

California adopts first air pollution measures targeting local emissions in Central Valley

By Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, Feb. 15, 2020

Anabel Marquez was on her way to church one day when she saw a group of people heading to a meeting. She asked what the meeting was about, and they said pesticides.

She was intrigued.

“Everything they said, I lived it,” Marquez said in Spanish.

Marquez, who lives in Shafter, 20 miles northwest of Bakersfield, said she knows and has heard about many people who have been sickened from pollution. Looking around the community she has lived in for nine years – surrounded by oil fields, dairies and agriculture – Marquez said there are many things that may have caused the illnesses.

“We don’t have to fight over who contaminates more or who contaminates less. We have to be conscious that everything contaminates,” Marquez said. “It’s not about who does it more and who does it less.”

On Thursday night, Marquez joined other San Joaquin Valley residents celebrating a historic step taken inside the Shafter veterans hall.

The California Air Resources Board met there following a tour in Shafter and another earlier in the day in south Fresno. After several hours, and at times battling over details and ideas, the board approved plans for both communities that outline ways to reduce emissions, including working with local industries.

Local committees of environmental advocates and residents spent months drafting the plans, which are the first to be approved in the San Joaquin Valley. Similar plans have been approved in other parts of the state. The plans are seen as major steps for heavily polluted communities as California seeks to curb pollution effects at the local level.

“It’s sadly historic, to have finally a process that puts the community front and center ... It should have happened long ago. But it’s happening now,” said Diane Takvorian, Environmental Health Coalition director and a CARB member.

Putting the plans to work will cost millions of dollars. Under AB617, the law that called for plans voted on Thursday night, the state set aside \$32 million for implementation of the south Fresno projects and \$29 million for Shafter. Eight other communities chosen for the programs also received funding, and each year new communities are added.

Targeting pesticides in Shafter

The air board approved plans for Shafter that include reducing pesticide exposure and use. That issue has been a concern to Shafter residents for years.

Val Dolcini, director of the state’s Department of Pesticide Regulation, expressed interest in his agency helping Shafter reduce pollution as well as helping the agriculture industry operate better.

He said he has been attacked for appearing pro- and anti-pesticide.

He also said the department would make an effort to be transparent, citing community distrust.

The measures for Shafter include expanding pesticide air monitoring and developing a pesticide application notification system. Some farmers who spoke during the meeting expressed dissatisfaction with a notification system and rules around pesticides all together.

Bianca Santoyo, organizer for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said she was glad to see the air board and the pesticide agency taking interest in addressing concerns.

“We see there is hope,” Santoyo said. “They gave us hope that they were listening to us.”

While pesticides were included as a priority in the plan, Paulina Torres, an attorney for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said the Shafter community is still left with other pressing concerns, which she hopes can be addressed as the emissions plans are put in motion.

“The resounding sentiment is there are not enough reductions,” Torres said. “That was a win, but it wasn’t a win on the oil and gas stuff.”

Fresno plan focuses on land use

Both the Shafter and south Fresno plans also included measures to add green barriers, like vegetation, to mitigate effects to residents from areas of high emissions sources.

The Fresno committee delivered a resolution to the board with a large focus on land use. But some in the committee said it wasn’t complete.

Ivanka Saunders, policy coordinator with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, said the committee did not have enough time to commit to stronger measures. She pushed to include a study of heavy truck re-routing in south Fresno and language to commit the San Joaquin Valley Air Resources Board to collaborate with the city of Fresno and county when industrial plans are being developed so air rules are followed.

After lengthy discussion, the board OK’d the amended resolution.

“Since we know that we are up against land use jurisdiction issues, the air district can use the power that it has in being able to create new rules,” Saunders said. “So it may not be the fix, but use what you have to make it as strong as possible.”

Nayamin Martinez, director of the Central California Environmental Justice Network, said the board’s approval of south Fresno’s amended emission reduction plan was a positive step forward – especially considering the city of Fresno has in recent months had discussion on industrial development in south Fresno.

“It makes no sense that we are here trying to improve air quality ... while the city is going on the other hand approving all this industry,” Martinez said. “You clean up one part and you get dirtier on the other side, it makes no sense.”

The Fresno plan also includes electric school buses and school air filters.

Next CARB meeting in Fresno

Each committee now has six months to begin implementing the measures laid out in the emission reduction resolutions. The board plans to meet in Fresno in six months for the first review.

Local air data has already been gathered through air monitors placed in each of the communities. Mobile units have been deployed to help capture data that is sent to the air board.

The data is gathered from all sources of pollution, including truck traffic, trains, stationary sources, agriculture and distribution centers, according to Stanley Young, spokesman for the air board. The data is then sent to an online system that allows for public viewing.

Some air board members shared during the meeting that there has been a shift in dynamics in how the state is addressing pollution. Young said AB617, in particular, has opened a new chapter in the state’s efforts.

“This is the first time that we’ve had plans to reduce air pollution and clean the air that are actually driven by members of the community,” Young said.