

Valley's poor towns need public help to drink healthy water, breathe clean air, EPA leader says

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sees a connection between cleaning up the air and water and helping the economy grow, says Gina McCarthy, who leads the federal government's environmental guardian.

As technology makes engines and water systems more efficient, people will save money and help the economy grow, she said Tuesday during a visit to Fresno. But she added that public dollars are needed to bring the same benefits to low-income communities that can't pay for new water facilities or cleaner-running vehicles.

"These are the communities hardest hit by polluted air and water," she said in an editorial board meeting with The Fresno Bee.

McCarthy was in Fresno to join state leaders — headed by Gov. Jerry Brown — at the groundbreaking of the state's high-speed rail project. The first leg of the bullet train will be a 29-mile section from Madera to the south end of Fresno.

The EPA leader said federal and state officials are working together to provide money for drinking-water fixes in the Valley. People in small, poor Valley towns, such as Orosi, Lanare and Kettleman City, have been forced to buy bottled water as they wait years for the state to spend federal money on cleanup projects.

Residents still buy the bottled water as they wait, but federal money now is flowing after California leaders streamlined the funding process to eliminate bottlenecks.

Regional EPA Administrator Jared Blumenfeld, who joined McCarthy at the editorial board meeting, said, "We have more than \$400 million in federal funding that is moving now."

For air quality, the EPA continues to work with the state to provide funding that will replace old diesel engines, but officials also are working on tighter regulation.

EPA is talking with diesel engine manufacturers in preparation to push for faster development of cleaner-running engines. California is leading the nation in on-road truck regulation as a way to comply with stringent federal ozone and particle-pollution standards.

Blumenfeld said the standards must be met because truck traffic is projected to increase. He noted Southern California's pollution emissions have been reduced while traffic has increased as tighter standards cleaned-up engines.

"We have to continue to be aggressive," he said.