

San Joaquin District Seeks More Time, Flexibility for Some Nonattainment Areas

By Carolyn Whetzel

Bloomberg BNA Environment Reporter, Wednesday, April 28, 2015

Air quality regulators in California's San Joaquin Valley have drafted a proposal for Clean Air Act amendments that would give areas with the worst air pollution extra time and flexibility to meet ozone and particulate standards.

Discussions are under way with several members of Congress, Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District, told Bloomberg BNA April 28.

"We're optimistic we're going to have a bipartisan introduction of a bill soon," Sadredin said.

Areas with the worst air pollution would win some flexibility and extra time to comply with federal Clean Air Act standards under a legislative proposal regulators in California's San Joaquin Valley hope will win bipartisan support in Washington.

Like the Los Angeles area, this is an extreme nonattainment area for ground-level ozone. Meeting the increasingly stricter federal health-based ozone standards has become a serious challenge, according to Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District.

The Clean Air Act needs to be updated to reflect "real world situations," Sadredin said.

Tough regional and state regulations have cut ozone pollution by as much as 80 percent, but additional cuts are needed to attain the current standard of 75 parts per billion, and now the Environmental Protection Agency is about to tighten that standard to between 65 ppb and 70 ppb, he said.

High background levels of ozone, some of it due to regional and transboundary transport pollution, make reducing air pollution in the valley more challenging than in other areas, Sadredin said.

"We support the well-intended concepts in the Clean Air Act, but some of those well-intended provisions are leading to unintended consequences," he said.

Change in Implementation Sought

Unlike other bills currently pending in Congress, the district's proposal would not weaken EPA's authority to set new health-based standards. The goal of the proposal is to change how the law is implemented as to the ozone and particulate standards, Sadredin said.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District, which oversees air quality in the four-county Los Angeles region and shares many of the same challenges as the valley, has not taken a position on the proposal, Sadredin said.

A key provision involves the formula-based attainment deadlines in the law.

Instead of the prescribed deadlines, extreme nonattainment areas would have to demonstrate progress toward achieving the standards by proving to the EPA, every five years, that they are implementing the most effective strategy and control measures that are technologically and economically feasible.

"The formula-based deadlines made sense when there was a lot of low-hanging fruit," Sadredin said. "It's physically impossible to meet the formula-based deadlines in the act right now even if money were no object. The technology does not exist."

Another provision would allow states to develop a single attainment plan that harmonizes multiple standards. The reasonable further progress milestones for the prior standards would be updated when a new standard is published.

The proposal also would amend the law to allow states to use alternative approaches to demonstrate equivalent emissions reductions; eliminate the need for contingency measures in extreme nonattainment areas; and allow states to take credit for all transportation control measures and strategies and not punish areas whose transportation control actions achieved reductions earlier than required.

Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, said the district's proposal "appears to remove the very important and bedrock piece of the Clean Air Act—attainment deadlines attached to compliance strategies."

"The public deserves the right to know that their air is expected to be cleaned by certain deadlines," Becker told Bloomberg BNA in an April 29 email. "Without such a commitment, there will be less emphasis on technology development on strategies that could help areas, like the Valley, provide clean air."

Becker also doubts the proposal will move forward, saying "there appears to be no bipartisan interest in opening up the Clean Air Act during this Congress."

Earthjustice has brought several lawsuits against the EPA and the air district on behalf of environmental and public health advocates to enforce federal and state clean air laws.

"There is so much more that the district, state and EPA could do to meet these standards," Paul Cort, an attorney at Earthjustice, told Bloomberg BNA in an e-mail. "There is no substance to the complaints about achievability and feasibility. And, the district's gripes about duplicative planning are the result of the district's choices to split these plans up and adopt plans that do not work so that they must be revisited over and over again," Cort said.

Drought making California's air quality worse, American Lung Assn. says

By Joseph Serna

Los Angeles Times, Thursday, April 30, 2015

Despite increasingly aggressive clean air and fuel standards, years of drought are taking a toll on California's air quality, the American Lung Assn. says in a new report.

The portion of California's Central Valley from Fresno to Madera was the most polluted region in the nation on any given day in 2013 with microscopic particulates, or soot, thanks in large part to the changing climate and drought, according to an annual report on air quality released Wednesday by the American Lung Assn.

"Continuing drought and heat may have increased dust, grass fires and wildfires" that have hurt the Central Valley's air quality in short-term particle pollution, the report stated. "The impact of climate change is particularly apparent in the West, where the heat and drought create situations ripe for episodes of high-particle days."

The report evaluated metropolitan areas based on recorded levels of ozone, the main ingredient in smog, and also measured particles, or soot, that tend to build up in colder, winter months. It looked at the annual average for cities and the worst on average in a 24-hour period. The report used data gathered between 2011 and 2013.

In both time frames, a swath of California's Central Valley topped the rankings for unhealthy particulate pollution. The Fresno-to-Madera region was the most polluted year-round for the second year in a row and the worst in a 24-hour cycle.

Bakersfield was ranked second, the area from Visalia to Hanford was third and the area from Modesto to Merced was fourth for short-term and annual particle pollution.

Los Angeles County actually performed worse in the 24-hour rankings this year than it did the previous year, the report noted.

Despite great strides in recent years, L.A. County again topped the nation's list of metropolitan areas with the worst smog for 2013, according to the report.

L.A. County has ranked the worst for smog among metropolitan areas in all but one of the association's 16 reports. Despite the high rank, the report said the city "exemplified" progress in reducing smog.

Its three-year average for 2011-13 was its best since the report began and showed a one-third reduction in the number of unhealthy air days.

Ranking fifth on the list of smog-polluted areas nationally, according to the report, was the area from Sacramento to Roseville.

Smog forms in warm, sunny weather with little wind. More than 138 million people, or 44% of the nation, live in areas with unhealthy air, according to the report.

Still, the situation has improved over the last 10 years.

“Even the more polluted cities had significantly fewer unhealthy ozone days than they had a decade ago,” the report states.

Poor air quality can most adversely affect the young and old, those with lung disease and asthma, heart disease and diabetes.

The report said that the Environmental Protection Agency’s current ozone air quality standards are “woefully inadequate” and called for the government to adopt stricter standards proposed by the EPA last year.

Large industrial fire in Fresno affects air quality

Central Valley Business Times, Thursday, April 30, 2015

Smoke from a large industrial fire in Fresno may periodically affect air quality in Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the valley portion of Kern counties until the fire is extinguished, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District,.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter that can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks, and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

People with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are especially susceptible to health effects from these pollutants. Air District officials urge residents to follow their doctors’ orders when exposed to fire emissions.

The fire is at a storage yard near Ashlan Avenue and Golden State Boulevard where dozens of creosote-coated power poles are stored by a company that sells them to Pacific Gas and Electric Company. The name of the firm was not immediately available.

Fresno firefighters say they have been hampered in dousing the fire because the area has few fire hydrants and water must be trucked in.

Cause of the fire is under investigation. No injuries have been reported.

Flames chew through up to 1,000 power poles in Fresno

By Scott Smith and Kristin J. Bender of the Associated Press
In the San Diego Union Tribune, Thursday, April 30, 2015

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — A massive fire at a power pole yard in Fresno shot flames and smoke into the sky Thursday, and it could take a full day to bring the blaze under control, authorities said.

There are few fire hydrants in the unpopulated, industrial area, so crews had to cut across private property and railroad tracks to get water, Fresno Fire Department spokesman Pete Martinez said. Firefighters are pumping up to 3,000 gallons a minute to douse the flames amid a historic drought in California that is forcing water restrictions on residents.

Before the fire started, there were between 400 and 1,000 wooden power poles owned by Pacific Gas and Electric on the 2-acre yard, Martinez said. Crews have moved away an unknown amount of undamaged poles to try to contain the blaze, he said.

Damage is estimated at \$1 to 3 million, and its cause is under investigation, he said.

The poles burned with such intensity that motorists along a nearby street said they could feel heat radiating through their windshields. Some drivers pulled off the road to snap pictures with their cellphones.

There are no reports of injuries, and the closest homes are 2 to 3 miles away, Martinez said.

The fire may periodically affect air quality in Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the valley portion of Kern counties, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said. A "health caution" is in place until the fire is extinguished.

The fire will generate fine particulates that can cause problems for people with respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people, the air district said.

"It's one of those things where any smoke is hazardous but the winds are blowing a lot of the smoke into the atmosphere," Martinez said.

The fire was first reported at 3:45 a.m. along State Route 99 northwest of downtown, and at least two dozen firefighters working from a dozen trucks and engines are fighting it. Motorists should avoid the area near Brawley Avenue and Golden State Boulevard.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Thursday, April 30, 2015:](#)

Valley air is better, but it's still not healthy

California is the nation's air pollution paradox.

We have the country's dirtiest air, especially in the San Joaquin Valley, where the drought is hurting our air quality, and the Los Angeles basin. But we are also a national leader in efforts to improve the air. And we've made more progress on that front than most other parts of the country.

All of this is evident in the latest "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association, which issues the annual report card as part of its effort to lobby for tougher air quality standards and enforcement.

Unfortunately, California cities topped the list for the nation's worst air quality by every standard measure. L.A. has the worst ozone pollution in the United States. And Fresno has the worst particle pollution, measured both on an annual basis and by the number of "bad air days" exceeding federal standards.

The bad air in L.A. is largely the result of its box-like topography and the region's car culture, plus what remains of its heavy industry, including the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. But L.A. also has reduced its number of unhealthy air days by a third in the past 15 years, and even its high ozone levels are falling.

Fresno and the rest of the Valley suffer from accidents of geography, too. Much of the tiny particle pollution produced on the coast is carried inland by prevailing winds. But our agriculture industry generates its share of pollutants from heavy machinery, as does the truck traffic rumbling up and down Highway 99 and Interstate 5.

Pollution from those diesel particles has improved in Fresno, the study showed, but things got worse in Bakersfield and Merced, among other places. So more work remains to be done.

Continued progress will be difficult, however, because so much has already been done and new technologies will be needed to reduce harmful emissions.

The state Air Resources Board already is talking about transitioning California's freight transportation system to zero or near-zero emissions over the next two decades. The movement of goods now accounts for about half of the diesel particulate pollution and nearly half of the nitrogen oxide that forms ozone pollution, so the ARB's goal is admirable. But achieving it will be expensive for public and private players alike.

Gov. Jerry Brown's announcement Wednesday that he plans to propose more ambitious goals for the state's reduction of greenhouse gases also will help, since most efforts to reduce the carbon emissions that cause climate change also will reduce the kind of emissions that pollute the air we breathe every day.

So the bad news is, California's air is still unhealthy by national standards, and compared to everywhere else in the country. The good news is, it is much cleaner than it used to be, thanks to regulation of polluters.

The sobering news?

If we want air that doesn't endanger children, older adults and people with chronic diseases, we are all going to have to help pay.