

Valley air district focuses on particulate pollution at local workshop

By Steven Mayer

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An air quality workshop held in Bakersfield Tuesday night started out like a polite government meeting, with scads of information about progress made in controlling dangerous PM2.5 particle pollution in the valley -- and plans being formed to control it even further.

But as the workshop moved into the public comment period, it came to resemble a verbal boxing match. In one corner were air quality advocates and the environmental community demanding more and faster progress; in the other, farming representatives angry, they said, that their contributions to cleaner air have not been recognized and respected.

And the ref in the middle was the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and its director of strategies and incentives, Sheraz Gill.

"We have to demonstrate attainment (of PM2.5 standards) by 2025," Gill told the 75 to 100 people who packed the air district's Bakersfield office. The workshop was also video-streamed to offices in Fresno and Modesto, where members of the public could listen and participate.

There's no doubt significant progress has been made.

After years of work and billions spent by private industry and government agencies, exposure of Kern County residents to high levels of the unhealthy micro-particles known as PM2.5 has been reduced by 85 percent.

The particulates are so small, scientists say, they can lodge in your lungs, and aggravate asthma, cause chronic bronchitis, irregular heartbeat, non-fatal heart attacks, lung cancer and even premature death.

Bakersfield and the valley portion of Kern County are considered a "hot spot" for such pollution.

Despite the reductions in exposure to unhealthy pollution concentrations, Gill said, under the federal Clean Air Act the entire Valley is designated as not meeting the standard if only a handful of high concentrations occur at a monitor at the worst location, at the worst time.

This leads to imposition of expensive regulatory measures up and down the valley, including locations that don't exceed the standards.

As a result, the air district wants to focus resources on areas in the Valley that will be most cost-effective toward achieving attainment.

This "hot spots" approach was first introduced to the district's governing board in 2015.

Now the district is considering a proposal to target the bulk of its regulatory and incentive-based strategies on pollution sources such as residential wood burning and under-fired charbroiling in hot-spot areas like the Fresno and Bakersfield urban areas.

"So if you have the valley in attainment, but you have one small region that is not ... focus those strategies in those hot spot regions," he said.

Since 1992, the District has adopted more than 600 rules controlling emissions throughout the valley, according to the district. The valley's ozone and PM2.5 precursor emissions are at historically low levels through decades of implementing the most stringent stationary and mobile regulatory control program in the nation.

The district also operates an ambitious incentive grants program, investing more than \$1.7 billion in public/private funding towards clean air projects to date that have achieved more than 140,000 tons of emissions reductions.

Despite the progress federal standards continue to get tougher.

And if you or your child is sickened by the valley's air, often the worst in the nation, no amount of progress seems enough.

"I have asthma," Fresno resident Janet Dietz Kamei, a member of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, told the gathering.

"It's a problem for everyone who lives in this valley," she said of the region's air pollution. "But for those of us who have asthma, (we experience) coughing, shortness of breath, light-headedness -- until you can't get air."

Clean air advocate Kevin Hamilton told air officials, "screw the money."

First find out what is needed to fix the problem once and for all, then worry about the price tag, he said.

"For those of us who you are accountable to," Hamilton said to Gill and Sylvia Vanderspek, who was there representing the California Air Resources Board, "you need to do better."

The comments continued, with some acknowledging the progress, but asserting that a sense of urgency is overdue.

Clean air, now, some seemed to be saying.

But when the comments shifted to the Fresno office, representatives of local farming interests were bitter in their condemnation of CARB and the air district for letting growers take criticism without air officials acknowledging the contributions the ag industry has made toward cleaner air.

"We are working to find solutions, not just sitting around and griping about it," said Roger Ison, of the Cotton Ginning Association.

"I'm disappointed with the district," he said. "Giving all credit to the environmental community and no credit to agriculture is a shame," he said.

Vanderspek tried to apologize, but Ison was having none of it. Neither was Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League.

Ag, he said, has been "part of the team."

He cited several programs implemented by growers, as well as efforts made in conjunction with the district, that have made a difference.

"You can take your AK-47s and shut down the small farmers," he said.

"Ag is doing its part," Cunha said. "...I'm just tired of being accused of doing nothing."