

Plan to clean Valley's air stirs debate

Air panel to meet Thursday as an EPA deadline looms.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, June 15, 2003, 5:18 AM)

Flawed, toothless and illegal. Environmental critics use those politically loaded terms in attacking a new plan to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's dust, soot and other microscopic pollution.

But as the intense and complex fight over air quality steps up, Valley air pollution officials defend their work. They say their plan would build on past efforts, employ cutting-edge concepts and reduce enough particle pollution to achieve health standards by 2010.

That and other differences of opinion are expected to heat up the boardroom Thursday when the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's governing members consider approving the 3-inch-thick plan.

A lot is riding on this debate.

If the air district board doesn't accept the proposal Thursday, the plan might not make the Aug. 28 deadline for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to receive it. Sanctions would follow, raising costs for new and expanding businesses.

If the plan is still in limbo in February, the EPA would take it over, and \$2 billion in road-building funds would be put on hold for the Valley.

The issue is important enough for the California Air Resources Board to convene in Fresno on June 26. The state agency's governing board must approve the cleanup plan before it can go to the EPA.

But activists argue there is a far more pressing issue than sanctions -- health.

Particle pollution, a fall and winter problem, can trigger asthma and other breathing disorders. Researchers have linked such pollution to heart attacks and heightened mortality rates.

Despite many rules and three plans over a dozen years, the Valley never has achieved health standards for tiny specks in the air. The bowl-shaped region tenaciously holds dust, soot, chemicals and other particles on calm, cool days.

This topography, weather patterns and a growing population make the Valley one of the worst places in the country for such pollution. And activists don't think the latest plan has a prayer of changing that by 2010.

"If we're willing to wait a generation, this plan might do," said Sierra Club member Kevin Hall of Fresno. "Really, this proposal will not give us clean air. Not five years from now, not 10 years from now -- never."

One of their bigger complaints: The district is not trimming 5% of all of the pollutants per year as federal law requires. They said officials should be accounting for 5% reductions in each of two pollutant categories -- one, a chemical called oxides of nitrogen (NOx) and the other, particles directly emitted into the air.

Instead, the plan would combine percentages from both categories to achieve the 5% reduction -- such as, 3% from one plus 2% from the other. That's a mathematical no-no, said Caroline Farrell, directing attorney for the Delano office of the Center on Race Poverty and the Environment.

"You don't add percentages, according to the statisticians we interviewed," she said. "You add actual numbers, then figure the percentage on the total. This won't be a 5% reduction."

But cleanup plans for another pollutant, ozone, routinely follow the same procedure, said Dave Jones, district planning director. The EPA has not issued an official position on how to approach the reductions for particle pollution.

The law specifies an annual 5% reduction in one or the other category for particle pollution, but not for both, as environmentalists believe, Jones said. The EPA's regional staffers in San Francisco unofficially suggested the district needs to reduce only one or the other category by 5% each year.

Combining the percentages from each category achieves EPA's purpose, Jones said, although the district also could make it work by following the EPA's advice. Environmentalists are just reading the law differently, he said.

"Our approach works," he said. "The plan demonstrates attainment by 2010."

The massive plan predicts a reduction in particle pollution by 45 tons a day and NOx by 119 tons a day.

The emphasis on NOx concerns environmentalists, who say the district is ignoring another problem -- ammonia from animal waste.

In winter, NOx combines with ammonia from livestock and other agricultural operations to form ammonium nitrate, a tiny particle that can evade the body's natural defenses and lodge deep in the lungs.

"Ammonia controls would reduce particulate matter in many areas," said Farrell. "Preliminary results from their own study show there would be a significant reduction in particulate matter if ammonia was controlled."

But the study is not complete, and scientists cannot make that conclusion about the Valley's atmospheric chemistry, said spokesman Jerry Martin of the state Air Resources Board. The state agency is performing the research.

The state estimates livestock operations contribute 66,000 tons of ammonia annually. Ammonia is common and widespread in the Valley's air. But without NOx, tiny particles will not form in areas where people live, said air district official Jones.

"Think of it as ribbons of NOx along the major roadways and around the larger cities in the Valley," Jones said. "The plan will be updated in the next two years to include new ammonia information."

Until then, the new plan would hang on three major points: dust regulation, changes in agricultural practices and a mandatory ban on residential wood burning on the worst air pollution days during cool weather.

Farming accounts for more than half of the particle pollution being sent into the Valley's air. Officials would require such changes as reduced tilling, technical advances in harvesting, watering unpaved roads and others to cut about 25% of farm-based particles.

For months, a technical team has been identifying dozens of practices and changes to clean up thousands of Valley farms. Farmers must choose at least one option in each of several categories.

Many choices are offered because there are many different farms and crops over millions of acres in the Valley. Farms of less than 100 acres would be exempt.

The district's plan is encouraging, said farmer Paul Betancourt, former president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. But he is concerned about farmers being forced to control particles during summer when violations typically are not recorded.

"It's the seasonality issue," Betancourt said. "We would be out there controlling dust when particulate matter is not the big problem."

Sierra Club member Hall said the bigger problem is the lack of consequences if farmers don't sign up. According to the plan, growers can opt to provide economic or technical reasons why they cannot implement new practices.

"This is a weak rule with no enforcement," Hall said. "How can they expect to get 25% reductions with it?"

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State may ban purchase of SUVs for official use

By Dean E. Murphy, New York Times, published in the Tri-Valley Herald, June 14, 2003

SAN FRANCISCO -- If sales are any indication, Californians love their sport utility vehicles. By one count, they bought more than 440,000 last year. The SUV is also the vehicle of choice for nearly half of the state's 120 legislators, though many live nowhere near a dirt road or icy peak.

But filthy air, tough budget times and old-fashioned politics are now pushing some elected officials here to seize on the SUV as a symbol of all that has gone wrong with the state.

Philip Angelides, the state treasurer, and John Burton, the Senate president pro tem, announced Thursday that they would seek legislation to ban state agencies from buying new SUVs. Among other benefits, they said, the ban would save the state about \$14 million over five years.

"California needs to take this step," Burton said at a news conference here. "Some would say it is symbolic. It is symbolic. It is a symbol to both Michigan and the auto manufacturers in this country and the other state legislatures, but also it can save lives, it can save money and do something about air pollution."

Law enforcement agencies and emergency services would be exempt from the ban. Other requests for SUVs would need to be approved by the state Department of General Services. It was unclear when the Legislature might take up the proposal.

Several cities and counties across the country have imposed restrictions on SUV purchases, and other state governments, including those in Ohio and Massachusetts, have considered similar proposals. But environmental groups that have waged a nationwide campaign against SUVs because of safety and fuel efficiency concerns said none approached the scope or scale of the California proposal.

Though a precise count was not available, state officials estimate that SUVs account for about 10 percent of the state's fleet of 73,000 cars and trucks, with about 500 new SUVs bought or leased each year. State officials said that California had the largest state vehicle fleet in the country.

"This creates an example every state in this country should follow," said Laurie David, a trustee of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Today's plan guarantees that law enforcement and rescue workers will have the trucks they need to keep us safe. But it will eliminate heavyweight government gas guzzlers that are pulling lightweight duty."

Jason H. Vines, president of the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America, an advocacy group in Washington, predicted that the legislation would fail because SUVs remain extremely popular, no matter the driver, and because critics of the vehicle have misrepresented it.

"SUV sales were a record last month, because of what they offer for their owners and their families," Vines said. "People like what their SUVs do. I won't have any other vehicle."

Thursday's proposal is the latest in a series of efforts by California legislators to curb SUV use among state officials.

Last December, the rules committee in the state Assembly created an incentive program to encourage Assembly members to choose hybrid vehicles or those that use alternative fuels.

Currently, 35 of the 71 members who drive state-owned cars have an SUV, according to the committee. (In the Senate, 16 of 38 members with state-owned cars have an SUV.) Under the incentive programs, Assembly members who trade-in vehicles with poor fuel efficiency get \$10,000 added to their office budgets.

As a practical matter, the effort launched Thursday is likely to meet stiff resistance among Republicans. Though members of both parties drive the vehicles, Republican legislators tend to represent rural areas and often have a legitimate need for them. Burton and Angelides also

fanned partisan fires by suggesting that their proposal offered an alternative to the Bush administration's "wrong direction" on fuel efficiency.

The Bakersfield Californian Editorial:

Air pollution not 'inevitable'

Saturday June 14, 2003, 06:00:17 PM

Bakersfield has a lot of "sources" to thank for creating one of the dirtiest air basins in the nation.

Depending on who is counting and how they align the numbers, agriculture is estimated to contribute 26 percent of the area's smog-forming emissions. Industrial plants contribute 22 percent, petroleum industry 8 percent and "consumer" activities ranging from mowing lawns to running air conditioners dump 4 percent into the mix.

Transportation cars on local roads; truck and car traffic on major state routes, such as I-5, Highways 99 and 58; trains; airplanes, etc. is blamed for 40 percent.

Pollution from vehicles and industrial plants is regulated. Emissions associated with agriculture are the exception. And Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, is taking a lot of heat trying to end that exception with a package of bills pending in the Legislature.

Seeming to combine many of these pollution sources and contributing mightily to Bakersfield's polluted air is sprawl the construction of homes and businesses farther and farther away from the city's core.

Sprawl's contribution is hard to measure with pollution coming from sources ranging from commuters' cars to residents' barbecues.

But it is certain that as more people move to Bakersfield, as more homes are built to house them and as more roads are poured to accommodate the increasing miles commuters drive to work, recreation and services, the air will become more polluted.

Laws are in place or being proposed to require pollution controls over industries and vehicles.

But when it comes to urban growth which many derisively call "sprawl" decisionmakers have concluded that there is "no feasible mitigation" to the likelihood of increased air pollution.

In plain English: People are going to move here. Their homes are going to be built. Polluted air is an inevitable consequence.

That may be true. But it doesn't have to be.

Committing to controlled growth policies, which encourage new homes to "infill", or be built closer to the city's core on existing property, will reduce vehicle pollution and the need to extend costly government services.

Designing projects "smartly" with homes closer together to encourage walking and to decrease vehicle trips will make better use of land and reduce pollution from vehicles.

Creating incentives to encourage developers to build closer to the city's core or include pollution-reducing designs and features in their projects will promote participation.

Bakersfield City Council members and Kern County supervisors should create and impose an air pollution control fee, similar to the other fees developers pay to accommodate projects.

This fee would finance air pollution reducing programs and community projects, such as the synchronization of signals to prevent traffic congestion.

Homebuilders who incorporate pollution controlling features such as outside electrical outlets for lawnmowers, natural gas outlets for barbecues and gas-fired fireplace inserts would be given "credits" and fee reductions.

The air pollution consequences of development must be considered and must be controlled just as pollution from other sources is controlled.

It requires the political will of our elected city and county officials, the creativity and willingness of Bakersfield's many good home builders, and a commitment by all of us to clean the air.

[The Record editorial:](#)

Testing the air

Published Monday, June 16, 2003

It never hurts to ask.

The San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors will apply the old adage to the idea that the air flowing over San Joaquin County is cleaner than the air above Fresno.

Last week, supervisors agreed to study the question of whether the Valley's three northernmost counties -- San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced -- should make up a separate planning area within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

If so, it could make a difference in federal air-quality designations and therefore impact business costs and transportation funding.

It's a question worth asking.

Ultimately, the regional district and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will have to agree to the idea. It's anybody's guess how that will go.

The idea prompts a second adage: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

[Modesto Bee Editorial:](#)

Off-road diesels a key component in valley's dirty air

Published: June 16, 2003, 06:45:13 AM PDT

A new report on off-road diesel engines reinforces the importance of fighting the San Joaquin Valley's air pollution battle on a number of fronts. Unfortunately, there's not a single answer to our air quality problem, so the region must make improvements in every pollution-causing area. Off-road diesel engines in tractors, bulldozers and other equipment produce a larger share of vehicle-related pollution in the region than elsewhere in the state, according to a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The report's results, which need to be verified by an independent agency, suggest that more attention should be paid to off-road diesel engines in the valley. The Union of Concerned Scientists supports the Environmental Protection Agency's proposal of two months ago that would tighten off-road diesel standards.

The report analyzed how much off-road diesel vehicles contributed to producing fine soot, known as PM10, and nitrogen oxides, or NOx, a gaseous fuel combustion product that contributes to both summer ozone and winter particle pollution.

For California as a whole, off-road diesels accounted for 41 percent of vehicle-related PM10 and 29 percent of NOx, according to the report. In valley agricultural counties -- no surprise -- the figures are higher.

The report urges a greater commitment to clean diesel technology, including exhaust traps for tiny soot particles and special absorbers to scrub emissions of nitrogen oxides, which are gases.

Agricultural representatives, fearful they will be singled out for more regulation, said the industry should get credit for its efforts to reduce pollution by replacing high-polluting diesel irrigation pumps. Those efforts are helpful, and are an important part of the overall solution.

Unfortunately, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District does not give high priority to the off-road diesel problem.

"We realize that we have an air-quality problem here in the valley, but there are other sources that we are looking at that are causing greater problems," said district spokeswoman Janis Parker.

This region must do all it can in every area that creates pollution. If off-road diesel vehicles can be made to run cleaner, that should be the goal, despite the mixed messages being sent by the air district on how to solve the problem.

[Fresno Bee Letters to the Editor:](#)

Bad plan

By Lydia Flores

Fresno

(Published Monday, June 16, 2003, 4:24 AM)

I have watched this debate about the development of the Copper River Ranch for many years. Developers have been drooling to level and build houses and golf courses out there to the detriment of the rolling hills and the beautiful landscape. Has anyone gone out there to view the congestion?

It is the traffic that brings the pollution. It is the people crammed into units who cause waste products. Reading the article on the front page June 4 was more about who was going to develop that area first -- Madera, Fresno County or the city of Fresno.

There was not one bit of concern for health or environmental issues except those expressed by the doctors. To continue the project is abusive and detrimental to people's health and the environment.

Sensible project

By Cam Maloy

Fresno

(Published Sunday, June 15, 2003, 5:20 AM)

I spoke in favor of the Copper River Ranch development plan that was approved on a 5-2 vote by the Fresno City Council after hours of public comment on June 3.

I was proud that Jerry Duncan and the majority of the council could see through the coordinated efforts of opponents to label this plan as the cause of our Valley's bad air and blame it for asthma suffered by our citizens; asthma is more a function of dust than car emissions.

What they saw was a well-thought-out, master-planned community that will contribute far less to air pollution than any other project ever proposed in the Central Valley, perhaps the state. Fresno is going to grow, this is inevitable and planned for in our 2025 general plan.

Smart growth is exactly what we have been given in this Copper River Ranch Development. This plan bans the use of wood-burning fireplaces and incorporates pedestrian trails and parks throughout the mixed use of residential, multifamily and commercial where people can work and live and provides for bus stops throughout the project. This is a large master-planned community, which by its very nature allows for smart growth and proper planning that smaller projects do not incorporate.

I applaud the council, planning department and developers for a project that will be something we should all be proud to have built in Fresno.

Unity needed

By John F. Salmonson
President Monterey AgResources
Fresno

(Published Sunday, June 15, 2003, 5:20 AM)

I read with interest the letter [June 6] by Leo Wilson and Pat Ricchutti concerning the building industry and agriculture doing their part to help improve the air quality in our Valley. I commend them for this pro-active position.

As a resident of the Valley for more than 30 years, I believe we all have a duty to help in any way we can to improve our quality of life. Clearing the air to practical and common-sense levels will be a monumental task. It will not be easy.

Our population growth, geographic locale and support industries for agriculture will present a challenge for everyone. No one else will trust the other to solve the problem, and the industry is so "beaten up" by government mandates and regulations all we can see in the future is more of the same.

In order to solve this problem, government will need industry cooperation. They cannot just threaten, fine and ravage the basic industry by which this Valley was built -- agriculture.

It is time for cooperation in helping to deal with the problem, for all residents, agriculture and industry in the most productive area for supply of food in the world -- the San Joaquin Valley.

Dwindling resources

By Karen Roberts
Friant

(Published Saturday, June 14, 2003, 5:04 AM)

I'm disappointed in the City Council's decision to allow the Copper River Ranch project to go through. In the face of "spare the air days" and unhealthy air quality, it seems illogical to continue adding so many new homes.

Every summer, we're asked to conserve water and electricity, but the building never stops, or even slows down, each home adding to the drain on our resources.

Cool, easy ride

By Nancy Jane Pierce
Fresno

(Published Friday, June 13, 2003, 5:41 AM)

Want to cool off at the coast without the long drive? Try the train to Bakersfield, then take a comfortable bus ride over to Ventura or Santa Barbara.

In January, with a free companion ticket, the train fare was cheaper than the cost of gas for a car trip. It is probably a little higher in the summer, but it is still a great way to relax, play a game or view the scenery. Try it. You'll like it as much as we did.

[Letters to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian:](#)

Builders not dummies

June 16, 2003

It is most interesting that within the past two months, two of Bakersfield's largest homebuilders have decided to sell their businesses to outside developers. Besides the obvious reason to make a ton of money, could there be other possible reasons that motivated them to make this decision?

Bakersfield is certainly not as desirable a place to live as say 20 years ago. Our quality of life has degraded to such a point that it makes one wonder why anyone would voluntarily move here.

Our air quality, presently third worse in the country, will quite likely return to the number two spot with the totally ridiculous approval of so many dairies. How long will it take before these same dairies contaminate our underground water supplies?

Our cheap housing may be a thing of the past as well, with our median prices increasing over 20 percent. They have been suppressed for years partially due to the building industry that manipulated local politicians to keep traffic impact fees unrealistically low.

Housing construction over the last 15 years hasn't come close to helping pay for all the traffic congestion it has created. It's most unlikely our infrastructure and roadway network will improve in the foreseeable future thanks to this grossly inadequate funding.

We have double-digit unemployment with no sign of it diminishing. Decent, well-paying jobs are few and far between. This is just a sampling of what this writer feels will cause a dramatic slowdown in the housing industry. Those builders were no dummies.

DENNIS BAINBRIDGE, Bakersfield

All have to clean up air

June 15, 2003

We're all aware how bad the air is in our valley. We've been asked to forgo mowing our lawns on bad air days as a way to "help" reduce the pollution on those days.

Is that just for homeowners who do their own lawns? What about the mass of people who mow lawns for a living? What's the difference between their exhaust and a homeowners'?

If we're all in this together, then homeowners who pay gardeners to come and mow for them should also be expected to forgo having their lawns done on that day. And while we're at it, why not the huge apartment complexes and business areas?

Oh, but we can't now, can we? It always comes back to someone making a living, which I think is fair. But what about the junk we breathe as they do it? Obviously, this is one area where the suggestion to not use gas mowers and blowers to help clear the air doesn't work. We all have to do it to make it work.

SUE BRAMAN, Bakersfield

[Letters to the Editor, Modesto Bee:](#)

Published: June 16, 2003, 06:50:12 AM PDT

Just say "no" to the proposed new housing element general plan ("Build it quicker, Modesto" May 26). My jaw dropped and blood pressure skyrocketed as I read of the state demanding Modesto increase its number of housing units, which translates into a decrease in the quality of life for you, me and our families.

At the San Jose State University graduation, a developer-contractor who was the keynote speaker proclaimed that the Santa Clara Valley was once an agriculture-oriented valley. Now it's

a valley sending traffic, smog, crime and high housing prices to this valley. Have you been affected by these changes?

Of the some 5,000 graduates of San Jose State, none received degrees in urban planning and development, while about 350 received degrees in marketing (sales). It seems to me we have a bunch of salespeople in government telling us what they think we need. Don't be fooled by their "low-income, multiple family units" sales pitch.

Why does Modesto have to be told what to do by people who don't even live here? We need true leaders in our local government to stand up to these ridiculous growth plans. You, too, must stand up and be heard if you are against this state's method of madness.

Has the state done anything for you lately? Do you think California can dig its way out of the deep hole we're in with developer fees and property taxes? I think not.

RONALD JANDA

Modesto