

Cap-and-trade plan upheld by Calif. court

By Bob Egelko, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Wed., June 20, 2012

A state appeals court on Tuesday upheld California's plan to combat global warming with a market-based cap-and-trade system to limit emissions of greenhouse gases, rejecting some environmental groups' arguments that the rules are too weak and could worsen certain types of air pollution.

The state Air Resources Board, which adopted the plan in 2009, gave adequate reasons for rejecting alternatives such as binding limits on emissions and a tax on carbon-based fuels, said the First District Court of Appeal in San Francisco.

"It is not for this court to re-evaluate ARB's judgment call," which came after "knowledgeable input from industry, academia, environmental organizations, and members of the general public," said Justice Stuart Pollak in the 3-0 ruling. He said the board can make future improvements based on "further research and experience."

The board's rules, scheduled to take effect next year, implement AB32, a first-in-the-nation law passed in 2006 that requires California to reduce by 2020 greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels.

Cap and trade sets industry-wide limits on emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases that scientists say are heating the planet. Businesses that exceed their limits can buy allowances from other companies and can also meet their obligations through environmentally friendly actions like planting trees.

Most environmental groups have backed the plan. But "environmental justice" organizations argue that the emission credits for tree-planting and for voluntary reductions in farm-related air pollutants are largely unenforceable and less effective than binding emission limits.

Opponents also contend that refineries and power plants that bought the right to exceed emission limits could subject surrounding communities, mostly poor and nonwhite, to increased pollution. In addition to Tuesday's court case, some of the same groups filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on June 8.

The court's assurances that defects can be repaired later will provide no relief "if toxic hot spots occur in low-income communities and communities of color where there's already a lot of pollution," said Maya Golden-Krasner, a lawyer with Communities for a Better Environment.

ARB spokesman Stanley Young said the ruling supports the board's goal of encouraging innovative technologies that will "continue to create new jobs and move California toward a clean-energy economy."

Latinos lack asthma info

By Daniel Casarez
Vida en el Valle Tues., June 19, 2012

This story was produced as a project for The California Endowment Health Journalism Fellowship, a program of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism.

FIREBAUGH -- Carmina Ramos vividly recalls the night her son, Francisco, then age 2, was in his car seat suffering from an asthma attack and gasping for air as her boyfriend barreled 80 miles an hour on a two-lane, country road to Children's Hospital of Central California, about 45 miles away.

Police stopped the car, and drew their guns as they shouted instructions. Francisco eventually made it to the hospital emergency room that night.

That frightening scene -- minus the police stop -- has become too common for Latinos in the San Joaquin Valley. Latino children in Fresno County are hospitalized at a rate of 289 per 100,000 residents, according to the state Department of Health. In California, asthma affects approximately 2.1 million residents, including 614,000.

From 2001 to 2009, asthma cases grew by 4.3 million, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2007, nearly 200 kids and 3,300 adults died from the disease.

About 17 percent of non-Hispanic black children had asthma in 2009, which makes it the highest rate among racially/ethnic groups. Nationally, 7 million of the 25 million asthma sufferers are children. According to the American Lung Association, asthma ranks third among causes for hospitalizations among children under 15. The bigger problem, according to health care providers, is the lack of information among Latino parents.

Carmina's family physicians, Drs. Óscar and Marcia Sablán, have operated the Sablán Medical Clinic in Firebaugh for more than 25 years. Because of the clinic location, the husband-and-wife team has been the first responders to hundreds of patients suffering an asthma flare-up.

The Sabláns believe too many families need more education on the disease, which is caused by an inflammation and constriction of the airways.

Early signs of asthma are shortness of breath, coughing and wheezing, and chest pain. Triggers for asthma vary among sufferers, but include allergens like pollens, animal dander, mere changes in weather, and exposure to respiratory irritants like smoke and smog. Too often, parents rely on humidifiers and Primatene mist and don't realize it is just a short-term fix. A doctor's examination is necessary.

"Basically people would not treat asthma; just opt for an ER visit," said Marcia Sablán.

"They would put a lot of Vicks (vapor rub) on their chest. For someone who has not seen a physician, those are the things they do. They don't realize they could feel better, and actually have a lot more energy when their asthma is controlled," adds Óscar Sablán.

"If you're not aggressive in treating the asthma, then the asthma persists into adulthood, and in a more malignant form."

Not facing the exacerbations of asthma, another term for asthma attack, could lead to more frequent attacks, if early treatment is not sought.

"If you have a lot of attacks, you are at risk to have another one, but if you can get it under control for an extended period of time, then you have less of a chance of recurrence," said Óscar Sablán.

Ramos began educating herself on the disease shortly after the first scare about 30 minutes after Francisco was born at Fresno Community Medical Center. He was soon transferred to Children's Hospital, where he was diagnosed with a collapsed lung. Doctors told Ramos that Francisco would live his life as a chronic asthmatic.

Families living in rural communities are not likely to have regular visits to a doctor. Therefore demographics and socioeconomic status play a major part in the disparity in the health care. Francisco's family has learned to follow a stringent protocol in his care. Ramos makes sure everyone is aware of the signs.

"I listen to my son's breathing," said Ramos, a Head Start teacher in Fresno who is working on becoming a lawyer, "and if I hear that he's beginning to have trouble breathing, I'm doing something about it."

She has three back-up doses of emergency medication for Francisco. That amount of medication, she said, is not overboard. Ramos said any parent who has been in tears and frightened because their child cannot breathe is reason enough to have the medication in such large numbers.

On a recent day in May, Francisco, an avid soccer player who, his mother says, spends too much time sprawled on the family's couch playing video games, was walking home from school and became ill.

"It was the air. It was something in the air. Sometimes that happens," said Francisco. "So I have to come home and take some of my inhaler."

In 2006, Oxnard resident Lydia Rojas rushed to the hospital where she found her husband in tears leaning against a corridor wall. Their 15-year-old daughter, Stephanie, was pronounced dead.

Stephanie suffered an asthma attack at Oxnard High School while swimming in her physical education class. Emergency personnel told Lydia that her daughter was already beyond the point of resuscitation after classmates pulled her out of the swimming pool.

Rojas said seeing a doctor is crucial, but not enough to prevent a fatal asthma attack. Rojas wants to make sure teachers, coaches, teammates, friends, other parents know the signs of an asthma attack.

"All of her friends told me they were scrambling looking for her backpack and running to her locker room. They knew she needed her inhaler," she said.

"We thought we were doing everything we were supposed to be doing. I had all the proper forms filled out at the school."

Rojas wants parents of children with asthma to have a one-on-one conversation with teachers and care givers in the hope of preventing further tragedies.

Rojas, who now lives in Fresno, has joined Carmina Ramos in promoting asthma education among Latino parents.

Both found that disparities in health care exist between children living in rural communities against those kids living in cities. Children in the cities are more likely to have regular visits with a doctor.

More than 90 percent of people with asthma live in counties with a failing grade for air quality, which can trigger an asthma attack. According to a study by the non-profit RAND Corporation, cleaner air would save about \$193 million and about 30,000 fewer visits to the hospital.

The American Lung Association published 'Luchando Por El Aire' (Fighting for Air), a report that explores the burden of asthma on Latinos. Asthma costs the U.S. \$50 billion and an additional \$6 billion in indirect costs, according to the report. One-third of the cost comes from urgent care fees.

María Elena Avilá-Toledo, a health promotion specialist with Cal-Viva Health, helps families in Madera, Fresno and Kings counties with education on a variety of health topics, including asthma.

"There are many misconceptions (about asthma). When I'm out in the community, I hear, 'Asthma is a kid disease,' and 'I'm too old to have asthma,'" said Avilá-Toledo.

"I don't think that everyone knows that asthma can be fatal. And I don't think that everybody knows that it is also manageable."

She agrees with Rojas and Ramos that parents still need to become more proactive in the education of the disease.

She believes there is a need for more education, and offered the Asthma Action Plan: Ideally create the plan with the advice of a health care provider.

"Try to find triggers in the home. We encourage families to wipe down areas to avoid the buildup of mold. If there is someone in the family who smokes, we encourage them to get help to quit because second-hand smoke does impact others," added Avila-Toledo.

In the San Joaquin Valley, bad air quality can become a major problem for asthma sufferers.

The most recent State of the Air report released in April by the American Lung Association ranked numerous Valley cities among the top 15 in either ozone, year-round particle pollution or short-term pollutants. Areas that made the top 15 included Visalia-Porterville, Fresno-Madera, Hanford-Corcoran, Merced, Modesto, and Bakersfield-Delano.

"What we breathe matters greatly to our health," said Dr. Kari Nadeau, a specialist on asthma and immunology at Stanford Medical Center and a board member of the American Lung Association in California.

"California continues to have some of the worst air quality in our nation," added Jane Warner, president and chief executive officer for the American Lung Association.

The Central Valley had nearly 60 days through last November without a drop of rain and result was devastating for asthma sufferers.

"Every day we see a variety of chronic problems. It's much more common in the farmworker population than the literature would let us know," said Marcia Sablán.

"We're seeing air quality degradation and along with that comes asthma. Probably in the last couple of weeks (as of March), we have seen as many as 40 patients a day with asthma, asthmatic bronchitis or some variety of that," said Óscar Sablán.

Ramos and Rojas believe a proactive approach starts with education in the home.

"I remember my son being intubated. I don't want to see that again," said Ramos. "Without clean air, you can't breathe, if you can't breathe, you die," said Rojas. "Know what to do."

State finds no link to birth defects in farm town

The Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Wed., June 20, 2012

KETTLEMAN CITY, Calif. -- State health officials say the number of birth defects in the Central Valley community of Kettleman City mirror the state average.

Some Kettleman City residents claim the region experiences an unusually high number of birth defects they believe is caused by pollution.

California Department of Public Health officials said during a public meeting Tuesday that tests near the homes of women who gave birth to affected children didn't reveal any substances that could be directly linked to causing defects.

Researchers did detect high levels of certain pesticides in the air, and arsenic and benzene in the water. The benzene is filtered out.

In 2008-2009 the town of 1,400 recorded 8.51 cases of birth defects per 100 births. Last year the rate declined to 1.79, close to its historic average.

Blackbeard's sails into solar power in Fresno

The Business Journal Tues., June 19, 2012

Blackbeard's Family Entertainment Center, a popular destination for Central Valley families for more than 35 years, has announced it will soon break ground on a solar installation to power its facility in Fresno.

A groundbreaking ceremony will be held at Blackbeard's, 4055 North Chestnut Diagonal, at 10 a.m. June 25. Blackbeard's is a 15-acre park that features miniature golf, go-karts, laser tag, bumper boats, batting cages, paintball, water slides, an arcade, a rope course and Cap 'N Kids Ride Land. The facility also has picnic areas.

The new solar system will include 19 ground-mounted solar "trees" using a total of 824 solar panels. The "trees" are large photovoltaic panels that act as car shades.

They are 15 feet tall, have large 40-foot-square platforms at the top and are held up by poles. Fourteen of the trees will provide shade for cars. The remainder will cover people eating lunch in the picnic area.

The system is expected to produce more than 316,317 kilowatt-hours of electricity in the first year of operation. This equates to the reduction of more than 312,000 pounds of CO2 emissions, which is the equivalent of offsetting the power demand of 29 residential homes, removing 19 cars from the road or planting 4,665 trees each year.

The system will also include two electric vehicle (EV) charging stations for customers. It is only the third public car charging station in Fresno.

"We are excited to be the first family entertainment center in Fresno to install these types of solar trees," said Greg Florer, founder and owner of Blackbeard's in a release. "Along with providing a large amount of shade for our customers, we now have a way to combat rising energy costs. This in turn will help us to keep our prices low as families look for affordable entertainment options."

Coarsegold, CA-based Earth Wind & Solar will install the 197.70-kilowatt system under a power purchase agreement (PPA) financing structure. The PPA enables businesses to adopt solar for no money down.

"Blackbeard's has been a Fresno institution for nearly four decades", said Robert Vaughan, President and CEO of Earth Wind & Solar. "With this new solar installation, the ownership of Blackbeard's is making a serious commitment toward remaining a part of Fresno's family entertainment scene for years to come."

Construction on the system will begin this month and is slated to take four months to complete.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Wed., June 20, 2012:](#)

Rule on soot standards was overdue

The Environmental Protection Agency is tightening the nation's standards for soot pollution. It only took a court order and five years of delay for them to do the right thing.

The proposal will reduce annual exposure regulations from 15 micrograms of fine-particle soot per cubic meter of air to between 12 and 13 micrograms. Earthjustice attorney Paul Cort, who represented the Lung Association and the National Parks Conservation Association in a successful lawsuit that is forcing the EPA to issue this rule, estimates that the new regulations will save 8,000 lives per year.

It's not like this knowledge is new. In 2006 the Bush administration rejected the advice of the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee to tighten the regulation. Lawsuits, both from the states and environmental organizations, followed. The courts have been demanding a change in EPA regulations since 2009.

Opponents of the new regulations have offered the usual arguments: that the new regulations will force oil refiners and manufacturers to invest in expensive new pollution-fighting equipment. They say that the science isn't strong enough to prove that tightening the standards will "save" lives, as opposed to "contribute" to curbing premature deaths, a curious argument.

It's about time the EPA did the right thing for the public's health.