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Valley deserves praise for efforts to clean air

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 been given 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 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 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, and dismissing it as isolated incidences of denial and blame is foolish.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control 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 core values, visit 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 serve as models 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 by some people in the community: our "Make One Change" campaign, which asks Valley residents to refrain from wood burning on days with poor air quality; and the new DMV fees that were enacted in response to what we believe is an unfair federal mandate.

The Check Before You Burn campaign 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 of dollars 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 his or his neighbor's 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.

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

Valley TV ad's air-cleanup claims controversial

Some say current effort hurt by sunny ads.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, Friday, Jan. 28, 2011

Also in the Sacramento Bee, Monday, Jan. 31, 2011

A television commercial by the local air district touts the winter of 2009-10 as the Valley's cleanest on record -- but is that true?

Yes -- with an asterisk.

The number of days with a "good" air-quality index has risen sharply over the last decade as the number of unhealthy days plummeted. But by another yardstick, the district's claim is debatable.

The Valley's air last year violated standards for soot and fine-particle pollution nearly as often as it did 10 years ago, according to state records. And even with some improvement, the Valley remains among the worst air basins in the country, air-quality activists say.

The district needs to push for earlier enforcement of stringent rules for diesel, one important source of the particle pollution, they say, adding that the Valley's own rules could be improved.

"The district should be passing tougher rules, not making television commercials," said lawyer Brent Newell of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, which represents activists.

Nobody claims the air cleanup is finished, say officials with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The commercial celebrates improvements and encourages people to keep up the fight against dirty air.

"There are more healthy winter days now and far fewer unhealthy days," said district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

The district's publicity campaigns have been debated for years. Officials have used them to rally support for such controversial rules as wood-burning bans on murky winter days. Activists say the messages take attention away from the Valley's continuing problem.

From November 2009 to February 2010, the region violated the air pollution standard for soot, or PM-2.5, more than four dozen times, according to state records. Only nine healthy days were reported during December 2009.

"If you look at how many days residents are exposed to pollution, the Valley is the worst in the nation," said Sarah Jackson, analyst for the legal watchdog Earthjustice in Oakland.

But district officials say simply counting violations obscures evidence of progress over the last several years. In part this is because violations are a fairly crude measure of air quality, they say: Even if only one monitor shows pollution exceeds the standard, the entire 25,000-square-mile region is considered in violation.

To more precisely portray air quality, the district emphasizes the air-quality index, a county-by-county air rating using such factors as pollution concentrations and weather.

The index includes air ratings -- healthy, moderate, unhealthy for people with lung problems and unhealthy for everyone. The ratings are used in a district program to notify schools of pollution changes during all hours of the day.

Since wood-burning prohibitions started several years ago, unhealthy days in all eight counties have plummeted 85% from November through February, district figures show.

Unhealthy days for people with lung problems have dropped nearly 60%. Healthy and moderate days have increased by nearly 20%, officials said.

Fireplace soot, diesel specks and other microscopic particles are considered dangerous air pollution. The inhaled particles can penetrate deep into the lungs, triggering lung problems, heart ailments and even early death.

Activists, such as the Association of Irrigated Residents in Kern County, have long said the district is not aggressive enough.

Other than fireplaces, these tiny specks come from farm operations, power plants, large boilers and oilfield equipment. The district could tighten rules over those sources to help achieve the tough federal standard.

District officials say they know it will be difficult to achieve the standard over the next decade. That is why the public needs to be involved, both in reducing pollution and supporting efforts to raise money for the fight, Holt said.

"You have to tell people when their efforts are paying off," she said.

Federal agencies to align with California on new clean car standards

By Tiffany Hsu, L.A. Times

Also in the Sacramento Bee, Monday, Jan. 31, 2011

The federal Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Transportation will coordinate with the California Air Resources Board when they simultaneously release proposed rules for vehicle fuel economy and carbon emissions on Sept. 1.

California has long been an early adopter of similar guidelines and is known for regulations that are often the strictest in the country. By agreeing to reschedule its announcement from the original March date, the state could be hoping to influence how the federal standards are developed, industry experts suggested.

"The vehicle manufacturers would certainly prefer a single national standard," said John Boesel, chief executive of Calstart, a clean-transportation technology trade group based in Pasadena.

"The California policymakers, if they agree to a single standard, would want to ensure it's demanding enough to address the state's very serious air pollution challenges."

A suggestion floated this fall from the Obama administration that new cars be required to reach 62 miles per gallon by 2025 met with backlash from the auto industry.

The EPA and the DOT had originally aimed for Sept. 30 to release their proposals, which will affect cars and light trucks in the 2017 to 2025 model years. The federal agencies say that the current standards for the 2012 to 2016 model years, adopted in April, will eventually save 1.8 billion barrels of oil and avert 960 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions.

A final set of rules will be approved by 2012. Automakers cheered the partnership between the agencies while urging them not to rush into any decisions about miles-per-gallon and emissions targets.

"The current process is still in the early stages, with much analysis needed on critical issues such as the costs of advanced vehicle technologies and potential impacts on vehicle safety and jobs," said Gloria Berquist, vice president of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers in a statement.