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Valley air quality much better, but more must be done

COMMUNITY VOICES

By Seyed Sadredin

In the San Joaquin Valley, our air-quality challenges are more difficult than those in any other region in the nation.

On one hand, we have circumstances over which we have no control: the valley's geography, topography and climate turn our region into a bowl with a lid; pass-through highway traffic brings pollution without any economic benefit; and emissions from the northwest add to our own.

On the other hand, our resources and capacity to absorb the economic costs of combating air pollution are limited due to our high poverty and unemployment rates.

Designing and implementing effective strategies that protect both the valley's economic well-being and our residents' health demand a great deal of innovation, creativity and hard work.

Thanks to residents and businesses, we have made significant progress, and air quality in San Joaquin Valley today is the best in recorded history.

Since 1980, air pollution from businesses has been reduced by more than 80 percent.

Given where we are in our journey toward cleaner air, each of us must have the courage to look in the mirror and do our part as we craft reasonable remedies to protect public health.

Enormous challenges remain, and we cannot achieve our clean air goals on the back of businesses alone.

Scientific polls show that air quality is a high priority for valley residents and that they are willing to do their part to reduce air pollution. Most residents respond positively to calls to refrain from using wood-burning fireplaces and to reduce driving.

Although I'm gratified by the results of these polls, I also believe that the discontent expressed by individuals in the community deserves our attention and response, as it represents the feelings of many. Dismissing it as isolated incidences of denial and blame is foolish.

The district's core values reflect a commitment to protecting the public health with minimal disruption to the valley's economic prosperity, operating with maximum efficiency, complete transparency and total accountability, and developing innovative and effective strategies. (For details about these values, visit www.valleyair.org.)

We have the lowest permit fees and administrative overhead among California's major air districts. We have absorbed significant new and unfunded mandates from the state and federal governments without increasing staff.

Many of our air quality programs now serve as the model for the rest of the state and the nation. All actions by the governing board are subject to months — and sometimes years — of public input, debate and discussion.

Our pledge is that every instance of less than exceptional service that is brought to our attention is investigated and corrected.

Two actions by the air district seem to be a source of discontent for some people: Our "Make One Change" campaign that asks valley residents refrain from wood burning on poor air-quality days, and the new DMV fees enacted in response to what we believe is an unfair federal mandate.

"Check before you burn" has been our most effective and least costly clean-air strategy. Getting equivalent reductions from our heavily regulated businesses could cost hundreds of millions of dollars, which we all would pay in one form or another.

Valley businesses have already spent billions cleaning up our air, which brings us to the new DMV fees. Facing an unfair mandate from the federal government, our board concluded that a \$12 per year fee is

less detrimental to the valley's economy than a \$29 million per year penalty on businesses. As one valley resident aptly said at the public hearing, paying \$12 is better than he or his neighbor losing their jobs.

But we believe that neither valley residents nor businesses deserve a penalty. If anything, they deserve commendation for their sacrifices and investments in clean air. We will continue our fight in Congress to repeal this unfair penalty.

Sadredin is executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Air District beefs up retrofit funding

Business Journal, Jan. 27, 2011

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced \$62 million in new funding to help diesel owners reduce emissions by replacing or retrofitting their vehicles.

Last year, the district reviewed 2,900 applications for diesel emission-reduction grants and helped fund the replacement of 548 high-polluting diesel trucks. Funding for such efforts is now 10 times what it was five years ago.

Additional money for the District's grant and incentive programs may come from a \$12 registration fee imposed in October on Valley drivers, who account for 80% of the region's ozone-causing gases.

Trucks, passenger vehicles and buses produce 57% of total nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions in the air basin.

Since its formation, the district's grant programs have put \$326 million back into local communities. Last year, its truck grants were found to have removed more than 6,000 tons of NOx from the air.