

Trying to clear the air

By Kellie Schmitt, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 19, 2011

ARVIN -- From his office on the town's central thoroughfare, Sal Partida has a view of brown, soupy haze.

"There's a mountain there, believe it or not," Partida said, pointing to the foothills. "This is like a holding tank -- everything from San Francisco down stays here."

Partida and the Committee for a Better Arvin are trying to create a "bucket brigade," a system that would allow residents to collect their own air quality readings. Members hope their self-collected data will press government authorities to improve the air in this dusty farm town, home to the worst smog in the country.

"In order for us to get a good reading, we need to monitor the air in our city," Partida said. "If we have to get our own monitors, we're going to do it."

The local effort coincides with residents learning that the California Air Resources Board moved its air monitoring station to a location on the outskirts of town.

Partida and his group say that won't give an accurate reading of Arvin's pollution, and could result in officials underestimating just how bad the air is.

"It's a fake reading, and it made us angry," Partida said. "We'd hope that our government agencies would be protecting us, but instead they're protecting themselves."

Before the monitor was moved, the Arvin area had the highest ozone reading in the San Joaquin Valley: 104 parts per billion (ppb), according to Gennet Paauwe, the board's spokeswoman. The federal Clean Air Act calls for maximum ozone levels of 75 ppb. While the new Arvin location reads about 11 percent cleaner, there is still a valley location -- Clovis -- with a reading at 103 ppb, Paauwe said.

"When we look at regulations and the worst areas in terms of peak values, those sites are exceedingly similar," Paauwe said. "What we do is regionwide; we don't base our rules on one site."

The Arvin monitor was moved two miles to Di Giorgio Elementary School because the state lost the lease on the prior site's land, according to the state board. The new site started monitoring in November 2009, but readings were done at both locations until October 2010.

When monitors move, the Environmental Protection Agency requires the new location to have "the same scale" of representation, said Matt Lakin, the manager of the air quality analysis office for the Pacific Southwest. A change of 10 percent would be "significant," though the agency hasn't made a judgment on the move yet. It would rule on those findings when the state board presented them, though he said he didn't know when that will happen.

Lakin said the replacement site initially had made sense since it was located on the outskirts of town, similar to the previous measuring station. The elementary school positioning offers a good sense of Arvin's air, especially since it is placed near children, Paauwe added.

But the Arvin committee members say they aren't convinced. On a recent afternoon, they drove to the elementary school site, only to get lost amid the cherry and orange orchards.

"I've never been near this school and I've lived here 10 years," said resident Hugo Tamayo, who is part of the bucket brigade effort.

Collecting their own data

That brigade is in the process of applying for grants that would fund their grassroots effort. Their hope is to create several monitoring stations around town, including one in Di Giorgio County Park in the center of town, about five miles from the air board's station.

While the state couldn't officially use the brigade's data, the information could supplement its own collection, Paauwe said. Official collection stations meet stringent federal requirements, including provisions such as ensuring the monitor is off the ground and away from trees, she said.

"We think this effort is particularly interesting and good because it turns people into air quality advocates," Paauwe said. "They start to pay attention and look at the overall air quality in their areas."

Paying attention comes naturally for Arvin residents such as Tamayo, a construction worker. When Tamayo travels outside the Arvin area for work, he notices he can breathe easier.

"You can work a lot better and you're not always thinking about the air," he said.

Tamayo said he's joining the bucket brigade effort to enact greater change: "I want to make a trip to Washington, D.C., instead of Sacramento."

Before the residents can set up their own monitors, though, they'll need money to fund the effort. They're working with the Delano-based Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment to help secure funding. Grants would be used to buy the monitors, conduct lab analysis on the results and train locals to accurately gather readings.

Even if the state board doesn't agree with the residents' findings, the information might spur them to do more monitoring themselves, leading to broader policy change, said Caroline Farrell, CRPE's acting executive director. If the air is found to be especially bad near a school, for example, more trees could be planted and outside playtime minimized.

The EPA could use residents' collections to help determine if more official monitoring sites are necessary, Lakin said. When a region exceeds federal air standards, the state must create a plan to improve the findings, such as cutting truck emissions, he said.

Bucket brigades in other communities

Arvin residents aren't the only ones in Kern County taking air measurements into their own hands. In the Frazier Mountain communities, residents received \$25,000 in funding for their own bucket brigade, thanks to the Kern County Air Quality Mitigation Fund.

While the mountain communities are located high above the valley's pollution, residents worry about diesel emissions and idling trucks on an Interstate 5 rest stop.

"If we can show a problem, we can get a faster solution and protect the community," said Linda MacKay, the president of the TriCounty Watchdogs, a local advocacy group.

When residents take air quality monitoring into their own hands, they typically work with organizations such as Global Community Monitor, a Bay Area group that trains and supports the bucket brigades. The brigade got its name from actual buckets that collect gases, but particle and ozone monitors are also used.

That group, which formed in response to concerns over a Northern California refinery's pollutants, offers training manuals and air sampling devices. The group is working with the Frazier Mountain Communities, and has extended its reach to places as far flung as India, South Africa and Thailand.

"We work with residents and take a critical eye to what flies under the radar," said executive director Denny Larson. "If you're excluding local knowledge, you're leaving out a lot of valuable information about what and where you should be monitoring."

If Arvin receives the funding, the organization will work with them to do a "toxic tour," an assessment of the areas where residents see or smell problems.

For Partida and his group, the first location is simple: Di Giorgio County Park, right in the middle of downtown Arvin, about a five-mile drive from the current state monitoring site.

"There's plenty of room," Partida said, gesturing to an open expanse just a few blocks from Bear Mountain Boulevard. "This is Arvin air."

Groups sue EPA over smog in L.A. basin

By Ashlie Rodriguez - Los Angeles Times

Sacramento Bee, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Tuesday, July 19, 2011

LOS ANGELES -- Environmental and public health groups filed suit against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Monday, saying the agency has failed to force officials to crack down on smog in the Los Angeles basin.

The suit contends the EPA missed a May 2011 deadline that, in effect, would determine whether the ozone level in the South Coast basin is hazardous to public health. Such a determination could trigger tougher limits on pollution from cars, trucks, ships and refineries.

The EPA did not comment on the lawsuit, which was filed by Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles, Desert Citizens Against Pollution, Communities for a Better Environment and the Natural Resources Defense Council, among other groups. A similar suit challenging whether [California's San Joaquin Valley](#) had met the ozone standard was filed Monday on behalf of the Sierra Club and Medical Advocates for Healthy Air.

The Los Angeles region has a long history of elevated ozone levels, and the American Lung Association, in its annual State of the Air report, recently determined that the region has the highest ozone level in the nation.

"Angelenos continue to breathe smoggy air that makes people sick, forcing mothers to question whether to allow children to play outside on dirty air days," said Adrian Martinez, an attorney for the NRDC. "These are choices mothers should not have to make."

Under the federal Clean Air Act, Congress established a one-hour standard for ozone pollution, a principal contributor to smog, and the EPA was to certify no later than May whether air districts had met the standard.

If the EPA were to determine that the region does not meet the national standard, then the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the basin's regulatory agency, would have one year to submit a clean-up plan.

The one-hour standard measures the amount of ozone in the air, averaged over one hour. Monitoring stations across the south coast collect data for the air district, which includes Orange County and parts of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

In California, the Central Valley and the South Coast are the only two areas that have not met the national standard. The EPA's "silence" on the L.A. region supports the idea the agency "knows we haven't met the standard and it is choosing to not make the determination," said Angela Johnson-Meszaros, an environmental attorney involved in the suit.

Air Quality Management District spokesman Sam Atwood said the agency has adopted a plan to meet an eight-hour ozone standard, which he said is "much more stringent" than the one-hour standard. The standard that measures average ozone levels over eight hours offers more health protection and requires stricter pollution controls.

Martinez, the NRDC attorney, said the region has taken measures to control ozone pollution, "but the question is whether it's happening fast enough."

Scientific studies have found that ozone inflames the respiratory system, causing asthma attacks, hospitalizations and premature deaths.

In Los Angeles, an estimated 1 million adults and 300,000 children have asthma, outranking 23 other congested cities, according to the American Lung Association's 2011 State of the Air report.

Lawsuit targets Valley air quality

Stockton Record and Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 19, 2011

Clean-air advocates are suing to force the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to bring air quality in the polluted San Joaquin Valley up to national standards.

The environmental law firm Earthjustice filed a lawsuit Monday in federal court in Fresno seeking to compel the agency to make an official finding on whether the Valley has met national ozone standards adopted three decades ago.

An agency spokeswoman says the agency is reviewing the suit but does not generally comment on pending litigation.