

San Joaquin air board help on electric mowers

The Modesto Bee, Monday, April 18, 2011

Air quality officials have trimmed the cost of switching from gasoline-powered lawn mowers to cleaner electric models.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is offering a limited number of vouchers that enable residents to pay \$50 for a cordless electric mower with a 14-inch blade or \$100 for a 19-inch version. The Clean, Green Yard Machine program will continue while funding lasts.

Residents of Merced and Stanislaus counties can get more information at (209) 557-6485 or www.valleyair.org.

The district has stopped accepting voucher applications for San Joaquin County residents.

Mendota considers plan to use animals as municipal lawn mowers

By Marc Benjamin, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Monday, April 18, 2011

Mendota may become the first city in the Valley to use sheep or goats for grass trimming and weed control.

Using sheep and goats as replacements for mowers and herbicides is a growing trend across California, said Rob Rutherford, an animal sciences professor at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and one of the foremost authorities on targeted grazing in the United States.

"We think of them as a living weed whacker," Rutherford said. "If the grazing is done correctly, we mimic the elk and antelope who were out there before we were here."

The cities of San Luis Obispo and Rocklin, east of Sacramento, have used sheep and goats for grazing to cut down weeds and grasses.

But in Mendota, there's a catch: the city prohibits grazing animals. City animal control officers frequently deal with livestock and fowl complaints in the city's residential areas, council members say.

One advantage to targeted grazing by sheep and goats is that they do not cut grass and weeds down to ground level, which is better for native grasses and the larger ecosystem.

So the city is revising its rules to maintain the ban on livestock in residential and business districts, but to allow sheep to graze on large swaths of city land zoned for public facilities, said Bryce Atkins, the city's director of support operations.

He said the city is considering using sheep at its airport and sewage treatment plant, which have large open areas. The goal of the grazing plan is to reduce dust, pollution, herbicide use and fire danger -- and maybe save the city money, Atkins said.

If the City Council gives the OK, sheep or goats could begin grazing on city property by the end of May, he said. The City Council has scheduled a public hearing and vote for April 26.

Sheep already have been used for weed control elsewhere in the county. Fresno County has used sheep at landfills, and a sheep owner paid the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District to graze his animals in an 87-acre fenced flood basin north of Clovis, said Jerry Lakeman, the district engineer.

"They do knock down grass and it reduces maintenance costs," he said.

The downside? One or two sheep were killed after dogs got inside the basin, Lakeman said.

Also, "there were sheep droppings, but they biodegrade over time so that didn't seem to be a problem."

A Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, study found that sheep make efficient grazers on land that contains solar panels. Sheep keep their heads down while they eat and may bump into solar equipment, but they are less likely to jump on solar panels or eat through wires than goats, Rutherford said.

Mendota city officials thought sheep grazing sounded like a good idea when it was pitched by managers of a Mendota solar plant.

Jake Rudisill, vice president of operations for Meridian Energy USA, which operates the CalRENEW-1 solar plant in Mendota, said he doesn't expect grazing will be cheaper than using herbicides, which already have been applied to kill weeds on the solar plant property this year.

But cost is not the only consideration, Rudisill said.

"We prefer [sheep] because we are an environmentally oriented company," he said.

He said the company will contract with a sheep owner who will move the animals, fence the land and possibly keep a shepherd on the property 24 hours a day, starting next year.

There are other benefits. Not using machines to clear weeds will reduce the chance for fires that equipment can spark, fire officials say.

And in contrast with mechanical cutting, sheep and goats do not cut grass and weeds down to ground level. A couple of inches of grass and weeds will keep the land cooler in the summer and warmer other times while helping the soil retain water. That gives native grasses, plants and animals a chance to thrive, Rutherford said.

Power plant proposal off the table

by Tracy Press staff Tracy Press
Tracy Press, Tuesday, April 19, 2011

A giant power plant once slated for Mountain House's western doorstep will not be built, according to the California Energy Commission.

On Monday, Joe Douglas, a compliance manager with the commission, which is the state's energy policy and planning agency, said that the energy company won't pursue the project.

"They no longer intend to build East Altamont Energy Center," he said.

The "they" is Calpine, which filed its application to get the East Altamont project rolling in 2001. Calpine vice president of corporate communications Norma Dunn declined to say why the company pulled the plug on the project.

But the why didn't matter to Jim Lamb, who sits on the board of the Mountain House Community Services District.

"It's definitely good news," he said.

The East Altamont plant would have sat less than a mile from Mountain House's western border, just across the Alameda County line. Lamb said its impact on the community would have been huge — the plant was projected to put out 1,100 megawatts and run on a full-time basis.

Comparatively, the Mariposa Energy Project — a proposed peaker power plant about 2½ miles from Mountain House that's headed toward a likely final approval — will only generate 200 megawatts at most, and will likely not run more than 600 hours a year, according to officials.

The community services district board opposed the Mariposa project, and would have opposed the East Altamont proposal as well, Lamb said. But Calpine's decision makes any local opposition unnecessary.

Lamb admitted, though, that it might not mean the end of power plant battles for Mountain House residents.

Energy company officials have said in the past that the area the East Altamont facility was slated for is perfect for such projects because of nearby water, gas and electric lines.

However, Lamb hopes that Mountain House will have more clout in staving off power plants as neighbors as the town grows. When East Altamont began to take shape in 2001, construction had only begun in Mountain House.

[Bakersfield Californian Editorial, Tuesday, April 19, 2011:](#)

GET's decision to look at new bus routes welcome

As gas prices rise and Bakersfield's geographic footprint continues to grow, public transportation becomes an increasingly important part of this city's future. But the all-too-common sight of a near-empty Golden Empire Transit bus isn't exactly an inspiration to those who might otherwise be inclined to consider that transportation option.

What's keeping riders away? A big part of it is undoubtedly California car culture – the deep-seated conviction that when one sacrifices one's vehicle, one sacrifices freedom and spontaneity. Convenience is another big factor, however, and it is on this count that GET must make some big strides if it hopes to win over new potential riders. Some routes are circuitous and unnecessarily long. Some transfers require lengthy waits at uncovered bus stops, and some trips are most efficient when they involve walking several blocks between stops. That's hardly the type of arrangement likely to make new ridership inroads.

That's why we're encouraged to see GET taking preliminary steps toward a revision of its Bakersfield bus routes and schedules – the first such undertaking since 1987, when the city was half its present size.

Among the proposals: Redirect more buses to popular routes to eliminate long transfer wait times at uncovered and unfriendly bus stops; create a new hub at Bakersfield College; and add Sunday routes.

Creating an efficient transit system that better encompasses the layout of the city can only encourage more people to commit to public transportation. The fewer the commuters using personal transportation, the better our iffy air quality.

Kudos to GET for its willingness to take this on, and kudos to the transit system's management team for its decision to incorporate the opinions of both typical riders and local leaders, such as the Kern Council of Governments, in formulating a master plan that makes sense for us all.

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Monday, April 18, 2011:](#)

Protect the air to protect our lives

I was glad to see Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, stand in support of clean air and public health. On April 7, he voted "no" on H.R.910, a bill that undermines the Clean Air Act. Among the actions that the bill would repeal is the provision that allows California to set clean vehicle standards to reduce smog forming pollution and carbon emissions.

The Clean Air Act is a true lifesaver. In 2010 alone our nation averted an estimated 160,000 premature deaths and 1.7 million asthma attacks. For the tens of thousands of asthma sufferers in San Joaquin Valley, where the air pollution is among the worst in the country, that's a great relief.

Despite the significant health benefits of EPA air quality standards, some members of Congress voted for this bill that restricts the EPA's ability to protect Americans from air toxics. They continue to claim that corporate polluters can't handle the consequences of clean air standards and that healthy air is too costly.

Last November, California voters spoke on this matter by their resounding defeat of Proposition 23. It's time to stop the bickering and start moving forward.

*Michael Peterson, MD
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Fresno*