

Valley officials weigh emission law

By Russell Clemings, *staff writer*

The Fresno Bee, Sat., April 10, 2010

A state-mandated effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions is turning into a struggle by local governments to maintain control over development.

This month, Fresno County political leaders expect to vote on proposed targets for cutting emissions of those climate-changing gases -- mainly carbon dioxide from burning gasoline and other fossil fuels.

In the long term, making those cuts will change how cities grow and how their people move around.

The local effort is intended at least partly to head off more aggressive targets that could be imposed this year by the state Air Resources Board, which oversees California's climate-change program.

"We felt it was prudent for us to provide a recommendation rather than letting the ARB do it on their own," said David Fey, deputy city planner in Clovis.

Whether that strategy will work is not clear. The state still reserves the right to set more aggressive targets and may need to do so, because it is counting on local land-use and transportation measures to cut large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

An initial plan from December 2008 estimated that 5 million metric tons per year of emissions could be cut that way. That's equivalent to taking 1 million cars and light trucks off the road completely.

Local governments jealously guard their longstanding control of local land use.

The law mandating the greenhouse gas targets -- Senate Bill 375 from 2008 -- doesn't change that. It does, however, call for the ARB to set emissions targets, which the locals will have to meet or risk loss of funding for transportation and other uses.

So far, ARB officials say they are content to let local governments take the lead on the target-setting.

"They actually said that we know better than them," said Kristine Cai, a planner at the Council of Fresno County Governments, which is coordinating the local effort.

Kurt Karperos, the board's air quality and transportation planning chief, said the targets from local agencies "will guide us in identifying what's achievable."

But he affirmed that the final authority to set targets rests with his board.

A balancing act

The Fresno County group appears to be heading toward recommending a target that takes into account several other ongoing planning efforts. Among them: Fresno's plan for its Southeast Growth Area, a 14-square-mile region southeast of the city, where housing densities are being proposed that would be twice to four times as high as current levels.

It is expected to stop short of proposing the maximum emissions cuts that might be achieved. Partly that's because the locals want to hold something in reserve in case the ARB requires them to find more cuts later, one official involved in the discussions said.

Perhaps more importantly, however, planning staffers at the local agencies are afraid to propose measures that their elected officials haven't already approved, at least in concept.

"It's fine for us to model and give them some idea where we're going, but we want our City Council to weigh in on this," said Keith Bergthold, Fresno's assistant planning and development director.

A final decision on Fresno County's recommended target is expected to be made April 29 by the council of governments' policy board, composed of mayors and other leaders from throughout the county.

The big picture

SB 375 is part of a broader state effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the end of this decade.

That amounts to a 15% cut from recent levels and 30% from 2020 levels given current trends.

The single largest share of reductions identified to date comes from ARB regulations designed to reduce emissions from new cars and light trucks by 30% in 2016.

Other big shares are focused on improving energy efficiency in buildings and increasing use of renewable energy, including solar power.

The local agencies plan to provide ARB with just a narrative description of how they would meet whatever targets they propose, again fearing that sharing specific details would commit them to measures that their political leaders have not yet approved.

In general, however, the measures fall into two categories:

*Ensuring that urban development puts more people on less land than under current conditions.

*Increasing public transit use by concentrating more development in transit corridors and near "activity centers" such as major shopping and office centers.

Both of those dovetail with other long-term planning efforts in the central San Joaquin Valley, especially the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint, said Barbara Steck, the council of governments' deputy director.

The Blueprint already has been endorsed by political leaders throughout the Valley. It calls, above all else, for increased housing densities.

In Fresno County, the goal is an average of eight homes per acre in future development, compared with 3.8 under existing trends.

Unlike the planned SB375 targets, however, the Blueprint goals are purely voluntary.

To Steck, that's the biggest difference between the two.

"SB 375 is going to have more teeth," she said.

M&ET goes loco for green engines

New locomotives use only power needed, gentler on tracks

By J.N. Sbranti, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Monday, April 12, 2010

The Modesto & Empire Traction Co. is being called the "greenest" short-line railroad in North America because it has replaced all its old locomotives with energy-efficient engines that spew far less toxins into the air.

The century-old, locally owned railroad is completing the purchase of five new "ultra clean" locomotives, funded largely by a \$6.7 million state grant. Until those new U.S.-made locomotives arrive next year, the M&ET is leasing five low-polluting engines, which went into service this winter.

"We retired all of our old stinkers made in the 1940s and 1950s," said Joe Mackil, the M&ET's president and chief executive officer. "The old ones just belched the junk out. These new things are very clean."

The switch will make a difference in air quality, which is what persuaded the state to pay for the replacements, explained Todd DeYoung, program manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"They're going to be a direct benefit to air quality, and the impacts will be immediate. The benefits will be realized locally," De-Young said. He is convinced that Californians will get the best bang for their buck by buying these locomotives. "It's very cost-effective in terms of the emission reductions we'll get."

Each of the five new locomotives costs about \$1.5 million, of which \$1.35 million will come from the state's Carl Moyer Memorial Air Quality Standards Attainment Program. The M&ET will cover the rest of the price tag, and it is paying to lease similarly low-polluting locomotives until the new ones arrive next year.

The railroad's 16 engineers are thrilled by the modernization.

"The old locomotives, with all the heat, exhaust fumes and noise they created, were not a friendly environment to work in," said Ron "Pete" Peterson, the M&ET's manager of safety and training. "They were very rugged. (The cabs) got cold in the winter and very hot in the summer."

Peterson said some of the old engines were "like driving a Model A," while he equated the new locomotives to a Lexus.

"They're a lot easier to operate," Peterson said. "The computer brings on only the power we need, and it turns off what we don't need."

Like 'a buckboard down a dirt road'

The old locomotives required very skilled engineers to maneuver through Modesto's 2,000-acre Beard Industrial District, where the M&ET hauls products to and from about 65 companies, including E.&J. Gallo Winery, Frito-Lay and Del Monte.

That requires lots of starting and stopping. Peterson said the old locomotives were slippery on the tracks, but the new ones operate "like a cat clawing up a tree."

The new locomotives also are easier on the tracks, compared with some of the 1940s-vintage models that had been in use.

"That old one rides like a buckboard down a dirt road," Peterson recalled. "These new engines feel like they float."

Besides their precise handling and smooth ride, what makes the new R.J. Corman RailPower 2,000-horsepower diesel genset locomotives so special is their energy-efficient design.

"They are the cleanest technology available in diesel engines right now," DeYoung said.

They pollute less because the locomotives can turn on or off each of their three engines, depending on need. If a 100-car grain train is being hauled, all three engines are activated. But when the train pauses, two of those engines automatically shut down.

"That saves them a ton of fuel. The less fuel used, the less greenhouse gases," said Connie Nordhues, Rail- Power's national salesperson.

Pollution elements slashed

Compared with the old locomotives the M&ET had used through last fall, Nordhues said the new ones reduce particulate matter emissions by 90 percent and oxide of nitrogen emissions by 80 percent.

Those two elements cause air pollution, which is linked to health problems including asthma and cancer.

The "M&ET's entire fleet of locomotives now is the cleanest fleet anywhere in the United States and Canada," said Nordhues, whose Pennsylvania-based manufacturing company has started promoting the M&ET's "green" status in railroad trade publications.

That recognition may help the Beard business park attract new companies.

"More and more of our customers are thinking green these days," Mackil said. Potential employers who are concerned about their environmental impact might choose to move to Modesto because of these low-polluting locomotives, he said.

The new engines cost less to operate and maintain, Mackil said, so they reduce the cost of doing business in Modesto.

DeYoung said it's good news for the Northern San Joaquin Valley to get state money to pay for the locomotives: "We're always fighting for the valley's share of statewide funds."

Mackil said the old locomotives "probably are going to be exported to a third-world country where they'll still be useful, or they will be parted out" as replacement parts.

Feds discover improper storage of PCBs at Kettleman waste facility

By Eiji Yamashita, staff writer
Hanford Sentinel, Friday, April 9, 2010

Federal officials cited Waste Management's Kettleman Hills Facility on Thursday after investigation found improper disposal by the company of chemicals known to cause cancer and birth defects.

The toxic waste facility is at the heart of the ongoing birth defect controversy emerging from Kettleman City, an impoverished farmworker community 3 miles from the largest landfill facility in the West.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found problems with the facility's handling of PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls. PCBs -- once used in paints, lubricants and transformers -- have been linked to cancer and birth defects. Congress banned their use in 1976.

Kettleman Hills is the only California facility permitted to accept the PCBs, and the company is currently seeking to renew its permit.

In the notice, officials state that the violations were found during an on-site inspection and sampling conducted at the facility in February. Specifically, they note the failure to decontaminate storage structures, improper disposal, and paperwork violations.

Waste Management officials said they have taken immediate steps to correct the problems.

"The inside of the building has already been cleaned according to EPA standards and the affected soil will be immediately cleaned to meet EPA requirements. EPA also noted three paperwork violations which have already been addressed," said Bob Henry, senior district manager of the facility.

Henry defended the company's safety record and said recent monitoring of soil, air and vegetation at the site has confirmed that PCBs handled at the facility have no impact on human health and the environment.

"The health and safety of Kettleman City residents -- and all Kings County residents -- are our highest priority," Henry said.

Nearby residents are still concerned, especially in light of some 11 birth defects cases reported, and confirmed by state health officials, since late 2007 -- a situation that triggered a governor-ordered health investigation.

Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction, called the violations a "wake-up call to the agencies to cancel permits and reject new applications and also increase scrutiny on whether or not Chem Waste might be linked to the birth defects."

The company was last cited for non-compliance regarding the handling of PCBs in 2007. Waste Management also admitted in its settlement with EPA in 2005 that it failed to perform monthly monitoring of PCBs at one of its Kettleman landfills for three years from 2000-2003.

Thursday's federal action prompted a response from Cal/EPA, the federal EPA's state counterpart.

Cal/EPA is tasked with investigating possible environmental causes of health problems in Kettleman City as part of the governor's response to its birth defect concerns while also processing Waste Management's controversial application for landfill expansion.

"We have committed to the community that no decision on the landfill permit will be made until our environmental assessment is complete, and I stand by that promise," said Linda Adams, secretary of Cal/EPA.

Since the controversy hit national headlines, California's two U.S. senators have called for a moratorium on expanding the facility.

Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, chair of the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee, has also recently joined the call.

States woo Calif. dairymen with less regulation

By Michael J. Crumb - Associated Press Writer

In the Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Sunday, April 11, 2010

DES MOINES, Iowa -- The number of dairies in California has plummeted by more than 500 in the past decade, with many moving to other states enticing them with promises of lower costs and simpler regulations.

Eight states, ranging from Idaho to Iowa, have been courting dairies from California, the nation's largest milk producer. The reason is clear: Cows mean cash for local economies.

Mike Meissen, vice president for value added agriculture for the Iowa Area Development Group, estimated each dairy cow has an economic impact of \$15,000 a year.

"So if a thousand cows go into a county, that's \$15 million," said Meissen, whose group is made up of rural electric cooperatives that work to bring new business to Iowa.

While officials in other states offer California farmers a number of reasons to consider moving, one of the biggest incentives seems to be the promise of fewer regulations.

It's a message that Michael Marsh, chief executive of the Modesto, Calif.-based Western Union Dairymen, said resonates in a state he calls a "regulatory nightmare for farmers." From air and water quality rules to reporting odometer readings on farm vehicles, regulations make it difficult for farmers to do business in California, he said.

"There are regulations you have here that you don't have in any other state or around the world," said Marsh, whose organization represents 60 percent of California's dairy producers.

Darin Dykstra left California in 2002 to start a dairy in northwest Iowa. Several factors drew him and his wife to Iowa, he said, including ties to Dordt College, the Sioux Center school they graduated from, and Wells Dairy, which buys milk from the Dykstras' 3,000 cows and is known for its Blue Bunny ice cream.

Dykstra also likes the slower pace, access to Christian schools for his children and distance from urban sprawl.

"Living in Southern California, there used to be grape vineyards next to our dairy. Now there are houses there," he said. "It's not ideal to have your farm in the middle of all that and slowly we were getting pushed out - all the dairies were getting pushed out - so you have to move to the Central Valley or move out of state, and I chose to move out of state."

Because land is cheaper in Iowa, he also could afford to grow feed corn on about 1,750 acres, rather than buying it as he did in California.

Dykstra still owns part of his family's farm in California. But he said he was glad to be away from the state's regulations, such as the required installation of expensive methane digesters over manure lagoons accompanied by a ban on emissions from the engines the digesters power.

"Dairymen are trying to do the right thing, but the state is putting up road blocks," he said.

Marsh said stories like Dykstra's are all too familiar. At least eight other states are trying to attract California dairies - Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, Texas and Wyoming.

"Other states come to farm shows and say 'Come to our state where this is little regulation, low taxes, jobs, state grants.' So for a lot of farmers, they look at that and the grass may be greener," Marsh said.

Iowa, which is known mostly for hogs and corn, has been able to attract enough dairies from California and elsewhere to become the nation's 12th largest dairy producer.

Texas also has lured dairies with what it claims are less onerous regulations, an attractive climate and large feed supplies. Its dairy cow population has grown from about 17,000 in 2000 to more

than 200,000 this year, said Ellen Jordan, a dairy specialist with the Texas A&M extension. Overall, Texas ranks No. 8 among dairy states, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Producers who come here know what the regulations are," she said. "They can get a permit to operate and they know the area they are choosing is very ag friendly."

Meanwhile, the number of California dairies dropped from more than 2,200 dairies in 1999 to 1,700 in 2009.

Still, what that means isn't entirely clear. Jay Van Rein, a spokesman for the California Department of Food and Agriculture, said the decrease happened as the industry shrunk and some dairies bought others out.

"It isn't just farms or herds disappearing," he said. "In many cases, they were absorbed into other herds."

The state had about 1.8 million dairy cows last year, down some from the year before, but still more than 300,000 more than it had in 1999, according the USDA.

Van Rein declined to "wade into" issues of California's regulatory climate, saying the Legislature makes the rules and agencies enforce them. But he acknowledged some communities didn't plan their growth well, leading to homes bumping up against farms.

"In our Central Valley, where most of our farms are, they have learned that lesson and are taking steps to improve their planning before they build subdivisions that are bordering farms," Van Rein said.

Emissions bill clears committee

By Wes Sander, staff writer

Capital Press Ag Weekly, Sat., April 10, 2010

A bill to help farmers reduce greenhouse-gas emissions has cleared the Senate Food and Agriculture committee.

SB1241, by Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis, would direct state revenue streams from emissions regulations toward projects to help agriculture reduce its emissions and help producers capitalize on a possible cap-and-trade program.

The bill was approved on a 3-0 vote involving only Democrats. It draws support from a list of organic and small producers and trade associations, the California Farmers Union and Pesticide Action Network North America. It has drawn no opposition.

The bill addresses the revenue stream that the California Air Resources Board will generate by implementing regulations to fulfill AB32, the state's landmark greenhouse gas-reduction law.

The bill would establish an Agricultural Climate Benefits Advisory Committee to advise the agency on distributing the money.

The board is currently assembling a cap-and-trade system to help meet AB32's targets. The board has proposed that the state auction the system's carbon allowances, which businesses can purchase to help meet limits.

Businesses can further purchase carbon offsets, which come from operations that have implemented third party-approved systems for reducing emissions. Credits could come from farmers who have invested in reduced tillage or methane digesters, among other practices.

The bill now goes to the Senate Environmental Quality committee.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Friday, April 9, 2010](#):

Yosemite gets smog violations before Valley, South Coast

By Mark Grossi

Yosemite National Park has more ozone violations so far this year than the San Joaquin Valley and the South Coast Air Basin. Can't make that statement very often.

There were two bad air days in what must have been a dry, warm stretch of late-winter weather in Yosemite. Just to clarify, they were violations of the state standard, which is more stringent than the federal one.

How common are any kind of ozone violations in Yosemite during winter? I found one on New Year's Day 2003, which was a rotten year for air quality in the mountains.

But who would ever have guessed Yosemite would have back to back violations -- March 13 and 14 -- on the books while the Valley and South Coast have zip?

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Friday, April 9, 2010](#):

A bright future for local public transit

Go get 'em, GET! Thanks to \$16 million in state and federal grants, the Golden Empire Transit District has 27 new, natural gas-powered buses ready to hit the streets of Bakersfield and Kern County, with five more to be delivered soon, GET officials said last week.

Community leaders hope the colorful buses -- with their vibrant palette of turquoise, blue, green and yellow -- will inspire people to get excited about public transportation. We share their hope.

Riding the GET bus not only benefits individuals by helping them save money on transportation costs, but it helps the entire community. More people on the bus means fewer cars on the road, which leads to less pollution, cleaner air and less traffic congestion.

"This is wonderful for our community," Anne Schoolcraft, Ride Share coordinator for the Kern Council of Governments, told The Californian last week. "Even if it's just one day a week, it's such a savings in terms of your wallet, exercise and air quality."

So, go on, get on the GET bus, and breathe a little easier.