

New air standard forces more Valley cleanup

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

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Federal leaders moved Wednesday toward a stricter threshold for summertime air pollution, dramatically pushing the cleanup in the country's two worst air basins — the San Joaquin Valley and the South Coast Air Basin in Southern California.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed an ozone standard between 65 and 70 parts per billion, lowering it from 75 parts per billion. The Valley led the nation in days above the old standard this year with 99 exceedances. Southern California had 93.

Across the country, the new regulation would prevent 320,000 to 960,000 asthma attacks in children, and 330,000 to 1 million missed school days, the EPA estimated. Ozone is a corrosive gas that attacks the lungs.

The EPA also said that by 2025 the new rule would prevent 750 to 4,300 premature deaths.

But to achieve a new standard, the Valley would have to eliminate fossil-fuel combustion emissions, says Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. That means shutting down vehicles.

"It has been demonstrated that the technology does not currently exist to meet the current eight-hour ozone standard of 75 parts per billion by the 2032 deadline," Sadredin said. Federal authorities Wednesday expect the new standard to be reached just five years later, by 2037.

Valley environmentalists reacted to the EPA announcement with disappointment. Environmentalists three years ago pushed for a standard closer to 60 parts per billion, but the Obama administration balked.

"How do you say, 'A day late and a dollar short,' in terms of years of delay and shortened lives?" asked activist Kevin Hall of Fresno. "The EPA is again failing to protect our children's health. We need the EPA to apply science-based standards, not politically compromised ones."

Although the EPA is proposing a range of 65 to 70 parts per billion, the agency's scientific advisers have endorsed a standard as low as 60 parts per billion. The EPA said it would take public comments on that lower level, too, leaving the door open to the possibility of even more stringent standards.

The agency will also seek comments on the current standard of 75 parts per billion. A final decision on the new standard is expected by October 2015.

As the standard is lowered, the cost of air cleanup climbs for more expensive pollution-control technology.

Nationally, the cost would be \$3.9 billion in 2025 if the government goes with a standard of 70 parts per billion, the EPA estimated. At 65 parts per billion, the EPA said, the cost grows to \$15 billion.

Industry groups said the cost would actually be far higher and that it would be nearly impossible for refineries and other businesses to comply.

Pushing back on those claims, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said lower ozone standards would actually spur more businesses, investment and jobs by making communities healthier. She said states would be given time to carefully design plans to meet the new standard over the coming decades.

"We have had a lot of recent improvement in air quality in general. The amount of lift this will take is certainly less" than previous ozone standards, McCarthy said. "We've done it before, and we're on track to do it again."

Business groups like the National Association of Manufacturers painted the government's move as a roadblock that threatens to jeopardize manufacturing's comeback in the United States. They accused the administration of moving the goalposts, since states are still working to implement the previous standard put in place in 2008.

"Tightening these standards could be the most expensive regulation ever imposed on the American public, with potentially enormous costs to the economy, jobs, and consumers," said Jack Gerard, president of the American Petroleum Institute.

The EPA was under a court-ordered Dec. 1 deadline to issue a new ozone standard.

But the proposal also fulfills a pledge President Barack Obama made during his first campaign for the White House and one of his first environmental actions as president: reversing President George W. Bush's decision to set a limit weaker than scientists advised.

In 2011, amid pressure from Republicans and industry, and facing a battle for re-election, Obama reneged on a plan by then-EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson to lower the permissible level to be more protective of public health.

"Seldom do presidents get an opportunity to right a wrong," said Bill Becker of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, one of numerous advocacy groups that were enraged by the White House's decision to table the first proposal.

Forest Service to begin prescribed burning projects in Kern

By Tomas Kassahun, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Friday, Nov. 28, 2014

Kern River Ranger District Fire Management personnel are planning to begin hazardous fuel reduction projects on three mountaintops surrounding the Kern River Valley.

The Forest Service expects to burn 1,000 acres this year in the mountains of Greenhorn, Piutes and Breckenridge to reduce the risk of a stand-replacing fire and restore natural ecosystems.

All projects are on forest land adjacent to communities and have high amounts of hazardous fuels. Smoke will be visible from most areas surrounding Isabella Lake while roads and trails are expected to stay open.

Fire managers will work with the Eastern Kern and San Joaquin Valley air pollution control districts to manage smoke production and reduce any local impacts.

For more information contact district fuels specialist Ernie Villa at (760) 376-3781, ext. #621.