

San Joaquin Valley nut industry works to cut dust

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010

Almond and walnut growers are harvesting their crops with the help of machines somewhat like vacuum cleaners.

But unlike the household appliances, these rigs can spew out plenty of dust as they go about picking up nuts.

In recent years, industry people have worked on ways to reduce the dust, which can cause health problems for people who breathe it.

Among the innovators is Doug Flora, co-owner of Exact Harvesting Systems Co., west of Modesto. His company has made a mechanical harvester that traps much of the dust by drawing it through a big polyurethane brush. A stream of water causes the dust to form into tiny mudballs that fall harmlessly to the ground.

"Our goal all along has been to address the dust problem without compromising production," Flora said.

By that, he means that the dust-control system must not reduce the speed of the harvester. Nut growers are on a tight schedule to get the crops in before autumn storms.

Almond grower Steve Van Duyn saw a demonstration of the new harvester in his Salida-area orchard last week. He came away impressed.

"What dust there is stays really close to the machine and drifts back down," said Van Duyn, whose orchard was harvested the same day with a conventional machine that sent dust across half a dozen rows of trees.

Mechanical harvesting has helped make almonds the second-highest-grossing crop in the Northern San Joaquin Valley, after milk. The nuts brought about \$935 million to growers last year, according to county crop reports.

Walnuts are a sizable business, too, bringing an estimated \$290 million to north valley growers.

Each harvest starts with shaking the trees to bring the nuts to the ground, where they are shaped into windrows. They then are picked up by harvesters, in what tends to be the dustiest part of the process.

In extreme cases, the dust clouds can cause accidents on roads. Even moderate amounts can be trouble for sensitive people.

"It's a short-term thing, but on the days it's occurring, it can be a lot," said Jim Swaney, a permit services manager with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The dust particles are small enough to get deep into the lungs and even cross cell walls, air district spokesman Anthony Presto said. "You are affecting lung function, and you are also affecting the heart."

The district has worked with the almond and walnut industries on dust-control measures. They include smoothing the orchard floor before harvest, tweaking the fans and other parts on the machines, and aiming dust away from roads and homes. If time is not an issue, harvesters can slow down.

Machines in wide use today have reduced dust by 30 percent to 40 percent compared with 20 years ago, said Gabriele Ludwig, who oversees research at the Almond Board of California, based in Modesto.

Efforts on dust reduction continue, but it is unlikely a nut orchard ever will be as clean as a living room rug. Summers are long and dry in the Central Valley, and irrigation stops before harvest because the crop should not get wet.

"It's not that there won't be any dust," Ludwig said. "It's reducing the amount of dust."

USDA, EPA officials play up farm-based conservation

By Wes Sander, staff writer

Capital Press, Tuesday, Sept. 21, 2010

The second-in-command officials of USDA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency visited the Central Valley on Sept. 20 and 21 to call attention to what they called enhanced collaboration to boost resource-conservation projects on farmland.

Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan and EPA Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe visited wildlife-conservation areas, a dairy methane digester and a farm employing emissions-control technology.

"We think there are opportunities for stronger partnerships between our two agencies," Perciasepe said.

They described the trip as an effort to spark ideas for helping farmers employ technology and farming practices that reduce carbon emissions, conserve energy and promote wildlife while also preserving their bottom lines.

The two officials are seeking "ways to allow (farmers) to be creative in ways that allow them not to go under," Merrigan said.

The officials sought to highlight the Environmental Quality Incentives Program conducted by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

They also called attention to the plight of dairy owners who have built methane digesters to produce electricity. With little standardization among digesters and stringent rules imposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, dairy owners and digester developers have encountered permitting processes that take 18 months and run up huge costs.

Perciasepe said EPA intends to contribute funding to the effort to find a standardized regulatory solution for digesters. The agency has designated the San Joaquin Valley an "extreme non-attainment area" for compliance with clean-air laws.

Merrigan said the agencies and Congress need to create stronger incentives for conservation practices while smoothing regulatory burdens.

"Producers are facing a number of different government bodies giving direction, and that can be frustrating," she said.

"They are wanting to care for the land," Merrigan said. "We understand the realities that farmers face, and we've got to juxtapose those with the realities in Congress and figure these things out."

Federal ag officials tour S.J.

Farmers' worries about dueling rules eased by visit

By Reed Fujii

Stockton Record, Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010

Top federal officials toured Central Valley farm and conservation sites Tuesday, reviewing Earth-friendly innovations but also getting an earful about the challenge of protecting the environment while at the same time preserving commercial agriculture.

The tour, headed by U.S. Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan and Environmental Protection Agency Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe, included stops at a Lodi dairy where manure powers an electric generator and at a farm in the south San Joaquin Delta that applies many conservation tillage practices.

"You can have environmental improvement through agriculture," Merrigan observed.

One demonstration of that was the use of farm tillage equipment that can plow, turn and shape and plant soil in one to three passes vs. the dozen or more trips traditionally needed.

"This has kind of revolutionized California agricultural tillage," said Dino Del Carlo, the south Delta farmer who showed off some of the equipment used on his cucumber and tomato fields.

It takes a large tractor with a big engine to pull the Eliminator, made by Wilcox Agri-Products Inc. in Walnut Grove and which features multiple rows of blades, discs, rollers and even fertilizers and seeders. Despite that, Del Carlo said, "Overall, we're still saving a tremendous amount of fuel."

Merrigan applauded those types of gains.

"I find most farmers don't need motivation. They are motivated," she said. "It really amounts to trying to remove barriers that hamper them or cost barriers that they can't surmount."

Del Carlo said he has used some government programs to help pay for conservation tillage and drip irrigation systems.

"They definitely helped us improve our operation," he said. "A lot of these things are so expensive, we couldn't do it without help."

Perciasepe said the officials were not just looking at innovation but at eliminating problems government may pose.

For example, he noted the electric generating system Castellanelli Bros. Dairy in Lodi is fueled by methane from manure but has been dinged by clean-air rules because it also produces nitrogen oxides that contribute to Valley smog.

"That's sort of the trade-off that we're looking at," Perciasepe said in explaining his agency committing \$400,000 to review the issue.

Dairy owner Larry Castellanelli said he's been frustrated by clean-air rules, when his project produces renewable energy, reduces dependence of foreign oil and cuts greenhouse gas emissions.

However, he said the EPA administrator recognized the dilemma and expressed support for similar projects.

"It was a definite positive," he said.

Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the Nisei Farmers League, said he had a good chance to express his concerns that possibly stricter limits on nitrogen oxides and particulate emissions could put many farmers out of business.

"I'm very encouraged," he said of Perciasepe's visit. "He really gets it."

[Sacramento Bee, Guest Commentary, Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010:](#)

Viewpoints: Is 'smart growth' law on right track? Yes

By Michael Dieden, Special to The Bee

This week is decision time for the California Air Resources Board.

Will board members act to keep California positioned as a leader in reducing our dependence on foreign oil and improve our quality of life?

Or, will they cave into pressure from Big Oil, locking another generation of Californians into just one option when it comes to getting around town – the automobile?

This week the Air Resources Board will have to resist the efforts of lobbyists for Big Oil and suburban sprawl developers who are trying to postpone California's goal of lowering its greenhouse gas emissions. Low targets mean business as usual. Strong targets mean an exciting new future for California. As a socially responsible real estate developer, I say strong targets, and here's why.

Since I'm in the housing business, I pay close attention to market demand. The new housing consumers want to live in neighborhoods where they don't have to jump in the car every time they leave the house. They want more options to get from point A to point B – whether by bike, on foot or using public transit.

The market bears this out. My firm, Creative Housing Associates, completed the Mission Meridian Village project in South Pasadena in 2005. The project features 67 homes located near transit. According to a study by Coldwell Banker, in the five years since its completion, Mission Meridian Village outperformed all other comparable projects in the market area by 26 percent. While my competitors' properties lost 16 percent of their value, Mission Meridian gained 10 percent. Mission Meridian is more desirable to homebuyers because it offers a better quality of life.

So what does this have to do with greenhouse gas emissions? In setting strong targets, the Air Resources Board will create incentives for the development of homes in walkable communities that are located near transit.

All Californians would benefit from environmentally conscious development. Homes located in neighborhoods that give people more options to get to and from work, school and other destinations mean fewer trips to the gas pump and more cash in their pocketbook.

Imagine living in a neighborhood that would allow you to give up one of the family cars. Doing so would save a family an average of \$8,500 annually. Put that into a savings account over a 10-year period and it's enough to send your kids to college.

Strong targets will also reduce air pollution, creating safer and healthier communities. According to an ARB study, about 9,000 people die prematurely each year from long-term exposure to pollution from diesel-powered vehicles.

California can, and should, lead the way in supporting environmentally responsible development by setting strong targets for reducing our carbon emissions. California must continue to be the leader that says "no" to Big Oil and leads this country into a new energy policy that promotes livable, walkable neighborhoods over more freeways and soulless subdivisions. We've tried that. Just take a look at the foreclosure signs to see that it didn't work.

I urge the California Air Resources Board to adopt strong targets Thursday.

They will be good for business, good for our economy and good for our quality of life.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010:](#)

Opposes high-speed rail

I am against high-speed rail. Years ago, I traveled on the high-speed bullet train in Japan as a tourist. Later, my hotel was a block from the tracks.

The bullet train was well-used early in the day and again in the evening by commuters going to work. The rest of the day it was used by a few tourists for the ride.

When my hotel was near the tracks, I asked why not slow the train during the hours there were few passengers. The response was that resetting electrical switches twice every 24 hours was prohibitively expensive. It was cheaper to run the cars continuously, even if the noise disturbed the populace.

High-speed rail makes no provision for freight. Yet, one 70-car freight train keeps 70 big-rig trucks off the highway and polluting our air.

Can California afford high-speed rail to take care of only a small proportion of the people?

Suzanne Ericksen, Reedley