

When the air up there is bad for kids' lungs

By Alex Breitler

The Record, Monday, March 22, 2010

A wildfire breaks out in the Sierra Nevada, the wind shifts to the west and, within hours, smoke settles in around your child's school.

Starting next fall, air pollution officials hope to be able to electronically notify hundreds of schools up and down the San Joaquin Valley as soon as air quality dips to the point where children should be kept indoors.

These notifications will be based on hourly readings from nearby air pollution stations, including two in Stockton.

"Nobody else has anything like this. Not for schools," said David Lighthall, health science advisor for the Valley Air Pollution Control District in Fresno.

For several years, the district has invited schools to raise a color-coded flag in the morning, indicating how severe air pollution is expected to be that day.

An hour-by-hour system will allow for more flexibility, Lighthall said.

Teachers don't want to keep students indoors more than they have to, since there is so much concern about childhood obesity and the need for outdoor exercise.

And yet, children's developing lungs are especially vulnerable to the tiny particles of pollution known as PM2.5, a big problem in the winter, as well as harmful summertime ozone.

"There is increased pressure from various agencies and the public to kind of redirect the ship when it comes to activities of children and ramping back up on exercise and recess," Lighthall said.

While the air in the north Valley is generally cleaner than points south, federal standards are tightening, meaning a likelihood of more "unhealthy" days up and down the Valley.

"We don't want it to be a hardship," said Susie Rico of the American Lung Association. "We still have to protect students and staff."

More than 650 schools participate in the flag program, including 40 in San Joaquin County, the association says.

The district last week approved a \$41,672 contract with the University of California, San Francisco at Fresno, to help develop the new program. It is expected to launch in August with the start of the new school year.

Chevron puts solar technologies to test

By Tiffany Hsu

In the Times, Fresno Bee and other papers, Sunday, March 21, 2010

LOS ANGELES On a dirt plot near Bakersfield where a massive refinery once churned out gasoline and asphalt, one of the world's largest oil companies is looking for something more green.

On Monday, Chevron Corp. plans to reveal that it has transformed the 8-acre site into a sprawling test facility with 7,700 solar panels. The panels, in various sizes, represent seven cutting-edge photovoltaic technologies from seven companies that Chevron is checking out as possible candidates to power its operations worldwide.

Chevron, which has operations in 100 countries, said it was looking for panels that cost less and are more reliable and efficient than what's available today.

"We're quite a large company that uses quite a lot of energy," said Des King, president of Chevron Technology Ventures, a division that looks for and evaluates new technologies including those in alternative energy.

Cost savings from past energy efficiency efforts have been significant, the company said. Since 1992, when Chevron began tracking its power use and began using hydrogen fuel cells and solar panels at its facilities, the company cut its energy use by nearly a third and saved nearly \$3 billion, King said.

The test complex just outside Bakersfield is the latest in a move by large companies to tap emerging technologies as a way to cut energy costs.

BP Solar, a subsidiary of British oil behemoth BP, designs, manufactures and markets solar products and says it invests more than \$10 million annually in photovoltaic research and development. Royal Dutch Shell has invested more than \$1 billion in alternative energy projects in the past.

For its part, Chevron said it plans to spend at least \$2 billion more over the next three years on renewable power ventures and research.

"All the companies are going about it in different ways," King said of Chevron's competitors. "Our goal is to be an early adopter."

Chevron researchers will study how the panels perform against a benchmark system provided by Japanese company Sharp Electronics Corp. The entire system, known as Project Brightfield, cost "millions of dollars" to develop, said Sean Connors, assistant project manager for the complex. He declined to disclose the exact cost of the venture.

The installation sits on the site of a former refinery tank yard that Chevron used from the early 1900s until 1986 and was later demolished.

Six of the solar panel companies - Sharp, Abound Solar, Schuco, Solar Frontier Ltd., Solibro and MiaSoleil of Santa Clara, Calif. - provided thin-film panels, which are known for their low manufacturing cost. Innovalight Inc., based in Sunnyvale, Calif., was the sole supplier of crystalline-silicon panels, which tend to be more expensive but are often better at converting sunlight into power.

The sloping panels will produce about 740 kilowatts of electricity that will be used to power the pumps and the pipelines operated at Chevron's Kern River oil field facility nearby. Extra power will be transferred to the local Pacific Gas & Electric Co. utility grid under a metering system that gives Chevron credit for the excess energy.

Chevron and the other participating companies will have access to data transmitted wirelessly from the project, including reactions to different weather conditions. Chevron expects to take three years to decide which of the technologies it wants to implement at its offices and production sites.

But the company said it plans to continue using the electricity produced from the facility for 25 more years.

Chevron began planning the project in early 2008. A team scouted more than 180 companies as potential participants, scouring the Internet for information and meeting in person with executives. After narrowing the field to the final seven companies and battling other Chevron proposals for funding, Project Brightfield sped through the local permitting process and completed construction late last year.

Cal/EPA to discuss plans for Kettleman investigation

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, March 20, 2010

California's environmental regulators are coming to Kettleman City Thursday as part of their role in the governor-ordered investigation into what could be causing an abnormal spike in birth defects in the small farming community in Kings County.

The California Environmental Protection Agency is holding a community meeting to discuss its plan to assess possible environmental contaminants in the air, water and soil that can cause birth defects. Cal/EPA officials are also seeking public comment about the process at the meeting.

State Department of Public Health officials will also join the meeting to report further progress in their investigation.

The meeting is the result of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's January order that directed two state agencies to take aggressive steps to investigate possible environmental and health issues in the impoverished community, where an apparent cluster of birth defects has come to light.

Some residents are worried that the nearby toxic waste facility may be affecting their health. Waste Management, which owns the landfill facility, is seeking an expansion.

Thursday's meeting will follow the monumental Feb. 9 visit by state public health officials, whose preliminary report indicating there is nothing unusual about the birth defect statistics in Kettleman was met with an immediate backlash from residents and activists, who accused the state agency of downplaying the severity of their concerns.

Subsequently, the total tally of confirmed birth defect cases over the last two and a half years has since nearly jumped from six to 10, with a possible 11th case, further aggravating the level of concern within the town.

Meanwhile, the state's toxic waste regulators were considering holding a community meeting on April 10 as part of their formal review process for permits sought by Waste Management for its landfill expansion plans.

But activists denounced the move, contending that the state has breached the public trust by trying to move forward with the permit process when the governor-ordered investigation has barely begun.

Public outcry has prompted the Department of Toxic Substances Control to back off its plans for that meeting.

"We were in the preliminary stage of looking at what dates and locations are good for the meeting. Hearing that there's a concern there clearly was something we considered," said Mercedes Azar, spokeswoman for the toxic substances control agency.

Azar also reminded that Department of Toxic Substances Control -- although it is a part of Cal/EPA -- performs a separate legal function from Cal/EPA's role in the birth defect investigation, which is to review the permit application for Waste Management's landfill expansion proposal.

Activists welcomed the cancellation of the meeting, but still expressed their distrust toward the agency.

"The DTSC was responding to community concerns, not because we think they care, but because we made them respond," said Bradley Angel, executive director of San Francisco-based Greenaction. "The fact that the state had the nerve to try to move the dump-permit process forward -- at the same time as the investigation is just starting -- was too blatant for them to get away with."

No date has been set for the community meeting.

Azar assured the thoroughness of the agency's review process and said community participation plays a "critical part."

"We're committed to not making a permit decision until we've thoroughly reviewed all the information and data recording and activities at the facility and we're certain that it's not causing any harm to its neighbors," Azar said. "That is what we do on all permit requests. The [community comment process] that we're going through under this separate permit review is critical to determining whether the facility is safe or causing harm."

Not just the community, but also Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein are now calling for a moratorium on permit activity at the Kettleman toxic waste facility. So far, no regulatory agency has ordered such a mandate.

A permit application is also pending with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

District officials said they are still negotiating with Waste Management on permit conditions and that they are nowhere near making a permit decision.

"We still have a lot of work to do to make sure that the permit assures compliance with our rules and regulations," said David Warner, the air district's director of permit services.

Warner said it remains uncertain how long that decision might take because of the pending lawsuit against the county over its December decision to approve the landfill expansion.

"We haven't analyzed whether that's going to prevent us from issuing a permit, so we just don't know," Warner said.

The air district is not planning to seek public comment over Waste Management's permit application -- another source of complaint for the residents and activists.

Rules do not require public hearings for projects with below-threshold emissions, Warner said. Waste Management's landfill expansion -- as currently proposed -- is likely one of them, he said.

Tulare County Association of Government serves multiple county needs

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, March 20, 2010

The Tulare County Association of Governments is a regional agency composed of representatives from the county and its eight incorporated cities.

TCAG:

- Obtains and administers state and federal funding.
- Oversees regional planning to comply with state and federal requirements.
- Maintains the long-range transportation model for the county and its member agencies.
- Researches and analyzes air quality issues related to transportation and other features that affect air quality.

TCAG is also the primary agency for executing the provisions of Measure R, the half-cent sales tax dedicated to transportation projects.

We asked TCAG Executive Director Ted Smalley to respond to questions regarding his agency's function and activities.

Viewpoint: Could you provide details such as: budget, number of employees and scope of duties?

Smalley: TCAG currently has 13.5 positions (two are not filled). TCAG's operating budget is approximately \$3.3 million for FY 09/10. TCAG also manages the Measure R budget, which has an average of \$24 million in annual revenue. State and federal transportation capital funding administered through TCAG varies greatly depending on regional projects — anywhere from \$30 million to \$50 million a year.

Viewpoint: Is TCAG funded by the county, county and cities or some other means?

Smalley: TCAG receives a combination of federal, state, and local funding. Approximately 40 percent to 50 percent in a given year comes from Federal Planning funds.

Thirty to 40 percent of the budget comes from dues paid by member agencies — each incorporated city and Tulare County — with the remainder of the budget coming from a combination of Measure R administrative funds, DMV fees, and other State and Federal funds.

Viewpoint: What has TCAG's role been in administering Measure R funding and setting priorities for projects?

Smalley: TCAG staff manages Measure R funds and project planning on behalf of the Tulare County Transportation Authority (TCTA). TCAG delivers Measure R projects based on a voter-approved expenditure plan, board-adopted policies and procedures, and direction from the TCTA governing board. TCAG works closely with the Citizens' Oversight Committee, providing information and resources and responding to concerns. TCAG produces an Annual Report on Measure R funding that is available to the public.

The plan divided revenues into three distinct categories as follows:

Regional Projects

The Expenditure Plan was developed with input from all incorporated cities and Tulare County in an effort to identify those projects that have the most region-wide benefit. The plan contains this list of all regional projects eligible for Measure R funding. Those that are construction-ready have top priority. An important consideration is how Measure R funds work as leverage to bring additional state or federal funds to Tulare County. A couple of examples:

- The Avenue 416 Bridge over Kings River is a very expensive project. Tulare County and the City of Dinuba can apply for a federal bridge program to fund 80 percent of the cost of the bridge, with the required 20 percent local match coming from Measure R. There would be no local funding for that match without Measure R.
- Another example is the extension of SR-190 improvements west to SR-99 in the Porterville area. Caltrans is working with TCAG to fund the \$21 million project, with \$4 million in Measure R funds. Without that local funding, the project could not be constructed.
- Another major consideration is project readiness. Last year, the Visalia Ben Maddox over-crossing project was ready to go to bid at the time the federal stimulus funding became available. The project readiness made it the best candidate for stimulus funding. Measure R money was then freed up for use on the next project in the Expenditure Plan.

Local Programs

Local project priorities are determined by each of the cities and the county. Most of the local program funding has been used for road rehabilitation, pothole repair and safety projects.

Transit/Bike/Environmental

Transit expansion is determined through transit development plans prepared by member agencies that serve as transit operators. Measure R funds may only be used to expand service beyond spring 2007 levels. Bike and pedestrian projects are also prioritized by individual agencies based on public input and member agency plans. The Santa Fe Trail connecting Visalia to Tulare is a regional bike project included in the approved Measure R Expenditure Plan.

Viewpoint: What is the agency's role in recovering the east county rail line?

Smalley: With all modes of transportation, the primary function of TCAG is planning, supported by technical research to ensure that the region is poised to receive all possible state and federal funds.

Currently, TCAG coordinates a rail advisory committee and is responsible for managing the preparation of the business plan by a rail consultant. Preliminary business plan results should be available by the end of summer.

Viewpoint: What role does TCAG play in either monitoring air quality or executing San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and state air board policies?

Smalley: Air quality planning is a major function of TCAG. TCAG is the sole agency responsible for demonstrating that Tulare County meets increasingly stringent air quality conformity requirements, known as "budgets." Failure to do so could result in the loss of significant funding.

Compliance with complex regulations is done primarily through the Regional Transportation Plan and traffic modeling. Staff works very closely with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, California Air Resources Board, Environmental Protection Agency, and others in air quality matters and relies on consultants to assist with highly technical research and compliance.

Viewpoint: What has been the role or position of TCAG in the ongoing high-speed rail project?

Smalley: Our primary role is one of regional advocacy and planning. The City of Visalia did a great job advocating with the HSR authority for station stop in the Hanford/Visalia/Tulare area. TCAG is currently coordinating an effort regarding the potential placement of the station in Kings County and the transit planning to and from Tulare County.

Viewpoint: What projects do you have in the works, and what are on the drawing board for longer term?

Smalley: For the short term, the attached exhibit shows all of the major regional transportation projects planned to break ground within 5 years, although some projects are dependent on state funds. Long-term projects include all of the projects in the Measure R Expenditure Plan. In addition to road projects, transit improvements and bike projects are planned for the future. Light rail is a long-term vision of Visalia, Tulare and TCAG.

Viewpoint: What are the priorities for county projects for the next five or 10 years?

Smalley: SR-99, Road 80, Plaza Drive, Avenue 416, SR-65, SR-65 (Spruce), Road 108, railroad grade separations and SR-99 interchanges. The attached map illustrates the projects going to construction in the next five years.

Viewpoint: Any other things readers should know about TCAG?

Smalley: The goal is to keep looking for opportunities to leverage Measure R. Successes to date are noted above but include the successful leveraging and planned investment of \$500 million of construction improvements to our county. Most counties don't see regional road projects constructed for three or four years after the passage of a local transportation tax. The first Measure R regional project was under construction within one year.

Ships skirt Calif. coast to avoid pollution rules

The Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Sacramento Bee, and other papers, Mon., March 22, 2010

VENTURA, Calif. -- Cargo ships are avoiding the California coast because of tightened [air pollution rules](#), causing problems for Navy missile tests off the Ventura County coast and travel pattern confusion at sea.

California Air Resources Board rules that went into effect last summer mandate that ships within 24 miles of the coast burn cleaner fuel. Officials are now trying to figure out a new plan to deal with ships skirting the Channel Islands so they can burn dirtier, cheaper fuel.

Marine Exchange of Southern California executive director Dick McKenna met with mariners, biologists and military officials Friday in Ventura to discuss a possible solution.

Port of Redwood City working on expansion plans

The Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee and other papers, Sat., March 20, 2010

REDWOOD CITY, Calif. -- A Northern California deepwater port that seems to be mostly in the shadow of other major ports is gearing up for an expected rebound in the economy.

Officials with the port of Redwood City say they're moving forward with plans for a \$15 million project to replace two wharves that were built during World War II.

The wooden wharves would be replaced by a single 520-foot-long wharf made of concrete. Other improvements to the port area would also be made.

Environmental studies on the project are still underway. A draft environmental impact released this week says the expected increase in shipping would also result in an increase in [air pollution](#).

If the project receives all the necessary approvals, the port's executive director says construction would take 12 to 18 months.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Monday, March 22, 2010](#)

Environmental regulations are good for us

Editor: Three years of drought have been terribly hard on our farmers. We have also had a contentious debate over the Wal-Mart distribution center. Through it all, many letter writers have been complaining about environmentalists as if they want to shut business down. This is nonsense.

Farmers need water for the crops we eat and fishermen on the coast need sufficient water levels for the fish we eat. Our county needs businesses for tax revenue and jobs to cut unemployment. We also need [clean air](#) and water.

Environmental regulations are necessary because companies are sometimes more concerned with their profits than being good neighbors.

If a company dumps tons of particulates in the air or leaks toxins into the ground contaminating our wells and people start getting sick, what will John Riis-Christensen have to say about environmentalists?

Shouldn't we all be concerned about our environment? Shouldn't we all want to learn and progress for the betterment of mankind? I thought working for a better way of life was the true American spirit and what our Founding Fathers intended.

MARY McMASTER

[Editorial in the Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, March 21, 2010:](#)

Good refinery news fuels economic hope

A ray of hope shines for locals who have an interest in the continuing solvency, and job-restoring potential, of west Bakersfield's Rosedale Highway refinery.

Owner Flying J Inc., which has been trying to sell the plant and had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, has a serious suitor -- a sole potential buyer -- in Alon Israel Oil Co. Ltd. The Dallas-based company appears ready to pony up \$40 million in bankruptcy court sometime this week and would take control by June 1.

That heralds a potential return to full refining operations after more than a year of negligible activity, and perhaps the rehiring at least some of about 175 employees who were released by Flying J after its Dec. 22, 2008 bankruptcy filing. It could also provide incentive for near-idle independent producers to restart their operations. Running full-tilt, the plant is capable of refining 70,000 barrels of oil daily, producing 2 percent of California's gas and 6 percent of its diesel fuel.

To be sure, a number of the displaced workers have moved to other jobs or have left the area. But those remaining fully support Alon's bid -- the company owns four refineries, including one in Southern California.

Our enthusiasm has some caveats, however. Big West was planning an important \$600 million upgrade project. We don't yet know if Alon plans to pursue any part of it, and the company isn't talking. And a lingering environmental cleanup mandate looms.

But Alon knows what it's buying. Revitalized oil activity will be a boon all around, providing a much-needed economic kick as well as tax revenue. Goodness knows Kern County can use it. Here's to Alon's success. Let's keep our fingers crossed.

Speaking of fossil fuels, the city of Bakersfield plans to construct a liquefied natural gas/compressed natural gas fueling station in the southeast corner of the city. The installation at south Mount Vernon Avenue and Planz Road will supply power alternative-fuel vehicles in the city's refuse-collection fleet. Federal funds will cover most of the \$2.2 million price tag, and a \$550,000 local match from the city's Refuse Fund is covering the rest.

Considering the volatility of standard fuel prices and [the region's notoriously polluted air](#), the project is another step in the right direction, as natural gas burns a bit more cleanly than the others. The city and county, for example, each have a number of "greener" vehicles, and Golden Empire Transit powers its buses with compressed natural gas, as do some school districts.

It would be a breath of fresh air for all of us if the technology were to get a tighter hold in the consumer market. But for now, it looks as though ambitions to extend a wider network of alternative fuel bases will slowly take shape.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Monday, March 22, 2010:](#)

Permit denial unfair

I recently called the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board regarding a burn permit for 30 to 40 tumbleweeds that blew into my large backyard. I live in a residential area where the lots are half to three-quarters of an acre. The area where the tumbleweeds are is the back portion of my yard.

I was told by the SJVAPCB that since I had received a burn permit a few years ago, someone would come out to my home to see where I would be burning. Several days later, I received a call from a gentleman from the air board who was in my neighborhood. He stated he was denying my permit since the houses surrounding me were close enough that the smoke might blow into my neighbor's home, causing them an inconvenience.

I asked him how that was any different than when I had a burn permit a few years ago. He said, "We are just trying to consider those around you."

Most of the time the breeze blows north to south. My home faces north. Have my neighbors ever inconvenienced me? I've smelled the exhaust from their cars, the odors of cow, pig and horse dung when the wind blows just right, and I've heard their dogs and their music all night.

Since I can't burn the tumbleweeds, I'm going to make several trips to the dump. I wonder if the air board cares about all the emissions from the exhaust of my truck?

JILL CHRISTOPHER, Bakersfield