

Fresno Bee Editorial, December 19, 2002

Last Gasp: "We can't go on living this way. And we won't."

First is a series of editorials to be published each Thursday.

Today: To clean the air, we've got to let go of denial and fatalism.

First things first

We can do something about the Valley's lousy air -- and we must.

The long and painful haul we face toward clean air in the Valley may best begin with a little attitude adjustment. Some of us have comforted ourselves in the past with the notion that the air quality problems here weren't really that bad. Some of us have believed it's all been a figment of imagination on the part of mad scientists and wacko environmentalists. In short, we've been in deep denial.

Others have recognized the problem, but thrown up their hands in dismay and cynicism: Yes, all those cars are killing us, but what can we do? You'll never get the American people out of their automobiles (or get farmers to stop burning waste piles in their fields, or get people to stop burning firewood for its wintertime ambience, or ...).

We can't afford to indulge in either of those attitudes any longer. The problem can't be ignored, the evidence can't be brushed aside as "bad science" or political correctness. That much -- and more -- is clear from The Bee's special report, "Last Gasp," published Dec. 15 (and also posted on The Bee's Web site, fresnobee.com).

The air is bad, that's costing us our health and an increasing amount of money. Denial, in the cinematic cliché, is no longer an option.

Nor is the fatalism to which some of us cynically cling. Giving up is the surest way to lose -- and there's a lot to lose here, including the very lives of the Valley's children.

There are many things we must do. Some parts of this effort will be easier than others, and can begin immediately. Other tasks will be more difficult, and must be undertaken over the long term. We'll be talking about specific details of those tasks in editorials to come, running each Thursday and on other days as the need arises.

For now, we can define the terms of the debate. Here's what we start with:

The problems are real, and very bad. Those who deny those facts are either liars or fools. The problems are also very complex. Those who offer simplistic solutions -- whether sound bites from politicians or knee-jerk ideology from special interests -- are doing us no favors. Some solutions may turn out to be simple, but most will be tough, and involve some measure of sacrifice.

Everyone -- everyone -- is part of the problem. Everyone must be part of the solution. Those who want to point fingers at some other person or group and shrug off their own responsibility are obstacles to overcome, not allies in the struggle.

Handwringing over the difficulty of this task won't help. We can do this. We have to believe that. Fatalism in this case could be, quite literally, fatal for some among us.

Achieving the goal of clean air in the Valley will be expensive. There will be economic dislocations -- some of them severe -- arising out of many of the solutions we impose on ourselves. But even that cloud may have a thin silver lining: There is a generation's worth of jobs in the work of cleaning up the air. And the cost of failure would be simply too steep to bear.

These are the broad principles that will guide us in the coming discussion. We hope they will be adopted generally. The struggle is already under way. Some of the pieces are already in place. It's time now for everyone to get involved.