

S A N F R A N C I S C O
The Examiner.

Publication date: 03/29/2002

Hazy logic clouds state's smog wars

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Special To The Examiner

SEVERAL AIR QUALITY GROUPS and a number of politicians are trying to blame Bay Area cars for air pollution problems from Sacramento all the way to Bakersfield.

Next thing you know, it will be Mayor Willie Brown's fault that it gets hot in Bakersfield in mid-July.

First, air regulators sued the state Air Resources Board, claiming the board isn't doing enough to prevent Bay Area smog from wandering into the Central Valley and Sacramento. Now a group of legislators is proposing a bill that would require tighter smog checks for Bay Area cars.

If folks in the Valley and Sacramento take a look at their own roads and the statistics, they'd see the real culprit -- local emissions. The Valley areas most affected by Bay Area pollution -- Stockton, Modesto, Vacaville and Fairfield -- have the cleanest air in the Central Valley. Meanwhile, the Valley areas least affected by Bay Area pollution -- Fresno, Bakersfield, Auburn and Folsom -- have the most ozone smog in the Central Valley.

Local emissions, not pollution drifting in from the Bay Area, cause the vast majority of the smog in these areas. The California Air Resources Board's own analysis states, "The impact of Bay Area transport diminishes with distance, so metropolitan areas such as Fresno and Bakersfield to the south are less affected. In those areas, ozone concentrations are dominated by local emissions."

The Fresno region violates the federal ozone health standard about 10 times per year. Meanwhile, with the exception of Concord, the entire Bay Area, as well as Stockton, Vacaville and Fairfield, already complies not only with the current federal ozone standard, but also with a new, much more stringent standard the federal government hopes to require soon.

Stricter smog tests: A waste of money

Tougher smog checks aren't the answer to pollution problems in the Bay Area or any other part of the state because most of the effort is wasted on testing clean cars. About

70 percent of money spent on the Smog Check program goes to testing clean cars and program administration, rather than to reducing air pollution.

On-road pollution studies in California have recently found that the highest-polluting 1 percent of cars account for one-quarter of all hydrocarbon tailpipe emissions and are about 30 times "dirtier" than the average car. Many of these gross polluters either passed a Smog Check or somehow avoided the program altogether.

Instead of increasing smog check standards, the state should use remote sensors to identify older, high-polluting cars on the road and offer owners cash to voluntarily scrap their vehicles. Remote sensing has accurately identified high- and low-polluting cars in dozens of evaluations, and is currently used by the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office to identify taxis that avoid Smog Check requirements.

The scrap program would get high-polluting cars off the roads and replace them with newer, cleaner vehicles. California has a modest scrap program already, but it is poorly targeted and the Legislature and governor recently reduced its budget.

Emissions measurements in California tunnels show that average vehicle emissions are dropping by about 10 percent per year. Based on roadside tests and California Air Resources Board projections, a new 2002 vehicle will produce 90 percent fewer smog-forming emissions during its lifetime than the current average vehicle on the road. This means pollution will keep dropping as older vehicles are supplanted by newer models. So why not try to get older cars off the road for good?

California's air has improved a great deal during the last 20 years and will continue to improve in the future because of fleet turnover. We can get the clean air we want faster and cheaper if we stop the blame game and focus directly on the cars that cause the problem, rather than continue Smog Check's ineffective, scattershot approach.

Instead of targeting people driving cars that already comply with smog laws, we should move toward a system that targets the real polluters. Then again, if the Valley can get away with blaming the Bay Area, maybe San Francisco can blame the problems on Portland, or better yet, on our neighbors way up north in Vancouver, Canada.

Joel Schwartz is the former executive officer of the California Inspection and Maintenance Review Committee, the independent government committee charged with evaluating Smog Check. He currently serves as senior scientist at Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles think tank (<http://www.reason.org/>).