

Unhealthful air expected today

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, Aug. 10, 2007

Tulare County air is expected to fall into the "unhealthful for sensitive groups" category today, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reported. Active children and adults and those with lung disease, such as asthma, are encouraged to avoid or reduce prolonged or heavy exertion outdoors.

Calif. farm town is nation's smoggiest

By SUDHIN THANAWALA

In the Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle, Contra Costa Times, Washington Post, San Diego Union Tribune, Capital Press Ag Weekly and Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, Aug. 10, 2007

Lying in a rich agricultural region dotted with vineyards and orange groves, this central California community seems an unlikely place for a dubious distinction: the most polluted air in America.

Hemmed in by mountains, Arvin is the final destination for pollutants from cities as far away as San Francisco Bay, and its wheezing residents are paying the price. Many of them complain that the air smells toxic.

"It's common for people here to say, 'I'm going to the beach so I can breathe,'" said Raji Brar, a councilwoman and member of the board that oversees the San Joaquin Valley's Air Pollution Control District.

Arvin has none of the smoke-belching factories or congested freeways of cities such as Los Angeles. In fact, it produces little pollution. But the pollutants that blow in from elsewhere get trapped by the mountains, causing airborne particles to coat homes and streets and blot out views of the nearby Tehachapi range on hot summer days.

Doctors and public officials say asthma and other respiratory problems are common among the 15,000 residents who live 20 miles southeast of Bakersfield. People complain of watery eyes, dry throats and inexplicable coughs, particularly in the summer, when temperatures can climb over 100 degrees and stay there for days.

Arvin's level of ozone, the primary component in smog, exceeded the amount considered acceptable by the EPA on an average of 73 days per year between 2004 and 2006. Second on the EPA's list was the Southern California town of Crestline, at 65 days. The San Francisco Bay Area averaged just four days over the same period.

"Sometimes you go outside and can hardly breathe," said Irma Garza, 48, who has lived here most of her life. "The worst part is in the summertime you can't send your kids outside to play."

Ground-level ozone is created when car exhaust and other noxious fumes are cooked by heat and sunlight. It can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic lung diseases like emphysema and bronchitis and may even reduce the immune system's ability to fight respiratory infections, according to AIRNow.gov, a Web site developed by several agencies, including the EPA, that monitors ozone levels around the country.

A 2002 study in the British medical journal The Lancet found children who breathe polluted air are more likely to develop asthma, although that conclusion has been challenged by other researchers.

Specific asthma data for Arvin is not available, but surrounding Kern County has a childhood asthma rate that far exceeds state and nation averages, with 17.5 percent of children under the age of 18 suffering from the condition. The state average is 14.8 percent, the national average 12.2 percent, according to the California Department of Health Services.

Dr. Ronnie Pasilliao, who works at Arvin's community health center, said asthma and allergies are the primary conditions he treats.

Despite the health complaints, the valley's air-quality board voted in April to extend by 11 years the region's deadline to meet federal ozone standards, saying cleaning up the air by the previous target date of 2012 was not possible. Brar, the city council member, voted against that decision.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger criticized the move when the California Air Resources Board voted in June to approve the local board's extension. A few days later, he fired the board's chairman.

The EPA is now considering the extension.

Brar and other local officials say Arvin has been neglected by smog regulators because its residents are mostly poor, Hispanic farmworkers.

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the valley air district, denied that and said he is trying to improve the board's efforts in the town.

"Everything we've done here is for Arvin," he said. "But unfortunately, Arvin will see progress later than any other area because that's where pollution flushes out of the valley."

In the meantime, residents make small adjustments to reduce their exposure to the dirty air.

Garza's son wears a mask when mowing the lawn. Mario Moreno, 19, who works at a local pizzeria, tries to stay indoors on hot days. He remembers feeling dazed and short of breath when outside for too long in the "nasty, muggy air."

Air conditioning is a luxury many residents cannot afford, said Amalia Leal, a family advocate with the local school district. Without the skills or resources to relocate, many families are trapped in Arvin.

But her advice to parents with chronically asthmatic children is simple.

"Move," she said. "If you love your child, move."

Ana Maria Corona is doing just that. After living in Arvin for four years and being hospitalized seven times for her asthma, she and her husband are looking for a new home in Arizona.

"It's not easy for us to leave this place," she said. "But what is my future here? What is the future of my children?"

City gets sprayed for West Nile virus

BY EMILY HAGEDORN, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Aug. 10, 2007

While most residents were calling it a night Thursday, a pesticide was sprayed over metropolitan Bakersfield for the first time ever.

The spraying is in response to Kern County's mounting West Nile virus cases, which currently stand at 48, more than any other county in the country.

It came with little more than 24 hours notice, angering some people concerned about what the chemicals will do to their health.

But the 11th-hour announcement could be considered a luxury. State and federal law does not require public notification, said Robert Quiring, manager of the Kern Mosquito and Vector Control District. And in Kern County, action needed to be taken quickly.

"This is one of those unique seasons that in spite of the control activity, it's not slowing down," Quiring said. "With that in mind, it was just time to go to plan B."

About 8:30 p.m., a twin turbine airplane sprayed water-based pyrethrin to kill mosquitoes, said Laura McGowan, spokeswoman for Clarke Mosquito Control, the Illinois-based company doing the spraying. The plane dropped 0.76 fluid ounces of pyrethrin per acre from about 300 feet.

The company is scheduled to do another spraying Monday, she said.

Health effects

Pyrethrin kills mosquitoes by attacking their nervous systems.

It only kills mosquitoes that are in flight, which is why the spraying took place in the evening, when mosquitoes are most active, McGowan said. The spraying was scheduled to be completed by 1 a.m..

"It is certainly much, much lower in toxicity than some of the older generation chemicals that were used to fight mosquitoes ... like DDT," said Glenn Brank, spokesman for the state Department of Pesticide Regulation. "It's used in lice shampoos for children."

The chemical, approved by the Environmental Protection Agency, reportedly causes no health problems for most pets, people or the environment.

"If that's the case, why do we have to consult our physicians?" asked Sharon Borradori, program director at the Kern County branch of the American Lung Association.

Asthma and allergy sufferers or anyone sensitive to chemicals should consult their physicians if symptoms flare, said Daniel Kim, director of health promotion and public information at the county Department of Public Health.

Pyrethrin, extracted from chrysanthemum plants, is not a "toxic substance," but it can cause wheezing and sneezing in some allergic people, said Dr. Patrick Leung, a Bakersfield allergist.

Before future sprayings, concerned asthmatics should make sure to use their preventive inhalers "to protect their lungs, so they are not going to respond to a lot of [particulate matter in the air](#)," said Dr. Paula Ardron, an allergist and immunologist with Bakersfield's Kaiser Permanente. Keeping windows closed and staying inside also helps, she said.

Direct skin contact to high amounts of pyrethrin can cause numbness, itching, burning or stinging, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is one of those products where the dosage makes the toxicity," McGowan said. The droplets are "invisible to human eye. Several fit on the head of the pin."

Late notice?

With its multiple human infections, Kern County has reached the "outbreak in progress" stage of the CDC's suggested response to West Nile virus, McGowan said. In this stage, widespread aerial spraying should be considered, the guidelines say.

McGowan said she first was called about the spraying in Bakersfield on Monday. An alert went out to media Wednesday night.

"We really can't say, 'Yes we're spraying, but we don't exactly know where,'" she said. "You need to have everything lined up first (before announcing it)."

Considering Kern County is entering the months when West Nile virus is typically most active, action needed to be taken.

"This is a public health emergency," Kim said. "We need to treat the mosquitoes as quick as possible."

Still, at least one resident isn't happy.

"I'm really pissed that they gave me a whole day's notice," said Katrina Beeson, 40. "I can understand them going over marshes, but they don't need to be spraying over the neighborhood."

Beeson has idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a fatal disease of the lower respiratory tract that causes widespread scarring of the lungs. Because of the spraying, she decided to stay inside and turn off her swamp cooler, worried the chemical would filter inside.

"The last thing I need to do is breathe in pesticides," she said.

Pesticide Watch, a Sacramento-based activist group, spoke to Sacramento's City Council Thursday night about that community's use of pyrethrin a little more than a week ago.

"If spraying does take place, people deserve to know when," said Paul Schramski, the group's director. "People need time to prepare and protect themselves," which means shutting windows and possibly leaving town.

The Kern health department started an aerial spraying hot line Wednesday to take calls from concerned residents.

"We care about what they're saying," said Kim Rodriguez, marketing and promotions associate at the department. "We are listening to every phone call."

Spraying must be approved by the Federal Aviation Administration, which requires authorization from the city manager, mayor and county officials, Quiring said.

"In light of the governor's emergency declaration, it was not a hard decision to make," Quiring said, referencing the proclamation Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed last week that set aside \$1.5 million to fight the virus.

The spraying will cost \$60,000 to \$80,000 for each application, Quiring said.

Late Thursday, the governor awarded the district \$200,000 for the treatment.

Boxer says EPA stalling ports' air cleanup

At a hearing in L.A., the senator says the agency is delaying cleaner-fuel mandates for the benefit of the international shipping industry.

By Janet Wilson

L.A. Times, Friday, August 10, 2007

Joined by a chorus of California and local officials, U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer accused federal air regulators Thursday of stalling on rules for highly polluting ocean vessels and said Congress must act instead.

The California Democrat, chairwoman of the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, held a hearing at the Port of Los Angeles to highlight the crippling health effects of freighter ships on communities near the port and to push for passage of legislation she has proposed with fellow California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

But shipping industry representatives and federal air officials said international regulations are in the works that might be implemented just as quickly and would have a more effective global reach.

More than 3,000 huge freighters stream into Southern California's ports each year, making them one of the region's largest sources of air pollution, and traffic is projected to double in coming years. The ships, which use dirty "bunker" fuel made from the dregs of petroleum refining, emit

more than half of all sulfur in the region. Sulfur contributes to cancer-causing diesel soot and other dangerous air pollution. An estimated 5,400 premature deaths annually in Southern California are linked to air pollution, along with millions of asthma attacks and missed school and workdays.

"We must set standards now," Boxer said. "The Bush administration is waiting for international negotiations to produce tighter standards, but those negotiations were recently delayed for at least another year. We must stop wasting time."

Boxer said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson and his staff were delaying so many initiatives for industry's benefit at the expense of public health, including this one, that "they ought to be renamed the Environmental Pollution Agency."

EPA spokesmen said the agency has proposed strict controls for oceangoing vessels but wants to see them ratified by the International Maritime Organization, an arm of the United Nations. Currently the IMO allows 45,000 parts per million of sulfur in ship fuel. Both the EPA's proposal and Boxer's legislation would slash that to 1,000 parts per million, requiring either the use of cleaner fuel or technology to scrub pollutants from dirty fuel.

"Pollution knows no political or geographical boundaries, and the current proposal to harmonize emissions standards at ports worldwide would deliver cleaner air to all Americans," said Jessica Emond, the agency's deputy press secretary. "EPA expects to make significant progress on this proposal over the next year."

U.S. officials and others had high hopes that a tough new international standard would be passed this year, but international marine officials ordered a year of study on competing proposals

T.L. Garrett, vice president of the Pacific Merchant Shipping Assn. in Long Beach, said that although he believed the EPA could enact national regulations applying to foreign vessels in U.S. waters, it would be better to have tough, new standards applied internationally.

The group, which represents nearly all marine shippers using West Coast ports, has sued the California Air Resources Board to overturn a new regulation that requires vessels to use cleaner fuel within 24 nautical miles of the coast. Nonetheless, Garrett said all shippers are voluntarily complying with the rule, and some, such as Maersk shipping lines, have switched to cleaner fuel in their main engines.

"Bottom line, I think what struck me at today's hearing is how close we are on a lot of the overall issues," Garrett said, noting that Boxer's and the EPA's proposals are nearly identical, and either could be in place by 2010, but probably not before. "We acknowledge the problem, and the industry is proactively working toward solutions," he said.

California air board Chairwoman Mary Nichols, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Riverside County Supervisor S. Roy Wilson, Long Beach Mayor Robert Foster and the heads of the L.A. and Long Beach ports testified at the hearing in support of Boxer's legislation and their desire to ensure that other U.S. ports develop regulations as strict as California's, to keep business on a level playing field while saving lives.

Two doctors also testified about the grave health effects of port-related air pollution, as did Rep. Hilda L. Solis (D-EI Monte), who has proposed companion legislation in the House. Boxer declined to speculate on the bills' chances.

Beijing to Test Anti-Pollution Measures

China to Temporarily Ban Cars from Streets Next Week to Combat Air Pollution

By Edward Cody

Washington Post, Friday, August 10, 2007

BEIJING, Aug. 10 -- Despite official hesitations, more than a million cars will be barred from Beijing's streets next week in a test of radical anti-pollution measures for next summer's Olympic Games, the city announced Friday.

The sweeping restrictions, set for Aug. 17 to Aug. 20, illustrated China's determination to be seen at home and abroad doing as much as possible to combat the capital's noxious air pollution in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Games.

The Communist government has vowed to make the games a success, hoping they will mark China's emergence on the world stage. But Jacques Rogge, the International Olympic Committee president, suggested Wednesday that some events, such as long-distance races, may have to be postponed if smog is too heavy during the competition.

Rogge's comment, in a CNN interview, differed significantly from repeated assurances by Beijing officials that air quality here is improving constantly and will be acceptable for the two-week Olympic period starting Aug. 8, 2008. Wang Wei, an executive vice president of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, reiterated the assurances at a news conference two days before Rogge's warning.

As Wang spoke, however, the city was blanketed by a thick haze of humidity, dust and exhaust fumes. The pollution also was visible during festive ceremonies televised worldwide Wednesday evening from Tiananmen Square to mark the beginning of the one-year countdown.

Beijing's Olympic Committee pledged the city will restrict cars during the Games as one of several steps to reduce pollution, predicting a third of the 3 million vehicles ordinarily on the capital's streets would be banned. Officials from the committee and the Beijing traffic department said last month a test ban would probably be enforced Aug. 7 to Aug. 20, roughly matching next year's Olympic period. But those suggestions were rejected and next week's more limited four-day test -- including a weekend -- was announced instead.

Olympic antipollution planners sought a week-long test, including workdays as well as weekend holidays, according to He Kebin, a professor at Tsinghua University's Environmental Science and Engineering Department and an adviser to the planners. But the government cut it back, he said, out of concern for disruption in the lives of Beijing commuters.

"I think people's lives will indeed be affected because of the traffic controls from Aug. 17 to Aug. 20, and more people's lives will be affected during the 2008 Olympics," he said. "But many Chinese people have said they would be willing to sacrifice convenience for a clean 2008 Olympics."

Du Shaozhong, deputy director of the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau, told reporters that, under rules for the testing, only cars whose license plates end in odd numbers will be allowed on the streets Aug. 17, only those with even numbers will be allowed Aug. 18 and so on through Aug. 20.

Police cars, taxis, ambulances and buses will not be affected, he said. Liu Xiaoming, deputy director of the city transport commission, promised increased bus and subway service during the test period.

The driving curbs, which include even stiffer restrictions on government cars, will keep up to 1.3 million cars off the road, Du predicted. During the four days, experts will conduct tests around the city to see how much pollution is reduced, he added.

Environmental activists have long urged Beijing officials to take steps to cut the number of cars on the streets, which increase by 1,000 a day. But even while recognizing pollution as a major problem, the government has been reluctant to act. One reason is that the auto industry is an

important part of the economy. In addition, the Communist Party has based its rule in recent years on pulling more citizens in the middle class, a transition often marked with the purchase of a car.

Environmental officials, nevertheless, have placed high hopes in next week's experiment because pollution dropped significantly during last November's Sino-African summit conference, when police restricted the number of private cars to allow the assembled chiefs of state to escape traffic jams.

Beijing drivers, who endure some of the world's most clogged streets in addition to the foul air, said they could see the logic in banning cars for the Olympics, but they were quick to point out the need of many suburban residents to drive to work because of infrequent bus service in outlying areas.

"At least the government is trying, which is good news," said Deng Xiaorong, an editor.

"It's hard for those colleagues who live far away from the company," objected Li Haibin, a cellphone engineer.

Zhang Ge, a computer salesman who lives in the distant suburbs, said officials were just trying to apply makeup on Beijing's long-term pollution problem as a way to please foreigners coming for the Olympics. What is needed is a long-term solution, he said.

"And no one mentioned what the punishment will be if we violate the rule," he added. "Is it coercive or voluntary? Few people will follow the rule if there is no sanction. Anyway, I will drive even if they punish me during the test period, because I really need a car."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, Aug. 10. 2007:](#)

Partnership for a better Valley

Panel will discuss crucial issues in Hanford meeting.

The high-powered California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley will hold a meeting in Hanford today. There's an agenda already prepared, of course, but we figured they wouldn't mind if we threw in a few items of our own.

The partnership was created in 2005 by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to address long-neglected Valley needs. It is led by a 31-member appointed board comprising cabinet secretaries in the Schwarzenegger administration, local elected officials, business people and various experts.

The heavy lifting is done by a set of work groups focused on such areas -- in addition to air, water and transportation -- as education, energy, health, economic development, land use and agriculture, communications and economic development.

The group's focus today -- and ours -- is on the Big Three of regional issues: air, water and transportation.

Air quality

The partnership's Air Quality Work Group will be giving a report on the latest efforts to meet ozone standards in the smoggy Valley. That's been a touchy issue since the Valley air district and the state Air Resources Board signed off on an attainment plan that delays a full cleanup until 2024. The Bee has been one of many voices that objected to that delay, and in response the local air district and the state air board have promised to do everything possible to beat that official deadline.

That's at least mildly encouraging, and we hope the partnership's board signs on to that effort. What's more, the partnership can do a great deal of good by using its high-level clout to push for more funding and more aggressive regulatory schemes to address the Valley's bad air.

Water quality

The Water Quality, Supply and Reliability Work Group will report on efforts to develop a Valley-wide Integrated Regional Water Management Plan. That's a great idea, and we hope it's pushed forward with enormous energy.

We have long called for more and stronger regional approaches to such issues as air, water and transportation problems that transcend local boundaries. Such a regional water plan would be a model for more such useful exercises.

We'd like to see the partnership adopt the three-pronged approach to Valley water needs we've been pushing: new surface water storage capacity, increased use of underground "water banking" and dramatically heightened conservation efforts.

Transportation

The Transportation Work Group will report on the latest efforts to improve crumbling and crowded Highway 99. Its members will also discuss high-speed rail. Both are critical issues for the Valley

Highway 99 will be getting \$1 billion from last year's infrastructure bond package. That's great -- but that's only about 25%, or less, of the money that will be needed just to bring the highway up to a decent capacity and condition. We urge the partnership to help find ways to fund the rest of the improvements that are needed.

High-speed rail is vital to the Valley, and the greatest obstacle to its development right now is the governor himself. We'd like to see members of the partnership, many of whom have the governor's ear, help persuade him of the enormous economic and environmental impact a high-speed rail system would have on the Valley and the state.

That's not the full range of issues confronting the Valley and its residents, and the partnership group will hear reports from all the other working groups. But if they come away from their visit to Hanford with a better understanding of the urgency of dealing with these Big Three, we'll all be better off.

[Tri-Valley Herald, Commentary, Friday, August 10, 2007](#)

GOP tangles with old foe on warming

By Daniel Weintraub - Sacramento Bee

JERRY Brown, who has been confounding California Republicans for more than 30 years, is at it again.

The Democratic attorney general — who served as governor in the 1970s and 1980s, led the California Democratic Party, ran for president and then served as mayor of Oakland — is now in the middle of a dispute that has been blamed for blocking passage of the state budget more than six weeks after it is due.

Brown has made global warming one of his top areas of concern and he is using his office to pressure local governments to account for the potential increase in greenhouse gas emissions when they consider new development. He has sued San Bernardino County to block its adoption of a 25-year master plan meant to guide growth in that booming region.

Brown's campaign has put the state's business leaders on edge and their complaints found a receptive audience among Republicans in the state Senate. As part of the price for their votes on the state budget, those lawmakers are demanding a provision that would stop Brown — or anyone else — from filing any more such lawsuits until 2012.

Sen. Dick Ackerman of Irvine, the Senate Republican leader, said Brown's attempt to use global warming to slow development harkens back to his time as governor, when he proclaimed an "era of limits" and "basically stopped all freeway construction and development" for his eight years as chief executive.

Ackerman fears that Brown also will try to use global warming to restrict the use of public works bonds voters approved last fall.

"When the people of California overwhelmingly approved \$40 billion worth of bonds, they wanted to put something in the ground, not have it all spent on litigation and challenges," Ackerman said. "His 'MO' has been to try to stop development and use this issue as a crutch. He'll do the same thing when people try to build a road or repair a levee."

In an interview, Brown told me that all he is doing is enforcing the California Environmental Quality Act, which requires local agencies to consider the potential environmental impacts of new development and take reasonable actions to reduce those effects.

Assembly Bill 32, the state's historic bill to fight global warming, requires California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by about 25 percent by 2020. But it will be years before that law takes full effect.

First, the Air Resources Board must write the regulations. Then, Brown suspects, business groups will sue to try to block many of those new rules.

In the meantime, Brown said, state and local officials should be doing everything they can to avoid making the problem worse, and he believes they were required to do so even before the passage of the new law.

Brown said he believes his office will soon reach a settlement with San Bernardino County. He also has sent letters challenging housing developments in San Jose and in Yuba County. He is monitoring transportation plans in Sacramento, Fresno, San Diego and Kern counties. And he is reviewing plans by Chevron and Conoco-Phillips to expand their oil refineries in Richmond.

Brown was a champion for growth in Oakland when he was mayor, and he says his goal is not to stop development. He just expects local governments at minimum to identify greenhouse gas emissions that can be attributed to the actions they are about to take and then consider ways in which they can reduce those emissions. He said his model is Marin County, which voluntarily adopted a greenhouse gas reduction plan last October.

The dispute has also put Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in a political bind.

As a proud advocate of AB 32, the governor has traveled around the country and around the world promoting California's leadership in the fight to limit greenhouse gas emissions. He says he thinks Brown has probably gone too far, too fast, in pressing their mutual cause, but he does not believe his fellow Republicans should be using the issue to further delay an already tardy budget.

Behind the scenes, Schwarzenegger's staff has been trying to broker a compromise that would limit lawsuits over land-use planning until the state establishes standards for local governments to use in measuring the potential greenhouse gases from development. A provision restricting the use of AB 32 in such lawsuits might satisfy Senate Republicans, even though Brown says he believes the state's other environmental laws give him wide leeway to intervene.

A perpetual minority, Republicans in the Legislature have leverage only when a bill requires a two-thirds majority to pass, as is the case with the budget. That's the only time their votes matter and that's the only time anyone listens to them. At the moment, on this issue, they're making it clear that they want to be heard.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the controversial visit by EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson. For more information, contact Maricela \(559\) 230-5849.](#)

Una visita muy controversial

El director de la agencia federal de protección al medio ambiente ignoró a grupos de base y activistas.

By Eduardo Stanley

El Sol, Friday, August 10, 2007

FRESNO — La agencia (EPA, por sus siglas en inglés) es la encargada de proteger el medio ambiente y, por lo tanto, a las personas. Por eso integrantes de la Coalición para la Calidad del Aire del Valle Central —que integran decenas de grupos, organizaciones y activistas del Valle— se plantaron frente al local donde Stephen Johnson se reunió con empresarios y miembros de gobiernos locales para expresar su repudio. Y algo más.

"EPA no respondió al pedido de una reunión que le hicimos varios días antes que Johnson viniera a Fresno", dijo Ray León, de Latino Issues Forum. "Ellos escuchan más a la industria que a la gente, pero no entienden que no hay economía sana sin población sana", afirmó Laiza Bolaños, de la Coalición.

Pero los casi 60 activistas que con pancartas, banderas y entonando eslógans criticando a EPA se dieron cita frente al edificio donde Johnson estaba reunido con autoridades locales, lograron su objetivo y, finalmente, fueron recibidos —aunque por escasos minutos— por el director de EPA.

Aunque las cosas no quedarán aquí.

La Coalición insistió en la necesidad de dialogar con la agencia en búsqueda de soluciones a los graves problemas ambientales que, dice, EPA pretende ignorar.

"En nuestra comunidad tenemos un serio problema con el agua", dijo Salvador Martínez, quien viajó desde Arvin hasta Fresno para hacerse escuchar por los representantes de EPA. "Si se tratara de Beverly Hills en lugar de una pequeña población rural, este problema ya estaría solucionado".

De acuerdo a Martínez, este problema existe desde hace décadas, en parte por el uso indiscriminado de pesticidas que contaminaron el agua. "Desde hace años nos dicen que limpiarán el agua, hasta hablan de opciones, pero al final no lo hacen".

Martínez, quien se moviliza en silla de ruedas, agrega que el gobierno inclusive cambió los estándares para calificar la calidad del agua —aceptando mayores niveles de contaminación como algo natural. "No quiero esperar otros 25 años para tener agua limpia en mi comunidad".

Las quejas contra EPA se sucedieron.

"La agencia no acepta las leyes protectoras de California", dijo Erin Rodgers, de Union of Concerned Scientists, de San Francisco. "La Suprema Corte tuvo que recordarle a EPA que su obligación es proteger la salud de la ciudadanía", agregó con ironía.

Nettie Morrison, de Allensworth, quiso asegurarse que la preocupación de su comunidad sería escuchada. "Si ponen las dos lecherías propuestas cerca de nuestro pueblo afectará la calidad del aire y del agua, además del olor".

Mientras los activistas enumeraban, en la calle, lo que consideran falta de interés de EPA por implementar las leyes de protección al medio ambiente y a la población, adentro Johnson estaba reunido con empresarios y miembros de gobiernos locales. El directivo de EPA vino al Valle ante una invitación del diputado federal George Radanovich (Republicano de Mariposa).

De acuerdo a un asistente del diputado, la intención fue tener reuniones en un grupo reducido para lograr mayor productividad, aunque no elaboró qué se discutió en esas reuniones ni qué quiere decir "productivo".

Ante las presiones, Johnson aceptó reunirse muy brevemente con la prensa y con los activistas.

Ante representantes de los medios, Radanovich dijo que la contaminación del Valle es preocupante y que deben tomarse medidas al respecto sin afectar la economía.

Johnson, por su parte, habló vagamente sobre el problema y destacó que la implementación de nueva tecnología ayudará a reducir los niveles de contaminación.

Luego recibió un pliego por parte de activistas locales y se le reiteró la invitación y necesidad de que EPA los escuche.

"Se plantearon muchos casos de contaminación, por ejemplo, lo de Kettleman City, donde se quiere instalar una planta procesadora de heces humanas para fertilizantes", dijo Ray León. "Para EPA todo está bien, pero no hay estudios ni escucha la opinión de la gente".

León agregó que recientemente un grupo asesor de científicos recomendó a EPA elevar los estándares de polución, pero la actual administración las ignoró. "Johnson apoya a las empresas, muchas de ellas contaminantes".

De acuerdo a Laiza Bolaños, desde 2002 California estableció estándares más estrictos pero no fueron aprobados por EPA.

Los problemas de contaminación ambiental, coinciden los activistas, afectan a la población de manera directa, creando serios problemas de salud, como el asma. Y no por accidente, la mayoría de las empresas más contaminantes, dicen, se establecen casi siempre en áreas donde predominan comunidades pobres y de color —como en el Valle.

"Si queremos cambios, tenemos que cambiar varias cosas, por ejemplo a los políticos que no apoyan una mejor calidad ambiental", afirmó Bolaños. "Pero queremos dialogar y buscar soluciones conjuntas".