

No neat fix for Valley air woes

San Joaquin basin has unique obstacles, think tank says.

By Mark Grossi

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The San Joaquin Valley, a vast agricultural landscape with some of the nation's dirtiest air, does not fit neatly into the big-city air cleanup approaches used in Los Angeles, Houston and Atlanta.

So says Adrian T. Moore, executive director of the Reason Public Policy Institute, a Libertarian think tank.

He told San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board members Thursday that state and federal strategies assume bad air is a big-city problem.

But with millions of farmland acres and modest cities, the strategies just don't work. By at least one measure -- daylong smog violations -- this bucolic place has the worst air in the country.

"If we want to get clean air," he said, "we need something radical. We need to be an example for rural areas around the country."

He urged the board to lead a political charge to Sacramento and Washington, D.C., for a solution.

The first target is traffic, which accounts for 60% of the area's pollution. Local officials have no direct control over pollution coming from cars, trucks and other vehicles. State and federal authorities set engine and fuel standards.

So, while the local district ratchets down emissions from businesses and industries, diesel engines and the highest-polluting cars continue as the biggest sources.

As a further frustration, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling last week opened the border to Mexico-based trucks, which experts say produce twice the pollution of their U.S. counterparts.

Mexican trucks may add as many as 8 tons of pollution per day to the Valley's air while local businesses face tighter restrictions. That's not fair, board members said.

"Not everyone is doing their share," said board member Michael Nelson, a Merced County supervisor. "A performance-based system would work better."

Added board member Judy Case, Fresno County supervisor: "Everybody needs to meet the same standard."

The Valley also faces challenges that other air districts do not. At 25,000 square miles, the country's largest air basin often has little wind to move pollutants beyond the surrounding mountains.

The bad air hangs here, pushing daylong smog violations beyond the South Coast air basin, where people produce twice the pollutants.

Besides Pacific Ocean breezes, the southern basin has a financial advantage. The Southern California area has 15 million residents and a massive economic base to absorb the higher business costs of clean-air measures.

The Valley has only 3.3 million residents and a fraction of the financial clout.

"We need to focus our resources to get the maximum air-quality benefit," Moore said. "Under the current system, the air district winds up investing time and money in reductions that are on the margin."

Moore said he had no specific suggestions yet on how to change the approach.

He said he has spoken with staff members of the governor's cabinet about general strategies: "I'm talking about the San Joaquin Valley as a pilot project to a new approach."

Buses could extend hours

Buses may also run more days, add more stops

By Laura Florez

Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, June 18, 2004

By the end of this year, buses in Visalia could run on weekends and a little later on weekdays.

That decision will be made Monday when the Tulare County Association of Governments decides how it will satisfy transit needs throughout the county.

Changes could include extended hours for the Visalia City Coach, bus service between Farmersville and Visalia, transit service in Terra Bella for transportation into Porterville and the addition of bus stops in Lindsay, Poplar, Farmersville and Strathmore.

Extended days and hours would mean a lot to Visalia bus users such as Samuel Peterson.

"I can get to work a whole lot faster," said Peterson, who takes the bus from Goshen to get to his day job in Visalia.

But when it comes to his night job, Peterson can only rely on the bus to get to work because Visalia buses don't operate past 7 p.m. on weekdays.

When Peterson gets off work at 11 p.m., he either rides his bike home to Goshen or finds a ride with a co-worker.

Peterson is one of the county's bus users who say satisfying transit needs throughout the county would make things a little easier.

That feedback from transit users is something that TCAG, a countywide planning organization, asks for every year at its annual Unmet Transit Needs public hearing.

The hearing, held in March, flooded the county with 110 comment cards, each with a suggestion of how to improve transit needs in Tulare County, said Ted Smalley, a transportation engineer for the county's Resource Management Agency.

Those comments were evaluated by the Social Services Transportation Advisory Committee. On Monday, the committee will recommend that the board fulfill nine of those suggestions.

But Plainview won't get a bus driver who speaks Spanish. The request was one several people from the community wanted.

"The county of Tulare has no requirement that drivers be bilingual," the committee's report said, noting that the provider, Trans West Specialties provides bilingual telephone information to its riders. "The county submits that the bilingual telephone information service meets the needs of the bilingual riders."

Although the number of the needs classified as unmet may seem small, Smalley said, it should be noted that some of the suggestions were similar. Others were needs that were already being met, the committee said.

If the board agrees, changes could happen by the end of the summer, after most bus services have submitted implementation plans, Smalley said.

One request submitted by Joe Rivera Jr., who catches the bus in Delano, said one of the county's transit bus stops there didn't have a sign.

"I believe taxpayers have already paid for such services," he wrote. Smalley said that kind of feedback is needed to improve the county's transit system.

"Those kinds of things could slip through the process," he said. "That's why we have this."

The board will also hear a presentation on the draft Regional Transportation Plan, which outlines transportation projects planned, sources of revenue and expected deficiencies.

The board will also consider projects nominated for funding through the federal congestion Mitigation and Air Quality and Transportation Enhancement programs.

Projects include improvements in downtown Lindsay; improvements to Main Street in Ivanhoe; the purchase of cleaner-burning diesel buses for the city of Visalia; a compressed natural gas trolley for the city of Dinuba; and a street sweeper for Tulare County.

Breathing a little easier

[Editorial in the Modesto Bee](#)

June 18, 2004

A popular state program that helps farmers and others replace older, dirtier diesel engines would receive a timely infusion of funding under a budget plan announced by the governor on Tuesday. It's a measure worth pursuing aggressively.

Gov. Schwarzenegger said he wants to add \$61 million annually to the Carl Moyer Program. He proposes to fund the injection of cash with changes in the state's Smog Check Program.

The Moyer Program offers incentives to replace older, dirtier engines used in a number of applications, including school buses, forklifts and tractors.

Diesel engine emissions include nitrogen oxide, a precursor to ozone, and particulates associated with various cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses. The older the engines, the worse the pollution.

Under the Moyer program, farmers may apply for matching funds to replace or retrofit older engines with newer, cleaner models. Most farmers can't afford to do that, especially all at once, without the incentive of matching funds. But using the Moyer program funding, valley farmers have replaced nearly 1,600 older engines since 1998. That's had a measurable impact on valley air, removing tons of pollution.

Schwarzenegger's proposal would keep this work going. So would a bond measure proposed by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter. That \$5.2 billion measure would dedicate \$400 million to the program.

This is a program that works. All of us breathe a little easier for that effort. Let's keep it up.

Sometimes, More Is Less

[Editorial in the Los Angeles Times](#)

June 18, 2004

Original thinker Carl Moyer died in 1997, and without an infusion of new money, the successful air cleanup program named after him is about to die as well. Moyer, a mechanical engineer, pioneered using financial incentives to phase out old diesel engines. Since its inception six years ago, the statewide Carl Moyer program has helped replace an average of 4,000 aging engines each year with cleaner technology.

Diesel emissions are particularly noxious. A study five years ago blamed diesel exhaust for 71% of the cancer risk from air pollution in Southern California.

The state bond that funded the diesel incentive program has almost dried up. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposes to keep it going with a little smog-fee sleight of hand: Currently, car owners pay a \$6 fee for the first four years after buying a new vehicle, during which smog checks aren't required. Under the governor's plan, the fee would double to \$12 a year, but owners would be exempt from smog checks for six years.

The exchange would provide about \$61 million a year to keep replacing those old engines, more than the old Moyer budget, and also would fund an ongoing program to help low-income motorists get their polluting cars repaired.

There's a price. There's always a price. During the two extra years without checks, the smog systems on at least a few cars will go out of whack without anyone detecting it. In fact, during the first, partial year of Schwarzenegger's proposal, those extra tailpipe emissions would add more pollution than the Moyer program would remove.

But that changes quickly, and by the year 2010, with smog systems improving and the Moyer program in full swing, the two-year extension would add 2.6 tons a day of pollution to California's air, while the diesel program would sponge out 33 tons.

The state has to invent and fund its own diesel reductions because the U.S. Supreme Court delivered a double whammy in recent months. It said state air quality officials could not require fleet operators to buy cleaner engines when they replace old diesels, and it allowed Mexican trucks free access to U.S. roads even though they emit much more diesel pollutants than the older domestic models. In fact, the governor should increase the fees a bit more to help fund his other smog-fighting proposal, to buy clunker automobiles from their owners.

In an ideal world, we wouldn't have to add pollution to subtract pollution. Ideal, though, isn't how any sane observer would describe California's current finances. In that case, trading smog checks for diesel pollution is a bargain for everyone.

Opening the border

[Editorial, The Orange County Register](#)

Friday, June 18, 2004

Monday's Supreme Court ruling paving the way for Mexican trucks to operate inside the United States was a long time in coming.

In a unanimous decision, the justices declared that President Bush has the authority to open the U.S. border to Mexican trucks without waiting for a court-ordered environmental study (which will probably still be completed).

The court's ruling arrived after years of delay that angered Mexican politicians, who felt the ban on Mexican rigs was protectionist and bigoted. Officials in that country had been pushing to get their trucks on U.S. highways, as stipulated more than 10 years ago under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Under the current rules, Mexican trucks are allowed to travel no farther than 20 miles past the border. As the Associated Press described it, a great deal of freight trailers are handed off from onetractor rig to another at the international boundary: "Mexican trucks unhook their trailers at the border, another cab pulls the freight box through inspection patios, and then an American truck picks up the load on the U.S. side."

This inefficient method adds an unnecessary step to international shipping, making it more expensive to transport goods across the border. NAFTA was designed to eliminate such trade barriers.

There have been legitimate concerns about whether Mexican trucks, some of which are older or poorly maintained, can operate safely on American highways. However, that same worry applies to American trucks.

According to 2002 statistics from the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration, 11.4 percent of Canadian trucks that were inspected were taken off the road, compared to 20.8 percent of U.S. vehicles and 26 percent of Mexican rigs. However, compare last year's numbers with those from 1999, when 13.8 percent of Canadian vehicles inspected were taken off the road, compared with 39.2 percent of Mexican trucks and 22.1 percent of U.S. rigs. Clearly, the number of rigs passing inspection is on the rise.

Granted, safety of these vehicles will remain a primary concern. But by reducing this artificial trade barrier that keeps prices high, the U.S. government will enable Mexican shipping companies to afford to maintain their trucks. Mexico claims the ban on its vehicles has cost the country more than \$2 billion, the Associated Press reported. Opening U.S. highways to Mexican trucks will benefit our neighbor to the south - and that will make life better on this side of the border as well.