

S.J. supervisors mull air-district split

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San Joaquin County took a tiny step Tuesday toward avoiding punishment from air-quality regulators for the relatively heavy pollution in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

Supervisors voted 4-1, with Dario Marengo opposed, to study the idea of creating a separate planning area within the northern three counties of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District.

The district this fall is expected to voluntarily ask the federal government to have its air quality reclassified as "extreme," worse than the current designation as "severe."

It's a tag that could cost businesses money in extra fees, and, officials say, theoretically threaten millions in federal transportation dollars.

Local transportation officials and business leaders are looking for a way to avoid that, but it won't be easy.

Eight counties in the Valley from San Joaquin south are regulated as a single entity because it makes sense; lousy air from here flows toward Bakersfield.

In fact, the air is less polluted in the northern part of the Valley than it is in the south.

So some officials want to see if it's a good idea to split the air district into two planning areas -- with San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties making up their own area.

If it happens, air-quality regulations that apply to one planning area will apply to both. But it might allow the northern counties to keep a "severe" designation while the southern district gets classified as "extreme."

The idea was floated by the San Joaquin County Council of Governments, a regional body of elected officials from each city and county government.

Jack Sieglock, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, is also chairman of COG.

And it was Sieglock who two weeks ago asked his fellow board members to back the idea of asking the air district to form a separate planning area.

But he ran into stiff opposition from Supervisors Dario Marengo, Steve Gutierrez and Victor Mow, who complained supervisors were acting as mavericks by taking such a stand.

So Sieglock softened his position -- and won the backing of Gutierrez and Mow, along with Supervisor Leroy Ornellas.

Marengo was still opposed, in part because the Fresno County Board of Supervisors wrote a letter to San Joaquin County Supervisors opposing a second planning area.

"This is an air-resources board issue," he said. "This is an issue for the district to work out. All we're doing is alienating other boards."

Sieglock won over his former critics by merely asking them to pass a resolution to study the issue, and not necessarily take a stand to support it.

Plus, for the separate planning area to come about, the air board will have to support it, and if it runs into much opposition there it's sure to fail, Sieglock and others said. The federal Environmental Protection Agency will have the final say-so.

"Let's argue the pros and cons," Mow said, "and come to some conclusion about whether this is a good idea."