

Smoggy car owners to get PASS at cash

By Alex Cantatore, Civic Desk

Turlock Journal, Wednesday, July 22, 2009

Owners of vehicles that have a hard time passing those pesky smog checks may be eligible for a new program that offers cash to get repeat polluters off the road.

"We kind of recognized there are cars out there that don't stay fixed," said San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Air Quality Specialist Kevin Wing.

The District's Polluting Automobile Scrap and Salvage program offers \$1,000 cash or a \$5,000 check towards a newer, cleaner car for those that submit their environmentally damaging vehicle for salvage.

The District established the PASS program about a year ago in efforts to reduce the emissions belched into the Valley's already shoddy air by repeat smog check offenders. While owners of vehicles that fail smog checks are required to repair the emissions systems before the vehicle can be registered, many cars that fail once are doomed to fail again, according to District personnel.

"Once you pass the test you're good for two years," Wing said. "If it happens that the repair didn't hold, you might be out there driving and emitting at a high level."

PASS aims to catch those vehicles that are likely to fall out of compliance with smog regulations, targeting vehicles that may have been recently renewed but already belching smoke again. In order to qualify, vehicles must be continuously registered for the past 24 months, be in drivable condition and must have passed their most recent smog check.

After contacting program managers and verifying eligibility, drivers can receive \$1,000 in cash or a \$5,000 check made out to a car dealership that agrees to work with the program. That \$5,000 can be used to purchase any 2006 or newer vehicle, or a 2003 or newer vehicle for qualified low-income participants.

Those who take advantage of PASS must agree to keep the cleaner vehicle they purchase for at least three years, maintain registration and insurance, and fill out annual reports for the District.

Whether a vehicle qualifies for \$1,000 or \$5,000 is up to the District's discretion, and is based upon the level of pollutants emitted by the vehicle.

"The \$5,000 pretty much relies on a past history of smog test failures," said District Supervising Air Quality Specialist Brian Dodds. "If you haven't really failed any smog tests, you're not going to be eligible for the \$5,000."

Last year, the District sent out about 5,000 letters to area drivers who, according to smog records, have had repeated troubles hitting smog standards. However, very few owners took the District up on the offer, with only 109 drivers submitting their vehicles for testing and less than 50 actually receiving a payout.

Approximately 25,000 more letters will be sent out by the end of the week in hopes of enticing drivers to take a look into PASS this year. Additionally, anyone who feels that their vehicle may qualify for the program can call (877) 900-5865 and ask for details.

The District has approximately \$2 million in funding for the vehicle buyback program, and expects to continue on with PASS until funding dries up.

For more information on the PASS program, call (877) 900-5865.

Toxic diesel emission rules eased

Lawmakers delay strict new standards targeting companies

By Michael Gardner, U-T Sacramento Bureau

San Diego Union-Tribune, Wednesday, July 22, 2009

SACRAMENTO — Under legislative orders, state air-quality regulators are preparing to grant the besieged construction industry a temporary reprieve from tough directives aimed at reducing toxic diesel emissions.

The delay, which specifically targets companies forced to park equipment and idle workers to stay afloat, will be taken up when the California Air Resources Board meets tomorrow in San Diego.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers agreed to relax the diesel pollution standards as part of a broader budget deal this year that included a package of business-friendly concessions. The complex amendments will provide qualifying construction companies several more years to comply with looming 2010 and 2011 deadlines to replace or retrofit their construction-site equipment with soot-catching filters or traps, from forklifts to earthmovers.

To secure an extension, companies will have to provide regulators detailed information about their fleet's status, such as operator logs, fuel-use records or how many pieces of equipment have been sold or temporarily sidelined by the recession.

Those companies that can stick to the compliance schedule, or even conform early, could also benefit. Regulators propose expanding a credit system that would reward those firms by giving them broad leeway as they work to clean up their entire fleet of off-road construction equipment.

"It doesn't open any new loopholes and doesn't cost us any more than absolutely necessary in emission reductions," said Mary Nichols, board chairwoman. "Nevertheless, it will delay some of the air-quality improvements we were expecting from this rule."

Mike Lewis, representing construction companies, welcomed the respite, particularly given that the industry has lost 300,000 jobs in California since the building market began to collapse. "The relief that is being granted is a help, certainly, but it doesn't address all of the problems," he said.

Even with the delay in regulations, Lewis said diesel emissions will still continue to drop as the economic downturn drags on and fewer engines are on the job. "We are still feeling the effects of the recession," he said. "We expect those declines are going to continue until the first or second quarter of next year."

The immediate financial benefits are hard to gauge because regulators do not know how much equipment has been left idle, or how many engines have been replaced or improved to trap soot.

Still, "the cost-savings will be significant for companies heavily impacted by the recession. Their costs could be driven to zero" during the delay, said Kim Heroy-Rogalski, a state regulator who helped craft the proposed rule.

Under one scenario, a hypothetical business with a mixed-fleet of 49 vehicles that were, on average, 13 years old in 2006, would pay an estimated \$3.75 million to replace or retrofit the engines over three years. The delay could save that same business \$2.8 million in early compliance costs. But, eventually, the equipment would have to be cleaned up.

Clean-air advocates remain disturbed as the legislative order is being translated into an air-board regulation.

"The diesel engine rollback means dirtier air for Californians," warned Bill Magavern of Sierra Club California. "This is what happens when policy is hijacked out of the normal process and decided in secret by political strong-arm tactics."

There may be collateral economic damage. The air board and others recognize that some companies that invested in manufacturing or stocking retrofit equipment anticipating a surge in demand could suffer the consequences of a delay. However, that could be balanced if enough companies replace or retrofit engines early to take advantage of some incentives, regulators say.

Tomorrow's meeting, scheduled to be in the San Diego County administrative center on the Pacific Highway, comes four days before the two-year anniversary of the adoption of the initial diesel rule.

The new standards, once fully implemented, eventually could clean some 180,000 diesel-powered rigs.

Climate change could put the heat on California crops

Fruit and nut orchards in the Central Valley rely on winter chilling hours, but those are in decline, according to a UC Davis study.

By Margot Roosevelt, staff writer
L.A. Times, Wed., July 22, 2009

The Lockes have tilled the rich soil along the Mokelumne River since 1850. Now Chris Locke, 57, looks forward to passing down his orchards of 40,000 walnut trees to his four sons. But the threat of global warming has him worried. "I talk to my boys about climate change," he said. When he was young, frigid fogs rolled off the delta into Lockeford, the town named for his forebears. "We would go a week without seeing the sun. But we don't seem to get that weather anymore."

If San Joaquin Valley farmers such as Locke are fearful, so are the agricultural scientists who support California's \$10-billion annual fruit and nut crop, the largest in the nation. A new study from UC Davis, to be published today, found that the number of winter chilling hours, essential to the flowering of orchards, has declined as much as 30% since 1950 in large swaths of the Central Valley, where most of the tree crops are grown.

Only 4% of the Central Valley is now suitable for apples, cherries and pears, all high-chill fruits that could once be grown in half the valley, according to the study. By the end of the century, it says, "areas where safe winter chill exists for growing walnuts, pistachios, peaches, apricots, plums and cherries are likely to almost completely disappear."

Winter chill hours could decrease 60% from 1950 levels by mid-century and by as much as 80% by the end of the century, according to the study.

"Climate change is not just about sea-level rise and polar bears," said UC Davis researcher Eike Luedeling, lead author of the study. "It is about our food security. Climate change may make conditions less favorable to grow the crops we need to feed ourselves."

The study comes amid a spate of reports predicting a decline in agriculture in California -- which produces half of the nation's domestic fruits, nuts and vegetables -- as climate change affects water supplies and growing seasons.

The UC Davis study, which is to appear in the journal PLoS One, builds on a 2007 paper by UC Berkeley scientists Dennis Baldocchi and Simon Wong that predicted dramatic drops in winter chilling hours. But it expands on that research using a variety of climate models, and maps the expected changes in detail.

"These maps directly communicate the devastating effects of climate change on tree crops in California," said co-author Minghua Zhang, a UC Davis professor of environmental and resource science.

Baldocchi endorsed the UC Davis study, remarking, "The irony is, just as the populace is getting more in tune with eating better, eating local, our wonderful fruit industry may be negatively affected."

Some experts assume that the state's agribusiness can adapt by breeding new varieties with lower chilling needs and by expanding the use of "rest breaking" chemicals that compensate for part of the trees' lost chilling hours.

"Adapting is part of the game in agriculture," said Jim Culbertson, head of the California Cherry Advisory Board, a marketing agency.

Scientists caution that adaptation could be expensive and difficult. "Orchards remain in production for decades," Zhang said. "Growers must consider whether there will be sufficient winter chill to support the same tree varieties throughout their lifetime."

Breeding new varieties requires genetic diversity, which is limited in some crops such as pistachios. In addition, low-chilling varieties of many fruits are vulnerable to frost, and rest-break chemicals raise safety issues, lead author Luedeling said

To project winter chill, researchers used hourly and daily temperature records at 205 weather stations since 1950. They factored that data into 18 greenhouse gas emission scenarios for the 21st century, developed for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of the world's top climate scientists.

Traditionally, California farmers plant their crops by calculating the number of hours in which temperatures are expected to fall below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. The UC Davis researchers used that metric, as well as another model that measures a broader swath of temperatures. That second model shows a slower decrease in winter chill -- up to 60% from 1950 levels by the end of the century.

Some experts put little faith in predictions. "These chill models are so unsophisticated," said Steve Southwick, a former UC Davis fruit science professor who now works for OG Packing, a major cherry and walnut distributor. "The way a tree behaves doesn't much match what the models say, and the level of research on fruit trees is meager."

Luedeling is concerned by what he sees as "not much preparation for these changes" in the agricultural community. "There's not much breeding effort," he said. "The main walnut breeder at UC Davis is retiring and after that, funding will be short."

Meanwhile, Locke, the San Joaquin Valley farmer, figures his orchards' chill hours have gradually sunk from about 1,500 a few decades ago, to about 1,000 to 1,200 today. He has made up for the drop by planting trees closer together and using new varieties, but he worries he may have to switch to other crops.

Few of his farmer friends have focused on global warming, Locke said. "A lot are conservative and don't believe we are experiencing climate change. But we need to anticipate the future. I'm worried about the whole planet, not just our little ranch here."

Report surveys Four Corners air quality

By Susan Montoya Bryan, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Wednesday, July 22, 2009

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—A new study shows that reducing emissions from coal-fired power plants and oil and gas operations in the Four Corners region would help lower ozone pollution levels.

The air quality modeling study was prepared for the New Mexico Environment Department as part of a long-term effort to inventory pollution sources and develop strategies for managing the region's air quality.

Environmentalists on Tuesday pointed to the report as evidence that the region—where New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah meet—should focus on trimming emissions and developing renewable energy sources if it wants to continue to meet federal air quality standards.

"This report confirms that dirty energy is taking a dangerous toll on clean air and public health in the Four Corners," said Jeremy Nichols, director of WildEarth Guardians' climate and energy program.

The report shows that power plants and oil and gas operations account for most of the region's ozone causing pollution. Ozone, the primary component of smog, can irritate the respiratory system, reduce lung capacity and aggravate asthma. It's formed when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds react with sunlight.

While northwestern New Mexico has been on the verge of exceeding the federal ozone standard of 0.075 parts per millions, ozone levels have been exceptionally low so far this year, said

Josephine Ball, quality assurance manager with the Environment Department's Air Quality Bureau.

Cooler temperatures and moist weather have played a role keeping the levels in check, and Ball said there's anecdotal evidence that less industrial activity in the region may have resulted in fewer pollutants being emitted.

The report also considered five scenarios for improving the region's air quality, including controlling nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants and limiting nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compound emissions from oil and gas operations.

The most promising scenario—a combination of limiting emissions from both the power plants and oil and gas—would reduce the ozone level by 5 to 10 ppm depending on the time of year, according to the report.

The Air Quality Bureau recently proposed changing New Mexico regulations in an effort to meet the federal ozone standard. The proposals include requiring operators to reduce emissions from compressor engines and other equipment at oil and natural gas well sites.

World's largest telescope to be built in Hawaii

Associated Press

In USA Today, San Diego Union-Tribune and other papers, Wednesday, July 22, 2009

HONOLULU (AP) — A consortium of U.S. and Canadian universities on Tuesday announced it has decided to build the world's largest telescope in Hawaii.

Mauna Kea volcano was picked by Thirty Meter Telescope Observatory Corp. The other finalist candidate site was Chile's Cerro Armazones mountain.

The \$1.2 billion telescope should allow scientists to see some 13 billion light years away — a distance so great and so far back in time that researchers should be able to watch the first stars and galaxies forming.

The telescope will be built by the University of California, the California Institute of Technology and the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy.

Its mirror will stretch 30 meters, or almost 100 feet, in diameter. That's about three times the diameter of the current world's largest telescopes, which are located atop Mauna Kea.

Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano, is already home to 12 telescopes. It's popular with astronomers because its summit sits well above the clouds at 13,796 feet, giving scientists a clear view of the sky above for 300 days a year.

Hawaii's isolated position in the middle of the Pacific Ocean also means the area is relatively free of air pollution. Few cities on the Big Island mean there aren't a lot of man made lights around to disrupt observations.

The Thirty Meter Telescope would collect 10 times more light than existing telescopes, helping researchers more clearly see objects that appear faint with current devices. It is expected to routinely offer views of hundreds of planets orbiting around other stars and stars that are near the sun. Current telescopes have only rarely been able to show these images.

The Thirty Meter Telescope is the first of several massive telescopes universities plan to build, so it may not hold the world's largest title for long.

A partnership of European countries plans to build the European Extremely Large Telescope, which would have an 138-foot mirror. The group is considering sites in Argentina, Chile, Morocco and Spain. It plans to decide on a location next year and be able to host its first observation in 2018.

Another group of universities plans to finish the Giant Magellan Telescope, also around 2018, with an 80-foot mirror in Las Campanas, Chile.

UN climate expert warns against carbon tariffs

By Dina Cappiello- Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, Wednesday, July 22, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The head of a U.N. panel on the science of climate change says trade tariffs in a House-passed bill to limit heat-trapping pollution have only served to irritate international negotiations and could undermine U.S. efforts to persuade developing countries to enter into a new global warming treaty.

Agenda Pachauri, whose Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shared the Nobel Peace Prize with former Vice President Al Gore in 2007, told The Associated Press that lawmakers should remove the tariff provision, which in 2020 would impose a "border adjustment" on goods from countries that do not limit the gases linked to global warming.

He warned that developing countries could in turn tax U.S. exports, which are probably some of the most carbon-intensive in the world.

"This is a dangerous thing, and I think people in Congress must understand this," said Pachauri, who spoke with the AP after he addressed the National Press Club. "Please don't use this weapon."

"I'm afraid that those that have been pushing these provisions probably don't realize that all of this can cause a major negative reaction," Pachauri added. "The United States has always stood for a free market system. ... Legislation to move away from that principle is clearly counterproductive."

Pachauri's comments come as the Senate begins work on the House version of the bill in the hopes of passing the measure before nations meet in December in Copenhagen to hammer out a new treaty.

President Barack Obama has said the legislation is necessary for the U.S. to take a leadership role in the negotiations. But days after the House vote, Obama expressed concern over the border tariff provision, saying protectionist signals were the wrong message to send during a recession that has caused a dip in global trade.

The provision was added at the eleventh hour to secure the votes of Rust Belt lawmakers concerned that steel, aluminum and other energy-intensive industries would be placed at a competitive disadvantage.

But abroad, it already appears to be hindering progress toward an international treaty.

Developing countries at a recent G-8 meeting in Italy rebuffed calls by the U.S. and other industrialized nations to accept binding limits on their growing greenhouse gas emissions. And Indian officials told Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton this week that their country would not accept binding targets on emissions.

India's minister of environment and forests, Jairam Ramesh, cited the carbon tariffs under consideration in Congress among the mounting pressures on developing countries.

"There is simply no case for the pressure that we - who have among the lowest emissions per capita - face to actually reduce emissions," said Jairam Ramesh. "And as if this pressure was not enough, we also face the threat of carbon tariffs on our exports to countries such as yours."

China, which has surpassed the U.S. as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has also said it opposes tariffs. Chinese officials have called on countries importing its goods to be responsible for the emissions created in China during manufacturing.

Pachauri said Tuesday that while U.S. leadership was essential, "you can't lead by bullying. You can only lead by setting an example."

"If the U.S. starts moving in the right direction and makes certain commitments, it will act as a model for the rest of the world and it would make a major impact in terms of changing people's values and their own intentions," he said.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, July 22, 2009](#)

Consider big picture

As I read the letters to the editor, I think how small the focus of attention is for many people. There is a big world out there, and it's all tied together under one ozone layer. For a good many years I have observed how the reactions of the public become more and more limited to just ignoring the overall, and hitting on the uncomfortable.

It's like watching water heat and begin to boil. Arguments from every topic abound, and without a label to identify your meaning, well, you are practically ignored. The glorious nature of the masses has turned to self preservation, at any cost.

There is no global warming — six and a half billion people and all of their life support can't possibly affect the planet. And yet my tap water tastes and smells like chlorine, and I have allergies I never had before. The air is worse than in Los Angeles on occasion. And everywhere I see litter and pollution of some sort.

FRANK DALLA, Modesto

[Merced Sun-Star, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, July 22, 2009](#)

Letter: Don't like it? Get out

Editor: Why does it seem that there is a handful of residents and one Merced City Council member who are always complaining? I don't mean they bemoan just a few things. I mean they are constantly complaining about a slew of subjects. This group grumbles about Wal-Mart, whines about air quality, and now they're complaining about comment cards at City Council meetings.

Don't fret yourself though! I have indeed come up with a solution to make them happy and reduce the amount of "whineage" that I hear: they should move to the Dutch country of Pennsylvania.

All problems would be solved! The Amish don't use cars (yay for bikes!), don't have a Wal-Mart, and probably have communal meetings where everyone participates equally. How great is that?

CATHY GILLILAND, Merced

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Wed., July 22, 2009:](#)

Anti-Chevron campaign punishes community

By Mike Coyle

During the past four years, Chevron has been working with the city of Richmond and the community to plan a major equipment upgrade at our refinery. The upgrade would install newer, cleaner technology and equipment to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions with no heavier crude oil processed. We would continue to make gasoline for the Bay Area from the medium and light crude oils we now process. I emphasize this point because those who oppose this upgrade claim otherwise. The claim is simply not true.

An extensive multiyear environmental review of the project was conducted by experts hired by the city and with oversight from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District - the agency charged with safeguarding regional air quality. The environmental review confirmed that the project would reduce emissions and improve air quality in Richmond, an area that already enjoys some of the Bay Area's cleanest skies. The refinery would continue to meet air district emission limits.

On top of the significant environmental benefits, the project would have created 2,000 construction jobs at its peak, pumped \$75 million into the local economy and provided an additional \$61 million in community and environmental benefits through an agreement with the city.

However, a lawsuit filed by Communities for a Better Environment, West Contra Costa Toxics Coalition and Asia Pacific Network has stopped project construction, forcing the layoff of 1,300

workers and leaving another 700 jobs unfilled. Imagine the effect on people who no longer have jobs to support their families during these difficult economic times.

The lawsuit also terminated the agreement providing \$61 million for the community. This funding was contingent upon the project moving ahead. Nonetheless, Chevron made good on its commitment to honor the agreement's initial grants. Last week, we gave \$565,000 to 19 groups in the Richmond area.

Despite the termination of the community benefits agreement, we plan to continue with our traditional support of community programs in Richmond.

Chevron has called California home for 130 years. Today, we are the state's largest company. According to a study by the Milken Institute, Chevron in 2007 generated more than \$9 billion in economic activity. In 2007 and 2008, we purchased more than \$1 billion in supplies from California minority and women-owned businesses.

In 2008, Chevron contributed more than \$20 million to community programs in the state. Our employees volunteered more than 16,000 hours and donated more than \$4 million to nonprofit organizations. Chevron is committed to making California a better place.

In Richmond, we have been a proud member of the community since 1902, three years before the city was chartered. Today, we are the city's largest employer and taxpayer - providing more than 2,500 jobs and paying millions in taxes to help fund critical local government programs and services.

While Chevron is appealing a court decision on the lawsuit, the future of the project is in question. It is unfortunate that a few voices have left Richmond waiting for a more modern refinery, thousands of new jobs and millions of dollars in support to help its people realize a better future.

Mike Coyle is the general manager of Chevron's Richmond refinery.

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Wednesday, July 22, 2009:](#)

"Trust me" science doesn't cut it

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

Oh brother.

Those were my first thoughts when I read yet another study designed to scare the breath out of us, literally.

This time around, it's air pollution making babies dumb in utero (that means before they're born).

The study, of 249 poor kids in New York City linked exposure to air pollution before birth with lower IQ scores later in life, which researchers said bolstered evidence that bad air may harm the developing brain.

Words like "link," "may," "suggest," "associated with" and "could" make me very nervous when used in frightening studies like this one that not only cause worry over the health of our children but could, might, may, probably will, be used to create even more restrictive regulations for benefits that are at best uncertain.

Basics from the study:

The moms wore air monitors for 48 hours during the last few months of pregnancy to gauge inner-city pollution exposure. Of the 249 kids studied, 140 were in the high exposure group.

At age 5, those kids scored lower than kids not in the high exposure group.

All the children lived in low-income neighborhoods and fewer moms in the high exposure group had graduated from high school.

I haven't read the study, just the article about it, which we dutifully ran on the front page as many news organizations did because A) it's a study and B) it's scary.

But since I started delving into these kinds of studies more deeply, I've learned to be a more skeptical.

I contacted Stanley Young, assistant director for bioinformatics at the National Institute of Statistical Sciences in North Carolina, and asked for his thoughts.

Turns out he had already asked the authors of this study for their data set to see if he could replicate their results. They declined. (This has been an ongoing issue with the authors of other studies "linking" PM2.5 exposure with an increased death rate, but that's another rant.)

Without the data sets, Young and other scientists were left to read the study and ponder its findings with the rest of us.

Just a couple of points I pondered were that the kids came from low-income neighborhoods and at least some had uneducated parents, two factors long associated with academic underachievement.

Young, who has a Ph.D in statistics and genetics, had more scientific ponderings. He noted the researchers did vast numbers of statistical comparisons and it doesn't appear they adjusted their analysis to reflect the number of questions.

Asking loads and loads of questions means you increase your odds of getting a "hit" (something that is statistically significant) by chance alone.

"Statistically significant does not equal true," Young explained. "But you will have to trust them as they will not give up their data set."

He also noted that the lead author of the air-pollution-leads-to-dumb-kids study used at least some of the same children and others in previous research that linked (there's that word again!) prenatal air pollution exposure with genetic abnormalities that could increase risks for cancer; smaller newborn head size; reduced birth weight; developmental delays at age three; and children's asthma.

Whew!

Again, if you're talking about low-income communities, factors such as diet, alcohol consumption, smoking and a host of others could be responsible for all those findings.

And I can't help wondering, if you're looking at the same set of kids and see developmental delays early on and then low IQ scores later, is it the air? Or the kids?

As Young points out, if you don't let other scientists scratch around your data sets, we'll never really know for sure.

Despite my skepticism, I'm not saying we shouldn't do these kinds of experiments and studies, we should.

But the data should be open for inspection. In fact, considering the possible regulatory impacts on all our lives, if a dime of government money is used, it should be required by law .

Perhaps I have trust issues.