

'Extreme' vs. 'severe' in smog wars

Monday, Dec. 1, Modesto Bee
Bee Staff Reports

Valley air regulators once again are taking up the issue of "extreme" vs. "severe" pollution -- and public comment is being sought.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board is considering asking the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to give the valley "extreme" status for one-hour measurements of ozone, the main ingredient of smog.

"Extreme" is the worst classification; it applies now to only one area in the country -- the Los Angeles air basin.

In the valley, a voluntary downgrading from "severe" would buy time to meet federal standards before penalties, such as a loss of highway money, are imposed.

The air board put off the "extreme" vs. "severe" request in August, and the matter is scheduled to return to the agenda Dec. 18.

Before then, the district plans a workshop to present information on the proposal and take public comment. The workshop is scheduled from 10 a.m. to noon Friday. Written comments are due by Dec. 12.

Under the "severe" classification, the eight-county valley air basin -- from San Joaquin in the north to Kern in the south -- has until Nov. 15, 2005, to meet the one-hour ozone standards.

Valley air quality officials say new federal and state pollution control measures are set to take effect after that date -- so the air district wants an extended deadline.

One way to get more time is to secure the "extreme" designation, under which the valley would have five more years to meet the one-hour ozone standards.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

The public is invited to review air district materials and submit comments on the "severe" vs. "extreme" air status issue. Also, people in the Northern San Joaquin Valley can attend this week's workshop without going to Fresno for the actual meeting.

VIDEO TELECONFERENCE -- 10 a.m. to noon Friday, Northern Region Office, 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, Modesto

DRAFT REPORT -- Available online at www.valleyair.org. Handouts and presentations from the workshop will be available afterward by telephone, 559-230-6005, and online, www.valleyair.org.

WRITTEN COMMENTS -- Due by the close of business Dec. 12; send to Donald Hunsaker, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno 93726.

Russia cool to Kyoto pact, worrying climate conference

Monday, Dec. 1, Modesto Bee

By FRANCES D'EMILIO, Associated Press ROME (AP) - Indications that Russia will reject the Kyoto pact on greenhouse gas reduction has participants at a U.N. conference worried that the global treaty might never get off the ground.

When organizers, scientists and environmentalists began planning for the conference, which begins Monday and runs through Dec. 12 in Milan, many had hoped that Russia would have joined the protocol.

The treaty, negotiated in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, sets a target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

To date, 119 parties have signed on, but together they account for less than 55 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, the threshold needed for the treaty to go into force.

After President Bush rejected the treaty and its mandatory pollution reductions in 2001 as too harmful to the U.S. economy, Russia's support was needed to meet the 55-percent requirement.

But in October, Russian President Vladimir Putin predicted that the pact would fail to reverse climate change, "even with 100 percent compliance." His economic adviser, Andrei Illarionov, contended the Kyoto Protocol would "doom Russia to poverty, weakness and backwardness."

Under the pact, if a country exceeds its emissions levels, it can be forced to cut back on industrial production.

Since the United States is the world's largest polluter, its refusal to join Kyoto is already "a big drag" on the battle to fight global warming, said Jonathan Pershing, a geologist heading the delegation of the World Resources Institute, an environmental think tank in Washington.

A rejection by Russia will further present a dilemma to those countries that have embraced the treaty, participants said.

"There's a number of forks in the road," Pershing said. "Those countries who have said 'yes' go forward without a formal international treaty. But how do you do that?"

Pershing said back-room discussions at the conference will cover the possibilities, including one option that nations could sign a series of bilateral deals with other Kyoto members.

Up for discussion in Milan are rules under which industrialized nations can earn credits toward satisfying their own emission-reducing requirements by helping developing nations, which aren't required under the protocol to reduce emissions.

Eligible projects range from making factories more energy efficient to helping promote forests, which absorb carbon dioxide, a chief greenhouse gas culprit.

"It doesn't matter where a carbon molecule comes from," in terms of overall greenhouse gas buildup, said Alden Meyer, a conference participant from the Washington-based Union of Concerned Scientists.

Meyer noted that the United States is a successful pioneer in what's known as emissions trading. Under a federal system, U.S. power companies can sell other companies credits they've earned for producing emissions linked to acid rain that are under capped levels.

The U.S. undersecretary for global affairs, Paula Dobriansky, who will attend the conference's final, high-level sessions, said the discussions will help illustrate "how promoting cleaning energy and energy technology is certainly in the interest of developing and developed countries alike."

The United Nations said the Milan conference will also evaluate efforts by governments to tackle the climate change challenge.

"That 2003 is on track to be one of the warmest years on record should be a warning that we must all take seriously," said Joke Waller-Hunter, executive secretary of the U.N. Climate Change Convention.

This spring, the European Union warned that 10 EU countries, including conference host Italy, are "way off track" for agreed targets on cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

A rise in average temperatures has been blamed, at least in part, for melting glaciers and rising water levels, prompting fears that coming decades will witness floods, water shortages and hardships for animals.

Retired Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., administrator of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said some questions about climate change are yet to be fully understood: the length of a carbon cycle, the way the molecule circulates around the planet and what humans contribute to global warming.

The United States aims to cut emissions by 18 percent over the next 10 years.

"The current administration has a policy to reduce greenhouse gas emission," Lautenbacher said. "Whether the world accepts that or not is another issue. We are not being irresponsible" by rejecting Kyoto, he contended.

High cost of garbage explained

Merced Sun-Star

Monday, December 01, 2003

By Jacob Fenton <mailto:jfenton@mercedsun-star.com>

Although that gelatin centerpiece might seem less than appealing a few days after Thanksgiving, here's one more reason not to throw it out. Trash costs Merced County "big bucks," according to Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) spokesman Dick Whittington.

Getting rid of trash these days is a lot tougher and more expensive than just dragging it to the edge of a landfill and pushing. A recent article in MCAG's newsletter pointed out the rising costs of trash disposal, and the veritable maze of applicable air and water restrictions. A consultant recently projected a new 17-acre pit could cost \$5 million to prepare.

To keep toxic runoff from seeping into the groundwater, the pit must be carefully sealed with a high-tech liner. A blanket of high-density polyethylene sandwiching pockets of clay costs roughly \$180,000 an acre. But lining a landfill takes nearly two acres of liner per acre, so lining costs end up topping \$300,000 an acre.

A layer of rock on the bottom adds to the costs, said Scott Johnston, deputy director of the county's solid waste division. The water that accumulates at the bottom of the landfill must be pumped out and detoxified, said Johnston.

Groundwater near the sites is also monitored. Merced County's facility on Highway 59 has more than 20 test wells, and samples from all of these wells are sent to outside labs for evaluation.

Strict air regulations also add to costs. A "landfill gas perimeter control system" is used to suck methane out of landfill, said Johnson. Though these measures protect the public from contaminated water and air, they may actually slow down the rate trash decomposes.

After landfills have been filled up, they are sealed with watertight coverings. Deprived of water and light, the natural decomposition process slows. As oxygen and other gases required by bacteria are consumed, decomposition slows further. Studies conducted around the country are looking to remedy this, said Johnston.

"They're actually looking to pump oxygen or air into the landfills," he said.

Despite all the rules and regulations, Johnston said Merced County residents should look on the bright side. Rates haven't increased in more than five years, and "tipping fees," the costs of actually disposing of garbage in a landfill, are some of the lowest in the area.

[Editorial, The Bakersfield Californian](#)

'No burn' alarm in valley

Posted: Sunday November 30th, 2003, 9:35 PM

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While some Kern County residents may have been doing a slow burn, most seemed to be obeying a new air pollution control law restricting the use of wood-burning fire places.

Last Tuesday was the first mandatory "no burn" day imposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The ban was triggered by deteriorating air quality.

The San Joaquin Valley particularly Fresno and Kern counties has the nation's second most polluted air. It is second only to Los Angeles.

As part of a larger cleanup strategy, the eight-county air district passed a rule banning the use of most wood-burning fireplaces and stoves on polluted, foggy days. People who burn wood on "no burn" days face fines ranging from \$50 to \$1,000.

District staff cruised neighborhoods in Fresno and Kern counties on the first "no burn" day, sending only six violation notices in Kern and 22 in Fresno. Reports of violations also can come from residents who telephone (800) SMOG-INFO or clicking on to the district's Web site www.valleyair.org.

A toasty, warm fire is especially comforting on a cold foggy night. But the valley's polluted air made worse by particulates spewed from fireplaces and trapped by the fog makes people sick and shortens their lives. Obeying "no burn" rules is a sacrifice we all must make to help clean up our air.

[Opinion, Fresno Bee](#)

A gas tax stands between us and great mass transit

By Stephen D. Lewis

(Published Saturday, November 29, 2003, 6:15 AM)

"We have met the enemy and he is us."

So said Walt Kelly's cartoon character Pogo about air pollution and environmental degradation, and Pogo was right.

Last summer, the Public Policy Institute of California released its "Special Survey on Californians and the Environment," and the results support Pogo's analysis.

The survey shows 58% of Californians believe air pollution is a serious health threat, but only 42% of Valley residents view air pollution as a regional health problem.

Even though the Valley is among the worst regions in the country for air pollution, why do fewer than half of Valley residents identify air pollution as a health problem?

Despite the measurements made by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that show 72% of our smog ingredients come from our own vehicle emissions, only 33% of us feel that vehicle emissions contribute most to our air pollution.

The Public Policy Survey also indicates 21% of Valley residents still believe the myth that our air pollution problem blows in from the Bay Area.

What can explain this huge disconnect between public perception and air pollution reality?

When a pipe under the kitchen sink leaks, we put a bucket under the drip to catch the water until the plumber comes. Just one tiny drop at a time will eventually fill up the bucket.

That is exactly the way air pollution happens, drip by drip, car trip by car trip, until the air in Fresno is an opaque brownish-orange toxic haze. The undeniable truth is that our own vehicle exhaust causes the vast majority of our smog problem; my car, your car, all of our cars.

Part of the problem

Pogo was right. We are each part of the air pollution problem when we drive our cars. Drip by drip, we each contribute to filling the air pollution bucket of the Valley until it overflows.

Mark Baldassare, Research Director of the Public Policy Institute of California, said "People don't recognize the connection between their own actions and the problems in their region."

It might take years of continued suffering from asthma before we all drive low-emission cars, but the problem might actually have an economic/social solution we can start on now.

What if it costs more than \$100 to fill up your gas tank?

According to Runzheimer International, an international management consulting firm, in January 2003 a gallon of regular gasoline in Hong Kong sold for \$5.34; in London, \$4.55; and in Paris, \$4.41. The average price for a gallon of gasoline in seven leading European cities was \$4.26 per gallon. At that price, it would cost about \$120 to fill up a Ford Expedition.

If gasoline in Fresno cost the same as it does in London or Paris or even in autobahn-loving Frankfurt, would our driving habits and vehicle choices change? I think they would.

But what about the lack of alternatives to driving our 6,000-pound, single-occupant SUVs everywhere we go?

Back to Europe: The difference in the price of gasoline between the U.S. and Europe is the tax. In Europe, that tax is used to support those wonderful alternative transportation systems so common there and unheard of in the United States.

Alternatives like bullet trains Le Train à Grande Vitesse, introduced in 1981 in France, and the Inter-City Express (ICE), introduced in 1991 in Germany. And we are still just talking about California high-speed rail.

An additional 25 cents per gallon gasoline tax would raise about \$195 million each year in the Valley, based on the 780 million gallons sold last year. A 50 cents per gallon tax would raise almost \$400 million every year, and gasoline would still be \$2 per gallon cheaper than in Europe.

How big is \$400 million in terms of building alternative transportation systems?

The Tasman West Light Rail system in Silicon Valley cost about \$325 million to build. A 50 cents per gallon gasoline tax, devoted to funding transportation alternatives, would pay for building a similar light rail system every year.

Locally, we could build a light rail line along Blackstone and Herndon, and downtown parking would not be a problem because we could all ride the "trolley" to the baseball game instead of driving, just like Grandfather and Grandmother used to do.

We would all still have the choices we have now; we could still choose to buy huge cars. We would simply have an economic incentive to make transportation choices that will clean up the air in the Valley.

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee](#)

There should never be days when it's OK to pollute

By Gunnar H. Jensen

Fresno

(Published in the Fresno Bee - Monday, December 1, 2003, 5:31 AM)

There can't be clean air days in the San Joaquin Valley until we stop thinking of those days as something akin to an empty vessel to fill with air pollution. There should never, ever be "burn days" (days when it's acceptable to pollute) here, in one of the most polluted air basins on the planet.

By the way, note to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District ("Control" intentionally omitted): Here on our block, "voluntary" means nothing to people who burn wood in their fireplaces. On the other hand, the threat of fines and sanctions does mean something to them, and we sincerely thank you -- from the tops and bottoms of our lungs, for that.

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee](#)

Ag's benefits

By John Rankin

Orange Cove

(Published Monday, December 1, 2003, 5:31 AM)

Sen. Dean Florez's air legislation ignores Bay Area polluters and blames Valley farms. Farming cleans more air than any agency or environmental group. Crops clean ozone, and irrigation halts dust storms.

Farm pollution is minuscule compared with the environmental benefits. The clean air gains are staggering. Farming deserves greater tax breaks, credits and exemptions.

The federal standard for clean air attainment is 0.125 ppm per one-hour reading. Four days exceeding the standard qualifies for non-attainment status. The Valley exceeded the standard 37 days this year.

Bay Area air regulations are less stringent than Los Angeles' and the Valley's, and the Bay Area's capacity to pollute is greater. Bay Area pollution blows into the Valley hourly. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District estimates 9% to 27% of Valley pollution is from the Bay Area.

If we attribute 16% of the Valley's total to the Bay Area, and remove it, theoretically, the non-attainment days could drop to two.

The air district admits it has no way of tracking "residual" Bay Area pollution in the Valley. Combined daily and residual Bay Area pollution inflates Valley readings. If Bay Area pollution stayed there, in my opinion, we would not be a "non-attainment" area. The district disagrees.

Instead of blaming farmers, Sen. Florez's legislation should have done the following:

Given the district authority to fine the Bay Area; synchronized traffic signals in large cities statewide; imposed Smog Check II statewide; used a percentage of the air district's budget to fund development of tail-pipe emission filters for cars, trucks, and tractors; used credits to reward farms that run clean operations; increased logging, thus reducing fuel for wildfires; modernized transportation infrastructure; and developed more water storage, increasing farming.

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee](#)

Breathing easier

By Jena Pierce

Fresno

(Published Saturday, November 29, 2003, 6:34 AM)

What a great thought: With all of the wood that is being saved due to the "No Burn -- Spare the Air Days" there should be fewer trees cut down next year, which means there should be more oxygen produced by the extra leaves on the spared trees.

If we save more trees we will have a better chance to help the air quality around here.

And then the forests would have more canopy, more to look at and more reasons to go for nature walks. More hikes, less driving, another benefit for the Spare the Air campaign.

Even though our freedom has been cut down in size, since we can no longer just burn wood in our fireplaces as we have over the last five generations, we can still pitch in and see the bright side.

In the rain forest, they would be saving the ozone layer and world if they would stop burning wood and knocking down all the trees.