

Clearing the air

Valley residents must be cooperative and creative to solve pollution problems

The Stockton Record Editorial - Published Friday, May 9, 2003

What's invisible, odorless, free, indispensable and vulnerable?

Air.

What's dirty, smelly, costly, deadly and contentious?

Air.

Northern California's windy, rainy spring has put air-pollution concerns on the back burner for most people.

Not so for the decision-makers. There are changes ahead likely to alter the way we live, work and warm our homes.

A recent survey suggests San Joaquin County residents will welcome improved air quality but might bicker with authorities over methods.

For the first time, says the Public Policy Institute of California, Central Valley residents are more concerned about air pollution than Los Angeles residents are.

Public awareness is the good news.

The bad news is the 19-county survey also reveals a stubbornness when it comes to government intervention.

Valley folks seem to be saying: We know we have polluted air. We don't like it, but don't tell us how to fix it. We'll figure that out for ourselves.

It's not that simple.

In July, when the dog days of summer are cooking the hard earth between here and Bakersfield, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is expected to approve rules limiting the use of wood-burning stoves.

Pushed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the threat of \$2 billion in lost federal highway funds, the district will impose several restrictions. None rankles independent Valley residents more than a mandatory ban on lighting your fireplace on days when air pollution is at its worst.

Letter writer Dale Edens (top right) says he and his friends won't abide by such regulations. They should.

As beautiful as our Valley remains, particularly at this time of year, it's not the same as when fur trappers settled around what is now French Camp. More than 7 million people call the Valley home. More than 615,000 people live in San Joaquin County. They and their activities are fouling the air. Adjustments and sacrifices will be required of everyone.

That includes farmers, whose use of diesel equipment will be regulated beginning Wednesday. Despite some persistent confusion over what constitutes a "major" pollution source, farmers will be required to have permits for diesel pumps used in irrigation.

It's the first time agriculture has been forced to operate under Clean Air Act rules. By 2008, additional regulations will be in place for diesel-powered tractors, bulldozers, graders and other machinery.

Even before that, we expect the board to impose overdue regulations on burning agricultural waste.

Cleaning up the air has hardly been a clear, straight-line process.

There have been federal-state disputes, an overload of legislation in Sacramento, local recognition for clean-air programs and efforts to split off from the southern San Joaquin Valley, where conditions are much worse and where incentives to business have met with mixed success.

Not everything about the drive to cleaner air is fair.

Not everything works. Not everything is controllable.

Thousands of Bay Area residents continue to flee the high cost of housing west of the Altamont Pass. As long as that parade of commuters continues, we must add carbon monoxide to the Valley's ever-increasing toxic brew.

Efforts must continue on many fronts, and limits on how we pollute the air must advance. It's going to take adjustments by everyone.

In its recent State of the Air report, the American Lung Association gave San Joaquin County an F for the fourth year in a row. It's one of 28 counties in California to fail.

The report made the dangers clear: The Valley, one of the nation's smoggiest regions, also has one of the highest asthma rates. Children and the elderly are the most susceptible.

To prevail in cleaning up our air, we must all join the fight -- and that means adherence to changing restrictions and being creative in finding new ways of reducing our own contributions.

We don't have a choice. Habit and lifestyle adjustments are needed.

Burned about fireplace use

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The other day I drove across Lodi and noticed several driveways with fresh wood stacked in them.

I've spoken to some friends who live in the Lockeford and Clements area and they say the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District can stuff its proposed rules.

They'll heat their homes with wood as they have in the past.

I want to see how the board is going to enforce a rule the majority of the people don't want and won't adhere to.

I have friends who live east of Clements. Their house can't be seen from any paved road.

I know they'll continue to use wood to heat their home.

That's what I plan on doing also, although next week I'm leaving to find property in rural Nevada in hopes of relocating.

It amazes me that, as reported in your paper, the state is going to wean the cities off sales-tax money and use more property-tax money so they'll put in more housing because we're 250,000 units short.

This equates to more cars, which are the real culprits in this Valley's dirty-air problem.

Dale Edens

Lodi

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Fireplaces and wood stoves are getting a bum rap in the Valley.

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If the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has its way, residents will unnecessarily lose their fireplace privileges up to 30 nights of the year.

What a shame, since the actual particulate matter from fireplaces and wood stoves is minimal, and the severity of the district's actions won't make a dent in solving real air-quality problems.

It's time for the district to rethink its excessive fireplace-regulation proposals and advocate a program that curtails the use of solid-fuel fireplaces and stoves only on the worst air-quality days during the winter and provides incentives for using clean-burning technology and fuels.

Excessive regulations don't help solve a problem that doesn't require radical controls. Inaccurately painting wood smoke as a major culprit doesn't do the air justice.

We agree that improving air quality is an important priority, and we applaud the district's efforts. Regulations should be proportionate to the problem.

We accept that a few nights during the winter, people might have to refrain from using fireplaces and wood stoves.

These restrictions should be imposed only in communities where weather conditions create a problem -- but only on those few nights when wood burning truly contributes to an air-quality problem.

Residential wood smoke is only a minor portion of the pollution problem. The claim that wood smoke can be up to 30 percent of the problem on any given winter night presents an inaccurate picture.

On only one occasion, eight years ago, were wood-smoke levels measured at 30 percent in one Valley neighborhood. These measurements have been highly disputed.

Installation of fireplaces and wood stoves in new homes also is being overregulated.

Clean-burning technology is the solution to the pollution. Giving incentives to residents to switch to cleaner-burning solid-fuel technology is the practical way to deal with reducing emissions from fireplaces.

Incentives work because they educate and encourage people to change their habits.

Without incentives or affordable options, people don't change their practices and burn cleaner. They just break the rules.

That won't improve Valley air quality.

Chris Caron

vice president, Duraflame Inc.

Stockton

* NOTE: For more information on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's fireplace-regulation proposals, go to www.valleyair.org.

Asthma awareness focus of May events

The Fresno Bee - (*Published Friday, May 9, 2003, 4:53 AM*)

Children and adults can learn about managing asthma and receive free screenings for the disease at a Valley Asthma Day fair from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday at Fulton Mall in downtown Fresno.

Screenings also will be available at the Longs Drugs store at Cedar and Herndon avenues from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday.

And a "Blow the Whistle on Asthma Walk" is planned for 8:30 a.m. May 17 along the Old Town Trail in Clovis. The 5-kilometer event will raise money for asthma research and education.

An estimated 16.4% of children in Fresno County are asthmatics, and asthma is the No. 1 disease related to emergency room visits and school absenteeism.

Asthma, a chronic lung condition, kills about 5,000 people each year nationwide, but the disease can be managed with medications.

"Asthma is a very frustrating, confusing disease," said Sandra Eaton, program director at the American Lung Association of Central California.

Managing asthma requires medical attention and education for children and their families, Eaton said. "Valley Asthma Day provides a wonderful opportunity for families to learn skills and techniques to control asthma."

Nurses, respiratory therapists, doctors, teachers and parents are volunteering time at the Fresno/Madera County Asthma Coalition's fair.

"Despite advances in the available treatments for asthma, we still are seeing far too many people undiagnosed or undertreated," said Dr. Jeffrey Glassheim, a Fresno allergist.

"These people often don't realize their diminished life quality, and they are putting themselves at risk for irreversible lung damage if they don't receive a proper diagnosis and treatment."

The screening is funded by an educational grant from AstraZeneca.

The coalition's asthma fair also is sponsored by the American Lung Association of Central California, Children's Hospital Central California, California Health Collaborative, Community Medical Centers Asthma Program, McLane High School, Blue Cross State Sponsored Programs, Health Net and Allergy One.

Team captains are still needed for the American Lung Association of Central Valley's walk on May 17. People who are interested can visit the Web site at www.asthmawalkcencal.org or call 222-4800.