

Calif farmers swap old tractors, boost air quality

The Associated Press

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FRESNO, Calif. -- California farmers and ranchers are helping lower air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley and other smog-laden regions by embracing a federal program that replaces old diesel tractors with cleaner-running farm equipment.

In the last two years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service has helped farmers replace 814 aging machines with more modern equipment.

That has reduced emissions of nitrogen oxide, a key component of smog, by 1,349 tons, which is equivalent to removing 408,000 cars from California highways.

Federal officials say next year they will invest \$24 million in the program, which splits the cost of upgrading equipment with owners. California's farm belt has some of the highest levels of airborne dust, smoke and soot in the country.

Funding available for clean air farm equipment

By Business Journal staff

Business Journal, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2010

California farmers are being sought out to replace polluting combustion engines with help from a program that has reduced 1,349 tons of nitrous oxide emissions in the state over the last two years.

Ed Burton, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist for California, spoke at the Souza Dairy Farm near Fresno today citing the success of the agency's voluntary air quality program since it rolled out in 2009 and urged those interested to sign up by Nov. 12 at their local NRCS office to be considered for the first funding round of fiscal year 2011.

"To put this in perspective, these emission reductions are roughly equivalent to removing 408,000 cars from California highways," said Burton, who also committed \$24 million to the program for 2011. "Think about it. That many cars would stretch from Washington State to Mexico."

The program, part of the 2008 Farm Bill, splits with farmers the cost of replacing the oldest and most polluting combustion engines on the farm, with new technology that runs 75 percent cleaner.

Using this program California farmers have contributed to pollution mitigation efforts by replacing engines on 814 old tractors and other farm equipment in the past two years. The program can operate for two more years under current authorizations.

City, county officials jubilant over high-speed rail grant

Sun-Star Staff

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2010

Merced city and county officials reacted gleefully to the U.S. Department of Transportation and Federal Railroad Administration announcement of a \$715 million grant that will be used to construct high-speed rail in the San Joaquin Valley.

"This funding is great news for the entire Merced region. Merced County, and the cities of Atwater and Merced, and numerous other entities that sit on the Greater Merced High-Speed Rail Committee have been strongly advocating that the Merced to Fresno section be built first and this funding can make that a reality. We are confident that the Merced to Fresno section will be the first phase constructed of the statewide California High-Speed Rail system given that we meet the independent utility requirements and have regional support for high-speed rail," said Merced County Supervisor John Pedrozo. "We thank the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration for this significant investment in the Central Valley."

The Merced to Fresno segment represents the backbone of California's high-speed rail system, providing crucial links to Sacramento, the Bay Area, and Southern California, the city said in a news release. The Merced to Fresno segment offers a line that is ready to go and will provide a functioning segment,

connecting the Merced to Fresno stations and an operating line that has independent utility, the release continued. The voters of California recognized the importance of building the link in Merced when they adopted Proposition 1A, which required that the high-speed train be built to Merced in Phase I, according to the city.

Approval of the Merced to Fresno section also positions the Castle Commerce Center in Merced County as the premier site for development by the California High-Speed Rail Authority as a Heavy Maintenance Facility (HMF), where trains would be assembled and maintained, the news release said. This facility would result in an additional 1,500 direct jobs and 3,000 indirect jobs, and millions of dollars in related economic activity. Because of its central location, proximity to major rail and existing rights-of-way, and available space, Castle provides many additional unique economic advantages for the project, like no other site under consideration by the California High-Speed Rail Authority, according to the city's news release.

"Our region has aggressively competed for high-speed rail and the heavy maintenance facility and we are ready to put our community to work," said Mayor Bill Spriggs. "We have continually pursued the high-priority corridor designation and we have mobilized the support of the northern Central Valley in advocating that the Merced to Fresno section be built first."

"We congratulate the California High-Speed Rail Authority for this great success," said Greater Merced High-Speed Rail Committee Chairman Dr. Lee Boese, Jr. "We are thankful to Congressman Dennis Cardoza and Assemblymember Cathleen Galgiani for working to bring resources to make high-speed rail a reality in Merced and provide badly needed jobs to our residents."

The overall system is expected to generate more than 160,000 full time jobs over the course of construction, according to the city's news release. The recent funding supplements additional funding California has received for high-speed rail development. The state was awarded \$2.34 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as well as the \$9 billion in funding that the California voters approved in state bonds in 2008.

California's planned 220 mph high-speed train system will cost less than half as much as building more freeway lanes and airport runways and will increase mobility while cutting air pollution and reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming, according to the news release.

Visalia seeks to green up businesses

By Business Journal staff

Business Journal, Monday, Oct. 25, 2010

In an age of environmental responsibility, cutting down on emissions and energy consumption can play perfectly into a business' marketing strategy while reducing overhead costs.

The Visalia Chamber of Commerce understands this and wants local businesses to adopt the concept through a new program developed in partnership with the city and several companies making up the Visalia Green Business Alliance.

Launched earlier this month at the chamber's office before an audience of about 40 business representatives, the Visalia Certified Green Business Program offers a special kind of certification that can be used to attract new customers while keeping in mind the scarcity of resources such as water and energy.

"I think it's more of a community and marketing piece," said Visalia Chamber CEO Glenn Morris. "We're not up to United Labs or Consumer Reports kind of level, but it gives a business some backing to be able to say, 'We're not just saying we're green, but we're actually doing things, and somebody else has looked at us and agrees with us.'"

Jumpstarted with a \$15,000 donation from The Gas Company and some professional expertise from Southern California Edison, Sempra Energy and the California Water Service Company, the program first directs businesses to fill out a checklist of equipment or activities in use at their facilities while the Alliance offers feedback on further green opportunities and ways to implement efficiency measures.

While some features may change after feedback from participants, the program endorses simple steps such as using natural lighting and planting low-water types of plants.

To cut down on pollution and waste, businesses can also commit to recycling, replacing aerosol sprays with pump dispensers, encouraging carpooling and engaging in other practices that spare landfills and the atmosphere.

After the initial self-checking, on-site evaluations will provide assistance to confirm how closely some of the standards are being fulfilled and to determine how a company can become fully compliant with the green business program.

According to Morris, some of the measures were borrowed from successful programs established in Santa Barbara County and in Sacramento, but with modifications to target issues unique to the San Joaquin Valley.

"This is something everybody ought to be dealing with regardless of where you are," Morris said. "There are areas of greater emphasis here. Water is clearly a concern, air, and then just general land usage."

Businesses achieving certification can show off the accomplishment with a signature logo on their letterheads, business cards and websites. They also can receive incentives for efficiency retrofitting that can end up saving companies thousands of dollars on energy or water bills and other expenses.

Gil Jaramillo, director of the Tulare-Kings Small Business Development Center, pledged to promote the certification to his clients with the rationale that it could make a difference in landing a contract or catching the eye of a green-cognizant customer.

"We're hoping some of the other local cities might do a variation of this," Jaramillo said. "It would be great if this spread throughout Tulare County, Kings County, Fresno County. The ultimate winner is the entire community because they're going to reduce waste and energy usage. But our individual clients will also come out ahead."

New funding sources will soon be sought to replace the initial \$15,000 investment. Donations from various environment-centered foundations are one possibility. Colby Wells, spokesman for The Gas Company, stressed the priority of keeping the program as accessible as possible to local businesses.

"We're trying to keep it a free program for the businesses to come into," Wells said. "We don't want to burden them with any sort of cost."

One such business attending the program's launch was Go-Eco-Green, which sells air purifiers, water ionizers and chemical-free laundry washing devices. Owner Maria Imre, who has marketed the devices for three years in Visalia, remarked on the importance of focusing on companies that appreciate the Valley's struggle with bad air quality.

"Visalia is really bad with the air for families and kids," Imre said. "When you look at the statistical numbers in this area, every third child has a breathing problem -- asthma, allergies and just waking up with stuffy noses, and they don't know from what."

More details about the program can be found by contacting Morris or Lisa Salazar at the Visalia Chamber at (559) 734- 5876.