

EPA commits to help clean area air

By Rebecca Plevin, staff writer

Vide en el Valle, Tues., Jan. 31, 2012

STOCKTON -- Standing in front of a recently retrofitted train, emblazoned with the phrase, 'Ultra Low Emission Locomotive,' the regional administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last Tuesday announced \$5 million in funding and a new strategic plan, both intended to improve the San Joaquín Valley's polluted air and improve public health.

"When the Clean Air Act was signed 40 years ago, the goal was to make sure every American could breathe the same air," Jared Blumenfeld said at a morning press conference at Central California Traction Rail Company, during the first stop in a two-day tour through the region. "That promise has still never been realized in the San Joaquín Valley."

To combat the Valley's dirty air -- Sacramento has the country's fifth worst ozone pollution, Modesto boasts the country's 10th worst year-round particle pollution, and Stockton offers the 16th-worst short-term particle pollution -- Blumenfeld announced \$5 million in funding to pay for cleaner locomotives throughout the region.

Blumenfeld also launched the San Joaquín Valley Strategic Plan, which is intended to guide the agency's future work in improving air quality in the Valley.

The plan -- the EPA's first for the region -- also includes goals to improve regional water quality, protect public health, and uphold environmental justice.

"This is a treasure," Blumenfeld said of the Valley, the country's most agriculturally productive region. "But no one wants to move to a treasure where there is poor air quality. No one wants to move to a place where there is poor water quality."

Officials responded with enthusiasm to the EPA's funding announcement. But, they said, more money and action would be needed to improve the region's air quality.

As she marveled at the retrofitted train's sleek appearance and smooth, quiet movements, Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston said the grants would help clean up a segment of the local transportation system, reduce emissions between Stockton and Lodi, and generally improve the local air quality.

Compared to the original 1953 versions, the retrofitted trains -- like the one on display at the rail company -- use less fuel, emit 90 percent less particulate matter, and 92 percent less nitrogen oxides, according to the EPA.

But, Johnston said, "this is not enough, obviously." She added that in the 40 percent Latino city of Stockton -- a transportation hub connected to two highways and a port -- many more trucks and ships also need to shift to clean energy.

"We are the central transportation system in the state of California," she said. "That is why we have the air quality issues, because we have so many diesel trucks and cars moving through the Valley. To be able to start cleaning up those engines is critical to the Valley and the state."

Of the \$5 million granted to the Valley, \$2 million will go to the San Joaquín Valley Air Pollution Control District to repower two older locomotives with newer, cleaner engines.

Seyed Sadredin, executive officer of the Valley air district, said the grant would hardly cover the costs -- an estimated \$3 billion -- of replacing the diesel engines of trucks, trains, and cars with electric ones, in order to drastically reduce emissions from the movement of goods and people through the Valley.

"It is a drop in the bucket," he said of the funding.

The Sacramento Air Quality Management District received a separate \$1,097,032 to fund cleaner agricultural irrigation pumps.

Responding to the agency's strategic plan, environmental advocates praised the EPA's heightened focus on the Valley's air quality. Still, they expressed cautious optimism as to how effectively the strategic plan would spur changes in health or the environment.

The plan includes concrete goals for improving regional air quality, including reducing annual concentrations of fine particulate matter by 7 percent per year, through regulatory action and accelerating the development of cleaner transportation; and achieving a 34 percent reduction of fine particulate matter, in order to reach attainment of standards by the end of 2014.

This EPA administration has, "definitely reached out more than anyone prior, and they have brought more resources than any prior administration," said Kevin Hall, executive director of the Fresno-based Central Valley Air Quality Coalition.

"This plan is a nice overview, but when it comes to air pollution, one paragraph and three bullet points doesn't quite cover the issue."

Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction for Health and the Environment, acknowledged the agency's diesel pollution reduction efforts, but was skeptical the strategic plan would influence the agency's actions on environmental justice.

The plan features a grant of \$25,000 to Greenaction to carry out a diesel emissions reduction project in the Kings County communities of Kettleman City and Avenal.

"To us at Greenaction, a plan is less than meaningless," said Angel, who works closely with Kettleman City residents.

"We want to see action, not rhetoric and not public relations. We want to see them do the job they were created to do, and in most cases, we don't see that happening."

In response, Blumenfeld said the agency and its plan are "only as good as those words turned into actions."

"What we want is for people to partner with us," he said. "We will be stronger by doing it together."

[Vida en el Valle Asthma in the Valley Blog, Feb. 1, 2012:](#)

By Daniel Casarez

Save the date: The 2012 Air Quality Conference *at* the Radisson Hotel in Fresno on March 21. The coalition is working with other groups for this year's conference theme: Lawn Care, Landscaping and Air Quality. The conference will explore strategies and opportunities for reducing health risks, while growing a lawn care and landscaping business.

Letter to the S.F.Chronicle, Thursday, Feb. 2, 2012:

More emissions rules

Kudos to the California Air Resources Board for passing new vehicle emissions regulations ("State OKs stringent fuel rules," Jan. 28).

But enough is not being done to get gross polluters off the road. A small number of vehicles on the roads are gross polluters, but they produce a disproportionate amount of our pollution. For example, last Friday I was traveling behind an Alameda County sheriff's bus that was intermittently spewing so much smoke that I initially thought it was on fire. Sheriff, that would be bus No. 2562.

Getting the gross polluters repaired or off the road would seem to be very effective at dramatically reducing pollution and greenhouse gases.

Robert Edelman, Oakland