

Valley gets funding to help clean up diesel emissions

Central Valley Business Times, Monday, Oct. 15, 2012

Two Central Valley air districts are getting a total of nearly \$1.6 million from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for "clean diesel" projects.

The San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District has received \$898,833 to replace at least 35 heavy-duty, long-haul waste transporting diesel trucks in the San Joaquin Valley with newer, cleaner model year engines that meet or exceed 2011 emission standards.

The trucks operate in areas that receive a disproportionate amount of air emissions, such as Kettleman City, the EPA says.

The life of the cleaner, lower emission trucks is approximately 1 to 1.5 million vehicle miles traveled, thus operating for at least ten years. These trucks will achieve up to a 97 percent reduction of PM and up to 94 percent reduction of nitrogen oxides (NOx), equating to lifetime emission reductions of 1,249 tons of NOx, 50 tons of particulate matter, 54 tons of hydrocarbons, and 388 tons of COx.

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District has received \$700,000 to repower a locomotive engine built in 1979 to the cleanest available level. The locomotive operates along corridors in the Sacramento, San Joaquin Valley and San Francisco Bay areas.

Three other areas also received funding.

"Five major metropolitan areas in California, some with the poorest air quality in the nation, have received grant funds specifically targeting projects to reduce diesel emissions," says Jared Blumenfeld, EPA's regional administrator for the Pacific Southwest. "Employees, residents, and visitors in those areas will be able to breathe cleaner, healthier air. Awarding these grants for important diesel emission reduction projects demonstrates how collaboration amongst public and private partners can benefit everyone."

Air regulators push for reinstallation of monitoring station

By John Cox, staff writer

The Bakersfield Californian, Thurs., Oct. 18, 2012

Federal and state officials are ramping up pressure on the Arvin-Edison Water Storage District to allow the return of an air quality monitoring station that the agency had removed from its property more than a year ago.

Representatives of the California Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sent letters to the district last week asking for a speedy resolution of the three-year-old dispute.

Both agencies warned that, until the matter is settled, the federal government cannot declare the Central Valley to be in compliance with air standards -- meaning \$38 million in fines will continue to be levied against area residents regardless of any improvement in air quality.

It remains to be seen what leverage the two regulatory agencies might bring to bear against the water storage district if it continues to resist reinstallation of the monitor.

But in an Oct. 8 letter to district Engineer-Manager Steve Collup, Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols noted that the district's ability to own property and levy taxes "come with a responsibility to the citizens of California." Although the letter contains no explicit threats, one is clearly implied.

"If an acceptable agreement cannot be reached, ARB will be forced to explore alternate options that unfortunately would likely demand more time and expense from all who would be affected if Arvin-Edison does not change course," Nichols wrote.

The Oct. 10 letter from EPA Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld was less pointed but equally emphatic.

"It is imperative that we quickly reach an agreement on how to relocate the monitor back to its original site," he wrote.

Collup said he would bring up the letters at the district's next board meeting, set for Nov. 16. But until then, he said he expects the state to look into the feasibility of moving the station to a neighboring property, as he recommended earlier.

"If that location is important to them, walk across the road," he said. "It's 70 feet and that landowner I'm sure would work with them."

The water storage district had hosted the monitor at its property on Bear Mountain Boulevard since 1989. But over the years the agencies' relationship deteriorated.

Collup said the last time the lease came up, in 2009, district board members expressed frustration with the air board's tighter air restrictions. They also complained that they were not getting straight answers from the state.

The water district's board members "really questioned the credibility and the science behind all these rules and regulations (air board representatives) were promulgating," Collup said.

He also said the district has had to replace or retrofit its dump trucks and other heavy equipment, at significant expense -- and that board members are local farmers who directly felt the effects of more stringent air rules.

The water district agreed to leave the monitor in place for another year, into 2010, but has resisted the board's request to have the device put back.

Different readings

The air board initially thought that moving the monitoring station would present no problems. But it became apparent that the new location, near Di Giorgio Elementary School, was registering ozone readings about 10 percent cleaner than those of the previous station.

That presents a legal problem. Nichols' letter says the air board and the EPA won't be able to determine whether the Central Valley has attained its air quality improvement goals unless new readings can be taken at the water district's Bear Mountain Boulevard site.

Nichols' letter offers to pay "any reasonable fee" the district deems appropriate. It notes that the monitor would be located in a shipping container on a concrete pad measuring 14 feet by 34 feet, and that air board personnel would need access to the station just once a week for one to two hours.

A Kern County environmental activist group, the Association of Irrigated Residents, has sided with the air board, arguing that air quality readings from the new monitoring station cannot be used to show improvement.

"Getting accurate and consistent readings of the air quality in the Arvin area is critical to the health and quality of life for thousands of valley residents," AIR President Tom Frantz wrote in a Wednesday news release.

Fresno Co. supervisors OK Carmelita mine

By Pablo Lopez, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Oct. 16, 2012

Fresno County supervisors on Tuesday approved a rock mining operation for the next 100 years on prime farmland near the Kings River, north of Reedley.

The 3-1 vote came after seven hours of debate about whether the Carmelita mine can crush rock to make cement and asphalt and then be loaded onto diesel trucks from early morning to night without harshly affecting neighbors.

Opponents complained that truck traffic would clog two-lane roads and add dust and exhaust into the region's already foul air. They also said 70-foot silos and 50-foot rock piles would be eyesores in a pristine wildlife area.

"Are you going to line the pockets of one family and their attorneys, or preserve the legacy of this beautiful area?" Christine Bienvenue challenged the Board of Supervisors. Her family lives just outside the site, which is bounded by Reed, Annadale and Central avenues and east of the Kings River.

Board Chairwoman Debbie Poochigian and Supervisors Phil Larson and Henry Perea approved an environmental impact report for the plant, a conditional use permit to allow it to operate 100 years, and a post-mining plan to mitigate the loss of about 600 acres of nectarines, peaches and other tree fruit.

Supervisor Susan Anderson voted no, saying the environmental impact report did not adequately address the opposition's concerns.

Supervisor Judy Case declared a conflict and did not vote. She said her husband has a business link to mining operations.

Momentum to dig in the Kings River area comes as mines along the county's San Joaquin River, to the north, run dry. Once the area's nearly exclusive source of mined rock and home to more than a half-dozen digs, just three quarries on the San Joaquin River operate with county permits today.

On Aug. 9, the county Planning Commission overwhelmingly approved the 886-acre Carmelita operation proposed on a 1,500-acre site owned by Fresno-based agricultural giant Gerawan Farming.

Planning commissioners cited the county's need for construction material as grounds to permit the project, despite opposition from more than 100 people.

The Carmelita site will be divided into 22 cells -- each 40 acres and up to 50 feet deep. Only a few cells will be worked at any time. The rock-crushing plant will be located in the middle of the site to lessen noise. It is expected to yield 1.25 million tons of aggregate annually over its 100-year life.

Mike Mallery, who spoke on behalf of the Gerawan family, which runs one of the world's largest tree fruit operations, told the board Tuesday that the family chose to go into mining because of the rocky soil at many of its orchards.

The Carmelita go-ahead comes just six weeks after the supervisors rejected gravel mining plans for 824 acres across Jesse Morrow Mountain. The iconic foothill about 20 miles east of Fresno with its link to the ancestral home of American Indians is less than five miles from the Carmelita site.

There are three gravel mining operations already in the Kings River area and another being proposed, said Will Kettler, manager for the county's Development Services Division.

Kettler said the Carmelita operation would have "significant, unavoidable impacts" to the environment, causing pollution, increased traffic and loss of productive farmland.

Attorney Marsha Burch, who represents the opposition -- Friends of the Kings River -- told supervisors Tuesday that the county's analysis for future crushed rock demands is flawed. She also said the post-mining plan will create "holes in the earth" that will fill with water -- of which 600 acre-feet will evaporate each year.

"This loss of water is a valuable resource," she argued, saying the evaporation will affect the groundwater table and neighboring wells.

The opponents said the hours of operation -- typically from 4 a.m. to 9 p.m., but possibly stretching deep into the night if Caltrans needs material, or round the clock during emergencies -- also pose a quality-of-life problem.

Dave Brown, who also spoke on behalf of the Gerawan family, rebutted that argument, saying similar gravel mines in the area have longer working hours.

Unlike the Jesse Morrow proposal, there will be no blasting, a county staff report said. And once the cells are mined, Brown said, about 240 of the 600 acres will return to farmland. The rest of the acreage will be ponding basins.

Fresno State, EPA sign partnership

Fresno State to offer internships with the Environmental Protection Agency

Business Journal, Wed., Oct. 16, 2012

Fresno State will work closely with the Environmental Protection Agency to boost careers in environmental fields following a pledge signed today.

With the Memorandum of Understanding now sealed, Fresno State will work to increase student internships with the EPA to learn about water, air quality and other environmentally related subjects.

The EPA will participate with on-campus career orientations and will outreach to students, faculty and alumni through student mentorships as well as through public policy forums, presentations and other events.

EPA staff will also participate in Fresno State events such as lectures and conferences and help in the development of educational curriculum. As well, EPA research facilities and instrumentations will be open to students and faculty, many of whom may work together with the EPA as visiting researchers.

"Fresno State has been working for many years solving our region's environmental challenges," said Fresno State Associate Provost Dr. Lynette Zelezny at the signing of the MOU, held at the university's Water and Energy Technology (WET) center. "Now we will have greater opportunities to work on these issues side-by-side with the EPA to maximize implementation of our research on the broadest possible scale."