

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Sunday, Sept. 16, 2012:](#)

One small step for common sense on air rules

By Lois Henry

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is learning the hard truth behind Kermit the Frog's lament "It's Not Easy Being Green."

In the midst of writing its plan for how the valley can achieve the most recent clean air standard handed down by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on PM2.5 (tiny particles of dust and soot), the district realized its plan would likely kibosh \$1.5 billion in upcoming transportation projects throughout the valley.

About \$640 million of that is set to be spent in Kern County. It includes the Rosedale Highway widening project as well as the Centennial Corridor linking the Westside Parkway to Highway 58, along with 10 other projects.

The problem became apparent as the air district compiled its emissions inventories to write the plan for this new standard.

That inventory includes emissions forecasted to increase during construction and greater use of new roadways. The district has to show it can still reach smog standards even with those new emissions.

But it couldn't.

"We were going to have to lower (the road projects') emissions budget," explained Air District Chief Seyed Sadredin. "It would kill those projects and be a huge economic loss to the valley."

This is a 35-year emissions forecast. Once in place, everyone, including local governments, will have to live with it for a generation.

The air board was set to approve the plan next month.

Instead, the board opted to delay the hearing and sent staffers back to the drawing board to recrunch the numbers.

Sadredin expects the rework will cause the district to miss the EPA's December deadline for the plan.

Local governments "are very nervous but what we told them is we will not propose a plan that will cause such tremendous economic hardship on the valley by stopping these needed projects."

I think they did the right thing, but the action is sure to invite a lawsuit.

Sadredin hopes to resolve the numbers. That's a tall order when you consider the EPA wants the amount of dust and soot in the air cut nearly in half and we weren't meeting the old standard as it was.

Oh, and the ink will barely be dry on this new PM2.5 plan when the district will have to start on a new one due in 2016 as the EPA is expected to reduce the annual standard even further.

Those ever changing standards are part of what Sadredin calls "the big picture." Which looks to me like a bureaucratic juggernaut that has less to do with actually cleaning the air than it does with justifying its own existence.

Along with those three PM2.5 plans I mentioned earlier, the valley district is operating under two different ozone reduction plans and anticipates having a new standard sent down from EPA after the election this year, which will mean another new ozone attainment plan will have to be drawn up by the district by 2015.

"It's chaos," Sadredin said.

Background: the Clean Air Act tasked the EPA with reviewing air quality standards every five years based on new science to see if new standards were needed. That, of course, has come to be viewed as a mandate for tougher standards every five years.

Meanwhile, the act was silent on whether the EPA should take into consideration whether new standards are economically or even technologically feasible. The act also doesn't explicitly state new standards will replace old standards.

Clean air activist groups have sued and won all those issues.

That's why the valley was dinged on an old standard that no longer applies. And it's why the EPA and CARB are allowing the valley air district to work with the South Coast Air Quality Management District to fund technology projects in hopes of finding new ways to reduce emissions.

The agencies even have a term for these fairy tale emission reductions calling them "black box" reductions. That's because neither current nor imminent technology exists to achieve them.

Still, EPA and CARB insist, those impossible standards must be met!

"A lot of people don't understand that policy is now being set by judges and bureaucrats," Sadredin said. "Congress, 20 years ago, wasn't thinking how five sets of new standards could create these problems."

Sadredin was invited to testify before the House Energy and Commerce Committee on the Clean Air Act this week, but those hearings have been postponed. Since the airline ticket was paid for, though, he plans to head out to D.C. anyway and meet with lawmakers individually.

He's not advocating tossing out the Clean Air Act.

"They should expect us to employ all strategies that we have available to reduce emissions and that should be the standard until technology catches up and we can do more."

I'm not sure there's any room for such common sense in today's air quality world, much less Congress. But I wish him luck.

[Fresno Bee columnist, Sunday, Sept. 16, 2012:](#)

Just like TV, clean-air effort showing reruns

By Bill McEwen

Truckers can relax. Congressman Jim Costa says that my idea of charging tolls for big-rigs on I-5 and Highway 99 for air-pollution cleanup was dead on arrival.

But Costa, D-Fresno, and Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, have renewed a decade-old effort to designate the San Joaquin Valley a federal air quality empowerment zone.

Their bill seeks \$20 million a year in federal grants through 2017 to clean the air and reduce asthma rates that are five times the national average. There is no prospect of the bill passing a gridlocked Congress this year. Costa says the goal is to "set the table" for 2013 following the November elections.

The bill summary cites air pollution's crippling impact on residents in the Valley's eight counties. Children miss more than 188,000 school days a year because of asthma. One in five children has asthma, and asthma is estimated to cost the Valley \$3.2 billion annually.

I have blasted federal lawmakers and the Environmental Protection Agency for not better supporting local efforts to meet Clean Air Act requirements. Costa says "it's a fair criticism" and this bill is an attempt to help Valley businesses meet federal guidelines without harming the Valley's troubled economy.

A similar proposal by then-Fresno Mayor Alan Autry -- backed by Valley businesses -- didn't make it to the congressional launching pad in 2002.

Four years later, Sen. Dianne Feinstein emerged from a strategy session in her Capitol Hill office and announced that she, along with Valley lawmakers, would seek \$100 million a year through 2020 -- \$1.3 billion in all -- to tackle the Valley's air mess. At that time, Sen. Barbara Boxer said she was exploring the creation of an air quality empowerment zone similar to federal economic empowerment zones.

The nation's economy was stronger in 2006. Federal debt was \$8.5 trillion, not the \$16.1 trillion of today. But the Feinstein effort went nowhere -- even with California Democrat Nancy Pelosi becoming speaker of the House in 2007, Boxer taking over as chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and Valley congressional Republicans backing the funding request.

Still, air pollution's harm to health and the economy is so great that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is willing to take another run at convincing Congress and the president to create the nation's first air and health quality empowerment zone.

"This legislation establishes the framework for bringing funding to the Valley without having to use earmarks which, as you know, has become a dirty word in Washington," says Seyed Sadredin, the air district's executive director.

The proposal also renews the debate about the air district's effectiveness. Health and community activists say the district should rely less on voluntary efforts and simply enforce the Clean Air Act.

"We feel very strongly that if the air district were to do its job, this health crisis would end," says Kevin Hall, executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition. "We want a can-do attitude, not leadership that throws its hands up in the air and walks away from the problem.

"On the issue of empowerment zones, the goal should be to focus on those communities within the Valley most impacted by air pollution."

So we're back to the big question: Will the federal government invest in the Valley's health and economy by helping clean our air? We'll know more on Nov. 7.

Throughout the presidential campaign Mitt Romney has made it clear that he's no fan of environmental causes or the EPA. Said Romney in one Republican primary debate, "I think the EPA has gotten completely out of control for a very simple reason. It is a tool in the hands of the president to crush the private enterprise system."

And history shows that even if President Barack Obama wins re-election, Congress -- whether run by Democrats or Republicans -- isn't much interested in the Valley's air troubles.

Poor air quality expected through Saturday

By Rebecca Kheel, staff writer
Bakersfield California, Sat., Sept. 15, 2012

Kern County's air quality is forecast as unhealthy for sensitive groups through Saturday, which along with the heat caused many football games in the county Friday night to be pushed back until later in the night when air quality improved a bit.

The forecast comes from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which puts out daily and real-time reports about air conditions in the Central Valley. Though the air quality is poor, it's actually slightly better than this time last year, said Jamie Holt, chief communications officer for the district.

"We have poor air, but it's not incredibly unusual for this time of year," Holt said.

Unhealthy for sensitive groups is third lowest ranking the district gives, after moderate and good. Anyone with respiratory issues like asthma or emphysema and small children are at risk at this air quality level, Holt said.

Air quality is worst during the summer from 3 to 5 p.m. after certain emissions bake in the heat causing an ozone effect. On Friday, the high for the day was 103 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

Doctors commended the football teams that pushed back their games until later in the night because of the air quality.

Dr. Sameer Gupta, an allergist with Kaiser Permanente, said poor air quality can cause problems for people with underlying issues like asthma when compacted with the heat of the day. Moving a sport event to night helps alleviate that.

"Bad air and heat don't mix," he said.

Gupta said he's glad schools are becoming more aware of the issue and taking proactive steps.

Dr. Claudia Jonah, the Kern County public health officer, said spectators at sporting events can be affected by poor air quality and heat, as well. "Anybody that's outside," she said, will be affected the conditions.

Even for people without respiratory issues, Jonah said it is good to hold off on physical activity when air quality is poor so that issues don't develop.

Pushing a football game back "is a prudent adjustment to make," she said. "so you can still have the game without health risks."