

Alex Sherriffs and John Capitman: Don't back off demands for cleaner air

By Alex Sherriffs and John Capitman

We are responding to a commentary in the Sept. 23 Bee written by five of our fellow board members at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

They support federal legislation that we believe will weaken, not strengthen, efforts to improve the Valley's air quality. As a practicing physician and as a professor of public health policy serving on the board, we cannot support a policy direction which threatens to extend the time Valley residents are breathing unhealthy air.

Generalities in the op-ed sounded good, but we cannot endorse many details of the legislative language, particularly as public discourse of its implications has been limited. The district needs to focus on policy and advocacy to increase the tools and resources to meet more healthful air standards – not on how to delay attainment.

Thanks to the Clean Air Act, the Valley's air is cleaner and more healthful than it was five, 10 and 25 years ago. The Clean Air Act represents 40 years of federal legislation driving efforts to combat air pollution. It got lead out of gasoline. It fights lung- and eye-burning ozone, and it has saved hundreds of thousands of lives by cleaning soot and tiny particulates from our air.

The Clean Air Act sets standards based on what the latest and best science tells us about the impacts of air quality on health. First and foremost, the Clean Air Act is about achieving better health for us all.

The Valley has made important investments to reach Clean Air Act goals. Thanks to federal, state and air district regulations, our businesses use cleaner technologies and have adopted more sustainable and efficient practices. Trucks have to upgrade to lower-emission, more fuel-efficient engines. The public has been essential in its demand for and acceptance of cleaner-burning, higher-mileage and alternative-fuel cars. The public also has been on board in its support of incentives, financed by state bonds and DMV fees specific to the Valley.

Agriculture, too, has played an important role. Farmers have switched from diesel pumps to electric pumps and have purchased cleaner-burning tractors, thanks to incentive programs.

Schools have been able to purchase less polluting buses, decreasing our children's direct exposure to toxic diesel emissions. Those incentives have helped businesses adopt cleaner technologies sooner. We all benefit: Businesses get assistance buying cleaner equipment ahead of deadlines, and the public sees cleaner air sooner.

We can all be proud of the combination of efforts that has resulted in better air quality. But we still have far to go. We still share the worst childhood asthma rates in the nation with the heavily polluted Los Angeles basin. We still have more than 1,000 premature deaths every year in the Valley because of air pollution. Among all the air pollutants contributing to cancer, diesel emissions remain the No. 1 cause.

Whenever we think about the costs of cleaning up, we must remember, too, the costs of not making things better for our children and grandchildren. The annual monetary cost of Valley air pollution in lost days of work, lost school days and health costs is over \$1 billion. That human suffering and monetary expense may not make daily headlines, but it is real and immediate.

We need to focus on achieving the health goals ahead, not on finding ways to delay success. Many thought that achieving current ozone standards would be impossible due to the costs and the lack of technology, but thanks to

regulations put in place, and especially cleaner trucks and buses, we are on a path of success into the 2030s.

Creating a cleaner and more healthful future requires change. How we will balance competing needs is never certain. We have great opportunities to promote even cleaner technologies, garner more support and financing to implement those strategies, and to be certain we include disadvantaged communities in that economic success.

Every day of delay is more deaths, millions of dollars in unnecessary health costs, and new cases of asthma. Any changes to the Clean Air Act must unequivocally help us move forward and strengthen our hand for cleaner, more healthful air.

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