

Arvin community starts its 'bucket brigade'

By Rebecca Plevin

Vida en el Valle Tues., Dec. 20, 2011

LAMONT -- On a hazy December morning, Arvin resident Hugo Tamayo stood on the dusty easement outside a controversial composting facility and pumped air into a clear, 18-quart bucket.

Once he had captured air in a 10-liter bag inside the bucket, the sample would be shipped overnight to a lab to be tested for volatile organic compounds and sulphur compounds, as part of a two-year, community-run air-monitoring project -- or "bucket brigade" -- funded by The California Endowment.

Tamayo, an unemployed father of four, said taking samples of the air, so its potential health effects could be analyzed, would allow him to do something positive for his neighbors in Arvin.

The Kern County city of about 19,304 people -- where 92.7 percent of are Latino and 36.2 percent live in poverty -- has gained notoriety for having some of the smoggiest air in the country. At least one environmental activist has called the city, "the poster town for environmental injustice and racism."

"We're doing something for the whole community," said Tamayo, who sported sunglasses and a slicked ponytail.

The bucket brigade project was launched after Arvin residents and members of the community group Committee for a Better Arvin expressed concerns about living amidst facilities -- like Community Recycling and Resource Recovery, Inc., the Lamont composting facility -- and not knowing if the facilities were emitting potentially toxic chemicals into the area's already-contaminated air.

The need for the monitoring project was intensified, though, when residents learned this summer that the California Air Resources Board had moved the city's air monitoring station from its historically dirty spot on Bear Mountain Boulevard, to Di Giorgio Elementary School, about two miles away, where the air appears cleaner.

The move was just the latest in a series of alleged environmental injustices the Committee for a Better Arvin has fought. The group formed about five years ago, when residents first learned their agricultural city was also home to the former Brown & Bryant, Inc. plant, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has declared a Superfund site -- an uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous waste site.

But the move wouldn't be the last issue the group would take up.

The stakes were again raised in October, when two brothers from Arvin -- Armando Ramírez, 16, and Eladio Ramírez, 22 -- died after apparently inhaling fumes inside an 8-foot-deep drainage tunnel at Community Recycling, according to The Bakersfield Californian.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors fined the company \$2.3 million and voted unanimously to shut down the facility, but a judge has lifted that order, according to The Californian.

Now, with the help of the air monitoring project, Tamayo and the Committee for a Better Arvin hope to scientifically prove what city residents know in their bones -- and their lungs: The air quality in Arvin has not actually improved, and the city's current environmental conditions are unacceptable.

"The issue is there, but the data is not there," said Gustavo Aguirre, director of organizing for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, which is assisting the community group. The monitoring project, he said, "gives us tools to advocate for the changes we need."

Arvin residents and environmental advocates kicked off the project last Thursday with a 'toxic tour' of the city. The first stop was Community Recycling, where Tamayo took the air sample.

As part of the monitoring process, Denny Larson then asked the small group to describe the smell of the air outside the composting facility. Larson is the executive director of El Cerrito-based Global Community Monitor, which has trained and supported communities to use environmental monitoring tools in 27 countries.

"It smells like -- 'starts with an 's,'" Tamayo said, half-joking. "We can say 'feces,' maybe 'human waste,'" Larson said, as he logged the description on a piece of paper.

But, the group said, the stench was more nuanced than that -- it almost had a sickening sweet smell to it. People sniffed the air carefully.

Larson asked if anyone experienced any health effects from breathing the air outside the facility. Some felt light-headed, others were nauseous.

A couple hours later, the group took a lunch break in the Committee for a Better Arvin's office. Over tortas, group chairman Salvador Partida said he hopes the air monitoring project arms community residents with the scientific proof they need to compel leaders to change regional environmental policies.

"We are not going to wait for the state to tell us how bad it is -- we will tell the state how bad we are," said Partida, a certified public accountant, who has also served as a city planning commissioner. "That way, they can help us more and more by making better rules and regulations for all the polluters from here to San Francisco."

Kevin Hall, director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, said the air-monitoring project would allow residents to reverse the history of environmental inequity in Arvin.

"When they have the right information, they can call on elected officials to do the right things," he said. "People are taking it on themselves to get that done -- and that is heroic."

Calif. air regulators consider banning wood fires

Merced Sun-Star, Wed., Dec. 28, 2011

SAN FRANCISCO – Air quality officials are considering banning wood-burning this coming weekend after soot from holiday fires and stagnant air caused an unhealthy mix in San Francisco Bay area skies.

More than 400 people called in tips to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, saying neighbors were lighting wood fires in their homes on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Officials aimed to discourage that by issuing several "Spare the Air" alerts in recent weeks but air quality was so poor Monday it rivaled conditions following 2008's major wildfires.

The San Jose Mercury News reports regulators have not issued any fines so far, but may crack down on repeat offenders once they sort through all the tips. The district has gotten 2,200 complaints about fires and banned fireplace burns since Nov. 1.

[Stockton Record blog, Tuesday, Dec. 27, 2011:](#)

Who obeys the air district?

By Alex Breitler

I found myself wondering over Christmas weekend how many people were heeding the Valley air district's no-burn ban. A similar ban got some press over in the Bay Area, but I haven't seen much on this side of the hill.

About 9:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve I took the resident mutt over to Barkleyville, north Stockton's popular dog park, and the smell of wood smoke from the surrounding neighborhood was obvious as soon as I stepped out of the car.

Also obvious is the lack of awareness most people have on this issue.

"Wait a minute," said my buddy at the dog park, after I mentioned the odor. "I can't burn at ALL???"

Take heart, air district employees. Someone is listening.

Later that night, at Central United Methodist Church's annual 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service, Pastor Dave Bennett announced that — contrary to what the bulletin said — church members would have to do without one tradition this year.

That tradition involves lighting a bonfire after the conclusion of the candlelight service, gathering around the open flames and singing carols into the wee hours of the morning.

The no-burn order made the bonfire a no-go, Bennett told the congregation, which went home a bit cold and a bit quiet, but well within the law.

[Sacramento Bee commentary, Tuesday, Dec. 27, 2011:](#)

A huge and long overdue win for public health

By Fred Krupp

It is one of the most important public health measures in a generation, one that will save tens of thousands of American lives. It will protect the IQ of countless American kids, and help clear the air for the millions of Americans with asthma. It may be the biggest health story you've never heard of.

I'm referring to the ruling the Obama administration unveiled Dec. 21 to control toxic mercury pollution from coal-burning power plants. These rules have been 21 years in the making, and now, at long last, they will bring Americans some relief from a pervasive toxin.

The United States has always shown good sense when taking on hazardous substances in our environment. We banned DDT in the 1970s after learning that this pesticide was killing birds of prey. We banned lead in gasoline and paint after scientific research proved it was harming our children. We joined the world in banning CFC refrigerants after scientists demonstrated they were depleting the Earth's ozone layer. And we took strong action to reduce sulfur emissions from coal plants, which were poisoning our forests and lakes with acid rain.

Now we have taken aim at another Public Enemy: mercury. The president deserves enormous credit for sticking with his plan despite furious opposition from some in the power industry and their allies on Capitol Hill.

Why is this such a big deal? For many Americans, it may come as a surprise that mercury contamination is even a problem. Moms will know that doctors warn against eating too much canned tuna, but may not be sure how the mercury gets in the fish. But make no mistake: this is a public health emergency of the first order, and it starts with coal-fired power plants.

Every year, U.S. power plants release almost 50 tons of mercury into the environment. When coal is burned, some of the mercury in it deposits locally and some can travel hundreds of miles to contaminate rivers, lakes, animals, plants and ultimately our bodies.

Mercury is highly toxic.

Mercury exposure, especially in infants and children and developing fetuses, can lead to serious neurological problems, including impacts on thinking, memory, language and fine motor skills. Scientists at New York's Mount Sinai Center for Children's Health and the Environment have estimated that mercury exposure causes reductions in intelligence for between 316,500 and 637,200 American children each year, and also cause disruptions in behavior. Most of these effects will last a lifetime.

Many of the other toxic pollutants controlled by these rules - such as chromium, arsenic and dioxin - are known or probable carcinogens and can attack the brain, lungs, liver and kidneys.

Industry lobbyists have always complained about measures to protect the environment and public health. The Clean Air Act would lead to the "collapse of entire industries," said the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971. Phasing out CFCs would kill the refrigeration business. Removing lead from gasoline would mean huge price hikes.

Despite these wild predictions, the sky never fell, the American economy continued to prosper, and costs have been far outweighed by the public health benefits. The Clean Air Act, for example, has dramatically reduced asthma attacks, heart disease and other illnesses, saving trillions of dollars in health costs. In fact, for every dollar we spend under the Clean Air Act, we receive more than \$30 in benefits. Now some lobbyists are complaining again, about the new mercury and air toxics rule. They claim the rule will lead to blackouts and service cutbacks and cause consumers' bills to skyrocket and they complain that utilities don't have enough time to meet the new standards.

President Obama and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson were right to stand firm on this rule. The new regulations will impose some costs, but they will save far more in public health benefits. And several recent studies, including one by the respected North American Electric Reliability Corp., have all concluded that the new rules will not cause electricity reliability problems.

And here's what the coal lobbyists aren't telling you:

- Canned albacore tuna has become so contaminated by mercury that children under six should be restricted to, at most, one meal a month. Children ages 6-12 should eat no more than two meals a month.

- States in the Midwest are advising women of childbearing age, and young children, to never eat fish caught in the Great Lakes, because of contamination by mercury (among other pollutants).

- All 48 of the continental United States had mercury fish consumption advisories as of March 2011.

- Wildlife that prey heavily on fish, including loons, mink, otters, beluga whales in the Arctic and even polar bears in Greenland, are heavily contaminated.

The new mercury and air toxics rule has been in the works since 1990 - long enough for the electric utilities to prepare. Many, to their credit, have done just that, and they support the new rules. But a few outliers didn't make the necessary investments, betting they could endlessly delay the new rules. They are the ones making the most noise and spending the most money. In the last two quarters alone, for example, American Electric Power Co. spent millions lobbying Congress to weaken and delay clean air rules.

Sorry, time's up. Twenty-one years is long enough to wait for such a big, life-saving win.

Fred Krupp is president of the Environmental Defense Fund.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Wed., Dec. 28, 2011:](#)

It's a job-creating machine that will never be less expensive

By Tom Richards

Most of us will agree California's transportation infrastructure is inadequate. Why? It was designed for a population close to half our size. The Central Valley's surface transportation future without high-speed rail is clear: land-consuming sprawl that will continue to encroach on precious agricultural land.

The valley has experienced lean times, but not since the Great Depression as severe as this recession. You know the statistics: one of the highest unemployment rates in the state, some of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation -- and, sadly, air that sickens our children and threatens our elderly most days.

California's high-speed rail project -- despite what the detractors say about it -- addresses every one of these urgent problems. It will put people back to work by creating solid, highly paid construction jobs that families throughout the valley need right now. Conservative estimates are that 100,000 jobs will be created in the Central Valley as Californians begin construction; and with implementation of the full high-speed rail system in California, as many as 400,000 long-term jobs statewide. It won't be construction alone that has an immediate positive impact on our economy. Small businesses, from diners to gas stations, will prosper as citizens in the Central Valley go back to work, helping their struggling families meet health care needs and mortgage obligations and reverse the foreclosure tragedy.

Two other important benefits of California's high-speed rail project should not be overlooked: first, it is committed to clean, electric technology, that [will reduce -- not add to -- the air pollution we all suffer from](#). Second, it will reduce our dependence on oil.

I realize that many of you are well aware of these advantages, but that you have concerns about funding and cost. We all do. These are legitimate questions to have and to be answered. We respect the opinions of critics of California's ambitious high-speed rail project and learn from them. Those of us working to make this investment in high-speed rail a reality, for today's and future generations of Californians, are convinced that it represents the most progressive and environmentally responsible solution for a transportation problem we are all going to pay for one way or another.

It will never be less expensive than now. Yes, the last few years have enabled preparation of more detailed engineering and investigation of potential rights of way. So yes, we are now in a better position to estimate and yes, costs are higher. The ridership numbers have been updated and presented at high, medium and low rider estimates. The new draft 2012 business plan incorporates this new information and because of it, presents a level of reliability you would expect from a project ready for construction.

Even under the harshest scrutiny, the long-term benefits of high-speed rail -- particularly for the valley -- far outweigh the costs, particularly when compared with the \$171 billion costs of building more highways and airport capacity that we will need to accommodate our growing population's infrastructure demands.

Ridership estimates in the new plan were developed by one of the leading forecasting firms in the world, critiqued by an independent world-class panel of distinguished experts and reflect conservative assumptions designed to avoid pumping up the results. Assumptions about funding are equally conservative, predicated based on the assumption that the federal government contribution will be 61 percent of the cost of connecting the Los Angeles Basin to the San Francisco Bay Area, far below the historical precedent of nearly 80 percent federal funding for other infrastructure projects.

Outreach is vital to our task, and we have been lauded by many Central Valley officials including Reps. Dennis Cardoza and Jim Costa, Fresno County Supervisors Henry Perea and Susan Anderson, and Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin for listening to the valley and altering routes based on residents' feedback. Attending public workshops, getting answers to questions from rail authority technicians for valley residents and keeping the public and officials informed of authority

events is time-consuming. To criticize the amount of money spent on outreach creates a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation, given that the public and the media expect the rail authority to be responsive to public concerns.

Like you, we understand the concerns about current and future economic uncertainty and together we will find solutions. But don't let that lead you to join those who call this commitment to the largest infrastructure project in the world just a dream or worse, even a folly. Nothing in our great valley comes from and goes nowhere. We are where it all starts! We're Californians -- we're used to dreaming big and converting such dreams into reality. And in the valley, we've always been big dreamers -- taking once arid land and making it the breadbasket of the world; finding oil at a time when most thought it was only in Texas -- or then Alaska; and creating a place that welcomed citizens from throughout America and the world to settle in a valley full of hope and promise.

I urge you to join the thousands of citizens in Bakersfield, the valley, and California and remain committed to planning for tomorrow.

Thomas Richards of Fresno is a vice chairman of the board of directors of the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Wed., Dec. 28, 2011:](#)

Clean air wins with new rules on mercury

Finally! After decades of effort stretching back through four administrations, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued new federal standards last week to limit the amount of mercury, arsenic and other harmful poisons emitted from power plants. The new rules require mostly coal, but also oil-burning, power generators to install modern technology that will eliminate 90% of the mercury and other toxins they emit. Most of the affected plants are in the Midwest and Southeast, but the pollution they spew travels well beyond those regions. Anyone who eats fish -- particularly fish near the top of the food chain, such as tuna -- is potentially at risk from mercury.

A potent neurotoxin, mercury can damage the nervous system of fetuses and young children. It can cause blindness, deafness, lower IQs and developmental disabilities. Other toxins targeted by the new rules cause cancer, stroke and heart attack. They damage kidneys, irritate the eyes and aggravate asthma and other respiratory ailments.

The federal EPA estimates the new rule will prevent 11,000 premature deaths a year and thousands of asthma attacks and emergency room visits.

Predictably, opponents are forecasting catastrophe. They say tightened standards will jack up electricity costs, increase the threat of power outages and kill jobs. Really? The pollution control technologies mandated by the new standards have been commercially available for more than 20 years. Hundreds of power plant operators in the 17 states that issued similarly stringent standards years ago have already complied with the new rules.

The coal-burning plants that will likely have to shut down because of the new standards account for less than one-half of 1% of the power generation for the nation. New jobs will be created to build and install the pollution equipment needed to comply with the new standards. And utilities have been given maximum flexibility. They have until 2015 to retrofit their plants, a year longer if the fix would in any way interrupt power supply.

Republicans in Congress, working with well-financed lobbyists for polluters, have promised to block the new rules. That will be interesting to watch in an election year. As President Obama has noted, it's a false choice to claim we can't have clean air and a strong economy. We can have both, and this rule will help accomplish it.