

Valley nut harvests kick up dust. Grants to growers can help residents breathe easier

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021

Almond and walnut growers can get grants of up to \$150,000 toward harvesting machines that reduce dust in the San Joaquin Valley air.

The region's Air Pollution Control District has \$12.5 million in state and federal money for its latest effort to protect residents' lungs, announced Tuesday.

The nuts are among the highest-grossing crops in Stanislaus County, but the harvests that start in late summer can be dusty.

One machine shakes the trees. Another spreads the fallen nuts into windrows so they can be picked up by still another and loaded onto trucks bound for processors.

The amount of dust per acre has fallen sharply in recent years thanks to industry and government efforts. Flory Industries of Salida and Jackrabbit Equipment of Ripon have made many of the lower-dust rigs at work today.

But dust remains an issue because of increased acreage, especially almonds. Stanislaus had 216,265 acres of this nut in 2019, versus 134,003 a decade earlier, the county agricultural commissioner reported. Walnuts went from 29,628 to 37,044 acres over that span.

The key concern for Valley residents is PM10, or dust particles measuring 10 microns or smaller. They can get deep into the lungs and aggravate asthma and other conditions.

"This program will significantly reduce the impact on Valley residents during the harvest season," said Todd DeYoung, director of strategy and incentives for the district, in a news release.

The grants cover half of the cost of machinery that reduces dust by at least 40%, with a cap of \$150,000. Details are at valleyair.org/grants or 559-230-5800.

The district shared an online video of almond grower Trevor Myers, who used a previous grant to replace machines on about 3,000 acres near Firebaugh. He noted that his new Flory equipment also works faster and has lower maintenance costs than the old models.

Electric vehicles bolster City fleet

By Cee Cee Howell

Patterson Irrigator, Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021

A grant funded by San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District afforded the City of Patterson the opportunity to acquire five battery powered utility vehicles from ZEROnox. After multiple delays due to high demand and COVID-19 the City took delivery of the vehicles earlier this month.

The Ion EC4 electric utility vehicles seat up to five people and include bed-space for hauling equipment. They can handle loads in excess of one-thousand pounds, can reach speeds up to 30 miles per hour and can be driven 60 miles before needing to be charged. Charging the vehicles is a simple process that requires no special equipment and takes approximately 3.5 hours.

Patterson - West Stanislaus Fire Chief Jeff Gregory expects these vehicles to improve accessibility and response times during events such as the Apricot Fiesta when it is often difficult to maneuver public safety vehicles and apparatus downtown due to crowded spaces.

The City plans to utilize the other three vehicles in the public works and recreation departments.

The carts, with stronger drive trains, greater capacity, and long-lasting batteries that are guaranteed to be maintenance free for 10 years, promise to be much more efficient than the gas-powered vehicles they are replacing.

ZEROnox is based in Porterville, CA and specializes in electric battery design and integration into emissions-free battery powered vehicles.

Anti-oil coalition presents 7,000 signatures ahead of county meeting on streamlined permitting

By John Cox

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021

More than 7,000 people signed a petition submitted Wednesday asking Kern's Board of Supervisors and Gov. Gavin Newsom to halt the county's push to reinstate streamlined oil permitting.

Arriving one day before the county Planning Commission takes up the matter, the petition presented by a coalition of environmental and environmental-justice groups says minority communities are more likely to live near oilfields in Kern and as a result suffer from cancer, asthma and other chronic diseases.

Commissioners will host a public hearing and vote on whether to establish an over-the-counter oil permitting system and also recommend the Board of Supervisors certify a related environmental review of local oilfield activities' various impacts.

Set to start at 7 p.m., the online meeting is the latest step in a process that started in late 2012 when the local oil industry offered to fund a county attempt to achieve environmental clearance across virtually the entire valley portion of Kern County.

The petition called on county supervisors to abandon a project that estimates say could lead to approval of 67,000 new wells over 20 years. It said the board should "take steps to better protect the health and safety of local communities, and to diversify economic opportunities while transitioning the county to a clean energy economy."

It went on to say Newsom will never be a leader in environmental and climate justice until he does more to cut supply along with demand for oil. In line with supporters' assertions he has the authority to intervene, it calls on the governor to "protect frontline communities and to lead a just transition to a green energy future."

An initial version of the system approved in late 2015 offered regulatory certainty plus even state-level environmental coverage in exchange for substantial new drilling fees.

It was discontinued nearly a year ago after California's Fifth District Court of Appeals ruled in February the county had violated the California Environmental Quality Act, including by failing to disclose likely noise impacts and neglecting to cushion impacts on water and air quality. County staff have vowed to revise and reintroduce the system as many times as necessary until it passes legal muster.

Opponents of the county's permitting effort, who have promised to keep challenging the county in court, generally contend well-by-well environmental reviews are more appropriate than a regional assessment they say is bound to overlook site-specific impacts.

Also, some local farmers say the county's system wrongly gives oil companies the upper hand in negotiations pertaining to so-called "split estates," in which a grower controls the surface and an oil producer owns the underlying mineral rights.

The county has defended the process as generating substantial new revenue for a regional fund paying for air-quality improvements, and it notes that without the system oil producers don't even need a local permit.

Meanwhile, the county's oil industry strongly supports the county's proposal. It maintains local oil producers operate under the world's strictest regulations and that cutting domestic supply ahead of sharp drops in California's demand for oil only shifts jobs and sales revenue to foreign countries with lower environmental and other standards.

Members of the coalition behind the petition spoke online during a news conference Wednesday afternoon.

Anabel Marquez, president of Committee for A Better Shafter, said the county should not sacrifice local communities' health "in the name of the economy."

"We have to find a way that we can make our communities thrive without having to depend on the oil industry," she said.

Juan Flores, a community organizer with the Center for Race, Poverty & the Environment, which has offices locally in the Bay Area, said during the event Newsom should take action against the efforts of "hard-headed elected officials" in Kern who are supporting an industry already dying on its own.

He declined to say how specifically the environmental review shot down in court still falls short of legal standards. But Flores said local communities "need leadership from the state" to avoid having the same battle every five years.

Anyone may tune in to Thursday evening's Planning Commission meeting by going online to <https://www.youtube.com/user/KGOVTV>.

Interested parties are invited to email their comments ahead of time to planningcommissioncomment@kerncounty.com. Alternatively, commenters may leave a voicemail comment by calling 661-862-5011, making sure to reference the commission's Agenda Item 1.