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Time to take the chaos out of air quality

By Lois Henry

If you want to glimpse a small bit of rational thought occurring in Congress, tune in to the Energy and Commerce Committee at 7:15 a.m. our time Thursday for a hearing on H.R. 4775, which aims to tweak the Clean Air Act.

Why would you want to be alert that early for something as un-scintillating as a congressional hearing on the Clean Air Act?

Well, air quality is a major deciding factor in whether businesses can locate, expand or even continue operating in the San Joaquin Valley.

And we all breathe...so there's that.

Anyhow, since the Clean Air Act was created in the 1970s, our air has vastly improved.

Yes, even here.

Over the past generation or so, air pollution in the valley has been cut by more than 80 percent even as we've continued to grow, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The Clean Air Act has been the catalyst for that success.

So any tweaking, such as proposed in H.R. 4775, will likely be seen by opponents as an attempt to gut the Act.

Not so.

This bill is very narrowly focused on the bureaucracy of the Clean Air Act, which has led to some unforeseen consequences.

For instance, a provision that ambient air quality standards be reviewed every five years using the latest scientific methods has come to be interpreted as a requirement that new, stricter standards be set every five years.

New standards are set regardless of whether old standards have been achieved. Then the standards run concurrently rather than the old being rolled into the new.

The result is that areas of extreme non-attainment, such as the San Joaquin Valley, have to implement and manage several different standards for the same pollutants.

That kind of multiple overlap is confusing and costly.

H.R. 4775 would synchronize standards, eliminating overlap.

"It does nothing to roll back or stop our progress," said Seyed Sadredin, head of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which supports H.R. 4775. "It would simply stop the chaos we're operating under now."

Sadredin will testify before the committee on Thursday.

Other provisions in H.R. 4775, co-sponsored by House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, include extending the time between air quality reviews from five years to 10 in order to give air districts time to comply with standards.

It would also require the EPA take into consideration whether a new standard is economically or even technologically feasible.

For instance, the EPA recently set the national ambient air quality standard for ozone at 70 parts per billion (ppb) for an 8-hour average. We have 21 years to comply.

(For those keeping track, we haven't yet met the two previous standards of 75 ppb, deadline 2032, and 84 ppb, deadline 2024.)

Sadredin has said repeatedly that for the valley to get close to 70 ppb, we would have to cease all fossil fuel combustion here.

At some point in the future, technology may make it possible for us to squeeze out more ozone from the atmosphere, but that technology isn't here yet.

H.R. 4775 would allow the Clean Air Act to set its standards, but with a proviso that the deadline is pegged to technology that can make it happen.

It wouldn't let anyone off the hook.

There are several more tweaks in the bill.

But to me, one of its key provisions is that it would require the EPA to study and report on "foreign sources of air pollution" coming from outside the United States and determine how those sources affect different air basins and their ability to comply with the EPA's deadlines.

Of course, in the valley, we've long known that we're held accountable for some of the Bay Area's pollution thanks to prevailing winds.

But we're learning more and more just how much of China's pollution we're also paying the freight for.

It's only right that that pollution be accounted for and taken off our tab.

Because I highly doubt the Chinese are gonna give a rip if they get a citation from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District for lighting up on a "no-burn night."