

Air deadline nears for 8,000 Valley farms Stricter pollution rules set to take effect Jan. 1

By David Siders
Thursday, Dec. 2, Stockton Record

Dust-control measures employed on San Joaquin Valley farms are unlikely to change after a Dec. 31 deadline requiring big farms to submit dust reduction blueprints to the Valley air pollution control district, the San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation said Wednesday.

The dust-reduction plans are required as part of an unprecedented attempt to clean dust from Valley air, but Joe Petersen of the farm bureau said the plans amount to a pile of paperwork that merely proves farmers have long curbed dust on their own.

"It's a joke," he said. "We were doing these things."

Dust-control plans from farms comprising 100 or more acres of contiguous land, as well as restrictions on construction sites and wood-burning fireplaces, are expected to cut Valley pollution by more than 20 percent before 2010, air pollution officials said.

Research indicates dust pollution -- also known as particulate pollution -- is responsible for asthma attacks and lung disease, and the Valley's air is among the worst in the nation. The Valley has never met federal limits on particulate pollution.

More than half of the Valley farms that must submit dust-reduction strategies have done so ahead of the deadline, said Janelle Schneider, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

About 8,000 farms are affected by the new rules, she said.

John Ledbetter of Lodi-based Vino Farms Inc., which has extensive vineyard operations in Northern California, is among them. He said he already harvests and sprays much of his crops at night. Then, the air is calm and moist, making dust less of a problem.

Ledbetter said air regulations are likely to become more stringent over time but added that current requirements are fair.

"We are part of business in California," he said. "We have to do our fair share."

An environmental coalition seeking to strengthen dust-reduction measures has filed a lawsuit over the air district's dust-control efforts.

Attorney Brent Newell, representing the Association of Irrigated Residents, said the farmers' complaint that the new requirements amount to little more than paperwork proves that the new rules don't go far enough.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved the air district's clean-air plan in April. It said then that the new plan and new federal regulations on tailpipe emissions would help the Valley reach clean-air standards by 2010.

Petersen said agriculture is not to blame. There is less farmland than ever before, and pollution is the worst it has ever been, he said.

Hazardous waste site gets extension

Supervisors unanimously approve five-year permit for Buttonwillow facility

By GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2004

County supervisors Tuesday unanimously approved a five-year permit extension for the Clean Harbors hazardous waste site west of Buttonwillow.

The landfill, formerly owned by the Safety-Kleen firm, recently ended nearly a decade of litigation involving radioactivity levels for waste accepted at the site.

The dump originally opened in 1983 to take in oil field waste, which has low levels of naturally occurring background radioactivity. The Clean Harbors site is one of three such hazardous materials landfills in the state.

Bay Area attorney Luke Cole, who founded the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment -- most famous in Kern for filing environmental lawsuits against dairy projects -- spoke against the project on behalf of a local citizens group, the Association of Irrigated Residents.

The site is the largest permitted toxic waste dump in the nation, Cole told the board.

"Kern County is No. 1," he said. "I don't think this is something you should be proud of."

Cole opposed the permit renewal on several points, including the lack of follow up on whether mitigation measures required 10 years ago have had any positive impact.

He also pointed out wording in the permit he claims would limit the county's ability to address future problems.

Such issues flared in the late 1990s when waste from buildings at the Manhattan Project, where some parts of the atomic bomb were developed in the early 1940s, were brought to the Buttonwillow dump.

"This provision is once again an abdication of your responsibility" to protect public health and safety, Cole told the board.

Several county residents also spoke against the facility because of public health concerns.

Representatives from the Greater Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce, the Kern County Farm Bureau and ChevronTexaco spoke in favor of the landfill, saying it benefits the county's oil and agricultural industries.

Supervisors and county staff generally spoke favorably of the landfill, although Supervisor Ray Watson successfully called for periodic third-party verification of radioactivity levels at the site.

Board members agreed, however, that the dump provides a necessary service for the local oil industry. Farmers can also drop off certain pesticides that are then shipped out of the county for disposal.

Chairman Jon McQuiston, who represented the county during a state appeals process over the dump, said the only reason litigation dragged on for so long was because the state has failed to come up with standards for acceptable levels of radioactivity.

Clean Harbors is a publicly traded firm based in Massachusetts.

The Buttonwillow facility, by state law, pays 10 percent of gross revenues to the county in exchange for Kern housing the site.

Last year that yielded about \$925,000 for county coffers, according to county finance staff.

Reawakened Mount St. Helens is state's new top polluter

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, December 1, 2004

(SEATTLE (AP) -- Washington state's top polluter isn't a pulp mill, a power plant or refinery. It's the newly awakened Mount St. Helens.

Since the volcano began erupting in early October, it has been pumping out 50 to 250 tons a day of sulfur dioxide, the lung-stinging gas that causes acid rain and contributes to haze. At peak, that's more than double the amount from all the state's industries combined.

Normally, the state's No. 1 polluter is a coal-fired power plant owned by the Canadian firm TransAlta. The plant churned out 200 tons a day of sulfur dioxide until regulators demanded \$250 million worth of renovations, bringing the level down to 27 tons a day.

Tough to get those kind of results from a volcano.

"You can't put a cork in it," said Greg Nothstein of the Washington Energy Policy Office.

Because the area around St. Helens is so sparsely populated, officials say they haven't heard complaints about respiratory problems linked to the emissions. But people with breathing ailments probably would feel the effects if they lived close to it, said Bob Elliott, executive director of the Southwest Clean Air Agency.

"We are very fortunate, in terms of the impact on human health, that Mount St. Helens is pretty remote," Elliott said.

Worldwide, sulfur dioxide emissions from volcanoes add up to about 15 million tons a year, compared to the 200 million tons produced by power plants and other human activities.

Burn advisory

Thursday, Dec. 2, Modesto Bee

People in Merced County are being asked to refrain from using fireplaces and older wood stoves today. The "burning discouraged" advisory comes from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.