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Efficient air pollution district flummoxes Sacramento auditors

By Lois Henry

Only in Sacramento.

A special state audit came out recently that found the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District — well known for charging the lowest fees in the state and making extensive use of federal and state grants — charges the lowest fees in the state and makes extensive use of federal and state grants.

What did this earth-shaking, no-news audit cost taxpayers?

A mere \$220,000.

Sheesh.

I'm all in favor of auditing government agencies. Believe me, most agencies could stand to be audited on a daily basis.

And the air district does undergo audits, both state and federal, on a regular basis. Not to mention it has withstood what might be deemed a "hostile" audit paid for by environmental groups in 2009 bent on proving the district was mishandling the public's money.

They've all come out the same.

This district, love it or hate it, operates extremely efficiently.

So why, then, did the Legislative Audit Committee, which usually focuses on bigger fish (such as its recent audit showing the University of California's financial practices hurt California-resident students), waste taxpayer money and time auditing the air district to reiterate known facts?

I called Assemblymember Jim Cooper, D-Elk Grove, who asked for the audit, but I never got a call back.

What I do know is that in his letter requesting the audit, Cooper is very interested in the air district's policies regarding indemnification.

He erroneously states that the air district requires businesses seeking permits to "post bonds against any potential lawsuit resulting from the granting of the permit."

Cooper's main concern is whether the air district is charging enough in fees to do its job.

To me, the implication is that Cooper thought the air district was overcharging for indemnification because it was undercharging for fees.

A couple phone calls probably could have set Cooper straight. Instead we got a \$220,000 pointless audit.

The audit, by the way, found the air district does not require businesses to post bonds against lawsuits.

It does require indemnification and, occasionally, letters of credit for a handful of the 4,000 or so permits it grants each year only when those permits involve significant environmental issues that could generate a CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) lawsuit.

Otherwise, the audit found that the air district charges the lowest fees in the state and makes extensive use of federal and state grants.

Of course, the audit was covered by a handful of news outlets with headlines such as, "Audit shows air district charges too little."

Which made it seem as though the air district is lax, which prompted online commenters to seize the audit as evidence that the air district is "soft on industry!"

Sigh.

In reality, the air district enforces some of the strictest air standards in the country and even the 2009 environmentalists' audit found it conducted more inspections per inspector and for less cost each year than other air districts. It also had more and better public outreach and better managed its incentive programs, according to that audit.

“Now we have to defend ourselves for having low costs,” joked air district chief Seyed Sadredin of the recent state audit. “What we’ve achieved here should be the example of good government. We don’t ascribe to the idea of bringing in all the money we can. Our fees are set where they need to be for us to do an effective job.”

And the air district is doing an effective job at reducing pollution in the valley, despite popular opinion.

In fact, emissions have been reduced by 80 percent over the last 20 years even as the valley has continued to grow.

The number of “unhealthy” days for ozone and particulate matter (PM2.5) have dropped, even hitting zero for ozone last July and zero for PM2.5 this past winter.

Considering the valley’s geography, it’s heavy industry, prevailing winds that bring pollution in from elsewhere and the ever more stringent standards we’re expected to meet, any success is hard-fought.

That the air district is, in fact, succeeding and doing it economically is phenomenal and should be celebrated.

Instead, Sacramento launches an audit. Yet another misfire from our so-called leaders.