

Too many buses, not enough cash

By Alex Breitler Record Staff Writer
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Some San Joaquin Valley school districts are getting nervous about an upcoming Jan. 1 deadline to replace older, polluting school buses.

Theoretically, buses that aren't compliant by then would have to be taken out of service, potentially stranding students.

The problem appears to be most significant in poor, rural school districts where money to replace a bus is hard to come by. Representatives with the Lodi and Manteca unified school districts said last week that their fleets already are fully compliant, and Stockton Unified says there is a plan in place to finish upgrading its 91-bus fleet, most of which is ready to roll.

While Valley air pollution officials say they've spent \$85 million over the past decade helping districts upgrade or replace 2,200 buses to comply with the state mandate, there still is a waiting list, with the deadline less than nine months away. Officials say there are 300 buses on the list, with an expected cost of about \$180,000 per bus.

But the air district has other costs, too, and says it can't finish the job itself. It has the broader task of meeting ever-stricter future air quality standards, which could require up to \$26 billion in incentives, according to a staff report.

"A lot more funding is needed if we want to deal with what the need is (for school buses) in the San Joaquin Valley," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district board voted Thursday to work with school districts to find new sources of money from the state and federal governments.

In a letter to the air district, the California Association of School Transportation Officials warned that the challenge is greatest in school districts serving disadvantaged communities. Many faced an "extreme financial crisis" during the recession, and any money to replace buses will come "directly out of the classrooms."

"High priority, high need school districts of the San Joaquin Valley urgently request support and assistance for emergency state funding," the group's letter says.

Beyond simply complying with state regulations for trucks and buses, cleaner buses would be good for children, who are believed to be more susceptible to diesel pollution.

"We realize this is one of the most vulnerable populations, and the air quality inside a diesel bus that doesn't have a filter is terrible," said Alexander Sherriffs, a family physician who serves on the air district's board. "This is important transportation for communities with a lot of poverty, but here we've got these buses spewing diesel exhaust which is so important in terms of the premature deaths we experience, and cancer risk from air pollution.

"Every bit we can do to clean it up is great."