State adds $100 million to Stockton project easing rail travel for Modesto and beyond

By John Holland
Modesto Bee, Monday, Dec. 07, 2020

The state has kicked in $100 million for a Stockton rail project that would ease freight and passenger service in nearby counties.

Funding now stands at $145 million for the $237 million project, planned for the state's most congested railroad junction. Backers say it would ease the movement of goods to market and enhance service on Amtrak and the Altamont Corridor Express.

The California Transportation Commission approved the grant Thursday. The money comes from the fuel tax increase paid by drivers since 2017.

The planners aim for a 2026 completion of the project, which includes an overpass and related upgrades in south Stockton. They hope to get the remaining $92 million from the fuel tax.

The site is called the Stockton Diamond, where north-south tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad cross an east-west route of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. About 60 to 90 trains pass through each day, most of them bearing freight for local or wider markets.

"The CTC's investment in this project is a ringing endorsement to the important role rail plays in expanding the reach of Central Valley industry to the rest of the nation," said Adrian Guerrero, general director of public affairs for UP in California and the Pacific Northwest.

His comment was in a news release from the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission, the lead agency on the project. It is undergoing study on the environmental impacts and could get approval from the panel next summer. Detailed design and right-of-way purchase could take until 2023, followed by three years of construction.

Passenger service is expanding

Amtrak San Joaquin trains use the BNSF tracks for four round trips a day between Oakland and Bakersfield, with stops in Modesto and 12 other cities. This line has a branch to Sacramento on UP tracks, served by buses for now because of COVID-19 cutbacks.

The bottleneck also is on the route of the Altamont Corridor Express. It has two round trips between Stockton and San Jose on weekdays, down from four before the pandemic. ACE is expanding to Stanislaus County, with the first train as soon as 2022, and also to Merced and Sacramento counties.

The overpass would be built five blocks south of Highway 4 in downtown Stockton, in a low-income neighborhood beset by heavy rail traffic. The project includes upgrading 10 ground-level crossings for the benefit of pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists. And a 15-block stretch of the north-south tracks would be rerouted onto a corridor just to the east.

Feds granted $20 million earlier

The $100 million came from the state's Trade Corridor Enhancement Program, which aims to improve rail and roads for the movement of goods.

The project got a $20 million grant in September from the federal BUILD program, which stands for Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development. Earlier state funding includes about $4 million for the environmental study, $13.5 million for design and $7.3 million for right-of-way purchase.

"The San Joaquin Valley region plays an important role in California's transportation system," Caltrans Director Toks Omishakin said in the news release. "This critical project will help facilitate economic growth, reduce dependence on fuel, improve air quality in the region and reduce delays affecting freight and passenger rail."

Planned PG&E outages canceled, but windy conditions — and fire risk — to persist for Bay Area

By Nora Mishanec
San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, Dec. 7, 2020

Strong offshore winds swept through the Bay Area overnight, carrying increased risk of fire danger across a region that remains alarmingly dry.

The National Weather Service on Sunday extended its red flag warning until Monday at 5 p.m., indicating that exceedingly dry conditions and critical fire weather would remain a concern throughout the warmest part of the day.

Red flag warnings in December are uncommon, meteorologists said. The last time the NWS issued a red flag warning this late in the year was at the tail end of the 2011-2017 drought that killed over 100 million trees statewide.

“Typically we are in a rainy period by now,” National Weather Service meteorologist David King said Monday morning.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. called off a planned preemptive power shut-off for 8,500 customers in portions of Fresno, Madera, Mariposa, Tulare and Tuolumne counties Monday morning, citing the onset of “favorable weather conditions.” The utility had initially planned to cut power to about 130,000 customers beginning Friday night, but the scope of the shut-offs diminished steadily over the weekend.

Forceful gusts up to 70 mph were confined to Mt. St. Helena overnight. But parts of the North Bay, where vegetation is at record-dry levels, also saw worryingly strong wind patterns, meteorologists said, with gusts up to 43 mph in Santa Rosa and 22 mph in Napa.

The strongest offshore winds — blowing warm air from the Central Valley to the ocean — are expected to subside throughout the day.

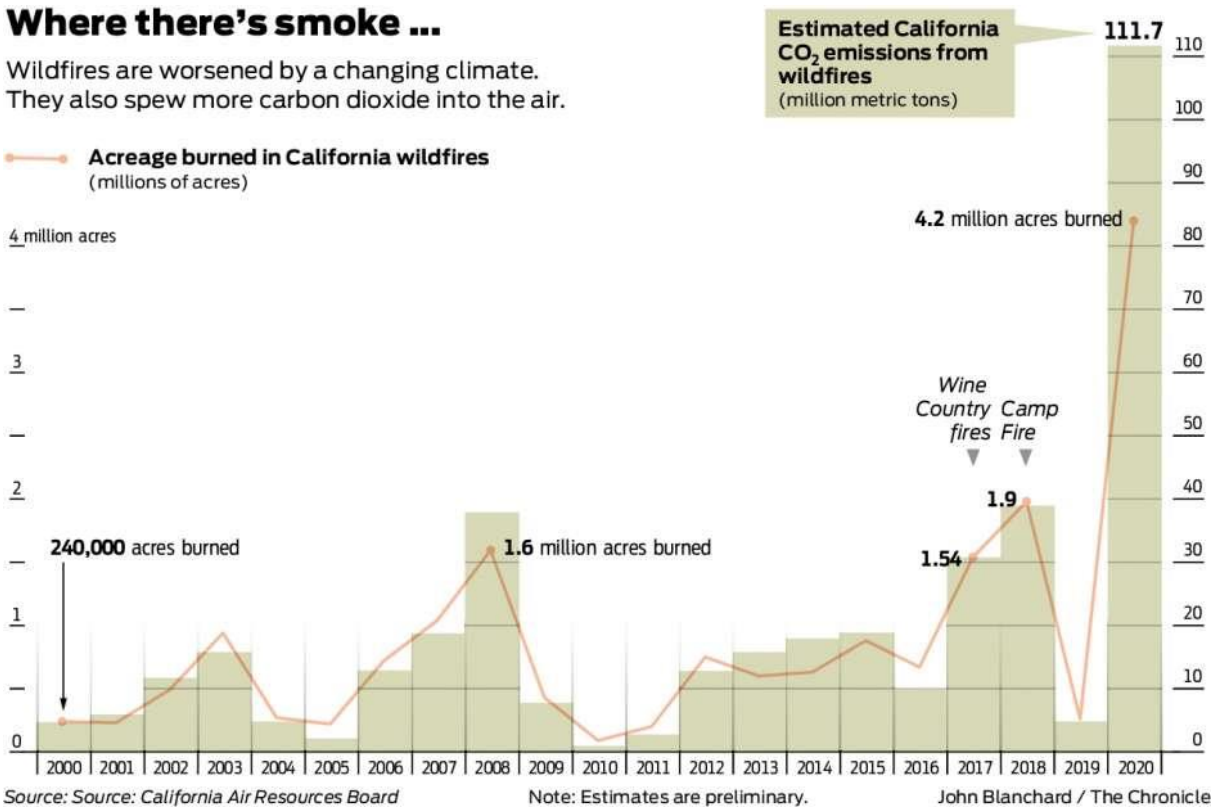
A warning trend is predicted to take hold Monday and remain into the middle of the week, meteorologists said. Temperatures around the region will stay in the low- to mid-70s. By Friday, the region is expected to cool off again as the winds recede, bringing weekend highs in the 60s.

Meteorological models have given no indication of rain on the horizon, King said. The persistent lack of rain could be partially due to La Niña conditions, when cooler ocean currents mean fewer rain clouds.

“It looks like the La Niña is strengthening, which can lead to a drier pattern persisting throughout the winter,” King said.

California wildfires emitted a huge amount of carbon dioxide this year. How much of a problem is that?

By J.D. Morris
San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, Dec. 4, 2020



California's historic 2020 wildfires released a staggering amount of planet-warming greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, but that may not be as big of a problem as it sounds, according to state officials and climate experts.

As of mid-October, fires in the state had produced more carbon dioxide than every economic sector except transportation.

Wildfires emitted 111.7 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, according to preliminary figures provided by the California Air Resources Board, compared with 169.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent for transportation in 2018, the most recent year for which greenhouse gas figures are available by sector.

Yet experts say that wildfire emissions should not be compared in an apples-to-apples fashion with emissions caused by cars, power plants and other sectors that burn fossil fuels for energy.

That's not because the emissions from fires do not trap heat in the atmosphere — they do. Rather, it's because fire is a natural part of the landscape in California, meaning that some amount of greenhouse gases should be expected every year because of wildfires. Also, the carbon released by a forest when it burns got there because trees took it from the atmosphere — as they'll do again when vegetation regrows.

"The forests are alive. They're growing and dying and regrowing," said Michael Wara, director of the climate and energy policy program at Stanford University's Woods Institute for the Environment. "That's really different than carbon that was buried 50 million years ago under the earth that we are unearthing and burning. I think it's not helpful to compare the two. It's a misdirection."

Forests typically take decades to fully regrow after being scorched severely in a wildfire, yet their ability to recapture carbon through photosynthesis is considered part of the Earth's natural carbon cycle.

The air board has been tracking wildfire emissions and is working to deepen the public's understanding of how the carbon dioxide released by blazes in recent years compares with what California experienced historically. A public webinar on the subject occurred Tuesday.

The air board's past figures show that 2020 was far more intense a time for wildfire carbon emissions than any other year in which records were kept, which is as far back as 2000. This year's fire-related emissions were significantly more than double the respective totals in 2018 and 2008, which saw two of the most severe fire seasons before this year. The 2020 estimate is also greater than the carbon estimates for fires in 2016 through 2019 combined.

That's not surprising, because this fire season has seen far more acres burned than any other year on record, with more than 4 million acres burned across the state.

Higher carbon emissions generally coincide with years where more land burned.

While carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas tracked by the air board in its wildfire emissions tally, fires can also release other planet-warming pollutants such as methane, experts say.

Air board officials are trying to get a better understanding of how much fire California historically saw before the modern era, including through cultural burning practices by Native American tribes. Further work is needed to arrive at a more conclusive answer, said Dave Edwards, assistant division chief of the air board's air quality planning and science division.

"The ultimate goal would be to put some context around today's fire," Edwards said in a recent interview.

Air board officials said at the webinar that they hope to have reports on fire emissions and historical fire activity in California finalized by mid-2021.

Tony Wexler, director of the Air Quality Research Center at UC Davis, said carbon emissions from wildfires are "pretty close to a zero concern for me."

"The carbon in the trees and brush and grasses that's burning all came from the atmosphere," Wexler said. "It's not a net emission of carbon dioxide — it's basically putting it back where it came from. I don't consider this to be a serious problem for climate."

Wexler is more concerned about the health impacts of pollution caused by wildfire smoke — which was particularly bad in California this year, when the air was unhealthy for weeks.

The problem of wildfire emissions, both the planet-warming kind and the particulate matter pollutants that can cause coughing and long-term lung damage, is made worse by climate change, which is drying out trees and shrubs more and fostering other conditions that make fires more likely to grow into vast, raging infernos.

California could get a better handle on its wildfire problem by stepping up its prescribed fire program, as the state has now committed to doing. Wexler said he also supports using more forest land to harvest biofuels, which turns organic materials into energy. Thinning forests can make future fires less severe.

Wara, the Stanford climate expert, said he has been trying to secure funding — so far unsuccessfully — to research how the state's big fire-prevention plans might affect smoke levels going forward. Using models typically applied to parse out the impact of new regulations on air pollution, Wara wants to project how California's plans to dramatically expand its prescribed fire program could affect the amount of smoke seen in the state every year.

Though he said he doesn't think fire emissions should be compared to those from fossil fuels, Wara said it's still useful to contemplate how land management practices can influence how long forests retain the carbon they store before releasing it back into the atmosphere.

"That's not a scary thing to consider, but it's just really different than coal and gas or oil," he said.

California fire danger remains high even as winds ease

By Christopher Weber, Associated Press
The Business Journal, Friday, December 4, 2020

(AP) — Fire danger remained high Friday amid unpredictable wind gusts and dry conditions in Southern California, as crews made progress against blazes that burned several homes and injured two firefighters.

The region's notorious Santa Ana winds decreased slightly but red flag warnings of extreme wildfire risk were in place into the weekend because of low humidity. After the weather calms in the southern part of the state, winds are expected to increase in Northern California starting Sunday, forecasters said.

Firefighters were still busy trying to contain a number of blazes south and east of Los Angeles. The biggest began late Wednesday as a house fire in Orange County's Silverado Canyon that spread to dry brush by fierce winds.

Some 25,000 people were ordered to flee their homes, although some evacuations orders were later lifted.

The fire grew to 10 square miles (26 square kilometers) and blanketed a wide area with smoke and ash. It was 10% contained as calmer conditions helped hundreds of firefighters who fought the flames on the ground and by air.

Two U.S. Forest Service firefighters were hospitalized after being hurt while battling the blaze, though it wasn't known how the injuries occurred. One was treated for a leg injury and the other suffered bruising and both were released Wednesday night, the Forest Service said on Twitter.

Some residents said they didn't receive evacuation alerts because Southern California Edison had shut off power as a precaution before the fire erupted, leaving them without cellphone service.

The fire was not far from the site of October's Silverado Fire, which also forced thousands from their homes and left two firefighters critically burned.

Crews mostly tamed two small fires that prompted evacuations in Riverside County east of Los Angeles.

And to the south, a small blaze in San Diego County that threatened about 200 residences was fully contained Thursday after destroying one home and damaging six others in a neighborhood near El Cajon.

Santa Ana winds hit 50 mph (80.5 kph) to 85 mph (137 kph) at times throughout the region beginning Wednesday night.

Numerous studies have linked bigger wildfires in America to climate change from the burning of coal, oil and gas. Scientists have said climate change has made California much drier, meaning trees and other plants are more flammable.

The fires erupted as Southern California utilities cut the power to more than 100,000 customers to avoid the threat of winds knocking down or fouling power lines and causing wildfires — something that has sparked devastating fires in recent years.

Southern California Edison cut power to nearly 50,000 homes and businesses, including those in the area where the Bond Fire started, but as winds eased the utility began restoring electricity.

San Diego Gas & Electric's precautionary blackouts affected around 73,000 customers at the peak.

California already has experienced its worst-ever year for wildfires. More than 6,500 square miles (16,835 square kilometers) have been scorched, a total larger than the combined area of Connecticut and Rhode Island. At least 31 people have been killed and 10,500 homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

The latest fire threat comes as much of California plunges deeper into drought. Virtually all of Northern California is in severe or extreme drought while nearly all of Southern California is abnormally dry or worse.

Winds stir up valley dust in Bakersfield

By John Cox
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Dec 3. 2020

During his years in the pool business Matt House has seen winds do real disservice to Bakersfield pool owners, like shattering a glass patio table underwater or dunking an awning that previously provided shade two houses away.

The mess he and his staff saw around town Thursday wasn't as bad as that. But it was bad enough that they expected to spend eight to 10 hours instead of the normal six hitting their daily quota of pool cleanings.

"The pools are a lot dirtier than usual," said the owner of Anytime Pool Service on Milo Avenue. "All kinds of stuff — leaves, dirt, patio furniture, anything the wind picks up."

Winds blowing across Kern County Thursday cleared a line of sight to the mountains but otherwise the immediate impacts were unhelpful, and any potential health benefits from sweeping out bad air weren't expected to last.

Strong gusts like those that arrived Wednesday night and were forecast to die down Thursday evening kicked up a lot of dust. The biggest impact on air quality was from stirring up relatively large, visible airborne material, not the fine particulates that can pose the biggest long-term health risks.

The risks were high enough Thursday to warrant words of caution from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. It advised local residents to retreat indoors, avoid burning firewood and stay in touch with their physicians.

District spokeswoman Heather Heinks explained the air is already dirty this time of year because of residential wood-burning, which was off limits Thursday.

Although there is some benefit to winds that temporarily lift local air quality once they calm down, she said the colliding weather that brought Kern County gusts measuring more than 40 mph will likely depart for other regions Friday. That's when the pollution is expected to settle back down across the southern part of the valley.

"That's generally how it works and we're thankful for the cleansing, if you will," she said. "But stagnation is not far away."

The district reported Thursday afternoon Kern County's air quality appeared to have improved somewhat Thursday and could get cleaner Friday.

Its daily summary said the valley's air was unhealthy for sensitive groups Wednesday because of a proliferation of atmospheric particulates with a diameter of less than 2.5 micros, more than 100 times finer than human hair.

Wednesday's pollution was estimated at 119 on the district's air quality index, almost 12 percent higher than Thursday's forecast of 105.

Friday's forecast was for moderate air quality with the biggest pollutant being larger particulates between 2.5 and 10 microns. It predicted a 73 on the index.

A meteorologist at the National Weather Services offices in Hanford, Carlos Molina, said a storm from the Four Corners region has brought no precipitation to California, only wind when its cold air comes into contact with warmer air from the coast.

That collision created the Santa Ana winds that fanned wildfires in Southern California Thursday. Molina said the orientation of Kern's mountain ranges largely protects the county from gusts of similar magnitude.

Wind gauges in Tehachapi recorded gusts of 43 mph Wednesday night and early Thursday, Molina said, adding the high at Meadows Field Airport in Bakersfield was 41 mph Thursday morning.

The NWS figures the storm will head south into Mexico then curve toward Texas. Molina said a separate storm expected to hit Northern California over the weekend will probably miss Kern.

He noted the winds have pushed up a great deal of dust from the desert and mountains, and that it will settle in the valley.

"A lot of the stagnant air pollution that will exist may not actually exit the area (despite) the strong winds to the north," he said. "Looks like the air quality won't improve too much as we go to the end of this week and early next week."

The wind woke up receptionist McKenna Molina in the middle of the night Wednesday. Her first thought was for her workmates at Atlas Pool Care on Jomani Drive.

It's hard work using a net on a pole to fish out leaves, she said. Company policy employees are not allowed to leave a pool until it's completely free of debris, even if the wind keeps blowing in more leaves.

Co-workers in the field texted her pictures Thursday morning of what they were coming across. One was a frightful mess.

"He got a disaster," she said.