

Who has the best clean-air video? You decide

By Pavan Vangipuram, staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, July 4, 2011

Valley residents now have a new way to combat air pollution: by voting for their favorite video in the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's 2011 For Reel Video Contest.

The contest, which is in its third year, is open to all students and teachers, from kindergarten to university, and asks contestants to make a 30-second video to demonstrate how they change their behavior to help reduce air pollution.

Three finalists were selected from a pool of 11 entries, and anyone can go to www.healthyairliving.com to vote for their favorite video.

Viewers can vote an unlimited number of times. The contestant who receives the most votes will win an iPad, with the possibility of having the video appear on television.

"We want to get students and teachers thinking proactively about what they can do about air quality," Ruth Crisp, the contest coordinator, said of the contest's goals.

Among the ideas submitted were carpooling, changing incandescent lightbulbs to compact fluorescent ones, cycling, reducing the use of aerosol sprays and reducing natural gas consumption.

The three finalists were Joel Dipert, 28, of Bakersfield, Andrew Heryford, 11, from Lodi, and Jeff Phillips, a student at Fresno State.

"I think a lot of people don't keep the air clean anymore," Heryford said. "We should start watching for that."

Heryford's video features him using his family's new electric lawnmower. By eliminating noxious fumes that come from gasoline-powered lawnmowers, Heryford said he helps to clean the valley's air.

"He does have asthma, so he's a bit more into clean air and filtered air than other kids," Will Heryford, Andrew's father, said.

Andrew said that since his friends have seen his video, they have become more conscious of the quality of the air they breathe.

"I think now that they've seen my video, my friends are changing what they do," he said. "They're riding their bikes more often and doing other things."

If he wins, Andrew said he will share the iPad with his family.

Dipert wrote and performed a rap song about clean air and riding his bicycle in his video. Having lived in Bakersfield for the past seven years, he said he is no stranger to pollution.

"I lived in Canada before moving to Bakersfield, so I never really experienced smog before coming here," he said. "I felt like I was sick the first year I was here. It took a long time to get used to the air."

Dipert said the air quality in Bakersfield was so bad it was "overwhelming" at times, but that if everyone did their part, they could make tangible improvements.

"The more people see of biking, carpooling and such, the more inspired they'll be to use that transportation themselves," he said.

Valley Air District officials warn of health impact from fireworks

Sun-Star Staff
Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, June 30, 2011

As the Fourth of July approaches, Valley Air District officials urge residents to consider the effect of fireworks on their neighbors' health and the Valley's economy.

During fireworks displays, dangerous particulate matter (PM) increases, pumping large quantities of airborne material, including soot, ash and liquids, into the Valley's air, the district said in a news release. This type of pollution causes serious health effects, including respiratory disease, bronchitis and cardiac illness. PM is especially harmful to people with existing respiratory or cardiac illness, elderly people and children, according to the release.

Elevated levels of PM also jeopardize the air basin's progress in meeting federal health-based standards, which creates economic burdens for the Valley, the news release continued.

"Fireworks use is harmful to public health. And it also carries potential economic fallout as an obstacle to attaining health-based standards," said Seyed Sadredin, the District's executive director and air pollution control officer.

In summer, the Valley's air can be already stressed by ozone (smog). Fireworks emissions add to the level of pollution in the air, the news release said.

For more information about the Valley Air District, call a regional office: in Fresno, 559-230-6000; in Bakersfield, 661-392-5500; and in Modesto, 209-557-6400.

Experts Say Fireworks Affect Air Quality

From kcra.com, Thursday, June 30, 2011

MODESTO, Calif. -- San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is urging people to limit firework displays this holiday weekend. Officials say setting off fireworks releases dangerous particulate matter into the air including soot, ash and liquids.

Experts say this could cause serious health effects that range from respiratory disease and bronchitis to cardiac illness, especially for those already suffering from these symptoms.

Officials add that the Central Valley's air is already filled with smog in the summer and that lighting fireworks adds to the pollution in the air.

Bad valley air could travel from overseas

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

In the Modesto Bee, Monday, July 4, 2011

FRESNO — Air-quality scientists long have suspected some of the San Joaquin Valley's notorious brown haze comes all the way from places such as China, taking an amazing wind-blown trip. Now it's time to find out.

Years ago, researchers confirmed that plumes of east Asian forest fires, airborne dust, industrial pollution and vehicle exhaust float high in the atmosphere to California and the rest of the West.

On a mountain ridge east of Big Sur, scientists plan to set up a monitor to capture gases, specks of soil and bits of ash that have been carried thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean. The site is in a direct line with the heart of the valley.

If such pollution is coming into the valley, it might ruin the chances of meeting increasingly stringent federal standards, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said.

The valley is among the dirtiest air basins in the country, struggling to meet standards over the next decade.

Local officials have no control over international pollution. In the future, as local pollution is mostly controlled, international pollution might become the difference between healthy and unhealthy air, officials said.

If the pollution prevents the region from achieving air-quality standards, federal officials should consider granting the valley clean-air status, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the local air district.

Years before decision

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would have to make a policy decision at that point, federal officials said.

But the issue won't be settled without years of research and discussion.

The district's governing board on June 16 decided the research should start, approving \$130,000 for scientists from the University of California at Davis to monitor Asian pollution for 12 months.

In the next few months, scientists will set up an air-quality sampling station at an observatory owned by the Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy, an independent, nonprofit group.

The observatory is on Chews Ridge, which is more than 5,000 feet high. Scientists have found wind-blown Asian pollution at 3,200 and higher, so Chews Ridge should easily be high enough to get good samples, said atmospheric scientist Anthony Wexler, one of the Davis researchers involved.

Researchers said the pollution could drop to ground level in downdrafts as it moves beyond the coastal range.

The pollution also might drop lower in the atmosphere as layers of air mix together.

The big picture

But those issues are not involved in the research beginning near Big Sur. Scientists simply are trying to find out whether the pollution is headed to the valley.

Wexler, who has measured air pollution in China, said there is plenty of pollution coming from Asia. He said many governments focus more on economic development than the environment.

"The air quality in many places is incredibly bad," he said. "It's not just coal-fired plants or dust storms from the eastern deserts. The industrial and traffic emissions are huge."

Scientists will look in microscopic specks of debris to figure out the source of the pollution. The chemical makeup of a particle can be linked to the location on Earth where it was formed.

Scientists can bolster their analysis by using an online tool to track the wind and the trajectory of the pollution back to its source.

How much would be too much pollution from Asia? Wexler said science can't answer that question yet.

"The questions go like this: 'First, is it a problem? How often is it a problem? To what degree is it a problem?' We're just starting on those questions because there is no research on this at all for the valley," he said.

Stanislaus dairy forging new road to energy production

Owner says regulations hamper project

By Jonathan McCorkell

Turlock Journal, Friday, July 1, 2011

Fiscalini Farms, a Stanislaus County 1,500-cow dairy, is leading the charge in California to prove that the business end of a cow's digestive track can be effectively used to generate power.

Owner, John Fiscalini is dedicated to his new renewable energy system, which is actually fairly simple — unlike the regulations and hurdles Fiscalini has had to overcome.

Manure to electricity process

Everyday Fiscalini's cows are stored in free stall barns and every day the barns are flushed with water to clean off fecal matter. The resulting slurry product is collected and drained to create manure rich sludge, which is then pumped into the digester. The leftover water is re-used to again flush out the cow barns.

Other materials such as feed and lawn clippings can also be put into the tanks. The digester itself consists of two round above-ground concrete tanks. Each tank is 86 feet in diameter, 26 feet in height and holds as much as 860,000 gallons.

Sludge inside the tank is heated to 100 degrees and bacteria breaks down the manure particles in the tank to create methane. The methane is captured inside an expandable rubber bladder and piped outside of the tank where it is cooled and transferred to a combined heat and power engine, designed to burn biogas and create electricity and hot water.

The 710 kilowatts of electricity is then sold to Modesto Irrigation District (MID), enough to power as much as 200 homes in a nearby community.

In addition, the hot water is used in the farm's cheese making process.

Cost versus profit challenge

The biggest problem for Fiscalini is that the cost of the digester doesn't justify the return on investment. The project took more than three and a half years and \$4 million to complete, mainly because of regulations implemented by a host of governmental bodies.

Fiscalini has had help financially in the form of grants and assistance from the California Energy Commission and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

According to Western United Dairymen Communications Director Mark Looker, the costs of the digester each month is about \$32,000 — as much as Fiscalini gets back from MID.

"It is a wash for return on investment. A lot of dairymen aren't willing to spend that much money for such a little return," said Looker.

"When I started this three and a half years ago I expected to be one of many in California, but we are the only one of this size," explained Fiscalini.

'Whack-a-mole' regulations damper digester viability

On Wednesday, Fiscalini sounded off about the hurdles he faced trying to make his project work when he hosted dozens of stakeholders, government officials and media for a tour of his facility.

"The reason we are the only dairy attempting a digester of this size is regulation, additional regulation, over-regulation and burdensome regulation. And I believe there are a few regulators that would like to regulate the regulations," said Fiscalini.

Regulations from agencies ranging from water districts to air pollution boards have hampered the project's financial feasibility.

"Economic feasibility on a digester in the U.S. is not something that happens," said Fiscalini.

Fiscalini said the primary reason the project is struggling is because of a regulation that allows him to create electricity from on-site waste materials only.

"Manure, left over feed, and lawn clippings go into the digester, but we are restricted to not put anything in except what we produce on site," explained Fiscalini. "The facility could take restaurant waste, poultry processing waste and cannery waste."

Fiscalini said his facility could produce two to three megawatts of electricity if regulations were eased — enough to power as many as 3,000 homes.

For Fiscalini the solution for increasing productivity and economic viability is simple. "Either reduce cost of the construction — that's not going to happen — or allow off-site waste to be brought in," he said.

U.S. Representative Jeff Denham (R- Atwater), who attended Fiscalini's tour, expressed his desire to ease restrictions on innovative projects.

Western United Dairymen CEO Michael Marsh called the regulatory hurdles for Fiscalini a "whack-a-mole" arcade game.

“WUD has been working with the legislature, the PUC, the water boards and the air districts to facilitate these innovative projects for over 10 years. Unfortunately, it seems that it's been a bit of a ‘whack-a-mole’ arcade game. Once one bureaucratic hurdle is cleared, another is created. The Legislature and the regulators need to get behind these projects so that they can work economically for the dairy farm families. Otherwise, they will languish.

“The dairy industry is extremely valuable to the Central Valley and our economy. Fiscalini Farms is a great example of how the private industry is developing creative solutions to allow the dairy industry to thrive and create jobs in our state. We must eliminate burdensome regulations that continue to hinder these efforts,” he said.

Concerns about potential air pollution cause government agencies to be wary of the project, but Fiscalini said concerns are unfounded.

“In reality, we’ve taken the equivalent of 25 cars off the road and added one diesel truck,” he said.

Despite the cost and hurdles, hope remains for the project. Recently, the California Energy Commission awarded Fiscalini a six-month grant to study how off-site fuel could improve the project.

Should the results of the study prove promising, restrictions could ease off-site digester fuel and profitability could increase for Fiscalini, and, potentially, dairies throughout the state could start taking notice. Ultimately, the dairy industry could lead California’s renewable energy push, ironically enough.

Environmentalists appeal power plant permit

Avenal project faces yet another delay after filing of petition for review with EPA

By Eiji Yamashita, Hanford Sentinel, Friday, July 1, 2011

Just as a long-delayed federal permit came through, the Avenal power plant project – opposed by nearby residents and activists – is facing another delay.

Two environmental groups say they want to reverse a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency decision in May that gave Texas-based Macquarie Energy's \$530 million natural gas-fired plant the green light to build without fully meeting the newest air and climate rules.

Paul Cort, attorney for Earthjustice, a public interest law firm, called the EPA permit decision in favor of the project "devastating" to communities that depend on the government to protect them from new pollution sources.

Earthjustice is representing Sierra Club and Center for Biological Diversity.

The groups filed a petition for review Monday with the EPA's administrative review board, known as the Environmental Appeals Board, of the agency's May decision in favor of the controversial project. Facing a lawsuit by the company over the permit delay and a court order mandating a final action, the EPA decided not to require the plant to demonstrate it won't cause unsafe levels of nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide emissions or install the best available controls for those gases - requirements that took effect after project application.

Construction cannot start on the project while an administrative appeal is in effect.

"EPA political appointees chose to ignore the plain requirements of the Clean Air Act," Cort said in a statement. "Our hope is that more neutral reviewers at EPA will reject this attempt to ignore these directives from Congress."

The proposed Avenal Energy project would burn natural gas to generate 600 megawatts of electricity, enough to power 450,000 homes. The company touts the project as one of the cleanest in the region. But the facility would be built near the communities of Avenal and Kettleman City, an area that already is among the worst in air quality. Activists say area residents are burdened by high levels of diesel fumes, pesticide and proximity to the largest toxic-waste facility in the state.

The appeal by the groups comes a month after a federal judge ruled in favor of Avenal Power Center, LLC, a subsidiary of Macquarie Group, and ordered the EPA to make a final permit decision that they had been delaying since 2008. Almost immediately, the EPA issued the permit for the project.

The EPA's permit delay resulted from agency's attempt to seek more information to make sure the facility meets the new national air standards adopted since the project was first proposed.

Earlier this year, the agency reversed its previous policy and announced that it will be one of the power plant projects across the nation to be exempted from the newest climate rules.

"The Avenal decision would be devastating not only for the communities living around the plant in San Joaquin Valley, but for all communities that depend on EPA to ensure that new industrial sources are only allowed if they will not create new air-quality problems," Cort said.

Modesto City Council watch

By Ken Carlson

Modesto Bee, Monday, July 1, 2011

The Modesto City Council will meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the basement chamber of Tenth Street Place, 1010 10th St. Its agenda, larded with consent items, includes:

- Transferring ownership of four parcels near 10th and H streets from the Modesto Redevelopment Agency to the city. The property is a potential site for a new Stanislaus County courthouse. The future is dim for the redevelopment agency, thanks to recent state budget decisions.
- Hearing a presentation on the Healthy Air Living Outreach Campaign by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District
- Accepting a \$92,000 Proposition 84 planning grant for the Community and Economic Development Department
- Considering freezing the annual inflation adjustment to water connection fees and waste-water capacity charges

Sierra Club asks EPA to rescind permit for power plant

By Lewis Griswald, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, June 30, 2011

FRESNO -- The Sierra Club has asked the Environmental Protection Agency to rescind a permit to build a 600-megawatt natural-gas-fired power plant in Avenal.

It should get an answer soon because the EPA has until Aug. 27 to uphold or deny the permit, issued last month under pressure from a federal judge.

On Monday, the Sierra Club filed a "petition for review" with the EPA's environmental appeals board.

The petition said the plant would emit too much smog-causing nitrogen oxide and is being wrongly "grandfathered in" under old clean-air rules.

But the planned \$530 million plant is "arguably the cleanest of its kind in the country," said Avenal Power Center LLC spokesman Frank Wilson.

At issue are nitrogen oxide and carbon dioxide emissions.

Under new federal clean-air rules approved last year, a maximum of 100 parts per billion of nitrogen oxide, a component of smog, is allowed in a one-hour period.

The Avenal plant would put out an estimated 44 parts per billion, but the legal limit might be exceeded when combined with an estimated 50 to 60 parts per billion of "background" nitrogen oxide, said Paul Cort, an attorney for Earthjustice, representing the Sierra Club.

Carbon dioxide must be controlled using the best technology available, which the company has not shown it would use, Cort said.

Avenal Power, based in Houston, will submit a response to the EPA by July 11, but for now has no comment on the particulars of the petition, Wilson said. The company believes the construction permit will be upheld, he said.

Whoever loses can appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals.

The Center for Biological Diversity joined the Sierra Club in the petition.

The environmental group People for Clean Air and Water, based in Kettleman City, filed a similar petition last week and is represented by the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment in San Francisco and Delano.