

Fresno Bee editorial, Oct. 2, 2003:

Don't choke

Air board officials must stand strong against special-interest lobbies.

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It took years for the San Joaquin Valley's air to become the second most polluted in the nation, and it will take some time to make it healthy again. But several new state laws and air district regulations will give the region tools that should help improve the Valley's air quality.

Unfortunately, there are those who would block the region's clean-air efforts for selfish motives, and they must not be allowed to prevail. As the political battle moves from the state Legislature to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board, the public must insist that its representatives don't water down the region's new air-quality rules.

Already, lobbyists for San Joaquin Valley agriculture have been quietly working their pals in Congress to get federal legislation to override the bills just signed by the governor that would regulate farm-caused air pollution. That kind of back-door maneuvering is not in the public interest and puts individual needs ahead of the health needs of Valley residents.

Don't be surprised if the Valley's air board also is aggressively lobbied by various special interests urging lax enforcement of provisions of the bills successfully carried by state Sen. Dean Florez.

The five new laws deal with long-standing problems ranging from agriculture burning to urban sprawl. This legislation is an important start in the growing movement to make the Valley's air more healthful. No longer are residents merely accepting poor air quality, but they must be vigilant or politics will trump the gains we have already made.

Unfortunately, this progress comes after many residents already have had their health damaged by the Valley's poor air.

More than 300,000 people -- 10% of the Valley's population -- are afflicted with chronic breathing disorders. More than 16% of the children living in Fresno County have asthma, a higher rate than any other place in California. Other Valley counties are not far behind.

That's why we can't allow any backsliding on our commitment to clean the Valley's air. The public can counter the expected attacks on these crucial air-improvement efforts by closely watching air board officials and elected representatives to see if they are working to clean up the air or caving in to the special interests.

We're all in this together, and we need to be unified in demanding cleaner air. The public health shouldn't be put at risk by special-interest lobbying.