

Vehicle air-quality testing could evolve

Environment: Canyon, Ada business and government leaders move to control pollution

By Dan Black - Idaho Press-Tribune: June 30, 2006

TREASURE VALLEY — Efforts to develop new local anti-pollution policies passed a milestone Thursday that may lead to uniform vehicle-testing programs in Canyon and Ada counties.

The Treasure Valley Air Quality Council adopted a plan that will be amended and then sent to the 2007 Legislature. The draft plan calls for the elimination of tailpipe emissions testing in Ada County, saying those tests are outdated and don't measure for pollutants that create ozone.

Instead, it would require owners of some cars to have their on-board computers tested every other year in both Ada and Canyon counties to make sure they aren't putting out too many dangerous chemicals.

The report notes that people across the Treasure Valley share the same air and that pollution should be managed uniformly, despite different local government jurisdictions.

The process to develop the draft "was fair," Canyon County Commissioner Matt Beebe said. Appointed by then-Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, Beebe sat on the council, along with 13 others. They represented local government, environmental concerns and industry.

Beebe said when the group first formed in December, he thought the discussion might come to "verbal fisticuffs" because the members were from a broad range of backgrounds and there had been historical differences between how Canyon and Ada counties dealt with air pollution.

But the group worked well together learning about sources of pollution, federal standards, and options for improving the air quality, the commissioner said.

The council learned that although cleaner cars have helped the valley stay comfortably within federal clean air guidelines, it might not meet more restrictive rules expected within the next few years, especially considering the area's rapid growth.

Beebe said some might criticize mandatory car computer tests, but the decision was the least intrusive way to deal with the problem.

Cars made before 1996 don't have on-board computers and would be exempt from testing. And cars newer than 4 years typically run so cleanly they won't need to be tested, said Leonard Herr, the airshed program manager with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

The DEQ gave technical expertise to the council.

Beebe said the worst-polluting cars may be caught by "smog dogs," or remote-sensing devices, which would be stationed at certain interstate on-ramps. If a heavily polluting car passes, the device takes a picture of its license plate and the owner is sent a postcard in the mail, asking that the car be tested.

"Some won't like it," Beebe said, out of concerns for privacy.

But, he said he believed it will be much better than mandatory tailpipe emissions testing for all vehicles.

It will also be cheaper, officials said.

The council suggests charging a fee for every car registration to help pay for the computer tests and the smog dogs.

Beebe said he thought it would be about \$5 per year per vehicle.

The council also recommends:

State funding of \$100,000 per year to educate the public about pollution, wood stove operation and reduced

trips.

An Airshed Management District to collect a fee during car registration to pay for smog dogs and computer testing.

Vapor-recovery rules for gas stations to capture harmful gases as large fuel tanks are refilled.

Local governments adopt uniform rules for air-quality issues such as burn bans, open burning and dust.

Local planning efforts to encourage community development that enables residents to make fewer car trips.

The report asks for more study of:

Standards for industrial and commercial emissions.

The "California Standard" for cleaner-burning cars in the entire state.

Rules on agriculture to curb emissions, including dairies.

The draft plan will be available for public comment starting today, said Dale Stephenson, vice chairman of the group. He said there will be a 90-day public comment period and those interested are welcome to join a citizen's committee that will review the council's plan.

Council members thought the committee should meet about three times during the next few months. Their comments and those of the general public will be considered in amending the draft before it goes to the Legislature.

Air concerns prompt changes

TREASURE VALLEY — The 2004 Legislature established the Treasure Valley Air Quality Council to help it develop a comprehensive, homegrown solution to the area's air pollution.

At the heart of the new efforts to make a policy are concerns about ozone and extremely small particles floating in the air, especially during air inversions in the winter and the hottest days of the summer.

During their meetings, the council learned of new studies showing health problems coming from these extremely small particles, called PM 2.5, which enter the lungs and go directly into the bloodstream.

New studies about ozone also showed dangers it poses to living beings by directly burning lung tissue.

To get involved

To review the draft plan and learn how to get more involved, check the Council's Web site at: www.air.idaho.gov