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Health of Stanislaus County residents is more important than Trump's ego

By The Modesto Bee Editorial Board

Efforts to reduce air pollution here in the San Joaquin Valley have worked. That's what makes President Donald Trump's attempt to turn back the smog clock so infuriating.

Always eager to hurt the state he hates, and to nullify any and all Obama-era progress, Trump's administration this week snatched back California's unique power for setting standards on tailpipe emissions that are higher than elsewhere in the United States.

Why? To make cars cheaper, the president says.

The health of his own people doesn't seem to matter much.

Before air districts throughout the state got serious about curbing pollution, California air was miserable. Many adults here in the Northern San Joaquin Valley remember a time when they were lucky to catch a glimpse of mountains on either side — the coastal range to the west, Sierra foothills to the east — because air pollution was so bad. The Valley's bowl shape is largely to blame, capturing Bay Area smog blown in on delta breezes and holding it captive.

People love to hate government overreach, always sticking its nose in our private affairs. So we grumbled when, many years ago, new air rules forced us to smog-check our vehicles, and sometimes pay dearly to bring them up to snuff. We complained when rules drastically reduced the number of nights we're allowed to stoke up the fireplace. Farmers were annoyed at limited burn days.

But these regulations and many more — however irksome — have done wonders for our air quality.

It's measurable, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says. Since 1990, air rules are credited with reducing:

- Cancer risk from dirty air by 87%

- Days of high ozone risk, or summertime air pollution, by 92%

- Days of PM2.5 risk, or winter air pollution, by 58%

Even with this progress, our area remains plagued with more than our share of lung problem cases. The American Lung Association gives Stanislaus County an F grade for both ozone and particle pollution. Imagine how much more our people would suffer if not for air regulations, now the most stringent in the nation.

Some of California's rationale for strict regulations is meant to confront climate change. Even if people don't believe the planet is warming, they can't argue with the documented health benefits of reducing air pollution, not to mention tule fog.

And most of it still comes from vehicles.

A Los Angeles Times editorial equates Trump's rollback order with telling automakers: "You must pollute more." That would be funny, if it weren't so serious for so many of our people at risk: 31,500 adults with asthma in Stanislaus County, 9,218 children with asthma, 17,541 people with COPD, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, the American Lung Association says.

And now the president's people are investigating four automakers — BMW, Ford, Honda and Volkswagen — because they dared to make a deal with California, saying they're good to stay on track with the state's higher exhaust standards. Trump's penchant for punishing perceived foes, even those who just want to live a higher law, is stunningly disappointing.

This region has dramatically improved our air quality precisely because California secured authority in 1970 to bypass federal air rules and come up with its own. The idea of reverting to lower standards to avoid bickering with the president is unthinkable. Our health is much more important than his ego.