

Desert Sun Op-Ed: Coachella Valley's 'dust summit' was a bust. Let's do this instead

Dr. Toper Taylor, Mayor Indian Wells

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The "Coachella Valley Dust Summit" swept into the desert like a haboob in early November, leaving those in attendance with toxic particles in our bloodstream.

The meeting boasted speakers of distinction, such as Dr. Nichole Quick of UC Irvine, who clearly stated that exposure to dust is dangerous to our health, and can actually lead to death. William Porter, a professor at UC Riverside, who has dedicated his life to the study of air quality, reiterated that yep, there's dust in the air and it ain't going away.

Leah Matthews, air pollution specialist from the California Air Resources Board, described real solutions that California is implementing in other parts of the state which can mitigate airborne dust, including planting, surface treatments, and water dampeners.

But the most important speaker who has the power and authority to assert statistically that the Coachella Valley has a dangerous health problem with dust and can thereby unlock significant government resources (read money), was Scott Epstein, manager for planning, rule development and implementation at South Coast AQMD.

Epstein said ... are you ready? ... the valley's dust problem hasn't gotten worse and, by some measures, has even gotten better over time. Epstein showed a bunch of slides from their monitors showing statistically that our air quality has actually improved since 1990.

1990? Need I remind those in attendance that in 1990 the smartphone and modern internet didn't exist. And more importantly for the economy of Coachella Valley, the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival and Stagecoach did not exist and the Indian Wells tennis tournament had not arrived on the global scene with BNP as the title sponsor. Wake up! Airborne dust may actually hurt our local economy by threatening the very existence of these festivals, sporting events, and the tourism that drives the entire Coachella Valley economy.

Another speaker was Aviva Goldmann, an epidemiologist with the county's public health agency, RUHS Public Health, which could help unlock resources by declaring health emergencies. Goldmann said the number of respiratory-related hospital visits in eastern Riverside County (that's us, from Palm Springs to the Arizona border) wasn't significantly different than in western Riverside County.

Really? That's not what the good doctors of Eisenhower are saying.

Eisenhower Health shared with me that emergency and urgent care respiratory visits rose from approximately 11,000 a year in 2021 to 26,000 in 2024, noting that particulate matter

is the most harmful form of air pollution because the particles can travel deep into the lungs, enter the bloodstream, and even cross the blood-brain barrier.

These good doctors, who care about our citizens, noted EPA data showing that from 2023 to 2024 unhealthy air days in the Coachella Valley went from 110 to 147. Wake up! The doctors at our valley's most prestigious hospital are seeing a lot more patients due to airborne dust today than they were a few years ago.

Can we please not have another dust summit?

Instead, let's take real action. How about we:

- * identify some acreage from where dust emanates (the Coachella Valley Association of Governments has some ideas right now)
- * put some non-chemical, all-natural green coagulant on half that land (Indian Wells uses this effectively to reduce dust from plots of land paralleling Highway 111 for the betterment of the community)
- * plant some indigenous shrubs on the other half.

Then let's see if we can reduce airborne particulate matter statistically, begin to learn which of the many solutions are the most effective, and then deploy the best solution to a broader surface area so we can permanently reduce airborne particulate matter, diminish the number of visits to urgent care, and save our outdoor-oriented economy.

Enough talk. It's time for action.

Toper Taylor is an Indian Wells City Council member and the founder of the Coachella Valley Coalition for Clean Air.

Dr. Toper Taylor

Mayor Indian Wells

p. (760) 346-2489

e. tt@votetopertaylor.com

44-950 Eldorado Dr.

Indian Wells, CA 92210

www.votetopertaylor.com

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