

Put the brakes on diesel trucks that pollute air

Modesto Bee editorial - Published Thursday, March 11, 2004

It's time to get tough on corporate cheaters, and we're not talking about inside traders. We're talking about diesel truck engine manufacturers.

From 1993 to 1998, seven of them equipped engines with "defeat devices" -- computer software that allows engines to pass emissions tests and then "defeat" the restrictions by exceeding emissions standards once the trucks are on the road.

The federal and the state governments sued and won. As part of the settlement, manufacturers agreed to disarm the defeat devices when the diesel engines were brought in for the periodic rebuilding they require. But modern diesel engines are more durable than older models, and only 10 percent have been fixed so far.

That's far too few.

The problem isn't trivial. The California Air Resources Board estimates that the cheating has allowed an additional 30 to 40 tons per day of nitrous oxide into the air. Nitrous oxide is a major ingredient in ground-level ozone, or smog. There also is additional particulate matter -- which is especially problematic in Stanislaus and Merced counties in late summer.

Those engines are spewing poison -- which is why laws regulate their emissions. In the Central Valley, where such gases and particulates often sit trapped for days or weeks, the problems are especially bad. Emissions have been linked to asthma and other respiratory diseases in children and adults.

The Air Resources Board will meet in Sacramento to consider the issue March 25. The staff has recommended new regulation to speed up cleanup.

The board must move aggressively to force the industry to act now. Give manufacturers another year to comply. If they fail, pull the trucks off the road and let truck owners sue the manufacturers for lost revenue and other costs.

Not moving aggressively against this problem is akin to rewarding the industry for cheating. That's unacceptable. It's time the manufacturers lived up to their obligations and quit allowing their product to poison our air.

IN BRIEF / FRESNO

Activists Criticize State's Voluntary Air Cleanup

LA Times Wire Report - Published Thursday, March 11, 2004

Clean-air advocates say the state's voluntary cleanup of pesticide air pollution has failed to meet targets as far back as the mid-1990s, and though the program has been achieving its goals in recent years, the activists are threatening to sue.

The community groups contend that state officials had promised to replace the voluntary effort with enforceable regulations if the program failed — and they say that time has come.

"It's quite astonishing that this has been out of whack for so long while regulators have looked the other way," said Brent Newell, a lawyer for the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment that is representing several community activist groups. "They violated the Clean Air Act."

Domino theory (Madera County subdivision may affect the way we all live)

Fresno Bee editorial - Published March 10, 2004

(Updated Wednesday, March 10, 2004, 4:35 AM)

A subdivision tentatively approved in Madera County is one more example of the importance of taking a regional perspective on land-use planning in the San Joaquin Valley. While this may be a Madera County project, its repercussions -- along with those of future projects planned for the area -- will affect the air quality, transportation patterns and water availability of the entire region.

Unfortunately, Valley residents too often haven't paid attention to planning decisions made by their cities and counties until the air is choking them, they are sitting in congested traffic, and the water pressure is barely a trickle in their showers.

The problem is never a single subdivision. They all seem to look good on paper. But the cumulative results of project after project in an area without the resources to handle them have an impact on our quality of life.

That's why the River Ranch Estates project in Madera County should be a wake-up call for the entire region. The project has plans for 1,646 lots on 793 acres, and it one day may be needed to meet the region's booming growth. But residents down the road shouldn't complain that they didn't see the problems coming.

This latest project, bordering the San Joaquin River, could be the first piece of what could be a city of 100,000 in Madera County's Rio Mesa planning area. The project received tentative approval Monday following a contentious five-hour hearing before the Board of Supervisors. It was turned down last year by the planning commission, which was concerned that the environmental studies didn't adequately address the problems that the subdivision would create. But county supervisors voted 5-0 to back the project, essentially ruling that it would have an adequate water supply and the San Joaquin River would be accessible and protected.

The decision is tentative because the board still must approve a written justification for its decision and language explaining mitigation measures. Representatives of the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, which had concerns about the project, will review the county's paperwork to see if the agency's concerns had been addressed.

Critics on Monday cited problems with the environmental study and questioned the project's impact on the river environment, roads, air pollution and irrigation water supply. Most said they weren't opposed to development but wanted their questions fully answered.

Project supporters said the full development would create jobs and generate millions of dollars in taxes and fees for Madera County when it's completed.

But this project isn't just about Madera County. We all have a stake in how our Valley is planned and developed.