

Federal takeover of Valley air cleanup on the table?

By Mark Grossi
mgrossi@fresnobee.com

It's known as the nuclear option — the feds taking over the San Joaquin Valley's air cleanup of dangerous soot, chemicals and other lung-searing debris.

It has never happened here and rarely anywhere else. Valley air leaders have fought desperately against it in the past, imagining nightmarish days when driving is banned or farming is shut down.

But some leaders say the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) needs to be ready for it after the epic drought created conditions for monster readings of the tiny pollutant, known as PM-2.5. There's no way the Valley will meet a Dec. 31 cleanup deadline for the 1997 standard.

The issue is more than bureaucratic red tape. At stake is the health of nearly 4 million people. The Valley has the nation's worst bouts of PM-2.5, and it is blamed for hundreds of early deaths here each year.

In April, Valley air board member [William O'Brien](#), a Stanislaus County supervisor, asked the air district staff for a report on what a federal takeover would look like.

"We don't want to give up any local control," O'Brien says. "We've made great strides in controlling pollution, but the nuclear option comes into play on Dec. 31."

To avoid the prospect, the district is offering an improved cleanup plan and asking the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to push deadlines to 2018 for 24-hour readings and 2020 for the annual average. But if EPA doesn't agree, maybe the federal officials should take a crack at it themselves, says a frustrated O'Brien.

We're not asking to be let off the hook. We just want goals that are halfway attainable.

Air board member William O'Brien

EPA officials have worked closely with the district on the improved plan, so hopes are high for approval. Even if EPA does not approve, a federal takeover would be years down the line, following two other sanctions.

They are higher expenses for new or expanding businesses and freezing \$2.5 billion in federal road-building funds. Local officials worry about slowing the local economy under such conditions.

"Sanctions can have a devastating effect on the poorest people in our area," says district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "I think it shows the need for modernizing the antiquated provisions in the federal Clean Air Act, which makes unreasonable demands on this area."

Critics say it's time the Valley caught up with a standard that was set 18 years ago. [Activist Tom Frantz in Kern County](#) likes the idea of a federal takeover.

He says the local air board hasn't regulated ammonia emissions from dairies or volatile organic compounds from the oil industry. The health of Valley residents should be the highest priority, not the needs of industries, he says.

"I would rather see EPA dismantle the air district entirely because of their compromised authority," he says "It's a great idea."

\$2.5 billion in federal road-building funds could be frozen

Air cleanup is a challenge in the 25,000-square-mile Valley. Surrounded by mountains and plagued by stagnant weather, the region naturally traps dirty air.

PM-2.5 is particulate matter 2.5 microns in width or smaller. Thirty to 40 of these particles would fit side-by-side across the width of a human hair.

The debris can be breathed deep into the lungs where some of it can pass into the bloodstream. It can trigger asthma and other lung ailments as well as heart problems.

Emissions sources for this cold-weather pollution are diesel exhaust, fireplace burning, cars, farming operations and industrial boilers.

The pollutant also forms in the air when ammonia from dairies combines with oxides of nitrogen from trucks and cars. Such specks are called ammonium nitrate.

When winters are dry and stagnant, the debris builds up in the air.

“PM-2.5 is exacerbated by drought,” Sadredin says. “We asked that the EPA not count the Valley’s high readings in these extreme drought conditions. The EPA refused.”

The [Clean Air Act](#) excludes stagnation and drought as exceptional events — events that could lead to a waiver of high pollution readings. But the agency is doing all that it can do to help the Valley achieve the PM-2.5 standard, says Kerry Drake, associate director of EPA’s regional air program.

“EPA’s goal is to continue working hard with the California Air Resources Board and the air district to provide healthy air for the residents of the San Joaquin Valley,” he says.

If the EPA does not approve the district’s latest plan and request for deadline extension, the Valley will have a year to submit another plan showing a 5% reduction in PM-2.5 every year until meeting the standard.

“We can’t hit that 5% reduction every year,” says board member O’Brien. “We’re not asking to be let off the hook. We just want goals that are halfway attainable.”

District rules control many sources, such as residential water heaters, school bus fleets, stationary gas turbines and wood burning in fireplaces. In the next few years, new technologies will be pushed to regulate under-fired commercial charbroilers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has spent more than \$100 million in incentive funds helping farmers to replace dirty diesel engines on tractors and other equipment. In the next several years, state diesel truck fleet regulations are expected to get big pollution reductions — one of the larger sources of PM-2.5.

The air district, businesses and Valley residents need to keep pushing forward on pollution reduction, says Valley air board member John Capitman, executive director of the [Central Valley Health Policy Institute](#).

He says there are many reasons why it’s not a good idea for the EPA to take over the cleanup plan, especially the loss of local control.

“I think the district staff has laid out a good plan,” he says. “We are going to make some tough choices. I think we need to be talking about a better partnership with the federal government.”

Mark Grossi: [559-441-6316](tel:559-441-6316), [@markgrossi](https://twitter.com/markgrossi)