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San Diego County Air Pollution Control District

It Has Used Vehicle Registration Fees to Subsidize Its Permitting Process, Reducing the Amount of Funds Available to Address Air Pollution

Background

Responsible for regulating stationary sources of air pollution—such as factories and gasoline stations—to protect the residents and environment of its county, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District (San Diego Air District) is essentially governed by the county's five-member board of supervisors (district board). The San Diego Air District is funded through a mix of vehicle registration fees, federal and state grants, and the permitting fees it collects from the operators of stationary sources of pollution.

Key Recommendations

- We recommended that the Legislature require local air districts to publish annual reports detailing how they use vehicle registration fees and require the San Diego Air District to use at least 90 percent of the vehicle registration fees it receives on projects related to mobile emissions.
- San Diego Air District should also do the following:
 - » Increase permitting fees to cover the full cost of the permitting program and use vehicle registration fees to reduce emissions from mobile sources of ozone-causing pollutants.
 - » Create and implement a plan to encourage public participation in creating regulatory and permitting policies. Further, the district board should fill the vacant seats on the advisory committee.
 - » Ensure that staff address complaints properly and promptly by establishing timeframes for supervisory reviews of complaint investigations and records.

Key Findings

- Although the San Diego Air District collects permitting fees, the amount it collects is not enough to cover the costs of its permitting program and it uses funds from other sources to subsidize the program.
 - » In fiscal year 2018–19, the district needed nearly 4 million dollars more than it collected in permit fees to cover the cost of the program.
 - » To cover the deficit, it uses vehicle registration fees, but doing so limits its opportunities to use these fees to address emissions from mobile sources—these emissions are the largest contributor to the region's excessive ozone levels.
 - » In fiscal year 2018–19, it spent only 17% of the vehicle registration fees it received on projects that were related to mobile emissions.
- The San Diego Air District and its board have not taken adequate steps to encourage public participation when making decisions regarding improving regional air quality.
 - » The district board relies on recommendations from an advisory committee that has consistently failed to comply with public meeting requirements and has not filled positions intended to represent critical stakeholders—some of which have been vacant for more than 20 years.
- Although the San Diego Air District investigates public complaints regarding air quality, records in its database are inaccurate and it has not ensured that all complaints are investigated in a timely manner.

The Advisory Committee Does Not Represent All Stakeholder Perspectives Due to Unfilled Vacancies

