

Valley on course to achieve ozone standard early

The Valley Voice, Thurs., June 24, 2010

The San Joaquin Valley is on course to achieve the federal ozone standard by 2022, two years ahead of schedule if improvements continue as they have in the past decade, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said. There has been a 44% reduction in violations over the last decade, officials said, crediting tough rules, industry investments in clean-air technology and cooperation from the public.

Visalia buys new tractor to comply with Air Board ruling

The Valley Voice, Thurs., June 24, 2010

In order to comply with the San Joaquin Valley Air Resources Board rules for diesel engine emissions, the city of Visalia had to purchase a new tractor for the water plant at a cost of \$128,743.

Solar heating up in the Valley: Walmart Distribution Center in Porterville part of 'green' initiative

By SIERRA2THESEA News Service

In the Porterville Recorder, Thursday, June 24, 2010

Central California is pioneering roof-top solar at your neighborhood big box store as well as Valley cold boxes — those big cold storage buildings that many local towns have.

Just in time for summer, the Visalia Costco Wholesale warehouse has turned on a new 500KV photovoltaic solar system on its roof. Some 3100 panels were installed by REC Solar of San Luis Obispo. The system provides about 25 percent of the power needs of the warehouse says Franz Lazarus, Sr. VP with Costco.

“We have about 40 systems now operating with another 10 in the pipeline” said Lazarus noting that most of the units are on Costco roof-tops in the Western U.S.

Not to be outdone — Kohl’s department store began its solar program in Central California in 2007 with the activation of solar panels at its Visalia and another California store. The company currently has 86 solar locations nationwide with the near term goal of reaching 100 locations in the coming months.

Also locally, Walmart Stores, Inc. installed a 554-kilowatt solar power system at the Walmart store in Hanford, early last year. The system generates approximately 15 percent of the store’s electricity.

The Hanford store was part of a Walmart pilot project to purchase solar power systems from solar supplier SunPower and other solar providers for up to 22 Walmart stores, Sam’s Club locations and distribution centers in California and Hawaii.

These solar power systems at Walmart’s facilities replace 7,000 to 8,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions per year. The systems help move Walmart toward its long-term goal to be supplied 100 percent by renewable energy, and will provide immediate cost savings over current utility rates.

The Hanford Walmart store — as well as the Walmart Distribution Center in Porterville — are two of eight Walmart facilities in California to have received SunPower solar power systems, totaling 4.2 megawatts, by the end of last year. The other six Walmart facilities included in the SunPower contract are located in Chino, Simi Valley, Brea, Orange and Lakewood and Palmdale.

Sun Cools Cold Boxes

Even bigger power users are the Valley cold storage facilities that can match the size of big box stores. Here, power costs to chill fruit and other food products can amount to 25 percent of the cost of operating.

This month, two new REC Solar units are going up in southern Tulare County costing \$4.5 million each. Installations will be made at Castle Rock Sales and VBZ, both in Richgrove. Both are major grape growers who have contracted with REC to do the work already underway. Each project is expected to provide 50 percent of the power needs for these electricity hungry buildings. The units should be fully in place by August.

"Our power rates went up March 1 anyway" said Castle Rock operations manager Mike Johnson. "This has helped improve the payback period for installing solar to 4 to 4 and 1/2 years," said Johnson. "Used to be solar would take 15 years to pay off."

Solar experts say that if you can pay systems off in less than five years you will be getting free electricity for the life of the units, which is expected to be more than 20 years.

Johnson says the solar arrays are being installed next to their huge 300,000 square foot cold storage building ready for most of this year's grape harvest. It's the same set-up at VBZ down the street.

The grape growers are not alone. Last year, Del Monte Foods dedicated a new 1.9-megawatt solar power system installed at two of Del Monte's manufacturing plants. Combined, the two installations represent the largest solar roof-top system in California's Central Valley. The system is expected to reduce carbon emissions by more than 95 million pounds over 30 years, which is equivalent to planting 9,800 acres of trees or not driving almost one billion miles on California roads, as determined by conversion formulas provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Del Monte estimates the system will deliver approximately \$500,000 in savings on electrical costs in the first year of operation, and \$25 million over its expected 30-year lifetime.

Del Monte's Hanford, plant is hosting a 1.2-megawatt solar installation. At the company's Kingsburg plant, a 759-kilowatt installation is in place.

In late 2008 the Tulare US Cold Storage plant installed a 785,00kWh unit that offsets 14 percent of the power need for their main building that stores milk products. Based on this first company installation, US Cold Storage is planning alternative energy systems on many of its 35 facilities that cover 200 million cubic feet, according to the company's latest newsletter.

Vida to zero in on health issues

By Rebecca Plevin

Vida en el Valle, Wed., June 23, 2010

EARLIMART -- Sprayers spewing pesticides have long been a common sight for Teresa De Anda, who grew up across the street from a grape vineyard in this unincorporated Tulare County community of about 6,583.

But she began viewing the sprayers from a more critical perspective on Nov. 13, 1999, the day a sprinkler application of the soil fumigant metam sodium blew into her hometown and sickened more than 170 people.

"The Big Accident," as she refers to it today, poisoned De Anda and five of her seven children. Then it angered her, and inspired her to take action.

She created El Comité Para el Bienestar de Earlimart (Organization for the Health and Well-being of Earlimart) to raise awareness of pesticide drifts, and now serves as the Central Valley coordinator for Californians for Pesticide Reform.

Her goal, she said, is to educate communities about pesticides, and encourage lawmakers to protect people from harmful chemicals.

"I know ag has to happen, and it's going to keep on happening," De Anda said. "But people need to be aware that humans can get hurt."

Over the next year, Vida en el Valle will zero in on critical health issues -- like exposure to pesticides -- that are impacting Latino communities across the San Joaquin Valley.

Readers will meet the people affected by chronic health issues -- like access to clean drinking water, healthy air, safe communities and healthy food -- and the community groups advocating for change.

The in-depth stories will also include a public policy perspective: What policies have created these unhealthy situations? What can local or state decision-makers do to fix these problems?

The stories, which will be reported and written by this reporter, are supported by a grant from the California Endowment, a private, statewide health foundation.

Why is Vida en el Valle dedicating so much time and newsprint toward community health issues?

Because Valley residents are hit on all sides by health and environmental factors, and the poor and people of color are often hit hardest. And because without media attention, conditions like these could persist:

The Bakersfield, Visalia-Porterville, Fresno-Madera, Sacramento, and Hanford-Corcoran metropolitan regions rank in the top ten in the American Lung Association's State of the Air 2010 rankings for most polluted cities by ozone, year-round particulate pollution, and short-term particulate pollution.

According to the association, minorities and lower-income groups are disproportionately affected by illnesses caused by air pollution.

In 2006, more than 326,700 Valley residents were served water with levels of contamination over a legal limit, primarily due to bacteria, nitrates, arsenic, and disinfectant byproducts, according to the Visalia-based Community Water Center.

Latino communities are more likely to have contaminated water than non-Latino communities, the center says.

The San Joaquín Valley is home to more than 220 disadvantaged, unincorporated communities. In these communities, where residents rely on the county government for services, people tend to lack the basic features of a safe and healthy environment, like clean water, sewage lines, storm drains, streetlights, and sidewalks, according to the national research and action institute PolicyLink.

And, because as EPA regional director Jared Blumenfeld put it when asked why he has prioritized environmental justice issues in the San Joaquín Valley, "(The Valley) is a part of the world that deserves attention, and hasn't gotten the attention it requires."

These community health stories won't be effective without your input. We want to know what health issues you're experiencing in your communities, and what types of health improvements you envision for your neighborhood.

MID wood-burning plant questioned

Proposed source of renewable energy draws concerns over need, feasibility

By John Holland

Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Thurs., June 24, 2010

A plan to turn orchard wood into electricity drew questions Wednesday about whether it would help clear the air.

Backers said the plant, proposed for the Beard Industrial District in southeast Modesto, would cleanly burn wood that has long been torched in the open.

But Modesto resident Brad Barker said open burning has been almost entirely phased out by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It seems like we're solving a problem that may not exist," he said.

The comments came at a public hearing on the possible environmental effects of the plant, which would supply power to the Modesto Irrigation District.

The 33-megawatt plant would meet 8 percent of the MID's demand and help it reach a state mandate to get at least 33 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020. The district stands at 12 percent, almost all of it wind, but could hit the target in a couple of years with wind additions and the wood plant.

The wood project is being planned by Stephen Endsley, a real estate investor and retired cardiologist in Modesto, and Bay City Boiler & Engineering Co. in Hayward. They hope to get a federal grant to cover 30 percent of the \$85 million cost.

The Mariposa Road plant would burn wood removed from nut and fruit orchards during pruning or replacement of the trees. The wood would come from within a 50-mile radius.

Phil Reese, an environmental consultant on the project, said the plant would emit only 2 percent of the pollution that open burning produces.

"Open-field burning is a phenomenally ineffective and inefficient way of combusting wood," he said.

In response to Barker, Reese said some open burning could continue to be allowed under exemptions to the air district's phase-out.

The district staff noted that the plant would displace fossil fuels, which are considered major culprits in the carbon dioxide emissions believed to be causing climate change. Trees are a "carbon-neutral" source because they absorb this gas from the atmosphere while growing, the staff said.

A group called Sustainable Action Modesto has said the wood supply could fall short, which could force the operators to use other fuels that could have an impact on the environment. The project planners said the plant would use only a small part of the available wood.

The MID board is scheduled to consider certifying the environmental study Aug. 10. The planners also need a power purchase agreement from the district.

The district would buy the power over 25 years. The price has not been set, but district staff estimates that it will require a 4 percent rate increase.

Proponents say the cost is worthwhile because the plant would run 24 hours a day. Wind power is limited to when the breezes blow, and solar power, including a plant proposed for north McHenry Avenue, comes only when the sun shines.

Solar power plant expanding

By Courtenay Edelhart, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, June 24, 2010

AREVA Inc. is expanding its Bakersfield solar power plant by adding a fourth line of solar panels, increasing capacity at the plant by 43 percent.

The plant belongs to Paris-based AREVA, an energy giant mostly owned by the French government that took over the facility as part of its acquisition of alternative energy company Ausra in March. The AREVA Solar business unit is based in Mountain View and sells electricity to the wholesale energy market, including utilities such as Pacific Gas & Electric.

"We still consider ourselves a small company, but now we have this immense experience and capability behind us," said senior vice president of engineering William Conlon. "It's just tremendous to have this big machine backing us."

Construction of the first of three existing lines of solar panels at the 11.3-acre Kimberlina solar thermal power plant in Bakersfield began in spring 2008. Initially, the facility was only used for testing, but last May the company began selling electricity.

The plant has a permanent operating staff of six employees, but the expansion has brought in five construction managers and about 50 construction workers.

The new line might create one more permanent position, but because most of the functions of the system are automated, it doesn't take many people to operate it, said AREVA Solar chief executive officer Robert Fishman.

Each of the Kimberlina plant's lines of panels is about 1,200 feet, and rotates incrementally throughout the day to track the sun. Mirrors reflect solar heat onto boiler tubes to raise steam.

The new line will be larger than the previous three with 13 rows of mirrors instead of 10.

Globally there is a great deal of interest in clean, alternative energy sources as a hedge against volatile fossil fuel prices.

The market for solar power plants is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 20 percent over the next decade, Fishman said.

California's three major utilities -- PG&E, Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric -- have a state mandate to produce at least 20 percent of their electricity using renewable sources by this year, and at least 33 percent by 2020.

PG&E says it will meet the first goal and is working "aggressively" to make the next target.

"We're mandated by the state, but also as a company PG&E believes that it's the right thing to do," said spokesman Denny Boyles. "Carbon-free sources are better for the environment and better for our customers."

AREVA hopes to have the fourth line complete by Labor Day.

Cut suburban sprawl, save energy, study urges

Will Kane, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Thur., June 24, 2010

New development in California needs to be designed from the start to conserve electricity and water, decrease driving time, improve air quality and promote a sustainable lifestyle, according to a landmark study of the state's future growth.

Vision California, the state's first major planning document in almost 30 years, was released Wednesday.

Growth should focus not on increasing suburban sprawl but instead on creating compact development in already established cities, the report says.

Bringing commuters closer to their jobs, its authors argue, can help Californians drive 3.7 trillion fewer miles and save 140 billion gallons of gasoline by 2050.

"The days when people could afford to drive until they find an affordable quality home maybe are gone," said Peter Calthorpe, head of Calthorpe Associates, the Berkeley firm that wrote the plan.

There are few surprises in the document, which focuses on a theme Californians have heard for decades: We need to conserve increasingly scarce resources.

The \$2.5 million effort was overseen by the Strategic Growth Committee, a Cabinet-level group that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger told to develop a state blueprint for growth.

"California is leading the nation in tackling smart and comprehensive land-use planning," Schwarzenegger said in a statement. "By working together at all levels of government, we can help create a brighter, more sustainable future for generations of Californians to enjoy."

Even though the report is only a recommendation with no teeth, the plan takes direct aim at today's development politics in California, where cities and regions have for decades insisted on having the autonomy to develop their own growth initiatives.

The difference now is that a variety of statewide rules and projects, including requirements to cut greenhouse gas emissions and the effort to design and build a high-speed rail system, requires that planning agencies throughout the state look at development from a broader perspective.

"It is always dangerous to isolate one issue, no matter how important that issue may be," Calthorpe said.

The political realities of California could dilute the full impact of the report.

A 2008 law gives the state authority to override regional plans that do not do enough to cut greenhouse gas emissions, but that authority has rarely been used.

Additionally, GOP gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman has said that if elected she would suspend a 2006 law that requires greenhouse gas emissions be reduced by roughly 25 percent. Whitman and other conservatives complain that the plan - strongly backed by Schwarzenegger - will increase energy costs and stifle much-needed economic growth.

A measure to suspend the emission rules qualified this week for the November ballot.

But Calthorpe said sustainable growth is necessary and will survive any short-term political delays.

"Quite frankly, I think market forces are just pushing us in this direction," he said. "I think a lot of this has its own momentum."

4 Calif. rail yard targeted for emission reduction

By Noaki Schwartz of the Associated Press

In the Stockton Record, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Thurs., June 24, 2010

LOS ANGELES (AP) — State air regulators this week are expected to consider voluntary emission reductions over the next decade at four rail yards in Southern California.

California Air Resources Board spokeswoman Karen Caesar says that since 2005 the state has significantly cut pollution at rail yards and this latest proposal will reduce emission levels by more than 130 tons by 2020.

The targeted rail yards are in San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Long Beach and the city of Commerce.

But critics say the changes should be on an accelerated timetable and be applied to more rail yards.

In addition to idling ships and truck traffic, rail yards are significant sources of pollution in the goods movement industry.