

Focus On Ag

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Saturday, November 6, 2010

Owners of farm and ranch tractors can get help in buying replacements that produce less pollution. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will pay up to 80 percent of the cost of qualifying tractors. They must be self-propelled, off-road vehicles that are not eligible for funding from the federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The application deadline is Dec. 31. Call 559-230-5800 for more information.

Truckers' air cleanup hits snag in recession

Some invested long-term for rule that may be delayed.

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Sunday, Nov. 7, 2010

David Chidester last year leased \$5.5 million worth of new diesel trucks to meet new air standards by Jan. 1 this year. He was trying to play by the rules. But that decision may kill his business.

His Fresno-based freight-hauling company is caught between the recession and 2008 diesel rules requiring billions of dollars worth of new California trucks over the next several years. Chidester invested in new trucks to be ready for the Jan. 1 standards for particle pollution and also to get ahead of a 2014 deadline for cleaning up nitrogen oxides.

A state trucking association says many other trucking companies -- perhaps dozens -- did the same. But many of the state's thousands of haulers chose a cheaper short-term fix that only meets this year's deadline. Those companies would gain a critical advantage if, as expected, the state postpones the 2014 deadline because of the recession.

"It is just not fair," Chidester said. "We need some kind of help to compete head to head."

But many truckers need the delay, state air officials say. The industry is driving 20% fewer miles, making less money and putting out less pollution.

"Getting relief from the recession is one of the big reasons for seeking a delay," said Mike Sutherland, air specialist with the California Air Resources Board.

In December, the governing board of the Air Resources Board will consider staff recommendations to delay the new truck requirement to January 2017.

Air officials are not backing off the requirements for pollution reduction from diesel. With federal air cleanup deadlines approaching throughout the next decade, they have no choice.

In California, diesel exhaust creates about half the ozone-forming nitrogen oxides coming from vehicles. In the San Joaquin Valley, heavy-duty diesel trucks and buses account for nearly half of all the nitrogen oxides emitted each day.

Diesel pollution is blamed for more than 9,000 premature deaths each year in California, according to the Air Resources Board. Diesel soot particles also are considered carcinogenic.

"We're dealing with a major health problem," said air board spokeswoman Karen Caesar. Chidester and other truckers have argued the state should have just allowed the fleet to turn over as older trucks wore out. New trucks would replace the dirtier ones as part of common business expenses.

But that would have taken too long, officials say.

And now that Chidester has invested in new trucks, he is fighting the latest proposal to delay the new truck deadline. He says his business won't survive if other companies can undercut his rates for that length of time.

For 15 years, Chidester's company, Central Cal Transportation, has operated drayage trucks, which haul freight containers out of ports and rail stations.

The trucks generally are considered the dirtiest of the heavy-duty diesel vehicles used for hauling.

From the center of the state, he can compete with companies in Southern California and in the Bay Area. Chidester's trucks haul many kinds of freight, including almonds, to the ports.

"We're in a good place for trucking," he said. "But we need a level playing field to stay competitive."

Many companies are having similar difficulties, says the Sacramento-based California Trucking Association, which has 2,500 members. The association works with truckers trying to comply with the diesel rules.

"Like Mr. Chidester, some people go forward and comply," said association spokeswoman Julie Sauls. "And then if rules are delayed, they're competing against others who have a lower rate because they're not trying to pay off new equipment."

Even tougher, Chidester does not qualify for any of the \$700 million from Proposition 1B, passed in 2006, to help the industry pay for upgrades.

To qualify, he needed to own the trucks. Chidester leases.

With the recession and his \$200,000-a-month lease payment, Chidester was forced to close his Lodi office and lay off 16 of his 30 employees. His operation has slimmed down from 240 trucks to about 120, many driven by independent drivers.

"We averaged 25% growth for many years," he said. "Last year, it was 5%. This year, it has been minus 5%."

Chidester could have opted for a cheaper, temporary fix. Many of his competitors used \$20,000 filters -- more than 80% cheaper than getting new trucks -- so they would be in compliance with the Jan. 1 deadline this year. The early deadline was intended only to cut back diesel soot particles.

But Chidester said it made no sense because the filters would be worth more than many of his old trucks, and he still would have to lease new trucks by 2014, under the current rules. State officials say they have listened to Chidester and are proposing changes to close loopholes.

One change would stop the practice of delivering freight to a neighborhood near the port in a cheaper, older truck, then switching the load to a clean-running truck for the actual delivery at the port.

Closing the loophole prevents companies from making the majority of their hauls with older, polluting trucks, which is cheaper and allows them to make a bigger profit or charge lower rates.

Valley to get state's 1st high-speed rail Federal fund restrictions narrow first-phase sites.

By Tim Sheehan, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star, and other papers, Thursday, Nov. 4, 2010

State officials acknowledged for the first time Thursday that they must use nearly all of the federal money allocated for California's high-speed rail system -- almost \$3 billion so far -- in the San Joaquin Valley.

That means San Francisco and Los Angeles will be left at the side of the tracks as the California High-Speed Rail Authority decides where to start building the proposed 800-mile system in 2012.

Members of the authority's board, meeting Thursday in Sacramento, recognized the constraint when they voted 6-0 to approve the criteria that will be used to pick the first section.

Board members discussed the San Francisco and Los Angeles sections before their vote, said Rachel Wall, the authority's press secretary, "but it was clear that they are off the table for the available funding."

Between federal grants and state bond funds, the authority has \$4.3 billion to design and build the first segment of the system.

Officially, four segments are potential starting points for construction: San Francisco to San Jose, Merced to Fresno, Fresno to Bakersfield, and Los Angeles to Anaheim.

But on Thursday, state officials said the Federal Railroad Administration has told them that much of the federal money offered to California's ambitious project must be used for one of the two Valley segments.

That's even more restrictive than state officials thought last week, when they believed the condition was limited to a \$715 million grant announced in Fresno.

Federal officials say they chose the Valley because either of the two segments here would have longer stretches of the high-speed system, and help improve air quality and traffic congestion as well as create much-needed jobs.

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph Szabo, in a letter to state officials, said California was selected for last week's grant "for use in combination with" about \$2 billion in stimulus funds awarded last year.

"These combined funds can be applied to final design and construction of one of two Central Valley sections -- Fresno to Bakersfield or Merced to Fresno," Szabo wrote to state rail authority CEO Roelof van Ark. The letter adds that the state authority must choose the segment by early December to meet a year-end deadline by the federal government to commit the money.

Economic boost

Whether the state chooses the 56-mile section to Merced or the 113-mile stretch to Bakersfield, Fresno -- an endpoint for both segments -- will benefit.

An economic analysis by the state rail authority estimates that the project could create as many as 135,000 construction jobs in the Valley over the coming decade. The region has been particularly hard-hit by the housing crisis and recession, and its unemployment rate runs well above the state average.

The federal restrictions also could improve Fresno's chances for getting a high-speed rail maintenance yard. The city is competing with communities from Atwater to Bakersfield as a site for the facility because of the jobs it would bring.

Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea called the development a boon for the area. "The federal dollars must be spent in the Valley, which means Fresno County is certain to be part of the system's first leg," he wrote in a statement issued Thursday.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin also hailed the announcement as "a monumental day for the economy of the Central Valley."

"The magnitude of this investment will provide tremendous benefits to Fresno and all of our neighboring communities," she said. "And it will secure the Valley's position as a leader in the development of the next generation of transportation technology for America."

Simplified selection

The federal restrictions reduce the state's options by half, but they also simplify the evaluation process, van Ark told his board members Thursday.

"The federal letter makes it easier" to meet the Dec. 31 deadline, he said. "It's slightly easier to prepare reports for the board for two segments rather than four."

Among the factors to be weighed by the state:

- Which portion can most likely serve as the system's core and be connected with future segments and other parts of California's transportation system.
- Where trains can be operated successfully if no future sections are built.
- Which section can realistically meet the federal deadline for starting construction by 2012 and being completed by 2017.
- Which section is the most cost-effective to build and operate.

While the federal conditions require the first piece to be built in the Valley, van Ark said, "after that we're free to build as we wish."

"No matter where we start building, the goal remains the same: a statewide high-speed rail system up and running in 2020 connecting the Bay Area with the metropolitan area of Los Angeles and Anaheim," van Ark said.

State officials estimate that it will ultimately cost about \$43 billion over the next 10 years to build the entire 800-mile first phase of the system, intended to haul passengers at speeds of up to 220 mph.

Future sections would extend high-speed service to Sacramento and San Diego.

The first-to-build choice is independent of the authority's consideration of sites for a heavy-maintenance facility for the train system, van Ark said.

That facility is the subject of intense competition among nine sites being pitched by communities in Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Kern counties because it is expected to provide up to 1,500 permanent jobs and attract other industries associated with building, equipping and servicing the trains.

State officials said a decision on where to build the maintenance station won't be made until at least next summer, after environmental studies are complete.

Feds say high-speed rail project must begin in Central Valley

By John Cox, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Nov. 5, 2010

The Central Valley has beaten out politically powerful neighbors to the north and south to become home to initial construction of the proposed California High-Speed Rail project.

A funding caveat disclosed Thursday stipulates that all \$3 billion in existing federal money for the project must be spent building a segment roughly between Bakersfield and Fresno or between Fresno and Merced. Project officials are to decide between those two options in a vote set for next month.

Actual construction is slated to kick off in September 2012, following an environmental review and contract bidding. By 2020 the project is expected to link Anaheim with San Francisco; it may ultimately extend to Sacramento and San Diego.

Thursday's announcement by the California High-Speed Rail Authority does not appear to affect Kern County's prospects for landing a lucrative train maintenance facility that would serve the rail system.

Until Wednesday, the authority was still considering starting construction between Anaheim and Los Angeles or San Francisco and San Jose. Authority CEO Roelof van Ark indicated that those options are off the table as a result of the Federal Railroad Administration's insistence that the \$3 billion -- which has been combined with another \$1.3 billion in state money -- be spent entirely in the valley.

"The Central Valley is indeed key to creating the core of a true high-speed rail system in California, as that is where our train will travel truly high speeds of 220 miles per hour," van Ark said in a written statement Thursday.

Building a rail system is expected to be quicker and easier in the valley than doing so in northern or southern parts of the state, where more heavily populated areas present construction complications largely absent in an agricultural area. But some have argued that the project is needed more severely and would be more widely used in congested areas like Los Angeles.

Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson said the valley was the right choice.

"I think it can be done here sooner than anywhere else, and at lower cost, and I think we should begin as soon as possible," Watson said.

There remain doubts that the entire project will be built in its entirety, despite California voters' 2008 approval of nearly \$10 billion in general obligation bonds for the project and the \$3 billion so far from the federal government. The rail authority has not yet declared exactly how it will fund the rest of the project, other than to say it will raise money from the private sector.

Even if the rest of the project never gets built, the first segment in the valley would function independently as an improvement to Amtrak's existing service. Recently, that very issue caused the authority to shift the proposed Fresno-to-Bakersfield segment northward in such a way that its southern end now would stop roughly at 7th Standard Road instead of Hageman Road.

Thursday's news follows an announcement last week that the federal government had dedicated an additional \$715 million for the project, and that this sum had to be spent in the valley. Prior to that, the Federal Railroad Administration had not stated where the federal money had to be spent.

High-speed rail now has GOP House to deal with Republicans campaigned on reigning in spending.

By Tim Sheehan – Fresno Bee
in the Merced Sun-Star, Monday, November 8, 2010

Republicans regained a majority in the House of Representatives in part by pledging to rein in stimulus spending by the Obama administration -- and that could include high-speed rail.

One GOP leader's promise to revisit the distribution of billions of dollars for high-speed rail has cast a shadow over California's ambitious plan to begin construction of an 800-mile high-speed rail system somewhere in the San Joaquin Valley in 2012.

But newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida are opposed to high-speed rail in their states. That's raising cautious hope that more federal money will be left for California.

Billions in rail funds must be used in Valley Federal authorities say so in letter to state panel.

Tim Sheehan – Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, November 5, 2010

State officials acknowledged for the first time Thursday that they must use nearly all of the federal money allocated for California's high-speed rail system -- almost \$3 billion so far -- in the San Joaquin Valley.

That means San Francisco and Los Angeles will be left at the side of the tracks as the California High-Speed Rail Authority decides where to start building the proposed 800-mile system in 2012.

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"These combined funds can be applied to final design and construction of one of two Central Valley sections -- Fresno to Bakersfield or Merced to Fresno," Szabo wrote to state rail authority CEO Roelof van Ark. The letter adds that the state authority must choose the segment by early December to meet a year-end deadline by the federal government to commit the money.

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An economic analysis by the state rail authority estimates that the project could create as many as 135,000 construction jobs in the Valley over the coming decade. The region has been particularly hard-hit by the housing crisis and recession, and its unemployment rate runs well above the state average.

Assemblywoman Cathleen Galgiani, D-Livingston, told the Sun-Star on Thursday that the \$4.3 billion will translate into 80,000 construction jobs for the Valley once work begins. She authored the legislation that put the high-speed rail bond on the 2008 ballot. It required a two-thirds majority in the Assembly and Senate to pass.

"Both Merced and Fresno have had committees of community leaders in place for a long time where they have been working together to voice concerns and preferences for particular routes," she said. By contrast community leaders in the Bay Area and Southern California have only been involved for 10 months, she said.

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Among the factors to be weighed by the state:

- Which portion can most likely serve as the system's core and be connected with future segments and other parts of California's transportation system.
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"No matter where we start building, the goal remains the same: a statewide high-speed rail system up and running in 2020 connecting the Bay Area with the metropolitan area of Los Angeles and Anaheim," van Ark said.

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The first-to-build choice is independent of the authority's consideration of sites for a heavy-maintenance facility for the train system, van Ark said.

That facility is the subject of intense competition among nine sites being pitched by communities in Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Kern counties because it is expected to provide up to 1,500 permanent jobs and attract other industries associated with building, equipping and servicing the trains.

State officials said a decision on where to build the maintenance station won't be made until at least next summer, after environmental studies are complete.

Central Valley 'backbone' for high-speed rail

Michael Cabanatuan, staff writer

San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, Nov. 5, 2010

Construction of California's 800-mile high-speed rail system will start in the Central Valley, not between San Francisco and San Jose or in Southern California, high-speed rail officials announced Thursday.

Just hours before a meeting to discuss the factors the High-Speed Rail Authority will consider in deciding where to start construction, officials said the federal government had made part of that decision for them.

In a Wednesday letter to the authority, the Federal Railroad Administration said that all of the federal stimulus money awarded to California - \$2.3 billion in January and \$715 million last week - must be spent in the Central Valley.

The news was not entirely a surprise. Last week's award specified that the money was to be spent in the valley, but high-speed rail officials believed they still had a choice on where to use the \$2.3 billion.

Because the initial phase of the \$43 billion system will connect San Francisco's Transbay Terminal with Los Angeles' Union Station and Anaheim, many observers thought construction would begin in one of the state's two largest population centers, in an effort to build support for the project.

The decision does not affect the allocation of \$400 million to build the foundation for a high-speed rail station in the new Transbay Transit Center in downtown San Francisco.

Building the whole system

Roelof van Ark, chief executive officer of the authority, said the decision to start in the Central Valley should not be seen as neglecting the needs or interests of the state's metropolitan areas or the vision of a statewide fast-train network.

"The Central Valley is the backbone of the future of transportation in the state," he said. "We need to connect Southern California and Northern California, then San Diego and Sacramento as well. Our intent is to build the system as a whole."

The federal order changes next month's decision on where to break ground on the 220-mph rail system from a statewide battle to a Central Valley feud. The authority has until Dec. 31 to decide whether to spend \$4.3 billion - including about \$1.3 billion in matching state bond money - on a segment from Merced to Fresno or one from Fresno to Bakersfield.

The money is enough to build one of the two segments, van Ark said, but not to construct a rail maintenance plant planned for the valley or to purchase trains. While work on the selected segment must be done by 2017, it will not carry trains running 220 mph. Most likely, he said, the rails will be used by Amtrak San Joaquin trains until the tracks can become part of a larger system.

"It's illogical at this point to buy trains," he said. "We don't have the ability to operate a system. We need to build the infrastructure first."

Rod Diridon, an authority board member from San Jose, said the Bay Area may have helped steer the federal funding toward the Central Valley with its fighting over which route to take into the region and the battles on the Peninsula to get the tracks buried in a tunnel.

"Because of the various things that have happened in the corridor, we don't deserve it," he said. "We've delayed. Some of the cities have refused to work with our engineers in a cooperative way. That may have had something to do with it."

Criteria to win funding

Diridon said that the criteria being used to determine where to spend the stimulus funds might have already pointed toward the San Joaquin Valley. To satisfy the feds, as well as the state bond act funding high-speed rail, the project needs to be ready to go by next fall, be completed within six years, and be usable. The segment producing the most high-speed rail track for the lowest cost, and with the least risk of delay or cost overruns, is also favored.

The authority board will consider those criteria next month when it decides which segment wins.

E-mail Michael Cabanatuan at mcabanatuan@sfchronicle.com.

California's first high-speed rail segment may run through the Central Valley

By Rich Connell and Dan Weikel
Los Angeles Times, Friday, Nov. 5, 2010

Reporting from Sacramento and Los Angeles — The first segment of California's proposed \$43-billion high-speed rail system may not be built in the highly populated coastal areas of the state, but in the Central Valley, officials said Thursday.

The federal government indicated Wednesday that it wants all of its initial funding of the project — nearly \$2.5 billion — directed to a single segment either between Fresno and Merced or Fresno and Bakersfield.

The Central Valley portion of the route would form the backbone of a system linking San Francisco and Anaheim, and passing through Los Angeles' Union Station. Eventually, the system would connect to Sacramento and San Diego.

Rob Kulat, a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration, said the focus on the Central Valley was made in collaboration with the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Many observers had expected the Los Angeles-to-Anaheim segment to be the first built because engineering on that section was further along.

Under the proposal, a total of \$4.3 billion in federal and state funds would be targeted for one of the Central Valley sections of the bullet train. That would be much of the funding currently approved for the project.

Officials apparently want to pump the first few billion dollars into the economy as fast as they can and build an operational piece of the system quickly. There is less political opposition in the Central Valley compared to the Bay Area and fewer complications presented by the heavily urbanized route between Los Angeles and Anaheim.

"We want to get people working," Kulat said.

It is not yet clear how or when the California High-Speed Rail Authority would secure the tens of billions of dollars needed to finish the first phase of the project.

The route between Bakersfield and Fresno would run west of California 99 for 113 miles; the section between Fresno and Merced is 60 miles. Planners estimate that the trips would take 37 and 21 minutes respectively.

The open spaces can provide room for the longer stretches of track necessary to demonstrate the capabilities of bullet trains, which can travel at more than 200 mph.

But without initially linking to the population centers of the state's largest cities, ridership and revenue could lag until more segments are completed.

"The Central Valley is indeed key to creating the core of a true high-speed rail system in California," said Roelof van Ark, chief executive of the state bullet train agency.

"But no matter where we start building, the goal remains the same," he said, referring to a Bay Area-to-Anaheim system that could be in operation by 2020.

The Federal Railroad Administration decision drew strong support from government officials in the recession-battered San Joaquin Valley, where unemployment is running as high as 26%.

"We think it's an opportunity to give the biggest bang for the buck to taxpayers," said Kern County Supervisor Mike Maggard. "And it's the greatest opportunity to demonstrate the system will work."

Maggard said the Fresno-to-Bakersfield segment has the lowest construction cost per mile and the \$4.3-billion investment would pay for nearly one-third of the track for the first 512-mile phase, at just 10% of the total estimated cost.

Critics say the Merced-to-Fresno route has been complicated by potential resistance from Union Pacific Railroad, which is concerned about the impact on its right-of-way, and opposition by farmers and Madera County cities to proposed routes. They also question whether either segment would generate much ridership considering that Amtrak already serves the region.

"There's no real market there," said Rich Tolmach, director of the California Rail Foundation and a critic of the project. "The train won't even go between Amtrak stations and the people just elected to Congress are talking about cutting funds for high-speed rail. We could end up with another bridge to nowhere."

Van Ark, addressing the authority board in Sacramento on Thursday, outlined proposed criteria for selecting initial segments for construction and sought to shift the public focus on the project to the goal of linking major urban areas.

He repeatedly stressed that bullet train cars are not expected to be ordered or put into operation on the first segment — or possibly the second segment — until enough track is built to make high-speed service viable.

Meanwhile, he said, starter sections could be used by Amtrak or other passenger rail systems while a network large enough to justify faster train speeds is constructed.

"This is a system that has to connect Southern California to Northern California," Van Ark said, adding that the project should be viewed and evaluated in that context.

Judge rules Tejon Mountain Village was adequately studied

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Nov. 6, 2010

A judge ruled Friday that Kern County had properly analyzed and evaluated the environmental impacts of the sprawling Tejon Mountain Village project, allowing construction to move forward, it was announced Friday.

Kern County Superior Court Judge Kenneth Twisselman sided with the county of Kern, Tejon Ranch Company and its development partner, DMB Associates Inc., according to a Tejon press release.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the mountain resort community in October 2009. In his ruling, Tejon said, Twisselman rejected claims by the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity and others that the environmental impact report for Tejon Mountain Village was inadequate.

"Tejon Mountain Village is going to be quite an asset for Kern County," said Robert Stine, president and CEO of Tejon Ranch, in the news release. "It sets a new standard for environmental sensitivity, sustainability, good planning, and soon, good living. We're pleased the judge's ruling gives us the green light to move forward with our plans."

Officials with the Center for Biological Diversity could not be reached for comment Friday evening. The center, other environmental groups, Native Americans and other local residents expressed concerns about the project's impact on the California condor, Chumash sites, [air quality](#) and other quality of life matters.

The project involves 5,082 acres of homes, hotels, golf courses and shops on more than 26,417 acres east of Interstate 5 near Frazier Park.

The village plans were borne out of what Tejon has called an "historic" conservation agreement with several environmental groups -- Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, the Planning and Conservation League, the Endangered Habitats League and Audubon California -- to preserve up to 90 percent of Tejon Ranch

Agency vows fines for no-burn day violators

Air quality district says period of leniency over; first-offense penalty \$50

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Saturday, November 6, 2010

A record number of San Joaquin County residents were cited last winter for using their fireplaces on no-burn days, making it more important than ever to check air quality before striking that match.

Air quality cops' annual Check Before You Burn program began again this week. It's not new; this will be the eighth year.

But consider these changes:

Fire in the hole

With citations on the rise, San Joaquin County residents are warned to pay attention to Valley air cops' fireplace burning restrictions.

Here's what you need to know:

- Each day, the district decides whether air quality will allow for fireplace burning in each of the eight Valley counties. Check valleyair.org and click on "Check Before You Burn," or call (800) 766-4463.
- A prohibition means no burning at all — even manufactured logs. "Burn cleanly" means you can burn dry, seasoned wood, or manufactured logs, which may be cleaner.
- You are exempted from the rule if you live in an area with no natural gas service, or if wood burning is your only source of heat.
- To notify the district about violations on no-burn days in your neighborhood, call (800) 281-7003.

In the past, the far north end of the Valley had no more than one day each winter in which fireplace burning was banned to spare the air. The bans were much more common in the central or south Valley, where the air is typically worse.

But two years ago, in an effort to reduce dangerous tiny particles even more, officials lowered the pollution threshold for a no-burn day. As a result, San Joaquin County had 24 no-burn days in 2008-09 and 21 no-burn days last season.

Officials say they were lenient at first, issuing 24 citations two years ago. But last year that number shot up to 65.

Expect more of the same this time. A first offense is \$50; multiple offenders - and there have been some - pay more.

"We feel people now have had ample opportunity to understand the program," said Jaime Holt, spokeswoman for the Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Now we're going out looking for violators."

No longer is the district merely responding to complaints. Inspectors on no-burn days will, on occasion, visit neighborhoods where smoke has been a problem in the past, Holt said. They'll

watch for smoke seeping from chimneys. They may even visit after hours or on weekends, she said.

The program has been criticized by residents who feel it's their right to burn in their own fireplaces. Holt said the district believes, however, that public opinion has turned. Now many of the calls the district receives are from residents asking inspectors to check on sources of smoke in their own neighborhoods.

"The buy-in from the public has changed dramatically," Holt said. "We've almost seen a 180-degree switch."

Some, in fact, have lobbied to strengthen the restrictions even more. Thomas Menz - who lives in Fresno, which suffers from even more bad-air days - once asked the district to consider a \$1,000 fine for first-time offenders. He even suggested stuffing the chimneys of repeat violators with foam, or filling them with cement.

"If they don't get the message the first time, fill their flue," Menz said this week. "No more burning."

Check Before You Burn continues through February.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Saturday, Nov. 06, 2010](#)

Many ways to love November

BURN, BABY BURN: That little nip in the air might have you wanting to throw a log into the fireplace. But check before you burn. That's the word from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which this week launched its annual residential fireplace program, including providing daily wood-burning status alerts through February. By calling 1-800-766-4463 or logging on to www.valleyair.org, you can find out if it's a "wood burning prohibited" or "please burn cleanly" day. The goal is to minimize the harmful effects of soot, ash, dust and other materials from fireplace burning to the valley's already polluted air. The district's Web site also includes handy tips on reducing pollution — and how to report violations.