

Largest Valley biomass plant to close doors by year's end

By John Lindt

Visalia Times Delta, Tuesday, December 1, 2015

The Valley Air District has worked with farmers throughout the Valley and has instituted a number of measures that have resulted in an 80 percent reduction in the open burning of agricultural waste.

But now, 12 years later, the severe drought conditions that the San Joaquin Valley has experienced and the recent demise of the biomass power industry that provided an alternative to open burning for a significant amount of the agricultural waste generated in the Valley has "created a severe problem that requires urgent attention by the Air District" says a strongly worded staff report as the board of the district meets this week.

"This is a big deal," said Dave Warner, one of the Air District's top staffers.

The latest sign of trouble brewing comes as news that the Valley's largest biomass plant in Delano will shut down this month. Since 2012, five Valley biomass facilities have shut down operations says the District, including a plant in Dinuba in September. The Valley's largest biomass plant — Covanta Delano — has stopped receiving new material as of November 1, 2015, and has informed the District that they "plan to shut down operations at the end of the year because they have been unable to secure a viable Purchase Power Agreement."

Going to get worse

The staff report states, "the District is facing numerous requests from growers to burn agricultural materials due to the lack of sufficient biomass power capacity. If the biomass power capacity does not return to previous levels, this situation will only get worse, especially given the hundreds of thousands of acres of orchards, vineyards and other agricultural crops that have been fallowed in response to the drought."

If an adequate number of feasible alternatives to open burning are not made available, the Valley may either have to roll back the successful measures that have reduced emissions from open burning of agricultural waste "or endure the economic devastation of Valley agriculture."

To assure that open burning of agricultural materials does not cause any violations of healthbased ambient air quality standards, open burning has only been permitted under the District's comprehensive Smoke Management System (SMS), which uses real-time meteorological information to analyze the impact of burning on air quality and appropriately limit burn allocations by area.

Under the District's SMS program, the Valley is divided into 103 zones. The amount of burning allowed in a given zone on a specific day is based on factors such as the local meteorology, the air quality conditions, the atmospheric holding capacity, the amount of burning already approved or happening in a given area, and the potential impacts on downwind populations.

The District's stringent residential wood burning regulation has also had a significant impact on reducing agricultural burning during the peak PM2.5 season (November through February). In addition to the phase-out implemented through the agricultural open burning program, agricultural open burning is also prohibited on fireplace curtailment days, even when air quality conditions in rural areas would support some level of agricultural burning.

Drought effects on agricultural burning

Exacerbating the reduction in biomass capacity in the Valley is the increase in agricultural waste over the past few years as a result of the extreme drought emergency currently facing California and the Western United States. There has been a major increase in agricultural burning as a result of the extreme drought conditions and the inability of agricultural operations to water their crops. To date hundreds of thousands of acres of orchards, vineyards and other agricultural crops have been fallowed in the San Joaquin Valley in response to the drought warns the report.

Industry helps in reducing wildfires

Additionally, reducing fuel loads in the forest is a primary method of controlling wild fires. The biomass industry provides an outlet for forest debris and materials from forest thinning projects.

This reduces the occurrence of catastrophic wildfires and the attendant damage to public resources, property, and air quality impacts.

Finally, biomass plants burn materials that would likely be placed in landfills if the plants were no longer viable, so biomass plants play a role in meeting the state's landfill diversion requirements.

The report concludes "As we pursue potential power pricing remedies, fairness dictates that we explore potential means of compensation for the societal benefits provided by biomass plants."

Demolition project expected to continue at Pixley Park

By Luis Hernandez

Visalia Times Delta, Monday, November 30, 2015

PIXLEY — County officials expect a project to demolish the former host house at Pixley Park will be able to continue.

Results on a test trying to determine if asbestos is present at the home are due in on Wednesday. Samples from the former house were taken last week.

And if the test provides proof there's no asbestos, the project will be allowed to continue, said Jaime Holt, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman.

During an inspection last week, there was no indication of asbestos, said Melissa Withnell, Tulare County public information officer.

"Once it's confirmed there's no asbestos, the county will move forward to make sure all steps are taken for a project like this," she said.

The project to demolish the former house, located in the heart of the park, was stopped when county officials received a notice of violation last week. The air pollution control district was neither told about the demolition project nor was the site checked for asbestos.

"They failed to follow proper procedure," Holt said. "They needed to have the building inspected properly."

Holt continued: "It's unfortunate they didn't contact us before they started the project."

When asbestos, a fibrous mineral used in construction and other industries, becomes airborne and breathed into the lungs, it can cause illnesses such as asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer, among other, according to the website WebMD.com.

However, since the air pollution board contacted park officials about the project, the two agencies have maintained constant contact, Holt said.

"We have been working closely with the county to ensure there are no health risks at the site," she said.

Tulare County Parks and Recreation Manager Neil Pilegard said the county has obtained a building permit and is awaiting the test's result.

Pilegard also said the demolition was a safety project. The house's front and back porch fell, creating a safety hazard. Roof shingles were removed as well, Pilegard said.

"Stuff had fallen off," he said. "We trying to make it safe. We are trying to remove a safety hazard."

Withnell agreed.

"It became a safety concern," she said. "It was in poor shape. Any building in that condition should be taken down."

Withnell said there were no injuries or similar incidents at the former house before the demolition started. The building is being knocked down as a precautionary step.

There are no immediate plans for new construction when the former house comes down, Withnell said. It will likely become additional space for park goers.

Located on Pixley's north side, the park sprawls just north of the Pixley Memorial Building and is accessible right off northbound Highway 99. There's a grassy, wooded area with picnic tables and baseball diamond that also serves as a soccer field.

Pixley, with a population of about 3,310 residents, is located south of Tulare.