

Van-pool operators eligible for new grant

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People who ride together can save together under a program announced this week by the city of Visalia and South Valley RideShare.

The Valley's status as a region with some of the nation's most polluted air prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to offer an incentive program to people who start van pools for commuting to or from work in Tulare County. Visalia city transit manager Monty Cox said operators of new van pools can receive a grant reimbursing them for 25% of their van-pool expenses for 12 months. Monthly van-pool expenses would include the cost of leasing a van, fuel and maintenance, Cox said.

The grant money is coming from the district's REMOVE, or Reducing Motor Vehicle Emissions, program and is available through 2004.

South Valley RideShare is a program managed by the city of Visalia for the Tulare County Association of Governments to promote car-pooling in the county. It not only provides a clearinghouse of information for people interested in starting car pools or van pools, but also maintains a database of people interested in pooling.

A computer program helps match potential riders and drivers to create car pools.

Funding is available to provide the 25% reimbursement to up to five new van pools, Cox said.

"Van-pooling is a great transportation option for many local residents," Cox said. "People who live and work in the same general area can share transportation costs ... and know they're doing their part to improve our air quality."

Details about the van-pool refund program are available by calling South Valley RideShare toll-free at (866) 808-RIDE.

Environmental report prepared for new dairy

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The Merced County Planning Department is circulating the final environmental impact report for a proposed 3,113-milk cow dairy east of Ballico.

The dairy will be located on an 1,840-acre site on Lee Road that was previously a feedlot for beef cattle.

Though planning documents refer to the dairy as the 2-Vel Dairy, a company representative said a change in partnership would likely result in the name being changed to the Veldhuis North Dairy. Owner Ray Veldhuis was on vacation and couldn't be reached for comment.

The dairy, set to go before the Merced County Planning Commission on Jan 14, will be the second dairy considered following the 2002 adoption of more rigorous environmental standards. Its consideration signals the gradual breakup of a backlog of new dairy applications, said Merced County Planning Director Bill Nicholson.

Several other dairies are expected to come before the planning commission in the near future, the first of which is expected as early as February.

The voluminous environmental documentation for the 2-Vel dairy considers the impact of the project on everything from endangered elderberry longhorn beetles to carbon monoxide emissions.

Because several environmental impacts will be significant and unavoidable following mitigation, the planning commission must adopt a statement of overriding considerations stating that the economic benefits of the project outweigh the potential damages.

The environmental impact report lists several impacts as significant and unavoidable after mitigation, including the following:

- Emissions of chemicals from farm equipment that may increase ozone levels.
- Emissions from manure, including ammonia and hydrogen sulfide, as well as several greenhouse gases.
- Wastewater and runoff may lead to degradation of water quality.
- Increased truck traffic may lead to greater congestion.

The property owner will be required to undertake considerable action as dictated by current management practices to insure environmental impacts are minimized.

The Merced County Planning Commission will vote on whether a conditional use permit for the dairy should be granted at a Jan. 14 meeting to be held at 9 a.m. in the County Administration Building at 2222 M St.

Home and Garden: New air district rules cover wood stoves, fireplaces

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New rules on wood stoves and fireplace inserts take effect this year as do limits on wood-burning devices in new home construction in an effort to help clear the air, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced.

The new restrictions on wood stoves and fireplaces take effect when a home is sold. Only an open-hearth fireplace, a pellet-fuel heater or an EPA Phase II-certified fireplace insert or wood stove may remain in homes when they are sold, according to the district. Other types of inserts or wood stoves must be removed or made inoperable.

Wood stoves and fireplace inserts made before July 1, 1990 likely will not meet the new requirement, according to the district.

Homeowners and others can get more information on wood stoves at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Web site at: www.epa.gov/compliance/monitoring/programs/woodstoves

The new rules took effect at the start of this year.

A statement of compliance must be completed when selling a home, according to the district.

Those who don't comply with the restrictions may be responsible for future costs of replacement or removal and fines.

A limit on open hearth fireplaces is also in place for new homes starting construction this year.

Only new homes going up in areas where there are two or fewer houses per acre may have fireplaces, according to the district.

Also, new homes may only have one solid fuel-burning device - such as a wood stove or insert,

according to the district. And that is limited to only two fuel-burning devices allowed per acre regardless of number of homes.

Wood stoves and fireplaces make up a significant source of "particulate matter" air pollution, according to the district.

Particulate matter can cause lung damage, increased respiratory disease, cancer and premature death, according to the California Air Resources Board Web site.

The new fireplace regulations are designed to help bring cleaner air.

"We do expect there will be some improvements," district spokeswoman Janis Parker said.

The district plans to compare air pollution readings from this year with previous years, Parker said.

As far as new home construction in Hanford, not much of a change is being seen, said city planner John Stowe.

Builders have already been installing inserts in new homes under construction in the city, Stowe said.

Home and Garden: 'Check Before You Burn' program is running

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The "Check Before You Burn" program began in November with the new regulation that allows the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to prohibit the operation of fireplaces on days when air pollution is particularly bad.

District spokeswoman Janis Parker said there are three levels of warning:

€ Wood Burning Prohibited - when fireplaces or inserts cannot be used

€ Wood Burning Discouraged - when use of fireplaces is not recommended

€ No Wood Burning Restrictions

Those who don't comply on the program's prohibited days can receive a citation.

Homeowners can check on a day's status by calling (800) SMOG INFO or logging onto the Web at:

www.valleyair.org

EDITORIAL

Assault on State's Air Rules

Los Angeles Times - published January 10, 2004

Last summer was the smoggiest in the Los Angeles Basin in six years. Look for even more days of watery eyes and wheezy chests if the federal government succeeds in hobbling local air quality officials.

President Bush and his congressional allies seem bent on blocking progress made by California in recent years. Their challenges, clothed in erudite language about state versus federal powers, are really outright concessions to car and engine makers and oil refiners. When Southern California cities or their private contractors replace worn-out diesel-engine buses, trash trucks and street sweepers, they are required to do so with cleaner-fuel vehicles. Nearly 60% of local transit buses - more than 3,000 of them - now run on natural gas or other clean fuels, along with hundreds of airport shuttles, school buses and dump trucks.

The White House is backing a lawsuit that would invalidate these local fleet rules adopted by the South Coast Air Quality Management District over the last three years. On Wednesday, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear the suit, brought by diesel engine makers, arguing that only the federal Environmental Protection Agency can set such fleet rules. However, Congress specifically allowed California to impose more rigorous pollution standards.

The administration is also pushing legislation that would weaken limits on ozone, the primary ingredient of smog. In 1997, the EPA toughened nationwide ozone limits. Those rules work, in part, by forcing cooperation between agencies accustomed to working independently to cut emissions. For example, in fast-growing Charlotte, N.C., local highway planners, meeting with air quality officials, have produced a plan that allows for new road construction while keeping a lid on smog. The region is now investing in light-rail transit to get commuters out of their cars and encouraging developers to mix new commercial projects with residential units.

With 70% of smog-forming emissions coming from cars and trucks, the joint planning is just common sense. Yet the president's transportation funding bill, now before Congress, would do away with it.

Finally, only last-ditch lobbying by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein and others kept Congress from killing new state rules intended to clamp down on smoke-spewing small gasoline engines that power lawn mowers, leaf blowers and chain saws. Engine makers and their political allies almost succeeded on their shaky argument that the requirement, which takes effect in 2007, would cost jobs.

The gray-brown haze that so quickly dulled the San Gabriel Mountains' snow-capped sparkle after last week's rains is a good measure of how smoggy the Southland remains. Californians want more progress, not less.