

The items in blue are a continuation of the air quality series running in the Visalia Times-Delta.

## **Clearing the Air: Next targets: fireplaces, lawn mowers**

By Justin Stoner, Visalia Times Delta, Staff writer, December 17, 2002

Typically when the air district meets, the audience is made up of business people, environmental activists and government employees.

But earlier this month when the district discussed putting a ban on fireplace burning during certain times of the year, it was the public that lined up to sound off on the issue.

Get used to it.

Increasingly, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will turn its attention to residents to help clear the air of ozone and airborne particles that can lodge themselves in the lungs.

"I like to say we've already picked the low-hanging fruit when it comes to reducing what's in the air," said Tony Barba, a Kings County Supervisor and member of the air district board. "We've got to get to the smaller fruit at the top of the tree, and that means looking to homeowners with their fireplaces, leaf blowers and lawn mowers."

### ***Industry***

Up to now, the air district has focused most of its efforts on getting businesses to cut down on ozone-creating gases and activities that stirred up particulate matter. Hundreds of tons annually have been cut out of the air, officials say. It's getting harder to find sources that would give the district big gains in reducing air pollution.

And it's those large gains the air district needs to help avert losing about \$2 billion in federal road money if certain deadlines are not met. At this point, the air district officials are seeking a voluntary downgrade from "severe" to "extreme." The downgrade would give the air district more time to meet standards.

There are other advantages for the Valley if an extension is granted, including elimination of about \$36 million in annual fines to businesses and keeping air decision-making local. On the other hand, it could lead to higher business costs and perpetuate the Valley's stigma of being one of the worst air basins in the country.

Part of the problem, however, is beyond the control of local leaders.

The largest source of ozone pollution in the Valley -- about 60 percent -- comes from cars, trucks, buses and other gasoline or diesel engines, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The district doesn't regulate mobile sources of air pollution. It's up to the state to continue its effort to cut vehicle emissions.

Air district and other officials are confident advances in technology will help vehicles cut down on the amount of ozone emissions, especially as older vehicles are taken off the road.

### ***Agriculture***

While the air district does regulate stationary sources that include gas- and diesel-powered pumps and other farm machinery, it doesn't regulate farm activity that occurs on the field, such as turning the soil and shaking walnut trees, among other aspects of farming.

At least, not yet.

For years, federal and state officials have held off enforcing clean air rules that would force farmers to reduce the amount of dust and other emissions they generate.

Agriculture, construction and oil producers teamed up with the EPA and the California Air Resources Board in 1992 to study dust emissions at a cost of \$31 million.

Ten years later the research from that study is still being compiled and probably won't be ready for another six months.

That's changing with Regulation 8, which requires farm operations and others to come up with a plan to keep dust down on dirt roads, equipment yards and bulk material storage piles.

Environmentalists claim the air board has protected agriculture from regulation.

Brent Newell, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, doesn't doubt that air district officials make their decisions with business and farming constituents in mind.

"The air district is beholden to agriculture," he said. "They are willing to break any law to avoid regulating them."

Newell blames what he describes as a cozy relationship between air district officials and the business and agriculture community on the makeup of the air board.

"The decision makers of the air board are county supervisors or members of city government. It's no secret ag is the No. 1 industry," he said. "When you have elected officials on a board supposed to regulate emissions, they have to regulate their biggest industry and they are fearful of what that could do to jobs, income or the economy."

Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, said he thinks the air board is doing a good job, even if he doesn't always agree with its regulations.

"I would rather have elected officials who sit on the board who know the Valley than a political appointment who owes a favor to someone," Cunha said. "I disagree with some of the regulations they are trying to put on me, but that's OK. We will fight it. They base their rulings on science and fact."

### ***Community responsibility***

The newest player in the effort to scrub the air is Clean Air Now or CAN, a nonprofit organization aimed at improving air quality throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

The organization wants to help educate community members about the need to take personal responsibility for improving air quality.

"CAN is about grass-roots leadership, not politics. It is about building a better future, not dwelling on the past. It is about making positive change on a vital issue, not more years of finger-pointing," CAN board president Bob Maddux said.

Maddux works for Gary McDonald Homes. He said his company is promoting the elimination of wood-burning fireplaces in new home construction as part of the clean air effort.

Other members of the CAN board are Gus Freshwater, general manager of the Elk Corp.; Fred Ruiz, chairman and co-founder of Ruiz Foods; Octavia Diener, president/owner of Densmore Engines; John Harris, president of Harris Ranch; Joe Drew, vice president of Tejon Ranch; K.C. Bishop, senior consultant for ChevronTexaco; and Rick Schellenberg, owner/operator of Schellenberg Farms.

Some suggestions made to the community by air quality experts are obvious, while others are not so apparent.

i Shop by phone, mail or Internet.

i Telecommute.

i On smoggy days, postpone yard care with gasoline-powered equipment, or better yet, use electric or manual tools.

i For clean fun in the sun, try sailing, swimming, hiking or cycling but remember to consider air quality and your health when planning outdoor activities.

i Start your briquettes with electric or chimney starters or use a propane or natural gas barbecue.

i Keep your car in good working condition.

i Maintain proper tire pressure.

i Don't top off the gas tank.

"We have to quit pointing fingers and begin to do something now to improve air quality," Maddux said. "If the Valley doesn't step up and begin to pull together now, we will never see clean air in our lifetime."

There are some community-level voluntary efforts underway, including the air district's "Spare the Air" days where people are encouraged to carpool or participate in other ozone-reducing efforts, as well as the "Don't Light Tonight" program which seeks to cut down on chimney smoke.

-- Bob Maddux, president of Clean Air Now

## Pollution settles in national parks

By Shannon Darling, Visalia Times Delta Staff writer, December 17, 2002

On a good day, Annie Esperanza can stand at 6,200 feet in the Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park and see 100 miles to the coastal range. Cities are visible, mountains are clear and sharp and she can see the mosaic of crops flourishing on the Valley floor.

"It looks like a green quilt," Esperanza said.

But views like that are rare in the late summer months at the park, Esperanza explains, during summer and fall months the levels of ozone and air pollution get so high it's difficult to see the next peak, just 14 miles away.

Ozone forms when nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons react in the presence of sunlight, and its occurrence is greater in the summer because a layer of hot air often traps in pollutants.

"People describe national parks as clean and pristine, when in reality, it's not true," Esperanza said.

As an air resources specialist, Esperanza has monitored the air in the park for more than 20 years but for most of that time the target was acid rain, and studies showed that the park has no significant acid rain deposits. Only since 1998 has the park studied ozone.

Between April and October 2002, levels of ozone exceeded federal ozone health standard 80 times in the Sequoia National Park, compared to 24 times at Yosemite and 33 at Joshua Tree National Park.

According to a survey released in September by the National Parks Conservation Association, Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks have some of the most polluted air in the nation. The park was ranked the fourth-worst overall, in the national park system for bad air, rating worse in terms of average annual ozone exposure than large cities such as Charlotte, N.C., Atlanta, Knoxville, Tenn., Washington, D.C., New York, Houston and Chicago.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, located on the Tennessee-North Carolina line, gets more than 9 million visitors each year and is the nation's most polluted national park, according to the same study.

Each year 1.4 million visitors travel to Sequoia-Kings Canyon to see the giant trees and the majestic scenery, and often to escape the smog in the valley. But research conducted by the National Park Service and the Forest Service shows that the Sierra, high above the valley floor, are not immune to bad air.

### **Research**

As one of three air resource specialists working for the U.S. Forest Service in the state of California, Trent Procter has monitored the effects of dirty air on the Sierra Nevada for 15 years.

He says he has seen the area that most people visit for its scenic beauty grow hazy. He has also watched trees and other plants in the area succumb to the damages of bad air.

Procter and other Forest Service researchers look for ozone damage in ponderosa and Jeffrey pine needles.

Exposure to ozone, an unhealthy mixture of nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons from car and truck exhaust which react to sunlight, produces yellow spots on the trees' long needles.

While scientists have not recorded ozone directly killing any trees, they have noted ozone interferes with the photosynthesis process, making trees susceptible to diseases and insects.

"Ozone is a weakening agent," Procter said.

He and Forest Service colleagues have noticed significant damage to trees in the Sierra Nevada, noting that the damage ozone causes to trees is worst in Sequoia National Park. Still, the park's treasured giant sequoias seem not to be affected.

According to an ongoing, combined study by the Forest Service and the National Park Service, 93 percent of ponderosa and Jeffrey pines in plots at Kings Canyon show some sort of ozone damage, compared to the Stanislaus National Forest where a selected plot showed 86 percent of its trees damaged.

Up north, in Lassen Volcanic National Park plots, only about 25 percent of the trees have ozone damage.

Study data reaches back to 1991 and shows the percentage of tree damage fluctuates over the years by 1 percent to 2 percent, but basically stays the same over those years.

"There is a tremendous drop-off once you go north of Sacramento," Procter said.

Air monitoring in Sequoia-Kings Canyon has been going on since the early '80s. Air quality measurements are taken year-around at the park.

"In the west, we have the longest-running air research program," Esperanza said.

While ozone is a problem at the park, another problem, visibility, is increasingly concerning park officials.

Saying visibility is increasing or decreasing would be speculation on Esperanza's part, because there is no long-running research to back up that claim.

"I grew up here and remember the sky would be black. But that was when they allowed smudge pots. The air was pretty bad," she said. "But now, I don't feel we are seeing the Valley as much as we should."

Esperanza and others at Sequoia-Kings Canyon are in the middle of launching a Web-based air-monitoring system in which a camera would produce and record live photos of the mountain's visibility and tell whether the ozone levels at any particular time are healthful.

The view from the air-monitoring point from 6,200 feet in the Sierra should be on the Internet by next year. Park visitors will be able to check out visibility and amounts of ozone from their computers.

### **Geography**

Wind direction and the shape of the Central Valley make it predisposed to trap pollutants.

"The Central Valley is a huge sink," Esperanza explained. "It's like an air eddy."

The Joshua Tree National Park, east of Los Angeles, is another park with unfortunate geography. Coastal winds often blow California's biggest city's pollution into the desert park.

"We have a significant ozone problem, primarily in the summer," said Margaret Adam, biological technician for the park.

A real-time ozone monitoring system at the park takes the ozone content every minute and averages it over the hour.

"It's very useful," Adam said.

But records at Joshua Tree, similar to those at Sequoia-Kings, don't show any significant upward or downward trend.

"Essentially, it hasn't changed over the years," Adam said.

## **Success stories from the clean air battle**

### **Clearing the Air; Clean cities say victories don't happen overnight**

By Laura Florez, Visalia Times Delta Staff writer, December 17, 2002

Denver had a brown cloud to worry about.

Los Angeles and Houston -- both major contenders for the title of worst place to breathe in the country -- had reputations to worry about.

But plagued with severe air-quality problems, Denver, Los Angeles and Houston have all, in recent years, managed to make strides in cleaning up their air-quality rap sheets.

In the Central Valley, where air quality is among the poorest in the state, officials are looking to others for advice on how to beat the Valley's bad air.

"The situation here is not getting any better, but it does seem like there could be a light at the end of the tunnel," said Kelly Malay, a spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

#### ***Denver***

This year, Central Valley air officials, who are trying to come up with ways to solve the area's particulate matter and ozone problems, couldn't help but draw inspiration from strides made in Denver.

That city, infamous for its brown cloud -- a visible byproduct of its air pollution -- and after having violated standards for years, became the first city in the nation to be designated as a clean-air city by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"Denver suddenly became an example for the rest of the world, but our success didn't happen overnight," said Christopher Dann, a spokesman for the Colorado Air Pollution Control Division.

Earning its mark as a clean-air city meant Denver was in compliance with all six air pollution health standards -- lead, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, ozone and particulate matter.

But the road to attainment was a long one which required cooperation from federal, state and local officials and even the city's residents, said Steve Arnold, deputy director for the Air Pollution Control Division of Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Some measures taken throughout the years in Denver include:

- i The requirement of vehicles to pass regular emissions tests.
- i High-pollution-day alerts.
- i The mandatory use of alternative fuels during winter months.
- i The use of oxygenated gasoline for vehicles during the winter high-pollution season.
- i Restrictions on street sanding.
- i Restrictions placed on wood burning stoves to reduce carbon monoxide levels. In the mid-1980s the city began declaring voluntary no-burn days for fireplaces during bad-air inversions, while in 1993 it became illegal to add an unrestricted wood-burning fireplace to any metro-Denver home.

Several of Denver's regulations, like restrictions on wood burning and issuing alerts like "Spare the Air Days," are similar to those currently being asked of San Joaquin Valley residents by the air control district.

But Arnold said what will work in the end is getting residents to take restrictions seriously and to stick to them, even though residents might not see results.

"It isn't a simple issue -- air quality is always going to be a challenge for us," he said. "Partly, that's because we have people who look outside, see the brown cloud and aren't thinking that, in terms of chemistry and federal standards, we are better off than before."

### ***Houston***

In Houston, efforts to conform to national ozone standards made headlines last year when the EPA approved a five-year plan which aimed at reducing nitrogen oxide emissions by 75 percent and volatile organic compounds by 40 percent.

The plan required a variety of measures, including cuts in industrial pollutants, lowering speed limits to 55 mph and more stringent tests for vehicle exhaust.

### ***Southern California***

Still, Dann said optimism for improving air quality can be found in California, especially when looking to districts like the Los Angeles southern basin which has managed to pull itself out of an air slump.

"There is certainly some trend-setting going on in that region," he said.

According to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which oversees the southern Los Angeles basin, including Orange County and major portions of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, air quality has continued to improve despite increases in population and in the numbers of automobiles.

But the district says it still has work to do. While recent years have been the cleanest on record, the area's air still violates the health standard for ozone on about 120 days a year with maximum levels more than twice as high as the federal standard allows for healthful air.

In the Central Valley, Malay said the San Joaquin Valley Air Control District will continue to compare its standards to others around the nation to make sure the strictest possible measures are undertaken.

"We're not out to mislead anyone. We're in a very serious situation here, but the light is there," Malay said. "It might be a long, tough and expensive tunnel, but the technology is available and if everyone takes part in the rules, we'll get there."

## Campaign focuses on education

By Visalia Times Delta Staff reports

A clean-air campaign in Tulare County will focus on educating children and workers on the importance of doing their parts to help reduce pollution.

The "Make a Difference in Air Quality" campaign is being launched by the Tulare County Association of Governments, which wants to encourage residents to use alternate modes of transportation to reduce ozone.

"Certainly industry and agriculture contribute significantly to our air quality problem, but we are all part of the problem," said Bob Stocker, TCAG's assistant executive secretary. "We could all be a part of the solution if we would be willing to change our habits."

The two-pronged campaign will include an effort to reach children in after-school programs throughout the county. Students will work with lessons from the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District on the importance of using non-polluting forms of transit.

They will compete in essay and art contests around the theme of making a difference for air quality.

The second effort will target businesses and service organizations, which will be asked to view a video, encouraging them to carpool, bike, walk or take a bus to work. Each gallon of gas burned produces up to 22 pounds of carbon dioxide, according to TCAG.

The outreach effort will also include a countywide contest in which families and individuals will be asked to tell how they made a difference for air quality. The winner will get bicycles, a bike rack and bike helmets, courtesy of Groppetti Automotive.

Tuesday, December 17, 2002

## Could you ever see the mountains?

### Clearing the Air

By Dan Martin, Visalia Times Delta Staff writer

Before the automobile, some people say, you could see the mountains east of Visalia almost every day. After all, there was no auto pollution. Because of cars, the mountains have been reduced to a blur behind the haze.

"As long as I've been here, you've been able to see the mountains about two days a year," Deputy City Manager Randy Groom said. "That is truly a shame."

Others say the mountains have always been cloaked by haze. This group points to century-old photographs of Visalia in which the mountains can hardly be seen.

And there's anecdotal evidence to support this school's assertion, local historian Terry Ommen said.

"I know old-timers who've been around who say, 'Hey. We could never see the mountains,' " Ommen said.

Books and articles about Tulare County and the Valley written by visitors in the 1800s say otherwise.

One such book is "Two Years in California" by Ohio resident Mary Cone, published in 1876. Cone discussed the omnipresent view of the Sierra Nevada and the coastal mountains:

Everywhere in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys these two mountain ranges are seen, forming the visible and distinct lines of boundary: the Sierra Nevada, with here and there a white-capped peak, on the east, the less pretentious coast range on the west.

The coastal mountains were seen, too, by J.H. Carson, who in 1852 published a description of what he called Tulare valley in a volume titled "Early recollections of the mines, and a description of the great Tulare valley." He mentioned "Four Creeks" -- what Visalia was called before it was named Visalia:

The oaks, in their majesty, thickly cover the plain for miles around, and stretch away to the shore of the Tulare Lake. Amongst them and through the high green grass, meander the Four Creeks. To the right, at a distance of 25 miles, runs the belt of timber, marking the course of the King's river to the lake. On the left is seen at the distance of twenty miles, the broad body of timber that marks the course of the Tule river. ... Stretching beyond this to the west lie the placid blue waters of the Tulare lake, whose ripples wash the foot of the low hills of the Coast range -- the blue tops of which set a boundary to the scene.

Meanwhile, a story in the Tulare County Times on Feb. 3, 1898, said: "When the rifts in the clouds will permit, one can see for a distance of sixty or more miles to the summits of many of the nearest Sierras."

All of this, in turn, suggests that vehicles and industry has indeed cast the veil over the mountains.

Ironically, the mountains themselves have helped to trap the haze, acting as walls over which smog won't blow. An "inversion layer" is often present.

"The same things that make it a beautiful place to live [in] are the ingredients for the issues we have," said Richard Cummings, a spokesman for the Great Valley Center, which studies the Valley's economic health, among other things. "We're 450 miles long and 50 miles wide, and hemmed in by mountains."

## **Funds for child asthma study renewed**

### **5-year study tracks 250 asthmatic children in Fresno, Clovis.**

By Barbara Anderson, The Fresno Bee, December 17, 2002

The state Air Resources Board has agreed to continue funding for a five-year study of the health effects of air pollution on asthmatic children living in Fresno and Clovis.

The renewed funding will allow completion of the \$4.5 million Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environmental Study. The ARB gave \$3.88 million in 2000 to finance the first two years of research by investigators at the University of California at Berkeley.

The ability to follow 250 children over five years sets the Fresno-based study apart from others that have chronicled short-term health effects from air pollution, said Kathleen Mortimer, study director.

"We really need to follow these children for a long time, over several seasons and several years, to see how their lung function develops over time and to see how their lung function growth is related to air pollution and other environmental exposures," Mortimer said.

The FACES study also could help identify asthmatics at greatest risk from air pollution, particularly exposure to air particulates -- microscopic pieces of soot, ash and chemical solids. The San Joaquin Valley has some of the worst levels of this pollution. Fresno County leads the state in childhood asthma, with one in six children having the lung disease.

## **Dairies face new EPA rules**

Environmentalists see weaker water pollution regulations, but producers disagree.

By Dennis Pollock, The Fresno Bee, December 17, 2002

New federal water pollution rules targeting large dairy operations were issued Monday, amid scrutiny from environmentalists and ranchers sorting out the new requirements.

Ranchers and a state regulator said the new rules likely will mean more management costs for dairies with more than 700 cows and the need for those dairies to get a \$2,000 permit. In Tulare County, the nation's dairy capital, the average herd is more than 1,000 cows, while the statewide average tops 700 cows.

The new rule from the Environmental Protection Agency says all large concentrated animal feeding operations must apply for a permit to control pollution under the Clean Water Act, administration officials said.

EPA Administrator Christie Whitman and Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman announced the new rules, which require large livestock operations to:

Develop a "comprehensive nutrient management plan" that sets limits on how much animal manure can be applied as fertilizer on farm fields. Plans must have state approval.

File annual reports on numbers of animals, the amount of manure they use and where it is going. Animal manure typically contains nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus but also pathogens, salts and heavy metals like copper.

Environmentalists were sharply critical of the new rules the Bush administration issued to meet a court-ordered deadline.

"This reduces the standard of regulations on animal waste," said Brent Newell, lawyer for the Centers for Race, Poverty and the Environment, which has filed legal action over dairies in several Valley counties since 1998.

Newell said the dairy operator must comply with a self-initiated plan to curb waste discharges, a plan "kept on site with no citizen access and no one except regulators knowing what is in that plan."

Paul Martin, coordinator of environmental services for Western United Dairymen, disagreed on the lack of oversight: "The law says you can't put manure in the water, and this rule doesn't change that."

Martin said if a dairy is in compliance with the California state law "they're probably in compliance with [the new] federal law."

California's dairy industry has sought to address contamination concerns with its Dairy Quality Assurance Program, said Rodney Kamper, a Riverdale dairy operator and chairman of the Environmental Issues Committee for Western United Dairymen.

Bob Krauter, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau, said the organization has stated that "self-directed, incentive-based programs" are a sound way to approach pollution problems: "We all agree on the need for water quality."

With milk producers facing low prices for at least the past six months, Kamper said, the added cost of permits and management will pose a problem.

But "as long as the best efforts are put forward and requests are reasonable, I don't think people will have a problem with it," Krauter said.

Some officials say older dairies could face more of a challenge because newer operations have faced more stringent regulation as they were established.

"Coming into compliance with the new regulations can be costly," said Gerald Higgenbotham, dairy adviser for the University of California, Cooperative Extension, Fresno and Madera Counties, especially for smaller dairy farmers. "Their facilities will need to be updated to reflect these standards."

Many of them have lagoons, which hold liquid waste, that will need to be enlarged to accommodate the law. The cost to enlarge the lagoons could put some dairy farmers out of business.

"I've already come across a couple [of farmers who can't afford to enlarge lagoons], locally," said Higgenbotham, adding farmers will just go out of business.

Dairyman Rob Hilarides, who is establishing a 14,000-cow dairy near Lindsay after three years of court battles, doesn't anticipate onerous controls: "A lot of this is stuff that was required in California anyway. After having to do the environmental impact report to comply with Tulare County regulations and Regional Water Quality Control Board regulations and regulatory issues, we should be OK."

Tulare County officials said the reporting requirement appears similar to one the county's supervisors may approve Jan. 7, a plan that would require dairies to produce annual reports.

A five-member code-enforcement team also would be responsible for making sure dairy operators are following guidelines detailed in their operational permits, which have become tougher the last few years following two lawsuits.

The system would have a significant effect on Tulare County's \$1.2 billion dairy industry, which is the largest dairy producer in the nation with about 300 dairies and 396,000 cows.

Under guidelines from the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, some dairy operators previously have been exempted from getting permits if they met a number of conditions including the option of being certified under "an environmental stewardship program," said Polly Lowry, senior engineering geologist with the water board.

Like others, Lowry still was sifting through details of the new rules Monday. But she said it probably means "dairies will have to hire engineers to design waste storage units and may have

to make some upgrades, perhaps increasing storage capacity for ponds. It might have some effect on some [dairies] that don't have proper facilities to contain the waste."

Tulare lawyer Dennis Mederos said he fears added regulations and subsequent paperwork would take time away from small dairy operators trying to go about their daily work.

"I think the majority of dairymen know that times are changing," Mederos said.

Staff writers Lisa Aleman-Padilla, Javier Erik Olvera and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

## Tire dump opposed

### Lode residents voice concerns for proposal at asbestos mine

By Francis P. Garland, Lode Bureau Chief, The Record, December 17, 2002

COPPEROPOLIS -- Residents made it clear Monday that they want no part of a proposed tire dump earmarked for what once was the nation's largest asbestos mine.

Speaking before California Integrated Waste Management Board staff members, residents said the proposed California Asbestos Monofill operation could pose a serious threat to nearby Tulloch Reservoir, a source of drinking water locally and irrigation water for downstream users.

The California Asbestos Monofill proposal has not yet been submitted, and state officials weren't in town to take comments on it. Rather, they wanted input on proposed statewide regulations being developed for waste-tire dumps, known as monofills.

But most of those who spoke raised concerns about the California Asbestos Monofill project, which could bury up to 1 million waste tires a year if Calaveras County and state officials approve it.

Vaughan Brewer of Copperopolis told state officials to return to Sacramento with a very simple message regarding the proposed project: "We don't want it."

Paul Kemper said he had a "total lack of confidence" in the county's ability to evaluate adequately the operation of any waste-tire dump and approve it, let alone respond to potential disasters such as fire.

The fire threat was on the minds of many, and several referenced massive fires that erupted in tire piles in Tracy and Westley in 1998 and 1999. **Those fires burned 12 million tires and spewed tons of pollutants into the air.**

Joey Toney of California Asbestos Monofill said the Tracy and Westley tire fires occurred in above-ground storage piles, and his company could not find any incidents involving tires buried in pits.

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## Crackdown on bus fumes

### New rules limit how long engines can idle at schools

By Audrey Cooper, Record Staff Writer, December 15, 2002

The often invisible brew of toxins includes formaldehyde, dioxins and soot. The cancer-causing mix swirls at nose level around those ubiquitous symbols of education: the yellow school bus.

While engines rumble outside schools each afternoon, the dangerous fumes spew from the aging bus-exhaust systems, lingering around the chatty students who flood out the school doors.

The exhaust is considered more harmful than secondhand cigarette smoke and often envelops our most sensitive citizens -- children with developing lungs.

Lucky students may not suffer at all from the exhaust. Others may cough or rub their eyes.

But some lungs can't cope with the particles that aggravate allergies and even trigger asthma, some scientists believe.

Prompted by a growing number of studies that show the state's aging school-bus fleet is a public-health crisis, state air regulators last week agreed to limit the amount of time buses can park with their motors running on school grounds. The goal is to dramatically curb student exposure to the 41 different toxins in diesel exhaust.

By the next school year, bus drivers will only be allowed to start up their buses a scant 30 seconds before leaving school grounds. Exceptions could be made for sweltering or freezing weather, when engines must run to maintain cabin temperatures tolerable to children.

Environmentalists have hailed the California Air Resources Board decisions as a major step toward protecting the most delicate Californians.

"This was easy, low-hanging fruit," said Jason Mark, director of the clean-vehicle program for the Union of Concerned Scientists in Berkeley.

"Kids are most sensitive to air pollution, and study after study is showing we have a health problem when we put these kids in some of the dirtiest vehicles on the road."

### **Asthma kids**

A growing number of studies have linked the type of exhaust coming from school buses with asthma. One in six San Joaquin Valley children has the disease. It's the No. 1 chronic condition for Valley kids, the leading cause of school absenteeism and the No. 3 cause of hospital admissions for children younger than 15.

Dontae Hayes, 9, and his sister, Jamila, 6, were both diagnosed with asthma when they were about 4 years old.

They say the buses at Lincoln Elementary in Stockton don't bother their lungs, but they're fortunate. Grandma picks them up from school.

"I can see why those buses might really bother them," their grandmother Helen Lollis said. "They smell terrible sometimes, and I think some of them have been around since I went to school."

School transportation officials said the new idling rules shouldn't be a problem. Some districts already limit idling.

"I think it's going to be something the drivers will have to learn to think about," said John Heerema, director of transportation for the Tracy Unified School District. He noted the district already encourages drivers to limit idling to five minutes.

### **Old, dirty buses**

California leads the nation in old and dirty buses. Buses that long ago would have fallen apart in extreme-weather states can survive several decades in California. Not only are most of the state's buses older than an average elementary school student, some could be older than the drivers.

Nearly half of the state's school buses were made before 1990. About 12 percent were made before 1977, before the more protective exhaust standards of the 1990s and even before some federal safety standards.

Some of the worst buses travel down Stockton streets each day.

"We have a very, very, very old fleet," said Dianne Barth, a spokeswoman for the Stockton Unified School District.

About 25 percent of the district's 86 school buses are more than 25 years old. The district has no buses with clean-diesel technology or buses that use alternatives fuels such as compressed natural gas, or CNG.

The result is rolling smokestacks filled with children.

Buses made before 1977 each produce the same amount of soot pollution as 970 average cars. A CNG bus, on the other hand, only puts out the soot equivalent of 22 cars, according to studies by the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Even residents without school-age children have a reason to be concerned: About 9,000 Valley residents die prematurely each year from air pollution, and the asthma hospitalizations and other pollution-caused medical problems cost the Valley \$300 million each year, according to the Medical Alliance for Healthy Air.

### **Cleaner buses**

Last week, the Lodi Unified School District received the last of 15 CNG buses bought with the help of separate grants from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the California Energy Commission.

Of that district's 107 buses, only three are of the bad, 1977-era sort. Those buses are left in the garage as spares, said Jay Zimmerman, the district's transportation director.

Zimmerman said his district has made an aggressive lobbying effort to qualify for grants to replace their oldest, dirtiest buses. In a perfect world, half of the buses would run on natural gas, half on the clean-burning-diesel technology, Zimmerman said.

"That way, we could have these clean buses and still benefit from whatever the lowest fuel costs are at the time," he said.

Gov. Gray Davis set aside \$50 million in the 2000-01 budget to fix or replace aging school buses. Another \$16 million came the next year.

Valley air regulators got \$1.16 million to dole out to districts that could retrofit 1990-era buses with particle-catching exhaust traps.

The \$7,000 fixes can reduce by 95 percent the amount of soot from buses, but none of the money has come to San Joaquin County, said Chris Acree, who runs the air district's program.

With 300 school districts, there isn't enough money to fix all the buses that could be retrofitted.

But the bigger problem is, there isn't a company that can do the installations in this county. Acree said one company has a jurisdiction that ends near Modesto. Another dealer in Woodland, in Yolo County, has had trouble getting certified for the procedure, he said.

The county has been more successful with grants from the California Energy Commission, which is in charge of the money to replace school buses.

Of the 91 CNG and clean-diesel buses given away, only two came to San Joaquin County. Tracy Unified received its CNG bus about three weeks ago and expects it will be toting children in January. Lodi Unified got the other CNG bus.

A CNG bus costs about \$140,000. Tracy's Heerema said his district only had to dole out \$25,000 for the bus because of the grant.

### **Money woes**

The Energy Commission has already spent its money for bus replacements. Commission spokesman Percy Della said last week that it is expecting a few million more to continue the program.

"Now, it's uncertain if that money will be there because of the state's fiscal situation," Della said.

With school districts facing \$1.9 billion in midyear budget cuts, school buses probably won't be retired en masse soon.

And the ones that are retired probably won't be replaced with the expensive CNG types. An old-style diesel bus costs about \$40,000 less.

SUSD's Barth said that although Stockton has recognized for several years that it needs more money to retire part of its fleet, it probably won't happen soon.

"I can absolutely tell you it won't happen this year if they're knocking millions out of our budget," she said.

That's bad news for people such as Kiera Hammon, 5, and her sister Danielle Gribaudo, 10. They say sometimes the buses near their school are "smelly." Their afternoon sitter, Julie Bragg, whom they call their step-grandmother, says she'll continue to avoid the school buses even on the street.

"I don't like to be behind them in my car because of that terrible exhaust. It can't be good for anyone," she said.

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