

EPA visit to Fresno sparks protests

Activists were refused entry to meeting with head of agency to discuss Valley air issues.

By Barbara Anderson

The Fresno Bee, Wed., Aug. 8, 2007

As the chief of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency made a rare visit Tuesday to Fresno, San Joaquin Valley environmental and community activists picketed outside to complain that they were shut out of a meeting on air pollution.

About 40 people carried "Clean Air Now" signs and shouted "EPA shame on you" on the sidewalk outside the closed-door meeting at the Council of Fresno County Governments' office on Tulare Street in downtown Fresno.

Inside, EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson met with civic leaders in a gathering organizers described as a small working group, not a public forum.

"We had to keep the numbers at something that was going to be productive but also represented the interests of everyone in the Valley," said Spencer Pederson, press secretary to Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa. Radanovich invited Johnson to Fresno to learn about the Valley's air quality problems.

Those left outside said they felt snubbed.

Johnson "didn't take a minute of his time to listen to those voices most impacted by air quality and water quality issues here in the San Joaquin Valley -- and that is simply not acceptable," said Liza Bolanos, coordinator for the Central Valley Air Coalition, an organization with 165 members in the San Joaquin Valley.

Protesters said they were upset that Johnson had carved out time to speak with leaders of agriculture at a breakfast meeting before the closed-door session downtown -- but not with environmentalists.

"The United States Environmental Protection Agency has got to learn to listen to the people and work with the people and not just with industry," said Rey León, senior policy analyst at the Latino Issues Forum.

Among the issues the protesters wanted to discuss with Johnson:

A Superfund cleanup site in Arvin.

An environmental assessment for chemical waste disposal in Kettleman City.

Proposals to build megasize dairies in Allensworth.

A 2024 ozone plan to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's air.

Nettie Morrison, 73, of Allensworth was among the protesters. Concern for a clean-air plan brought her to the protest in Fresno.

"I don't like knowing my health is deteriorating and there could be help," she said. "Why are they ignoring the issue when something could be done now?"

As the meeting ended, the protesters were allowed inside to hand Johnson a list of demands for the EPA.

EPA spokeswoman Lisa Fasano said later that Johnson was willing to meet with concerned residents and encouraged them to contact his staff to arrange for meetings.

Johnson was appointed EPA administrator in 2005 and has made at least one prior visit to the Valley. In 2006, he toured the Phoenix Bio Industries ethanol plant in Goshen.

Pete Weber, who helped set the agenda for Tuesday's meeting, said he agreed with the decision to keep attendance small. Weber is chairman of the air-quality working group for the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, a task force trying to improve the region's economy and livability.

Participants talked about strategies for cleaning up the air, such as new technologies that would reduce pollutants from locomotives, Weber said. They also talked about the need for money from the EPA to support those efforts.

Participants also briefed Johnson on the health implications of air pollution, such as the high asthma rates in the Valley.

Weber said more than 300 organizations were represented among those who participated in the meeting.

In addition to representatives from the partnership, he said people in attendance included Fresno Mayor Alan Autry, congressional staff, members of the California Air Resources Board, the EPA and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, a Fresno allergist, a program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association and representatives from Operation Clean Air, a nonprofit group dedicated to voluntary pollution reduction.

Ashley Swearingin, director of the Office of Community and Economic Development at Fresno State, was invited as a member of the California Partnership.

The meeting was significant, she said. "It was the first time -- and maybe the only time -- the U.S. EPA administrator had been fully briefed on the challenges to obtaining clean air in the Valley."

Speaking briefly to news reporters at the end of the meeting, Johnson said air quality in the San Joaquin Valley was a priority at the EPA. "Everyone wants to do everything we can to accelerate the schedule of bringing cleaner air," he said.

School bus company to fix or replace all its diesel vehicles

Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, August 8, 2007

The second-largest school bus company in California has agreed to repair or replace buses that allegedly expose children to diesel exhaust - a potential cause of cancer and respiratory problems - in leaky passenger cabins.

In a proposed settlement filed Tuesday in San Francisco Superior Court, Durham School Services pledged to replace all its buses in the state, or retrofit them with low-emissions engines, by 2014. During the upgrade, which is to start by the end of this year, the company agreed to post notices in buses warning of the cancer risk from diesel fumes, as required by California's toxics disclosure law, Proposition 65.

The suit, filed last year against Durham and another major school bus operator, Laidlaw Transit Co., alleged that some of the highest levels of exposure to diesel exhaust are found in the private buses that carry 1 million California students to and from school each day. About half the buses in the state were more than 15 years old as of 2003, making them vulnerable to cracks in the chassis that allow fumes into the cabin, the suit said.

Diesel exhaust, a mixture of gases and particles, was listed as a carcinogen by the state in 1990, and can also contribute to asthma and other respiratory problems. Lawyers for the plaintiffs said the settlement would reduce diesel emissions from Durham's buses by more than 85 percent.

Durham, based in Illinois, operates about 10,000 school buses in 22 states, according to its Web site.

"While (the settlement) ultimately reduces the amount of diesel some children breathe, it also gives families and the public the truth about diesel buses, information parents throughout California can use to demand their school districts provide clean school buses to all California children," said Shana Lazerow, a lawyer with Communities for a Better Environment.

The allegations were strongly disputed, however, by the remaining defendant in the case, Laidlaw, the largest school bus company in California and the nation. At a hearing next month before Judge Ernest Goldsmith, Laidlaw will argue for dismissal of the suit, while the plaintiffs will seek an injunction requiring cancer warnings on Laidlaw's diesel-powered buses.

"School buses are by far the safest means of getting your kids to and from school, safer than walking, safer than bicycling, safer than cars," said Mark Fogelman, a lawyer for Laidlaw. "Although there is an alleged risk from diesel engine exhaust, which we believe does not exist, the risk of serious injury and death if you scare kids off school buses by warnings is far greater."

The plaintiffs said Laidlaw was offered \$1.7 million by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to retrofit 100 school buses in Richmond but turned it down. Fogelman said the funding came with conditions that "would have made it difficult for Laidlaw to do business."

County may 'plug-in' to high gas mileage

Supervisors view new breed of electric hybrids that supposedly get 100 miles per gallon

By Rebekah Gordon, STAFF WRITER
Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, August 8, 2007

REDWOOD CITY — San Mateo County supervisors and curious onlookers got a glimpse of the future Tuesday morning parked at the curb along Marshall Street.

With eye-catching decals proclaiming that it can get 100 miles per gallon and some yellow racing stripes to boot, this was no ordinary Toyota Prius.

Call it a hybrid with an extension cord.

Peeking out of the back bumper above the slogan "I can't remember the last time I filled up," was an electric cord and plug, the telltale sign that this was a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle.

Proponents tout it as the future of clean automobile technology.

"If we need to continue to rely on single-occupancy vehicles, we need to do so in the least-impact way possible," said Jodie Van Horn, the coordinator of Plug-In Bay Area.

A chapter of the national Plug-In Partners campaign, the Bay Area group — a consortium of environmental organizations, electric-car proponents and PG&E — is seeking to get local governments hot on the idea of plug-in hybrids and to prod automakers to put them on the market.

They succeeded in converting San Mateo County's Board of Supervisors Tuesday, who passed a resolution pushing for the development and mass production of plug-in hybrids and urging the county to purchase them for their own fleet whenever possible.

Van Horn said that San Mateo was the third county, after Marin and Solano, to adopt such a resolution. Eight Bay Area cities have also come on board.

"The reason that plug-in hybrids are getting so much hype right now is because they're cleaner and they're cheaper, and they're a domestic source of energy that can fuel our vehicles," Van Horn said. "They're also a stepping stone to a zero-emission future."

Plug-in hybrids work and look much the same as standard hybrids on the road today, which are powered by a rechargeable battery and gas. But unlike the standard hybrids, which reclaim energy while braking to recharge the battery, a plug-in has a much larger lithium-ion battery that can be recharged by plugging it into a standard 120-volt outlet.

The difference, according to Plug-In Partners, is 30 to 50 percent better fuel economy than a standard hybrid and 20 to 60 miles of driving without using gas at all.

"You just plug it in to a standard socket," Van Horn said. "You don't need fancy infrastructure."

Plug-in hybrids are not commercially available today. The only way to get one now, Van Horn said, is to send your standard hybrid off to one of four conversion companies in the U.S. and Canada. The conversion costs about \$20,000.

Plug-In Bay Area hopes that asking counties or cities to pass these statements of intent to purchase plug-in hybrids once the cars become commercially available — called "soft fleet orders" — will pressure automakers complacent with the success of standard hybrids.

"Because of that success and because of the monetary gain, there's not a lot of incentive to move forward," said San Mateo County Supervisor Jerry Hill, who sponsored the resolution. "We want to make sure that they can see that there is a market available and that there's a demand for something better."

San Mateo County has more than 130 hybrids, including two plug-in hybrids, in its fleet of 900 vehicles.

Hill took the plug-in hybrid, on loan from PG&E and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, for a quick spin around the block, prompting comments about the virtually noise-free and smooth ride.

But for all its assets, there may be one drawback: This is not a car for the absent-minded.

"Please be sure to unplug the vehicle," a paper-sign inside the car said, "before you drive off."

Metro wants more drivers to hurry up and get in the van

BY SUE DOYLE, Staff Writer
LA Daily News, August 8, 2007

Targeting the 70 percent of Los Angeles County commuters who drive solo, Metro on Tuesday kicked off a five-year, \$19-million program to get them riding together in vans.

Van pools can provide a much-needed answer to Los Angeles' distressing rush-hour traffic jams by clearing extra cars off the roads and even reducing air pollution, transit officials said.

"We could virtually wipe out congestion in Los Angeles County," said Roger Snoble, Metro CEO. "It's that powerful."

Snoble said that nationwide over the past five years, the number of passengers in each car on the road has gradually dropped from about 1.3 to 1.1 - which helps explain the growing traffic snarls across the country. In Los Angeles County, passengers per car have remained steady for the last 15 years at 1.1.

But Metro wants to raise car occupancy in the county to 1.5 per vehicle to eliminate bottlenecks and get the region moving.

The transit agency said it will focus on getting employers in major centers to participate. It said its van-pool program could save solo drivers up to \$615 a month in gas, car maintenance and insurance and cut at least 20 minutes off an average commute because it can use car-pool lanes.

On average, Metro van poolers pay \$170 a month for the ride, transit officials said.

"Now it's even more cost effective for many of today's commuters whose budgets are continually depleted by persistently high gasoline prices," said Pam O'Connor, Metro board chairwoman.

Already in the San Fernando Valley, there are 49 van-pool groups participating in the program, which officially began three months ago.

Across Los Angeles County, there are 430 van pools in the program.

Through Metro's program, commuters each month get \$400 off the van rental, which typically costs about \$1,100 before the subsidy, and are leased from Enterprise Rideshare, Midway Rideshare and VPSI Inc., the private companies in the program.

Metro provides the subsidy through federal and state grants.

IOC: China Pollution May Prompt Delays

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers
Tuesday, August 7, 2007

BEIJING, China (AP) -- Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee, acknowledged Wednesday that Beijing's air pollution could force the postponement of outdoor events during next year's Olympics.

"Yes, this is an option," Rogge told CNN in a brief interview. "It would not be necessary for all sports, sports with short durations would not be a problem. But definitely the endurance sports like the cycling race where you have to compete for six hours, these are examples of competitions that might be postponed or delayed to another day."

The statement from Rogge came just hours before Beijing was to celebrate the one-year mark in the countdown for next year's opening ceremony. A party in Tiananmen Square to celebrate the moment was to be attended by 10,000 people, including Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Beijing's filthy air and clogged traffic have worried Beijing organizers and the IOC, but this was Rogge's strongest statement on the subject and was sure to embarrass local organizers.

Beijing officials have spent billions of dollars closing factories and moving others out of town, but nonstop construction and booming car sales have made air quality even worse.

Beijing Olympic organizing officials refused to comment on Rogge's statement. The media relations office said rules prevented spokesmen from answering questions over the telephone. The director of Olympic cycling events was in a meeting and not immediately available to comment.

Poor air quality may cloud Olympic Games in China

One-year countdown begins as groups protest event, health concerns rise

By Stephen Wade, Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, August 8, 2007

BEIJING -- The Olympic Games are a year away, but protests have begun from groups who want the event to change China.

Also clouding the picture Tuesday was a thick blanket of smog that has hovered over the city for weeks -- not the blue skies hoped for by the organizers of the Beijing Games.

Officials including International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge will mark the start of the one-year countdown with a lavish ceremony Wednesday in Tiananmen Square.

On Tuesday, Chinese authorities detained six activists descending part of the Great Wall with a 450-square-foot banner reading: "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet 2008," according to the foreign-based Free Tibet Campaign. Three of the six were U.S. citizens, the group said, identified as Nupur Modi of Oakland, Leslie Kaup of St. Paul, Minn., and Duane Martinez of Sausalito. Their protest followed a Reporters Without Borders demonstration Monday in which foreigners across the street from the Beijing Olympics headquarters unfurled a banner depicting the Olympic rings as handcuffs and urging that jailed reporters be freed.

The London-based Free Tibet Campaign and Students for a Free Tibet said China is using the Olympics to strengthen its claims on Tibet. China says it has ruled the remote region for centuries, but many Tibetans say their homeland was essentially an independent state for most of that time. Chinese communist troops occupied Tibet in 1951, and Beijing continues to rule the region with a heavy hand.

In an open letter to Rogge, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, a group of 40 well-known dissidents said China's Olympic preparations had obscured widespread civil-rights abuses.

"We find no consolation or comfort in the rise of grandiose sports facilities or a temporarily beautified Beijing city or the prospect of Chinese athletes winning medals," the letter said.

Chinese officials promised foreign reporters free movement seven months ago. However, the temporary freedoms do not extend to local Chinese journalists.

The Committee to Protect Journalists urged Beijing to free 29 imprisoned journalists and loosen the restrictions on local reporters. It also called on the IOC to pressure China to increase press freedoms.

"There's a major responsibility for the IOC ... to speak out and to encourage the government of China to live up to its commitments," said Wall Street Journal editor-at-large and Committee to Protect Journalists board chairman Paul Steiger.

The IOC said the games, which begin Aug. 8, 2008, could be a "catalyst for constructive dialogue."

"We believe that the Olympic Games will act as a vehicle for positive change in many ways, some of which may take time to realize," the IOC said. "From what we have learnt in meeting with human rights groups, they typically agree with our viewpoint that the Games being held in Beijing is a positive thing."

Rogge has called the games "a force for good" but has cautioned they cannot change China's political and social institutions.

Dismal air quality, meanwhile, could threaten the performance and health of thousands of elite athletes, and some are already saying they will stay away until the last minute because of pollution concerns.

Australian IOC member John Coates said after meeting Tuesday with other Olympic delegations and Beijing organizers that he would be telling his athletes to stay away from Beijing until four or five days before their events.

The Washington Post contributed to this story.

EPA cites Illinois power plants for releasing too much soot

The Associated Press

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, August 7, 2007

CHICAGO -- The Environmental Protection Agency says six coal-fired power plants in Illinois, including five in the Chicago area, are releasing too much soot.

In documents released Monday, the EPA cites Midwest Generation for releasing too much microscopic air pollution. And the agency alleges that the company has continued to operate its aging power plants without adding pollution controls required by the Clean Air Act.

Midwest Generation owns two coal plants in Chicago, two in Will County, one outside Peoria and one in Waukegan. All of the plants were once owned by ComEd, which also is cited by the EPA.

The report comes as Cook County and the surrounding area have repeatedly been found in violation of federal standards for smog this year. Local EPA officials said they've been investigating Midwest Generation's plants since 2003.

"It took us some time to process and analyze this information," said George Czerniak, head of the EPA's regional air-enforcement branch.

Midwest Generation spokesman Doug McFarlan said the company has a long-range plan to address the issues raised by the EPA. And a ComEd spokeswoman said the utility is reviewing the complaint.

In December, Midwest Generation entered an agreement with the state to clean up its coal plants by 2018. At the time, Midwest Generation said three older plants - two in Chicago and one in Waukegan - could be closed if the cleanup is too costly. The EPA action could force reforms at the plants to be made earlier.

Joel Africk, president of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, said the EPA action comes amid heightened awareness of the dangers of pollutants.

"As a society I think people are starting to get more conscious of what we're putting in the air and what we're putting into the water," he said.

Environmentalists have been asking for EPA action against the plants for more than 10 years.

"This is long overdue but very welcome news," said Bruce Nilles, director of the Sierra Club's Midwest Clean Air Campaign.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wed., Aug. 8, 2007:](#)

'Clean up our act'

Now that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has decided to delay clean-up of the Valley's air until 2024, I propose we stop issuing building permits outside the city limits. Let's not increase person/miles traveled over ever more roads while we are choking our children, our elderly and ourselves to death. Perhaps linking development and air quality in this way might encourage the district to reassess our technological options and our commitment.

The current approach of accepting deadly conditions while building full speed ahead should be recognized as unacceptable. If we really are in a hole this deep, we should stop digging immediately. Can we publicly acknowledge the impact of toxic agriculture on the air pollution inventory? How about incentives for organic farmers who reduce the load of biocides we take in? (The organic markets are booming and this might do our growers a major service in any case.)

Is there any leadership from our elected or appointed officials? If we clean up our act we could carefully consider how best to proceed with development in this air basin, which might now be described as a toxic toilet bowl without a flush lever.

Jem Bluestein, Clovis