

Heavy fog cancels flights out of Fresno

By Paula Lloyd and Jim Guy

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010

Lingering heavy fog canceled some flights out of Fresno on Monday and may have been responsible for a fatal accident near Firebaugh.

At Fresno Yosemite International Airport, 14 flights were canceled or delayed by overnight fog that still blanketed the Valley on Monday morning.

Morning flights to Los Angeles, Denver and San Francisco were grounded. Flights to Phoenix were canceled, and some were delayed, because those planes were not able to land at the airport Sunday night.

Some flights began arriving by about 11:30 a.m., which allowed flights to depart for San Francisco and Los Angeles in the afternoon, said airport spokeswoman Vikkie Calderon.

"It seems like things are back to normal for now," Calderon said shortly before 5 p.m.

The California Highway Patrol on Monday issued widespread fog reports on area roads, including Highways 99, 43, 198, 41 and 145.

There's no relief in sight, at least for the next week, according to the National Weather Service.

"There are no major systems on the horizon" to blow the fog out of the Valley, said meteorologist Jim Bagnall.

The service forecasts patchy fog beginning about 10 p.m. and ending about noon through next Sunday, with highs in the mid 50s and lows in the mid 40s.

With the fog comes warnings about poor visibility on Valley roadways, some delays of flights leaving area airports and foggy day schedules at area schools -- although many students remain on extended vacation until Monday.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control district reported that air quality was moderate in Fresno, Madera, Merced, Kings and Tulare counties.

On the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, the weather service issued a freezing fog advisory until 10 p.m. today and said ice is likely to form on Highway 395 from Susanville to Doyle.

Above the fog, however, the days of early January in the Sierra Nevada should be bright and sunny, with daytime highs in the low 60s and overnight lows in the low 30s.

Effort to limit Valley sprawl hits crucial stage

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010

San Joaquin Valley leaders spent three years hammering out a plan to control urban sprawl. That was the easy part.

Now, as the Valley Blueprint Planning Process enters its fourth year, regional planners are shifting their focus to a thornier issue: How to change decades-old development patterns and put more people on less land.

For Fresno County, the Blueprint calls for an average of eight homes per acre in future development, compared with 3.8 under existing trends. That's more than a doubling of current densities.

Getting there is going to involve shaking both builders and their customers out of long-standing habits that favor sprawl over compactness.

"The local builders are very dialed into a detached, single-family residence" form of development, said David Fey, deputy city planner in Clovis, which is revising its general plan to reflect Blueprint principles.

To achieve higher housing densities, that preference for detached homes will have to change, planners say. Future development will have to consist of fewer one-family homes and more apartments, condominiums and townhouses.

And for that to happen, everything from consumer preferences to the mortgage financing system will need to adjust.

"For the types of housing that would actually help us get to higher densities, the institutional barrier is that in many cases they can't get loans," said Barbara Steck, deputy director of the Council of Fresno County Governments and a leader in the Blueprint effort.

One reason why, she said, is that some lenders require a large share of the units in a condominium project to be under contract for sale before they will write mortgages on any of them. That can create a circular dilemma — projects can't get financing until they have enough buyers, but can't get many buyers without financing.

Builders are apprehensive about the changes even as they're shifting to smaller houses on smaller lots as a result of the recession, said Michael Prandini, president and chief executive officer of the

Building Industry Association of Fresno and Madera Counties.

"The era of the 10,000-square-foot lot is gone," Prandini said. "Those lots will still be out there but they won't be typical."

More two-story homes are in the offing, he said. So are apartments and mixed-use developments that combine housing, offices and stores, sometimes in the same building.

At the same time, a recent state law is exerting pressure that supports the Blueprint densities.

Senate Bill 375, enacted in late 2008, requires local agencies to provide for greenhouse-gas reductions in long-term housing and transportation plans, and promises more state funding in those areas for those who comply. That gives Blueprint advocates a powerful carrot to use in getting their ideas implemented.

"Our new general plan definitely will be taking into account SB 375 and the planning issues we discussed in the Blueprint process," Selma City Manager D-B Heusser said.

Among the measures that city will consider early this year is a decrease in the minimum lot size from 7,000 to as little as 5,000 square feet. Even smaller lots could be developed with City Council approval, Heusser said.

The next step in the Blueprint process is scheduled to get under way in February when a consultant starts work on a "toolkit" of planning techniques aimed at helping local agencies implement the Blueprint guidelines.

Some examples: Model zoning codes, case studies showing how other communities have handled similar planning issues, and a primer on legal issues. The work is scheduled to be completed in October.

Cities are eager for the results, Steck said.

"It's encouraging to me to hear our member agencies call us and want to talk about the Blueprint as they're doing their general plan updates," she said. "They're thinking about it as they're going through the planning process."

Environmentalists sue Long Beach over truck deal

The Associated Press

In the Merced Sun-Star and Modesto Bee, Tuesday, January 5, 2010

LONG BEACH, Calif. -- Environmentalists are suing the port of Long Beach over its decision to settle a federal lawsuit challenging its authority to regulate trucking in and around the port.

The Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit in state court last week over the closed-door deal. They claim port and city officials violated state law requiring public involvement and an environmental review before agreeing to a deal with the American Trucking Associations.

The deal involves settling certain aspects of the Clean Trucks program, which is aimed at reducing diesel emission around the port.

Long Beach City Attorney Robert Shannon said a federal judge approved the settlement with the ATA, and that the new lawsuit doesn't belong in state court.

Raley's store in Tracy gains green approval

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, January 5, 2010

West Sacramento-based Raley's opened its latest ultra-green store Wednesday in Tracy.

The store received a "gold" certification from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's GreenChill Partnership. The program works with the supermarket industry to promote installation of improved cooling systems. These systems reduce emissions of refrigerants that both deplete the ozone layer and act as greenhouse gases. GreenChill-approved refrigeration units are also very energy-efficient.

Raley's has five stores certified under the GreenChill program, more than any other chain in the nation.

Raley's last opened a location in April – also a GreenChill "gold" store – in Petaluma. The chain operates 134 supermarkets in Northern California and Nevada. It is the leading grocer in the Sacramento region.

Truckers at Oakland port get break from air rules

By Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010

Oakland, Calif. (AP) -- Hundreds of truckers who haul goods at the Port of Oakland will be able to continue working there for the next two weeks under an agreement that postpones new pollution rules for them.

The Oakland Mayor's Office helped broker a deal Saturday that gives 1,300 truckers more time to comply with stricter diesel emissions standards that went into effect Jan. 1.

The deal allows drivers who were denied grants last fall to keep working while they reapply for \$11 million in new funding to outfit their vehicles with diesel filters. The filters are intended to reduce air pollution that's blamed for higher rates of cancer and asthma in areas surrounding the port.

The truckers had planned a major protest at the port Monday morning but canceled after the weekend deal was reached.

Air board, port truckers agree on upgrading

By Kelly Zito, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2010

A last-minute deal between California air pollution regulators and Port of Oakland truckers Monday will allow hundreds of big rigs to operate at the port for two weeks while they work to meet stricter requirements on diesel emissions that officially took effect for the new year Friday.

The truckers had planned a work stoppage at the Oakland facility to protest regulations passed in 2007 that prohibit large diesel trucks made before 1994 from operating at the state's ports and rail yards and require pricey filters on trucks made between 1994 and 2003.

The state had allocated \$22 million in grants to help the truckers pay for the filters or new trucks, which average about \$16,000 and \$100,000, respectively. But the funds ran out, leaving the operators of about half of the 2,300 trucks that service Oakland to face unemployment or take out big loans to continue running their rigs.

Last week, the California Air Resources Board said it had scoured its coffers to come up with an additional \$11 million to aid the truckers. But many remained frustrated by the short time frame for compliance amid a downturn in the economy and a drop in the number of containers flowing through the port.

"This is a much-needed reprieve," said Julie Sauls, spokeswoman for the California Trucking Association. "But it's difficult for the industry because the goal line keeps getting moved. These folks are doing their best to stay in business and employ people."

The regulations are designed to cut statewide diesel particulate emissions, which are blamed for increased rates of cancer, asthma and other lung ailments, by 85 percent by 2020.

Under the agreement, brokered by Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums, drivers whose grant applications were turned down through this fall have two weeks to apply for the new funds, which will provide \$5,000 toward a new filter or \$50,000 toward a new truck.

Dellums announced the deal at a news conference at Oakland City Hall on Monday along with representatives from the state air board, Bay Area air district, Port of Oakland and trucking and labor organizations.

"Today's announcement shows that we can balance environmental, economic and equity interests by working collaboratively and in good faith with the key stakeholders," Dellums said.

If the sale or retrofit can't be completed by Jan. 17, drivers will have to offer proof of a contract or purchase agreement in order to apply for an extension to operate through April 30, according to state officials.

"If they're showing a good-faith effort to comply and they're waiting on the funding or the retrofit, they can continue operating," said Leo Kay, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

For those truck companies that did not apply earlier for the grants or for those who are struggling to pay for the balance of the upgrades, Dellums' office and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District said they are working with banks and other lenders to provide flexible financing on the retrofits and truck replacements.

Last week's showdown between policymakers and the trucking industry will probably play out again in different parts of the state over the next year, when similar rules affecting the rest of the trucking fleet in California - about 1 million trucks - start going into effect.

Truckers scramble to qualify for \$11 million in new grant money during two-week reprieve

By Cecily Burt, Oakland Tribune

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Tues., Jan. 5, 2010

Hundreds of anxious truckers lined up after work Monday to renew their grant applications for diesel trucks and filters now that an extra \$11 million has been found to help them comply with new strict air regulations that took effect Friday.

More than 1,300 drivers who previously were denied grants when a \$22 million fund ran dry were given a two-week extension to keep hauling cargo at the Port of Oakland while they secure new grants and line up the extra financing needed to pay for the equipment.

About 1,200 drivers are eligible for \$5,000 toward a new filter and 100 drivers are eligible for \$50,000 toward a new truck. The filters help reduce as much as 85 percent of dangerous particulate emissions that can lodge in the lungs and cause asthma and cancer. The filters cost an average of \$16,000, but they can be much more. The previous grant funds covered the entire cost of the filters, minus sales tax.

Although the new influx of money is good news, many drivers worry that they will be out of work in two weeks if they cannot find the cash to make up the difference in cost. Several said they spent what they had to buy newer used rigs, and many said they would not qualify for bank loans.

"I hope they come up with more money, because \$20,000 is very expensive," said Zijad Alibasic, 53, of Alameda, who applied for a retrofit grant in May. "I'm only working three or four days. I'm upset they are not paying the whole thing."

Kulwinder Nijjer, 39, of Tracy, applied for a retrofit grant for his 1998 truck. When the deadline was drawing near, he made a down payment on a filter but did not have any money to pay the difference, so he's hoping to get the \$5,000 grant, "It's hard paying this much money, but at least we get something."

Truck drivers have until Friday to renew their grants.

During a news conference Monday, Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums acknowledged that there still are many issues remaining to be worked out and not much time to get it done. He pledged to continue working with local, state and federal partners to secure more funding to help the truckers and to push banks to give the drivers loans so they can retrofit their trucks and keep working. That, he said, will avoid an economic catastrophe for the truckers and make the air cleaner for everyone.

"These last couple of weeks we've taken a giant step and now we must continue working (toward solutions) and I think we're all committed to that," he said. "So if you are a truck driver, you are not out here alone, because we are all part of the community, and we will survive or perish together."

The California Air Resources Board approved the port truck rule that went into effect statewide Friday. The rule bans trucks manufactured before 1994 and requires soot filters on trucks manufactured from 1994 to 2003.

Despite the additional funds to help retrofit the trucks, Lakhbir Bhambra, vice president of the Northern California Rail and Port Truckers Association, said the organization would not drop a lawsuit filed last week. The action seeks to stop the new regulations until the state identifies money to pay for the filters like it did before. He estimates that would cost \$30 million.

"I'm looking for business damages and for stress," he said, adding that his company did not get a single grant last year out of 11 applications. "I had to tell my customers I couldn't work (after Jan. 1) and they found other haulers. Now we can work, but I don't have the customers."

The new grant funds will not help a significant number of drivers who never bothered to apply for grants last year because they own older model trucks that are banned under the new regulations and could not afford to purchase a new truck or a newer model used truck that would have been eligible for a filter grant.

The new grant funds will not help drivers such as Manuel Rivas, of Oakland, who owns a 1989 truck. "I didn't apply," said Rivas, a 56-year-old single parent. "I didn't have the money to buy a new truck."

The Oakland Private Industry Council is hosting four workshops for truckers who are facing unemployment. They will be held from 10 a.m. to noon Jan. 12, 14, 19 and 21 at the OT411 center, 11 Burma Road. Truckers can call 510-768-4431 or 510-627-1135 to reserve space in the workshops.

New shuttle bus service to serve downtown Oakland

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Tues., Jan. 5, 2010

Oakland plans to begin a free weekday shuttle service to and from Jack London Square, transit stations and downtown restaurants and theaters to lure more people and business into the city core.

Service is expected to debut in May or June now that \$720,000 is lined up for first year of the shuttle, city officials announced Monday.

Buses will run every 15 minutes from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekdays, with 10-minute intervals during morning and evening rush hour, on a proposed three-mile loop between Jack London Square and West Grand Avenue.

City officials said they hope to give commuters, downtown workers, diners and theatergoers a faster and less polluting way get around downtown areas where many new restaurants and housing projects have opened in the past decade.

"I see this as another step in revitalizing the downtown," said Rebecca Kaplan, a city council member who formerly served on the AC Transit Board. "By connecting these areas with a free shuttle, we're going to draw more people in the area, increase business and reduce pollution."

Offering the shuttle for free speeds service because the buses don't have to wait for passengers to pay before boarding.

Other cities ranging from Portland, Ore., to Walnut Creek and Emeryville in the East Bay have used free or low-cost bus shuttles as a tool to attract more people to their downtowns, officials said.

The Oakland City Council is scheduled tonight to give final approval to a funding plan that relies on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to contribute \$500,000 in clean-air grants annually for two years to run the service.

Oakland will contribute \$80,000 this year in redevelopment funds and three property owner groups will contribute another \$140,000 this year. The groups are the Jack London Square Partners, and the Downtown and Lake Merritt-Uptown community benefit districts.

Kaplan said city officials are determined that this bus service will not flame out and die for lack of permanent funding, as did a lunch time downtown Oakland shuttle in 2001.

"Failure is not an option," she said. "We are counting as this, and we will continue to look for (government) grants and funding from the private sector to sustain it."

City officials plan to make an agreement for the Alameda Contra Costa Transit District to run the buses on the loop mostly following Broadway and Telegraph Avenue. Shuttle stops at BART and Amtrak train stations and a ferry dock near Jack London Square will make it easier for commuters to get to and from downtown Oakland, said Zach Seal, project manager for the shuttle.

If the shuttle proves popular, city officials likely would look at expanding service past 7 p.m. on weekdays, Seal said.

Kaplan said she and other city officials also hope that new bus shuttle can be the first step toward developing an electric streetcar system to the downtown some time in the future. Streetcars ran in downtown Oakland in the 1940s.

Report: Ind. electricity rates may rise 12 percent

The Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, January 5, 2010

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. -- A state-funded research group is predicting that Indiana's electricity rates could rise 12 percent over the next four years.

The Purdue University-based State Utility Forecasting Group released a report last week that looked at the state's energy needs between now and 2027.

Its findings include the prediction that Indiana's overall electricity rates could rise 12 percent by 2013 due to more stringent environmental guidelines.

However, the report does not take into account the impact of federal controls on carbon dioxide emissions that Congress is considering.

Such controls could drive electricity rates even higher in Indiana because the state gets about 95 percent of its power from coal-fired power plants that release large amounts of carbon dioxide.

[Manteca Bulletin Editorial Jan. 5, 2010](#)

No economic justice for San Joaquin Valley

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

The Congressional Research Service in December of 2005 released a 353-page report that dubbed the eight-county San Joaquin Valley as “The New Appalachia.”

The per capita income of the San Joaquin Valley is actually lower than in the 68-county Central Appalachia region that has long been viewed as the poorest region in the country. Rates of welfare dependency are also higher in the San Joaquin Valley than in Appalachia.

San Joaquin County – while not typical of much of the rest of the valley due to its de facto status as the affordable housing solution for the high priced Bay Area and the growing number of jobs moving here that are tied to distribution – is not immune from poverty.

Yet you see no targeted federal program such as in the Appalachias to pull the region up by its bootstraps, so to speak.

What you do see, however, is a complete disregard for the health and economic well being of the area. It took years for California’s [air quality regulators](#) to recognize that even if Bay Area pollution that is cleared out most days by breezes leading inland over the Altamont and Patterson passes ultimately accounts for 12 percent of the air quality problems in Bakersfield that they must also adhere to tougher standards.

Bay Area pollution accounted for close to 20 percent of San Joaquin County’s air quality woes and its impact generally drops off as the air moved south into the lower double digit range. The San Joaquin Valley for years had higher pollution control standards and restrictions that chased off jobs that gave the Bay Area an economic advantage. Finally the inequity was addressed when air quality rules were upped in the Bay Area to match those in the Central Valley as a whole.

Bad air isn’t all that Kern County gets from the wealthy coastal cities. Los Angeles and other Southern California cities own farmland in Kern County where they spread sewer sludge. San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties have rules in effect that bans the importation of sewer sludge.

It is alright to send San Joaquin Valley bad air and human waste from the coast as there is a lack of political force in Sacramento or Washington to block such dumping. It is OK to bypass the San Joaquin Valley - the natural initial benefactor of the Sierra watershed - and export the water to fuel the economic vitality of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego.

Now the San Joaquin Valley is about to become ground zero for another NIMBY – not-in-my-back-yard – style project.

The firm Areva has signed a letter of intent with investors to try and pursue the construction of one or two nuclear reactors in Madera County or Fresno County. Granted, the California Legislature has banned the construction of more nuclear plants in the Golden State until the federal government establishes a storage facility for nuclear waste. But like all other legislation, it can be overturned when it becomes convenient for the money interests who tend to be real cozy with the state’s coastal political power bases.

There is no way a nuclear power plant would be a boon to the San Joaquin Valley economy especially considering even those who would build it are workers who likely have skills not found in the region.

Much like the coal mines in the Central Appalachia Mountains, the energy it creates will be for economic growth elsewhere. Meanwhile, the San Joaquin Valley has to provide huge amounts of fresh water – about 136 million of gallons daily – to cool each reactor. That is water that will be taken from agricultural – the prime source of jobs in much of the poverty stricken valley – and from helping support urbanization in the region that includes new job opportunities.

To show you how much the rest of the state has written off the San Joaquin Valley that they depend upon for cheap and abundant fresh food, not a whisper of outrage was heard last week from the usual suspects when Areva announced their plans.

Had that nuclear reactor proposal been for anywhere on the coast, the high desert or even near Sacramento there would have been immediate howls of protest.

The San Joaquin Valley and its people deserve economic justice. The nuclear power plant would do nothing to advance such a goal but instead will simply drain the area of water just like Los Angeles and San Francisco have been doing for decades.

[Editorial, in the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, January 5, 2010](#)

Obama must lead effort for cap-and-trade law

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

The following editorial appeared in the San Jose Mercury News on Sunday, Jan. 3:

As the new year begins, a multitude of issues are competing for attention in Washington. We hope that 2010 will be the year that one long-neglected problem - reducing carbon emissions - at last reaches the top of the legislative agenda.

Getting a cap-and-trade law through the Senate will be one of the greatest challenges of the young Obama presidency. But if there is to be any chance of halting the rise of global temperatures, it is crucial. And it will be a cornerstone of a newly competitive American economy.

Accomplishing this will require President Barack Obama to do what he does best: explain and inspire, capitalizing on hopes and not fears.

Unfortunately, he drew on these skills too little in his drive for health insurance reform. Obama's governing style for his first year - set broad goals and leave it to lawmakers to, well, make laws - would be reasonable in a different political climate. But in 2009, it left the alarmist rantings of tea partiers to dominate the debate.

Obama cannot let the same thing happen as the Senate begins considering cap-and-trade legislation, probably in the early spring. Already, opponents have dubbed it "cap-and-tax," claiming - without evidence - that it would be a job-killer.

Cap-and-trade sets a limit for overall emissions and creates a market for businesses to buy permits to pollute. Companies that pollute less will be able sell their permits to those that pollute more, encouraging innovation and conservation.

Democratic senators from coal and manufacturing states want Obama to wait until after the November 2010 election to push the legislation. He should refuse. As The Economist put it, "Climate change is the hardest political problem the world has ever had to deal with." Waiting another year won't make it easier.

In Copenhagen last month, the U.S. committed to a 17 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020, the level mandated by House legislation passed in June. The goal is too modest, but it's better than nothing. It must be ratified by the Senate if we expect other nations to follow suit.

So the president must forcefully argue, to the American public and their senators, that a law limiting carbon emissions is both long overdue and vital to our economic security. There is a good case to be made.

The bill would actually create jobs, since it would give businesses an incentive to invest more in technology that reduces emissions. That's already happening in California, where the number of green jobs is growing while the overall number of jobs has shrunk, and in China, which has spent billions getting ahead in the green sector.

Job creation is rightly the No. 1 focus of many lawmakers right now, but it pairs naturally with goals for a greener economy.

The arguments for passing a cap-and-trade law, and quickly, are compelling. If Obama makes them as clearly and forcefully as he made the case for himself during the 2008 campaign, the nation will accept the trade-offs and support the law - and senators will ignore him at their peril.

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Tues., Jan. 5, 2010:](#)

Smoke and mirrors

A recent commentary by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District claimed that wood fires are the leading source of particulate matter pollution (size less than 2.5 micrometers) in the Bay Area.

That's incorrect for Contra Costa County. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the leading source in this category is industrial processes. Wood fires account for only 24 percent of particulate matter pollution, not the 30 to 40 percent claimed by the BAAQMD.

Furthermore, why are wood fires banned, but other polluters (industry and cars) are not even asked to cut back during winter Spare the Air alerts?

Why are fires banned on the two days (Thanksgiving and Christmas) when they are part of peoples' tradition and culture? Perhaps the BAAQMD should take a long hard look in the mirror and realize mandates don't work and aren't even relevant in Contra Costa County.

David Smethurst, Walnut Creek

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010:](#)

Winter dry spell happening now

By Mark Grossi

For weather watchers, the winter dry time has arrived. But it doesn't necessarily mean the season will be dry.

Meteorologist and consultant Jan Null says the dry stretch is a regular feature of California weather:

"On almost as regular basis as the swallows returning to San Juan Capistrano an extended period of dry weather likes to return to Northern and Central California in the middle of winter."

For the San Joaquin Valley, it sometimes means days of overcast, occasional drizzle, fog and afternoon sunshine in some places. And it means pollutants hang around in the moist air, often leading air officials to prohibit fireplace burning.

Null says even in California's record-setting 1982-1983 rainfall season, San Francisco had a three-week stretch of dry weather. And it started on Christmas eve.