

Dan Morain: From an obscure panel, John Froines made a difference in our lives

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The tribute was very low-key, fittingly held in a small hearing room at the [California Environmental Protection Agency](#). No one knew about it, other than a few selected guests.

John Froines, a chemist and retired UCLA professor of environmental health, was the man of the hour. Froines' name might stir dim memories among some tiny number of people who recall the turbulent 1960s. But this event was about Froines' science and the impact it has had on our lives.

California is different than the other states for many reasons, some good, some bad and some downright embarrassing. Smog has plagued our state. California also has done more than others to combat it. Froines has been at the forefront of that effort.

At the tribute, a video of which I watched, [Gina Solomon](#), Cal-EPA's deputy director, listed some of Froines' work. While working for the federal government in 1977, he helped set [workplace standards](#) for lead and cotton dust exposure, no small matter.

But he had perhaps his biggest impact on an obscure branch of state government, the Scientific Review Panel on Toxic Air Contaminants. He was appointed to the panel at its creation 30 years ago and was its chairman for the past 15 years until he recently stepped down. He is a social justice and civil rights advocate, but not when science is at stake.

"I insisted that we not let politics ever enter our decision-making," Froines told me the other day. "You can't do your job if you don't have integrity. That was essential to the success."

California government can be tawdry, and its denizens can be self-serving. But parts of California government work well. The Scientific Review Panel is one such place.

It's composed of nine scientists nominated by the [University of California](#) president and appointed by the governor, Senate Rules Committee and Assembly speaker. They get expenses, but nothing more for their work. It's hardly a sinecure.

Over the decades, the nine-member panel has reviewed 450 assessments on a witch's brew of toxins: Chloropicrin, methidathion, metam sodium, benzene, [tobacco smoke](#), endosulfan, and many other pesticides and air contaminants that are potential carcinogens, genotoxins, neurotoxins, or all of the above.

The panel reviews other scientists' work, draws conclusions and turns over its best assessment to such regulators as the [California Air Resources Board](#) and Department of Pesticide Regulation to develop policy.

In 1984, the panel reviewed the gasoline additive benzene, and concluded it was linked to cancer. That led the state to require vapor retrieval systems at gas stations, otherwise known as those rubber fitting on the nozzles.

In 1998, the panel concluded that diesel exhaust causes human cancer. The air board continues to work on ways to rid the air of diesel exhaust.

"We always had unanimous decisions, and that doesn't happen much any more," Froines said. "It had to be a group decision."

The Scientific Review Panel was created by legislation in 1983 by then Assemblywoman Sally Tanner, a Democrat from the [San Gabriel Valley](#), where the summer air at the time was especially bad. The law recognizes that there is uncertainty. The panel doesn't need to conclude beyond all doubt that a pollutant is toxic.

"Our job is to determine if is chemical is toxic, and if so how bad," said Stanton Glantz, a UC San Francisco medical school professor and a [panel member](#). "Our job is to come up with best reading of the science and hand it off to the regulators.

Glantz recalled a meeting in which trucking representatives who depend on diesel engines warned that the panel's assessment that diesel exhaust causes cancer could ruin the economy.

Glantz remembers Froines responding by saying that the economic impact wasn't in his purview. His job and that of the panel was to assess the health risk and provide an honest assessment to policymakers.

It doesn't get much more honest than what Froines wrote in his letter to the air board about the panel's diesel findings: "Based on available scientific information, a level of diesel exhaust exposure below which non carcinogenic effects are anticipated has not been identified."

Not surprisingly, interests groups have struck back.

In 2009, the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation sued the state on behalf of dump truck owners, contractors and the [construction industry](#).

The suit warned that [California Air Resources Board](#) regulations would have a “strongly negative effect” on the industry. But rather than directly attack the regulations, the suit sought to disrupt the Scientific Review Panel, which issued the assessment that led to the regulations.

The suit contended that the state failed to follow its own rules in the appointment of Scientific Review Panel members, Froines among them. The state settled by paying \$4,000 in attorneys fees and agreeing to go about its procedure correctly. Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez ultimately reappointed Froines.

At 74, Froines has relinquished his position on the panel and is receiving accolades. He traveled to Italian town of Capri two months ago to accept the Ramazzini Award, prestigious among scientists who dwell in the world of occupational and environmental health. The award committee called him a “public health hero.”

Earlier, the [California Air Resources Board](#) honored his “significant contributions toward improving [air quality](#),” and Physicians for [Social Responsibility](#) in [Los Angeles](#) recognized his “courageous commitment to scientific integrity.”

It could have turned out differently.

Froines, educated at [UC Berkeley](#) and Yale, was among the anti-Vietnam War protesters who disrupted the 1968 Democratic [National Convention](#). He was indicted in the Chicago 7 case, tried on a variety of charges related to inciting the riots, and was one of two defendants acquitted.

Froines’ sense of right and wrong has played a part in his life work. Poor people tend to live in closer proximity to diesel fumes; farm laborers are most likely to be exposed to dangerous pesticides.

He doesn’t much like to talk about it. But he believes the issues raised in the ’60s – war, civil rights, racism and poverty – “are still with us.”

“He is pretty much the same way he was long ago,” said [Tom Hayden](#), a friend and one of his Chicago 7 co-defendants, who made his mark as a writer and a California state legislator. “He has anger, he has frustration. He has managed to channel that into his quest to create unassailable work.”

As a young man, Froines took actions that might have helped end a senseless war. From an obscure panel, he improved Californians’ lives. At the tribute, Solomon said, Californians are “healthier and the environment is cleaner” because of him.

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Shweta Saraswat / UCLA

John Froines has pushed for health standards on fuels and chemicals that could affect public health. Two months ago he traveled to Italy to accept the Ramazzini Award for his work in occupational and environmental health.