

Part of solution

Addressing emissions from off-road diesel engines necessary element.

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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% of vehicle-related PM10 and 29% of NOx, according to the report. The numbers were lower in major urban counties. But in Fresno County, off-road diesels accounted for 50% of vehicle-related PM10 emissions and 32% of NOx. Merced County was even higher, with 52% of PM10 and 34% of NOx coming from off-road sources.

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 that 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.

Shift in air district urged

By BOB WHITE

MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, June 12, 2003

STOCKTON -- San Joaquin County officials want air quality watchdogs to consider putting the three northernmost San Joaquin Valley counties into their own little air quality planning area.

The San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 Tuesday to ask the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to look at the idea of putting Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties into a single area for meeting federal clean-air standards.

Supervisor Dario Marengo, who voted "no," said he wants no part of the proposal without the other counties in the eight-county air district knowing what is going on.

Board Chairman Jack Sieglock assured board members that the vote did not mean that they endorse the proposal. He said it simply was a request that the air board study the feasibility.

Ultimately, the state Air Resources Board and federal Environmental Protection Agency would have to approve any new planning area.

Leading a campaign to create the planning area is the San Joaquin Council of Governments, of which Sieglock is chairman.

Julia Greene, executive director of the Council of Governments, told the Board of Supervisors that there is a misconception among the valley's southern counties -- Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern -- that the idea is to create a new air district for the northern counties.

That is not the case, she said.

The Council of Governments and chambers of commerce in San Joaquin County are pushing for the separate planning area to try to escape federal sanctions that the valley may be facing.

Seeking to postpone sanctions, the valley air quality board plans to voluntarily request a downgrade of the valley's air quality status from "severe" to "extreme" for ozone.

That would give the district five additional years, until 2010, to achieve federal clean-air standards and avert sanctions that could include the loss of \$2 billion in federal highway money.

Ron May, president of the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce, said the extreme classification could bring stricter rules and requirements for businesses in the northern counties, even though the air in the north valley is much cleaner than in the south.

Most San Joaquin County supervisors expressed reluctance at taking the lead in calling for a new air planning area.

"I sure don't want to alienate other counties," Marengo said.

Fresno County already has made its feelings known: It does not like the idea.

Supervisor Judith Case wrote the San Joaquin board: "We believe that working together in a coordinated regional effort will bring clean air to the San Joaquin Valley sooner than a fragmented system with separate planning areas."

The Fresno board voted unanimously against establishment of a separate planning area for the northern counties, she said.

In Bakersfield, Kern County Supervisor Don Maben said his board has not discussed the matter, but he does not favor the idea.

"When you have a common problem," he said, "you stick together."

Kings County Supervisor Tony Barba said he would have to hear more about what San Joaquin County has in mind, although he noted that bad air does not stop at county lines.

"Seems to me we'd be splitting the baby, so to speak," he said.

Stanislaus County Supervisor Paul Caruso was not available for comment on Wednesday, but previously has said that he was not inclined to see Stanislaus join in the effort to create a separate planning area.

Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey, on the other hand, said she likes the idea.

The Merced board will discuss the matter soon, she said.

To her, it looks like a win-win situation. "There is no down side," she said, "because we would still be in the mix and we would still be working together toward the same end -- clean air."

The valley air district board is expected to discuss the San Joaquin County request in July.

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Community Briefing

ELECTRICITY

Power plant considered

A proposal for a 250-megawatt natural gas-fueled power plant in Turlock is due for discussion next week in preliminary staff assessment workshops scheduled by the state Energy Commission. The power plant, proposed by the Turlock Irrigation District, would be built near West Main Street and Washington Road. The state commission, meeting in Sacramento, is scheduled to consider all issues except air quality at 10 a.m. Tuesday, and air quality only in a session set for 9 a.m. June 19. The workshops are at Energy Commission offices, 1516 Ninth St. For more information, call Roberta Mendonca, (916) 654-4489 or (800) 822-6228, or e-mail pao@energy.state.ca.us. The commission's Web site is www.energy.ca.gov/sitingcases/turlock.

Off-road rules enforced

Registration to be checked at Carnegie recreation area

The Record

Beginning July 15, the state of California will strictly enforce registration requirements on off-road vehicles driven in the Carnegie State Vehicular Recreation Area and five other state-designated parks, the state Department of Parks and Recreation has announced.

Motorists who don't have a green or red sticker on their off-road vehicles will be ticketed.

At the same time, the state Department of Parks and Recreation is attempting to clear up any confusion that resulted from the issuing of red and green stickers, which indicate the emissions released by the vehicles. Some vehicles were given the wrong ones, according to a state press release.

Green stickers allow off-road vehicles to operate on public land all year, while the red stickers are for vehicles not certified to the state's emission standards, the state Department of Parks and Recreation Web site said. Vehicles with red stickers can only operate in Carnegie between Nov. 1 and April 30, according to the Web site.

The state will issue green stickers for off-road vehicles made in 2002 or earlier, regardless of the emission standards.

Green stickers will be issued to 2003 models that are certified to meet air-quality standards. Other 2003 models will be issued red stickers.

The new guidelines will help enforce the state's six riding areas, said Tony Perez, chief of the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division in a news release.

"It will also bring clarity to owners and give both riders and the agencies involved a fresh start in implementing this important air-quality-related program," Perez said in the news release.

Motorists can register their vehicles with the Department of Motor Vehicles. The registration fee is \$21 per vehicle, and registration is valid for two years, according to the Web site.

Carnegie State Vehicular Recreation Area covers about 1,500 acres on Corral Hollow Road, 80 percent of which is in San Joaquin County. About 2,000 riders a day use the park.

The park has tracks for motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles. In addition, there is a beginner's track designated for motorcycles and ATVs with small engines.