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State drops delay to air cleanup deadline
Extension would risk Valley lives, critics say.
By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee
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More information
 [The letter retracted by the state air board](#)

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What: Senate Select Committee on Air Quality hearing

When: 3 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Room 3191 of the State Capitol Building in Sacramento

The state on Tuesday backed away from a controversial idea to delay the cleanup deadline for dangerous diesel soot and other airborne debris in California, but a Valley legislator won't let the issue drop.

Following sharp criticism, the California Air Resources Board retracted the proposal it made last week to extend the deadline five years, saying the suggestion was misunderstood.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, will convene a hearing Tuesday to further discuss the proposal and the air board's leadership.

"If this truly was just a suggestion, why are they retracting it?" asked Florez, who heads the Senate Select Committee on Air Quality in the Central Valley. "We're concerned that we have a leader with a finger on the pause button for air cleanups."

Environmentalists quoted medical research showing such a delay for the San Joaquin Valley would cost hundreds of lives from years of additional pollution-related mortality.

State air officials said they were only exploring the idea of an extension to the 2015 federal deadline for cleaning up fine-particle pollution in the South Coast Air Basin, not the Valley. They said they believe the Valley can achieve the 2015 deadline.

Catherine Witherspoon, executive director of the air board, suggested the deadline extension in a March 12 letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The letter said new federal standards for diesel engines would not be in place fast enough to help California clean up diesel soot, dust and chemical specks, called PM-2.5.

"The letter was misinterpreted by several stakeholders in California as an official petition for a 5-year delay to the current 2015 deadline for attainment ... which was not my intent," Witherspoon wrote Tuesday.

Medical researchers say PM-2.5 is a serious health risk. The tiny particles -- 30 of them fit side by side across the width of a human hair -- lodge deep in the lungs. They trigger asthma and heart problems as well as causing early death, according to the latest research.

In the Valley, the specks come from vehicles, fireplaces and farm operations. The particles also form in the wintertime air when oxides of nitrogen from vehicles combine with ammonia from dairies.

Witherspoon's letter last week referred to such PM-2.5 pollution in both the South Coast Air Basin and the Valley, leading opponents to believe the delay proposal was intended for both places.

"There's no other way to read it," said Tim Carmichael, president of Coalition for Clean Air, a statewide nonprofit group.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said a five-year extension would unwisely relieve pressure on state and federal officials to help in reducing pollution.

With the deadline pressure of 2015, Valley officials said, state and federal governments have reason to provide hundreds of millions of dollars to help replace polluting vehicles, which create a big part of the problem.

"It won't be easy to make this deadline, but we can do it," said district Executive Director Seyed Sadredin. "We don't agree with a delay."

Neither does the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Said spokesman Sam Atwood: "We think it condemns the residents of Southern California to another five years of unhealthy air."

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