

Valley airs soot woes at EPA hearing

By Richard Chang, The Sacramento Bee

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Jesse and Jessika Hernandez were barely a year old when the twins contracted asthma.

Now, at age 10, they grapple with the illness every day, missing school and ending up in a hospital, because of the poor air quality in their native Fresno.

The two were among several dozen that attended the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Sacramento hearing on national air quality standards Thursday. The agency is proposing a change to the annual standard for soot and is seeking the public's input.

"We're here today to listen," EPA spokeswoman Alison Davis said.

At the hearing, regulators got an earful. Some decried the agency for not protecting public health, while others blamed regulations for driving them out of business.

"It's a difficult balancing act," said Errol Villegas, program manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "How do we balance public health with jobs?"

The San Joaquin Valley is among the worst-polluted areas in the nation.

Current EPA rules for soot allow 15 micrograms per cubic meter, but the agency is now proposing 12 or 13 micrograms. Environmentalists have said that's not enough – they want 11 instead.

The stakes for California are high. It is one of the worst soot-polluted states in the country.

The American Lung Association said 70 percent of California's soot pollution originates in the transportation industry, with trucks, trains and airplanes the biggest polluters. The remaining 30 percent comes from power plants, manufacturing and home sources.

Robert McClernon, a former trucker, said the current regulations "destroyed" his livelihood. In 2009, McClernon said he was forced to close his trucking business, because his equipment didn't meet EPA rules.

But Tony Wexler, director of the Air Quality Research Center at UC Davis, believes the financial cost of clean air is justified.

"It's cheaper to have stricter regulations, because health costs are much higher," Wexler said. "Industry groups only see the costs in front of them."

Environmentalist and clean air groups were out in full force at the hearing, with a slew of representatives testifying before the five-member panel. Only a handful of speakers, mostly from business groups, argued for maintaining the current standard.

The Sierra Club led a small rally at Cesar Chavez Plaza across from the California EPA building, where the hearing was held.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Thursday, July 19, 2012:](#)

Recession slowed city sprawl in Valley

By Mark Grossi

New research this week says the air, water, soil and other parts of the environment in California's Central Valley have improved over the last five years, but not fast enough.

That's not what caught my eye in this study from the nonprofit Great Valley Center and UC Merced's Sierra Nevada Research Institute.

For me, the interesting news was that the recession slowed city sprawl over prime farmland, a precious part of this region's No. 1 industry.

The study urges leaders to plan smarter, more compact city footprints that will result in less driving and reduced air pollution.

The study also includes thoughts from one the nation's cutting-edge water researchers, UC Merced Professor Roger Bales. He is designing a high-tech system to measure far more precisely how much water is coming out of the Sierra Nevada, source of two-thirds of the state's water.

Bales says it is important to provide a secure supply of water for the future. But no matter how many water supply solutions are found, it will be important to find out exactly how much water is coming from the Sierra, he says.

Overall, this study looks at progress from 2006 to 2011 in the Central Valley -- which includes both the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. The subject is familiar to me only because I've been covering the issues.

But it's worth your time to look at it. Planners, politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and wonks will get a lot out of the research. I think it makes interesting reading for the rest of us, too.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, July 20, 2012:](#)

No New Year's fireworks

I can't believe that the state would even consider having legalized fireworks, not only on the Fourth of July, but also on New Year's Eve! Please do not let this happen.

Have we forgotten that our air is already unbreathable because of all the debris that settles here due to living in the Valley? Have we forgotten about the children with asthma who are on medication? Have we forgotten about all of the adults, especially seniors, who have trouble breathing because of the bad air?

During this past Fourth of July, there were 199 emergency calls and 72 fires. I suggest that we first ask the firemen if they would want fireworks two times a year.

Let's be smart and think of others and say no to this bad idea.

Eileen Crowley, Fresno