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Soberanes smoke illustrates one piece of valley's air pollution puzzle

By Lois Henry

You couldn't have asked for a better real-life, real-time example of how much Northern California's pollution affects the valley than we got last Monday from the Soberanes Fire burning near Monterey.

Smoke from that fire has been affecting our air quality from the time it started in July.

But on Monday, a strong low pressure system shoved the Soberanes smoke over the coastal range so aggressively that the smoke streamed southeast and filled our valley to the brim.

Satellite photos look like a pollution angiogram.

Folks here in the southern San Joaquin Valley have long contended that a significant portion of our pollution is brought in on the same breezes that keep air in coastal areas to the north so wonderfully pristine.

But the EPA has poo-hooed that contention, holding us responsible for all pollution in the valley regardless of where it comes from.

"We are definitely saddled by their (Northern California) pollution," said Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The Soberanes smoke was a good visual example of what we've been arguing to the ARB (California Air Resources Board) and EPA all these years but with no success."

The local district even did a model in the mid-1990s that showed Northern California pollution accounts for as much as 30 percent of pollution in the valley north of Fresno and about 7 percent by the time prevailing winds bring it down our way.

Hmmph. If the Soberanes smoke was any indication, I'd say NorCal's emissions account for way more than 7 percent of our pollution.

Sadredin did agree the district's numbers are old and it would be updating that model.

Not that it will make any difference in how the EPA views our clean-up responsibility.

That's because the Clean Air Act doesn't have a provision for separating transported pollutants within states.

"The feds look at states as being responsible for pollution overall, even though, when it comes to sanctions, regions are divided so we get penalties, not the Bay Area," Sadredin said.

And that brings up the bigger issue of how the Clean Air Act has gone from being a highly useful scalpel to a sledgehammer that could crush the valley economy.

Over the years, the act has been interpreted as requiring new, much stricter standards every few years (it actually just says standards should be reviewed using the latest science), regardless of our ability to meet new standards based on current or foreseeable technology.

And the Clean Air Act gives no exemption for not meeting those standards, only penalties.

If a local district can't come up with a plan to meet air standards, the ultimate solution under the Clean Air Act is for the feds to take over.

That's where we're teetering right now, according to Sadredin.

The district cannot write a plan for new ozone and PM2.5 air standards because the technology does not exist to cut stationary sources any more than they've already been cut.

"The only thing they (the federal government) could do that we're not already doing is have no drive, no farm, no construction days," Sadredin said. "Not for one or two days. They would have to do that for months to achieve the new standards."

Regardless of how ridiculously unreasonable such actions would be, the Clean Air Act doesn't take economic or societal hardship into account.

Without help from Congress to tweak the Clean Air Act, Sadredin estimated that we could face such draconian measures in three or four years.

Which is why Sadredin has made several trips to Washington, D.C., begging for some common-sense fixes to the Clean Air Act.

Meanwhile, the district sent a petition to the EPA asking it to create national emissions standards for cars, trucks and trains.

The local air district has no authority over tailpipe emissions.

Without a reduction in emissions from those mobile sources, we simply cannot achieve the new standards, according to Sadredin.

The valley isn't alone in this.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District sent a similar petition to the feds along with a request for a national standard as well as \$15 billion to help with fleet turnover.

I was told by the EPA that it is taking these petitions seriously and researching the issue.

In the meantime, emissions standards for new cars and trucks are going down. That's long-term, but it will help, as will greenhouse gas reduction requirements.

And emission reduction technology is improving quickly from just five years ago.

Coupled with the "long horizons" built into the Clean Air Act for complying with new standards, the EPA was optimistic that the valley won't face such draconian measures as "no drive" days, or even months.

To which Sadredin replied that the EPA needs to look at a calendar.

Just looking at PM2.5 (tiny bits of dust and soot), the district is currently managing for three different standards.

We blew the 2015 deadline for a 1997 standard of 65 micrograms per cubic meter over a 24-hour period, so the district must now come up with a plan for how to reduce PM2.5 by 5 percent each year.

"That's 5 percent from today's PM2.5, not 1997's PM2.5," Sadredin explained. "And that's the easy one."

There's also the 2006 standard that requires our PM2.5 to be at 35 micrograms per cubic meter by 2019. But in order to be considered in compliance, it actually has to be at 35 for three consecutive years.

So that actually means we have to be at 35 for 2017, 2018 and 2019.

"And 2017 is just a few months away," said Sadredin.

The valley's PM2.5 is at a little more than 65 micrograms per cubic meter on a 24-hour time frame.

And all that doesn't begin to address the 2012 annual PM2.5 standard, nor the three ozone standards the district is chasing.

"The EPA likes to say we should aim high and see what happens, but this isn't theoretical for the valley," Sadredin said.

We've already squeezed what we can squeeze locally.

If the EPA declines to set a national standard, the local air district may push to have some of the underlying mandates of the Clean Air Act declared unconstitutional.

All of which initially made me think my complaints about sucking up Northern California's bad air was small potatoes.

No, Sadredin said.

When you're talking about air pollution problems as large as we have in the valley, you have to look at every possible source, including Northern California and, yes, China.

It's all part of the pollution puzzle that Sadredin and other local air district officials have been trying to get the feds to acknowledge for years.

Well, I'm glad to join the bandwagon.

Unless region gets relief, Clean Air Act requirements could end use of fossil fuels, Valley Air official says

By Doug Keeler, staff writer

Taft Midway Driller, Friday, Sept. 23, 2016

Taft and the rest of the San Joaquin Valley are facing increasingly onerous air pollution controls that, unless relaxed, could force a virtual ban the use of fossil fuels to meet federal Clean Air Act standards.

That's the message the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District brought to Taft Tuesday night.

Tom Jordan, a senior policy advisor for the SJVAPCD, outlined the situation the region is in as increasingly strict controls come into effect in the coming years in a PowerPoint presentation at Tuesday's Taft City Council meeting.

It was titled "Valley in Peril."

"We really are at a critical junction in the Valley," Jordan said.

The District has made progress, but isn't meeting current standards even with very strict emission standards for cars and trucks and controls like "no-burn" days for fireplaces and wood burning stoves.

"Getting to those next reductions is going to be extremely difficult if not impossible," said Jordan, who came to Taft at the request of Councilman Orchel Krier, who heard a similar presentation at KernCOG.

"It's a virtual elimination of emissions," he said. "We'd almost have to ban all fossil fuels."

The air quality standards that the SJVAPCD is asked to reach are based on goals set by the Clean Air Act that look only at health issues, not feasibility or affordability, he said.

"You are basically being asked to replace every car, every tractor, even farm pumps with technology that doesn't even exist yet," he said. "It's going to be nearly impossible to do business here because of the new regulations."

There are appeals available, including a five-year extension to meet goals, but Jordan said, given past dealings with the Environmental Protection Agency, he isn't optimistic.

The District tried an appeal on a short-term goal but the EPA took no action after environmental groups objected, he said.

The new strict goals don't kick in for several years, but the District is going to have to show it met the standards starting in 2017.

If it doesn't, the area could face strict sanctions, including the loss of federal highway funds which pay for much of the new construction of roads and road repairs in the region.

He said the District is going to try everything it can -- "leave no stone unturned" -- in an effort to get relief from the requirements he said are impossible to meet without a major economic disruption.

That includes working with the Valley's congressional delegation to help pass legislation to ease the requirements.

Smog repairs help to clean the air, Valley Clean Air Now officials say

By Monica Velez

Merced Sun-Star and Fresno Bee, Sunday, Sept. 25, 2016

When Deja Hassen was on her way back from Colorado to her home in Merced, she noticed the atmosphere changing as she approached the San Joaquin Valley.

"I could see the air getting thicker," the 29-year-old Hassen said.

According to the annual 2016 State of the Air study, the top four regions with the worst short-term particle pollution in the nation are all in the Valley: Bakersfield, Fresno-Madera, Visalia-Porterville-Hanford, and Modesto-Merced.

Hassen said once she hit Fresno, the air started looking worse.

On Saturday morning, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and Valley Clean Air Now, or Valley CAN, worked together to have a Tune In and Tune Up event. Workers from Valley CAN gave each car that came through a free vehicle emissions test.

Jose Marin, outreach specialist for Valley CAN, said emission test events are important to the Valley because of the high pollution rates in the air that affect community health, especially for people with respiratory problems.

“This program wants to work with the state of California so residents can abide by standards they make for California drivers,” Marin said. “Some people can’t afford to get the test or the repairs.”

If the amount of emissions from a car were over the California standard, the driver received a \$500 voucher for repair work at a local smog repair shop, said Jedidiah Morris, emissions tester for Valley CAN.

Having local shops do repairs also contributes to the local economy, Marin said, and keeps money flowing into community businesses.

Every car in California is required to have a smog check every two years, Morris said.

“If the car is running effectively and efficiently, then there shouldn’t be high emissions coming out of the tail pipe,” Morris said. “Our goal is to clean smog in the Valley. There are many vehicles running that are polluting the air.”

Morris said Valley CAN estimated 300 metric tons of smog were cleaned in a year throughout the Valley because of Tune In and Tune Up events that happen monthly around the eight counties the Valley air district serves.

“It’s very important because it affects our Valley and air quality,” Morris said. “It’s important for the vehicle because it creates the best efficiency for the vehicle.”

Hassen came to the Tune In and Tune Up event for the first time on Saturday and in search of an explanation about why her car’s “check engine” light was on. Although it turned out her emissions weren’t an issue, she said, Valley CAN workers were able to point her in the right direction.

“Now I can go get this problem fixed,” Hassen said.

Next month’s Tune In and Tune Up will be at the Stanislaus County Fairgrounds Oct. 22 from 8 a.m. to noon. Organizers will be able to test up to 525 vehicles.

Message of clean air hits home at Hidahl Elementary

By Nan Austin

Modesto Bee, Friday, Sept. 23, 2016

A light harvest haze of dust and a slightly acrid scent of wildland fires wafting on a crisp breeze lent atmosphere to the art project at Hidahl Elementary’s after-school program, where a group of kids leaned over a large poster, illustrating ways to improve the Ceres air.

The indoor activity Wednesday served two purposes. First, creating an artistic backdrop for an upcoming school assembly on Healthy Air Living Schools. Second, providing an alternative for students with respiratory issues, because Wednesday was a bad day for sensitive groups to go outside to play.

There are 71 kids at Hidahl with asthma, 15 percent of the school, Principal Vaughn Williams told students at the Thursday assembly.

That compares to a nationwide average of 10 percent of children, by federal figures. Asthma in children is higher across the San Joaquin Valley, where its geographic bowl tends to trap pollutants.

“We had some of our students come in during the recesses (Wednesday),” Williams said. “On really bad days our P.E. teachers are instructed to keep the students inside.”

Like other Ceres Unified schools, Hidahl checks air quality throughout the day and puts up a color-coded flag for healthy and unhealthy days. As quality falls, the campuses shift to indoor recess and to move physical education into the cafeteria, where kids play games or work on sports skills.

“They’re ready to go at the drop of a dime,” said Brian Murphy, Ceres Unified coordinator of student support services. The schools use the Real-time Air Advisory Network, a free program of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Signs in the parking lot urge parents to turn off their motors while waiting for kids after school and the well-attended after-school programs train Clean Air Champions.

While grown-ups debate the politics of reducing pollution, kids at Hidahl are trying to do something about it.

“We should tell our parents (to not idle). It’s important, because we’re not the ones driving. We don’t have the driver’s license,” said fifth-grader Natalia Armas-Perez, 10, after the assembly. “They should turn off the car while they’re waiting.”

Riding bikes to school would help the air, said classmate Emaly Fernandez, adding that it would also be good exercise.

“I think we could help clean the air by not using our fireplace as much. We could use the heater instead of a fireplace. They work the same,” fifth-grader Lily Smith said.

Anthony Presto, the school outreach lead for the air district, said he hopes all those great ideas will find their way into art submissions for the annual calendar, due by Oct. 3. Presto urged students to think about all the ways people could make the air cleaner, and start drawing.