

Get a new bus, Gus, schools are told

Air district's proposed regulation would force old diesel fleets to be replaced by cleaner-air models by 2015

Tri-Valley Herald

By Dave Myhra, SAN JOAQUIN BUREAU

Friday, April 02, 2004 - MODESTO -- The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will hold meetings next month about a proposed rule that would require school districts to replace all older diesel buses by 2015.

The proposed regulation was prompted by an October 2003 California Air Resource Board report that said, among other things, older buses -- due to exhaust fumes in their cabins -- could increase cancer risk for children by up to 4 percent.

"We are more concerned with the children (than the air). Old buses cause a health risk that we want to reduce," said Maria Stobbe, senior air quality specialist for the district.

However, the newer buses that are set to replace the Valley's 2,700-vehicle bus fleet will have a beneficial effect on the air as well, Stobbe said.

Using lower-sulfur fuel and exhaust controls, new diesel engines can lower particulate emissions by 85 percent and emissions that create ozone by 75 percent. A natural gas bus can reduce emissions up to 87 percent.

The proposed rule states school districts would be required to either add emission control devices to old engines, switch to newer diesel engines or to go to natural gas by 2010.

When hybrid buses become available, they would be good alternatives as well, Stobbe said.

If a school district decided to buy an all-new transportation fleet, it would have until 2015.

Due to budget problems, most districts "want to keep their buses for as long as they can," Stobbe said. By the time this rule could go into effect, half of the Valley's diesel school buses will be at least 15 years old.

Since money is a problem, the air district is helping buy cleaner-running buses with grants. So far it has provided \$2.8 million in grants to school districts for natural gas buses, and \$1 million for installation of particle control devices.

The air district isn't alone in the cleaner-bus quest, though. Of 150 school districts spanning the Valley, 19 have begun to purchase new cleaner buses on their own. There are 174 natural-gas school buses on the road in the Valley.

A public forum will be held about the proposed rule at 1:30 p.m. April 27 and 28, and at 10:30 a.m. April 29, at 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, in Modesto.

Kern's best-kept cogeneration secret

The Bakersfield Californian

April 3, 2004

By ERIN WALDNER, Californian staff writer; e-mail: ewaldner@bakersfield.com

An industrial kitchen of sorts is busy at work just north of Bakersfield. At the Mt. Poso Cogeneration Plant, coal, tire chips and petroleum coke are blended to produce electricity and steam.

Not many locals know it exists.

Donald Waln, vice president of Millennium Energy LLC, which provides asset management and technical support services for Mt. Poso, recalled the time someone visited the plant for the first time. When Waln later ran into him in town, the person commented, "That's quite a place you've got out there."

As a cogenerator, Mt. Poso uses one fuel source -- the petroleum coke, coal and tire chips are blended into one product -- to produce two forms of energy.

Built in 1989, the plant generates 53 megawatts of electricity per year for Pacific Gas and Electric Co. One megawatt will power 1,000 homes. The steam it makes is pumped into the nearby Mt. Poso oil field to help recover thick, heavy crude.

Plant manager Bill Dickson said he believes the plant provides a viable service for California and the environment. The Integrated Waste Management Board estimates the plant saves 1 million tires a year from being dumped into Southern California landfills.

Mt. Poso began burning tire chips last year, "with no increase in our emissions," Dickson said.

Tom Goff, permit service manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said that is accurate.

Mt. Poso is one of three coal-fired cogens, or cogenerators, in the area. Mt. Poso was the first.

The coal Mt. Poso uses is brought in from Utah by train.

Dickson said many people picture heavy plumes of smoke exiting into the atmosphere when they think of coal-fired plants.

He and Waln stressed that's not the case at Mt. Poso.

They said the plant's original owners spent more money and time building a plant that uses clean coal technology. A modern combustor burns the coal and coke with fewer emissions than a conventional boiler would.

The white cloud visible at the top of the plant is not smoke.

"It's just vaporized steam," Waln said.

Ammonia, limestone and a fabric filter are also used at Mt. Poso to keep emissions down.

Goff said Mt. Poso generates more pollution than a natural gas power plant of comparable size, but that based on the magnitude of its emissions, Mt. Poso is not among the worst polluters in the valley.

"It's state of the art for a coal-fired plant for the time it was built," Goff said, adding that older coal plants don't have the kind of emissions control technology that Mt. Poso has.

The petroleum coke Mt. Poso consumes comes from the Shell Bakersfield Refinery on Rosedale Highway. The refinery is scheduled to close its doors Oct. 1.

Waln said Mt. Poso will have to look elsewhere for petroleum coke and that it may end up being too costly to continue using it.

The tire chips Mt. Poso uses come from a Los Angeles company that processes used tires.

Once at Mt. Poso, wires in the chips are removed and sold for scrap iron.

Residual ashe is sold for different uses, including as a soil amendment.

Twenty-four employees operate Mt. Poso.

Two of them had their feet up in the plant's control room one recent afternoon while they studied computer data.

"That's good," Waln said, adding that it meant everything was running as it should be.

Portable air cleaners are popular -- but do they work?

Though sales have boomed, many of the devices are not very effective, and there's little evidence that they improve users' health.

The Orange County Register

Column: THE M.D.

By Valerie Ulene

April 5, 2004

For 50 years, California residents have been fighting to improve the quality of the air outdoors. Now the air-quality battle is shifting indoors, and a new weapon has joined the fray — portable air cleaners.

Some of these devices use mechanical barriers to filter the air; others create an electrical field to remove pollutants from the air. Sales of these devices have soared in recent years, with Americans buying approximately 3.4 million in 2002.

Health concerns are driving sales. The air inside homes and buildings is often more polluted than that outside. Levels of chemicals such as formaldehyde, for example, are typically many times higher indoors. And contaminants such as tobacco smoke and radon — present only in very low concentrations outdoors — can reach potentially dangerous levels indoors.

It's not just the quality of indoor air that's worrisome, but the amount of time people are exposed to it. According to the Air Resources Board, Californians spend an average of 87% of their day inside.

Of course, inhaling pollutants isn't good for your health. Exposure to secondhand smoke, radon or asbestos increases the risk of some cancers — especially lung cancer. Formaldehyde can cause headaches and burning sensations in the eyes, nose and throat, and molds and pollen can set off allergic reactions.

"My husband and I both have allergies," says Los Angeles resident Tamara Nichols, who bought an air cleaner a year and a half ago. "I thought it might improve the air quality in our bedroom."

Unfortunately, many air cleaners don't dramatically change the air quality. Even those that do remove pollutants haven't been shown to produce significant health benefits.

If there's one thing air cleaners are good at, it's clearing the air of solid particles, such as smoke and dust. Very small particles can be inhaled deep into the lungs and damage the airways. "High-efficiency particulate air filters — or HEPA filters — are designed to capture fine particulates," says Hamid Arabzadeh, an industrial hygienist in Irvine.

However, not all air cleaners contain this type of filter, and not even the best air cleaner can completely remove all particles from room air. Nor can they clear pollutants that aren't airborne, such as large pollen and mold particles that tend to quickly settle onto the floor and furnishings. (Simply walking through a room or sitting on furniture can stir up these pollutants.)

Further, the mechanical filters and electronic technologies used to capture particulates don't work well against gases, such as formaldehyde and ammonia. "When you get to chemicals, all bets are off," Arabzadeh says. "To get rid of chemicals, you need a second layer of protection."

Although some specially equipped cleaners can trap certain gaseous pollutants, most are not effective against all gases typically present in indoor air. A filter that works against one type of gas might not help with another. Also, chemical filters may eventually release the gases they do trap back into the air.

In short, most consumers won't get any significant health benefits from air cleaners. People with asthma or allergies are the one possible exception. While several studies have found air cleaners to have little or no effect on asthma and allergy symptoms, others have suggested they might help.

Before investing in a portable air cleaner, try eliminating the sources of indoor air pollution. If tobacco smoke is the problem, don't allow smoking in the house. If you're struggling with allergies to a cat or dog, keep the animal outdoors. Also, simply opening doors and windows will increase ventilation and can dramatically improve air quality.

Although flicking a switch on an air cleaner may seem simpler, it may not be more effective. It's even less effective if you don't bother to turn the device on. Nichols has only used her unit about four times. "Ironically, it sits collecting dust," she says with a laugh.

Filtering the claims

Air cleaners vary widely in their design and effectiveness, and it's often difficult to determine how well a particular product works. Although there are no industry-wide performance standards used to rate these devices, the Assn. of Home Appliance Manufacturers (AHAM) offers a voluntary certification program.

Products participating in the program undergo testing and display a rating referred to as the clean air delivery rate (CADR). The CADR indicates the cleaner's ability to clear three particulate pollutants — tobacco smoke, dust and pollen — from indoor air; the higher the CADR, the more effective the unit.

Dr. Valerie Ulene is a board-certified specialist in preventive medicine practicing in Los Angeles. She can be reached at themd@att.net. The M.D. appears the first Monday of the month.

["My Voice," Stockton Record, Sunday, April 4, 2004](#)

Bush environmental record is polluted

By Molly Ivins

AUSTIN, Texas -- If George W. Bush loses the election narrowly in November, put it down to the birders.

You read it here first. What was Karl Rove thinking when he allowed William Haynes II to be nominated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit?

There are all the usual reasons for rejecting a Bush judicial nominee -- he's only tried one case; no understanding of the Constitution; author of the "enemy combatant doctrine" that allows American citizens to be held in prison without trial, without counsel and without knowing the charges against them.

But the fatal faux pas is the feather-blowing tale of Haynes' role as the top Defense Department lawyer in the case of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

The Defense Department wanted to use an island in the Marianas for bombing practice.

So Haynes' team of lawyers argued that bombing the bird haven wouldn't break the treaty and would enhance bird-watching, because people "get more enjoyment out of spotting a rare bird than they do spotting a common one."

By this logic, we should drive every bird on Earth to near extinction, and just think what a thrill we'd get out of ever seeing one. According to The New York Times, "Mr. Haynes says he only supervised the case and was unaware of the bizarre claim." He only supervised the case?

If you've never seen a flock of enraged birders, you don't know what danger is. These people don't just watch pewits and tweety birds. They're into raptors, too -- falcons, eagles.

They know how to swoop and strike. How could Rove ignore the warning, "Beware the wrath of the birding legions."

There's no way to keep up with the Bush administration's assaults on the environment. They're just endless.

Most notable lately was the decision to let mercury pollution, which is extremely toxic, continue. With current technology, we could cut mercury emissions by 90 percent in four years. Instead, the Bushies chose a plan that will reduce it by 50 percent over 14 years, thus saving millions for their big campaign contributors in the power, coal and chemical industries.

To make up for it, they warned pregnant women not to eat tuna.

That's not all:

* The U.S. Forest Service is going to eliminate any reviews of its actions by outside agencies for compliance with clean-water, endangered-species and historical-preservation laws.

* The Department of Energy is moving to overturn a court decision on standards to clean up the country's most toxic and radioactive waste.

* The Environmental Protection Agency's inspector general has concluded that senior Bushies at EPA repeatedly have made misleading statements about purported improvements in drinking-water quality. Oh no, not Bushies lying.

Other actions way too numerous to mention can be found on the Web sites of environmental groups.

To counter this ghastly record, the Republican Party issued a talking-points memo for members of Congress.

In it, [the congressmen are advised to inform their constituents that: global warming hasn't been proved, there are no clear links between childhood asthma and air pollution](#) (the memo advises that the links are "cloudy"), and America's rivers and lakes aren't nearly as polluted as the EPA says they are.

The EPA says at least 40 percent of our streams, rivers and lakes are too polluted for drinking, fishing or swimming.

Sen. Jim Jeffords of Vermont observed: "It's so incredible that they have this denial of any responsibility for the serious situation we have in this country as far as the environment goes. They have a head-in-the-sand approach to it. They're just sloughing off the human health impacts -- the premature deaths and asthma attacks caused by power-plant pollution."

One of the weirdest environmental developments is the attempt by right-wing anti-immigrant groups to take over the Sierra Club. The latest fad among these anti-immigrant groups, many of which have ties to disgusting racist groups, is to blame immigrants for our environmental problems.

I see a lot of Mexican immigrants -- and some must be illegal -- doing gardening in this country. I don't know of many who run power plants that spew tons of [mercury into the air](#). You hardly ever see an illegal Mexican immigrant on a snowmobile in Yellowstone.

Illegal Mexicans are seldom in charge of timber companies that want to clear-cut the national forests. It's not often that illegal Mexicans run chemical companies that dump toxins into rivers and wetlands.

It's rare to find an illegal Mexican in deciding to end the Superfund cleanup program or to lower air- and water-quality standards.

I don't know about you, but we can't pin this one on them. Reckon these folks have some other agenda?

[Commentary, Merced Sun-Star, April 3, 2004](#)

Examining poverty in Merced County

By Dennis Cardoza

Last Updated: April 3, 2004, 09:45:19 AM PST

The arrival of spring brings new energy and optimism, but one problem, sadly, does not change with the seasons.

The scourge of poverty is at the heart of many of the crucial issues in our region. The statistics cited in a recent Sun-Star editorial are compelling. Merced County, along with neighboring communities, is one of the poorest regions in the nation. Yet there is an alarming unwillingness to address poverty, caused in part by a lack of awareness about how pervasive the problem is in our area and how it affects everyone.

Substantial portions of our population are locked in perpetual winter, frozen out of the opportunity that has become known as the "American Dream." Year after year, deplorable living conditions, grinding unemployment, and lack of access to health care are captured in new statistics, but solutions are rarely addressed. The problems are so large and costly that political leaders at all levels of government are reluctant to discuss them. There is often a feeling that there is no "political win" in addressing these very important issues.

We all have to get past this "play it safe" way of thinking. Regardless of political philosophy on the plight of those living in poverty, the fact is that we all are affected. For too long, our local governments have been crippled by a low tax base and the high percentage of tax dollars that are spent providing services for those who cannot afford to pay for basic necessities themselves. This leaves us unable to fund major community needs.

Our resources are drained further when those in poverty turn to illegal substances, particularly the methamphetamine drug trade. The resulting breakup of families, placement of children in foster care, increased criminal activity, and other misfortunes all cost taxpayers dearly and result in moral decay.

The only way out of this problem is successful economic development. Providing jobs and opportunities for economic advancement are essential to elevating people out of poverty. But bringing jobs to Merced County has been a challenge. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's most recent job report, the Merced area has the second highest unemployment rate in the entire country at 17.2 percent.

There is no doubt that California is a state with high costs of doing business. However, the greatest obstacle to expanding our economic base is the education level of our community. Silicon Valley has one of the highest costs of doing business in the world, but boomed in the 1990s based on the intellectual capital of its residents. Companies routinely dismiss Merced County as a potential business site due to what they perceive as an unskilled labor force. Making matters worse, low-skilled jobs that were recruited and anticipated just a few years ago are now being outsourced to countries overseas where labor costs are much lower.

Those unfavorable developments only underscore the fact that education is the most practical long-term solution to poverty in the Central Valley. And that's why UC Merced is so important and has consistently been my highest priority. Opportunities for higher education must be maximized, especially for those living in poverty. The resources of a world-class institution will assist us greatly in that cause, and by doing so, UC Merced will be the single greatest engine for economic development in our area.

Despite its virtues, UC Merced will not solve all of our problems. Fortunately, other local resources are already taking steps to address poverty. Merced College, for example, provides a gateway to higher education to hundreds of low-income students through various vocational programs, which, over time, promise to have a meaningful impact. We must do more to support that institution. None of this will be possible if we don't focus on K-12 education as well. We should not solve this problem with handouts, but education is a hand-up we can't afford not to fund!

[Outside of education, we must promote development by attacking air pollution head-on and doing everything possible to hold those in the Bay Area who create it accountable.](#) Merced County must do a better job of obtaining its fair share of state and federal grants, using those funds to help offset the overwhelming price we pay for poverty. And elected representatives of both parties must continue to work together to compensate for the Valley's historically weak political position due to the fact that rural areas don't have a high concentration of people. Valley legislators are regularly outvoted in the State Legislature.

The solutions cannot stop there, however. Poverty should not be the elephant in the room. Our community would benefit from public dialogue and a more concerted effort to address our toughest issues.

Merced County is rapidly emerging from winter into spring, but without a serious and honest discussion about poverty, the season we so anxiously await will not bring the change we expect. I will not rest so long as this problem remains. EDITOR'S NOTE: Congressman Dennis Cardoza represents the 18th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

[Editorial, Modesto Bee, Sat. April 3, 2004](#)

THUMBS UP to new regulations for controlling dust. The rules might be bothersome, but breathing air filled with microscopic dust particles is unhealthy for everyone. No one group is being picked on. Builders, farmers, street sweepers and others will have to take steps to keep the dust from getting into the air. Knowing the valley's air is among the worst in the nation, many more such steps are needed.