

## High-schoolers leading biking-to-school movement

By Jorge Barrientos, Californian staff writer  
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The new Bakersfield High School Caterpillar Biking Club is on a mission -- bike to school the entire month of May, and get as many students and residents involved as possible.

"We really just try to encourage people to ride their bikes," said BHS senior and bike club President Peter Welsh. "There's an alternative way to get around."

From Monday through Friday, students ride their bikes several miles through Stockdale Highway, taking a trail to Beach Park and over to BHS where members attend school. Some have given up their cars entirely for May -- National Bike Month -- riding to school, work and to run errands.

Welsh rides more than 13 miles every school day to and from BHS. A group of students meets at Finish Line Bicycles on Stockdale Highway just after 6 a.m.

"It's such a great way to start the morning," said Welsh, who has logged hundreds of miles this month. "It gets my day going."

The school club has gotten the support of several local biking groups, including Bike Bakersfield and Safe Routes to School, a national center advocating safe ways to get to school.

Ramon Jacquez, local coordinator of Safe Routes, has taught the students rules of the road, hand signals and ways to stay safe.

He said BHS students, who kicked off the club this month, have taken the lead in trying to get other high schools involved, and is the first campus to join Bike Bakersfield's junior club.

Local biking officials hope to use the school's club as a pilot program for other campuses. Arvin and Stockdale high schools are pushing to join the biking movement next year.

"The students are awesome," Jacquez said. "These young cyclists will be cyclists their whole lives."

Snider's Cyclery on Union Avenue is opening its doors to the students, too, teaching them how to repair bikes for free.

The students are "health-minded," simply enjoy riding their bikes and want to share that passion with others, said David Krog, a Spanish teacher at BHS and Caterpillar club adviser. Krog has ridden to school the last several years.

Adam Montoya, a junior at BHS, will take the lead next year for the Caterpillars (the club name has no real meaning, students said). His ultimate goal is to get more campuses involved in biking to school.

"It's healthy and it's fun," he said. "And it gets you from point 'A' to 'B' as a plus."

### TIPS: RIDING TO WORK/SCHOOL

- **Select your route:** Follow the same roads on your bike that you drive, or choose a more bike-friendly route that avoids highways or unsafe roads. Need help? Call the Bike Buddy Program, where Bike Bakersfield sends an experienced commuter that will teach you basic safety tips and rules on your commute.
- **A-B-C quick check:** Keep your bike well-maintained. AIR: tires should be inflated to the rated pressure noted; BRAKES: Check brake pads for wear and brake cables for fraying; CRANKSET: Make sure cranks, the arms that attach the pedals to your bike, don't move. Tighten or if both move, take to a shop; QUICK RELEASES: Be sure the quick releases, the levers that hold wheels on your bike, are firmly closed.
- **Clean up:** Shower at school or work if possible, or freshen up. Stow baby wipes and deodorant. That way you can wipe your face, feet and underarms.

**Source:** Bike Bakersfield (More information: 321-9247 or [www.bikebakersfield.org](http://www.bikebakersfield.org))

## **Florez fumes at air district for exempt ag burns**

By Mark Grossi

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Valley air officials want to allow some agricultural waste burning beyond the June 1 deadline for permanently ending the practice. Alternatives are too expensive for some farmers, air leaders say.

But state Sen. Dean Florez, who wrote the 2003 law phasing out farm burning, says the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is inflating the costs and giving some farmers a free pass.

Florez said he will ask the district board today to delay the exemptions -- which are allowed under the law -- so he can schedule a Senate Agriculture Committee hearing on the district's analysis.

"The district is finding ways that farmers can exempt themselves," said the Shafter Democrat, who has long maintained the district bends to the will of farmers and other industries. "That's very troubling."

District officials say they have complied with the law, Senate Bill 705. Over the last seven years, the amount of acreage burned each year has been reduced by 70%. That figure will increase to 80% or 90% by next month, they said, and it will further increase if cheaper alternatives are found in the future.

Officials said their 500-plus-page analysis shows there should be limited exemptions for a variety of farmers, including almond, grape and citrus growers.

The costs of chipping, grinding and sending crop waste to biomass plants are simply too much for many growers who have small farms or have specific problems, such as wire removal in vineyard waste, officials said.

And the remaining burning does not have the impact it did years ago, officials said, thanks to a smoke management system that divides the Valley into more than 100 smaller burning zones. Daily weather forecasts determine which areas can burn without smoking out the Valley.

"Farmers can't burn any time they want," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin.

Last year, nearly 1,673 tons of fine particles went into the air from farm burning. According to data filed with the California Air Resources Board, farm burning tops the list of contributors of soot and smoke, ahead of fireplace burning and farm dust.

But officials say farm burning generally does not take place during the worst times for such particles, known as PM-2.5, which is late fall and winter. The particles -- many of them from diesel trucks and fireplace burning -- tend to hang in the air for days in the Valley's fog season.

There are still problems for anyone who breathes the soot and smoke, health experts say. PM-2.5 is among the most dangerous air pollutants in the Valley, causing heart problems, lung disease and early mortality.

Air activists say the best alternative to burning is shredding the waste and tilling it into the soil.

Many growers chip their prunings and orchard removals, then send them to a biomass plant, which efficiently burns them to make electricity. A modern biomass plant produces a small fraction of the pollution that open-field burning creates.

Sadredin said there is no assurance that biomass plant operators would take the farm waste in future years, even though there is capacity at biomass plants right now. He said the uncertainty over biomass capacity makes it a factor in allowing exemptions.

The California Biomass Energy Alliance disputes the district's analysis of the biomass industry in the Valley. The region's biomass plants have room right now for a lot of farm waste because the recession has all but eliminated construction-wood waste.

"Today, a number of our member plants are extremely short of wood fuel and are curtailed or operating at reduced loads," according to a May letter from the alliance to the district.

Alliance officials also said the air district undercounted the number of biomass plants in the district. There are 12, not nine, as the district's analysis showed. The alliance anticipates biomass plants could handle woody waste from farmers in the future.

Florez criticized other parts of the district's farm-burning analysis, saying officials considered too short of a life span for orchards and vineyards.

He said growers won't have to go through the expense of replacing the crops nearly as often as the district says, meaning the district's estimates for crop removal are inflated.

The state senator also opposed the district's proposal to exempt grape growers who have more than 100 acres. District officials said it is too expensive to remove wire from the vineyard waste before it can be burned at a biomass plant.

Florez said the argument works for a small farm, but not a larger one.

"A large table grape farm will make \$3,000 an acre, but a small raisin farm might only get \$300 an acre," Florez said. "The larger growers should be removing the wire as part of their business expenses."

Officials replied that removing wire that supports the vines on stakes would take 45% to 72% of the profits on a large grape operation. The threshold for allowing the exemption is 10%, officials said.