

May 13, 2010

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Jerry McNerney (CA-11) today introduced H.R. 5296, the Air and Health Quality Empowerment Zone Act, legislation aimed at helping to improve air quality in the San Joaquin Valley. Companion legislation has also been introduced in the Senate today by Senator Barbara Boxer.

H.R. 5296 would allow the Valley, consisting of San Joaquin, Kern, Fresno, Stanislaus, Madera, King, Merced, and Tulare Counties, to seek designation as an “Air and Health Quality Empowerment Zone.” Under H.R. 5296, obtaining this status would help the Valley to receive grants for programs that help residents voluntarily replace or retrofit polluting engines. The bill also allows up to \$20 million per year, through 2015, to be allocated to this grant fund.

“Poor air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is harmful to our way of life and our children’s health,” said Rep. McNerney. “Improving the quality of the air our families breathe is vitally important. This legislation will help address this serious problem by making the San Joaquin Valley eligible to apply for additional grants for programs that help residents voluntarily replace or retrofit polluting engines. It’s a step in the right direction for better health and a better way of life in the San Joaquin Valley.”

According to the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District, the San Joaquin Valley emits extremely high levels of pollutants, putting it at a level of non-attainment of air quality standards. According to the California Department of Public Health, San Joaquin Valley residents experience three times California’s state average for asthma attacks and five times the national average for asthma attacks. Each year, one in five children in the Valley are diagnosed with asthma, to which poor air quality is a major contributing factor, and one in four children miss a day of school each year due to extreme air pollution. Additionally, according to information provided by the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District, approximately 450 residents of the Valley die earlier than otherwise expected due to elevated ozone levels.

The Air and Health Quality Empowerment Zone Act has widespread support, including from numerous local organizations and community leaders such as Congressmen Jim Costa and Dennis Cardoza; San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Governing Board Member and San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas; Chair of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and Kings County Supervisor Tony Barba; and President of the NISEI Farmers League Manuel Cunha.

“Improving air quality is a critical issue for our Valley and nation,” said Congressman Jim Costa. “This bill will deliver immediate and needed air quality benefits for our children and all Valley residents. I am pleased to join with Congressman McNerney and others on this important effort.”

“The San Joaquin Valley has been particularly hard hit by the current economic downturn,” said Supervisor Ornellas. “The counties in the San Joaquin Valley have unemployment rates ranging from 15% to 23%. The Valley also faces significant air quality challenges. The resources that are made available in the health and economic empowerment zone legislation provides vital resources to allow us to continue to make air quality progress during these trying economic times.”

“The San Joaquin Valley faces significant air quality and economic challenges,” said Supervisor Barba. “The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has reduced emissions from stationary sources, which are under our direct regulatory control, by 80%. In order to continue to make progress it is imperative that we achieve reductions from mobile sources. The health and air quality empowerment zone legislation proposed by Congressman McNerney provides necessary resources for incentives to accelerate the turnover of heavy-duty equipment that is the single largest source of air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley.”

“The agricultural industry is committed to do its part to provide cleaner air to the residents of the San Joaquin Valley,” said Mr. Cunha. “To date, the industry has spent millions of dollars to reduce air emissions from agricultural equipment. The air and health empowerment zone legislation proposed by Congressman McNerney will allow the industry to accelerate the clean-up of agricultural irrigation equipment, tractors, and engines and achieve cleaner air sooner than would have otherwise been possible.”

According a list compiled by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the Air and Health Quality Empowerment Zones Act is also supported by the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, Ag Council, Allied Grape Growers, Blue Diamond Growers, California Association of Winegrape Growers, California Cattlemen's Association, California Citrus Mutual, California Cotton Ginners Association, California Cotton Growers Association, California Farm Bureau Federation, California Grain and Feed Association, California Poultry Federation, California Women for Agriculture, Manufacturers Council of the Central Valley, Pacific Egg and Poultry Association, Western Agricultural Processors Association, Western Plant Health Association, and the Wine Institute.