

Roll call

Mixed results on air quality from Valley legislators in Sacramento.

Fresno Bee Editorial (Published Thursday, March 20, 2003, 4:50 AM)

In recent months there has been a remarkable upsurge in attention to the pervasive air quality problems we endure here in the Valley. That's gratifying, since recognizing the problems is the first step toward cleaning them up.

The record of our Valley legislative delegation is a bit spotty, though there are clear highlights. State Sen. Dean Florez, the Shafter Democrat, has to lead that list. He's taken the bit between his teeth and is lapping the field, an indication of his aggressive approach to legislative issues. His colleagues have been more measured (if you're one of those who thinks Florez is pushy) or more timid (if you like Florez's brash style).

Florez has introduced a package of 10 bills on topics ranging from ag exemptions from pollution permits to older cars, from dairies to wood-burning fireplaces. The legislation is a good start in what promises to be a long and difficult struggle to clean up our air.

Florez is not alone, though. Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, put herself in the air quality picture by stepping in to help neighbors put at risk by the recent Crippen trash pile fire in Fresno. She is also working on a bill to address the long-standing exemption agriculture has enjoyed from certain pollution permits.

Assemblywoman Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, is offering a bill that would require all coastal air districts to comply with Smog Check II, much the same as last year's legislation by former Assemblyman Dennis Cardoza of Merced (now serving in Congress) that imposed similar requirements on the Bay Area. Parra has a second bill to extend the life of the grant program for biomass facilities to burn ag waste, a key component of the effort to end open-air ag burning in the Valley. The program is set to expire next January, and Parra's measure would keep it alive indefinitely. Unfortunately, the bill may fall victim to the state's budget crisis. The state's general fund, the source of the grant funding, is shrinking by the day.

Assemblyman Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, is working on the issue of forest fires and how they affect air quality and has some legislation related to that. He is also working on AB 1672, a bill related to biomass plants, which burn ag waste to produce electrical power. And has pushed AB 565, which would provide a 25% tax credit on the replacement of old stoves or fireplaces with Environmental Protection Agency-certified clean-burning stoves.

Sen. Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno, is a co-sponsor of Florez's SB 703, which would revoke "standby" charges that agricultural customers must pay utilities to keep irrigation pumps connected to the electricity grid. That would reduce costs, and should encourage farmers to use electricity rather than cheaper, but dirtier, diesel fuel.

But beyond that, all Poochigian has offered is skepticism, which isn't very helpful.

And that's about it. Assemblymen Steve Samuelian, R-Fresno, and Bill Maze, R-Visalia, along with Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, are missing in action on air quality.

The good, the bad, the ugly. It will help if all of us who are concerned about our collective health -- and the futures of our children in this Valley -- will give aid and comfort to those leaders working to make our lives healthier. And it won't hurt if the slackers get a different message.