

Backing off State board may ease standards on zero emission vehicles.

Editorial, Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, March 23, 2003, 5:38 AM)

The staff of the California Air Resources Board has not recommended abandonment of the state's historic Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) mandate, but almost.

Bowing to powerful resistance from the automobile manufacturers, CARB's staff now wants to discard the requirement that 2% of all new cars sold in the Golden State after 2005 produce no tail pipe emissions.

Instead, their new plan calls for car manufacturers to produce 250 zero-polluting fuel cell vehicles between 2005 and 2008. Essentially, the state would require car companies to commit \$250 million to test a promising technology, one that the manufacturers say they are committed to anyway.

The new proposal requires car makers to continue to produce hybrids, natural gas and ultra-low emission vehicles as well.

Given the market, technology and political realities, CARB staff has made a reasonable adjustment. Still, it could be improved.

A dozen years ago, car companies made the same claims about electric vehicles that they now make about fuel cells: that they are really, truly the technology of the future.

But if the auto manufacturers really believe that, state officials should not let them off the hook after 2008, as this new proposal does. A mandate for some level of zero-polluting vehicles should remain.

Also, since no one can predict what the future will produce, the state should not abandon its policy of favoring no specific technology. Regulators should not dismiss fuel cells or electric or even technologies as futuristic as solar or wind power.

Despite opposition by car companies, California's ZEV mandate has produced results. It is responsible for hybrids being sold commercially now and for fuel cell prototypes the manufacturers say will be the basis for clean technology of the future.

State regulators are right to adjust to reality but they should not lose sight of the goal nor abandon the mandate that has been instrumental in producing

considerable progress.

Bee report on air pollution saluted with national award

Bee Staff Reports
(Published Sunday, March 23, 2003, 5:36 AM)

A report by The Bee on the Valley's polluted air took top honors in its circulation category in the 2002 Investigative Reporters and Editors awards.

The national competition recognizes investigative work in print, broadcast and online media.

Bee reporters Mark Grossi, Barbara Anderson and Russell Clemings were honored for their work on "Last Gasp," a special section published this past December that documented lax government oversight that aggravated the Valley's status as the worst air basin in the United States.

The report won in the category of newspapers with circulations between 100,000 and 250,000.

"We are thrilled that our journalists and newspaper have been accorded such a prestigious national honor for Last Gasp," said Bee executive editor Charlie Waters. "Even more rewarding, however, is the tremendous response to the special report in the community, and the fact that this section has been the foundation for much-needed examination and action on the most serious issue facing this Valley."

The IRE Awards will be presented June 7 at the association's annual conference in Washington, D.C.

Time to get tough

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

By Michael Kobata
Fresno
(Published Sunday, March 23, 2003, 5:15 AM)

Every time I get in my car I see other vehicles that couldn't possibly pass a smog test. We need to have much stricter laws and enforcement prohibiting such vehicles from the streets.

The consequences for "fix-it" tickets simply aren't enough. Police action seems to be the only solution for pulling these vehicles over.

Agency reverses its objection to a law exempting farms that allegedly pollute.

By Mark Grossi and Lesli A. Maxwell

The Fresno Bee

(Published Saturday, March 22, 2003, 5:29 AM)

Federal officials are no longer calling on California to repeal a law that exempts large farms from air pollution monitoring permits.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which publicly favored repeal last month, says it seeks only an amendment so "major" farm sources could be compelled to get permits.

The approach, outlined last week in a letter to state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, aligns EPA's regional office in San Francisco with a farm-based suggestion raised several weeks ago. In contrast, Florez's SB 700 would remove the loophole completely.

Florez said he suspects the regional office was influenced by a farm-friendly Bush administration in Washington, D.C. He said he would pursue SB 700 no matter what the EPA says.

"I definitely think this [letter] was written under duress," Florez said. "The fact that people in Washington would try to rein in their agency that is in California just blows me away. We have them on the record saying they support SB 700."

Jack Broadbent, director of the agency's air division in this region, denied he wrote the letter after being influenced by EPA headquarters in Washington. Broadbent last month told Florez at a public meeting that EPA wanted the exemption removed, but farm officials and many others subsequently asked him to reconsider the issue.

After review, he concluded that farm officials were correct about an amendment and seeks such a fix.

Broadbent said, "We believe the deficiency can be sufficiently addressed with an amendment that allows for permitting of agricultural sources that are defined as 'major' under the Clean Air Act."

Florez said Broadbent's letter won't affect his legislation.

"We're not taking our cue from the EPA," he said. "If the farmers' argument is going to be that the EPA says we don't need to go that far, that's not acceptable. We are not interested in doing the minimum. We want to clean the air."

Farms produce as much as 20% of smog-making gases in the San Joaquin Valley, according to current state figures. Groupings of large diesel engines on water pumps might be considered large sources under federal law.

EPA is requiring large farms to apply for an air permit by May 14. But the agency also said the state needs to fix the farm exemption by Nov. 23 or face millions of dollars in business sanctions throughout California.

For decades, the exemption has prevented farms from being included in the so-called Title V federal permit program, which tracks pollution from major sources and requires fees from the sources. The program usually includes large power plants, glass factories and refineries, not farms.

EPA last year settled an environmental lawsuit by agreeing to enforce the permit program on farms.

Though agriculture officials believe there is not enough science to accurately identify large pollution sources on farms, they proposed an amendment to the state exemption that would focus on major sources.

Most farms are not large enough to be considered major sources of air pollution, they said.

"The approach makes sense," said Cynthia Cory, representing the California Farm Bureau. "We've said all along that it answers the questions about the specifics."

Broadbent said he still believes the repeal would be the most direct route to the permit program for agriculture, but he said he would not characterize it as the preferred approach.

"Removal of the exemption is the cleanest way to deal with it," Broadbent said last week. "Unfortunately, it's not that simple."

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Zero-emission vehicles needed

Editorial, Merced Sun-Star
Saturday, March 22, 2003

Aaahhh choooooooooooooo!

Now that we've let loose one of our 10 or more daily sneezes and wheezes, we think it's important to fill you in on what a state agency is proposing to do about the air we breathe.

Yes, we're talking about the Central Valley's famously unhealthy, ozone-and-particulate-laden air that has all of us sneezing and coughing and, even worse, developing asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

The California Air Resources Board has a plan to vaporize some of the pollution with an ambitious Zero Emission Vehicle program, or ZEV as the policy wonks refer to it.

Under the plan, 2 percent of all new cars sold in California after 2005 must produce no tailpipe emissions. With all of those new (presumably electric) cars spewing no pollution, the quality of our air would improve. This is important considering some 60 percent of the Valley's air pollution comes from "mobile sources" - cars, trucks, tractors and other vehicles.

Now it looks as if the future of that commendable plan is, well, hazy. And we think that stinks.

Earlier this month, staff members of the air resources board produced a report asking the board to drop the ZEV program. The report instead recommended encouraging nonpolluting hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles and relying on gas-electric hybrids that get better mileage and spew less pollution.

The staff report is headed to the full board, which will meet Thursday to vote on it.

We think the air resources board would make a critical mistake if it accepts the staff's recommendations and thereby deals a deadly blow to the ZEV program.

High pressure from Detroit

It's no secret that the automakers are against California's plan. Detroit's opposition is the only reason why we're talking about this today.

In an effort to blow away the ZEV program, automakers have enacted high-priced lobbying campaigns opposing the ZEV requirements, which they see as unrealistic.

Their campaigns have been successful. The original ZEV plan, passed in 1990, made history by requiring that 10 percent of all new cars sold in the state this year produce no tailpipe emissions. That standard has been gradually eroded by judges and the state air board. If the air board votes to amend the ZEV program on Thursday, it will be the fourth such alteration.

The new plan would allow some gasoline-hybrid vehicles to qualify as ZEVs, even though they're still belching pollution, albeit less than a regular fossil fuel engine. It also would require the automakers to develop only about 41 zero-emission fuel-cell vehicles through 2008 per automaker.

While Detroit would make out like a bandit with the staff's plan, what would we get?

Nothing. Automakers would get out of a significant program to clean the air while being asked to fulfill new standards that are weakened. And we all continue to breathe dirty air.

If the air resources board really wants to do something to clean the air, it must draw a line in the sand and uphold the ZEV plan. Continuing to erode the plan on the whims of the auto companies doesn't solve the problem.

We need to hold the automakers accountable for producing ZEVs, and the only way to get them to do it is to keep the current plan in place instead of letting them squirm out from underneath it.

Unique situation

The Central Valley is a unique area for air pollution largely because of its geography. We're like a big bathtub, with the coastal mountains to the west and the massive Sierra Nevadas to the east. The air just stagnates in that big bathtub, making the pollution problem even worse.

Merced County Supervisor Jerry O'Banion, our most recent representative on the board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, has gone on the record against weakening the ZEV plan. He has taken the right position.

Other regional politicians have lent their support.

It's now time for the people to speak up.

The air issue is critical to the future of the Valley. Our economy needs to diversify, yet the dirty air does nothing but keep businesses away. As the Valley continues to grow, the problem will only become worse and worse unless we take action.

We won't get any closer by eliminating the ZEV requirements. They must be kept.