

Clovis and Bakersfield, with dirtiest of dirty air, complicate Valley's pollution battle

By Mark Grossi



In a 2004 file photo, the Sierra foothills fade from sight because of poor air quality along Highway 168 north of Clovis.

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A decade ago, corrosive air hung in the San Joaquin Valley for more than 10 weeks from June to mid-August — 73 consecutive days of a breathing nightmare.

That summer, Southern California, supposedly the nation's king of bad air, exceeded the federal ozone standard 115 times. The Valley did it 143 times. From 1999 to 2004, the Valley averaged 153 bad ozone days a year, a lung-scalding run that launched the Valley into a public spotlight nationally.

New rules, big investments in technology and public awareness have made those ozone sieges fade, but air quality still is far from the health standard. The Valley led the nation this year with 97 bad ozone days. And specks of soot, chemicals and other debris are as bad here as they are anywhere in the nation.

It might be time to add a new tactic by focusing a little more on pollution hot spots in this 25,000-square-mile region, says the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Some ideas: Require electric motors to replace diesel engines on farm water pumps in a hot spot. Raise a little more money from vehicle registration fees in hot spot areas and use the money to help clean up dirty engines and

industries.

And maybe shift production times for some industries to avoid afternoon pollution peaks. There might even be consideration of an afternoon ban on some driving in a hot spot on the worst days.

Why? Because the Valley needs to address a tough technicality in the U.S. Clean Air Act: If only one monitor detects an air violation, an entire basin is considered out of compliance with the health standard that day.

Look at Oct. 12 this year. Clovis just slightly exceeded the federal eight-hour ozone standard. No other monitor showed a problem in the 25,000-square-mile Valley from Stockton to Bakersfield. The air was healthy everywhere except Clovis, yet the entire Valley was marked down for an ozone exceedance.

As it turns out, Clovis is the Valley's hot spot for ozone. Bakersfield is the hot spot for particle pollution, known as PM-2.5, according to the district.

"If those places do not attain the standard, the Valley won't attain," district executive director Seyed Sadredin said. "We're not talking about backing off on the pollution reduction in other parts of the Valley. But we're seeing that these two hot spots need more attention."

The idea is in the talking stages as the district embarks on extensive planning to control ozone and PM-2.5. In the next few years, the district will have to complete plans with enough reductions to attain three PM-2.5 standards as well as tighter ozone standards.

The PM-2.5 cleanup deadline will be in five years. The next ozone deadline will be 2024.

Built-in problem

The Valley has always struggled with air cleanup deadlines. The bowl-shape region traps dirty air. Warm, stagnant weather holds it here. It takes far less pollution to exceed a federal health standard here than in many places, including Southern California.

Even with tougher district rules — such as the new wood-burning restrictions — and tighter federal standards on diesel engines, the hot spots will be hard to clean up, district projections show.

To focus on Clovis and Bakersfield, officials will need to deal with regional politics, doubts from air activists and probably state and federal air agencies.

Historically, the politics have involved the Valley's northern tier of counties — San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced. Their air is cleaner than counties to the south, but they feel they need to speak up for their share of the \$150 million in federal and state grants the district gets each year.

The money helps replace diesel engines, fireplace inserts, gasoline-powered lawnmowers and pay for many other incentive-based cleanup programs. Thousands of old diesel engines and diesel-powered vehicles have been replaced with this kind of money.

Stanislaus County Supervisor Bill O'Brien, an air district board member, defends the northern counties.

"We can't just take the money from one area and give it another," said O'Brien, whose family owns O'Brien's Market, based in Modesto. "If the hot spot is around Fresno or Bakersfield, then we might want to talk about different rules and different ways of raising money in those areas to spend there."

Too narrow a view?

Air activist Tom Frantz of Shafter in Kern County says he worries that new efforts might be focused too narrowly around one air monitor just to lower the monitor's readings.

He mentioned an urban Bakersfield monitor that might get better readings if nearby restaurants had PM-2.5 filters. But buying filters for those restaurants wouldn't help in other areas, he said.

"A problem a few miles away, caused by diesel trucks and ammonium nitrate, is left untouched," he said.

The Valley's troubled air quality extends to the outdoor paradise of Sequoia National Park, which has sometimes led the region in bad ozone days.

Sequoia's problem is a little different, but it needs to be addressed, Sadredin said. In addition to getting pollution from the Valley, a major culprit in warm weather can be wildfires. The district can't control wildfires, but it can work on Valley sources.

"We have to target the primary sources that contribute to ozone formation at the hot spots," he said. "National parks come with complexities and anomalies that may require other approaches."

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Valley's bad-air hot spots

Local air regulators are talking about ways to cut back pollution in the San Joaquin Valley's two worst pockets of bad air.



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