

New clean-air group called business sham

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

Friday November 15, 2002, 11:23:26 PM

A new group established to help clean up the valley's air is already causing a stink among critics, who say it's just a front for industries that want to fight pollution controls.

Clean Air Now had its coming out at a press conference in Fresno on Thursday. The nonprofit says it aims to bring a more freewheeling, entrepreneurial style to the clean-air effort by funding grass-roots pollution solutions. But some observers have a hard time seeing past the oil companies, housing developers and industrial farmers on its board.

"The agenda of these industries is to say do not enforce the federal Clean Air Act in the San Joaquin Valley, exempt us from its requirements," said Kevin Hall, air quality chairman of the Sierra Club's Tehipite Chapter. "These industries have so much to answer for, and they don't want to answer it. They want to shape the questions. They're seeking to confuse and mollify the public."

Leaders of the Fresno-based group aren't exactly surprised by the criticism. Instead, they urge the public to judge them by their deeds.

"Government's not going to clean up our air alone. We're going to have to step up," said Bob Maddux, president of Clean Air Now and an executive with developer Gary McDonald Homes of Fresno. "It's about making positive change on an issue that's just absolutely vital to all of us."

Skepticism is natural after looking at the group's board of directors, critics contend. It includes representatives from Tejon Ranch, a major agriculture corporation now transforming its vast land holdings south of Bakersfield into housing and industrial developments; asphalt shingle manufacturer Elk Corporation; and Densmore Engines, one of the West's largest automotive engine remanufacturers, with facilities in Fresno and Sacramento.

Also represented on the board is ChevronTexaco, which gave Clean Air Now its startup funding of \$2 million. The company will take a tax write-off deduction for its contribution, Bishop said. ChevronTexaco has extensive petroleum operations in Kern County and, ironically, is also fighting federal air pollution mandates as a member of the Western States Petroleum Association.

But K.C. Bishop, manager of strategic programs at ChevronTexaco and a board member of Clean Air Now, said the group's only goal is to "change the confrontational paradigm" and deliver innovative solutions.

"We're trying to create a whole new way of looking at it, as opposed to what's happened in the past: suing people and blaming people," said Bishop. "Chevron's got a lot of

employees. They want clean air. Our customers want clean air. All of us think this is something that's really important for California."

Hall said the stakes in the pollution fight have increased significantly with impending federal mandates. As a result, he charged that the group's goal is to remove the mandates by working to dismantle the federal Clean Air Act.

"These are the folks who can pick up a phone and call congressmen and senators in Washington. What I'm anticipating is a direct run at the federal Clean Air Act. They will pressure the government to do the exact opposite of what we need," Hall said.

Both Maddux and Bishop denied that charge, insisting that none of the money and none of the effort will be spent on politics.

"You will not see us fighting regulations," Maddux said.

Clean Air Now encourages the public to submit ideas for pollution control projects it can fund. Maddux said the group's work may include direct grants to the public for clean-air projects. For example, he said, it could launch a program to help farmers and low-income people install pollution controls on cars and agricultural equipment.

Said Bishop: "Judge us by what we do."

Ideas for pollution-control projects may be submitted to the group by calling 1-800-806-2004, or by visiting its Web site, www.cleanairnow.com.

Up in the air

New industry group joins effort to clean up Valley's dreadful pollution.

Fresno Bee Editorial (Published Monday, November 18, 2002, 5:25 AM)

A new player took the field in the campaign for better air in the Valley last week, but some of the other team members viewed the development with a jaundiced eye.

Clean Air Now, an effort organized by the San Joaquin Valley's biggest industries and funded by \$2 million from Chevron Texaco, announced that it would begin working to find what some of its members called "real world" solutions to the Valley's miserable air quality.

But skeptics immediately reacted with warnings that the group was more likely to impede, rather than help, serious efforts to clean the air. Many members of the industry group have worked to gain exemptions from air quality rules for their own operations, or have been seen as obstacles to real progress in cleaning up the air.

Perhaps the skeptics are right. But there is a logical case to be made for real and energetic involvement on the part of industries -- particularly agriculture and oil -- in the process of cleaning the air. Failure to implement useful solutions locally and regionally -- however painful they may be to corporate bottom lines -- is likely to lead to the imposition of rules and sanctions by the federal government that could prove even harsher.

And the Valley's dirty air is costly to industry and business as well as to individuals. Agriculture suffers huge losses because of foul air. Businesses often have difficulty recruiting employees they need to an area that is so well known for its air pollution.

There is also the matter of those serious federal sanctions that could come crashing down on the Valley if efforts to clean the air fall short. Millions of dollars in highway funds could be cut off, and huge fines might be levied against business and other institutions that continue to pollute.

And people involved in these industries also live here. Their families -- their children -- breathe the same filthy air we all breathe. That's the simplest and most direct type of special interest.

In any case, the group can make useful contributions, seeking answers and funding research. If, as the skeptics charge, this is a smoke screen to mask efforts to slow or derail the kinds of aggressive steps we must take, that will be revealed soon enough. In the meantime, take Clean Air Now at its word, and welcome them to the fight.

Group tries to clear air of politics

Leaders of campaign seek to relieve skepticism about intent.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee (Published Saturday, November 16, 2002, 5:20 AM)

The San Joaquin Valley's biggest industries, bankrolled by \$2 million from ChevronTexaco, announced Thursday that their new, nonprofit campaign for clean air would aim at answers, not delays or lawsuits.

But one environmental activist was skeptical as he viewed the public introduction to Clean Air Now, the industries' new nonprofit group. Sierra Club member Kevin Hall said such well-funded efforts are commonly used to manipulate the political system.

"These are the same industries that have been weakening and diluting regulations for a decade," he said. "They intimidate the local board, which is filled with local politicians."

Clean Air Now board members said their goal is healthful air, not politics. Several board members said they joined the effort because it would be directed at "real world" solutions and projects.

As its first official act, the board presented a \$20,000 check to the Fresno Business Council's Air Quality Task Force, a group focused on research and development of clean-air solutions.

The new industry-based group has not yet defined specific projects, but ideas range from helping to replace old farm diesel engines to repairing older cars for people who can't afford to fix them.

Officials said they want to encourage the community to approach the group with clean-air ideas that can be promoted and funded. They said they also want to educate the public about its role in cleaning up the air.

"This is grass-roots leadership," said Bob Maddux, a building-industry official who is board president of Clean Air Now. "We're not about pointing fingers at what's happened in the past."

But the Valley's past is one reason the group was formed. The area has missed many air-cleanup deadlines, prompting threats of federal sanctions and, more recently, environmental lawsuits.

In the past year, lawsuits have revealed years of federal neglect regarding Valley air-cleanup plans, which have been inadequate to make the air healthful. Lawsuit settlements with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are resulting in a flurry of deadlines in the next three years for the Valley, considered the second-worst air basin in the nation.

The consequences of missing the deadlines include federal sanctions that would be costly to new and expanding businesses. Federal road-building funds also would be withheld.

The sanctions, along with the social stigma of unhealthful air, would no doubt affect businesses backing the new Clean Air Now group, some board members said. The businesses include farming, building, petroleum and various other enterprises.

But the political consequences of the Valley's air problems are not part of the equation for the new nonprofit group, said board member Gus Freshwater, a Kern County businessman.

"We're not here trying to manage the regulatory issues," Freshwater said. "Many of us have personal reasons. My wife has asthma. She didn't develop it until we moved here from Texas."

In response to reporters' questions, K.C. Bishop of ChevronTexaco, which has extensive operations in Bakersfield, said the companies represented on the new board are not involved in lawsuits over air. But he agreed ChevronTexaco is a member of the Western States Petroleum Association, which is appealing a federal decision about an air-rule exemption for the petroleum industry in Kern County.

Valley farmers also have been represented this year by the California Farm Bureau in an appeal of a federal decision over an agricultural exemption to air rules.

"But, as individuals, we aren't involved with those cases," Bishop said. "You have to judge us on what we do in Clean Air Now."

Environmentalists remained suspicious. Luke Cole of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment in San Francisco said people should watch carefully to see what the group accomplishes.

"When faced with regulation, industries will create a committee to suggest less protective regulations that mean more profits for them and more pollution for the rest of us," he said. "Valley residents should see through this latest industry smoke screen."

The Associated Press, November 15, 2002

FRESNO, Calif.(AP) - Representatives of the San Joaquin Valley's farming, oil and construction industries say their new campaign for cleaner air would provide answers to the smog problem, not delays or lawsuits.

"We're not here trying to manage the regulatory issues," said Clean Air Now board member Gus Freshwater, a Kern County businessman. "Many of us have personal reasons. My wife has asthma. She didn't develop it until we moved here from Texas."

Clean Air Now is a private nonprofit, funded with \$2 million from ChevronTexaco, created to study and promote voluntary actions to clean up pollution. Some ideas include replacing old farm diesel engines and repairing older cars for people who can't afford to fix them.

Fresno leads the state in childhood asthma and the valley was ranked this year as the second smoggiest place nationally by the American Lung Association. Air pollution is blamed for asthma, other respiratory ailments and heart problems.

On Thursday, Clean Air Now presented a \$20,000 check to the Fresno Business Council's Air Quality Task Force, a group focused on research and development of clean-air solutions.

Sierra Club member Kevin Hall called the group's efforts political.

"These are the same industries that have been weakening and diluting regulations for a decade," he said. "They intimidate the local board, which is filled with local politicians."

Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee

A new Measure C

By Michael Becker

(Published Saturday, November 16, 2002, 5:26 AM)

As a citizen involved in the recent successful "No on C" campaign, I'm writing on where we go from here. I hope to be putting up "Yes on C" signs in the 2006 election. It will take until then to accomplish three necessary goals for constructing a balanced, comprehensive transportation plan designed through a democratic process.

A true citizens advisory committee must be established. Input must come primarily from citizen groups, transportation groups, medical advocates, health advocacy groups, environmental groups and other regular folks, not primarily from businesses and government agencies. Agencies have an advisory role and businesses have a right to be heard. But their views should not prevail over the concerns of ordinary citizens.

The county's transportation authority must have checks and balances so that a single, unelected authority cannot thwart the will of voters.

A truly balanced transportation plan must be developed, one that focuses on clean air and compact growth, not unchecked sprawl. Such a plan might look roughly like this: 20% for road projects; 20% for the integration and expansion of bus systems within and between cities; 20% for inter-city rail using abandoned rail lines throughout the county; 20% for modern, efficient rapid transit within the cities; and 20% for rail consolidation, traffic safety measures, bicycle, pedestrian, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance and similar projects.

Like others in the "No on C" campaign I will campaign twice as hard in the future for a transportation plan that will begin to build a different future for our community -- one that involves clean air and viable, affordable and efficient transportation options.

Put out the fire so we can all breathe easier

Modesto Bee Editorial

November 16, 2002 Posted: 05:35:10 AM PST

The San Joaquin Valley has the second worst air in the country, yet when residents are asked to take even the smallest steps to clean up the air, the whining can be heard from

Bakersfield to Stockton. The message that we are sending is that we don't want to be inconvenienced, even if we are struggling to breathe.

The reaction to the likelihood that residents won't be able to burn wood in their fireplaces during the winter's poor air days next year says a lot about public unwillingness to confront the problem.

In dragging their feet in several air-improvement areas, valley residents and policy-makers have invited federal sanctions that could severely restrict the independent lifestyles that so many of us say we want. All the while, the health of our children remains in jeopardy. We must take steps now to improve our air quality.

Restricting fireplace burning seems simple enough. This winter it is voluntary, but next winter the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will regulate the burning during episodes of bad air. Repeat offenders could face fines.

Air district officials say the no-burn rule, which is required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, could be called on five to 20 nights a year, depending on the weather.

Health officials say soot and ash pollution can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems. This type of pollution also has been linked to higher death rates and heart problems.

About 30 percent of the wintertime soot and ash around valley cities come from residents burning wood in their homes.

We can help clean the air by cutting back on the use of our fireplaces.

As air district officials release proposals for the mandatory effort next winter, they will schedule public meetings to work out the details of the plans. Go to the meetings and support steps to improve the valley's air.

There's much we should do to facilitate that improvement, including using mass transit, carpooling, reducing agricultural dust, ending the burning of farm waste -- and cutting back on the use of fireplaces.

We'll all breathe a little better for our efforts.

Agency says many want details on fireplace curb

November 17, 2002 Posted: 06:00:17 AM PST

By Melanie Turner, Modesto Bee

Bonnie Hill of Ceres lives on a limited income and said she can't afford a gas fireplace, the type installed in most new homes.

Even if she could afford one, she thinks regular fireplaces are warmer.

"I just like the fireplace heat," said Hill, 87. Besides, she added, "All my friends complain about how high their gas bills are."

She concedes that "it must be necessary" for officials to impose a rule next winter that would keep people from lighting their fireplaces on some winter nights.

"But I don't like it," she said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has heard from a lot of people who don't like the idea of restricting fireplace burning.

Officials are letting people know now of the coming no-burn rule in case they want to buy cleaner-burning technology.

People who have cleaner-burning stoves or inserts will be exempt from the no-burn rule on some days.

The rule is coming because the valley fails federal standards for tiny airborne particles, such as soot, ash, smoke particles and dust. As much as 30 percent of the problem is blamed on wood smoke in the winter.

Valley air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said the district has received dozens of calls about the rule.

There have been a few irate callers, but most people simply want to know how next season's rule is going to work, she said.

Air officials emphasize that fireplaces are not being banned. But they say they need to curb harmful pollutants on days when levels are high to comply with federal regulations.

People also want to know how the district plans to enforce the rule. Officials likely will rely on a combination of the honor system, a tip line for people to report infractions and some form of district enforcement, Bello said. She has said there likely will be no fines the first year.

Fireplace owners are not the only people unhappy about the no-burn rule.

Stockton-based manufacturer and distributor, Duraflame Inc., is raising a stink. Manufactured logs are not included in the air district's proposed wood burning regulations.

The company sponsored a survey last weekend that indicates, company officials say, that the air district is headed for a showdown with its proposal to require no-burn days.

McGuire Research Services surveyed 300 valley residents. While 49 percent of them support a mandatory ban on burning wood in fireplaces on high pollution days, many opposed the proposed regulations, according to a Duraflame spokeswoman.

Nearly 30 percent of those surveyed said they would ignore the ban as currently outlined, she said.

Other survey results include:

After being told that under the new rule homeowners would have to retrofit their existing fireplaces to a cleaner technology, at a cost of \$800 to \$3,000 each, or they would have to stop using their fireplace on many winter nights, 67 percent said they would strongly oppose such regulations.

If the air district passed a mandatory ban on wood burning in fireplaces, 7 percent said they would retrofit their fireplaces, 45 percent said they would not use their fireplaces and 27 percent said they would ignore the ban. Eight percent said they had already retrofitted, and 13 percent said they didn't know.

Air district spokeswoman Bello said officials at the air district "thought it was incredibly positive," given the district only recently rolled out the new rule.

With nearly 30 percent of people polled saying they would ignore the ban, officials said they assumed that meant 70 percent would adhere to it.

Randy Wooding uses a wood stove to heat his family's 96-year-old, two-story brick house in Empire.

The house doesn't have any other form of heat, and it gets particularly cold without firing up the stove, he said.

With three years' worth of firewood stacked in the back yard, Wooding said the rule has caught him off guard. "We would not comply with any rule that's foolish like that."

But Wooding actually would be exempt from the no-burn rule, since his wood stove is the family's only form of heat. People who have heat, but want to use their fireplace to lower their heating bills, would not be exempt, Bello said.

Some people say the no-burn rule is long overdue.

Kristen Michael said in her new northeast Modesto neighborhood, sometimes she can't open up her house in the winter because of fireplace smoke lingering outside.

Longtime Modesto resident Jim McElroy agreed. He said smoke has been getting worse in the city every winter for the past six years.

"When the inversion layer is down, it's oppressive outside with so much smoke," he said. "They're going to have to do something to limit the pollution from these fireplaces."

McElroy said he only uses his small fireplace for special occasions, like Christmas.

Longtime Modesto resident Gertie Pelucca opposes any restrictions.

"It's running too much of our personal life," she said. "If they only knew. Burning a fireplace in the evening with a family -- it's cozy. It's nice. It keeps the family together."

Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee

How to make it work

By Scott M. Kruse

(Published Saturday, November 16, 2002, 5:26 AM)

Re your front-page article Nov. 11 on Measure C: Voters support measures in which specific improvements are clearly identified in detail. A new Measure C must acknowledge the new general plans emphasizing infill in the Fresno metropolitan area and clearly identify what voters will receive.

The defeated measure was vague in attention to detail other than freeway and surface street expansion, and promoted sprawl and poor air quality while ignoring transit, business, school, residential, pedestrian and bicycle needs. Fresno previously enjoyed light rail from downtown to the San Joaquin River. A larger population and emphasis on infill will make light rail more cost-effective.

It is clear in every community across the country that we cannot build our way out of congestion, nor use the same methods that create problems in the first place. The present system adversely affects homes, business, schools and agriculture with poor air quality, noise, lights, pavement and sprawl. Many intersections are severely congested during rush hours because Freeways 41, 99 and 180 exist with no regard for surface street traffic.

Work by the Sierra Nevada Alliance and Great Valley Center consistently demonstrate that successful communities have broad-based public involvement and support, take a "bottom up" approach, think and act long-term, encourage local business and schools, and offer itemized detail in proposed solutions.

Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee

Study seeks solutions to asthma afflicting Valley children

By Kathleen M. Mortimer, Project Director, School of Public Health

University of California, Berkeley

(Published Monday, November 18, 2002, 5:25 AM)

A great deal of media attention has been paid to high rates of asthma and air quality concerns in the Valley, with repeated calls for "something to be done." We'd like to highlight the fact that one of the most promising things that is being done is getting very little media attention, despite our efforts.

The Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environment Study (FACES), conducted by UC Berkeley, includes several hundred children to evaluate the effects of air pollution on asthma. Funded by the California Air Resources Board, FACES has important public health implications.

First, it will identify what types of pollutants (e.g., agricultural vs. vehicle sources) are most harmful. This will help regulators and policy-makers implement the most effective methods for improving air quality. Second, it will describe the spatial variation of air pollution across the Fresno-Clovis area, identifying areas most in need of air pollution reduction. Third, FACES will identify asthmatic children experiencing the most severe air pollution-related health problems.

For example, we may find that children who attend schools located close to major roadways have greater responses to air pollution. This would allow public health officials to target valuable resources to those populations.

We are extremely grateful to more than 200 families who have participated so far. Local businesses and organizations have generously supported the study with donations and advertising. Additional family and community support is essential, however, to the success of this project. As study findings are released, it is likely that more research dollars will be allocated to studying Fresno's unique air pollution problem, which will have enormous benefit to the population. We are reaching out to the community and the media to support our efforts to identify the reasons for Fresno's asthma epidemic.

Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee

Is this where 'evolution' leads us?

By R.J. Finderup

(Published Sunday, November 17, 2002, 4:15 AM)

At the dawn of human existence, human beings evolved gathered around smoky cooking fires and huddled for warmth around smoky cave fires.

Through the millennia, human life evolved around smoke-belching fires -- for cooking, for warmth, for metallurgy, for manufacturing.

Now, in this last blink of human evolutionary time, we have come to such a state that a whiff of fireplace smoke in a winter night's air is deemed a grave threat to human existence.

Editorial: School bonfire rallies shouldn't be doused

The Bakersfield Californian Editorial

Sunday November 17, 2002, 08:10:05 PM

The news story said it all: The Shafter vs. Wasco football rivalry may never be the same. Traditional bonfires in each city before the game are endangered.

Pollution-control rules snuffed out Shafter's annual ritual earlier this month. Fire officials stopped the fire just before it was to be ignited because a permit was not obtained from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. That left more than 300 people who came to watch the star-crossed conflagration grumbling. "I can't believe our little fire would mess up the air for the whole valley," said Shafter parent Sandy Wiedmann. Neither can we. The bonfires should be allowed to stoke friendly rivalries.

Valley air district officials may have to revamp cleanup plan

Friday, November 15, 2002

By Mike Jensen <<mailto:mjensen@mercedsun-star.com>>

Central Valley residents may find it easier to breathe a couple of years from now, but in the meantime, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District officials may suffer from some big headaches.

The officials may have to develop a new air clean-up plan, revamp one that's been in the works for months or write two air clean-up plans side-by-side.

Those are possible ramifications of a lawsuit settlement this week over national limits for ozone air pollution.

The plaintiffs, which included the Sierra Club, the American Lung Association, the Alabama Environmental Council and the Ohio Environmental Council, filed suit against the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

When asked to comment on the settlement Thursday, Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman with the air pollution control district, said, "This situation is pretty hazy." The district is charged with cleaning the air from Bakersfield to Stockton.

It was unclear Thursday exactly how the tougher air pollution requirements will be implemented in the Valley. But the end result will be cleaner air, said air district spokesman Charlie Goldberg.

It will also mean tougher regulations on businesses and agriculture, he said.

The Valley's ozone air pollution is already considered to be in "severe" noncompliance with federal Clean Air Act standards. And air district officials are on the verge of asking the EPA to downgrade that rating to "extreme" - the worst possible classification - to buy time to meet air pollution standards and avoid federal sanctions.

Only one other air basin in the country - Los Angeles - is in "extreme" noncompliance.

Lisa Fasano, an EPA spokeswoman, said Thursday that she is not clear on details of the settlement. However, she said the EPA may now set standards calling for ozone pollution to be limited to 0.08 parts per million, instead of 0.12 parts per million.

At the same time, Fasano said, the air pollution measurements may be averaged over an eight-hour period, rather than a one-hour period.

Officials with the Valley air district also said they are not clear on many of the details of the settlement, and they said more information will be forthcoming.

Possible outcomes from the settlement include the Valley air district needing to revamp its current ozone plan that has been in the works for several months, according to Merced Bello.

Or the district may have to complete work on the plan already in the works while starting to work on a new plan to meet the new requirements of the settlement.

That scenario could put an additional burden on air planners already struggling to meet existing EPA regulations. Merced Bello said, "It would definitely be a challenge to our planning staff."

Since January, the Central Valley has exceeded the current federal ozone standards 123 times, according to the air district's Goldberg. The northern section of the Valley, including Merced County, has exceeded the eight-hour standard 62 times.

Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, 11/17/02

Bad air gives city bad rap

Four years ago, I moved to Bakersfield, where I have become increasingly interested in the debate over Bakersfield's image. The problem boils down to a single issue: the area's poor air quality.

Our problem really isn't the heat; Las Vegas and Palm Springs can be hotter. It isn't a lack of things to do. There are loads of activities for all. It isn't that we don't have good restaurants, schools or roads. It's the air. The dirty fallout is everywhere.

Take a drive after sunset on Stockdale Highway to I-5, then to Rosedale Highway or Taft Highway and back. You will be shocked at the amount of particulate matter that fills the sky. Look from the overpass down the length of I-5 at the haze made visible by the automobile lights. It's not fog. It's dust mixed with a chemical soup from farming, ranching and emissions from vehicles, oil wells and manufacturing plants. The prevailing wind carries this stuff over our city and we breathe it everyday. It cannot be healthy for any creature.

Look at the obituaries published every day in The Californian. Note the ages of those who have died. There is a high percentage of people listed who have died in their 60s, even younger. It's connected.

Our political leaders have pushed this issue under the rug far too long -- perhaps out of concern for the vested interests that fill their campaign chests. Until we come to grips with this continuing menace, Bakersfield's image will twist in the wind. And the health of its citizens will, as well.

GREGG K. KNOWLES, Bakersfield