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## Lawmakers hope to fund clean air fight with \$100M a year

By Michael Doyle  
SUN-STAR WASHINGTON BUREAU  
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WASHINGTON -- California lawmakers hope to secure \$100 million a year in federal funds to help clean up San Joaquin Valley air pollution.

It's ambitious. It's also just the start.

In a Capitol Hill strategy session Wednesday, lawmakers agreed they will seek \$100 million a year annually through the year 2020. That adds up to some \$1.3 billion or more for attacking the region's ozone and particulate matter mess. Equal levels of state funding also will be sought.

"The Valley has a very serious issue," Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said following the meeting in her office.

The 25,000-square mile San Joaquin Valley is the nation's largest designated air basin, and also one of the dirtiest. Last summer, the Valley violated the federal ozone standard 85 times. By some estimates, 2,400 Californians die annually due to exposure to dust and air pollution.

"This is turning into an air quality Katrina," Fresno Mayor Alan Autry said following the Capitol Hill meeting and a follow-up meeting at the White House. "It's a tsunami that doesn't recede."

The political challenge is equally serious.

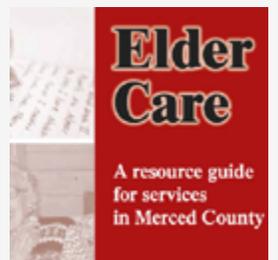
A senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Feinstein will take a lead role in the funding search. She convened the meeting in her office with San Joaquin Valley congressmen along with staffers, state and federal regulators and Autry.

Their goal was to help flesh out federal support for a San Joaquin Valley air basin clean-up plan that's currently due next year. They recognize the enormity of the task; in particular, the odds against Congress signing such a big check in a time of war and red ink. The \$100 million is significantly more than the federal government currently spends on San Joaquin Valley air programs.

"It's going to be very difficult," Feinstein acknowledged, "but all I can do is the best I can do."

The money could be applied many ways, including helping to replace heavily polluting engines.

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Ideally, the Californians want the Bush administration to request the funding as part of the White House's fiscal 2008 budget that will be presented next February. That way, the money will have some momentum and can be cast as a national priority. The problem is that Bush may have little incentive to funnel so much money to California, which favored his 2004 Democratic opponent by a 54 to 44 percent margin.

"I'm going to be doing everything I can to get the president to put this in his budget," Autry said.

The alternative is for California members of Congress to slide the funding into next year's individual appropriations bills. That presents a different political problem, as lawmakers from other states raise hurdles and reformers raise questions about so-called earmarks.

"Obviously, it's a big dollar amount," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia. "I'm not sure we can get those kinds of dollars, but I don't want to sound at all pessimistic."

A separate but complementary track discussed Wednesday has been presented to Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, who next January takes over as chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

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