

State air board sees one choice for Valley Region should volunteer for worst-polluter status, high-ranking official says.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

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The California Air Resources Board sees little choice for the San Joaquin Valley -- it's time to go "extreme."

A high-ranking air board official Wednesday said the eight-county area has no chance of achieving the clean-air standard for ozone by 2005, the federal deadline for the Valley.

The governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District next week will consider switching the area from "severe noncompliance" of the ozone standard to "extreme noncompliance."

The move would extend the deadline from 2005 to 2010, delaying a freeze of federal highway funding and preventing new or expanding businesses from being charged extra fees.

But the move to extreme also would leave the Valley in the same category with Los Angeles, long considered the country's smog capital.

The state still thinks it's the right thing to do, said Lynn Terry, assistant executive officer for the state air board, who addressed the Valley Clean Air Now board meeting in Fresno on Wednesday.

"As a practical matter, it's the only goal to support at the moment," Terry said.

Terry was one of several speakers visiting Clean Air Now, an industry-sponsored nonprofit campaign for clean air. The effort, funded by a \$2 million grant last year from Chevron-Texaco, has invested about \$500,000 in voluntary pollution control efforts.

Terry lauded the campaign, saying she would like to see more recognition for voluntary efforts as part of formal pollution control plans in the state.

Clean Air Now gave \$100,000 to the Center for Advanced Research Technology, a charter high school for Fresno and Clovis students, for in-depth study of air pollution. Students are exploring everything from legal aspects to innovations in controlling diesel emissions.

The nonprofit group also tested 600 Valley vehicles over the past six months and discovered one-third of them were gross polluters. The organization provided \$100 coupons to help the vehicle owners get their cars fixed.

"We went to Tracy, Fresno, Dinuba, Bakersfield, Visalia and Merced," said Shelley McKenry, who works with Clean Air Now. "People really wanted the coupon."

Such voluntary efforts are important in conquering California's poor air quality, Terry said.

But she said the Valley still should volunteer for the worst-polluter status to delay sanctions and push back the cleanup deadline. No other place in the country has ever made such a request of the federal government.

She added that tighter standards on vehicle fuels and engines by 2007 would play a major role in reducing ozone, the warm-weather corrosive gas that is the main ingredient in smog.

The Valley, which is one of the dirtiest air basins in the country, will need anticipated pollution reductions from the fuel and engine standards to make the cleanup deadline in 2010, local air officials have said.

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com or 441-6316.

Wood-burning forecast listed daily

The Fresno Bee

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The Fresno Bee's weather page today will begin carrying a forecast that tells readers when they are restricted from burning wood in their fireplaces, wood stoves or other heating devices.

The forecast, which applies from midnight to midnight on the day it appears in the newspaper, includes a five-county Bee circulation area -- Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare.

Each county will have a number indicating the air quality forecast (AQI), a health index accounting for the level of pollution, weather and other factors. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District makes the forecast.

A forecast AQI of 101 and above, which affects people with sensitive lungs, triggers a call for people to voluntarily refrain from burning wood. A forecast AQI of 151 or above, which is unhealthy for everyone, causes authorities to ban wood burning for the day.

No residential wood-burning restrictions were posted for today.

The wood-burning restrictions apply from Nov. 1 through Feb. 28, and residents are responsible for determining the burn status before lighting their wood-burning devices.

For daily burn status reports, call the air district at (800) 766-4463, or see the district's Web site at <http://www.valleyair.org> <<http://www.valleyair.org>>.

Transit officials come up with funds to buy one natural gas bus

Thursday, December 11, 2003

By Jacob Fenton, Merced Sun-Star

Merced County Transit officials are hoping the purchase of a single, less polluting bus will get skeptical policymakers on board a plan to eventually replace the entire bus fleet.

"It's important to go with cleaner fuel technology, but there's always good things and bad things that go along with it," said Merced County Supervisor Mike Nelson who's also a board member of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district currently has the second dirtiest air nationwide. "Before you go and buy a whole fleet it's good to know how much it's going to cost," Nelson said.

Larry Shankland, transportation manager for Merced County Transit, said officials had applied for the cost of more than 12 buses initially, but "when the smoke cleared" in Washington there was just enough money for one bus.

That will allow Shankland to figure out exactly what the cost of operating the buses is, though consultation with other transport groups has been ongoing.

"We want to pick the brains of experts who are already doing this so we don't reinvent the wheel," said Shankland, who noted that Sacramento had already moved to natural gas for its buses.

The federal grant will pay \$300,000 towards a 35-foot-long natural gas bus, which Shankland estimated would cost around \$360,000.

A regular diesel bus would cost about \$290,000, he said.

The difference is a decrease in pollution. Shankland said that the natural gas bus would produce roughly 40 percent less nitrogen oxide emissions, often called nox, than a diesel bus made in 2000.

A 1988 diesel bus, said Shankland, puts out 8 times as much nox as a natural gas bus.

In all, the county transit runs 25 full-size buses and 31 midsize buses. The current fleet is fairly new, said Shankland, with most buses purchased after 2000.

When passengers step on the bus some time in 2005, they should notice few differences beyond an array of fuel tanks on the roof.

There shouldn't be much difference under the hood either. Natural gas engines operate the same way car engines do, said Shankland.

Operating costs between diesel and natural gas buses are comparable though natural gas price volatility adds some uncertainty according to Shankland.

It also means buses would have to fuel up at a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. station on 15th and M Streets, though the natural gas buses' range of 400 miles would be essentially the same as the older buses.

Natural gas maintenance costs should be lower, said Shankland, because the engines are physically cleaner.

Wood burning fireplaces and burn days

Pete Clarke, pclarke@sierrastar.com, Sierra Star, December 10, 2003

Confused about whether or not a ticket will be given for using a fireplace heater under the new San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District guidelines?

Wonder why the fire truck rolled up and told a neighbor to put out that fire in a pile of leaves at 5:30 p.m. on a burn day? Don't panic, there have been some changes but the Mountain Area is not witnessing anything radically new. The biggest change only affects homes put up for sale.

According to Janelle Schneider, a spokesperson with San Joaquin Valley APCD,

homes located 3,000 feet or above, homes that have no other source of heat, or homes that do not have natural gas are exempt from new fireplace heater use regulations.

The Mountain Area has propane, but not natural gas; therefore, all homes are exempt at this time. Go ahead and warm up without fear of a knock at the door. In any case, enforcement is handled by the Air Control District not by local units of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (CDF).

After Jan 1, 2004, however, if a property is sold, any woodstove, insert or free-standing fireplace heater in the home must meet EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) Phase II certification requirements or must be removed. Still in doubt? All compliant stoves manufactured after July 1, 1992 have an EPA verification sticker located on the back plate of the stove. It will still be legal to use an older heater/fireplace, but the house cannot be sold with the unit still in place without possible penalties. In addition, it will be illegal to sell or install a non-EPA Phase II stove or insert unless it is a pellet-fueled heater. According to Air Pollution Control flyers, "Old stoves may be re-sold for decorative purposes, but they must first be rendered permanently inoperable for burning." For more clarification call a local fireplace/heater store or go to the Air Pollution Control District web site at: www.valleyair.org or www.epa.gov/compliance/monitoring/programs/woodstoves/index.html or call 230-6000.

Burn Day

Burn day hours have been shortened from the previous hours of 8 a.m. - 6 p.m. to new hours of 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. The old Oakhurst area number, 683-1441, will redirect calls to a new Air Pollution District number. According to Fire Battalion Chief Roger Simms even though many of the permits which have been issued have the old burn hours, residents should honor the new ones. Chief Simms also stated that, "All permits are null and void when fire season begins." Normal fire permit burning is not allowed during fire season. According to Simms, sometimes confusion results when the Air Pollution District fails to change the burn day message on its toll free number, leading Mountain Area residents to believe that a permissible day is in effect when in fact a no-burn day has been announced. This will bring a CDF truck and so, possibly, will burning after 5 p.m. Don't panic, most likely a resident in such cases will simply be asked to put out the blaze unless, of course, there is an obvious violation of the law.

Fresno Bee editorial, Dec. 11, 2003:

Long row to hoe

Farmers, air district officials must flesh out clean-up legislation.

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Legislation passed this year calls on Valley farmers to reduce the amount of dust their operations put into the air. Local air district regulators must write rules containing specific ways to do that. Both groups began the long process of coming up with those rules at a workshop Tuesday.

This is something new and untried, and we can expect the usual teething pains that accompany such things.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has offered a 12-page preliminary list of options farmers may employ to reduce dust created by their operations, and that's a good starting place. Different farms face different circumstances; procedures that might work in a stone fruit orchard may be wildly ineffective with row crops, for instance. Flexibility is crucial, and farmers have been right to insist upon it.

In any case, the goal is cleaner air, and any method or device that gets us there -- without making other things worse, of course -- is a good one.

An old objection to district efforts was raised again on Tuesday: How can the district be so accurate in its numbers about who does what to the air? The answer is: It can't, not precisely. But the numbers the district uses are more than just educated guesses. They are scientific estimates based on actual observations and extrapolations from that evidence.

Better information may be available from a study to be released next year. If that's the case, then the rules and regulations being written now can -- and should be -- refined to fit the new facts.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Another in a series of Thursday editorials on the Valley's poor air quality. Today: Farmers, regulators start writing new rules.