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Sac Valley racing to meet federal clean-air deadline

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There's no getting around that fact that the Sacramento region's housing boom means an increase in the number of cars on the roads around Sacramento. For a region already struggling to meet federal Clean Air Act requirements, that could spell trouble.

That trouble may come in 2005, a make-or-break year for clean air in the Sacramento Valley. If the Sacramento region doesn't meet federal clean-air standards by then, it stands to lose millions of dollars in federal transportation funding, and that could mean a halt to new road and mass-transit projects.

"We're not giving up," said Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management district spokesman Kerry Shearer. "We could be close."

The district will have to work against a rising tide of traffic to succeed.

From 1981 to 2000, the population in the Sacramento Valley grew 51 percent. The number of miles traveled by cars, trucks and buses on the valley's roads grew at an even faster rate, increasing by 95 percent. People living in new housing on suburban outskirts often have to drive farther than city dwellers to get to work each day. Ask anyone who's been commuting to work on U.S. Highway 50 for the past 10 years and he'll tell you the traffic's been getting worse.

At the same time, automotive emissions standards have become more strict. Cars rolling off factory production lines for sale in California pollute less than ever, though standards for sport utility vehicles and light trucks are more lax. Federal, state and local regulations aimed at reducing emissions of smog-forming chemicals have changed the content of all kinds of everyday products, from the gasoline we put in our cars to the carpet cleaner we use to clean up Fido's mess. Standards have been tightened to reduce pollution from lawn mowers and tractors, boats and jet skis.

Still, the Sacramento region hasn't attained some of the air-quality standards required by federal clean-air legislation. Though levels of ozone, a major component of smog, have dropped slightly over the past 10 years, it's not enough. Meanwhile, the levels of tiny particles in the air we breathe continue to rise.

The plan: In May the U.S. Department of Transportation ordered the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and local air districts to come up with a new plan by the end of this year for bringing the

Sacramento region into compliance with the Clean Air Act by 2005. The current plan relies on models created from 1994 data, when fewer smog-belching sport utility vehicles traveled the region's roads. If the state doesn't have a new plan in place, the federal Department of Transportation may block new transportation projects or changes to existing federally funded projects.

SACOG, local air districts and Caltrans are looking for funding to develop the new plan. The new plan is likely to preface stricter emissions controls on equipment and trucks that operate on diesel, more controls on ozone-causing ingredients used in consumer products and other pollution control measures. But the Sacramento region will still face difficulties meeting the 2005 deadline for compliance with national ozone standards.

There are actually two parts to the standards. First, ozone measurements conducted over one hour must not exceed 0.12 parts per million more than once a year. In 2000, the last year for which data are available, the region topped out at 0.15 parts per million. An even more difficult federal standard was approved in 1997, and implementation is just beginning. The new standard looks at ozone measurements taken over eight-hour periods. The fourth-highest ozone concentration, averaged over three years, must not exceed 0.08 parts per million. The compliance figure for 2000 was 0.10 in 2000, meaning we failed the test.

By tightening the standard, the feds have brought it closer to natural background levels. Globally, ozone background levels typically range from 0.03 to 0.04 parts per million, said University of California at Davis atmospheric scientist Tom Cahill. Ozone increases on hot, sunny days, so in the summertime background ozone levels in the Sacramento Valley can approach 0.06 parts per million, not far from the 0.08 federal eight-hour ozone standard, he added.

Bay Area's dirty air: Emissions from cars and trucks produce the bulk of the smog-forming emissions and soot particles that plague our area. But the Sacramento region hasn't had as much success cutting pollution levels by curbing car emissions as the Los Angeles area has, Cahill said. That's probably because more of our pollution comes from other sources, like agricultural activities and driving on dirt roads. But there's another factor at work. Some of the pollution in our region blows in from the Bay Area.

"Sacramento Valley is definitely being impacted by the relative lack of controls in the Bay Area," said Cahill, who studies how pollutants move through the atmosphere.

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District agrees. In March and April the air district sued the state Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, accusing them of failing to limit wind-blown air pollution from the Bay Area. The air district claims the state Air Resources Board has known since 1989 that Bay Area pollution has affected the valley, but has continued to exempt the Bay Area from the Smog Check II program required in every other major urban area of the state. The Smog Check II program, which took effect in our area in 1998, requires the use of treadmills when conducting smog checks to more accurately simulate driving conditions. The air district added that requiring Smog Check II in the Sacramento Valley gives an unfair business advantage to fleets with headquarters in the Bay Area. It's estimated that more than 45,000 vehicles per day travel through Sacramento from the Bay Area.

Ultimately, there's not going to be a simple fix to the region's air-quality problems, Cahill said. But the region can compensate for a growing population with better regional planning, more accurate data showing the sources of emissions and carefully crafted regulations targeting those emissions. The same

kind of hygiene that makes a town more attractive, like planting trees and paving dirt roads, usually helps keep the air cleaner, he said.



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