

Tough smog law pitched

Wednesday, April 23, 2003

By Mike Jensen - Merced Sun-Star

FRESNO - A new bill being introduced in Sacramento today could provide the local air pollution control district here with sweeping new regulatory oversight for roads and highways throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

Senate Bill 709 is expected to cut down on vehicle emissions by expanding the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's authority over "mobile sources" of air pollution, including passenger vehicles and trucks.

Measures in the bill include:

- . Requiring ridesharing programs for businesses with 100 or more employees.
- . Directing public agencies to add low-emission vehicles to their fleets.
- . Monitoring all stationary agricultural pumps.
- . Establishing an office to help small businesses and farmers comply with new air quality measures.
- . Raising the car registration fee in the Valley \$1 to help fund air district programs.

The bill's text also includes a measure to "prohibit or restrict the operation of heavy-duty trucks during hours of heaviest commuter traffic on freeways and other high traffic volume highways."

But that measure won't be pursued in the final version of the bill, according to the sponsor, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter.

The Kern County senator is the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Air Quality in the Central Valley.

Mobile sources of pollution - including vehicles, locomotives and marine engines - contribute more than half of the smog-forming emissions in the Valley but currently fall outside the regulatory authority of the air district.

"It gives our board something we've always wanted," said David Crow, executive director of the air district, speaking of the proposed legislation during a press conference here Tuesday.

In addition to SB 709 being introduced today, Florez also has seven other air pollution bills being introduced in various Senate committees later this month.

Florez told the Sun-Star that in recent months he's met with representatives from various industries, agriculture and environmental groups.

"Nobody is happy," Florez said of his legislation. "So we must be somewhere in the middle. I think we're trying to strike a good balance."

During the press conference, flanked by television cameras and reporters, Florez said that similar measures to those proposed in SB 709 have been used by the South Coast Air Quality Management District to clean the air in Orange County and Los Angeles.

"We believe this legislation has very strong precedent," he said.

Among the other bills being introduced this month:

- . SB 700 - Repeals a decades-old air pollution exemption for agriculture. If the state fails to remove the exemption, the federal government could sanction billions of dollars in highway funds.

- . SB 701 - Puts forth a \$4.5 billion bond to California voters that would help provide financial incentives for industries and farmers to upgrade to less-polluting equipment.

The California Farm Bureau Federation said it doesn't have a significant objection to SB 709, although there are some minor concerns about the language.

"I think they're things that can be worked out," said Cynthia Cory, the farm federation's director of environmental affairs.

Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Salinas, represents Merced County in the state Senate and also sits on the air quality committee with Florez.

Denham said Tuesday that he opposes the bill.

"I've got huge difficulties with this from many different standpoints," he said.

He said he's concerned that the bill could lead to increased government regulations working against Valley businesses.

"We're going to see a decrease in jobs and an increase in businesses moving out of the area."

Denham also said he's concerned that the legislation doesn't apply to the Bay Area, where a portion of the Valley's smog originates.

The senator said he's committed to working on solutions to the Valley's air quality problems but believes a better approach is to work with voluntary programs and incentives.

Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, who also represents Merced County in the state Legislature, was unavailable Tuesday.

However, spokeswoman Cathleen Galgiani said the assemblywoman would be concerned about the cost to businesses regarding the ride-sharing portion of the bill.

Before deciding how to vote, Matthews would want to know how the program had worked elsewhere, Galgiani said.

Clear the skies

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

By Don Royer

Fresno

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I agree that our air pollution is a serious problem. Every time I look up into the sky I see dozens of airplane jet streams. This must add to the problem.