

Fuel burning program to begin at Bass Lake Ranger District

Sierra Star, Wednesday, Mar. 27, 2013

The Sierra National Forest is preparing to implement the spring burning program at the Bass Lake Ranger District, which consists of pile and broadcast burning with objectives to reduce forest fuel concentration and introduce low intensity fire to the ecosystem.

Underburning projects proposed for the spring of 2013 are scheduled for the following locations:

- Lone Sequoia located west of Highway 41 near the Westfall Fire Station.
- Sugar Pine located east of Fish Camp and northeast of Sugar Pine community.
- Source Kinsman located west of the Kinsman community.
- Batterson and Jerseydale Administrative burns located at each of these stations.

"The objective of underburning is to reintroduce low intensity fire to the ecosystem on a rotational basis. These frequent fires maintain surface fuels at low levels and reduce small trees and other vegetation in the understory that could form fuel ladders, which are conducive to crown fires," said District Ranger Dave Martin.

Burning will be conducted in moderately unstable atmospheric conditions and on burn days to provide optimum smoke dispersal. Burning will stop if dispersion becomes a problem and suppression tactics employed if necessary. Stump holes and logs may be mopped up to reduce the smoldering phase of combustion. High use roads will be monitored for visibility hazards, and traffic control will be provided when necessary.

Pile burning projects are widely dispersed throughout the Bass Lake Ranger District. While many of the projects are located at the higher elevations of the district, some are near populated areas, and may result in a temporary reduction in air quality in the communities of Oakhurst, Fish Camp, Bass Lake, Ahwahnee, North Fork, Kinsman and surrounding areas.

Burning will be conducted on burn days as determined by the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District, and the County Air Pollution Control District within Mariposa County.

Burn Day determinations are based on atmospheric conditions which provide optimum smoke dispersal, however, normal diurnal wind changes allow the settling of drift smoke in basins and drainages during the late night and early morning hours.

By limiting the number of piles ignited at one time, and by "mopping up" (extinguishing) smoldering piles, it is expected that emissions will not reach unacceptable levels. Actions to reduce visibility hazards include monitoring high use roads and providing traffic control if necessary.

For questions or further information, contact Burt Stalter at (559) 877-2218, extension 3208 at the Bass Lake District Headquarters in North Fork.

EPA to set new rule for cleaner gas

Proposed standard seen as key to lower pollution

By Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post

In the San Diego Union-Tribune, Friday, Mar. 29, 2013

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency will move ahead today with a rule requiring cleaner gasoline and lower-pollution vehicles nationwide, amounting to one of President Barack Obama's most significant air pollution initiatives, according to those briefed on the decision.

The proposed standards would add less than a penny a gallon to the cost of gasoline while delivering an environmental benefit akin to taking 33 million cars off the road, according to a senior administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the announcement had not been made.

Oil industry officials, however, said the cost would be at least double the administration's estimate, and could add up to 9 cents a gallon in some areas.

The proposed standards, which had been stuck in regulatory limbo since 2011, would reduce the amount of sulfur in U.S. gasoline by two-thirds and impose fleetwide pollution limits on new vehicles by 2017.

The Obama administration's decision to go ahead with the regulations deals a political blow to the oil and gas industry, which had mobilized dozens of lawmakers in recent days to lobby the White House for a one-year delay.

It also comes as the administration angered many environmentalists by weighing a delay in limits on greenhouse gas emissions from new power plants. Unlike the sulfur limits, the administration has argued, the power plant limits could immediately hurt the struggling economy.

While gasoline sulfur itself doesn't pose a public health threat, it hampers the effectiveness of catalytic converters, which in turn leads to greater tailpipe emissions. These emissions — nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide and fine particles — contribute to smog and soot, which can cause respiratory and heart disease.

The proposed standards were first reported by The Washington Post Thursday afternoon and confirmed by the administration Thursday night.

The regulations are supported by environmental advocates, state regulators and automobile companies, who would prefer uniform sulfur standards for fuel nationwide. But oil industry officials and their congressional allies say it will cost up to \$10 billion to upgrade refineries and an additional \$2.4 billion in annual operating costs.

Both public health advocates and the administration say the ultimate cost would be much lower because of provisions giving refiners flexibility in complying with the standards. The EPA estimates annual health benefits of up to \$23 billion by 2030.

The agency surveyed 111 U.S. refineries and found 29 can meet the sulfur standard or come close to it; 66 can reach it with modest modifications; and 16 would require a major overhaul.

The requirements also have the potential to cut major contributors to smog-forming ozone and pollution — nitrogen oxides and particulate matter, or soot — by 80 percent and 70 percent, respectively, according to the administration official.

S. William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, said the new standard could be "the most significant air pollution policy President Obama will adopt in his second term ... There is not another air pollution control strategy that we know of that will produce as substantial, cost-effective and expeditious emissions reductions."

Automakers have lobbied in favor of the rule in part because they must meet stricter emissions standards in California.

"Cleaner cars will need the cleaner fuels already on sale across Europe and Asia," said Auto Alliance spokeswoman Gloria Bergquist, whose group represents several major automakers. "And the best part of these low sulfur fuels is they provide clean air benefits to all 250 million vehicles on the road right away from day one at the gas pumps."

Charles Drevna, president for the American Fuel and Petroleum Manufacturers, said the EPA isn't obligated under the Clean Air Act to reduce the sulfur content of gas any further. U.S. refiners have lowered gasoline sulfur nearly 90 percent since 2004, according to the association, from 300 to 30 parts per million.

"Those remaining molecules of sulfur that are left, those little buggers don't want to come out easily," Drevna said. "This is an all cost and no benefit regulation."

EPA takes aim at auto emissions, sulfur in gas

By Dina Cappiello, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Friday, March 29, 2013

WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration is unveiling a plan to clean up gasoline and automobile emissions. Officials say it will result in cleaner air across the U.S. and higher prices at the pump.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates the new rule will reduce sulfur in gasoline and tighten automobile emission standards beginning in 2017. They say it will increase gas prices by less than a penny per gallon and add \$130 to the cost of a vehicle in 2025.

But the agency says it will yield billions of dollars in health benefits by slashing smog- and soot-forming pollution.

EPA Cleaner Gasoline

The oil industry, Republicans and some Democrats wanted EPA to delay the rule, citing higher costs. An oil industry study says it could increase gasoline prices by 6 to 9 cents a gallon.

Reducing sulfur in gasoline and tightening emissions standards on cars beginning in 2017, as the Obama administration is proposing, would come with costs as well as rewards. The cost at the pump for cleaner air across the country could be less than a penny or as high as 9 cents a gallon, depending on who is providing the estimate.

An oil industry study says the proposed rule being unveiled Friday by the administration could increase gasoline prices by 6 cents to 9 cents a gallon. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates an increase of less than a penny and an additional \$130 to the cost of a vehicle in 2025.

The EPA is quick to add that the change aimed at cleaning up gasoline and automobile emissions would yield billions of dollars in health benefits by 2030 by slashing smog- and soot-forming pollution. Still, the oil industry, Republicans and some Democrats have pressed the EPA to delay the rule, citing higher costs.

Environmentalists hailed the proposal as potentially the most significant in President Barack Obama's second term.

The so-called Tier 3 standards would reduce sulfur in gasoline by more than 60 percent and reduce nitrogen oxides by 80 percent, by expanding across the country a standard already in place in California. For states, the regulation would make it easier to comply with health-based standards for the main ingredient in smog and soot. For automakers, the regulation allows them to sell the same autos in all 50 states.

The Obama administration already has moved to clean up motor vehicles by adopting rules that will double fuel efficiency and putting in place the first standards to reduce the pollution from cars and trucks blamed for global warming.

"We know of no other air pollution control strategy that can achieve such substantial, cost-effective and immediate emission reductions," said Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies. Becker said the rule would reduce pollution equal to taking 33 million cars off the road.

But the head of American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers, Charles Drevna, said in an interview Thursday that the refiners' group was still unclear on the motives behind the agency's regulation, since refining companies already have spent \$10 billion to reduce sulfur by 90 percent. The additional cuts, while smaller, will cost just as much, Drevna said, and the energy needed for the additional refining actually could increase carbon pollution by 1 percent to 2 percent.

"I haven't seen an EPA rule on fuels that has come out since 1995 that hasn't said it would cost only a penny or two more," Drevna said.

A study commissioned by the American Petroleum Institute estimated that lowering the sulfur in gasoline would add 6 cents to 9 cents a gallon to refiners' manufacturing costs, an increase that likely would be passed on to consumers at the pump. The EPA estimate of less than 1 cent is also an additional manufacturing cost and likely to be passed on.

A senior administration official said Thursday that only 16 of 111 refineries would need to invest in major equipment to meet the new standards, which could be final by the end of this year. Of the remaining refineries, 29 already are meeting the standards because they are selling cleaner fuel in California or other countries, and 66 would have to make modifications.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the rule was still undergoing White House budget office review.

Kettleman landfill slapped with \$300K fine

Company busted for 72 spills of hazardous materials

By Seth Nidever, staff writer

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, March 28, 2013

KETTLEMAN CITY — An almost-full hazardous waste landfill operated by Chemical Waste Management a few miles away from this small Kings County town was hit with a \$311,194 fine for not reporting spills of toxic materials, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control announced Wednesday.

“This is a substantial and aggressive penalty which reflects the seriousness with which DTSC views these violations,” said Brian Johnson, DTSC’s deputy director of enforcement, in a conference call.

The fine covered 72 unreported spills at the facility dating as far back as 2008. The facility was cited with the violations last November. Most of the spills were small and did not threaten public health, according to Johnson.

“We sort of disagree with DTSC that these were violations,” said Jennifer Andrews, a Chem Waste spokeswoman. “These were spills done by third parties that were immediately cleaned up and recorded.”

The company did not think it had to report such small spills from trucks coming into the facility, Andrews said. She said the company now fully understands its reporting responsibilities.

“We’ve made the appropriate changes,” she said.

The fine comes as Chem Waste is rapidly filling up its existing hazardous material capacity and trying to get a permit from DTSC to build an expansion. The application for an expansion permit, filed in 2008, is still awaiting approval.

Meanwhile, Chem Waste’s existing permit expires in June. They will have to apply for a renewal in addition to applying for the expansion, Johnson said.

Johnson said he hoped a decision on the expansion permit will be made by December. The facility is the largest toxic waste repository in the U.S. west of the Mississippi River.

Environmental health and consumer groups, which have long blamed Chem Waste for birth defects and other health problems in Kettleman City, immediately protested that the fine was too small.

“DTSC could have charged the company \$25,000 for each spill and fines would have totaled \$1.8 million,” said Liza Tucker with Santa Monica-based Consumer Watchdog. “Instead, we see another break for a serial violator of hazardous waste laws.”

People for Clean Air and Water of Kettleman City, an offshoot of Bay Area-based environmental group Greenaction, joined Consumer Watchdog in calling on DTSC to “deny permits to expand ... due to the repeat and chronic violations that have plagued this toxic-waste facility.”

DTSC also fined Chem Waste \$46,000 in 2011 for two other spills at the Kettleman landfill.

DTSC considers “enforcement actions” such as fines and citations when considering permit renewals, Johnson said.

Meanwhile, toxic waste produced in California that normally would have come to the Chem Waste site, including lead contaminated soils, herbicides and other material, is being trucked to Arizona, Utah and Nevada because there’s little room left in the Kettleman landfill.

Unlike California, which requires it to be disposed of in separate hazardous material landfills, these states allow toxic material to be mixed with regular trash in regular disposal sites, Andrews said.

“These other states aren’t thrilled,” Andrews said. “It’s rather inappropriate for us to ban things and not be able to handle them in our own state.”

Air pollution linked to birth defects in San Joaquin Valley, study says

By Anna Gorman, staff writer

L.A. Times, Thursday, March 28, 2013

Researchers have linked air pollution and birth defects among pregnant women in the San Joaquin Valley, according to a study by Stanford University School of Medicine.

The study looked at women between 1997 and 2006, including 806 whose pregnancies were impacted by birth defects and 849 not impacted. Researchers determined that the women who spent their early weeks of pregnancy living in areas with worse air pollution had a higher risk of having a birth defect in their babies.

Women who breathed the highest levels of carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide were more likely to have a baby with a spinal column problem or an underdeveloped brain, according to the study.

Researchers said the study, which appears online in the American Journal of Epidemiology, is unique because it focused on where women lived early in pregnancy when birth defects develop.

The issue attracted attention in recent years after nearly a dozen babies in Kettleman City were born with birth defects, including three who died. Public health officials investigated but could not determine what was causing the defects. They ruled out a nearby toxic waste dump.