

'Spare the Air' plan gives drivers chance to switch gears

By TODD MILBOURN, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, June 5, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley is home to some of the dirtiest air in the country. But that hasn't convinced people to cut back on driving or other smog-causing activities.

"It's the fast and the furious," said Aaron Schultz, 20, of Waterford. "No one wants to give up their ride."

Facing a reluctant public, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District kicks off its annual Spare the Air program today.

The campaign encourages people to voluntarily cut back on pollution-causing activities when valley air reaches particularly unhealthy levels.

Auto exhaust, as well as agricultural byproducts, paint fumes and chemicals are major contributors to high ozone levels and smog. Smog has been linked to respiratory problems, including asthma.

Air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said surveys show that many San Joaquin Valley residents are aware of the 7-year-old "Spare the Air" program, and of the need for cleaner air, but few are willing to sacrifice.

"It's hard to get anybody to do anything," she said. "We love our cars."

Last year, unhealthy air levels triggered 30 Spare the Air days. Merced Bello said she expects roughly the same this year.

But peak days aren't the only problems; day-to-day breathing of dirty air also contributes to respiratory problems, Merced Bello said.

Vehicles drove 10 million miles in Stanislaus County each day in 1999, said Lark Downs, a senior planner at the Stanislaus Council of Governments. As the area grows, Downs projects that figure to rise to 18 million miles by 2025.

The auto exhaust contributes to the pollution problems that caused the American Lung Association to give Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties F's in air quality in a report released last month.

According to the report, about 22,000 Stanislaus County adults -- and 7,700 children 14 and younger -- have asthma. In Merced, it was nearly 10,000 adults and about 4,000 children, while in San Joaquin, it was nearly 28,000 adults and nearly 10,000 children.

George Bensch, an allergy and asthma doctor in Stockton, said the pollution combines with naturally occurring allergens to produce a "toxic mix" in the region. He said the valley has the third-highest death rate from asthma in the country.

Despite the figures, Merced Bello said consumer culture remains an obstacle to improving air. To try to change attitudes, the district is working with employers and other groups to encourage environmental-friendly practices.

Still, Merced Bello said she's unsure whether valley residents will make sacrifices needed for cleaner air. "The car is a status symbol," she said, "and with all these commercials out there, it's a challenge."

Senate approves 3 Florez air bills

Measures address smog from vehicles, biomass plants, developer fees.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

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Three more San Joaquin Valley air quality bills cleared the state Senate on Wednesday, including one that would assess fees for pollution coming from new business developments and housing subdivisions.

With the three bills, Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, now has a total of six San Joaquin Valley air quality measures heading to the Assembly this summer. Two more are under consideration in Senate committees.

In addition to new developer fees, Wednesday's measures would provide a \$6 million boost for clean-burning biomass plants and offer drivers help to repair their gross-polluting vehicles.

Of the three measures, local officials were most closely following Senate Bill 709, which allows the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District power to assess the developer fees as well as impose a \$1 fee on vehicle registration renewal.

SB 709 also would allow the district to require businesses with 100 or more employees to have a ride-share program. In the South Coast, the nation's worst air basin, the ride-share requirement has been in place for years.

More than half the Valley's smog problem comes from vehicles, which are regulated by the federal and state governments. But the Valley district's authority historically has focused on businesses and area-wide pollution sources, such as water heaters and fireplaces.

"[SB 709] would clearly give us authority to address issues we haven't had the power to address," said David Crow, district air pollution control officer.

Money raised from vehicle registration fees and developer fees could be used to help agriculture and other industries invest in clean-air technologies.

Florez's SB 708 also would address vehicle smog. Aside from helping drivers fix their polluting vehicles, the bill also would provide stiffer fines for repeat offenders of vehicle emission laws.

The fines are \$100 for conviction on the second violation and up to \$250 for subsequent violations. Florez's measure would raise the figures to \$135 and \$285.

Money figures prominently in SB 704, which provides \$6 million to subsidize biomass power production using agricultural waste.

When biomass power plants burn woody farm debris, they remove more than 95% of the particle pollution compared with open-field burning.

But biomass electricity is more expensive to produce than in natural gas-fired plants, so many biomass plants have gone out of business in the past decade.

To further complicate the picture, cities are selling woody debris to biomass plants cheaper than farmers can. For cities, it's less expensive than paying fees at landfills. Many biomass plant owners use a lot of the city waste wood to make ends meet.

The \$6 million from the Florez bill will help, said Kent Duysen, owner of Sierra Forest Products in Terra Bella. But he said his biomass plant may not make it much longer.

"We still do not have a long-term contract," Duysen said. "SB 704 is a step in the right direction, but we're just trying to survive."

The remaining two bills in Florez's series of air quality measures are SB 701 and SB 703.

SB 701 would place a \$4.6 billion air-quality bond issue on the March primary ballot. Florez is optimistic about the measure even though the state's budget crunch threatens most bond efforts.

SB 703 would direct the Public Utilities Commission to consider rate changes that would make electricity more attractive as a power source for irrigation pumps.

Firms join to Spare the Air

By Audrey Cooper
Record Staff Writer
Published Thursday, June 5, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley's smog season kicks off Friday with the first Spare the Air Day of the summer. The program is intended to encourage carpooling, public transit and other anti-pollution activities when smog is expected to reach unhealthy levels.

This year, air regulators have decided to call Spare the Air alerts for individual counties. That means areas with the particularly bad air quality, such as Fresno County, won't trigger as many smog alerts in counties where the air is cleaner.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also plans to issue two-day smog forecasts to warn residents of upcoming bad air days.

The first day of Spare the Air season is always an alert day so that participants can think about how they could change their normal polluting habits. The air quality Friday is not expected to surpass health levels in San Joaquin County.

Last year, the air district called 30 Spare the Air days in the Valley. All but three of those days included San Joaquin County. The Fresno region also had 11 health advisories when smog could have sickened otherwise healthy people. Those advisories did not apply to San Joaquin County.

Air-district spokesman Charlie Goldberg said that the air district has been warned that this summer may be warmer than the last. Higher temperatures will likely mean more smog alerts. Smog is formed when certain emissions mix in the air with sunlight and heat to become the smog that clouds local skies.

More than 730 businesses and organizations around the Valley have signed up to get Spare the Air alerts. Fifty-eight of those groups plan special kick-off events for Friday.

That includes SRI/Surgical Express, a Stockton business that provides sterile operating-room equipment to hospitals. Plant Manager Philip Nagata said the 49 employees at the company will be encouraged to carpool to work.

Nagata said his company frequently tries to find environmentally friendly ways to do business, such as reusing and resanitizing equipment.

"I, for one, would like to see our world better off than the way we found it," he said.

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Help out

Air-district officials say there are several ways for people to help on Spare the Air days:

- * Walk to lunch instead of driving.
- * Postpone yard work that involves gasoline-powered equipment.
- * Don't use aerosols.
- * Avoid using paint, which emits smog-forming gases.
- * Organize errands into one trip.
- * Shop by phone or via the Internet.
- * Don't top off your gas tank.

Information: www.valleyair.org

[Editorials in Fresno and Modesto Bee, June 5, 2003](#)

While we blame smog on others, our kids suffer

Summer brings many things to the valley: vacations, backyard swim parties, baseball, boating, picnics -- and smog. The early smoldering temperatures we've been having -- three weeks before the official start of summer -- have already combined with the emissions from our various activities to cook a nasty brew of ozone. It's a long way to autumn, and hopes for a respite. The hazards of smog to children, the elderly and those who suffer respiratory illnesses are well-documented. Healthy adults can withstand the effects more easily, but the long-term impact of living in the valley and breathing the smoggy air isn't understood so well. Plenty of anecdotal evidence -- and simple logic -- suggests it isn't good.

Our smog is clearly linked, along with particulate pollution most prevalent in the winter, to the dreadful rate of childhood asthma in the valley.

An estimated 16 percent of kids in the valley have the disease. That's compared with fewer than 10 percent statewide and about 5.5 percent nationally. Smog deprives children of outdoor activities on bad air days. In the worst cases, it robs them of life itself.

We produce our summer smog in many ways. The biggest single source is the "mobile" category. It includes motor vehicles -- cars, trucks, buses, motor homes, motorcycles and off-road vehicles -- as well as airplanes, boats and trains. Together they account for more than half the chemicals that bake into ozone in the hot sun. Valley motorists drive almost 80 million miles each day.

Agriculture is another big source, producing about 20 percent of the total of those chemicals. Other industries contribute about 15 percent. Activities that help create smog include construction, fires and even people cooking at home.

Doing something about it won't be easy. In fact, it often will be painful. And even as awareness of how serious an air quality problem we have has burgeoned in recent months, we've also seen how easy some find it to concede the problem and, in the same breath, blame someone else. But it's our smog. We all create it. All of us have to clean it up.

Valley Voice, Fresno Bee, June 5, 2003:

Car culture cripples cities with convenience

By Michael Becker

Fresno

(Published Saturday, May 31, 2003, 4:10 AM)

Imagine if, 100 years ago, a panel of engineers and planners sat down to design a transportation system for the United States.

Imagine that these are their design criteria:

The system must be terrorist in nature, killing 50,000 and injuring three million Americans a year.

It must be so destructive that a Byzantine and costly insurance system must be created to prop it up.

It must also be destructive of the natural and social environments, polluting land, air and water and creating a cacophony in local neighborhoods.

The system must cost an enormous amount both in personal expenditures and in tax dollars used to subsidize the infrastructure of the system.

It must be convenient. Under these design criteria, the hypothetical planners could look back with great satisfaction on their efforts.

Of course, the current transportation system is not the result of any kind of forethought, let alone planning. Each year we slouch forward through another round of deadly accidents, smog, delayed air board plans and corporate lobbying.

In fact, corporate average fuel efficiency is lower now than when the concept was created as a regulatory tool in 1974. Stickers indicating miles per gallon are not even required for Hummers. I mean, what's the point?

Constant pressure

Still, despite advertising fantasies and constant corporate lobbying pressure, we are being forced to look at the true costs of the current automobile transportation system. Every spring the highest mountains in the 48 states recede into a gray-brown Los Angeles haze at an earlier date. People are beginning to notice. An increasing percentage of children include inhalers with their pencils and backpacks as they leave for school each day. Parents, physicians and respiratory therapists are taking note. Even the local corporate paper declares that "We can't go on living this way, and we won't."

But, then, we will, unless we address the massively destructive, extraordinarily expensive automobile transportation system. This is the elephant in the living room that no one wants to talk about because nearly everyone is addicted to oil. Upwards of three-fourths of the air pollutants in the Valley are from tailpipe emissions.

Say this to yourself: "Each time I drive, I am the problem." Now repeat, until you get it firmly into your head. Then do whatever is necessary to contribute to the five following steps to end the transportation (and energy) problems in the Valley and truly spare the air:

Pass a county-wide bond measure to build and operate solar panel plants in the Valley.

Provide the solar panels to Valley residents, businesses and farmers for the cost of installation.

Sell surplus energy from solar panels to PG&E to finance the bonds.

Impose an annual smog tax of 1% of the value of a vehicle for every mile below 40 miles per gallon at which the vehicle operates (so, at 10 mpg, a Hummer owner pays 30% of the value of the vehicle annually for the cost of killing the rest of us. That seems reasonable. Besides, hybrid SUV's are available.)

Use the tax monies to provide rebates for the purchase of electric and hybrid electric vehicles to be charged by the solar panels.

These steps are relatively simple and rely on long standing technologies. Taking these actions will provide jobs, win independence from PG&E and clean up the Valley's lethal air.

Motor mania

They will also eliminate Valley residents' electric utility bills and transportation fuel costs. Unfortunately, given motor mania, accidents will continue to occur.

But, hey, one problem at a time. Naturally, I don't expect that any of these steps will be taken as they run counter to corporate interests, and corporations call the shots. In the meantime, we have options.

Move away. Put on your pollution mask and ride your bike. Take out asthma insurance. Or, better yet, go into respiratory therapy; they say that business there is booming. Seriously, the politicians and the pundits need to stop all the sermonizing about air pollution until they are prepared to make real proposals for real change addressing the real issue -- the automobile.

Letters to the Editor

Fresno Bee:

It's about cars

By Edythe E. Corum
Clovis

(Published in the Fresno Bee, Thursday, June 5, 2003, 5:32 AM)

I laud Channel 30 for addressing our air pollution problem in its recent Town Hall program.

Nevertheless, I was astounded that the major culprit for air pollution -- the cars we drive -- was not even mentioned until the final quarter of the broadcast. Until we see the automobile as Public Enemy No. 1, we don't stand a chance of cleaning up our air. Once we stop living in denial, and admit that every time we turn that ignition key we're part of the problem, we can begin to discuss solutions.

Possible solutions include airing public service announcements and displaying billboards that convey the message of driving less and using alternate transportation more, building an extensive network of bicycle paths and lanes, upgrading and expanding bus service, and introducing the possibility of light rail. (Financing light rail could draw our community together as people participate in fund-raising events, and individual citizens donate money. What parents of an asthmatic child wouldn't be willing to give hundreds or even thousands of dollars to ensure their child's health?)

The solutions are out there, but first we have to be willing to lick our driving habit. Perhaps Channel 30 and the other television stations can do their part by airing fewer car commercials, replacing them with messages on ways we can all help in the fight against air pollution.

[Madera Tribune:](#)

Our resources are very like ... well, a roll of toilet paper

Friday, May 30, 2003

Two hundred years ago this Valley was very different. By any standard it was a desert. It had, however, a very valuable resource to the east. That resource is the Sierra Nevada.

Those Mountains gather the winter storms and provide some of the purest water man has ever seen.

Water - we need it like the air we breathe. What a convenient thing. Hydrogen and Oxygen put together at the same temperature that we find comfortable to live in.

Something to do with a Big Bang I guess.

I wish I were here years ago to see the wonder of this place without the intrusion of man. But then I am a man and I would have been an intrusion.

We need to understand that we are the imbalance that through our comfort need has caused the most serious problems this Earth will have to face.

We can try, as we have to clean the air and the streams but as long as we continue to multiply we will have these problems because more of us will need these comforts.

One of our comforts is eating. This Valley, (with irrigation) can provide that need. In so doing there will be some inconvenient by product. Dust from working the soil, sprays for the bugs and smells from the livestock.

Last year I had my truck smogged and while I was waiting I thought I would walk to the Post Office. It was June. I walked east on Yosemite past the furniture store and as I passed the alley I was greeted with the unmistakable smell of urine, Human urine. I live in the country. I am so glad I don't have to live in the City with all that.

My thoughts on resources are likened to toilet paper. When we have a new roll we use too much. Our roll is getting small; we need to use each piece wisely.

Bill Hoffrage,

Madera