

Feds offer conservation assistance to Valley farmers

By Bee Staff Reports

Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, Oct. 20, 2013

The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service has set a Nov. 15 deadline for farmers and ranchers to apply for a program that helps with projects aimed at protecting water, air, habitat and other resources.

Applicants who meet the deadline will have the first chance at funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program during the fiscal year that started Oct. 1.

Go to www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov or call (209) 491-9320 for Stanislaus and Tuolumne counties; (209) 472-7127 for San Joaquin and Calaveras; or (209) 722-4119 for Merced and Mariposa.

Biomass co-gen plant fires up local officials

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 18, 2013

Until about a year ago, nearly 2 million pounds a day of agricultural waste and urban tree trimmings would go up in smoke or get trucked to a landfill, and nobody really benefited from it.

Not anymore. Now it fuels a power plant north of Bakersfield that generates enough electricity to power 30,000 homes -- and it helps produce steam that doubles production in nearby oil fields.

On Thursday, Kern County dignitaries, including state Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford, gathered for a tour of the plant in celebration of the inaugural National Bioenergy Day. They were impressed.

"Very few subjects really excite me like cogeneration and biomass," county Supervisor Leticia Perez said. "This really is the future." (Cogeneration is the dual process of creating electricity and steam for oil production at the same time.)

The 38-employee plant, Mt. Poso Cogeneration Co. LLC, underwent a roughly \$50 million, 15-month conversion from being coal-fired to running only on wood pulp from Central Valley farms and urban sources as far away as Los Angeles.

Air regulators say biomass plants emit roughly the same total amount of pollution as coal. But they say plants that run on wood pulp are much more beneficial because they spew less sulphur oxide and certain other pollutants, and the carbon they release into the air is captured in plant growth.

Biomass plants also help California meet its renewable energy goals. Mt. Poso has a 15-year contract with Pacific Gas and Electric Co., which like other investor-owned utilities is under regulatory orders to secure a third of power from renewable sources by 2020.

Despite their emissions, biomass plants are considered better than wind turbines and solar plants in one way: They can provide juice to the grid 24 hours a day.

The tricky part is finding enough feedstock. Covanta Delano, a larger biomass plant in Delano that does not produce steam for oil production, competes with Mt. Poso for sources of wood pulp.

"You can't just open the gate up and hope (truckloads of biomass) come," said David Mittelstadt, who as Mt. Poso's manager of resource recovery has to make sure feedstock deliveries arrive consistently year-round.

This year, Mt. Poso signed an exclusive contract with Kern County to take all its tree trimmings. It also accepts biomass from Tulare County and other sources.

In another innovative recycling twist, the water Mt. Poso uses for steam and other purposes comes from nearby oil fields, noted Don Macpherson, president and CEO of Macpherson Oil, California's eighth largest oil producer. The Santa Monica-based company is a 50-50 partner on the plant with Ann Arbor, Mich.-based DTE Energy Services.

"We're quite proud of this plant," Macpherson said.

The plant was built 25 years ago near Famoso Road. About 39 percent of the recent conversion from coal-firing was paid for by the New Markets Tax Credit program, established in 2000 to encourage equity investment in poor communities.

Oil industry tires of PR assault, will fight back on fracking

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Oct. 19, 2013

TAFT -- Deeply concerned about attacks by environmentalists on fracking, oil industry leaders at a conference on Friday rallied around the idea of a multi-pronged public relations offensive to explain their position. The overriding concern expressed by several speakers was that environmentalists are winning the battle over how to regulate -- and even whether to ban -- hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," the highly effective but controversial technique used locally for decades.

Local lawmakers joined industry leaders in calling for more informational outreach to the public, as well as frequent visits with state and national legislators.

The discussions took place at the inaugural West Kern Petroleum Summit, which drew hundreds into a large white tent set up on the campus of Taft College.

Speakers worried that zealous activists could effectively tie the industry's hands as it works to tap the massive Monterey Shale oil reservoir underlying much of the southern Central Valley. Industry trade groups have promoted the economic bonanza that could come from producing along the Monterey, even as insiders have cautioned that much research remains to be done before the formation can live up to its vaunted potential.

While a new state law regulating fracking pushed the technique to the fore Friday, another focus of discussion was the California Environmental Quality Act. Conservationists have used CEQA in recent years to halt new drilling in parts of Kern County and elsewhere.

In a panel discussion moderated by Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, state Sen. Jean Fuller, R-Bakersfield, openly strategized with Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield, on how to push CEQA reform through Sacramento for the benefit of Kern oil producers.

The last lawmaker to lead such a charge was former state Sen. Michael Rubio. The Shafter Democrat spearheaded a CEQA reform attempt last year before resigning in February to take a government affairs job with Chevron.

While Fuller said her minority party status preempted her from taking the lead on reforming the environmental law, Salas noted that he, as a "big believer in CEQA modernization," hopes to do so with the help of other moderates in the Assembly.

"We would love to" have the Assembly move on CEQA reform, he said, except that it requires the cooperation of the chamber's leadership.

Salas said such a campaign would be easier with more industry support -- namely, by inviting state lawmakers from coastal areas to tour Kern County oil operations.

"They only hear the horror stories," he said, "but they don't see how much technology is used. They don't see how much thought goes into this."

This became a common refrain throughout the event.

There were hopes expressed by more than one speaker that Kern County government would prevail in its ongoing efforts to produce a CEQA review of all oilfield activity in the county. If the plan succeeds, environmentalists and others would be unable to use CEQA to challenge local oil production.

Oil companies have not sat entirely silently in the face of environmental rallies and other forms of anti-industry activism. Notably, Chevron has taken its "We Agree" advertising campaign to magazines and billboards around the world, just as industry-friendly documentarians have produced work to counter anti-fracking films.

The maker of one such documentary, "FrackNation," strongly denounced California's environmental movement at Friday's event. Director and producer Ann McElhinney called on the industry to come clean with maps of where fracking takes place.

"Stop hiding, oil and gas companies," she said. "Tell them the truth. ... It looks bad if they have to pull it out of you."

The event's first and highest-profile speaker, Rep. McCarthy, offered a series of proposals aimed making the United States energy-independent.

Claiming the Monterey Shale has the potential to reproduce North Dakota's oil-fueled economic boom here in Kern County, McCarthy called for more regulatory certainty and improved distribution through federal approval of the Keystone Pipeline proposed to carry oil from Canada to refineries in the Gulf of Mexico.

He also appealed for greater deployment of technology that increases energy efficiency, and for a national energy policy that emphasizes petroleum no less than renewable forms of energy such as solar and wind. He applauded attempts to rework the nation's tax structure in ways that would promote oil investment.

Probably the most enthusiastically received speaker was the former president of Shell Oil Co., John Hofmeister. He delivered a keynote address proposing \$1 trillion a year investment in the nation's aging energy infrastructure, including 1960s-era nuclear power plants.

Hofmeister pointed to China's ballooning expenditures on petroleum, and suggested the United States exploit its "hidden asset" by converting a substantial share of the nation's vehicles to run on natural gas.

"Natural gas breaks the gasoline pricing cartel of OPEC," he said.

Critical of the partisanship he saw as standing in the way of progress in Washington, Hofmeister went on to propose a national energy regulatory structure akin to the Federal Reserve System.

Pleas for better industry outreach resurfaced amid a panel of industry professionals toward the end of the summit.

Texas petroleum executive Jerrit Coward said oil companies don't do enough public outreach, and that this has impeded project applications.

Gene Voiland, former president and CEO of Bakersfield-based Aera Energy LLC, called public education and outreach "a really critical area."

He recalled a longtime local teacher who had no idea what purpose is served by the common pumping jack.

"We're not going to get our message to kids through that teacher," he said.

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Sunday, Oct. 20, 2013:](#)

Looking for truth on fracking makes for a compelling film

By Lois Henry

Do yourself a favor and buy a copy of the documentary "Fracknation." Even if you think you've made up your mind on the now-controversial method of oil extraction known as "fracking," get the film.

In fact, you should watch it *especially* if you think you've made up your mind on fracking.

Because this documentary does something I love, something that I think is sorely lacking in most environmental reporting today -- it asks questions.

Seeking answers is a lot different than herding viewers down a chute to a preconceived conclusion, which is what I see in so many environmental news stories today.

Something is deemed dangerous to public health and instead of questioning the veracity of that statement, journalists dutifully go fetch reactions to this new supposed threat.

The alleged threat becomes solidified under the weight of those reactions.

And ultimately, fear, not truth, drives policy.

Fracking has taken that formula to new heights bordering on hysteria.

Filmmakers Ann McElhinney and Phelim McAleer, both former print journalists, set out to see if the hysteria was justified.

"I wanted to show the scientific evidence behind these allegations," McAleer told me.

Had fracking destroyed people's water? Was it responsible for water you can actually set on fire?

Had it increased cancer rates among nearby populations? Was it truly a seismic risk?

All of this and more has been laid at the feet of fracking by Josh Fox's "GasLand" documentaries and the avalanche of news stories that followed.

McAleer takes viewers along the journey as he crisscrosses the country and the globe in search of answers.

Living in Kern County, where hydraulic fracturing is common and has been for more than a generation, I really didn't give the issue much notice at first.

As oil exploration spread into the Shafter area with companies trying to get at the formation known as the Monterey Shale, I started hearing more fracking fears.

After "GasLand," which focuses on shale fracking in particular, fracking fears really ramped up in California.

Again, I say this is nothing new.

I covered the "big find" more than 20 years ago when oil companies first started fracking the Monterey Shale near Shafter. No horror stories ensued. The water was fine and people weren't keeling over because of chemicals used in fracking solutions.

In fact, the biggest problem with fracking the Monterey Shale was that it didn't work. Every well had the same result, a big play of light, sweet crude in the first few weeks that choked off to a dribble.

No one could find the right method to crack the shale and keep the oil flowing. (I recently heard on the QT that one company may have found the key, but I'll have to get back to you on that.)

The point is, not only have companies been hydraulically fracking wells for decades in western Kern, they've been doing it in the Monterey formation right around Shafter and no harm has come.

Even without some dude in a lab coat, I'd say the historic evidence shows fracking is less harmful to your kid's health than, say, a giant sugary soda.

But "Fracknation" went in search of that lab coat dude and the resulting film is both fun and educational.

A highlight is when McAleer goes to Dimock, Pa., the epicenter of concerns over fracking and water quality, to ask one couple about a recent EPA finding that Dimock's water is perfectly safe.

I can't do the scene justice by describing it. You have to watch it for yourselves.

Another highlight is when McAleer finally gets "GasLand" director Josh Fox to say why he didn't mention that methane is naturally occurring in water where some areas also have large gas and coal deposits, such as Dimock.

Fox replies that he didn't find it relevant.

"That's a killer point," McAleer said. "Because he knew the water could be lit on fire long before fracking, but he chose not to include it. He knew he was excluding relevant evidence in order to make a partisan point."

Lighting a running kitchen tap on fire is a key dramatic scene in "GasLand." The ball of flame even scorches hair off the man's arm.

"Fracknation," however, gives evidence that people were lighting water on fire from Pennsylvania to Louisiana from the time of George Washington. (Oil and gas drilling appears to have, in some instances, allowed methane to migrate into to water wells but only because of poorly constructed well casings, not fracking, which happens too far below ground to affect most water wells.)

And those skyrocketing cancer rates in a Texas fracking town? The film quotes source after source, from both government and watchdog organizations, saying that just isn't so.

"The truth is, it's a lie," McElhinney told me.

McElhinney is passionate. Not just about holding environmentalists' feet to the fire, but about how journalists have abdicated their responsibility to do the same.

"The environmental movement is big business, some groups are vast corporations," she said. "Big oil should be scrutinized, for sure. But so should the environmentalists."

Environmental groups have the power to keep communities from developing their resources and improving their lot in life, which she accuses them of doing in impoverished countries around the globe.

That's how she says she got started on this quest. She was a freelancer covering a controversial gold mine in Romania.

Outside activists, she said, stopped a Canadian gold mine from opening in Rosia Montana, saying the mine would dump harmful chemicals and was already taking people's land and homes.

"None of it was true," McElhinney said. "They stole that community's dreams based on lies."

She thought other journalists would jump on board this great story she'd uncovered. Nothing.

"That's because most journalists are the environmental movement's constituency."