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Wednesday, August 10, 2005

Air quality agency spends bulk of funds on personnel

By LEROY STANDISH/Staff Writer

VICTORVILLE — The employees of Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District earn an average of \$91,000 a year in salaries and benefits.

The second largest air quality district in the state spends 68 percent of its \$5.5 million budget on salaries and benefits for its 41 employees to monitor air quality that for the most part is a reflection of the air quality in the Los Angeles basin.

The agency serves over half a million people within the boundaries of the MDAQMD.

"It is typical," said Steven Frates, senior fellow of state and local government at the Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College. "Most government entities are primarily service entities."

Most of the employees divide time between inspecting businesses to make sure they are in compliance with clean air guidelines, responding to complaints and constantly monitoring the district's air quality.

The district, which stretches from the Cajon Pass to the Nevada stateline, spent \$3.7 million on salaries and benefits and the remaining \$1.7 million of its 2002-03 budget on services and supplies, operating transfers out, capital assets and contributions to other agencies, according to the recently released MDAQMD report "A Decade of Progress." The report documents the agency's accomplishments from 1993 to 2003.

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The bulk of the revenues coming into the agency for 2002-03 — \$3.02 million — comes from more than 800 permits issued to companies located in the district. The next two largest sectors of revenue for the MDAQMD are \$1.2 million in motor vehicle registration fees, \$821,820 for managing the Antelope Valley Air Quality Management District contract, and \$174,688 in fines.

Aaron J.H. Walker / Staff Photographer
 MDAQMD's Larry Parks explains the functions of an air sampler the agency uses to check air quality throughout the Victor Valley.

"Most of the time when you have a service oriented agency the bulk of your expenses is toward personnel," Violette Roberts, spokeswoman for the MDAQMD, said. "We don't use any (state) general funds moneys. We are almost funded entirely by our permits."

Most of the pollutants in the MDAQMD's area of responsibility come from down the hill — from heavy industry and motor vehicle emissions carried by the winds over the Cajon Pass — and are totally out of the control of the local air district, Roberts said.

Surprisingly, the air quality of the High Desert has improved despite the rapid increase in the local population, said Larry Parks, instrument technician with MDAQMD.

The three main contributors to the improved air quality in the last decade include reformulated gasoline that burns cleaner, cleaner cars and heavy industry moving out of the L.A. Basin, Cook said.

"We used to see stuff off the charts every single day," he said. "Now it's out of the ordinary."

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