

An extreme choice

The San Joaquin Valley Air District is considering a bold step to voluntarily seek the federal government's worst air quality designation for ground-level ozone. To better acquaint residents with the issues, the District has prepared this fact sheet with frequently asked questions. More details can be obtained by calling the District at 559-230-5800 in the central valley, 209-557-6400 in the northern valley, or 661-395-6900 in the south, or on the website, www.valleyair.org <<http://www.valleyair.org/>>. Written comments on this issue can be submitted by U.S. mail to Joan Merchen, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave, Fresno, 93726 or via e-mail to joan.merchen@valleyair.org <<mailto:joan.merchen@valleyair.org>>.

Q: What is the issue?

A: Our region has seen noteworthy air quality improvements over the past decade. Despite a 45 percent reduction since 1989 in the number of days the Valley's air violated health-based levels for ground-level ozone, commonly called smog, the region still does not meet the standards established by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Q: Does this have anything to do with the hole in the ozone layer?

A: Stratospheric ozone, known as the ozone layer, protects the earth from excess ultraviolet light by forming a shield high above the earth's surface. Although the same gas, ozone is considered a pollutant at ground level because it is corrosive and dangerous to breathe.

Q: Why does this region have a particularly bad problem with ozone?

A: The Valley's long, hot summers; stagnant weather conditions; frequent inversions; and bowl shape with surrounding mountain barriers create the perfect conditions to form and trap ground-level ozone. A fast growing population driving approximately 90 million miles per day compounds the problem.

Q: Where does ground-level ozone come from?

A: About 60 percent of the Valley's smog problems come from cars, diesel trucks and other internal combustion engines such as lawnmowers and boats. These are collectively called "mobile sources." The other 40 percent comes from business and industrial sources.

Q: What about agriculture?

A: Diesel and gasoline engines used in all types of activities contribute to ozone formation. Agricultural, prescribed and fireplace burning primarily cause another type of pollution called particulate matter. The District implements other controls for these tiny airborne particles because they are unhealthy, but they are not a major factor in smog formation.

Q: If there has been progress in reducing smog, what's the problem?

A: Unfortunately, improvements have not come quickly enough to meet clean air deadlines. Because the Valley failed to meet the federal ozone standard by the last deadline, the EPA downgraded the Valley's category for the ozone standard from "serious" to "severe" late last year. This means that the Valley must now meet the ozone standard by 2005.

Q: How close are we?

A: To meet the standard, the Valley must reduce the total emissions inventory by an additional 30 percent or 300 tons per day.

Q: Can we do it?

A: This will be tough in the long-term and nearly impossible by 2005. One significant challenge is the District's legal inability to directly control emissions from mobile sources. State and federal agencies regulate these sources of emissions. With the District's existing and future efforts to control industrial emissions and aggressive new measures for mobile sources by other agencies, the District projects eliminating 63 tons per day by 2005.

Q: *What's the next step?*

A: Because the Valley was reclassified to severe, federal law now requires that the Air District present the EPA with a plan by May 31, 2002 that clearly demonstrates that the Valley will meet ozone standards by 2005 and a detailed outline of the control measures that will be implemented to do so.

Q: *What happens if we can't submit a demonstration plan or attain the standard?*

A: If the District cannot submit an implementation plan that demonstrates attainment by 2005, the Valley faces possible sanctions under the severe nonattainment designation. The most significant sanctions would be the loss of \$2 billion in federal highway funding until the Valley reaches attainment. Additionally, the federal government could step in and dictate a clean air plan for the Valley. This would take away local control and might include restrictions such as mandatory no-drive days.

Q: *Is there a way to avoid these sanctions?*

A: It is highly improbable that the Valley could meet the ozone standard by 2005 given the Air District's legal jurisdiction and authority. This is why the District is exploring the option of requesting an "extreme" designation. With this designation, the new attainment date for the Valley would be 2010. It is still possible that if we fail to meet ozone standard in 2010, the Valley would still face sanctions. The District, however, would continue an aggressive rule adoption schedule to avoid sanctions in 2011.

Q: *How would the extreme designation allow us to avoid sanctions?*

A: State and federal agencies have committed to controls - primarily on mobile sources - between 2005 and 2010 that will reduce emissions by 105 tons per day. Additionally, the expanded timeframe allows the District's incentive-based programs to take effect. These programs provide financial incentives for users of heavy-duty engines to implement cleaner alternatives and for Valley residents to purchase hybrid electric-gasoline automobiles, electric lawnmowers and other air-friendly consumer products that reduce ozone-forming emissions.

Q: *Does this mean we have to breathe bad air longer?*

A: An extreme designation is not a delay in implementing air pollution controls. The District will continue to work aggressively with the business and industrial sources to improve air quality. Rather, this timeframe gives the Valley the opportunity to benefit from improved pollution controls for industry as well as mobile source controls being implemented by other agencies without incurring any immediate sanctions.

Q: *What's the down side to going extreme?*

A: The Valley would face the stigma of being the only other region besides the Los Angeles area to be classified as extreme. This could negatively impact economic development. Other disadvantages will mostly affect businesses. They include a lower threshold for businesses that will be required to participate in a federal permitting program, stricter offset requirements, and installation of advanced emission control devices. It is important to note that industry would face these costs and changes if the Valley could not present an attainable severe plan.

Q: *Sounds like a big problem. What can I do?*

A: The District faces a tough choice in whether or not to pursue an extreme rating for the Valley. Regardless of the final decision, one thing remains clear: Valley residents make daily choices that ultimately will determine whether our air becomes healthier. Realizing that personal clean air choices are imperative to the future of our Valley is a step in the right direction. Achieving clean air is not just the job of industry or government. It is everyone's responsibility.