

Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011

Improving air district programs

Having grown up in the valley, we weren't exposed to air district programs until we commenced our first semester at Fresno State this fall. We would like to suggest the following improvements to the air district programs so that more people are informed:

- Flag program — Flags are used at schools to inform teachers and students about the daily air quality. We suggest communicating air quality information over the PA system and displaying the current flag color in classrooms and gymnasiums.
- Air Alert program — Messages focused on vehicle registration fees when air quality exceeds the national ozone standard. Provide alerts on public message boards reading "air alert" and the possible fines. Short radio broadcasts of air alerts.
- Real-time Air-quality Advisory Network: Air quality notifications through e-mail and texts. Rallies and-or assemblies held in the public school system to help inform about the network. Advertising on light poles, banners, buses and in movie theaters. An easier sign-up process, possibly signing up through text messaging.

In addition to the current programs, we suggest a social media campaign to increase the number of users on pages such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

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Editor's note: For more information on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and its programs, go to www.valleyair.org.

S.F. Chronicle editorial, Thursday, Dec. 15, 2011:

California must stay course on cleaner fuels

California, which has led the way on many clean-air regulations, took a bold step in demanding that oil companies reduce the carbon intensity of the fuels they sell by 10 percent by the end of this decade. Wisely, this state also declared that the greenhouse-gas impact of producing and distributing those fuels should go into the equation. Perhaps not surprisingly, as those regulations approach the end of their first year, the oil industry is lobbying to undercut them.

The California Air Resources Board is expected to consider a series of amendments to the landmark Low Carbon Fuel Standard at its meeting in Los Angeles on Friday.

The most significant amendments being pushed by the oil industry would require the air board to annually review the program with the option of suspending or halting the regulations if they proved to be too onerous or expensive.

This would be a huge mistake. The key to attracting investment and innovation in biofuels is to show that the state is committed to requiring 10 percent cleaner fuels by 2020 - and thus, there will be a market for these alternatives.

If the air board hedges, then the oil-industry's claim that it cannot meet the standard because of a lack of alternatives to high-carbon fuels will become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

"What they're arguing is that they can't comply with the standard, so let's just weaken it," said Simon Mui of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "That is true if they don't invest" in alternative fuels.

Tupper Hull, a spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association, said the escape clause was necessary because of doubts that enough biofuels would reach the market by 2015, when the clean-fuel standards begin to escalate. Oil companies had to merely reduce the carbon intensity of their gas and diesel by 0.25 percent this year.

If the biofuels are not available, there is "serious potential for fuel disruptions like we saw with electricity in the last decade," Hull said.

However, the 10 percent reduction by 2020 is hardly draconian compared with what is being required of other pollution sources - carbon emissions from tailpipes must be reduced 30 percent, under a separate state law - and the economic, ecological and moral imperative of slowing climate change.

Another point of dispute is whether to calculate the carbon impact of the production and distribution of tar sands and oil shale. The oil industry suggests that such accounting would put those sources of crude at a disadvantage.

But it would be the height of folly for the air board to ignore the full carbon impact of various fuels in its enforcement of this landmark regulation. The board was right two years ago to take what Chairwoman Mary Nichols called a "comprehensive cradle-to-grave approach" in forging the Low Carbon Fuel Standard - much to the chagrin of the ethanol industry, which lost points because of the direct and indirect impacts of corn production on carbon emissions.

California has allowed oil companies great leeway to meet the standard, but has insisted that it be achieved through honest carbon accounting, with a firm deadline. The air board should stay the course.

Creating benchmark for producers

2007: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued an executive order calling for a 10 percent reduction in the carbon intensity of California's transportation fuels by 2020.

2009: The California Air Resources Board adopted rules to implement the order - and, in a significant move, ruled that the greenhouse-gas impact of producing and distributing the fuel must be taken into account.

2011: The rules went into effect, requiring oil companies to achieve a 0.25 percent reduction by year's end.

Friday: CARB is scheduled to review how the new rules are working - and potentially adjust them.

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