

Blowing dust prompts health advisory

By Jill Cowman, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, March 7, 2012

Why were Bakersfield residents' respiratory issues acting up Tuesday?

The answer -- as it has often been during this dry, dusty winter -- was blowing in the wind.

Gusty conditions and flying particulate matter throughout the valley, including much of Kern County, prompted officials to issue a health cautionary statement Tuesday, advising people to avoid prolonged exposure to dust.

A low-pressure system moving quickly to the southeast brought winds gusting up to 41 miles per hour in Bakersfield and as high as 73 miles per hour in Jawbone Canyon near Mojave, according to the National Weather Service.

Sustained winds blew at about 27 miles per hour in the Bakersfield area, said meteorologist Jim Andersen.

Although some rain had been predicted for Tuesday, Andersen said, "as far as precipitation, we're pretty much done with that."

Earlier in the day Porterville and Delano saw some showers. Higher elevations, too, saw a bit of rain, he said, but it was "very patchy and spotty."

Instead of sprinkles, most of Kern County got only swirls of dust and blustering gusts, which authorities at various agencies said caused only a few minor issues.

In addition to a few small, scattered storm-related power outages throughout the day Tuesday, a downed power line and transformer knocked out power for 169 customers just after noon, said Pacific Gas and Electric, Co. spokeswoman Katie Allen. Power was restored for those customers just before 2 p.m., she said, although as of almost 4 p.m., crews were still on scene repairing the equipment.

The California Highway Patrol and the Bakersfield Fire Department also responded to the downed power line and transformer, which had reportedly fallen in the roadway near Sparks Street and Burchfield Avenue just outside Fairview Elementary School, said CHP Officer Robert Rodriguez.

Kern County Fire Department Capt. Derek Tisinger said the department responded to reports of a few downed power lines and one small grass fire near Tehachapi.

The fire, he said, appeared to have been sparked at about 10:30 a.m. Tuesday by a windmill that was "just kind of spinning out of control."

Tisinger said at about 6 p.m. that crews were still on scene, but he did not anticipate much trouble controlling the blaze.

The fire covered about two and a half acres, near a ridgeline just south of the Sand Canyon exit off Highway 58 he said.

Bakersfield Police Sgt. Joe Grubbs said BPD responded to a tree down in the area of Truxtun Avenue and Mohawk Street. Aside from the usual increase in false burglary alarms because of the wind and a few calls about "poor visibility in the Rosedale area," he said that as of about 4:45 p.m. Tuesday, that was "really about it."

For Tuesday afternoon, residents with respiratory problems, children and older adults in particular were encouraged to avoid prolonged exposure to the dust, as breathing in particulate matter can trigger asthma attacks and other health issues, a Valley Air District news release said.

Everyone was urged to exercise caution, by limiting their exposure to the wind and avoiding strenuous outdoor activity.

Andersen said Wednesday's concern will be not the wind, but the cold.

A freeze warning was in effect for the valley from 1 to 8 a.m. Wednesday and again Wednesday night into early Thursday morning, said meteorologist Cindy Bean.

"One thing you have to remember about freeze warnings for March is you don't have to get as cold to put (one) out as you would in December, because of the vegetation and the state of growth it's in," she said. "If we didn't blow the blossoms off the trees" on Tuesday they could freeze off overnight, she said.

During the day Wednesday, highs of about 61 degrees are expected for the Bakersfield area, Bean said.

Andersen said temperatures should warm up to the mid-70s later this week, and no more precipitation is forecasted.

"(The precipitation is) basically moving out of the area as we speak," he said. "It was a very low precipitation event. The winds are the big story here."

California helps finance cleaner diesel trucks

By Mark Glover, staff writer

The Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Mar. 8, 2012

The California Air Resources Board is offering a lease-to-own financing program that encourages small-business owners to replace their older diesel trucks with cleaner new equipment.

Officials said the objective is to encourage early compliance with ARB's on-road diesel vehicle and tractor-trailer greenhouse gas regulations.

"This is a program that benefits small fleets and owner-operators," said ARB Chairwoman Mary Nichols. "It provides them with an additional way to pay for a cleaner truck, even if their credit isn't stellar."

For more information, visit <http://www.treasurer.ca.gov/cpcf/calcap.asp> or call (866) 634-3735.

A collision of visions on bullet train

The high-speed rail line would transform California lifestyles for the better, backers say. Opponents see a costly social-engineering folly.

By Ralph Vartabedian, staff writer

L.A. Times, Thursday, March 8, 2012

The bullet trains that would someday streak through California at 220 mph are, in the vision of their most ardent supporters, more than just a transportation system. They are also a means to alter the state's social, residential and economic fabric.

But those broader ambitions are triggering an increasingly strident ideological backlash to the massive project.

The fast trains connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco would create new communities of high-density apartments and small homes around stations, reducing the suburbanization of

California, rail advocates say. That new lifestyle would mean fewer cars and less gasoline consumption, lowering California's contribution to global warming.

The rail system also would reduce the economic and transportation isolation of the Central Valley, which would grow by 10 million or even 20 million people, according to Gov. Jerry Brown.

"We are going to have to live closer together" and accommodate growth in more environmentally sustainable ways, Brown said in a recent interview. "The high-speed rail will be built in that vein."

Opponents, most of whom are political conservatives, regard the ambitious project as a classic government overreach that will require taxpayer subsidies. But they also see something more sinister: an agenda to push people into European or Asian models of dense cities, tight apartments and reliance on state-provided transportation.

In their view, the rationale of the rail system rests on flawed assumptions that would undermine California's identity, which during the last half-century has revolved around single-family homes that have driven economic growth, family-oriented lifestyles and signature West Coast recreation.

"It is a real movement in California of controlling the masses, controlling land use, deciding where people should live," said Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Tulare). "I oppose that absolutely, because it is a form of left-wing social engineering."

When voters approved funding for the rail system in 2008, it was promoted as nonpartisan. Even some Republicans supported it. But the \$98.5-billion project has taken on powerful political and philosophical overtones as it has matured. It now reflects much broader conflicts about the state's future, government spending and, most important, efforts to change the way people live.

Whether California's classic style of growth, which created population clusters in the San Fernando Valley, Orange County and the Inland Empire, is sustainable is a matter of sharp political debate. But the justification for high-speed rail depends on something even more basic: projections that the state's population will continue growing rapidly.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority's business plan for the project asserts that the state will have 60 million people by 2050, up from the current 37.3 million, with most of the growth in the agricultural heartland.

The project "is based on an optimistic assessment of where California is going," Brown said after the plan was released.

Academic experts say the growth models that put the state's population at 60 million by mid-century lack credibility. And the state Department of Finance is now revising official population projections downward.

Walter Schwarm, a state demographer, said the lower estimates are based on three factors: California overestimated its population before the 2010 census; as many people will move out of the state in the future as move in; and Latino birthrates are declining.

"We have always assumed in the past that we were a strong magnet for individuals, but now we are looking like every other state. People move in and people move out," Schwarm said.

The state's economic outlook also raises questions about whether it can support a bigger population, particularly in the Central Valley, racked by some of the highest unemployment in the nation.

"What are all of these 10 million additional people going to be doing for a living in the Central Valley?" asks USC historian and author Kevin Starr. "You have to ask are these going to be 10

million more taxpayers or 10 million people who have to be supported by other taxpayers?"

Starr has written that the state's boom after World War II revolved around single-family homes, an outcome that "had its psychological origins in the deepest recesses of American identity." It led, he said in his book "California Dreams," to "a tidal wave of marriage, sexuality, procreation and family building." The bullet train is supposed to help rewrite that blueprint.

The rail authority paid Calthorpe Associates, a Berkeley-based urban planning company, \$1.6 million for a report, "Vision California: Charting Our Future," which laid out the case for compact communities reducing demand for residential land, single-family homes, vehicles, energy and water.

Company principal Peter Calthorpe said in a New York City speech in November that high-speed rail is more than a technology to move people.

"It is the thing that lays the groundwork for the kinds of communities that are possible," he said. "It is not just the cost of high-speed rail versus the alternative highways and airports. It is the cost difference between two different lifestyles that inevitably emerge." Calthorpe's ideas are anathema to conservatives.

"It has nothing to do with transportation. This is entirely social policy," said Rep. Tom McClintock (R-Granite Bay). "It is all about the far left's fever dream to get mother Earth back to a pristine condition by elbowing us into these dense urban cores."

Calthorpe said conservatives mischaracterize his ideas. "They turn it around, like Republicans always do, and say we want to force everybody into apartments."

One exception is Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, the lone Republican in the Obama Cabinet, who disagrees with rail opponents in his party. "They are not in sync with the people they represent. I am a Republican and I am leading the charge on high-speed rail and proud of it."

Leaders in the home building and agriculture industries remain skeptical.

Mike Winn, president of the California Building Industry Assn., said his members believe that at least half of future home buyers will want detached family homes, not the 30% that some government agencies project.

"This has been developed and designed as a suburban state," Winn said. "It won't change in one generation. Sure, you can bemoan the long commutes, but you are not going to undo the cultural allure of living in a single-family home."

The rail authority also argues that the bullet train will preserve farmland by concentrating growth in city centers. It's a laudable goal, but not a believable one, said Chris Scheuring, an environmental attorney at the California Farm Bureau Federation.

High-speed rail "directly and immediately eats up farmland," he said. "The beneficiaries are urban and the people holding the bag are rural. My guys are looking at this as a real loser for agriculture."

The argument that the rail line would concentrate population in the cities is "just a hypothesis. The counties are still going to be seduced by highways and commercial development."

Even the argument that the rail system would reduce greenhouse gases — the rail authority claims savings of 3 billion pounds of carbon dioxide annually — is questioned.

Robert Poole, a transportation specialist at the libertarian Reason Foundation, said the Obama

administration's push to improve automobile fuel efficiency would cause a significant drop in carbon dioxide emissions, apart from the rail project.

In addition, building hundreds of miles of bullet train bridges and tunnels is so carbon-intensive it would take decades for the system to break even on greenhouse gas emissions.

A 2010 UC Berkeley study asserted that the rail system, based on the median estimate of riders, would take 71 years to break even in greenhouse gas emissions. Mikhail Chester, an author of the study, said adjustments for cleaner electricity generation and other factors in the future could yield a net reduction in greenhouse gases in 30 years.

That's still a costly trade-off for Poole. "It is like using an atomic bomb to kill a housefly," he said.

The sharply divergent views of high-speed rail reflect larger divisions in charting the state's future, Starr said.

"The arguments for and against the train go right to the core of the unresolved nature of politics in California," he said.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Thursday, March 8, 2012:](#)

CARB misses the point with Harris solution

When an old, polluting diesel truck is replaced with a newer, cleaner truck, our air quality improves. Period. The California Air Resources Board needs to grasp that fact in its handling of truck replacement funds for a valley business.

Instead, the board is refusing to honor an agreement to help replace seven old diesel trucks owned by Harris Ranch, a large-scale cattle operation 100 miles north of Bakersfield. The ranch had plans to replace the big rigs with new ones and get half the cost of each truck covered by a state air quality grant program. Then the trucks were lost in a fire, the suspected work of eco-terrorists, and the Air Resources Board is now refusing to honor the agreement.

Board officials say they're simply being sticklers on the rules, and those rules say the state must be the one to destroy any truck taken off the road under the program. Since the Harris Ranch trucks were destroyed by fire, the air board considers the trucks as already removed from the road and therefore ineligible for replacement funds. The board then followed up with a solution for Harris Ranch: If the beef company wanted the money for new trucks, it would have to buy seven older trucks, drive them for six months and then turn them in for destruction.

That's utter nonsense. It's one thing to stick by the rules, another to propose an alternative that violates the spirit of the rules. CARB's proposed work-around would actually go against the program's stated goal -- putting cleaner trucks on the road -- by insisting that dirty ones be put into service.

The whole issue would have been moot if it weren't for delays on the state's part. Bonds to fund the program were sold late and so the program is running a few months behind schedule. Had the program been on track, Harris Ranch would have turned in its trucks and received funds to buy new ones before the fire -- thought to have been set by an animal rights group -- ever took place.

What should matter in this case is that the ranch owned trucks that were old enough and dirty enough to qualify for replacement funds. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the state air board's regional arm, even sent inspectors out after the fire occurred to verify the burned trucks were the same ones that were approved for replacement under program guidelines. They are. And Harris Ranch offered to deduct any insurance money it receives for the torched trucks

from the funds it was supposed to receive to buy new trucks, a reasonable offer that it should be required to do. But CARB hasn't budged.

That's surprising since the board knows well the gravity of truck pollution on public health in California. It recently passed the strictest laws in the nation for diesel truck emissions and took a lot of flak for it since the rules were passed during an ongoing economic recession and amid revelations that a board scientist who authored studies supporting the rule had falsified his credentials. For the air board, reducing diesel emissions was that important.

And it is, especially here in the San Joaquin Valley, where a full 40 percent of air pollution emissions come from on-road diesel trucks. With the state's highest poverty rates, poorest health outcomes and highest numbers of under- and uninsured residents, we need all the help we can get on the air quality front. Even if it's just seven new trucks.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Thursday, March 8, 2012:](#)

Time to get our heads out of sand on California's high-speed rail

By Howard Silver

Given the financial problems faced by our state and local governments, now might seem like a lousy time to invest big dollars in a visionary and bold project like high-speed rail. In fact, the opposite is true.

Now is exactly the right time to begin investment in high-speed rail. With double-digit unemployment, a booming population and increasingly congested roadways, it's exactly the time for visionary, yet realistic actions to start getting California back on track while laying the foundation for future prosperity.

The alternative is to do nothing, reject the benefits high-speed rail could bring to Kern County, ignore our state's future needs, and stick our heads in the sand. That's unacceptable. History has taught us that tough times call for bold action, which pays dividends later.

I fully understand the criticisms leveled at the high-speed rail. But none of the concerns raised are enough to convince me to abandon support for high-speed rail. Why?

Because California needs it, because Kern County needs it, and Kern residents will benefit from it. High-speed rail will clean our air, it will create jobs and, according to Kern County officials, grade separations built to accommodate high-speed rail could save Kern County "millions in transportation costs."

Once built, it will become an important part of our transportation backbone and our economic growth. It will, literally and figuratively, transform the way we travel, do business and connect with other economic centers.

As with every project of this magnitude, it's easy to find fault. Opponents of the Central Valley Water Project, for example, called it a "fantastic dream" and said it would not work. They scoffed at the price tag, calling it "staggering." Sound familiar?

Today, we all know the Central Valley Water Project is responsible for turning semi-arid desert soil in the San Joaquin Valley into some of the most fertile farmlands in the world.

Here's something else to consider. In 20 years, California's population will reach 50 million, an increase of 13 million or twice the population of Arizona. With all this growth, it's no wonder travel on our interstate system is increasing five times faster than capacity. We've all experienced delays on Highway 99 and I-5; and if we do nothing about it, our trips to Southern California will only grow longer.

The benefits of high-speed rail are clear. It will help move our population in the most efficient, cost-effective and environmentally friendly way. It will connect our state's major economic centers, creating economic growth between regions that doesn't exist today. Imagine being able to commute from your home or office in Bakersfield to a job or meeting in Los Angeles, or vice versa.

High-speed rail will generate tens of thousands of jobs immediately and permanently statewide, and will bring between 5,000 and 10,000 new jobs to our area over the next five years, according to Kern County staff. This is welcome news to our region, which suffers from more than 13 percent unemployment.

The unemployment rate is even higher in the construction industry, with more than 20 percent of workers currently unemployed. That's more than twice the state unemployment rate. High-speed rail could bring paychecks to many currently collecting unemployment checks, which could boost local demand for goods and services, and aid in the creation of secondary or indirect jobs, particularly in the service sector.

Another reason Kern County residents should support high-speed rail: It will take cars off the roads and airplanes out of the skies, thereby reducing air pollution and eliminating 3.2 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually, statewide. Air quality benefits from high-speed rail will be especially important to Kern residents. According to the American Lung Association, the Bakersfield-Delano metropolitan area ranks first in short-term particle pollution in the nation, and they are the only two cities where year-round particle pollution worsened from last year.

Opponents in Kern County are loud and vocal. Understandably they have concerns. The project is expensive, it is big and it is hard to visualize. But high-speed rail must be part of our regional vision. Let's have a discussion about the best way to accomplish this critical transportation project. Let's hold the California High-Speed Rail Authority to the highest standards of accountability and performance.

Rather than simply say, "no," let's roll up our sleeves and build something that will serve our state and our region for generations to come.

Howard Silver of Bakersfield is chairman of the Golden Empire Transit District and a member of the Kern Council of Governments Planning and Policy Committee.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, March 8, 2012](#)

Ban leaf blowers

Let's be the first to have a "Leaf Blower-Free Zone" in Fresno. Yes!

Start in Old Fig Garden. Get rid of the dust, dirt, noise and the smell of burnt gas and oil. Do it now.

Use your rakes and brooms like we did 30 years ago when the air was a lot cleaner.

Joe Caetano, Fresno