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Fresno County Supervisors Scheduled to Rescind Approval of Sprawling and Ill-Conceived Housing Development

Health Risks to Valley Residents from Friant Ranch Air Pollution Must Be Analyzed

Fresno, CA, April 13, 2021. After losing in the California Supreme Court and Court of Appeals to plaintiffs Sierra Club Tehipite Chapter and the League of Women Voters of Fresno, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors is expected today to comply with a court order to rescind its approvals for Friant Ranch, a proposed 942-acre, 2,500-unit residential and commercial development on former grazing lands, six miles north of Fresno. This Board action is a belated response to plaintiffs' unanimous, landmark, 2018 California Supreme Court victory.

That court decision, *Sierra Club v. County of Fresno*, requires all California agencies preparing Environmental Impact Reports to include an analysis of projected air pollution harms from the project on residents in the region, and must reasonably inform the public of its findings, as required by the California Environmental Quality Act. The legal victory promotes environmental justice throughout the state, because air pollution disproportionately harms low-income residents and, in the San Joaquin Valley, predominately Latino communities.

"All Californians, now and in the future, must be informed about significant health impacts, including cumulative impacts, from air pollution when new development projects are approved, now and in the future. Vulnerable populations, including asthma sufferers and traditionally underserved communities, deserve this disclosure under the law," said Gary Lasky, Chair of the Sierra Club Tehipite Chapter, in Fresno.

The San Joaquin Valley is now among the most polluted air basins in the nation: one in four Valley children have been diagnosed with asthma. The pollution sources of concern are NOx (nitrogen-based chemical) emissions from passenger vehicles, which produce smog when exposed to sunlight and heat in the presence of specific other chemicals; and PM2.5 pollution, tiny airborne particles which impair breathing and lead to heart disease.

"We urge the Board of Supervisors at their meeting on April 13 to be leaders and put affordable, environmentally sound housing where it belongs — near the job centers in downtown," said Dr. Joseph Lyou, President of the Coalition for Clean Air, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the Friant Ranch case. "Let's not make dirty air in Fresno dirtier and sick people in Fresno sicker."

Fresno County officials have done their best to minimize the importance of this court ruling, and an attorney for the developer, Friant Ranch LP, argued before the State Supreme Court that it may be impossible to evaluate the impact of this large project on the respiratory health of communities in the region.

Yet, less than a year after the Friant Ranch decision, California State University conducted just such a health assessment modeling for the expansion of its Dominguez Hills campus. And in 2020, the Sacramento Metro Air Quality Management District prepared new guidance for correlating health impacts to project air pollutants, citing the Friant Ranch decision as its basis for the new rules. No such guidance has been forthcoming from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which regulates air emissions in the Valley, nor from Fresno County government officials.

“Fresno County cannot continue to approve development without considering the air quality and health impacts on the most vulnerable communities in our region. Racist and discriminatory planning practices have resulted in the segregated communities we see today where certain populations bear disproportionate impacts,” emphasized Mariana Alvarenga, Policy Advocate with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, in Fresno.

“Consideration of air quality and health impacts represents the minimum the County must do to show its commitment to the well being of its existing residents. Instead of focusing on exclusive ‘new town’ development, Fresno County needs to focus on meeting the County's serious housing needs by investing in existing communities.”

Today’s 10:00 AM meeting of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors may be accessed online at the Board’s calendar, <https://fresnocounty.legistar.com/Calendar.aspx>. Click on the video link for the 4/13/2021 meeting. The agenda for Friant Ranch (item #10) is also here, as well as at: <https://fresnocounty.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4905208&GUID=BE3FF397-B262-4DBA-9451-C7AD654B2A1C&Options=&Search=>.

Following the Board’s actions, representatives of the League of Women Voters of Fresno, Sierra Club Tehipite Chapter, Coalition for Clean Air, and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability will be available for comment via Zoom at Noon today. This Zoom meeting can be accessed at <https://sierraclub.zoom.us/j/4673636527>, or by phone at (669) 900-6833 with the meeting ID: 467 363 6527#.

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