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Auditor should find out why return on cap-and-trade is so pathetic

By Adam Gray

The San Joaquin Valley's air quality continues to rank among the worst in the nation. The American Lung Association gives the Valley an "F" for both ozone and particle pollution. The report points out that air quality has improved somewhat since the 1990s, but the reality remains that Valley residents breathe some of the worst air in America.

We should be implementing air quality improvement programs to clean up the air, but instead the Legislature and California Air Resources Board are fixated on lofty long-term greenhouse gas reduction programs.

At the heart of the issue is the \$3.1 billion generated from the air board's cap-and-trade program. This pot of money has sparked a feeding frenzy for a multitude of pet projects and programs. These funding fights are over pork – not climate change.

The state's Department of Finance recently reported projects funded by cap and trade will eventually remove 14.3 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions by 2095 – 70 years from now. With California currently emitting around 459 million metric tons annually, this represents just a 3 percent reduction. But the cost to taxpayers is billions of dollars each year.

That's a tragic return on our investment.

We are missing an important opportunity to fund real priorities that need our immediate attention – like improving the Valley's air quality and funding long overdue road maintenance and construction throughout the state.

The Valley's children suffer from asthma and other respiratory illnesses at a much higher rate than those on the coast. They need clean air now – not long-term greenhouse gas reduction programs that might or might not achieve results in our lifetimes.

For example, the Air Resources Board has recently introduced a plan to send millions of taxpayer dollars to indigenous communities in the Amazon rainforest in exchange for efforts to preserve trees and prevent deforestation.

In contrast, regardless of your position on high-speed rail, at the very least we can agree the project spends the dollars in California improving rail linkages between the Valley and job centers in the Bay Area. This is far preferable to the air board's proposal to send our money to other countries for ambiguous benefits with little or no accountability.

It's time we figure out just how effective, or ineffective, the state's greenhouse gas reduction programs have been at addressing climate change.

I am requesting a formal audit of these programs by the independent state auditor. In my request, I make clear the primary responsibility of the Legislature to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used in the most productive and cost-effective manner, and I ask the auditor to weigh in on the cost-effectiveness of current and proposed cap-and-trade programs.

The Legislature has the authority to make decisions related to the budget and prioritize the expenditure of billions of dollars, including cap-and-trade revenues. We must re-evaluate the current pork barrel approach to cap-and-trade dollars and make thoughtful investments in the communities with the most immediate needs.

Adam Gray represents the 21st Assembly District, which includes all of Merced and part of Stanislaus County.