

Nunes, Costa, Cox collide on climate change, yet they represent the same Fresno County region

By Rory Appleton

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Just outside Fresno's southeastern border lies a road in which the urban rolls into the rural in a juxtaposition common in California's central San Joaquin Valley.

A trucking yard sits a few dozen feet from residential homes. Children play at an elementary school flanked by farmland – tangled, empty vines and trees sprinkled with white blossoms. The snow-capped Sierra Nevada are unusually visible after February storms pushed out Valley smog.

This is Lone Star, an unincorporated community found on Fowler Avenue between Jensen and North avenues and a physical representation of the environmental challenges of the area.

The air that typically obscures the mountains is often judged as the most toxic in the country and is blamed for cutting the life expectancy of the children at Lone Star Elementary and hundreds of thousands of their neighbors. The trucking yard and farms are a prime target for environmental reform, with agriculture finding itself in a difficult spot as costly regulations and brutal market factors collide.

These issues are not at all specific to Lone Star, but the community is unique in that it also serves as the exact dividing line for the federal leadership partially tasked with fixing them.

Three California congressional districts – the 16th, the 21st and the 22nd – meet at Lone Star. More than 2.2 million people are governed based on their home's relation to this area, and their leaders have starkly different plans to curb climate change.

If someone were to stand on the northeast side of Fowler near Jensen, for example, climate change barely exists. Here in the 22nd, long held by Tulare Republican Devin Nunes, environmental conspiracies and expensive job-killing legislation – many of which are associated with climate change – are to be rooted out.

That same person could throw a rock toward North and into the 21st, where newcomer TJ Cox, D-Fresno, is not far from supporting the [Green New Deal](#) – a progressive resolution that seeks to zero out greenhouse gas emissions and one that has dominated the national conversation on climate change. Businesses, cities, farms and individual citizens can and must adjust to green energy standards, Cox contends, and many already have.

And to the northeast, Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, takes a familiar position in between his two neighbors, though he is decidedly closer to Cox on most of the issues. Climate change is real, he said, but Bay Area pollutants and cyclical changes also play a role. The Green New Deal sets positive, aspirational goals, Costa said, but it's lacking in detail and too punitive toward ag.

Leadership from the Valley's congressional delegation is only one slice of perhaps the area's most complex issue, the environment, but farmers, scientists and interested citizens have one eye fixed on how local representatives help shape the national conversation on climate change.

Well-studied problems

The Fresno area's struggle with pollution, clean water and climate change is well-documented.

A [November study](#) from the [Energy Policy Institute](#) at the University of Chicago noted the Fresno metropolitan area had the worst concentration of particulate pollution in the country. The amount of soot in the air was roughly twice what the World Health Organization sets as a maximum guideline, and thus residents could see up to a year of their lives reduced by related health issues.

Gov. Gavin Newsom chose Riverview Elementary near Parlier – little more than 10 miles from Lone Star – as the site to sign his first bill, one that allocated \$131.3 million in part for emergency relief to communities without safe drinking water. The students at Riverview have been forced to drink bottled water for months. Some must go to a friend's house in order to bathe safely.

More than 100,000 Valley residents do not have clean drinking water, a February 2018 UC Davis [study](#) concluded.

On the climate change front, a [recent study](#) from the University of Maryland's Center for Environmental Science concluded that if current high emission levels continued, Fresno's average winter temperature will be about 7 degrees higher in 80 years. It will also be nearly 56 percent drier.

Climate change has deeply affected agriculture – the Valley's identifying industry – and will continue to do so.

A [University of California](#) study found the Sierra snowpack, a primary source of water in the Valley, could reduce by as much as 65 percent by 2070-2090. Global crop production will need to double by 2050 to meet growing population needs, but the average yields of many Valley crops such as table grapes are expected to decrease in that same amount of time due to shifting climate.

The [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) raises and spends about \$400 million annually to study and combat pollution problems, said Samir Sheikh, its executive director and air pollution control officer.

Sheikh explained that the Valley is basically a bowl that traps in emissions, be they from neighboring regions or produced locally. Trucks flood Valley roads due to its position between major shipping hubs. Agriculture, industry and a fleet of aging vehicles play a part.

"We have to work harder to reduce pollution than other regions," Sheikh said. "We release much less pollution, but there's no ocean breeze or other meteorological conditions to help."

California has also experience a major uptick in wildfires, which compound air quality issues. Despite this, Sheikh said, the district has made continual progress, and 2018 saw the region's lowest ozone pollution levels on record.

But the task is still daunting.

The district has had some success in lowering emissions through incentive programs – everything from large grants for businesses to [offering free repairs](#) for cars that can't pass smog checks – but it has struggled to reach even decades-old federal air quality standards for ozone and fine-particulate matter.

After failing to reach four-year health standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency, the district has a new five-year plan that calls for \$1 billion in raising and spending per year for five years – more than twice its current budget.

Sheikh said the district will continue to work with federal leaders for help in this area, but he believes most of the funding should come from the state. Air pollution tends to hit disadvantaged communities harder, and two-thirds of California's disadvantaged communities are within the Valley.

Ground zero: Arvin

Perhaps no community bears the weight of the region's environmental issues as much as Arvin, a town of about 20,000 in southeastern Kern County. Mayor Jose Gurrola said he isn't aware of any empirical studies focused solely on Arvin's air or water quality, but he knows what's at stake.

Pollution created locally and moving through from other regions sits heaviest in Arvin due to its deep position in the atmospheric bowl that is the central San Joaquin Valley.

"If I asked a class to raise their hands if they have asthma, more than half the kids would raise their hands," said Gurrola, who is also a substitute teacher. "A lot of students miss school due to asthma and respiratory problems."

Arvin's water is also tainted by unhealthy levels of arsenic and 1,2,3-Trichloropropane, a chemical allegedly spread through fumigants made by the Shell Chemical Company and Dow Chemical Company.

"Every month, my constituents receive a notice of their arsenic level attached to their water bills," Gurrola said. "Research has shown we should not be drinking this water, bathing in it or cooking with it, but we can't afford bottled water."

Gurrola said his constituents believe their water is making them sick. It's unclear just how long the residents have been exposed, since the arsenic levels have only been deemed unhealthy since the federal Environmental Protection Agency adjusted its standards in the early 2000s.

The mayor said he believes the air and water have contributed to high rates of birth defects, cancer and diabetes in Arvin and the surrounding Kern County.

The city has received help from state and federal grants that have paid for new trees and fresh wells, but it may not be enough, Gurrola said. If the wells don't work out, Arvin will need to build and maintain a \$10-13 million water treatment plant.

According to Gurrola, funding has been a bit hard to come by. At 20,000 residents, Arvin is too large to qualify as an agricultural community worthy of grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is too small to receive some grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Gurrola was grateful to Cox, his congressman, for actively listening to these concerns and working to change these grant requirements and secure new avenues of funding for Arvin.

"It's good that (Cox) is an engineer," Gurrola said. "He understands us and the science of climate change."

He also praised Sen. Kamala Harris, state Sen. Melissa Hurtado and Costa, who previously represented Arvin and helped secure funding to transition its cop cars into hybrid vehicles. The city will soon take that a step further, adding electric city buses to its fleet.

Gurrola, who serves in a nonpartisan office but is a Democrat, said the city's previous representatives – state Sen. Andy Vidak and Rep. David Valadao, both Republicans – offered some assistance but typically opposed environmental interests due to party loyalties.

"People talk about the Blue Wave and immigration being a No. 1 issue among my constituents, but it's not," Gurrola said. "It's not. It's water, air and jobs. When I knocked on doors for my own campaign, those were the questions people had. And it showed in the polls."

Cox charts his path

TJ Cox is the Valley's newest member of Congress, but the freshman seems to have already positioned himself to affect change for the region's air and water quality problems.

As a member of the House ag committee and the new chairman of the House Natural Resources subcommittee on oversight, Cox said he will first work to ensure government agencies no longer suppress climate change data.

With that done, the government can then work on what Cox believes are the two primary ways in which the Valley will slice into its own air and water problems: Innovation efforts at local colleges, and increased incentive programs to bring those innovations to farms, businesses and homes.

"The greatest challenges bring the greatest opportunities," Cox said. "I don't accept the notion that sustainable technologies are anti-business."

The Fresno congressman is an ardent supporter of electric vehicles, telling The Bee's editorial board during his campaign that he believed the Valley could create thousands of jobs – beyond the obvious environmental benefits – by embracing that industry.

Recharging stations would have to be built and maintained all along the well-traveled routes from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

Cox, an engineer by trade who also runs a variety of businesses including a nut processing center, said most of the farmers he knows have already made great strides, converting to solar energy or using dairy digesters to convert methane into renewable energy. They are trading in their two-stroke diesel tractors for electric models.

Cox referenced a [recent study](#) conducted by UC Davis in which dairy cows were fed a seaweed supplement, which cut down the animals' production of greenhouse gases. If every dairy cow in the world

was fed in this way, Cox said, it would reduce carbon emissions by two gigatons each year – roughly the amount of pollution put out by the entire United States in the same period.

Green New Deal

Innovation and incentive programs are not new ideas for Valley politicians, but Cox could soon throw his name behind something a bit more radical for the area: The unabashedly liberal Green New Deal.

“I am not supporting it just yet,” Cox said. “I’m still waiting for the particulars of the legislation to come.”

The Green New Deal, like the New Deal before it, is a framework that is expected to have waves of legislation added onto it over time.

Cox does, however, support the primary tenants of the Green New Deal.

“The community, economic, social and environmental benefits (of the Green New Deal) – we can have that all,” Cox said. “I’m talking about clean, renewable technology investment; quality, affordable education and health care for all and post-secondary education for all. Everyone in America knows we need to do this.”

The potential hangup for Cox, he said, was making sure the bill was positive on agriculture. He hopes to share the technological strides by the industry with his fellow members to ensure any environmental legislation is not too punitive.

“It doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game,” he said. “We just need the technology and the leadership to move forward.”

Costa not as enthusiastic

Jim Costa was less supportive of the Green New Deal.

“The goals are aspirational, and that’s positive,” Costa said. “But it’s very deficient in that it lacks the detail and does not seem to be very focused on how you achieve solutions in the short and long term.”

Costa said he worries the legislation will be too hard on agriculture, particularly after a document from Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s office [referenced the difficulty in stopping “farting cows.”](#)

“Clearly the group of people who put that (document) together have not spent much time if any out on a farm,” Costa said. “I’d love to have them spend the day with me. I could show them the difficulties of ag.”

Costa and his sister grow almonds, while his cousin grows table grapes. The family previously ran a dairy, but that operation was sold 35 years ago, Costa said.

Like Cox, Costa also praised the innovation taking place at local universities. He is a Fresno State graduate.

Ag community’s position

Costa’s read on the Green New Deal was music to the ears of local ag leaders, who also worry about the legislation’s possible wrath.

Ryan Jacobsen, CEO of the [Fresno County Farm Bureau](#), said the central San Joaquin Valley is already on the cutting edge of environmentally friendly innovations in agriculture. Any attempts to pile federal regulations onto existing state requirements could spell doom, particularly for a dairy industry that has struggled with market uncertainties due to sanctions on milk and cheese.

“The cost of production outweighs what they are being paid,” Jacobsen said. “A regulatory pinch plus this market would be a death sentence.”

Roger Isom, CEO of the [Western Agricultural Processors Association](#), echoed Jacobsen’s comments. In addition to solar panels and hybrid tractors, some farms are utilizing hybrid or electric nut processors and vegetable dehydrators.

The only thing holding back the full implementation of such technology is cost, Isom said.

“That’s the only bottom line,” Isom said. “There isn’t anyone out here who doesn’t want a new tractor or to breathe clean air.”

There’s been progress, he added, but even many of the state’s most innovative incentive programs require the farmers to foot half of the bill.

Isom said that because much of California’s produce is bought and sold within global markets, farmers do not have the flexibility to pass the cost of technology upgrades along to the consumer.

“Contractors who want to replace a truck or construction equipment can pass that cost on to the consumer,” Isom said. “But I can’t tell China you’re going to pay more for my cotton; I want to go electric, but you need to help me out.”

Isom praised Costa and Nunes for finding ways to chip away at the cost burden, be it tiny chunks of the country’s farm bill or local case work.

Costa’s niche

That type of work is Costa’s specialty.

“With problems as large as our air or clean drinking water, there’s never just one source of funding,” Costa said. “We need a collaborative approach.”

Costa said he worked with Newsom and legislators on the state’s recent attempt to tackle clean drinking water, noting that he also worked to add more clean drinking water funding sources from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the most recent farm bill.

These unsung victories perhaps lead some to criticize whether Costa is thinking big enough. He is also one of the most conservative Democrats in Congress, and his campaigns are routinely backed by the traditionally conservative agriculture and fossil fuels industries.

Costa attacked any notion that he has not done enough for the environment in his nearly 40 years of elected office.

He said he’s supported sensible environmental improvements that include better smog check policies and enforcing regulations within the Bay Area to keep pollution from flowing into the Valley. He is working now to fund clean drinking water efforts.

But above all, Costa noted that he secured the funding to create the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. He has since worked to keep money flowing to the agency, he added.

“I have a long history of efforts that are always focused on how we can achieve success,” Costa said. “It’s easy to sit on sidelines and be critical, but you have to figure out practical solutions that can achieve results and be successfully implemented.”

Nunes gets low conservation rating

Devin Nunes did not respond to an interview request for this story, but he has generally opposed most notions of climate change and environmentalism over the years.

The League of Conservation Voters [gives Nunes](#) a score of 3 percent based off of his almost unanimous disapproval of environmental legislation.

He has routinely slammed California and the Endangered Species Act, both of which he believes have kept water from reaching farmers during the recent drought. He [has even mocked](#) “environmental extremists” through an unlikely political medium: cupcakes.

He also [supports](#) expanded offshore energy drilling.

Recently, Nunes took the added step of devoting [an episode](#) of his weekly podcast to specifically tear down the Green New Deal.

Although he [has previously ripped](#) Ocasio-Cortez as a member of a “strange, socialist, fascist, communist cabal,” the 16-minute podcast focuses mainly on what Nunes characterizes as the plan’s lack of financial feasibility with no obvious personal attacks.

Nunes interviewed [Dan Kish](#), a senior vice president at the Institute for Energy Research, whom he called “one of the nation’s real experts on energy and fossil fuels.”

This institute was founded by Robert L. Bradley Jr., who spent 16 years as a policy leader at Enron, and Charles Koch, of Koch brothers fame. It has routinely denied climate change and received donations from fossil fuel companies and lobbying groups.

In the podcast, Nunes notes [correctly](#) that only about 11 percent of the energy consumed in the United States comes from renewable sources, despite billions of dollars in federal investment.

He said that the government would have to enter every home to completely rewire and insulate it for renewable energy use. People would have to carry expensive reserve batteries in case their solar panels do not work, and there would be periods of time in which power is simply not available in your home.

Air travel would no longer be possible under the Green New Deal, Nunes added.

The podcast does not discuss climate change.

Costa a bigger risk than Nunes?

Kevin Hall is among Fresno’s most active Twitterati, particularly when local politicians do something that is not environmentally friendly. The air quality advocate graduated from Fresno State and wrote for agricultural trade publications before shifting his focus solely to pollution advocacy about 20 years ago. He is a regular contributor to The Bee’s Valley Voices opinion section.

He believes that many of the area’s seemingly positive environmental steps, such as the state’s cap-and-trade policy that allows polluters to purchase credits used to fund other programs such as the air control districts, are not enough to truly deal with the area’s air quality issues.

“In a way, it’s like World War III,” Hall said. “It’s us against ourselves.”

Hall said the younger generation that Ocasio-Cortez is emblematic of knows that it is facing a destabilized atmosphere and climate change refugees in its lifetime due to global warming and climate change. He praised the Green New Deal for its veracity in reaching a fully carbon-neutral planet now, not decades from now.

The funding for these programs must come from a higher tax rate on the wealthy, Hall said.

Hall is optimistic about Cox, whom he said he has known for a while.

“He brings an important level of expertise on the financing of community development in regards to clean energy,” Hall said. Cox is the president of Central Valley NMTC, which has provided millions in funding to local communities through new market tax credits.

Hall referred to Nunes as a “lost cause.” He said Nunes claims to care about water and agricultural issues, but neither will be sorted without first addressing climate change.

“He is what I call a cafeteria scientist,” Hall said. “He uses science for pesticides or antibiotics for his health, but he rejects the science he doesn’t like.”

But it is Costa, not Nunes, who Hall said is the bigger threat to climate change progress in the Valley.

“Climate change deniers won’t be a problem for much longer,” Hall said. “They really aren’t an issue now. The problem is climate delayers – politicians who support mechanisms that will take too long or who don’t want to deal with the hard issues now.”

Costa and his fellow conservative Democrats see climate change as an opportunity to trade votes and broker deals, Hall said.

“Jim Costa is absolutely a bigger risk to climate change aid than Devin Nunes,” Hall said.

Hall believes that the future of climate change aid is indeed a political one.

“This is not a science problem. We know what the problem is. It’s not a technology problem. We have the technology that we need right now. It’s a politics problem,” Hall said.

“We know what to do. We just have to do it.”