

Clean air topic of San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District video contest

Modesto Bee, Thursday, March 24, 2011

Students and teachers have a chance to help clean the air with 30-second videos promoting bicycle riding, car-pooling and other practices.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is holding its third annual For Reel Video Contest for elementary through college entrants.

The deadline for submissions, which must be on DVDs, is May 27.

The district will award an iPad to the winner and show the video on its Web site.

Get more information at 559-230-6000 or www.healthyairliving.com.

Federal EPA administrator tours Valley farms

By Robert Rodriguez, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Wed., March 23, 2011

The head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency made her first trip to the Valley on Wednesday to get a firsthand look at how farmers are using technology and innovation to reduce air emissions and conserve water.

Lisa Jackson, EPA administrator, toured two Fresno County farms and later met privately with a group of farmers and ranchers.

Jackson said she was impressed with the work Valley farmers are doing to lessen their negative effect on the environment.

And she appreciated their cooperation.

"There are some parts of the country where it's a win in the ag sector if we just went away,"

Jackson said. "But that is not the posture at all here in the Valley."

For years, Valley farmers have been working to comply with air-quality standards from government regulators, and to reduce their use of water.

It hasn't been easy. Some farmers have spent tens of thousands of dollars to convert diesel engines to cleaner-burning machines. Others have installed costly drip irrigation to reduce water consumption.

Westside farmer Don Cameron said he was pleased that Jackson visited his ranch Wednesday. She also toured J & L Vineyards near Easton.

"It was very positive," Cameron said. "It's important for her to be able to meet one-on-one with farmers so that the next time they are creating new regulations they may remember us."

Cameron is among the farmers who have used government funding to help pay for replacing older pumping equipment with newer, cleaner-burning equipment. Cameron swapped natural gas water pumps for electric-powered pumps that produce no harmful emissions.

At J & L Vineyards, Jackson heard about the Jacobsen family's use of water-saving drip irrigation and the reduced use of pesticides to control bugs and weeds.

Ryan Jacobsen said he hopes Jackson gets a better understanding of the issues California farmers face and how they are dealing with them.

"There is no doubt that what we are doing is a step above the rest of the country," Jacobsen said. "But we also want her to know how difficult it can be when the rules begin to add up."

Jackson said part of her goal in meeting with farmers was to hear their concerns.

She, along with Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, met privately with a group of farmers and agriculture-industry leaders.

"The whole purpose is to communicate with each other and not talk at each other, which happens a lot in Washington," Jackson said.

"And I want them to know that we understand their concerns."

Among the concerns raised by farmers was the fate of methyl iodide, a powerful fumigant that some environmental groups are trying to ban. Farmers use fumigants to clear the soil of harmful pests and disease, but environmental groups say it is a threat to public health.

Jackson said that while her agency is reviewing a petition trying to block the fumigant's use, she stood by the EPA's decision to register the chemical.

"I assured the farmers that any decision we make is based on science and not emotion," Jackson said.

"But the EPA has evaluated methyl iodide and will evaluate any new information, but we believe it can be used safely."

Regional nuke plant back in spotlight Group makes Kings Co. pitch after approval by Madera supervisors

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, March 24, 2011

A proposed nuclear power plant in western Fresno County is getting new attention - but not necessarily the way promoters had hoped.

The serious breakdown at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant following the recent earthquake and tsunami has brought renewed focus on the local proposal, which has failed to get off the ground because of a state ban on new nuclear plants in effect since the late 1970s.

The Fresno Nuclear Energy Group has been doing everything it can to persuade regulators that the ban should be overturned. It touts the project as a "purposed energy park," combining Fresno wastewater to cool the nuclear reactor, which the group says would mainly be used to power a desalinization plant.

Now the group is trying to drum up support from surrounding counties, including Kings. Craig Schmidt, a lawyer representing the group, made an unannounced pitch to the Kings County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

The board made no formal response and will take the issue up at a later date.

The Madera County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a letter of support for the project March 15. Phil Larson, chairman of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, wrote a letter in support of the project in January and said he continues to support the proposal despite the events in Japan. But one of his colleagues, Supervisor Henry R. Perea, said in a letter to the Fresno Bee Tuesday that he opposes the project.

Schmidt said he plans to ask for the support of supervisors in Kings, Tulare, Fresno and Merced counties. He said he may also seek the support of Kern County supervisors.

The Westside has plenty of salty underground water that can be reclaimed and sold to agriculture, John Hutson, CEO of the group, said in an interview.

But he acknowledged that the nuclear component has become a harder sell after all the ominous news coming from the Fukushima plant, which was first damaged by a huge earthquake and then by a tsunami. It appears that Japanese workers have managed to stabilize the situation at Fukushima, but the risk is still critical.

"I suspect that it will make the education process for the public more difficult," Hutson said. "We're dealing with the perception that it's dangerous. This is the only industry where you can't afford one single death. We're the most watched industry, and rightly so."

The proposed local plant has several safeguards that the Fukushima reactors don't, Hutson said. He said the plant would have containment vessels several feet thick, as opposed to the several inches of stainless steel at Fukushima. The plant would have special material underneath the reactor to prevent a meltdown, he said.

Proponents play up the clean-air benefits of the plant because it would not release any emissions into the environment, unlike coal and natural gas fired plants. San Joaquin Valley air remains among the dirtiest in the nation.

"I think it's a good deal, as far as pollution goes, and cheaper power," said Tony Barba, Kings County supervisor. Barba also sits on the board of directors of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Barba sees a benefit to nuclear power as an alternative to fossil fuels. Nuclear has picked up support from environmentalists. Aside from the clean air and greenhouse gas reductions it would create, Barba noted that the clean-energy alternatives of solar power and wind power have raised complaints among environmentalists who say they kill wildlife and ruin wilderness settings.

But Barba admitted that the Fukushima disaster has made it more difficult to get the general public to support nuclear power.

"People are saying, 'If it blows up, we're all gone,'" Barba said.

New program to award eco-friendly gardening

Business Journal Wed. March 23, 2011

Central Valley gardeners will be recognized later this year for adhering to a new program aimed at conserving water, reducing garden waste and protecting wildlife habitats.

Residential gardeners have until June 1 to sign their handiwork up for the Central Valley Landscaping Awards program, a partnership of the cities of Fresno and Clovis, the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District, the Clovis Botanical Garden and the University of California Cooperative Extension's Master Garden Program.

The winners, to be announced Oct. 1, will be those that most closely uphold seven environmentally-smart gardening principles of the program: conserving water and ensuring water quality; conserving energy and air quality, nurturing the soil; reducing garden waste, managing pests; selecting appropriate plants and creating and protecting wildlife.

"Our hope is that registered Central Valley Friendly gardeners will inspire others and really showcase the beauty and functionality a Central Valley-friendly garden can offer," said Nora Laikam, Fresno's Water Conservation Program Supervisor, in a press release. "We want people to know that a Central Valley Friendly Landscape doesn't have to be a desert landscape. These model gardens will include anything from native wildlife habitats to Mediterranean retreats to an edible kitchen garden."

In addition to being named at a public awards event yet to be announced, winners also will receive an 18-inch Margaret Hudson quail sculpture with recognition plaque and a Central Valley Friendly Landscaping yard sign.

Applications are available for download at www.ucanr.org/sites/cvlandscape. More information can be provided by calling Fresno's Water Conservation Program at (559) 621-5480.