

Striking the Right Balance on Air Quality



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California, long-known for its environmental leadership, also boasts the world's sixth largest economy. For Southern California, with our large, diverse population, the leadership challenge we face is how to create more good-paying, middle class jobs while improving our quality of life – cleaner air and water, reduced road congestion and increased affordable housing.

Nowhere is this balancing act better illustrated than at the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) – the regional air board responsible for managing air emissions from stationary sources in four counties – Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino.

For the past four years, SCAQMD Board and staff have engaged with stakeholders to develop the latest iteration of the region's Air Quality Management Plan (AQMP). SCAQMD staff held hundreds of meetings and forums, generated thousands of pages of documents and produced a final draft Plan that is balanced and strong. In fact, SCAQMD staff indicated at the February meeting where the Plan was discussed that this AQMP will set us on course to achieve federal clean air standards (something that the district has struggled with in the past) and does so at a pace that is equal to or faster than prior AQMPs. This AQMP will achieve these standards in a way that also allows for continued economic growth.

It should be no surprise that this Plan is both balanced and strong given the robust stakeholder process that developed it. This point was not lost on SCAQMD's long-time chair, Dr. William Burke, who commented at the start of the February 3 Board hearing, "There has been more engagement and intellectual exchange on this AQMP than ever before."

Unfortunately, at that same February SCAQMD Board meeting, several Board members dropped last-minute amendments that would create whole new areas of regulation and, if added to the Plan, would throw its all-important balance out of whack.

What's problematic about these proposed amendments is that, unlike the rest of the plan, they are neither scientifically nor economically analyzed and therefore their true environmental benefits and economic impacts are yet unknown. As a result, these amendments could potentially wreak economic harm on vast sectors of job producing industries with little corresponding benefit in cleaner air.

One of these amendments seeks to adopt an Indirect Source Rule (ISR) which particularly targets the goods movement sector – ports, airports, truckers, distribution centers and more. Goods movement is the one of the largest sector in the Southern California economy, producing more than 14% of the region's GDP and employing over 1.4 million people ranging from longshoremen and shippers at the

ports to warehouse workers and railroad operators in the Inland Empire. Perhaps more importantly, it is the source of many of our region's best paying blue collar jobs... jobs that have become more important as other blue collar sectors in our region have declined.

Knowing this makes it easier to understand why many of those who track the region's economy are concerned when an eleventh hour ISR amendment is introduced with no information as to the mechanics of how it would work. The risks of adopting such a potentially job killing amendment without analysis just doesn't seem to make sense, especially given that the proposed AQMP will already achieve identified clean air goals for the region.

The ISR amendment is just one of several last minute unanalyzed proposals that could collectively, if adopted, create significant imbalance and unintended consequences in the region.

Instead, the better course of action is for the SCAQMD Board to adopt the proposed AQMP on March 3rd without amendment. This approach would honor the robust four-year stakeholder process and maintain the all-important balance of jobs and the environment which is carefully crafted into the Plan.

Richard Lambros is the managing director of the Southern California Leadership Council, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization formed to provide leadership on major public policies critical to economic vitality, job growth and the quality of life in Southern California led by three former Governors – Gray Davis, Pete Wilson and George Deukmejian – and over two dozen President/CEOs of major companies and agencies.

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