

Stanislaus to vote today on plan to escape EPA's pollution district

By MELANIE TURNER, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, August 5, 2003

Stanislaus County today will consider asking the valley air district to separate it and two other northern counties from their more polluted counterparts in the south. Today's decision by the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors will follow an earlier 4-1 vote by the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors to make the request.

Merced supervisors could consider the matter as early as Aug. 12. The requests would be scheduled to go before the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on Aug. 21.

Each area within a district can have its own goals and rules for reducing air pollution, according to an official with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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.

"If the northern area is in compliance (with the Clean Air Act), there's no reason for it to be penalized," said Jack Sieglock, chairman of the San Joaquin Council of Governments.

Others, however, are cautious, at best, about the idea.

"At this point, it's pretty tough to see any clear benefit from it," said Jan Ennenga, executive director of the Manufacturers Council of the Central Valley. "I think it's premature to say whether or not the concept is going to be beneficial."

Stanislaus County Supervisor Pat Paul said: "I think we should move cautiously. One part of me says I can't stand to be lumped in with the whole group," she said. On the other hand, said Paul, whose district includes businesses such as Hunts and Hershey, "I don't know what the restrictions are for industry."

Concerns that businesses in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties are being punished unfairly based on air quality some 200 miles away led the San Joaquin Council of Governments to commission a study last year examining the possibility of breaking the three northern counties into an air district of their own.

The report explores alternatives, such as the separate planning area. About six weeks ago, the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors voted to ask the air district to study the concept.

The EPA would have the final say, and it will consider such a request only if it comes from the California Air Resources Board.

At least one EPA official questioned the logic behind the idea.

"I continue to maintain I don't see how it's possible from a totally objective point of view to say that the San Joaquin Valley isn't one air basin," said Kerry Drake, air division associate director for EPA Region 9.

The eight-county air district covers 25,000 square miles between Stockton and Bakersfield. It is among the worst air basins in the country for smog.

Geographically, Drake said, the air basin is one area. Its population patterns and weather are similar from one end to the other, too.

He said he hopes the valley will use its resources to clean up the air.

"We'll be obligated to consider it if the state presents it to us, but it just seems a stretch," Drake said of the idea of a northern planning area.

There are several complicating factors in dividing the district, including the fact that the air district is required to meet federal standards for smog by 2005, and air officials say the district won't meet that deadline.

The air district governing board could vote as early as next month to downgrade the valley's federal nonattainment designation for clean air from severe to extreme, pushing back the clean air deadline to 2010.

Under the designation, new and expanding businesses would be subject to increased fees. But if the valley fails to meet an air quality deadline, sanctions, such as the withholding of federal money for transportation projects, could be imposed.

San Joaquin officials say it's not right to penalize the northern counties with fees and sanctions if they can meet the deadline and avoid the extreme designation.

But others say all the counties contribute to the problem. San Joaquin, in fact, ranked third-highest for nitrogen oxides emissions in 2002. Nitrogen oxides, which spew from vehicle tailpipes and other combustion sources, are one of two main ingredients in smog.

EPA officials say the northern counties would have to demonstrate that they have a separate and distinct air region before they could become a separate planning area.

"They all impact each other, they all share the same air and they're going to have a very difficult time making their case," said EPA spokeswoman Lisa Fasano.

Ozone Poses New Health Threat in Denver

By ROBERT WELLER

Associated Press Writer

Published in the Tulare Advance-Register, August 5, 2003

DENVER (AP) -- Ozone is posing a new health threat to Denver residents, a year after health officials said they had stamped out smog as an air pollution problem.

Unlike the brown cloud produced by smog, ozone is a colorless, odorless gas. Air quality experts say the new problem reaches north from Denver all the way to the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park, 30 miles away.

"We were stunned by it because it has been so many years since we have seen anything like this," said Richard Long, director of regional air and radiation programs for the Environmental Protection Agency.

A monitor last month recorded the highest ozone levels since 1986. So far this summer, the city has violated new, stricter federal air quality standards 33 times.

"It is a health threat," said Dr. Sverre Vedal of National Jewish Hospital, the only medical research center in the nation devoted entirely to respiratory, allergic and immune system diseases.

"It's largely from the tail pipes," he said.

For years, the brown cloud of smog defined Denver's struggle to control air pollution.

Smog - made up of particulates like soot, road sand or ashes - was mostly a problem in the winter. It disappeared as the state put restrictions on wood-burning fires and aerosol sprays, and introduced oxygenated gasoline. Chemicals are now used to melt road ice and any sand used to improve traction is quickly swept up.

Last summer, federal officials said Denver was the first city in the nation to get a clean bill of health for the five federal air quality standards it once violated.

Little notice was given to Long when he warned ozone levels were deteriorating.

Ozone is made up of industrial pollution and car exhaust, and it's mostly a problem on bright sunny days when the air heats up.

Experts said it is the latest headache to emerge from Denver's population boom. Long said the area's large number of sport utility vehicles contributes to the city's steady stream of ozone alerts.

Adriana Raudzens, transportation organizer for the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Sierra Club, said Denver is the fifth-most congested city in the nation - and getting worse.

Vicki Patton, a senior lawyer for Environmental Defense, said state officials were hasty in declaring Denver's air pollution problem solved.

"In fact the air quality monitoring this summer demonstrates that we have a serious public health problem that puts our children, elderly and those who enjoy Colorado's great outdoors at risk," she said.

AQMD Updates Blueprint to Curb Pollution

'We are drowning in ozone, and there is no relief in sight,' says a board member, as the agency bemoans an inability to do more.

By Miguel Bustillo, Los Angeles Times, August 2, 2003

Southern California's smog-fighting agency approved a new air pollution plan Friday despite objections from environmentalists, who said it would doom the region to "decades of smog."

The board of the South Coast Air Quality Management District — which is charged with cleaning the air breathed by 16 million people in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties — unanimously passed the updated blueprint at a meeting in Diamond Bar.

The new plan includes relatively few additional measures to combat Southern California's smog problem, which appears to be getting worse after years of progress. Instead, the plan calls on state and federal authorities to take greater action to reduce the region's dirty air, and contains a list of more than 30 ways they could do so. The pollution sources in need of greater regulation, according to the district, include planes, trains, automobiles and cargo ships.

The proposal outlines local regulatory solutions for only one-fifth of the air pollution the district still needs to cut to meet a federal clean air mandate by 2010. District officials say they have authority over only one-fifth of the region's air pollution sources, primarily local industry.

By approving the admittedly incomplete plan Friday, district board members hoped to send a political message to the California Air Resources Board and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Give us greater authority to fix the pollution problem or do something about it.

"We are drowning in ozone, and there is no relief in sight," said board member Jane Carney, mentioning the main component of smog.

Although environmentalists agreed with the district that the state and federal governments need to do more, they had urged rejection of the plan.

They said the list of recommendations carries no legal weight, and argued that a protest vote would place pressure on state and federal officials to respond with action. But board members rejected that argument, saying a delay would accomplish nothing.

State and federal regulators clearly got the message; they sent delegates to the local hearing and promised to continue cooperating on solutions to Southern California's unhealthy air.

"With respect to the gauntlet being thrown down before the Air Resources Board, I am here to tell you we accept the challenge," the state board's executive director, Catherine Witherspoon, told the local officials.

The EPA's representative, Jack Broadbent, pledged cooperation, but he predicted that his agency probably would reject the state's call to take on added responsibility — a response that did not satisfy the district board.

"Four years from now, with all the people moving into this area, we are going to be in serious trouble," said board member Hal Bernson, a former Los Angeles city councilman.

Panel Urges State, U.S. to Help Curb Smog

Southland air board calls on higher authorities, saying it has done all it can. Environmentalists say it could do more.

By Miguel Bustillo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer, August 1, 2003

Southern California's air quality agency, which has begun losing ground in its battle with smog after years of gains, is poised to approve a new plan today that includes only modest new controls and instead calls on the state and federal governments to take a greater role in fighting dirty air.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District — which is charged with curbing air pollution for 16 million residents in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties — contends that it has neared the limit of what it can do to fight smog. While it is the main agency Southern Californians turn to in the battle against the unhealthy haze, it has authority over only about one-fifth of the pollution sources, district officials point out.

As a result, the three-year blueprint the district board is set to approve today in Diamond Bar comes with a strong political message — a list of measures the local officials want the California Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to adopt to help the pollution problem. They include tougher emissions controls for planes, trains, automobiles and cargo ships, as well as regulation of consumer products such as hairspray.

"The current plan is potentially one of the more controversial plans we have had in recent years," said Barry Wallerstein, the district's executive director. "The bottom line is that we have such a severe air pollution problem in Southern California that everyone needs to contribute fairly. No one should be sitting on the sidelines."

Although environmental groups agree that state and federal authorities have not done enough to curb Southern California's notorious smog problem — which may again be the worst in the nation this year — they are united in opposition to the district's plan. They assert that the region's air regulator could do much more.

The groups are pressuring the board to delay a decision until its staff comes up with stronger local smog-fighting tactics.

The district is bound by federal law to reach a set of smog reduction goals by 2010. But 80% of the necessary reductions are not addressed in the plan, noted the conservation groups, which include the Coalition for Clean Air, Physicians for Social Responsibility and the California Environmental Rights Alliance.

"This is the weakest clean air plan we have seen in a decade," said Gail Ruderman Feuer, the director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Southern California Air Project. Right now there is no meat."

Feuer described the district's list of suggestions to state and federal regulators as a positive step, but without legal force, amounting to "a prayer that another agency will come through."

Wallerstein complained about the attitude of state and federal regulators Thursday during a briefing on the plan. He spoke of talks with the state Air Resources Board as resembling "hitting one's head against a brick wall."

State officials insisted they are doing their part and said they would attend today's hearing and debate which measures they were willing to take.

Some of the measures the district is recommending that others take are bound to generate strong opposition from industry — and also from the public. One, for example, is for the state to use lasers to randomly screen the emissions of cars and trucks as they enter a freeway, and then to try to get the worst-polluting vehicles off the road. The proposal raises many of the same civil liberties issues that have made red-light traffic cameras so unpopular, district officials acknowledged.

Some of the measures they are proposing to adopt are also controversial. One, modeled on an effort already underway in parts of Northern California, would study a ban on fireplaces and furnaces in all new homes in Southern California. Home builders have already expressed opposition.

Regulation of air quality has reached such a challenging moment because many of the easier steps to reduce smog have already been taken. Economic arguments could make it difficult to touch ships, railroads and airplanes, despite their clear contributions to smog.

Bob Wyman, a partner in the law firm of Latham & Watkins heads a regional coalition of businesses — including the oil, energy, aerospace and entertainment industries — that lobby on air regulations. He advocates that consumers be given more information so they can, for instance, choose household products that are good for air quality. Giant transportation businesses would be much harder to regulate. "Ships engage in commerce around the world," Wyman said. "Trucks are often owned by independent drivers who cannot afford new vehicles."

Twenty years ago there were 152 days in the Los Angeles Basin in which ozone, the main component of smog, reached what the federal government deemed unhealthy levels.

By the late 1980s, that number had dropped to about 40 a year. A few years ago, California officials bragged that Houston, not Los Angeles, had become the capital of smog.

That has changed, however. The Los Angeles region had 50 days of unhealthy air last year, and is on pace to far surpass that number this year, with 44 days already as of Thursday.

Officials attribute the jump to increased population, the continuing preference of many Southern Californians for sport utility vehicles and other gas-guzzling automobiles, among other causes.

[Letters to the Editor, Modesto Bee, August 5, 2003:](#)

Stop urban sprawl

It is time for a growth ban to stop all urban sprawl throughout the entire Central Valley. The valley is home to the richest farmland in the world and is under no obligation to become one vast bedroom community for the Bay Area.

The entire coast has had a "nimby" (not in my back yard) mentality for years; hence, the overflow of people who need housing. The air we breathe is awful, due to the last 15 years of uncontrolled growth, and it's caused by more cars, not ag burning, fireplaces or tractors, as the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board would like to have the public believe.

Quite possibly, when the valley has a growth ban, the Bay Area towns will find a way to solve their own housing problems. People can live near their jobs -- what a concept.

No one can fault those who have chosen to commute 100-plus miles so that they can own a house. But those of us who live here need to preserve our "better life," not let overcrowding happen in the valley.

JACK ARNOLD
Modesto

[Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor](#)

Cleaning the air

By Josette Merced Bello, Public Education Administrator, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

(Published Tuesday, August 5, 2003, 5:11 AM)

A recent survey shows that Californians are concerned about air pollution but don't connect it to their own vehicles. Considering that on-road vehicles account for 37% of the Valley's smog problem, it's important to plan activities to help reduce air pollution.

Simple things like banking at the grocery store, packing a lunch and combining errands reduce trips and emissions. So does postponing single-destination trips until they can be done with other outings.

Sharing shuttle duties to school and youth activities gives busy parents -- and our air -- a break.

Amtrak lets us work or enjoy family time while sparing the air.

The way we drive impacts emissions. Hard accelerations use extra gas and pollute more. Cruise control keeps the speed constant, allowing the engine to operate more efficiently.

Typically, new vehicles are cleaner than older ones. But before you buy, consider the mileage and emission ratings, which can be found on new car stickers and the Internet.

Electric-gasoline hybrid cars are affordable, get great mileage, run clean, don't need to be plugged in and generate their own electricity. They also get up to highway speed quickly.

It's encouraging that most Central Californians recognize vehicle emissions as a serious problem. But it's also important to understand how our daily decisions impact air quality. If we want to breathe clean air, we must make wise choices.\