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Air quality improving, but more federal support needed to achieve clean air

By Vito Chiesa and Tania Pacheco-Werner

This year, the Valley Air District commemorates its 30th year as a public health agency working to improve the health and quality of life for valley residents. As valley residents and members of the Valley Air District Governing Board, working to improve public health and quality of life for residents of the valley is of the utmost importance to us.

Over the past 30 years, the San Joaquin Valley has made remarkable progress in cleaning the air through the implementation of innovative clean air strategies, reducing harmful smog-forming nitrogen oxide emissions from locally regulated sources by more than 93 percent. From collaborative public/private investments of more than \$4.5 billion in new, cleaner passenger vehicles, agricultural equipment, heavy-duty trucks, and other technologies, to the most stringent control strategies for industrial, agricultural, and other sources, the valley has served as a national model of clean air innovation.

Through this collective effort, the valley now meets a number of federal health-based air quality standards, and valley residents are breathing much cleaner air than ever. As compared to even just a few years ago, it is gratifying and exciting to see so much conversation about how frequently the mountains surrounding the valley can now clearly be seen.

While considerable and undeniable progress has been made, it is clear that more must be done. Due to our region's unique geographical and meteorological challenges, and, increasingly, changing climate conditions that exacerbate our challenges, the valley continues to face major difficulties in meeting the latest air quality standards, and we are at an important juncture in our clean air journey.

The Valley Air District is committed to ongoing local clean air efforts, including fighting for, and making available, hundreds of millions of dollars in clean air grants, and continually enhancing strategies for reducing emissions from sources under local jurisdiction. As one example of this ongoing work, just last year, the governing board adopted the only-of-its-kind strategy for the virtual elimination of agricultural burning by the end of 2024, supported by \$180 million in new state funding to help offset the high cost of new alternatives such as chipping and soil incorporation.

However, to meet our region's clean air goals and federal requirements, it is clear that more must be done to address air pollution from mobile sources that now make up the majority of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the region. Scaled-up investment is needed at the state and federal level to support an accelerated, transformational transition to new clean air and low-carbon vehicle and equipment technologies and mode shifts in the goods movement, transportation, agricultural, energy production, building and other sectors. In planning these transitions, community input and perspective will be critical to ensure equitable policies are pursued that assist, and do not leave behind, the valley's many disadvantaged communities.

At the state level, the governor and Legislature are committed to unprecedented clean air investments, and we urge strong allocation of these funds for investment in valley communities and other regions with significant air quality challenges. With federal mobile source emissions soon surpassing those under state jurisdiction, it will be imperative that the federal government partner with the valley to equitably address sources of air pollution under their jurisdiction.

This includes moving forward with new low-emission federal heavy duty strategies, and prioritizing billions of dollars in new climate funding for clean vehicles/infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, and other new clean air and low carbon investment opportunities to regions facing the most difficult air quality challenges. These focused federal investments and partnerships in the San Joaquin Valley will be essential to helping the valley meet its clean air and public health goals, while also helping to improve the economic resilience of our region in a rapidly changing global economy.

We invite the public to learn about and support the valley's clean air journey by visiting the Valley Air District's website at valleyair.org, signing up for email updates on activities, reading our latest annual report, and taking advantage of available clean air grant opportunities.