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**AQMD to vote on smog plan
Wide-ranging proposal for the South Coast
Air Basin is to be weighed today. Critics remain skeptical.**

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The South Coast Air Quality Management District today will consider a sweeping plan to reduce smog and air particulate matter that includes everything from wood-burning fireplace restrictions to a proposal for a high-speed train system.

The agency responsible for clean air in the Los Angeles region is scheduled to vote this morning on the final version of its 12-part Air Quality Management Plan, a document months in the making that counts on cooperation from several other agencies.

The plan aims to reduce fine particulate matter - tiny pollutants caused by aerosol sprays and soot - by 2015, and meet federal ozone health standards by 2024.

Already, officials say residents in the South Coast Air Basin are exposed to ozone levels higher than the national standard. And in terms of particulate matter, the basin sees a disproportionate share compared with the rest of the country.

An assessment by the state Air Resources Board blamed unhealthy levels of the fine pollutants for 5,400 premature deaths, 2,400 hospitalizations and 140,000 cases involving asthma and respiratory symptoms.

"The bottom line is, the challenge (in meeting federal mandates) is great, but to not meet that challenge carries even greater consequences," said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District. "The region, clearly, is bearing an unfair burden here."

The plan reflects a gap between the AQMD's projections for reducing pollutants by 2015 and the federal mandates, Wallerstein said Thursday. The shortfall results in 74 tons of airborne nitrogen oxides that would need to be cut per day.

To close the gap, Wallerstein said staff members are recommending that the

final air quality plan include tougher regulations for commercial charbroilers and wood-burning fireplaces, which would be banned indoors or outdoors in new developments. The recommendation also includes two transportation projects proposed by the Southern California Association of Governments: a high-speed train system carrying freight from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to San Bernardino and trucks-only lanes on the Long Beach (710), Pomona (60) and Interstate 15 freeways.

To make up the remaining difference, he said, the agency would lobby the state to focus on reducing pollutants from mobile sources. Emissions from cars, boats and trains have been a point of contention for the AQMD; while responsible for the region's air quality, much of the regulation oversight belongs to the state and federal governments.

Wallerstein said the AQMD would pursue limits on fireplace use on days when the air quality poses higher health risks, and toughen-up a 10-year-old proposal to reduce emissions from commercial charbroilers. Staff members estimated new measures could be in place by 2012, and retrofits could run from \$10,000 to \$15,000.

The transit proposals will likely require much more time and consideration, however. Although Wallerstein indicated both options would be considered as part of the AQMD's clean-air strategy, SCAG Program Manager Jonathan Nadler said Thursday the agency will ask that the initiatives be pulled back for a month for more analysis while the overall plan moves forward.

Although the high-speed freight train and trucks-only lanes were suggested as possibilities for reducing the AQMD's emissions shortfalls, the state still needs to enact additional mobile emissions regulations as backstop measures, he added.

Clean air advocates, too, have called upon the state Air Resources Board to tighten its controls. Tim Carmichael, who serves as president of the Coalition for Clean Air, said California is "well behind" in regulating consumer products and reducing boat emissions.

Still, he offered criticisms of the AQMD's plan as well. Carmichael objected to the agency's request for a delay to meet certain federal guidelines and said the plan falls short on specifics.

And he questioned the likelihood that a high-speed train could be built in time to meet the federal deadlines.

"We're strongly supportive, but it's a long shot," Carmichael said. "The plan is supposed to be things you can count on."

The document includes a list of controls for the state Air Resources Board to consider, including limiting pollutants from heavy-duty trucks, reducing locomotive emissions and an accelerated turnover for outdated pleasure craft.

ARB spokeswoman Karen Caesar said she couldn't speak to the specifics of the plan, but defended the board's steps to improve air quality. The board "has been very aggressive in addressing mobile source pollutants," she said, citing proposals requiring engine retrofits for off-road vehicles and diesel fuel regulations for ships.

"We're on that path," Caesar said. "We're starting to see the benefits, but we have a number of things still on our plate."

AQMD officials said their plan would cost \$2.3 billion each year, but could reduce annual costs by as much as \$14.6 billion. About two-thirds of the costs associated with dirty air are related to health care.

Assuming it passes, the documents will head to the Air Resources Board and then to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for adoption.

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