

Air district: Help take control of pollution to avoid fine

By Kellie Schmitt, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2011

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has created a new plan for keeping ozone levels below the EPA limit, even as local drivers and businesses brace for a \$29 million noncompliance fee.

That controversial annual fine, which could go into effect as early as the fall, will tack on \$12 to valley car registrations and charge large businesses that haven't invested in emissions-reducing technology.

But, if the district can go three years without an ozone violation -- and so far this year, there haven't been any -- the EPA will lift the penalty. The district's latest publicity campaign will try to forecast potential violations in hopes residents will help cut pollution.

"If there are no violations from 2011-2013, the DMV fee sunsets," said district spokeswoman Jaime Holt. "We want people to know they're in control of the pollution that tips the scales for us."

Valley residents' extra vehicle registration fees will generate about \$19 million while the remaining \$10 million will come from large industrial businesses. The money gathered will come back to the district in the form of grant programs that help decrease emissions.

Predicting air violations

This year, the valley has edged close to the ozone violation threshold, which is 125 parts per billion during a one-hour period. The Fresno area climbed to 122 twice in July, and recorded three June days at 119.

By studying previous years' data, the district found that violations tend to occur around the beginning of the school year, in the afternoons between 2 and 5 p.m.

During those periods, a series of events may be conspiring to drive up ozone, which is created when ultraviolet rays react with pollutants.

On hot, late August afternoons, parents are picking up their kids, or idling as they wait in the parking lot. That's also the time when people drive home from work. High populations might exacerbate the problem since college students have returned from their summer break and fewer people are on vacation.

The district is hoping to keep this year's ozone under the threshold by alerting residents when a violation is likely. A staff team will study factors that contribute to ozone, such as high temperatures, no cloud cover and several days of stagnant air. During those times, they'll ask residents to put off errands, carpool, bike to work or school, or simply refrain from idling their car.

The district will put out an "air alert," giving residents 48-hours notice before the expected violation in hopes of changing car use.

An unfair penalty

In the meantime, Congressman Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, has introduced a bill that would repeal the \$29 million fine. He pointed to the valley's dramatic reduction of bad air days over the past several years.

In 2010, there were seven ozone violations, compared to 56 in 1996, according to the district.

"You don't punish people, you reward them," McCarthy said. "Where's the encouragement to improve further?"

Because of the Valley's location, and Bakersfield's position at the "end of the bucket," the region ends up taking the blame for others' pollution, he added.

At the district, officials share McCarthy's frustration.

"We'd like to have an extension to give us more time, but the Clean Air Act is a one-size-fits-all approach," Holt said.

Through a spokeswoman, the EPA said that the \$29 million isn't a "fine" but a "fee" and emphasized that the money will go back to the valley to help clean the air. The Clean Air Act requires areas that failed to meet a health standard for ozone to collect fees from their "major stationary sources," and the valley "has chosen an alternative approach" by adding the vehicle fee and exempting some businesses, she wrote in an email.

Industry response

The district will fine valley businesses that don't have the "best available control technology," Holt said. She did not name any businesses on the list, but said they'll be "large industrial stationary sources," not smaller retail stores, offices or independent restaurants.

While some Bakersfield businesses will be affected, many of the area's chief industries -- such as agriculture, dairy and oil -- have already taken many steps to upgrade their equipment, the district said.

The district's plan was "the only fair way to do it," said Les Clark, the executive vice president for the Independent Oil Producers' Agency. Industry has already reduced emissions significantly, and putting the entire fine on them wouldn't be right, he said.

In an effort to clean up emissions, the oil industry had developed new technology such as adding scrubbers on steam generators, which clean up plumes leaving the stack. Still, there are limits on their role in improving the air.

"With this terrain, it's not quite that simple," he said. "But the air quality has been improving over the past few years."

Valley ozone violations by year

Year: Number

2000: 30

2001: 32

2002: 31

2003: 37

2004: 9

2005: 8

2006: 18

2007: 3

2008: 19*

2009: 4

2010: 7

* Wildfires impacted air quality, according to the air district.

City Council rejects State Senate redistricting plan

Turlock should be with Valley cities, not foothills, says mayor

By Alex Cantatore, staff writer

Turlock Journal, Wed., August 10, 2011

The Turlock City Council on Tuesday took a stand against a statewide redistricting plan which would slot Turlock into a State Senate district comprised of foothill communities, separating the city from its Valley neighbors.

"The proposed Senate district that includes Turlock appears illogical," said Michael Cooke, interim assistant to the city manager. "It cuts Turlock off from its San Joaquin Valley neighbors."

The redistricting process intends to equalize the populations of all State Senate districts based on population counts from the 2010 census. For the first time, district lines are being drawn by a

citizens' redistricting committee, approved by voters in November 2008, rather than by state legislators.

The finalized boundaries for Turlock's proposed Foothill district includes cities such as Rancho Cordova, Sonora, Jackson and Clovis, as well as Stanislaus County neighbors Hughson and Oakdale. The district also includes numerous state and national parks, such as Yosemite National Park and Death Valley National Park.

The wants and needs of those cities don't line up with Turlock's legislative priorities, the council said. State Senators tasked with representing the district may end up focusing on foothills issues, leaving Turlock without a voice in the State Senate, according to Mayor John Lazar.

"For whatever reason, they did it again," Lazar said. "I don't know why they can't just leave us whole with adjoining neighbors who have common interests."

Foothill economies are largely based on tourism and natural resources, rather than the Valley's agricultural focus. Foothill cities aren't members of the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#), as Turlock is. Existing highways – such as Highway 99 and State Route 165 – don't logically connect Turlock to the foothills. And the California State University, Stanislaus service area doesn't stretch to the foothills.

Instead, the Turlock City Council supports joining the "Merced" Senate District 12, which includes cities like Ceres, Patterson, Newman, Hilmar, Merced, Madera and Salinas.

"We feel that District 12 is much more aligned with our issues," Cooke said.

While council unanimously supported shifting to the Merced district, the final decision rests with the citizens redistricting committee.

Even if Turlock remains in the Foothills district, the city has a chance of being heard in Sacramento, Councilman Forrest White said. With population centers in Turlock, Clovis, Hughson and Oakdale, the few, large Valley towns may control the candidates elected from the Foothills district, White said.

"That's going to be the power center of this district," White said. "The bigger players will control the issues."

First fuel-efficiency and greenhouse-gas emissions standards for trucks announced

President Obama and truck makers reach agreement on fuel economy and pollution standards for big rigs, work trucks and other heavy-duty vehicles.

By Neela Banerjee, staff writer
L.A. Times, Wed., Aug. 10, 2011

Reporting from Washington — [President Obama](#) announced the first fuel-efficiency and greenhouse gas standards for long-haul rigs, work trucks and other heavy-duty vehicles Tuesday, the second mileage pact with manufacturers in less than a month.

The regulations call for reductions on fuel consumption and greenhouse-gas emissions by 2018 of 9% to 23%, depending on the type of vehicle. Trucks and other heavy vehicles make up only 4% of the domestic vehicle fleet, but given the distance they travel, the time they spend idling and their low fuel efficiency, they end up consuming about 20% of all vehicle fuel, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Experts say that a 20% reduction in heavy-vehicle emissions would boost fuel efficiency to an

average of 8 miles per gallon from 6 mpg now.

The announcement comes less than two weeks after Obama and the country's automakers unveiled new fuel economy rules for passenger vehicles that would boost fleet-wide average gas mileage to 54.5 mpg by 2025, from about 27.8 mpg now.

The success of the Obama fuel-efficiency program, some of it hard won through difficult talks with carmakers, stands in sharp contrast to the failure of other environmental initiatives such as climate change legislation.

At a time when nearly all major corporate lobbying groups and the [Republican Party](#) insist that the administration's environmental regulations destroy jobs, the automakers, the United Auto Workers union and truck and large engine manufacturers are collaborating on rules they say could create jobs. Most environmental groups also praised the new truck standards.

The automobile industry has been more cooperative with the government since the federal bailout of two major carmakers, [General Motors](#) and Chrysler. It is also mollified by the fact that the new, 2025 auto rules have what critics consider loopholes that allow the carmakers to improve fuel efficiency on their most popular models at a slower pace.

Moreover, the new standards encourage car and truck makers to use off-the-shelf technology, some of which they have already deployed, rather than invest in scientific breakthroughs.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Thursday, Aug. 11, 2011:](#)

Lion fire in Sequoia has been good for nature

by Mark Grossi

A reader asks why the Lion Fire has been burning more than a month in Sequoia National Forest. It's a far more complex question than most people realize.

The short answer: It has been good for nature, and it hasn't been truly dreadful for the breathing public.

The blaze is a lightning fire that has slowly burned more than 20,000 acres of unwanted "needles, leaves, logs and shrubs with very little tree mortality," federal officials say.

The chances of a huge, catastrophic fire are reduced when a natural fire cleans out the excess brush. It's the way the Sierra worked before people started dousing every fire in the early 1900s.

But what if the smoke ruins air quality for people in the San Joaquin Valley? That has not been a problem, though mountain towns have had smoke problems.

Federal authorities have been working daily with three air quality districts -- San Joaquin Valley, eastern Kern County and Great Basin on the east side of the Sierra. Fire authorities actually made the fire burn faster to avoid smoke later in the summer.

The relationship works, but there is a thorny issue in the background. Air districts cannot require the forest service to snuff a natural fire, even if they feel the smoke is causing air violations. So, should air districts have the authority to order the federal government to stop a natural fire?

I've heard arguments on both sides.

The Valley's air quality is among the worst in the country. And forest fires create both ozone-making gases and dangerous particle pollution -- a double whammy. Residents should come first, according to one argument.

On the other side, natural fires are necessary to eliminate excess growth that could create catastrophic fires -- fires that would make more smoke and perhaps a much bigger air-quality mess.