

Fresno supervisors oppose air bills

Florez rushes from Sacramento to defend his measures.

By Jim Davis

The Fresno Bee

(Published Wednesday, August 20, 2003, 7:54 AM)

State Sen. Dean Florez sparred with Fresno County supervisors Tuesday after flying from Sacramento to defend several of his bills that aim to clean Valley air.

Florez scrambled to get to Fresno midday after he learned supervisors would take a stance on the bills.

"If you take a vote -- know as they tell you in Sacramento -- that the vote sticks with you forever," Florez said.

But supervisors voted 3-2 to oppose the bills, deeming them too harmful to agriculture. Supervisors adopted a resolution that was written by the Fresno County Farm Bureau.

"I think we either support our major industry in the Valley or we don't," Supervisor Phil Larson said.

Before Florez arrived, Larson accused the state senator of seeking to better his political fortunes by pandering to Los Angeles and San Francisco constituencies.

"Mr. Florez is not looking to help the San Joaquin Valley," Larson said. "Mr. Florez is looking to help his political future."

Florez asked for -- but didn't receive -- an apology from Larson: "One of the things that I was taught was to never criticize a person when they're out of the room."

Also on Tuesday, Tulare and Kings county supervisors unanimously adopted similar resolutions.

The boards for the counties objected to four bills of eight in an air package that Florez, D- Shafter, has been backing to clean the air.

The bills would end the ag industry's historic exemption from air operating permits, stop traditional farm-waste burning that saves money but sends clouds of pollution into the air, and ban dairies within three miles of cities and schools. The fourth bill would allow an added \$1 charge on Valley vehicle registration fees to raise money for clean-air projects.

The San Joaquin Valley ranks among the worst in the nation for both smog and tiny particle pollution. Most of Florez's air measures have passed the Senate and are in the Assembly.

County supervisors took up the resolution opposing the air bills Tuesday morning. The resolution was added Friday to the board's agenda after the paper versions had been printed.

Pat Ricchiuti, first vice president of the farm bureau, and Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno, told supervisors they were troubled by the air bills.

"That's all I'm asking you to do is be very cautious, because my industry is at the max," Cunha said.

They said the bills could stop student projects by groups like Future Farmers of America or 4-H. They also said the bills would force farms in California to close and make the country dependent on foreign food sources. And they said that some doctors and people with doctorate degrees are terrorizing agriculture.

Supervisors discussed the issue into the lunch hour and then agreed to make some changes to the resolution before bringing it back at 2 p.m. Supervisor Judy Case asked Cunha to make the revisions.

Meanwhile, Florez heard from an aide that supervisors were taking a stance on the air bills. He listened to part of the meeting on the Internet, chartered a single-propeller plane and flew to

Chandler Airport. He said he paid \$100 an hour for the plane out of his campaign contribution fund.

Florez arrived at the board chambers at 2:15 p.m., shortly after supervisors reconvened.

Case criticized the air bills, saying the bills, if passed, would put restrictions on agriculture more strict than any other place in the country.

"I think what our board wants and you would want are solutions that are practical," Case said.

Florez said this area is different because the air is so dirty in Fresno, Bakersfield and Visalia-Tulare. He said Fresno and Bakersfield city councils already supported his air bills.

"They recognized that of the five dirtiest cities in America, we are two, three and four," Florez said. "We're only sandwiched by Los Angeles and Houston."

Board Chairman Juan Arambula originally supported adopting the farm bureau's resolution, but asked supervisors to wait a week.

Supervisor Susan B. Anderson also wanted to wait a week, noting that the item was added at the last minute as an addendum to the agenda.

"We really didn't give the public an opportunity to give input on this," Anderson said.

But Supervisors Larson, Case and Bob Waterston wanted to vote on it, saying there is an urgency because the bills are being debated at the Capitol this week.

Reliance on cars should be addressed, group says

Transit funding cuts threaten Valley air quality

By Audrey Cooper, The Record, August 20, 2003

Car-dependent communities have fueled air pollution across the country, and the federal government should do more to solve the problem, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a group that advocates for more public transit, says efforts by the Bush administration and some members of Congress to cut money for public transportation threaten improvements in air quality.

Work is under way in Congress to reauthorize a massive transportation funding bill. A multibillion-dollar spending plan could be finalized later this year.

The group calls for new fuel-efficiency standards, more money for public transportation and a greater emphasis on local transportation planning that minimizes car trips.

Nowhere is the unhealthy link between cars and air pollution truer than in the Central Valley, where many residents commute long distances to work. In the air basin that includes San Joaquin County, cars and trucks are responsible for up to 57 percent of the pollution problem, according to local air regulators.

The STPP report lists the metropolitan areas with the unhealthiest air. The top five cities are all in California, and three are in the Central Valley. They are Riverside, Fresno, Bakersfield, Los Angeles and Sacramento, respectively.

"The number of cars and trucks on the road has increased; the number of trips taken has increased; the number of miles driven is increasing. In most cases, this is the leading cause of air pollution," said Dr. Howard Frumkin, a member of the American Public Health Association.

"The problem is that our transportation system relies on cars, and alternative means to get around are less available," he said.

Air pollution has been linked to cancer, hypertension, strokes and premature deaths. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that air pollution costs the health-care system more than \$40 billion a year, a number that is certain to grow, Frumkin said during a telephone conference Tuesday morning.

Anne Canby, president of STPP, said that while tailpipe emissions per mile driven have decreased substantially over the past 30 years, more cars are going farther than ever before. That has stalled improvement in air quality, she said.

According to the report, much of the improvements in air quality over the past several decades could be undone if people continue to rely on their polluting cars.

The report recommends the Bush administration back off from recommendations that a new transportation-funding bill cut money that goes to transit projects that would lead to cleaner air.

The Altamont Commuter Express train, for example, receives money from the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement program.

The Record Editorial, August 20, 2003:

Is an environment of collaboration possible?

If nothing else, Utah Gov. Michael O. Leavitt would make things intriguing at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Leavitt, a three-term Republican governor, is President Bush's pick to replace Christine Todd Whitman as director of the EPA. He's either a great collaborator or a great deceiver, depending on whom you ask.

"He has different views," confirms Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy. "It would be interesting to see how he would influence the agency."

Take Interstate 15, a federal highway that links Las Vegas with Salt Lake City.

Leavitt cites the highway as an example of compromise and economic necessity.

It was designed to unsnarl a major commuter bottleneck while paving over only 114 acres of Great Salt Lake wetlands. Most Utah residents agreed it would benefit their quality of life. He was re-elected twice after announcing the project.

Environmentalists disagree. They point to his secret negotiations with the Interior Department to lift wilderness protections. They're unhappy with the proposed destruction of fragile shores and the harm done to migratory waterfowl patterns.

Not surprisingly, the issue is in the courts.

Placing Leavitt at the helm of a federal agency also would be engrossing because he's been such a strong states-rights proponent on environmental issues.

He and Oregon Gov. John A. Kitzhaber, a Democrat, created a concept in the mid-1990s known as Enlibra.

It's a word taken from Latin that conveys the need to consult all sides to achieve a collaborative result. Among its principles: national standards with local controls and market incentives -- but not mandates. Enlibra has been adopted by Western governors of both parties.

Leavitt cites his involvement with a task force to clean the air over the Grand Canyon as one of his most-important accomplishments. It involved 13 states, 13 American Indian tribes and three federal agencies during the Clinton administration.

Leavitt doesn't lack for confidence. "I am nothing but satisfied with my environmental record," he said. "I think the facts bear that out."

It will be up to Congress to determine that during his nomination confirmation hearings.

Before the first gavel is rapped, Leavitt already is more interesting than his predecessor. Unlike Whitman, he has first-hand knowledge of the challenging issues facing Western states.

The Modesto Bee, Aug. 20

ENVIRONMENT

Pollution decision delayed

A request from Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties to study a plan to break off those counties into a separate air quality planning area was expected to go before the valley air district governing board as early as Thursday. However, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had not received an official request from the counties to place the matter on Thursday's agenda, district spokeswoman Janice Parker said. "We're anticipating it will probably go either Sept. 18 or Oct. 16," she said. Stanislaus and Merced county supervisors voted earlier this month to join San Joaquin County in making the request. Supporters of the concept say that by creating a separate planning area, the three northern counties might avoid federal sanctions the valley faces if it does not meet a 2005 federal deadline to clean up smog.

Common pesticide found in rainfall

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FRESNO -- Pesticides sprayed during the agricultural off-season have been found in high levels in rainfall in the San Joaquin Valley, threatening aquatic life, according to a U.S. Geological Survey study.

The levels of diazinon and chlorpyrifos collected in Modesto and surrounding fields during January and February rainstorms in 2001 exceeded levels safe for aquatic life, according to the study released Monday.

"It wasn't like you had pure rain and it picked up chemicals as it drained off. Sixty-eight percent of it had existed in the rainfall itself," said Charlie Kratzers, a U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist who assisted in the study.

Glenn Brank, Department of Pesticide Regulation spokesman, said the levels of toxicity found in the samples were not a threat to human health but were to tiny organisms such as water fleas.

The department, which sponsored the study, also is devising regulations to limit the use of these pesticides, he said.

"The winter rainstorm runoff as a primary source or component of transportation pesticides always seem to be a factor to us. What we have now is solid evidence and data on this," Brank said.

Diazinon is a popular chemical used to kill insects in orchards from November to January to control hole-boring insects.

Chlorpyrifos is a popular pesticide used in homes to treat termites and lawns.

Both chemicals, which can also run off into streams, are organophosphates, a class of chemicals that is highly toxic.

Excessive exposure can cause neurological problems.

Kratzers said the pesticides can get into rain after they are shot into the trees by a machine and they linger in the air sometimes for weeks or months before getting washed out or deposited.

Diazinon and chlorpyrifos already pollute the San Joaquin Valley's waterways. During the same study, researchers took samples from the San Joaquin, Merced, Stanislaus and Tuolumne rivers and Orestimba Creek and found that 60 out of 240 of the samples exceeded state guidelines for safe levels. The highest concentrations of diazinon were found in the San Joaquin River.

Since 1996, diazinon manufacturers have been working on a plan to reduce runoff. The plan has showed some reduction, but not enough to meet safe levels for aquatic life, Brank said.

In December, diazinon will be phased out for residential use following a decision by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Air status decision may be delayed

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer
The Bakersfield Californian
Tuesday August 19, 2003, 10:50:09 PM

Valley air-quality officials on Thursday are expected to delay a decision to brand the region with the federal government's worst smog designation, a move that has broad implications for public health and the economy.

The valley is currently designated as a "severe nonattainment" area under the federal Clean Air Act. This gives the region until 2005 to meet air quality standards, a deadline that San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials say is virtually impossible to meet. Missing the deadline would bring steep penalties and a federal takeover of the valley's air-quality program.

Last year the district began discussing the prospect of opting for "extreme nonattainment" status, the worst category, which would give the valley until 2010 to meet air quality standards. It would also require more local businesses to obtain air pollution permits, and may require some to pay higher fees.

The district planned to decide by September to opt for the extreme category, but recent actions by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have complicated the picture and also created a little more time, said Dave Jones, air district planning director. The district's board will be asked Thursday to postpone the decision until January to create more time to study recent federal regulatory changes.

The most significant is an EPA plan to impose an eight-hour measuring standard for ozone. The present one-hour standard is more stringent numerically, but measures only peak pollution levels. The eight-hour standard is considered more protective of public health because it measures long-term exposure. But it will not be adopted until December at the earliest.

"We think it's best to wait to see the final rule so the board will have complete information," Jones said. "We still think we should go to extreme, but we just think we should wait."

Ozone, formed when exhaust fumes react in heat and sunlight, causes a range of nasty problems, from reduced breathing capacity and throat irritation to tissue damage, heart and lung disease, and reduced crop yields.

EPA plans to reclassify all air basins under the eight-hour standard starting in April 2004, but it hasn't decided whether to withdraw the one-hour standard or leave it in place. Even if withdrawn, the one-hour standard would remain in force for a year until the new standard takes effect, Jones said.

"We basically exceed the eight-hour standard more than anybody else in the U.S.," said Jones. "We don't have the highest readings, but we have a lot more days over the standard."

The air district board meeting starts at 9 a.m. Thursday in Fresno at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave. Kern County residents can participate by live videoconference at the air district's Bakersfield office, 2700 M St., Suite 275.

News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley

The Associated Press
In the Bakersfield Californian
Tuesday August 19, 2003, 10:10:10 AM

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) - Staff members of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are advising members of the district's governing board to wait a few months before volunteering to join Los Angeles in a federal category reserved for the nation's worst smog offenders.

Control district staff said the federal smog standard will change in the next two years, and that it may be premature to join because it's unclear how the new rule will affect the valley.

"There are a lot of unanswered questions right now," district planning director Dave Jones said. "We anticipated having full knowledge by this time, but the questions haven't been answered."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is scheduled to release details of the new standards in December.

District officials have said they want to volunteer for the worst-offender status to push the valley's 2005 smog cleanup deadline to 2010 and avoid expensive penalties. Staff plan to explain their reasons for waiting at a board meeting on Thursday.

EPA to set new rules for cleaner air in parks, wilderness areas

By JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press Writer

In the Bakersfield Californian

Tuesday August 19, 2003, 04:15:18 PM

WASHINGTON - In a court settlement with an environmental group, the Environmental Protection Agency agreed Tuesday to set new rules by April 2005 for reducing air pollution in national parks and wilderness areas.

The EPA would require states to set limits on air pollution from power plants and other sources whose emissions drift hundreds of miles and cause haze and visibility problems in remote areas.

Those limits, meant to improve visibility at 156 parks and wilderness areas, would be established according to EPA guidelines required by a court settlement with Environmental Defense, a group based in New York. The settlement requires approval from the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia after a 30-day public comment period. The EPA would also be required to propose the new rules by April 2004. The rules would go into effect the following year.

"The importance of clean-air measures and clean air in our national parks is underscored by the millions of Americans who are right now visiting these treasured places with family and friends," said Vickie Patton, a senior attorney for the group in Boulder, Colo.

Her group sued to enforce 1977 Clean Air Act amendments that set goals for improving the visibility in 35 national parks, 120 wilderness areas and Roosevelt Campobello International Park near Lubec, Maine, which is overseen by a U.S.-Canadian commission.

Some of the most popular parks - and residents living in regions nearby - would be affected, including Maine's Acadia, Montana's Glacier, Arizona's Grand Canyon, Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina, Virginia's Shenandoah, Yellowstone in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho and California's Sequoia and Yosemite.

The EPA had no immediate comment Tuesday.

In 1999, the EPA issued regional haze regulations to require states to develop visibility improvement plans. Along with requiring states to take the lead, the EPA also said certain groups of polluters contributing to regional haze should have to install the "best available retrofit technology" to cut emissions.

But after a coalition of utilities, mining interests and the state of Michigan sued, claiming the regulations were arbitrary and unlawful, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ordered the EPA to rework part of its regulation.

The appeals court, however, upheld the EPA's fundamental goal of having the states put pollution controls in place to return parks and wilderness areas to "natural visibility" over 60 years.

The Bush administration's former EPA administrator, Christie Whitman, had endorsed the Clinton administration regulations requiring that visibility be improved by 15 percent each decade at each of the parks and wilderness areas.

Fresno No. 2 for dirty air

An advocacy group lists Fresno among the most dangerous places in the nation to breathe.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Wednesday, August 20, 2003, 7:19 AM)

Fresno and Bakersfield again have landed among the top three in a nationwide ranking that nobody covets.

A national advocacy group lists the two San Joaquin Valley cities among the three most dangerous places in the nation to breathe. Behind the Riverside-San Bernardino area in Southern California, Fresno is No. 2 and Bakersfield No. 3.

The Surface Transportation Policy Project, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., announced the ranking Tuesday in a report aimed at federal funding for mass transit, light rail and other air-friendly travel options.

In May, the American Lung Association issued an identical ranking for the counties containing Riverside-San Bernardino, Fresno and Bakersfield.

It's no surprise in Central California.

"We're all suffering from this air," said Carolina Simunovic, environmental health coordinator with Fresno Metro Ministry. "We have to make major policy shifts. We need to depend on mass transit and stop designing transportation around freeways and sprawl."

Officials for the transportation policy project said 133 million people throughout the country breathe unhealthy air.

The group will use the new report in fighting current congressional proposals to reduce funding for rail, busing and bikeways as well as relax requirements on transportation planning.

The group's report argues that poor air quality related to vehicle travel over the last decade has aggravated mushrooming lung problems in America.

Researchers counted the number of days each city recorded above 100 on the air quality index, a scale running from a healthy zero to a lung-searing 500. At 100 on the index, people with sensitive lungs are affected.

Fresno had 421 such days from 2000 to 2002, the report said, and Bakersfield had 409. Riverside-San Bernardino had 445. No other city in the country had more than 255.

Officials said air pollution is one reason childhood asthma has doubled over the last two decades.

"The health costs related to air pollution and lung problems are between \$40 billion and \$60 billion each year," said Anne Canby, president of the Transportation Policy Project. "There are many lives at stake."

But the group's research inflates air pollution numbers and fails to connect air quality to asthma and other lung problems, said critic Joel Schwartz, senior fellow at Reason Public Policy Institute, a Libertarian think tank. He said the group is using scare tactics.

"Like the American Lung Association, they are playing games with numbers," Schwartz said. "If you use averages and present the numbers in certain ways, you can make it appear that there is an upward trend. On the whole, the air is much cleaner around the country than it was 20 years ago."

Schwartz agreed smog has become worse in the Fresno area and remains about the same in the Bakersfield area.

The Valley air basin, which includes Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Tulare counties, has the nation's third-highest total of smog or ozone violations this summer -- 18. Only the South Coast Air Basin, with 52, and Houston, with 20, are worse.

Ozone, the major ingredient in smog, forms in warm, sunny weather as certain emissions from cars, power plants, paint and other sources combine in the air.

Health officials say the corrosive gas triggers respiratory problems, especially in young children, the elderly and those already suffering with lung ailments. One in six children living in Fresno County has asthma.

Since dirty air from vehicles accounts for more than 40% of the smog-making gases in many American cities, health officials say transportation planning must incorporate cleaner alternatives.

"We've made a lot of progress in reducing vehicle pollution over the last 20 years," said Dr. Howard Frumkin, an Emory University professor speaking for the American Public Health Association. "But thousands of Americans suffer and even die prematurely because of air pollution each year."

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com <<mailto:mgrossi@fresnobee.com>> or 441-6316.

UNHEALTHIEST CITIES

Days above 100 on the air quality index, 2000-02

1. Riverside-San Bernardino 445
2. Fresno 421
3. Bakersfield 409
4. Los Angeles-Long Beach 255
5. Sacramento 163
6. Pittsburgh 134

Source: Surface Transportation Policy Project

Smog hangs heavier over local cities

Report finds childhood asthma on the rise despite touting three decades of emissions progress

By Douglas Fischer, staff writer, TriValley Herald, Aug. 20, 2003

Air pollution in many of the nation's cities has gotten worse -- not better -- over the last decade, despite aggressive efforts to clean up auto emissions and retrofit belching power plants, according to a report from a group of public health doctors and experts.

The findings, released Tues-day by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, come as Congress takes up a Bush administration proposal to loosen federal air quality standards on power plant upgrades. It also presents a bleak polyphony to much-hyped gains made over three decades in tailpipe and factory emissions.

Tailpipe emissions have dropped 90 percent since 1970, but miles driven have soared 162 percent since then, while the average number of trips made by cars and trucks has leapt 57 percent, according to the Washington, D.C. -based organization.

The result is an increase in premature deaths and ailments such as asthma, heart attacks and respiratory problems, said Dr. Howard Frumkin, chairman of the Department of Environmental Health at Emory University in Atlanta and a member of the project.

Childhood asthma has doubled in the United States, with almost one out every 12 children, or 6.3 million, now carrying inhalers to school. Asthma remains the leading cause of hospitalization for children in America.

"When air pollution rises, asthma attacks increase," said Dr. Carlos Camargo, an emergency room doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital and a specialist in asthma. "The problem is, of course, preventable."

Regulators often stress that air quality over the past 30 years has improved mightily in many urban areas across the United States. The problem, said Anne Canby, the project's president, is that many of those regions have slipped in the past decade.

In California, Oakland saw a 3 percent bump in the number of bad air days from the first half of the 1990s to the last half, according to the report. Fresno jumped almost 28 percent -- the largest gain of any California city -- while bad air days in San Jose fell by one-fourth and stayed even (with zero days) in San Francisco.

Almost 14 percent of all adults in Oakland and Fresno have been diagnosed with asthma at some point, the report claimed. And scientists are finding that those adults -- and their children -- tend to be low-income minorities.

Dr. Luz Claudio, an associate professor at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, said 40 percent of the students at one elementary school in Harlem had been diagnosed with asthma, with 26 percent of the school exhibiting active symptoms of the ailment.

"Those numbers are not uncommon for other schools in similar neighborhoods," she said.

The Bay Area remains on the cusp of meeting federal air quality rules but falls well out of compliance with stricter state standards. Local environmentalists recently won a key court case forcing regulators to better define how they intend to scrub pollutants from the air. The regional air and transportation districts drafting the blueprint have appealed.

Said Frumkin: "The problem is not that people drive cars. The problem is our transportation system relies more and more heavily on cars. And alternatives -- be it walking, biking or public transit -- are less and less available to people.

"Public health is an afterthought for many transportation planners."