

Cleaning up the Valley's air is a test of our rationality

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Richard Unruh

Fresno

(Published Monday, May 19, 2003, 5:45 AM)

Congratulations to the Fresno City Council for beginning to take concrete steps to cut air pollution in the Valley. One wishes the same could be said of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

We are going to have to change our lifestyles to significantly reduce air pollution in the Valley, and the ideas the council is considering (such as free bus rides) are steps designed to encourage people to do so.

Albert Einstein once said that insanity is "doing the same things you have always done and expecting to get a different result." That has often seemed to be our mode of operation in the Valley, but it is good to see that the council is starting to move us toward "sanity."

May Council Member Brian Calhoun's comment that "we have the political will" to reduce pollution be reflected in coming months, when there will be those who will want the council to continue to act "insanely."

'Ultimate answer'

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By David Cloyd

Ponderosa Hearth & Home, Clovis

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The "Hold firm" editorial of May 8 continues to pass on bad information regarding the matter of residential wood smoke's contribution to air quality. But more important, you're missing the big picture: Many people will continue to burn wood as a traditional fuel. When people choose to use wood, there are "clean burn" technology fireplaces and stoves that are the ultimate answer to drastically lowering emissions. Demanding that we not burn on a particular day won't do it. That is why I support the two-stage program that encourages people to clean up their burning if they want to use wood.

The assertion that the small fireplace stores will lose jobs due to restrictions is simply not true. The vast majority of our hearth product sales are fueled with

natural gas or propane. It's the mid- to low-income homeowner who depends on low-cost solid fuels that will be hurt the most.

The editorial states wrong numbers. Independently created research has found that wood smoke is actually only 2% to 3% of our overall air quality problem and only in certain urban areas on still nights. The one-third number that keeps appearing was measured only two or three nights four years ago during a cold thermal inversion in one older and densely populated Fresno neighborhood. This is not a chronic problem.

The air district's proposed one-stage curtailment is the worst possible idea and will ensure that the "gross polluters" will stay in use for years to come.

Good start

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Sevag Jierian

Fresno

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In response to the measures proposed to cut air pollution, I think they will do practically everybody in the city a lot of good. They will give the people in the community a better environment as well as a better workplace.

If the city's plan goes through, people will start to work at home and even have shorter work weeks. This will definitely be accepted by many people because Fresno has such a bad environment, with all the air pollution, and people are willing to do anything just to help cut the pollution down.

Before choking ag, look at all air studies

By Michael LaSalle

Hanford

(Published Saturday, May 17, 2003, 5:26 AM)

Much has been reported in The Bee recently about the San Joaquin Valley's air quality, as well as State Sen. Dean Florez's legislative efforts to address the issue. The primary focus has been on the premise that the Valley's ozone levels are producing very high asthma rates -- a 16% rate. The EPA and Sen. Florez

seem to agree that our Valley's agricultural activities need to be more stringently regulated in order to improve air quality. These are driven by presumptions that agricultural activities are significant producers of precursors to ozone formation, and that ozone and other products of agricultural activities -- namely, dust, engine exhaust and smoke -- produce significant adverse respiratory effects among Valley residents.

It was in that context that a recent article in the New York Times caught my attention. The article referred to a study in the Harlem section of New York City, in which it was found that 25% of the youngsters in Harlem suffered from asthma -- even higher than our Valley rate.

The article described how the researchers suspected that the high asthma rates came from allergies to dust mites, cockroach feces, cigarette smoke, mildews and molds -- conditions which tend to be most prevalent in poor communities. In other words, the causes of asthma may more likely be found in our homes rather than from outdoor sources.

I have encountered a number of other interesting facts. For one, asthma rates are indeed found to be highest in urban areas and lowest in rural areas. The EPA's own daily air quality maps for the San Joaquin Valley show ozone levels to be highest in the urban areas -- Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield, while the ozone levels in our rural areas are virtually always shown to be less than in our urban areas.

Steady decline

It was interesting to note that our nation's air pollution, as measured by various standards, including those of ozone levels, has been on a steady decline, while, counter-intuitively, asthma rates have been increasing. This completely flies in the face of contentions that increased ozone levels produce increased incidence of asthma.

It was astonishing to find a study completed by the John Locke Foundation last year that showed that there was a negative correlation in North Carolina between ozone exceedence days (when ozone exceeded 85 parts per billion) and asthma hospitalizations for children 14 years of age and under.

Looking at all North Carolina counties, the study noted that Swain County, which had no ozone exceedence days, had the highest rate of asthma hospitalizations; while Caswell County, which had the highest number of ozone exceedence days, had the lowest rate of asthma hospitalizations. This study seems to turn the entire issue of the ozone-asthma relationship on its head. Do these studies suggest that asthma rates depend on what goes on indoors rather than what is going on outdoors?

It seems that the Environmental Protection Agency and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District only cite a few selected studies, which they use to alarm the public and to build the perception that agriculture plays a significant role in our Valley asthma rates.

Yet, these same governmental agencies fail to call to our attention counter-indicative data or studies, such as those mentioned above. As taxpayers and voters, we have a right to expect our air quality agencies and our politicians to be honest and forthright with us.

Before Sen. Florez proceeds with saddling our agricultural industry with more costs and burdens, as contemplated under his bill, SB 700, he should make sure he has gotten it right.

Sen. Florez' legislation should not proceed until he has ensured that all evidence has been examined and considered. Otherwise, his ill-conceived, ill-considered and ill-advised bill would be another example of wrongly blaming and punishing agriculture -- our politically disfavored industry -- for something of which it may not be guilty.

Examine information

To The Bee and its distinguished journalists and columnists, I would conclude by asking them to examine their own treatment of these issues in light of a statement contained in the John Locke Foundation study:

"Advocacy groups and politicians from across the state have asserted this proposition as if it were an undeniable fact. And newspapers, either due to laziness or bias, have reported such assertions without question and without conducting any independent investigations of their own."

Michael LaSalle of Hanford is a retired lawyer.

Operation Clean Air has Valley leaders gasping for answers

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, May 18, 2003, 8:15 AM)

Operation Clean Air might be the hottest news in a now-urgent push to clear the polluted haze over the San Joaquin Valley.

Bureaucrats and business owners from Bakersfield to Stockton are intrigued by the group's vision of using federal money to entice voluntary pollution reduction from Valley residents.

Trouble is, nobody knows much more than that. And while everyone waits for the details, skeptics say they doubt a volunteer effort will help the Valley anyway.

Curious about the effort, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, devoted a field hearing on air pollution about a week ago to Operation Clean Air. In his questioning, he inadvertently drove the point home about a lack of detail.

Florez asked whether critic Kevin Hall of the Sierra Club would attend the next Operation Clean Air meeting. Hall answered: "Nobody knows where they meet."

The group, officially born April 23 at a meeting of Valley leaders in Fresno, does not have a business office.

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston came up with the idea last year to promote a voluntary air cleanup by local governments, industry and residents. Autry and Waterston believe the Valley can achieve healthy air without hurting the economy.

Florez learned the group's steering committee is hurriedly working on plans to approach the federal government for \$200 million. Federal officials seem interested, especially because Fresno County is the second-worst place in the country to breathe.

But critics point out that representatives of farm, building and petroleum industries are on the steering committee while environmental activists have been left out.

With the detail work on Operation Clean Air largely taking place out of the public eye, activists wonder whether this is a delaying tactic for businesses that fear air regulation will undercut their bottom lines.

Activists said the Valley needs to comply with the law, which required healthy air years ago. "Since when did a voluntary program ever work?" Hall asked.

Voluntary actions in Los Angeles, Houston and Denver helped, but they could not replace air cleanup rules, said federal officials. Voluntary and regulatory efforts can work well together, they said.

California and Valley air regulators agreed, saying such efforts are effective public relations tools that can result in some pollution reduction. "We applaud any effort at voluntary air pollution reduction," said Jerry Martin,

spokesman for the California Air Resources Board. "The South Coast has had a number of voluntary efforts. They are in the vanguard."

Valley residents can look much closer to home for an example, however. Bakersfield had a decade-long, nonprofit effort called Project Clean Air, which ended about a year ago.

Many people involved thought Project Clean Air helped.

"It certainly was not a waste of time," said former Executive Director Don Murfin, a retired Bakersfield school superintendent. "I think we had some impact, especially in the early 1990s."

But another Bakersfield resident, Laura Dennison of the League of Women Voters, said she considered Project Clean Air an "utter failure." Dennison was a volunteer and board president of Project Clean Air a few years after Murfin departed the organization.

"On the whole, people did not do anything that they didn't have to do," she said. "I firmly believe people will only do what is required by government."

Project Clean Air was successful in buying old cars and scrapping them as well as in promoting awareness of clean-air activities, such as car pooling. Kern County's air problem improved, but the petroleum industry's investments in cleaner technology for oil fields are considered the prime reason. Regulation played a large role in requiring the investments.

Project Clean Air's downfall came when funding from petroleum and other industries began to dry up in the late 1990s.

"When the funding for the incentives disappeared," Dennison said, "the voluntary efforts started disappearing."

Funding may be the major difference between the now-defunct Bakersfield group and Operation Clean Air.

If the new voluntary program can secure the \$200 million in federal money as well as tax credits and low-percentage loans, it would be quite different from other volunteer efforts, Autry and Waterston said.

The money, tax credits and loans would be the persuasion for businesses to retool, residents to ride buses and industries to change practices. Waterston and Autry said they want to expand the leadership to include activists, such as Sierra Club members.

"There have been a lot of naysayers," Waterston said at Florez's hearing. "Now we have a lot of people onboard."

Tracy Pepper, president of the League of Women Voters, wants to know how Operation Clean Air will allow public scrutiny.

"This body, which includes elected officials who purport to represent the public, seems intent on making decisions, including land use and transportation decisions, outside of the usual safeguards intended to ensure accountability to the public," she wrote in a statement to Florez. "Who is in charge of this process? What type of oversight is there for funds that would be allocated?"

The group is not ready to answer those questions, officials said. But they said they will move swiftly. A series of federal cleanup deadlines will begin in the next few months, and they will continue for years.

A federal official said he likes Operation Clean Air. But the official, Wayne Nastri, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said many important questions must be answered.

"Voluntary measures will help," he said. "But what are the goals? What are the milestones? How will you account for everything? You've got to back it up. You have to track it and make midstream corrections. And the process has to be transparent."

Cyclists pedal on the fringe

The Stockton Record - Originally Published Sunday, May 18, 2003

Bike to Work Day came and went Wednesday, with only a couple dozen Lodi workers checking in with transportation officials at a table set up in front of Lodi Station.

Even though I watch the Tour de France each summer on the Outdoor Life Network and cycle frequently for the health benefits, the camaraderie of other riders and the saddle sores, I truly understand why more people didn't bike to work Wednesday.

Cycling to a job has its drawbacks. For working parents, 60-pound children are too big to fit in a backpack or panniers -- a bicycle version of saddlebags -- and they have a tendency to squirm after a few minutes on a trip to school.

And you think every other driver on the road is a moron? Ride a bike to work and your opinion will be unshakable.

Yes, cars are expensive to maintain and fuel and a chief reason the Valley is a horrible place to try breathing. But they do have their benefits, most of which are found in a variety of switches and levers on the dashboard.

The downside

For one, I've never been shot while driving, although someone once found it hilarious to assassinate the rear tire on my pickup as I motored down Highway 99 a few years back. I have been shot while bicycle riding.

Also, teenage boys won't honk and yell, "YAAAAAHHHH" as they pass you, hoping to distract you into riding off the pavement. Gulping coffee while riding has little appeal, especially when it's squirted from a sports bottle.

Despite the downsides, Lodi is superbly suited for biking to work or to run errands. It is a compact city, and not only does it have bike lanes or wide streets on most major north-south and east-west routes, but they're also pancake-flat. And for the most part, the weather isn't too discouraging, as long as you're prepared.

The upside

Another bike-friendly development is the Lodi Lake Park trail, which soon will give riders a way around the hazardous railroad tracks on Lower Sacramento or Turner roads, as well as a car-free route. Also, a handful of bike lockers are available at the downtown parking garage, even though it appears some folks are using the handful of locker cages to stash personal effects.

In fact, about all it would take for Lodi to gain recognition as a cycling center is to get more soft butts on hard saddles.

Thursday, the League of American Bicyclists announced its first Bicycle-Friendly Community awards. Nearly all of the 14 communities honored for policies that promote safe cycling are homes to major universities. Corvallis, Ore. (Oregon State), and Palo Alto (Stanford) were the top cities.

In Corvallis, one out of every 14 workers gets to his or her job by bike. In Palo Alto, it's one out of every 24, and city employees receive \$20 a month for cycling to work.

Now, if the county -- which spends 1.3 percent of Measure K funds on bicycle projects -- would develop suitable bike paths on major roads leading into the city, such as Lower Sacramento from the north, Turner Road from the west or Victor Road from the east -- sort of like spokes on a wheel -- even more people would be encouraged to ride into the city.

Drivers' attitudes would likely change, and perhaps more would give up two of their four wheels. The health benefits of exercise are indisputable and cycling doesn't cause smog or traffic congestion. With 18 percent of household spending devoted to vehicle travel, cycling is a money-saver, too.

But try that logic on someone after an eight-hour day and facing a ride home in 96-degree weather. Biking to work during the cool morning might be invigorating. It's cycling home that stinks.

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Boy puts face on Valley's air woes

Six-year-old's asthma acts up during Fresno hearing on pollution.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Saturday, May 17, 2003, 5:21 AM)

Six-year-old Larry Hinojoza left for the hospital shortly after testifying Friday at a state Senate hearing in Fresno on the San Joaquin Valley's air pollution.

His asthma -- which his mother says has left the family \$9,000 in debt -- was flaring again. His mother, Sophia Hinojoza, testified that the first-grader had missed 58 days this school year.

Hinojoza added that she and her 16-year-old daughter recently were diagnosed with asthma. Asked whether she had ever considered moving from Fresno, she replied: "I'd leave this place today if I had the money."

Hinojoza and her son put human faces on claims that the Valley's murky air is incubating a respiratory health crisis. They testified before state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, who has proposed several cleanup measures for the Valley, which has the second-dirtiest air in the United States.

Florez is holding hearings throughout the Valley to gather facts, opinions and ideas about cleaning up air pollution. His next hearing is scheduled for 10 a.m. June 6 in Stockton City Hall to discuss the federal deadline for clearing Valley smog.

Friday, Florez heard from asthmatics, medical experts and school health officials. Florez and others discussed a startling statistic: One in six children in Fresno County has asthma, the worst rate in the state and triple the national figure.

Later, as Florez listened to Sophia Hinojoza, Larry's sniffles and occasional coughs caught the senator's attention. He asked the boy what he thinks the Valley should do about the air problem.

"I think we should plant more trees," he answered.

Other ideas came out. Respiratory therapist Kevin Hamilton, a founding member of Medical Alliance for Healthy Air, suggested the local air district alert people when smog episodes are at lower levels, before they spike.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District currently alerts people when the air quality index -- a number representing a combination of air-related factors -- reaches 150. People are advised to limit outdoor exposure and pollution-creating activities.

"It's a great idea, but people with sensitive lungs are affected at 100 [on the index]," Hamilton said. "It would be better if the trigger level was 100."

Fresno Unified School District officials suggested hiring more school nurses who could help educate parents and monitor asthmatic children. An estimated 8,900 children have asthma in the district, which has 80,000 students.

But cleaning the Valley haze is probably the only way to address some problems, such as the cost of medicine and the load on the health support system.

Dr. Malik Baz, a Fresno allergist for 21 years, said asthma treatment could easily cost \$300 to \$500 a month.

"Many people don't have insurance," he said. "For some, it's a choice between buying the medication and eating."

It's not just about respiratory problems or money, others said. Dr. John Telles, a cardiologist for the past 25 years, said studies show heart problems increase in places where the air regularly violates federal health standards.

He said the connection between particle pollution and heart problems is pretty convincing. The Valley's worst season for tiny specks of soot and chemical pollution is in winter.

"We see patients more frequently suffering heart attacks in the winter than in the summer," Telles said

Dirty air: 'We can't just let it all happen and forget

about it'

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Kamalpreet Singh

Fresno

(Published Saturday, May 17, 2003, 5:26 AM)

"When there were 107 unhealthy air days last year and people were warned not to go outside, we have no choice but to get serious," says state Sen. Dean Florez. Did you know Fresno has the worst air quality in the nation? That's right. There are said to be 311 deaths a year in Fresno County due to bad air. Sooty air causes more deaths than car accidents, homicides and AIDS combined.

Fresno County's 16.4% child asthma rate is the highest in the state; Fresno County ranks as the third-most ozone-polluted county in the country. We can go on and on about the air issue. But how can we fix it? Maybe carpool? We all hear the ads on TV, but do we really care? Most of us don't, but we should, because 311 deaths a year is a lot.

They make a huge deal out of kids killing themselves because of drunken driving and drugs, yet this is not a big issue? I think people need to be aware of what they are breathing into their lungs. It's so bad the Sierra Nevada are barely visible in the distance because of the thick pollution. I think this is a huge issue and there has to be something we can do about it. We can't just let it all happen and forget about it. People are losing their lives to air pollution, so we need to act now.

Closer to a plan

Agreement could give federal EPA increased power over Valley's air.

Fresno Bee Editorial

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has agreed to reverse a decade of dilatory pursuit of clean air for the Valley, and to take over the effort from the local air district if an acceptable plan doesn't emerge in the next 14 months.

That's good news for the Valley's air, and especially for those of us who breathe it.

EPA's agreement settles a lawsuit brought by environmental groups who were unhappy with a 10-year-old Valley air plan that never measured up. The EPA never seemed that interested in the shortcomings of that plan -- until it was sued. Now that's changed, or could next year. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has until July 31, 2004, to complete an acceptable plan. It has a draft ready, and expects to hold its first public hearing on the plan in mid-June. But environmentalists already believe they've spotted flaws in the plan; that's why they embrace the EPA decision.

For its part, the local air district is happy because having EPA at the table may increase the odds of getting serious federal resources -- which will certainly be needed -- to address the Valley's dirty air. And the EPA itself is pleased -- a spokesman said this agreement "gives the Valley air district the chance to come up with a plan."

So there we are. Everyone seems happy. The proof, of course, is in the pudding, or in this case, in the details of the cleanup plan that's produced.

In the end, as important as these institutional forces will be in cleaning the air, it's really up to all of us. We all do our share to pollute, and we'll all have to bear a share of the pain in cleaning it up.

'Simple to see'

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Earl Hudson

Fresno

(Published Friday, May 16, 2003, 5:35 AM)

The article "Activists sue in ag pollution dispute" [May 13] proves to me that environmental groups such as Earthjustice have no desire to see the air cleaned up because it would put them out of jobs. It is not OK to pollute, but if you pay more for a permit, then that makes it OK.

These groups file suit over potential pollution from farms -- potential? Are these people serious?

Webster's Dictionary defines "potential" as something that can be, but has not yet come into being. Now, that should clean the air, and maybe they could sue the cities for subdivisions and freeways that haven't been built yet. Think how much that would reduce pollution.

Pollution in this Valley has gotten steadily worse as the population increases -- no sane person can deny that. As population increases, farmland is paved over. More people means less farming because of the urban sprawl. Farming is not the

cause of the pollution in this Valley. The cause is too many people. In the late-1960s, you could see the Sierra all summer long. Farming was here then, but the population was probably one-third what it is today. It is simple to see where the pollution is coming from.