

EPA praises Clovis plating company

By Robert Rodriguez, staff writer

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A Clovis-based chrome plating company received national recognition Wednesday from federal officials for its effort to eliminate the use of highly toxic chemicals.

Valley Chrome Plating was recognized as part of the National Partnership for Environmental Priorities program.

Jared Blumenfeld, the Environmental Protection Agency's regional administrator, honored the company during his two-day sweep through the Valley that ended Wednesday. Blumenfeld's visit included stops at an almond processing plant, the

University of California at Merced, California State University, Fresno, and the South Valley.

"There are more than 500 metal plating plants in California and most of them are in neighborhoods, performing some of the most toxic activities around," Blumenfeld said. "And you have one place here in the Valley that, in terms of environmental benefits, is among the best of the best."

Ray Lucas, president of Valley Chrome Plating, said the company has become a zero discharge plant that recycles all of its production materials. It also switched two years ago from the highly toxic hexavalent chromium -- a protective metal finish -- to the less toxic trivalent chromium.

The company, which makes truck bumpers, said the changes have saved the family-owned firm thousands of dollars in waste treatment costs and hauling fees.

Blumenfeld, who is based in San Francisco, said reducing the use of toxic chemicals in this industry is a significant accomplishment. He said that over the past two years, nearly half of the enforcement actions in California, Nevada, Arizona and Hawaii were against metal finishing plants.

Hexavalent chromium can cause serious health effects, from irritation to the skin, nose, eyes and throat, to lung cancer in workers.

Also on Wednesday, Blumenfeld toured Fresno State's Center for Irrigation Technology where campus officials talked about the university's role in developing water technology.

The goal is to make Fresno County the hub for water-related and irrigation companies.

"We have investors and tech companies from Silicon Valley who are starting to look at what is going on down here," said Helle Peterson, who heads business development for Fresno State's Water, Energy & Technology Center.

County planning commission approves permit for dairy's expansion

By David Castellon

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thurs., Jan. 26, 2012

The Tulare County Planning Commission approved on Wednesday a special-use permit that would allow a dairy southeast of Waukena to nearly double the number of cows in its herd.

But don't expect those extra cows to show up at Curtimade Dairy any time soon, said owner Ben Curti.

He said it took about six years to do the work that led to the Planning Commission's decisions to approve the permit so his dairy could house up to 12,192 head of milking and non-milking cows, and to approve an environmental impact report on the project.

Curti said he currently has about 6,000 cows on his dairy southwest of Road 24 and Avenue 184.

And he expects to spend months more seeking permits from the California Water Resources Control Board and the California Air Resources Board, which will review the potential environmental effects of the planned dairy expansion and decide whether to approve the plans.

And even if those permits come through, Curti said he may decide to hold off on his expansion plans until milk prices – which have been down for the last few years – improve.

He said the prices dairies get per hundred weight – 100 pounds of milk – is less than \$16, about a \$5 drop from October. Curti, who started his dairy-expansion efforts when milk prices were good, said his dairy is just breaking even at the current price.

Still, he said he was happy with Tuesday's vote by the five planning commissioners present and alternate Gil Aguilar, who cast a vote because commissioners John Elliot and Charles Norman were absent from Wednesday's meeting.

"It's been a long-fought war," Curti said after the vote.

Curti, a third-generation dairy operator, said he sought the permit because he plans to add Jersey cows to his herd of Holsteins.

Jerseys are smaller and generally produce less milk than Holsteins, but their milk tends to be higher in butter fat and proteins.

"You can get more butter per gallon of milk and better cheese conversion" with Jersey milk, said Curti, whose milk is used to create cheese products for Land O'Lakes, not for drinking.

That means he can earn more profit on the milk Jersey cows produces, he said.

Curtimade Dairy currently occupies 1,157 acres, with about 143 of those acres housing the actual dairy operation and most of the land used to grow feed for the cows. Cow manure is used as fertilizer for the farm operation.

With the new special-use permit, the dairy will be able to expand to 1,395 acres, with the extra land used to grow more feed for the additional cows.

Curti said he plans to build two more barns on the dairy operation area – each with enough stalls for about 800 cows – without expanding beyond the current 143 acres. Before the planning commissioners voted, they held a public hearing on the matter, but nobody came forward to speak against Curtimade's plans. Amy Lizarraga, a Tulare County Resource Management Agency planner, told the commissioners her office isn't aware of any opposition to the plans or raised environmental concerns.

"I've known the Curti family for years, and they run a first-class operation," said Ed Dias, one of the commissioners, prior to the vote.

Two planned dairies ask for extensions

Besides voting on the Curtimade expansion, the commissioners also voted to extend by two years the time available to establish two new dairies in the county.

One is planned on 183 acres 8 miles south of the city of Tulare, between Avenues 176 and 192, west of Road 56.

Plans are for that dairy to house 7,652 "animal units," which isn't the same as counting each head of cattle.

Animal units vary by the ages and breeds of cows and whether they're producing milk. For example, a milking Jersey cow is 3/4 of an animal unit, while a milking Holstein – which is larger – counts as one.

A calf, in comparison, counts as only a tenth of a unit, and older cows that aren't producing milk yet also count as less than one unit, said Curti, who isn't involved in either of the new dairy projects.

That second new dairy is planned for 154 acres north of Alpaugh, west of Road 40 between Avenues 112 and 96. Its special-use permit allows for 6,037 animal units.

RMA officials said even though special-use permits were approved for both proposed dairies, the developments have been delayed because of the poor market for milk and the high prices for dairy cow feed.

"[With] the economy and milk prices and feed prices being what they are, to build a new dairy doesn't make business sense at this moment," said Micah Bowman, a project engineer on the dairy planned near Tulare by Jay Te Velde Jr., who operates a Visalia-area dairy.

Study: Old Port of Oakland trucks out, cleaner air in

By Cecily Burt

Oakland Tribune, Thurs., Jan. 25, 2012

The air quality in neighborhoods around the Port of Oakland is bad enough to cause health problems for residents three times the state average. But a new study shows that steps taken by state air regulators to rid the port of old, polluting diesel trucks cut the most noxious exhaust emissions in half.

The study, by Robert A. Harley, professor of environmental engineering at UC Berkeley, is based on tests performed from a Seventh Street overpass in West Oakland, one of the main conduits to the Port of Oakland, the fifth-busiest container port in the country.

Harley and his team collected and tested exhaust samples from hundreds of trucks that passed beneath the overpass in November 2009 and again in June 2010 to measure the amount of dangerous particulate matter, soot and nitrogen oxide emitted by the trucks.

The first samples were taken before a January 2010 deadline at the Port of Oakland to retire drayage trucks with engines manufactured before 1994 or install diesel particulate filters on model year 1994-2003 trucks. The filters trap 85 percent of particulate emissions that can get into the lungs and cause serious health problems.

The second samples were taken six months later, after the dirty trucks had been removed or retrofitted with filters.

The results, achieved in eight months, were striking, Harley said.

"The main thing we were so impressed with, we saw a 50 percent reduction in black smoke and 40 percent reduction in nitrogen oxide," Harley said.

Black smoke filled with particulate matter is responsible for severe health problems, including cancer and other lung diseases. Nitrogen oxide is the main contributor to smog.

Without the accelerated replacement program, Harley said, it could have taken 10 years of trucks being voluntarily retired to achieve the same results.

The study likely captured exhaust from non-port trucks as well. The state air board has extended the deadline to replace or retrofit trucks that haul cargo outside California's ports, but has so far refused to extend the compliance deadlines for port trucks because of health concerns for port neighbors, workers and truck drivers.

"The ports were deliberately an early action item because there is such a heavy disproportionate impact," Harley said.

"The bottom line is that diesel trucks are a big source of air pollution in California. The state is committed that there is going to be a serious effort to clean it up."

About 250 more trucks with model year 2004 were banned from the Port of Oakland on Jan. 1, and 1,700 trucks with engine years 1994-2003 will be banned on Jan. 1, 2014.

Harley said he plans to return to the overpass next year to conduct more emissions studies as older trucks are taken off the roads and replaced with cleaner-burning models.

Cynthia Marvin, assistant division chief for the state air board's stationary source division, said the study confirms that the new air quality laws are having an impact, and port trucks are getting cleaner, but there is still work to be done.

"While we recognize this progress, we must also acknowledge that we're not done yet," Marvin wrote in an email. "The remaining requirements in the regulation need to be fully implemented to ensure that the truck fleet serving the Port of Oakland meets the Air Board's targets for pollution reductions to protect West Oakland and nearby communities."

West Oakland is surrounded by freeways, and ships, trains and construction equipment are also contributors to its poor air quality.

Margaret Gordon, a West Oakland resident and environmental activist, said Harley's truck measurements paint a rosy picture, but don't include cumulative impacts from other sources. Somebody, she said, needs to study the health risks from indoor air pollution.

"What's outside originally gets trapped indoors, so we need to have a balance of both indoor and outdoor testing," Gordon said. "You can't just consider one source. It's a matter of public health."

Calif. poised to vote on new 'clean car' regs

By Jason Dearen, Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee, Hanford Sentinel and other papers, Thurs., Jan. 26, 2012

SAN FRANCISCO -- California is poised to vote on new rules that would require automakers to build cars and trucks by 2025 that emit about three-quarters less smog producing pollutants and also mandate that one of every seven new cars sold in the state be a zero emission or plug-in hybrid vehicle.

The California Air Resources Board will begin hearing testimony Thursday in Los Angeles on its "Advanced Clean Car" program, and is expected to continue on Friday.

The new emissions standards, which also include big cuts in greenhouse gas pollutants, would begin with new cars sold in 2015, and get increasingly more stringent until 2025. Generally, the regulations would require a 75 percent reduction in smog emissions in new cars by 2025, and a 34 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over roughly the same time.

The new rules will continue the state's first-in-the-nation greenhouse gas emissions standards for cars and trucks, which went into effect in 2009. This time, the greenhouse gas reduction element of the program was designed with the federal regulators so that it will match national standards expected to be passed later this year.

"When we did the first greenhouse gas standards, it was war," said Tom Cackette, deputy director of the board, referring to legal challenges from auto dealers and business groups after the state passed the initial greenhouse gas emissions limits.

"They sued us in two federal courts. Fortunately, from our viewpoint, they lost. Over that time, with the increase in gas prices, the shake-up in the auto industry brought new management which looked at the future. Where's our future? It's not profits next quarter but how do we make a sustainable business."

California's smog emissions standards are often more strict than federal ones, which means other states often adopt them as their own.

Fourteen other states, including Washington, New Jersey, New York and Massachusetts, have adopted California's current emissions goals, which is why the new regulations could have a wide-ranging effect. Of those states, 10 have also adopted the zero-emission vehicle standards as well.

In addition to new smog and greenhouse gas emissions limits, the regulations being voted on also includes a new zero-emissions vehicle mandate. The goal is to have 1.4 million zero-emission and plug-in hybrids on California roads by 2025. But the program also looks ahead to

2050, laying groundwork for a goal of having 87 percent of the state's fleet of new vehicles fueled by electricity, hydrogen fuel cells or other clean technologies.

"This regulation is planned over a 40-year horizon, and that is extremely unusual," said board spokesman David Clegern. "But it gives us time to put the pieces in place with no surprises. The individual companies can plan for changes and develop the technology, and over the long haul, it will shift us away from reliance on petroleum."

The board's meeting comes just three days after federal regulators met in San Francisco to hear public comment on the Obama administration's national fuel economy standards, the most far-reaching in history. If passed later this year, they would require the average passenger car to reach a 54.5-mpg standard by 2025.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 13 automakers, CARB and others worked together so that when the federal government passes its greenhouse gas emissions limits later this year, they will match California's and create one national standard.

Some automakers said the market for clean car technology is already spurring the technology and innovation the regulations seek to influence.

"Yes, the cars will be lighter, compact, far more fuel efficient. That's what the mandate will be. It's not enforced by the government but really by the economics of the future," said Michael Dobrin, a spokesman for Toyota.

Yet some auto dealers have argued that the government's emphasis on strict pollution controls will result in much higher prices for consumers.

Forrest McConnell, director of the National Automobile Dealers Association, testified during the federal hearing Tuesday that tightening fuel efficiency standards will result in unaffordable cars.

"We all want better fuel economy, but it is not free. By adding \$3,200, if not more, to the average cost of a car, over seven million Americans will be priced out of the market, fleet turnover will be reduced, and public policy benefits will be delayed," McConnell said.

Other dealers say consumer demand for electric and hybrid vehicles is not what the board hopes it is.

The California New Car Dealers Association says hybrid vehicles, which have been marketed and sold for 13 years, only make up 2.1 percent of the national market, and 4.1 percent of California's market. They say the goal of making one of every seven new cars sold in California a zero-emission vehicle in roughly the same amount of time is unrealistic.

"Rather than setting vehicle manufacturers, new car dealers, and alternative vehicles themselves up for another predictable failure, (the board) should adjust the mandate to reflect a goal that is realistic and attainable," said Jonathan Morrison, the state dealers' association's director of legal and regulatory affairs.

The air board's research and environmental advocates dispute those cost increase estimates, and say increases in hybrid and other sales continue to rise as more cars hit the market. They argue that fuel cost savings will make up for any vehicle price increase.

"Our research shows a \$1,400 to \$1,900 car price increase, but over the life of the vehicles, the owners save \$6,000 in reduced fuel and maintenance costs," said Clegern.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., Jan. 25, 2012:](#)

Say goodbye to that refreshing break from soot violations

By Mark Grossi

The last soot violation in the San Joaquin Valley was Saturday as a storm flushed the rest of the debris out of the air.

The refreshing break has lasted several days after a siege in December and the first two weeks of January. But the numbers are on the rise and it's only a matter of time before the assault is back.

The microscopic chemicals, soot and other particles kill 9,200 people prematurely in California each year, and more than 10% of those are in the Valley. Will that average creep upward because of this season?

EPA's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee several years ago recommended fine particulate standards with a maximum daily limit between 30 and 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air.

But the American Lung Association has said the daily level should be set below 20. Some researchers think that's too high.

The point is that this is dangerous stuff. And it was at 32 micrograms in Clovis on Wednesday. Count on seeing federal violations again, maybe today but certainly tomorrow.