

[Business Journal commentary, Fri. Aug. 6, 2010:](#)

Clean air grants should help farmers curb burning

By Mike Lane

On July 28 in Sacramento, State Senator Dean Florez (D-Shafter) convened a hearing to review rulings by the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (SJVAPCD) and the California Air Resources Board to continue to allow the open field burning of agricultural waste products in the San Joaquin Valley.

I was on the "2" side against on an 8-2 vote to accept the SJVAPCD analysis and recommendations on this when it came before our board in May. It was clear to me at that time that ag could do more but was unwilling to do so because of their antipathy toward Sen. Florez. Henry Jay Forman, Ph.D. basically said as much in the meeting and was castigated for it. He is a scientist from UC Merced and was the only other board member to vote with me. In fact, at our hearing, I had encouraged the board to postpone the vote by a week so that we could hold a special meeting to go over the data with Sen. Florez and Mark Arax and strike a viable compromise, but my suggestion was rebuffed.

It is often through conflict and confrontation that true progress is made in public policy debates because it forces all parties back to the negotiating table. I would prefer that Sen. Florez more frequently acknowledge and display sympathy for the difficulty of being in the agricultural industry in California given the many taxes, fees, regulations, water supply challenges, etc. Perhaps his successor in the State Senate will do this.

At the hearing last week in Sacramento, SJVAPCD Executive Director Seyed Sadredin offered revised data that demonstrates more can be done to eliminate open field burning. In fact, Mr. Sadredin finally said that our goal should be the complete elimination of ag burning. Up to this point, it has been the position of the district that this was not financially feasible nor the optimal use of district resources in any case. It has been claimed that purchasing new buses and engines is more productive.

Significant progress has been made since the passage of Sen. Florez' bill in 2003, which restricted ag burning. About 70% of all open field burning has been eliminated. While some exceptions and exemptions on a case-by-case basis may be necessary and appropriate, the fact is we live in a deep bowl in the Valley and must reduce the practice even further in order to improve air quality.

Open field burning is a 19th century practice being utilized by our 21st century agri-business industry in California. However, the entire financial burden of eliminating ag waste burning should not be borne solely by our agriculture industry, which feeds us and the whole world. The vast majority of grant funds allocated by the district are directed at mobile sources, e.g., the purchase of new engines and vehicles. While it is true that 70% of the air pollution in our Valley comes from mobile sources, just buying new busses will not solve our nonattainment issues because much of the traffic that travels up and down Interstate 5 and Highway 99 is comprised of big rigs from outside the Valley, from other states and even from other countries.

The district will give out \$200 million in grants this year in order to improve our air quality. Is it really too much to ask that a small percentage of that amount be dedicated to providing financial incentives to farmers, purchasing equipment such as chippers and entering into contracts to ensure sufficient capacity at biomass plants?

While it is true that many sources of the grant funds under the district's control are restricted, our congressional delegation and state legislators who are always pledging their fealty to agriculture on the campaign trail could take the initiative and work with the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies to ensure that adequate resources exist to transition our farming industry away from open field burning completely. In addition, during our recent budget hearings, I requested that discretionary grant funds with the needed flexibility be programmed for this purpose and I will continue to insist on this.

The fact is by burning ag waste we not only pollute our own air in the basin, we also lose the potential energy that could be generated by taking the waste to biomass plants and converting it to power our economy. We have 12 biomass plants in and around the Valley — more than any other air district in the nation. Let's take advantage of this now. A strategic partnership between ag and the clean energy industry could transform our region and significantly improve our air quality and economy. Through this joint venture and with a lot of goodwill and cooperation we can profitably provide both the food and the fuel required by the residents of our state.

Sen. Florez will be termed out of the state Senate this year and this was his last hearing for now. While always colorful and frequently controversial, he is a master of public policy and has served his constituents and the Valley well. Thank you Sen. Florez.

Mike Lane of Visalia serves on the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the Visalia City Council.

Modesto Irrigation District wood-burning plant debated

MID weighing benefits vs. environmental concern

By John Holland, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, August 10, 2010

It made sense to cavemen: If you need fuel, start with the branches and twigs all around you.

Eons later, the Modesto Irrigation District is thinking along the same lines. A plant proposed for the Beard Industrial District would burn wood from the region's orchards to make electricity.

Proponents see this as an ideal source for the MID's power customers: It would create local jobs, unlike fossil fuels from distant places. It would cleanly consume wood that farmers have long torched in the open.

"We set out to produce a unique, environmentally friendly biomass plant for the people of Modesto," said Robert Ellery, a partner in the project, at an MID board workshop last month.

The 33-megawatt plant, which would meet 8 percent of the district's power needs, would burn about 375,000 tons of chipped wood each year from Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties.

Most of it would be from nut and fruit orchards removed to make way for new plantings or development. The fuel could include pruned limbs from living trees and wood waste from construction sites.

Ellery, who owns a Hayward boiler company, is a partner in the project with Stephen Endsley of Modesto, a real estate investor and retired cardiologist.

"This biomass plant is right in the middle of our community," said Endsley, a former almond grower.

The partners plan to spend about \$80 million to build the plant. They hope to cover 30 percent of that with a federal economic stimulus grant.

The plant is expected to employ 22 people. Fifteen to 20 others would work for contractors that collect and haul the fuel. The plant, which could be running by fall 2012, would be the first

biomass operation in the MID's territory. The state has about 30 such plants, including one near Chinese Camp that mainly uses trees thinned from forests.

The MID board had tentatively planned to vote on the project today, but it has been postponed to at least Aug. 24 so district staff can respond to concerns about the plant's environmental impacts.

The Stanislaus Taxpayers Association has been the main critic, questioning the cost and the emissions. It takes issue with the proponents' claim that controls on nitrous oxides, a key component of smog, would be among the tightest ever achieved.

"It is a completely fictitious, unsupported rate of emissions," association treasurer Eric Reimer said at the workshop. "It has never been accomplished."

Emissions goals

The plant aims to emit no more than 0.012 pounds of nitrous oxide for each million British thermal units of heat produced from the wood. Ellery said his company, Bay City Boiler & Engineering Co., has a patent pending on an emission-control system that would achieve this.

The pollution limit would be one-eighth of the 0.1-pound standard that can be achieved with today's best technology, said Dave Warner, director of permit services for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

He said that if the plant cannot meet the 0.012-pound target, it still would have to stay within 0.065 pounds, less than the current technology.

It's worth a try to achieve the lower rate, Warner said, to see if it can be applied to future projects. His agency has approved a tentative permit for the MID plant.

The taxpayer group also worries about the ammonia that would be injected into the plant's exhaust to help break up the nitrous oxide. The group claims some of the ammonia would escape, spreading a strong odor and irritating people's lungs.

Warner said "small amounts of ammonia are inevitably released into the air," and his agency would require monitoring to assure that the gas does not cause problems.

Most open burning on farms has been phased out under a 2003 state law. That has prompted critics of the biomass plant to ask whether it would do much to improve the air.

Warner said burning continues at about 20 percent of the old level under exemptions to the law, including one for small parcels.

"Open burning of ag waste is so dirty and thoroughly uncontrolled," he said. "Burning it in a controlled environment results in significant reduction in emissions."

The proponents also see the plant helping to stem climate change, believed to be caused mainly by burning of carbon-based fuels.

Wood is among these fuels, they acknowledge, but they say the emissions would be canceled out by the carbon that the trees absorb from the air while growing.

Jerry Jackman of Modesto questioned this assertion at the board workshop.

"Consider that trees grow for decades and this plant will be burning 1,000 tons a day," he said.

The backers of the plant say it also would reduce emissions of methane, an especially potent climate changer that is produced when wood decays. In many orchards, wood chips from pruned limbs are left on the ground to improve the soil quality.

The plant would provide a new market to people who make a living at pulling out orchards. One of them is Jesse Angel, based near Delhi.

"A local plant would be great because all of your costs pretty much are in trucking," he said.

Enough fuel supply?

Dave Thomas, president of the taxpayers association, questioned whether the region has enough wood to supply this and other plants. He said biomass is an unreliable source that would cost MID ratepayers far more than power from natural gas, the main fuel.

The price of the power has not been disclosed, but it is at a level that works for both the MID and the builders, said Greg Salyer, manager of resource planning and development for the MID.

He said biomass is somewhere between the cost of wind, the cheapest renewable source, and solar, the most expensive. And the 20-year contract would cap increases at 2 percent a year, he said.

The wood burner would have the advantage of running at all hours, district officials said. They point out that wind turbines turn only when the breezes blow and solar panels produce only when it's sunny.

The project got support at the workshop from the Modesto Chamber of Commerce and the Stanislaus Economic Development and Workforce Alliance.

"The Chamber of Commerce likes the fact that it provides local jobs in our community and that it is a green project," Chief Executive Officer Joy Madison said.

Phil Reese, chairman of the California Biomass Industry Alliance, said the plant would be relatively cheap to operate because it would be new and reliable.

BY THE NUMBERS

375,000: Tons of chipped wood waste that the proposed power plant would burn each year

50: Average number of truck trips each day to deliver wood chips to the plant from orchards and other sources

2 to 3: Average daily truck trips to haul ash from the plant to processors that would use it to make concrete and other products

200 to 400: Gallons of water the plant would use per minute for cooling of the generating equipment and other purposes. It would come from an existing well with a 1,500-gallon-a-minute capacity.

RENEWABLE POWER

How utilities are faring on the state mandate to get at least 33 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2020:

Modesto Irrigation District: 12 percent as of 2010, almost all wind. It could reach the target by 2013 with planned wind additions, a large solar plant and the wood-burning plant.

Turlock Irrigation District: 28 percent as of 2010, almost all wind from one Pacific Northwest site

Pacific Gas & Electric Co.: 14 percent as of 2008, including wind, solar, biomass and other sources

Note: Large hydroelectric systems do not count toward the goal.

Feinstein calls for EPA to reconsider pesticide

by Associated Press

Capital Press, Monday, August 9, 2010

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- California Sen. Dianne Feinstein has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider its approval of a cancer-causing chemical used by farmers in other states to kill soil-bound pests.

Feinstein said in a letter last month to the EPA that scientific evidence presented during methyl iodide's California registration shows federal regulators may have allowed the compound to be used at dangerous levels.

The EPA approved methyl iodide for use in most of the country in 2007.

California regulators opted to put the compound through their own registration process and gave it tentative approval in April, despite concerns by a scientific advisory panel that it could poison the air and water.

An EPA spokeswoman did not return a phone call.