

San Joaquin Valley's air ranks among worst in U.S. This plan promises to improve it by 2024

By Brianna Calix

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The California Air Resources Board this week approved a plan to reduce air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley and hopefully meet federal air regulations that aren't being met.

The plan is key because Valley cities consistently rank among the worst ozone and soot-filled areas of the nation.

With \$5 billion in incentives for residents and various businesses, the clean air plan tackles reducing fine particulate matter — called PM2.5 — generated from gas and diesel vehicles, wood burning and dust.

Under the plan, officials hope air quality in the Valley will meet federal standards by 2024. Currently, the Valley is classified as a “serious non-attainment” area for four federal standards.

“The adoption of this plan is the next step in our clean air journey that will require continued support from all Valley sectors and significant investment at the state and federal level,” said Samir Sheikh, the executive director and air pollution control officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“The district will continue its work with residents, businesses and agencies throughout the San Joaquin Valley to implement this clean air plan and continue to improve quality of life for all Valley residents.”

The air district is a public health agency covering the Valley from San Joaquin County to Kern County that aims to improve the health and quality of life for residents through air quality management.

The plan was unanimously approved during a Thursday meeting in downtown Fresno, where health advocates and residents urged the board to approve the plan, but also questioned where the \$5 billion would come from.

Although the plan says that federal and state funding sources have been identified, allocations to the San Joaquin Valley have yet to be determined.

“With this money, there's a good down payment leftover as a sort of final gift from (former) Governor (Jerry) Brown,” said Kevin Hamilton, CEO of the Central California Asthma Collaborative.

“We have to line up with some of us in the environmental justice community and work with our industry partners and agencies locally to make the case to the new governor that this money is necessary to protect the health of children in the San Joaquin Valley.”

The plan outlines incentive money needed through 2024 for things such as clean fuel trucks and buses, agriculture equipment, off-road equipment, commercial charbroilers, replacing residential wood burning devices and internal combustion engines used for ag operations.

Further restrictions will be placed on residential wood burning devices and fireplaces, but incentives will be available to convert heating to natural gas.

New rules will be introduced under the plan to reduce air pollution from industrial sources such as broilers, steam generators, internal combustion engines, glass manufacturing facilities and more. New strategies also will be used to reduce emissions from commercial restaurants using charbroilers.

New grants for residents will be available for electric vehicles and replacing gas mowers. Incentives also will be available for businesses to replace heavy duty trucks, ag equipment lawn and gardening equipment and more, according to the plan.

The plan and Sheikh were praised for an increased level of community engagement, compared to a 2016 plan which had to be resubmitted with the new, 2018 plan.

“This plan is the result of a cooperative effort among air quality regulators at the local and state level, members of the community, and industry,” said Richard Corey, the CEO of the Air Resources Board.

State OKs Valley's new clean air plan

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The California Air Resources Board has adopted a plan that it says will show the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency how the San Joaquin Valley air basin will attain each of four federal standards for fine particulate matter by federal deadlines.

Meeting standards for fine particle pollution, or PM2.5, is the San Joaquin Valley's most critical air quality challenge. "Now begins the hard work: to implement the measures and secure funding for the incentives to make sure the plan delivers the required air pollution reductions," says CARB Executive Officer Richard Corey.

Here are some of the ways the stricter standards will impact business and daily life in the Valley:

- New regulations targeting emissions from heavy-duty trucks, including an inspection and maintenance program, a low nitrogen oxide engine standard
and a low-emission diesel fuel requirement
- Tightened controls on residential wood-burning stoves and fireplaces, and enhanced incentives for cleaner-burning alternatives
- Enhanced incentives for purchase of cleaner agricultural equipment and commercial underfired charbroilers
- A suite of measures to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxide from flares, including flares at refineries, oil fields and landfills, internal combustion engines and boilers, among other sources, and,
- A suite of incentive programs for Valley businesses including for the replacement of heavy duty trucks, agricultural equipment, off-road equipment, electric dairy feed mixers, locomotives, almond harvesting equipment, commercial zero emission lawn and garden equipment, and other grant opportunities.

The plan relies on both regulations and financial incentives to accelerate emissions reductions. Securing approximately \$5 billion in incentive funding by 2024 will be critical for implementing the plan.

Particulate matter, which can be made up of soot, soil, dust and sulfate particles, comes from a variety of sources, but primarily from the burning of carbon-based fuels, such as gasoline, diesel and wood. In the San Joaquin Valley, car and truck emissions make up about half of measured airborne PM2.5, and local sources, such as wood smoke and dust, make up the other half.

The San Joaquin Valley has the worst particulate matter pollution in California — and the worst in the nation for annual federal standards. Despite progress — existing CARB strategies such as engine and fuels standards have reduced Valley nitrogen oxide emissions by 60 percent and Valley Air District programs have reduced PM2.5 emissions by nearly 40 percent — PM2.5 emissions are expected to rise as the population grows.

The San Joaquin Valley has been working for decades to improve air quality by putting into place the toughest and most innovative clean air measures in the nation, air pollution officials say. These efforts have not been easy or cheap — billions in dollars have been invested by Valley agriculture and businesses to upgrade equipment, modernize fleets, install pollution control equipment, and enhance operating practices.

But despite decades of progress and significant reductions in air pollution, the San Joaquin Valley continues to face difficulty in meeting the latest federal health-based air quality standards due to its unique geography, topography, and frequently stagnant weather conditions that create air quality challenges unmatched by any other region in the nation.

"The adoption of this plan is the next step in our clean air journey that will require continued support from all Valley sectors and significant investment at the state and federal level," says Samir Sheikh, executive director and air pollution control officer.