

Expo celebrates green achievements, future

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

Stockton Record, Thursday, March 10, 2011

STOCKTON - Somewhere in the middle of a green-business exposition - among displays of blindingly efficient streetlights and vials of clear biofuel - stood a man grilling sausage.

No, Frank Pazzanese wasn't selling the latest environmentally friendly pork product.

But his company, Alpine Meats, did recently change out all the light bulbs at its Lower Sacramento Road facility. And it wants to do more to both save money and help the environment, Pazzanese said.

That's why he showed up Wednesday at the Hilton Stockton. "We're looking for anything that makes sense, and there's a ton of ideas here," Pazzanese said while handing out free samples to the public.

Indeed, the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce's annual REXPO - in its seventh year - is all about ideas.

Pencils made of recycled denim jeans were distributed to the crowd. So were rulers made of recycled polystyrene (Styrofoam).

Stockton-based All Weather Roofing switched on a couple of light bulbs and demonstrated the difference between traditional asphalt roofing and a reflective white surface (about 80 degrees or so). One inventor pushed a Water Decontaminator, a giant filter that hangs beneath a storm drain and catches pollution before it enters natural waterways.

Dozens of businesses shared their work, while hundreds of people milled around the exposition.

REXPO is part celebration of what's already been achieved and pep rally for what's yet to come - the realization, some say, of Stockton's potential as a sort of green jobs capital.

"We are a community of entrepreneurs, pioneers and hard workers," Stockton City Councilwoman Susan Eggman said.

One of those pioneers is Community Fuels, a biodiesel plant at the Port of Stockton. The fuel produced at that plant is mixed in with conventional fuel for cleaner vehicle emissions and smoother performance, said Lisa Mortenson, the company's chief executive officer. Some of it is shipped to China (as opposed to the other way around).

Mortenson said Community Fuels considered 75 locations before picking Stockton for its multimillion-dollar plant.

"Do you guys think we made the right decision?" she asked the crowd, which then applauded.

EIP: Unregulated Factory Farm Air Pollution at Some Sites Now Dirtier than America's Most Polluted Cities

By Environmental Integrity Project, Washington, D.C.

In the Sacramento Bee, Thursday, March 10, 2011

WASHINGTON, March 9, 2011 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- New federal and industry data show that the air at some factory farm test sites in the U.S. is dirtier than in America's most polluted cities and exposes workers to concentrations of pollutants far above occupational safety guidelines, according to a new report from the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP). While the

measurements were taken onsite at factory farms, the pollution levels are high enough to suggest that those living near these massive livestock operations also may be at risk. Estimated emission levels for some pollutants were higher at some test sites than amounts reported by large industrial plants.

In outlining needed action steps, the EIP report concludes that the problem is sufficiently grave that it should lead to the overturning of a 2008 Bush Administration "backroom deal" that gave concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) amnesty from federal pollution reporting rules.

The new EIP report states: "Five years ago, EPA suspended enforcement of air pollution laws against CAFOs until the study was complete, and in 2008, EPA exempted CAFOs from most pollution reporting requirements altogether. But the study shows that many CAFOs pollute in quantities large enough to trigger emission reporting laws that have applied to most other large industries for decades, and that Clean Air Act protections may be warranted to protect rural citizens ... [The new] research confirms that the large CAFOs, or factory farms, that dominate the nation's meat industry are major sources of ammonia emissions and other dangerous air pollutants."

Among the EIP report's key findings:

Fine particle pollution can damage the lungs and heart and cause premature death. The EPA/industry study measured levels of particle pollution well above Clean Air Act health-based limits at some sites: Fine particle pollution was much higher than the federal 24-hour exposure limit on the worst days at 6 of 15 study sites, including 5 poultry operations in California, Indiana, and North Carolina, and a Washington dairy. Peak 24-hour exposures at two henhouses in California and one in Indiana were more than three times higher than EPA's 35 microgram standard.

Ammonia can damage the respiratory system and is life-threatening at high concentrations. Based on sampling results, 11 of 14 CAFOs in the study emit more than 100 pounds of ammonia on average days, which triggers pollution reporting requirements for non-livestock industries. Some CAFOs emitted thousands of pounds on their worst days. These industrial-scale emitters include hog CAFOs in Indiana, Iowa, Oklahoma, and North Carolina, dairies in Indiana, Washington, and Wisconsin, and egg layer or broiler chicken facilities in California, Indiana, and North Carolina.

Hydrogen sulfide also causes respiratory symptoms, damages the eyes, and is fatal at high concentrations. Federal right-to-know laws also require companies to report hydrogen sulfide emissions that exceed 100 pounds per day. While oil refineries are a recognized source of hydrogen sulfide, the data suggest that some large hog and dairy CAFOs release comparable amounts of the same pollutant. Texas has established an enforceable air quality standard of 80 parts per billion of hydrogen sulfide averaged over half an hour, due to the pollutant's effects on those downwind. The air around 7 hog and dairy sites – nearly half of the confinements studied – exceeded this level for entire days during the study. Long-term ambient levels of hydrogen sulfide were also significantly higher than EPA's reference concentration of 1 ppb at most study sites."

The full EIP report is available online at <http://www.environmentalintegrity.org>.

Commenting on the findings, Tarah Heinzen, attorney and report author, Environmental Integrity Project said: "No other major industry in the U.S. would be permitted to pollute at these levels without EPA oversight. Our findings indicate that citizens near factory farms may be breathing unsafe levels of small particle pollution, ammonia and other toxic gases, and that EPA's failure to regulate air pollution from these operations may threaten public health. It is time for EPA to overturn the Bush Administration's backroom deals with the factory farm industry and begin applying consistent federal standards to all major polluters."

"The findings of the EIP analysis corroborate a large body of scientific evidence," said Keeve E. Nachman, PhD, MHS, program director, Farming for the Future, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Animal production sites have been repeatedly demonstrated to release a wide spectrum of particulate and gaseous contaminants of concern; exposures to contaminants measured in the NAEMS study have been linked to a spectrum of adverse respiratory and mental health effects."

Brent Newell, general counsel, Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, said: "President Obama made a campaign promise to protect rural Americans from animal factory air and water pollution. If EPA accepts this industry-tainted junk science and implements this Bush EPA policy, then the President will break that promise and sacrifice the health of rural Americans."

Lori Nelson, a Bayard, Iowa resident with 5,000 hogs in two factory farms within one-half mile of her house, said: "Factory farms need to be held accountable for their air pollution and should be regulated by the Federal EPA under industry guidelines under the Clean Air Act. Communities, and residents in close proximities, such as me, should have the right to know what is in the air we breathe. The EPA needs to reverse its regulation that exempts factory farms from reporting toxic ammonia and hydrogen sulfide emissions."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The EIP report spells out a number of needed to steps to remedy CAFO pollution problems:

Rescind the 2008 rule that arbitrarily exempted CAFOs from most of the pollution reporting requirements in two federal environmental laws.

Contract with independent experts to peer-review the industry's analysis and establish an independent committee to oversee the emission estimating methodology process. This process will enable CAFOs to begin estimating their pollution based on the results of EPA's study and existing scientific research. The committee should include representatives from the public health, environmental justice, and environmental communities.

Re-calculate daily and overall emissions averages with all negative values and other clearly erroneous data points removed, and use the resulting total emissions to determine whether CAFOs of a certain size should be regulated under the Clean Air Act.

Use the study's minute-by-minute monitoring data to calculate short-term pollution levels as well as 24-hour averages, and determine whether spikes in pollution in either emissions or the air surrounding CAFOs pose a threat to public health.

Drafting regulations necessary to use the Clean Air Act to protect public health from ammonia, volatile organic compounds, and other factory farm pollution.

METHODOLOGY

With industry support and funding, Purdue University conducted the two years of air quality monitoring at 15 livestock confinement sites, 9 livestock waste lagoons, and a dairy corral in nine states, measuring background concentrations and emissions of ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, particulates, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). EPA approved Purdue's methods and supervised the study. In January, Purdue presented the results to EPA as a series of summary reports and data sets that EPA made available to the public without further analysis. The Environmental Integrity Project analyzed these initial reports, comparing CAFO air pollution with established health standards and emissions reporting rules to assess the need for increased public health protections from factory farm emissions.

ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY PROJECT

The Environmental Integrity Project (<http://www.environmentalintegrity.org>) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization established in March of 2002 by former EPA enforcement attorneys to advocate for effective enforcement of environmental laws. EIP has three goals: 1) to provide objective analyses of how the failure to enforce or implement environmental laws increases pollution and affects public health; 2) to hold federal and state agencies, as well as individual corporations, accountable for failing to enforce or comply with environmental laws; and 3) to help local communities obtain the protection of environmental laws.

State to monitor air quality in Ripon Officials will test for presence of pesticides

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

Stockton Record, Thursday, March 10, 2011

RIPON - Like all communities in farm country, there is still much to be learned here about the risk that pesticides used on crops might pose to urban residents.

Officials don't know, for example, how many of these chemicals become airborne and swirl into city neighborhoods.

Getting hard data is the goal of a long-term study now under way in this south San Joaquin County town of 15,468 residents. Ripon was one of three communities statewide selected for the new monitoring program by the state Department of Pesticide Regulation, the department announced last week.

It's not that state officials have never tested for the presence of pesticides in urban areas. But those tests have typically lasted only a short while and were specific to just one when there are many kinds of chemicals applied to crops.

The tests in Ripon, Salinas and Shafter will continue at least two years and will monitor the air for the potential presence of 34 pesticides.

Officials were quick to say that Ripon was selected because of the quantity of pesticides applied on nearby fields as well as having a sizable population of young and elderly residents who may be more susceptible to pesticide exposure. The city was not picked, they say, because of any evidence of extraordinary exposure.

"Ripon is not an area where we're finding high levels of illnesses," said Gary Stockel, San Joaquin County's assistant agricultural commissioner. "It's no different than any other location."

The data that comes out of the study could show whether changes in pesticide regulation are needed, said Lea Brooks, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Pesticide Regulation.

"We just want to make sure the restrictions we have now are adequate," she said.

Once a week, an employee will check the Ripon monitoring station behind the Police Department. Canisters with air samples will be taken to a laboratory in West Sacramento for analysis.

Results should be released as soon as 2012.

Ripon was picked over Linden, another candidate city, in part because the farmland around Ripon - including almond orchards, field crops and grapes - has higher recorded applications of the pesticide 1,3-dichloropropene, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says probably causes cancer in humans, state documents say.

From 2005 to 2007, San Joaquin County ranked fourth in the state with 10.4 million pounds of pesticides used. Overall, however, pesticides have declined in California as farmers switch to methods less toxic to people and the environment, state officials say.

Gas prices not at tipping point -- yet

By John Cox and Jason Kotowski, staff writers
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, March 10, 2011

Alta Sierra resident Bill Edwards dreads the thought of traveling to Bakersfield these days. And it's not because of his sensitivity to the air quality. It's the price of gas.

"If it goes up to \$5 a gallon," he said while in town for a doctor's appointment Tuesday, "we will be forced to move."

That goes for a lot of people lately. Though his is an extreme case, indications are that overall, locals are holding out before making the kind of drastic changes they made during the 2008 gas crisis, like downsizing their vehicles, switching to bicycling to work or getting back on the bus.

A gallon of regular unleaded sold in Bakersfield Wednesday for an average price of \$3.939, the AAA reported. That represents a 15 percent increase over the average reported a month before, and a jump of 26 percent over the city's average price a year earlier, when AAA said it cost \$3.125 a gallon.

Bakersfield has seen worse -- but only 17 percent worse. The city's highest average on record was \$4.591 a gallon for regular, a height reached June 24, 2008, AAA reported.

So far, there has been no noticeable shift on Golden Empire Transit buses, marketing manager Gina Hayden said. Some of the more popular routes are overcrowded, she said, but other than that ridership is pretty close to what it was last month.

She said that's to be expected. In 2008, it wasn't until prices hit \$4.23 a gallon that ridership figures jumped significantly.

A similar pattern is evident at the online carpool service run by the Kern Council of Governments.

"We haven't seen an increase in the number of requests on our site," said executive director Ron Brummett. Higher unemployment may account for part of that, he said, but also, gas prices just aren't overbearing quite yet.

"I think people are still at the point where they're making decisions whether or not they want to drive and link their trips and doing those kinds of things, as opposed to looking for alternatives at this point," he said.

"I don't think we're quite there yet."

Eric Darwin is. A Bakersfield father of nine -- six of whom still live at home -- Darwin said high gas prices have forced his family to eat more canned food and more ramen to save money. They no longer travel as much as they used to, he said, because every family outing costs the equivalent of a house payment.

"Who's thinking about going out of town this summer?" he asked.

Tracing prices to the Middle East

Until recently, a gradual rise in U.S. gas prices was attributed to growing global demand for fuel as the world economy continues to recover, as well as the yearly cycle that typically pushes up prices during the spring.

But the steep increases of the last several weeks results primarily from the ongoing political turmoil in the Middle East, said Tom Kloza, chief oil analyst for the New Jersey-based Oil Price Information Service.

He said investors and others in the energy industry worry that crude supplies will become tighter, especially if the unrest rocking Libya spreads to Saudi Arabia.

As for criticism that market speculators are driving the high prices -- and profiting greatly from them -- Kloza said that is simply the nature of investment as money chases money.

"Oil has grown as an asset class in the last 10 years just exponentially," he said.

Crude prices should settle down again soon, he said, and in turn, that will lower prices at the pump.

"The market can get accustomed to anything," he said. "but right now it's all hyped up and worried."

Little change in vehicle choices

Still, new car and truck dealers in town said shoppers have made no great shift toward economy cars. They said people continue to buy big trucks, even if some do let gas efficiency inform their purchases.

At Haddad Dodge, customers have bought more full-size trucks so far this month than they did at this point in February, President Chuck Haddad said.

"I don't think they're worried about the gas prices," he said.

Three-Way Automotive Group's president and CEO, Ted Nicholas, reported a 35 percent increase in Chevy Silverado sales last month over February 2010, and a 113 percent jump in sales of the Chevy Equinox, a medium-size SUV. What's more, he noted, sales of the full-size Cadillac Escalade was up significantly over February 2010 numbers.

Some of the increase is probably due to financial institutions being more willing to lend, Nicholas said in an e-mail. But he added that some of the change may also be the result of greater fuel efficiency in full-size vehicles.

Fred Cummings Motorsports on Chester Avenue reported a spike of consumer interest in motorcycles and scooters since gas prices began to climb. Sales manager James Robertson said customers see it as practical to buy a motorcycle and save on monthly payments as well as at the pump.

Some of the smaller scooters are estimated to get 100 miles per gallon or more, Robertson said.

A teacher who bought a dual-sport motorcycle at the store Tuesday said he had been driving a Dodge pickup and needed to make a change with gas prices as high as they are, Robertson said.

"He's changing from eight miles per gallon to 50 to 60 miles per gallon," Robertson said of the teacher's purchase.

Robertson has seen this phenomenon before, particularly when gas prices skyrocketed in 2008.

"Vespa sales went nuts -- and any mid-size motorcycles went crazy -- in '08 when gas was five bucks a gallon," he said.

Carey Taylor, manager of Snider's Cyclery on Union Avenue, said bike sales were up, but that they're usually busier at this time of year anyway because there's more sunshine and people are receiving their tax refunds.

She said that, as far as she knew, only a few people had said gas prices were the reason they were buying a bike.

Tough on charity cases

A very different indicator of consumer attitudes came from Anthony Ortiz, a 24-year-old Frazier Park resident who lately has been driving to Bakersfield every day to get his pregnant girlfriend to a medical clinic.

Because he has no money for gasoline, he stands at an Arco filling station on F Street and asks people to fill up his small red gas can so he and his girlfriend can drive home. He said lately more people are saying no.

But maybe that's because his face has become too familiar, he said. "I may have to switch gas stations pretty soon," Ortiz said.

Supes grant extension to West Park project

by Jonathan Partridge, staff writer
Patterson Irrigator, Thursday, March 10, 2011

Stanislaus County supervisors on Tuesday gave West Park developer Gerry Kamilos another 15 months to finish work on his proposal to turn the Crows Landing Air Facility into an inland hub for the Port of Oakland.

The board's decision came after about a dozen West Side residents spoke in opposition to Kamilos' plans, which have changed drastically in recent months to include about half the acreage and half the jobs contained in his original design, as well as fewer trains and a solar farm.

Supervisor Vito Chiesa, who cast the deciding 3-2 vote in favor of extending the agreement with Kamilos, warned the developer that he must prove that the project is financially viable and do a better job of communicating with West Side residents if he hopes to continue with the county.

"I have to say that if we go forward with the 15-month extension, you have your work cut out for you because (West Side residents) are going to be important in the decision making up here," Chiesa said.

Kamilos hopes to develop Crows Landing's former naval airbase into a 2,800-acre industrial park with the prospect of creating 14,000 to 17,000 jobs after it is built out in 30 years. His plans recently have grown to include an 850-acre solar farm run by La Jolla-based Spinnaker Energy that could generate up to 150 megawatts.

Other updates to Kamilos' plans entail two trains traveling to and from the Port of Oakland to the inland port each day, rather than six trains that were initially anticipated. The project also has shrunk substantially from Kamilos' initial 4,800-acre proposal. In addition, he has received letters of support within the past month from the Port of Oakland and the Union Pacific railroad, which previously had not been the case.

Despite recent project changes, about 15 representatives from opposition group WS-PACE.org attended Tuesday's meeting, continuing to advocate that the project remain within the confines of the former 1,528-acre Crows Landing naval airbase as the county initially requested. They also complained of possible impacts that trains and truck traffic would have on the West Side and requested more specific project details, even as they expressed doubt about West Park's potential.

"These uncertain years are not the time to go ahead with such an unproven speculative project," WS-PACE.org vice president and Patterson resident Claude Delphia said.

Newman's Mayor Ed Katen and City Manager Michael Holland joined Patterson City Council members Annette Smith and Larry Buehner and former City Attorney George Logan in the chorus of opposition.

Smith said she initially only intended to ask supervisors to hold off on voting on the project extension. However, she ultimately decided to ask the county to start searching for a new developer after learning that West Park representatives had recently approached business groups based in Modesto and Turlock about supporting their project but had not communicated with West Side leaders.

"I find it very disturbing that Mr. Kamilos has made the time to go see the Turlock Chamber of Commerce, the Modesto Chamber of Commerce, the Alliance and any other group beside the agencies on the West Side, who were very vocal during the last go-round with him with regards to the impacts of his project," Smith said.

Representatives from all of those groups and several other Modesto and Turlock business representatives spoke in favor of West Park during the meeting, saying that it would provide the county with sorely needed jobs, particularly amidst unemployment rates hovering in the 20 percent range.

Supervisors who voted against the project will have to look their constituents in the eye and say they had done away with the prospect of 17,000 jobs, said Bill Bassitt, CEO of the Stanislaus Economic Development and Workforce Alliance.

"I think in some respects this could be the easiest decision you've ever made," he told the board. "On one hand, you have a decision that could lead to 17,000 direct jobs. On the other hand, you have a process that leaves you with a derelict abandoned airport."

Patterson resident Mary Clemmer, the only West Side resident to speak in favor of the project, stressed that the delays facing Kamilos' project were not his fault and requested that he be granted an extension. She also took umbrage with project criticisms by Supervisor Jim DeMartini, saying that he did not speak on her behalf when he claimed to represent West Side residents.

DeMartini grilled Kamilos during the meeting about how he would finance West Park and about tasks related to his project that were left incomplete during the past four years, such as completing an environmental impact report. He expressed skepticism that the developer would find success with a solar project, and he questioned him about some of his other business ventures that had not been built after several years of planning.

"We should not give him a 15-month extension," DeMartini said. "He has not lived up to his promises."

Supervisor Terry Withrow was less pointed, but he expressed several concerns. Those included a lack of information on the revised project and Kamilos' dependence on bond money and tax increment financing, given that state officials have discussed eliminating redevelopment funds.

"I think the easy thing to do here is go another 15 months," Withrow said. "But I think the hard decision and in my opinion the right decision is to end our relationship, to end this venture up to this point with West Park and put this up again for proposal."

Supervisor Dick Monteith came to Kamilos' defense, however. Not even the county knows whether redevelopment funds will be in place, so he questioned how Kamilos could predict what would happen, he said. He also gave kudos to Kamilos for sticking with the project despite the current economic difficulties and other challenges, adding that he still believes in West Park.

"This actually could be one of the greatest anti-pollution programs in the state of California," Monteith said, describing how the inland port aims to eliminate truck trips between the Port of Oakland and the Central Valley.

Both Monteith and Supervisor Bill O'Brien took issue with critics who said the county would be better off with another proposal for the airfield presented by Dallas-based Hillwood in 2006. O'Brien read off a few recent newspaper headlines about Hillwood, indicating that some of the company's business parks had experienced major problems as of late.

"That just goes to show this economy is affecting everybody," O'Brien said.

Despite voting for the project extension, both O'Brien and Chiesa said they would not approve another extension 15 months from now. Kamilos plans to complete an environmental impact report, a specific plan and a new draft development agreement in that time frame.

Kamilos said after Tuesday's meeting that he plans to spend a lot of time on the West Side in the upcoming months, starting with informal gatherings with Newman and Patterson leaders, school district officials, and representatives from the West Stanislaus County Fire Protection and Del Puerto Water districts.

"We want to make sure that everyone who observes this whole process can see that we are making a real strong, good-faith effort to communicate with the West Side agencies and the stakeholders and that we have communication that's very fluid and very transparent," Kamilos said.

He defended his development record, saying that some of the Sacramento-area projects that DeMartini attacked were delayed by circumstances outside his control. For instance, his 2,000-acre Sacramento-based Metro Air Park project already has about \$100 million in infrastructure in place but was delayed because the project area is surrounded by levies that were temporarily decertified by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, he said. He also reiterated to supervisors that a lawsuit by the city of Patterson and the economic downturn have caused West Park's delays.

Patterson City Manager Rod Butler noted after Tuesday's meeting that Kamilos had contacted the city the previous day about wanting to meet with its leaders.

Kamilos plans to meet with both Butler and Smith on Friday, Smith said. She hopes that he will eventually meet with Newman and Patterson leaders and representatives from various West Side agencies on a monthly basis.

While most longtime critics remained skeptical of Kamilos' plans this week, Supervisor Withrow appeared to hold out hope that the project could succeed despite his reservations.

"I hope you prove me wrong," Withrow told West Park consultant Mike Lynch, shaking his hand as he exited the supervisors chambers Tuesday.

60-megawatt solar project planned near Stratford

By Eiji Yamashita, staff writer

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, March 10, 2011

Idle, unproductive farmland near Stratford may have a new use in the near future with the submission of plans by a New Zealand-based company to build a 480-acre solar farm.

Meridian Energy USA has filed an application with the Kings County Community Development Department for the utility-scale renewable project to be built off 18th Avenue between Kansas and

Laurel avenues, about two miles east of the rural town on the county's sunny Westside.

The company made headlines last summer when it developed California's first grid-connected solar farm in Mendota. Building on that success, Meridian is now eyeing building an even bigger project in Stratford. The 60-megawatt Stratford project, if built as planned, would be 12 times the size of the 5-megawatt Mendota solar farm.

Sixty megawatts is enough to power about 19,000 typical households in the Valley, said Shaun Cornelius, vice president of project development with Meridian.

Cornelius said the Stratford solar farm, the Jacobs Corner Solar Project, is one of many projects the company is hoping to unveil in the western United States in the near future. There is no firm timetable for the project construction.

"It's one of a number of development opportunities we're pursuing, so we are simply moving the sites forward through the development process and progressing the permitting, connection and other aspects," Cornelius said. "We're not able to say exactly when we'll be able to commit to construction."

Local job creation is one of the things that the company touts in its project application.

"(The Mendota project) was unique in that Meridian was proactive in recruiting and training local residents to become solar installers, and will implement similar programs for the construction and operation of the Jacobs Corner Solar Project," the company says.

Kings County's Westside is on the way to becoming a solar powerhouse as domestic and international companies rush to invest in new projects. Meridian's proposal is the latest in a series of utility-scale solar farms that are in various stages of development in the region.

Nearing completion is a similar sized project in Avenal being developed by Japanese-owned Eurus Energy. The three-part Avenal project totaling 48 megawatts is expected to be complete by the summer, according to county Senior Planner Jeremy Kinney.

The GWF solar farm proposed for 990 acres of land south of Naval Air Station Lemoore has also been permitted for construction. Two other projects near Corcoran are in the environmental review process.

An application for the Meridian project in Stratford was filed March 2.

Cornelius said the Stratford site -- with its easy access to transmission connection, low value as farmland and minimal environmental issues -- offered an ideal site for the project.

The project site is designated by the Department of Conservation as low-value, non-prime farmland, and it requires minimal water use for the occasional washing of panels.

Meridian proposes to operate the project for at least 35 years. The project is designed so that the facilities will be removed, and the site can return to agricultural use at the end of its useful life, the company says.

The Stratford project would be interconnected with the PG&E's electric distribution grid via a new line being constructed by the utility.

County Senior Planner Sandy Roper said it is still too early to tell how long the approval process might take.

"We're sending out a request for comment to other county departments and other regulatory agencies, and at the conclusion of the comment period, those comments will be provided to the applicant," Roper said. "The applicant and his consultant will be preparing the (California Environmental Quality Act) document. That work has not been done yet, so it's premature to try to guess the time line to go before the planning commission."

Bicycle lanes get big boost in Visalia Plan calls for five-fold increase in network for riders

By Gerald Carroll, staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Wed., March 9, 2011

Visalia neighborhoods, especially in new construction in northwest and southeast portions of the city, would be honeycombed by nearly 250 miles of bicycle lanes — more than five times the current amount — under a sweeping proposal now working its way through city approvals.

The chart-and map-stuffed plan is designed to "close gaps, expand the existing network and increase bicycle use," reported its author, Lisa Wallis-Dutra, senior traffic engineer for Visalia-based Quad Knopf, who presented the package to the Visalia Planning Commission last week.

After substantive comment last week, the commission voted 5-0 to approve the plan. The Visalia City Council also approved it, also by a 5-0 vote, Monday — but not without some concerns.

For example, the plan calls for an extension of bicycle lanes on the busy east-west "collector" routes of Mineral King Boulevard and Noble Avenue between Mooney Boulevard and Akers Street.

"Our studies show that bike lanes are feasible there," said Adam Ennis, chief engineer for Visalia, "but businesses are concerned that some street parking will be eliminated."

Overall, Visalia already has 46.71 miles' worth of "finished" bicycle lanes, but that balloons to 248.65 miles of lanes under the proposal. No details on how such lanes would be financed are included, though Ennis said that grant funding is usually available.

Largely, the plan proposes new bike lanes for almost every new and proposed subdivision around Visalia's city-limits perimeter — but ignores many core traffic areas where bicyclists, often illegally, proliferate.

At present, Visalia's growing bicycle-rider population is not as sensitive to bicycling etiquette as city officials would like to see.

Therefore, crucial in the plan is a bicycling safety and education program, Wallis-Dutra told the planning commission. Bicycle use has grown in response to aggressive local promotion, the unintended consequence of careless riding, officials admit.

In Visalia, "every street is considered a bicycle lane," said Paul Scheibel, Visalia's planning services manager. "Enforcement [of existing bicycling laws] needs to be city-wide."

Education of bicyclists on proper bike-lane use, general safety and common sense would stand to mitigate most of these concerns, Wallis-Dutra said.

Further, some myths about bicycle safety need to be addressed as any bike-lane plans are considered, said planning commission member Terese Lane.

"The age breakdown shows that most bicycle-related accidents involve riders 16 and over, and not children," Lane said.

Overall, the plan stated, bicycle incidents are down, and only two fatalities were reported between 2005 and 2009 in the Visalia area, state records show. Injuries are also down, from 52 in 2005 to 41 in 2009. Total "collisions" involving bicycles in Visalia are down from 61 in 2005 to 46 in 2009.

Commission member Adam Peck said that some of Visalia's most celebrated, highly visible bike lanes — like those integrated into downtown thoroughfare Acequia Avenue's redesign in early 2009 — are simply "not accessible" from outside the immediate downtown area, mainly because of longstanding gaps in the network.

"These [bike lanes] have been talked about for five years now," Peck said. "It's frustrating."

The plan does call for increasing connectivity of these existing bike-lane fragments where feasible.

Detractors point out that downtown bike lanes are seldom used. Wallis-Dutra counters, saying that a campaign encouraging more use of existing bike lanes should be part of the overall plan. On the other extreme, a tipping point can be reached where bicyclists, rather than vehicle drivers, start dominating inner-city transportation.

"I've visited Amsterdam," said Larry Segrue, chairman of the Visalia Planning Commission. "Bicycles rule there."

Indeed, the city of Visalia — and many private firms, such as Quad Knopf — have long pushed the idea of bicycle use as a main commuting tool in a "concentric" Visalia, and not just for recreational value.

But to accomplish that, more attention needs to be focused on main avenues where bicycles proliferate — but where lanes are not planned under the proposal. Huge segments of North Dinuba Boulevard, South Mooney Boulevard, Demaree Street and Akers Street, for example, are targeted only for distant "future" bikeways, a plan map shows.

"Any bike lanes on North Dinuba [Boulevard] would have to be planned through Caltrans, since that street is also a state highway [Highway 63]," Ennis said. The same would go for Mooney, also a segment of Highway 63 and recently widened by the California Department of Transportation.