

Study links smoggy air to heart attacks

By Mary Elizabeth Dallas, Gannett

Visalia Times Delta, Mon. February 25, 2013

Levels of ozone and of air pollution are directly linked to heart attacks, according to a new study from Houston.

For both ozone and airborne fine particulate matter (tiny solid and liquid pollutants such as those emitted by cars and factories), peak exposure was found to increase the risk for heart attack nearly 5 percent. Men, blacks and people older than 65 were at greatest risk, the investigators found.

These findings should prompt health officials to continue their efforts to reduce air pollution and provide the public with early warnings of high ozone levels, the study authors suggested.

“The bottom-line goal is to save lives,” researcher Katherine Ensor, a professor and chair of the department of statistics at Rice University, said in a university news release. “We’d like to contribute to a refined warning system for at-risk individuals. Blanket warnings about air quality may not be good enough. At the same time, we want to enhance our understanding of the health cost of pollution — and celebrate its continuing reduction.”

In conducting the study, Ensor and colleagues examined eight years of data on air quality in Houston. They also reviewed information compiled by Houston Emergency Medical Services on more than 11,000 heart attacks that occurred outside of the city’s hospitals. More than 90 percent of cases were fatal, and 55 percent occurred during the heat of summer.

Heart attacks were linked to exposure to both ozone and particulate matter smaller than 2.5 micrograms in the air. An average increase in fine particulate matter of 6 micrograms per day over the course of two days increased the risk for heart attack by 4.6 percent. People with pre-existing health problems would be at particular risk, the researchers noted.

Similarly, an ozone level increase of 20 parts per billion (ppb) in one to three hours increased the risk for heart attack up to 4.4 percent. However, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide levels did not affect the number of heart attacks, the researchers said.

Study co-author David Persse, EMS physician director for the Houston Fire Department, said that EMS workers have long believed that certain types of air pollution, including ozone, have serious harmful effects on people’s hearts and lungs. “But this mathematically and scientifically validates what we know,” he said in the news release.

The American Lung Association ranked Houston eighth in the United States for high-ozone days. The city is taking steps to reduce fatalities from heart attacks, such as increasing education on bystander CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) in at-risk communities.

The best way to prevent the harmful effects of exposure to air pollution, however, is to improve air quality, according to Houston’s Health and Human Services Department.

Rice University environmental engineer Daniel Cohan said that environmental strategies that reduce ozone year-round may be needed.

The researchers noted their findings could have important implications as states plan to meet national ozone standards. Although standards are now set at 75 ppb, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is considering tightening them to between 60 ppb and 70 ppb.

A 2012 study from Rice determined that the EPA’s particulate standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter does not go far enough to protect people’s health.

The findings were scheduled for a presentation at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Boston. The study will also be published in the journal *Circulation*.

S.J. Transportation Plan

Update factors in new laws for climate change

By Zachary K. Johnson

Stockton Record, Monday, February 25, 2013

STOCKTON - The impact of the state's climate change laws can be seen in a long-term transportation plan developing in San Joaquin County, which will exhibit a stronger-than-ever link to planned housing and other land use expectations.

The Regional Transportation Plan includes policies, programs and specific projects needed in the county. It's updated every three years, but the latest iteration for the first time will include a "sustainable communities strategy."

This comes from state climate change law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

For San Joaquin County, the California Air Resources Board target is a 5 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020 and a 10 percent reduction by 2035, according to the San Joaquin Council of Governments.

The 2014 Regional Transportation Plan being developed would set forth a forecast development pattern that will be able to meet those reduction targets, said Aaron Hoyt, an associate regional planner with COG, the county transportation planning authority.

"It also identifies the transportation network that will be needed to serve the needs of the future by all modes (of transportation)," he said.

The agency is seeking input before it sets the scope of an environmental report for the new plan, which will lay out the county's transportation needs until 2040. It is scheduled for final adoption in October.

The changes stem from AB32, climate change legislation passed in 2006, and SB375, which requires the sustainable-communities strategy.

About a third of the climate change-causing greenhouse gas emissions in the county come from vehicle emissions, so it makes a difference where people live and how they get to where they need to go.

And one of the ways to meet state-mandated targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is to reduce vehicle miles traveled.

High-density housing linked to jobs and shopping areas by public transportation or walking and biking trails tends to lead to fewer vehicle miles traveled than spread-out housing connected only by roadways.

The impact of the state legislation is evident in other plans developed by local governments.

"It goes hand in hand with what we're doing with the Climate Action Plan," said Dale Stockton, a Sierra Club member who is also a part of the county Sustainable Communities Strategy committee, formed last year. But it's not a quick change, he said.

"My analogy is turning a battleship," he said. "You turn the rudder, but it's 30 miles later when the ship turns."

The Regional Transportation Plan includes specific transportation projects, and those projects would be shut out of certain funding if they were not included in the plan.

And housing developments that are found in compliance with the new plan can benefit from a streamlined environmental review process.

John Beckman, CEO of the Building Industry Association of the Delta, said he anticipates all of his membership would comply with the sustainable-communities strategy.

But it's important to ensure there is flexibility for developments as the plan develops, he said.

"With the direction it's going, it will still allow the flexibility to remain," he said. "Ideally, by complying with the Sustainable Communities Strategy, we will reduce our greenhouse gas levels."

What's next

For more information about the 2014 Regional Transportation Plan, go online to sjcog.org. The San Joaquin Council of Governments is still seeking input for the scope and content for the plan's program environmental impact report. The council's board of directors will discuss the plan at its next meeting, 5 p.m. Thursday at 555 E. Weber Ave., Stockton.

The deadline for input is March 7. Comments can be made by calling (209) 235-0450 or sending an email to hoty@sjcog.org.

There will be other chances to get involved before the draft report is prepared at meetings across the county starting in March.

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Sun., Feb. 24, 2013:](#)

Westside hydrogen plant bubbling with issues

By Lois Henry

There are plenty of good reasons to oppose the Hydrogen Energy California (HECA) power and chemical/fertilizer plant proposed to be built near Tupman.

Air quality isn't one.

Here's why.

This plant was devised as a demonstration project on how to make electricity cleanly using coal and, at the same time, keep greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere by using them to plump up local oil fields.

That's the whole reason it got that ginormous \$300-plus million stimulus grant from the Department of Energy back in 2009.

It's designed to be a low-emission energy producer.

Low-emission is relative, of course. It is a power plant after all.

Which is why the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District stepped in, even though it does not have authority to approve or deny an operating permit for the plant.

That power lies with the California Energy Commission.

All the air district can do is let the commission know if the plant is in compliance with required mitigation standards. Mitigation means the plant has to make up for environmental damage it causes, i.e. if it pollutes it has to reduce pollution elsewhere.

And in this case, the air district is making HECA go above and beyond legally required mitigation standards.

Instead of accepting 1-1 mitigation (for every ton of pollution produced, the plant has to reduce a ton elsewhere), the air district is requiring a 1-1.5 mitigation.

To do that, the plant owner, Massachusetts-based SCS Energy LLC, has agreed to pay nearly \$8.5 million to the air district, plus buy pollution credits from the now-shuttered Alon Refinery on Rosedale Highway.

That district will use that money to help school districts buy low-emission buses, aid with traffic synchronization, work with farmers to replace diesel ag pumps, etc.

Contrary to popular belief, the district didn't give a thumbs up to HECA emitting more than the "allowable" amounts of pollutants, explained Air District Director Seyed Sadredin.

It's a little confusing, but there's no such thing as "allowable thresholds."

"It's not a go or no-go situation," Sadredin said. "There are levels established that, in our region especially, if you emit more than those levels, you're considered a significant source of emission."

Once a business is in the significant category, the air district can work up mitigation measures.

"We're not supporting or advocating for this project," Sadredin said. "Our position is, if project proponents want it to be built, they have to do all these extra things before we give our OK."

Since the plant owners have said they're cool with the air district's demands, I doubt opponents are going to make headway on the air issue with the Energy Commission.

Likewise with water.

This plant will take a lot of water, more than 7,400 acre feet a year. That's huge.

But Buena Vista Water Storage District happens to have a large supply of brackish groundwater, too salty for crops, in the western reaches of its district. It needs, and wants to, get rid of that water and has repeatedly made that case to the Energy Commission.

So, no traction to be had on the water issue either.

Recently, a new issue has surfaced that may have more bite. Fertilizer.

The original owners, oil giant BP and mining company Rio Tinto, only wanted to make power from coal and sell the Co2 (carbon dioxide) byproduct to Oxy to inject into it's Elk Hills field.

SCS Energy has said it also needs to make fertilizer to turn a profit.

However, in its application papers to the Energy Commission, SCS also suggested the plant would make products "beyond the scope of the production of fertilizer for agricultural uses." Such as urea, urea ammonium nitrate and anhydrous ammonia.

That caught the eye of Kern County Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt. She wrote to the Energy Commission concerned HECA was basically turning out to be a chemical manufacturing plant.

Her concerns were met with a "tut tut" wait-and-see response from the Commission.

I think HECA's real Achilles heel is in its waste.

Three years ago, I caught wind that the plant would produce an average of 400 -- to as much as 840 -- tons per day of slag.

That's the stuff left over from gasification of the coal and petroleum coke, which generates the plant's power.

They super heat the coal/coke to extract the hydrogen, which is used to crank the turbines to make power.

What's left is "gasification solids," or slag, a hard glassy substance that breaks into obsidian like flakes, Oviatt told me.

Three years ago, when Kern County Supervisors first learned of the massive slag waste, they fretted that the plant would obliterate the county's landfill capacity. Not to mention destroy our ability to comply with the state's mandate to reduce our overall waste stream.

HECA owners at the time planned to recycle the slag by selling it as road base. That never panned out.

SCS Energy spokeswoman Tiffany Rau told me plant owners are still hoping to recycle the slag either as asphalt cover or for sand blasting. If not, she said, they would ship it out of state.

Won't work.

Shipping out of state still counts against Kern, Oviatt said.

"So, we'd go from 62 percent compliance (with the state's waste diversion mandate) down to 27 percent," she said. "The slag is a problem. There is really no use for that much stuff."

Under the original HECA project, county staff figured it could cost up to \$10 million a year to mitigate for the waste impacts. The owners at the time protested that number.

Looking at it today, staffers figured the cost could be as much as \$30 million a year if the slag can't find a recycled use.

SCS Energy hasn't protested that amount.

That tells me they expect to make a fertilizer load of money selling their electricity, Co2 and what not.

Hmmm.

Like I said, plenty of reasons to oppose HECA. Opponents just have to pick the right one.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Friday, Feb. 22, 2013:](#)

City of Fresno should team up more, sue less

By Ronn Dominici

After three terms serving the residents of Madera County as a supervisor, I decided it was time to see what retirement really looked like last year, and I didn't run for re-election.

I worked hard during my tenure to help Madera County. During my 33 years in the California Highway Patrol, I gathered a form of good patience and tolerance and knew how to speak and talk with people. These skills served me well.

Madera has been left in good hands and has a road map for the future that is well planned. As the central San Joaquin Valley grows, so, too, will Madera.

We also know that we must not only meet the needs of our residents, but we must be a good neighbor. That's why when we undertook the Rio Mesa Plan to meet our future growth we knew it needed to comply with the state's regional planning guidelines established under SB375 and the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint process. And that's probably why I remain bothered so much by the city of Fresno's decision to sue Madera County over the Tesoro Viejo project.

Not only did Fresno have more than 11 different public opportunities to comment, they could have called me or any of my board colleagues at any time and asked to speak with us about their concerns.

Instead our neighbors to the south chose to sue Madera County at the 11th hour and tell people we never listened to their concerns.

One of my last board actions was to see the approval of Tesoro Viejo, a true master-planned community that should be something the entire Valley, not just Madera County, is proud of.

The project takes into consideration our need for jobs as well as concerns about air quality, water supply and transportation infrastructure. The project learns from our past and builds with the whole region's future in mind.

A true sustainable, mixed-use destination, Tesoro Viejo will offer 5,200 homes, 3 million square feet of non-residential space, 7,000 jobs and more than 400 acres of open space -- this alone is equivalent in size to the entire Harlan Ranch project! There will be 15 miles of walking, hiking and biking trails.

The builder has commitments for a major employer that will invest in the region and provide some of the more than 7,000 jobs. The builder also has implemented a vocational education program that plans for the future and has resolved water-supply requirements in partnership with Madera Irrigation District.

The builder has agreed to improve Highway 41 from Avenue 12 to Avenue 15, and to make those improvements before the first residential occupancy.

Under the law, he isn't required to make those improvements until the project reaches completion. So that's a huge investment of capital up front and a huge commitment to the region. It also ensures that the needs of Madera County and our neighbors traveling through Madera County are put first.

The builder has agreed to self-mitigated air quality concerns by imposing the VERA program -- that means the mitigation fees paid for the assessed air quality impacts will be used to support Madera's farmers and purchase equipment with cleaner-burning ag engines.

This was a decision my esteemed colleague on the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District, Fresno City Council Member Oliver Baines, described during the plan review at the air district board meeting as being a significant commitment that takes care of all of our neighbors.

The Valley has a chance to work together and plan wisely for our future. We can only look to Los Angeles, the Bay Area and our own growing pains to know what we don't want to become and the mistakes we don't want to repeat.

As I sit back and reflect and continue to think about the future of Madera County, I can't help but wonder if a little bit of communication by our neighbors when they had a concern might have made a world of difference.

It's all about talking with each other and trying to understand. Lawsuits don't get any of us, anywhere. All they do is cost all of us time, money and jobs!

Ronn Dominici represented District 3 on the Madera County Board of Supervisors for 12 years. He retired in 2012.