

Keep Paris, I'll take Bakersfield over Pittsburgh

By Dennis Wyatt

Turlock Journal, Wednesday, June 14, 2017

Forget Paris — or Pittsburgh for the matter. I'd rather have Bakersfield.

With all the coronaries following President Trump's decision to pull out of the Paris Accord and the chest pounding battle cries of how states, cities, colleges and non-profits like the Sierra Club are going to "go it alone" without the White House, people need to stop hyperventilating and grab an oxygen mask.

The Paris Accord may have 144 nations on board but it is all flash with no nuts and bolts. Sure, there is language that the world mean temperature should not deviate more than two degrees from its level in 1800 — as if that were a magical date in the 4.54-billion-year history of the planet — and other policy statements, but no real day-to-day game plan.

Let's go back to another date that is definitely not magical — Dec. 27, 1991.

If you were driving Highway 99 through Bakersfield that day you would have thought there was low hanging fog the San Joaquin Valley is famous for. You couldn't see the abrupt rise of the Sierra 15 miles to the east. It wasn't fog. It was smog. The biggest culprits were vehicle emissions, open fires and factory emissions.

Fast forward to December 2016.

The hazy days of winter absent when fog permeates from the ground are for all practical purposes gone from Stockton to Bakersfield. The air is a lot cleaner in the winter. The air is also much cleaner other times of the year, despite population in the valley nearly doubling. It can get cleaner, but just like anything else it will come up against the point of diminishing returns unless technology changes and does so in a cost-effective way.

The Valley clean up to date was done using a series of strategies out of Sacramento. Three of the bigger items were reformulated gas, vehicle emission standards, and higher mileage. Squeeze more out of a gallon of gas and you generate less pollution to move people around. It's a big deal considering we have close to 29 million registered vehicles in California.

It required an exemption by Congress, but California has for all practical purposes has always gone it alone until other states such as New York started piggybacking. The auto manufacturers had no choice but to go along with California or else write off one-ninth of the American market.

I get that people who do not live on the West Coast or East Coast thought concerns about air pollution on a global basis were overkill. The Eastern seaboard is densely populated and so is part of the West Coast. Out here, though, we have geological features that add to the air quality problem such as the Los Angeles Basin and the Central Valley. The lack of real mountains — sorry, I'm from California where they have to be 5,000 feet or higher to start earning that moniker — plus wide-open spaces and wind make air quality concerns a virtual non-issue in much of the Midwest.

Note, I did not say global warming. It is obvious global warming is natural or else we wouldn't have had glacier ages come and go that helped carve the landscape. While man contributes I'm not convinced it is that significant to justify some draconian proposals. In reality, the truth is probably out there in the middle ground between the Chicken Littles and the so-called climate change deniers.

Would I trust Sacramento to get it more on target for California than I would someone worried about Pittsburgh or 144 nations signing a document in Paris? Absolutely even though I can list bonehead moves by the state that shouldn't have been made and some that have been stopped. We have a better chance of getting greenhouse emissions right for California than a bunch of politicking stuffed suits in Paris.

It also assures a more practical approach. Say what you want about Gov. Brown — I know I do — but he is definitely more pragmatic about balancing economic reality and air quality mandates than some bureaucrat behind a computer in The Hague.

Brown shelved an expensive and marginally effective proposed mandate for truck diesel engines to get the gas tax increase to address the state's crumbling freeways and bridges. It was an action that made it clear reducing air pollution at all costs wasn't an absolute.

International treaties often sacrifice air quality by justifying that one nation is poorer so therefore it is justified that they can pollute more when you are comparing apples and apples.

The North American Free Trade Act had a provision that allowed Mexico's trucks that ran on dirty diesel to travel into and out of California — often into the heavily polluted San Joaquin Valley. They could fuel up with cheaper and dirtier diesel before crossing the border.

I get the belief that global action is needed given air moves around. I'm well aware of research that shows a healthy double-digit percentage of air pollution picked up by coastal monitors here in California originates from China.

The truth is Washington, D.C., may have started the pushback on air pollution in this country but they never really drove it after it got rolling. Most innovations were market driven from firms trying to deal with California standards.

A lot about greenhouse gas impacts and strategies and the natural progression that man does not control are open to debate.

Meanwhile California has arguably done proportionately more than most if not all of the 144 signers of the Paris Accord including the United States when it comes to greenhouse gases.