

Counties eye lighter smog rules

By Matt Weiser, Californian staff writer

The Bakersfield Californian

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The San Joaquin Valley's three northern counties on Thursday will ask regional air-quality officials to consider treating them under a lighter set of rules, a controversial plan that critics say could worsen air quality for the rest of the valley.

Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties want the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to create a separate planning area for their region. They would remain within the air district under the same 11-member board, but be subject to more lenient smog-fighting rules.

The three counties benefit from coastal breezes more than the rest of the air district, and claim their air pollution violates federal standards less often. As a result, they say they should not get dragged down by strict rules needed to improve air quality in the southern valley.

"It could be advantageous to the three counties," said Merced County Supervisor Michael Nelson, also a member of the air district governing board. "If our air really isn't as bad as, say, the south valley, why should we be penalized for that? Why should we all be lumped in together?"

Critics say a separate planning area would allow the northern counties to emit more pollution. Some of this would eventually drift south, contributing to Fresno and Bakersfield smog that's already worse.

A separate planning area would have to be approved by both the California Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Federal officials have already said it will be difficult to justify, given that the eight-county San Joaquin Valley is a single air basin with a shared pollution problem.

"There's no denying this is one valley and they are in the valley," said Kevin Hall of Fresno, a Sierra Club air-pollution specialist. "They would like to think the meteorological conditions don't affect them. I don't think their justification is legitimate."

The issue comes at a critical time for the air district. The valley is currently classified as "severe nonattainment" for ozone pollution by the EPA. This status requires the air district to demonstrate it can meet federal pollution standards by 2005.

That deadline is considered nearly impossible to meet, so the air district may opt for "extreme" status, the worst category. This would buy another five years to meet air quality standards before penalties kick in. Those penalties could include the loss of \$2 billion in federal highway funds and a federal takeover of local pollution-control programs.

But extreme status also requires more businesses to obtain air pollution permits, and could mean higher costs for new or expanding businesses. It also carries a certain stigma, as Los Angeles is the only other region classified as extreme. The three northern counties want to avoid all this.

They will ask the air district on Thursday to study their request alongside work now under way for the "extreme" designation. But this work could be "seriously delayed" if creation of a northern planning area is piled on top, said air district Planning Director

Dave Jones. The extra workload could push the air district beyond federal deadlines and, again, result in penalties.

The meeting begins at 9 a.m. in Fresno. Kern County residents can participate by live videoconference from the air district's Bakersfield office at 2700 M St., Suite 275. For more information, call 326-6900 or visit www.valleyair.org.

Altamont Commuter Express passengers get a free ride on the train today.

The (Stockton) Record
Tuesday, September 16, 2003

The gesture aims to make up for a massive delay caused last Tuesday by the derailment of a Union Pacific Railroad freight train near Fremont. The accident caused delays of more than two hours for some ACE passengers.

"When there is a long, big delay, obviously that impacts our passengers adversely, and we try to have a free day to make up for that inconvenience," said Brian Schmidt, ACE's director of rail services.

Passengers who buy monthly tickets can complete an online form to receive a voucher that will reduce the price for their next pass. That form is available at www.acerail.com.

Despite the delay last week, Schmidt said ACE trains have been on time 95 percent to 97 percent of the time over the past few months.

[Opinion, Visalia Times-Delta, Sept. 16, 2003:](#)

Lemonade out of auto mall lemons

By Maile Melkonian, special to the Times-Delta

When I was a child, I clearly remember seeing the Sierra Nevada from my kitchen window -- every day. The San Joaquin Valley was a healthy place to live.

Now, according to an annual Washington, D.C.-issued report ranking the most dangerous air qualities in the United States of America, Fresno is No. 2, second only to San Bernardino. Bakersfield is third. (L.A.'s air is now better, repeat, better than all three.) Where does that put Visalia? Not a very good place on the map to be.

The glaring irony of the Visalia auto mall project is that City Council members had to vote to ignore the environmental impact report's findings that it would negatively affect the (already toxic) air quality in order to approve a plan to boost car sales.

This project is not about a candy manufacturing plant, or a baseball stadium, or even an office building. It is meant to increase the sales of poisonous-emissions-generating machines.

Yes, we all love our wheels. But automobiles do not have to pollute the air. Nothing is more basic to quality of life than the air we breathe. Let's turn these lemons into lemonade.

Alternatives already exist: hybrids, electric cars, better-gas-mileage conventional engines, ethanol burners. And, believe me, Detroit has even better designs under wraps,

awaiting the day when they will finally be forced to retool and implement them. Let's help give them the push they need.

I propose to limit car sales at the auto mall to vehicles that get 25 miles to the gallon or better.

Many Visalians are worried about growth. My sister would have her family here except for the air quality, and only the air quality. You may not know or care about my sister, but everyone knows someone who has made the same decision she did. Don Landers does.

All he has to do is look at his City Council colleague. Wendy Rudy is reluctantly removing her asthma-plagued family to a coastal location where she and her kids can recuperate from the damage done to their lungs by life in the Valley air.

Kaweah Delta Hospital plans to add a cancer wing. Why is such a thing needed here in Visalia? The air we breathe is not benign.

Phil Cox, in misguided defense of the Auto Mall, says we can't put fences up around our town to keep polluted air out.

Precisely my point.

Until every community in the San Joaquin Valley is doing its part to counter this scourge, there will be no improvement. It's as simple and as complicated as that. Visalia should be contributing to the solution, not to the problem.

As Bob Link reminds us, when the Visalia Mall was proposed, naysayers said it would never work. An indoor mall was a revolutionary concept at the time. So is this.

Let's do it, and put Visalia back on the map.

Maile Melkonian, a former radio reporter for Public Radio International and Japan's NHK, is a native Visalian.

[Letter to the Editor, Visalia Times-Delta, Sept. 26, 2003:](#)

Tulare County growth: Stop the Goshen slaughterhouse

Now that the auto mall has reached its inevitable conclusion, there is another grave matter on the horizon that our residents must deal with. The slaughterhouse in Goshen has reared its ugly head again.

In July, Judge Paul Vortmann and the Tulare County Board of Supervisors approved the building of a slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant in Goshen under a special use permit.

To start with, 850 cows will be processed using thousands of gallons of water a day. That is just one shift. When the goal of three shifts a day is reached, that means 2,500 to 3,000 cows processed, using a mind-boggling amount of water per day. Our water aquifer is low enough already, and we residents are restricted as to when and how we may use this precious commodity. Where are these hundreds of thousands of gallons of water per day to come from? And where will it go to, full of muck and entrails?

The company claims it will be a "state-of-the-art" plant, modeled after the one in Brawley, down south. No matter how high the "state of the art," the manure and urine that will be tracked into our area from dozens and dozens of cattle trucks, plus the inevitable offal and waste material to be disposed of, will foul the soil and pollute the wells of Goshen and wreak havoc with the air we breathe. Ask the people of Brawley. The Valley air is bad enough now, and much effort is being put into cleaning it up, yet

this plant has been approved. What happens when we have weeks of triple-digit heat, and there is no escape from the flies and the disgusting stench trapped by the weather? It is horrible to contemplate.

Two weeks ago the Times-Delta printed a front-page article and pictures, boasting about \$890,000 homes being built in Visalia.

What do you think prospective buyers will do when they find out about this slaughterhouse in close proximity to these expensive houses? We are the Gateway to the Sierra. What a wonderful welcome to give people -- muck paved roads and the stench from a slaughterhouse. It will be detrimental to the lives of people in the whole area, despite the carrot of "jobs" being dangled in front of the people of Goshen, and it will affect all homeowners and business owners alike, especially those in real estate. This plant must be stopped.

Barbara Saks, Visalia

[Opinion, Tulare Advance-Register, Sept. 16, 2003:](#)

Our agriculture industry is under attack

The agriculture industry is under constant attack. Despite its mammoth contributions to California, the nation and the world, some liberal Democrats in the California Legislature want to further restrict and regulate one of the last major industries in our state -- one that is hanging by a thread.

It appears their success is systematically running out manufacturing jobs and small businesses has gone straight to their heads. These same politicians will not rest until California has no major job base remaining. It really makes you wonder whether these legislators are on the right track or on a path to total destruction.

Senator Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has been making the rounds these days trying to drum up support for his air quality bills. On the surface, his legislation may sound reasonable - - everyone wants clean air, right? However, his method, his reasoning and his objectives are hardly sound, rational or pure.

(Florez' bills were passed after Maze wrote this column, although there were some concessions given to agricultural interests.)

Florez visited the Central Valley recently, making what equated to political threats to the Fresno County Board of Supervisors because the board thought that his legislation unfairly targeted the agriculture industry. His reasoning is especially troubling. As anyone who has flown through the Central Valley and landed in the Los Angeles Basin lately can attest, the air in the Central Valley is comparatively clear. Most often, you can fly through the Central Valley in the middle of the day without any kind of instrumentation. If you try to fly into Los Angeles, you must use instruments to land, because you cant' see clearly for more than a mile or two.

Florez's objectives purport to improve the quality of life for Valley residents. Yet, if this was truly the case, he would not be trying to put agriculture -- the largest and most vital Valley industry -- out of business. His true motives are political -- he is pandering to the liberal left in a bid for future statewide office. Never mind that his legislative efforts may eliminate thousands of jobs in a region already faced with some of the highest unemployment rates in this state.

Keep these factors in mind:

Agriculture has been doing its part; innumerable air quality programs with various districts already exist.

Examples of existing compliance incentives: the Carl Moyer program (replacing more than 500 tractor engines, hundreds of diesel truck engines, and stationary pumping engines), SCE and PG&E, and funds through the NRCS (USDA funded), coordination with growers in cost sharing programs like oiling the roads, chipping instead of burning and replacing 273 pumping engines.

Florez's bills demonize agriculture as the major culprit of asthma and other health problems when this is not the case.

Florez's bills do not have a basis for long-term funding nor feasibility of technology; as such, SB 700 goes far beyond both federal and state mandates.

This kind of behavior is reminiscent of ultra-liberal, anti-business legislators such as former San Francisco Assemblymember Carole Migden (current Chair of the Board of Equalization) who was heard by many, suggesting that San Francisco should not be subjected to the rigorous Smog Check II standards required in the rest of the state, since it hardly mattered -- the smog just blew into the Valley.

Senator Florez has adopted this type of mentality and has turned his back on the Valley. His political ideology has undergone a major shift, and he has his eye on a statewide run. Folks, let me point out that major liberal voting bases are in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and that seems to match the tack that Florez has taken of late. It is interesting to point out that even Leland Yee (D-San Francisco) and Fabian Nunez, (D-Los Angeles) joined Republicans in opposing Senator Florez because of the far reaching ramifications of this bill. Apparently, Florez has forgotten about his own constituency, which relies on agriculture for jobs and to keep the local economy going.

Sen. Florez received an unexpected surprise in the Assembly Appropriations Committee when he learned that SB 700, the centerpiece of his "air quality" legislation, may be held indefinitely in committee. One can't help but wonder if this was an effort to protect a fellow Valley Democrat, Assemblymember Nicole Parra, from having to take a politically uncomfortable position to support her own constituency or align herself with the radical political agenda of Senator Florez. As such, Parra and other Democrats were unwilling to support SB 700 as presented.

It is unacceptable and unethical to take advantage of your constituency for their votes, and then turn your back on them as soon as you vie for higher office. This is positively parasitic behavior.

Too many times in recent years, Democrat statewide office-holders, beholden to the liberals in San Francisco and Los Angeles have routinely shortchanged the Valley. I would hope that Valley legislators would not forget who first elected them. In Florez's case, it seems that metamorphosis is already underway. Agriculture is the lifeblood of this great San Joaquin Valley. I will not turn my back on the Valley or the good people who elected me. So, let's all work together and not bite the hand that feeds us.

Bill Maze is a Republican and represents the 29th District in the state Assembly.

Former secretary of state says plant will benefit entire nation

Monday, September 15, 2003

By Milagros Delgado - Staff Writer - The Madera Tribune

The proposed Ethanol Plant to be built by Pacific Ethanol Inc. would bring more than 40 high paying jobs to Madera County, according to Bill Jones, former secretary of state.

Jones said the 40 jobs do not include the growers who would grow cotton for the facility, nor does it include the truckers who would ship the corn and distillers grain from place to place. Jones said the facility is a \$40 million dollar project and would create \$1.5 million in revenue each year.

"This is a win-win situation," Jones said.

Jones said there is a shortage of liquid fuels in California and new oil refineries are not being built. He said ethanol is where California needs to turn.

"It is a bio-refinery and will help keep cost of fuel down," he said.

Jones said he has been looking at ethanol for 20 years now, even before he began his career in politics.

"The timing just wasn't right before," he said.

He continued to say ethanol has many benefits. It is a high octane, naturally produced fuel, and can give the United States energy dependency from the Middle East. It will also help decrease the amount of pollution in the air, he said.

Jones and his family own and operate J&J ranch located in Firebaugh. He said his ranch will grow some of the corn needed for the facility.

"We have talked to growers who are interested in growing for the facility," he said. "But the season does not begin until Spring, so we will be discussing the issue further when that time comes."

Pacific Ethanol Inc., is currently working with the County of Madera to obtain a permit to produce ethanol.

"The County of Madera has been very cooperative and we appreciate their involvement," he said.

Jones said the Coast Grain facility will continue to be used as a feed plant, and the new facility will be built adjacent to the current one. He said the ethanol plant will produce 35 million gallons of ethanol a year and a quarter million tons of wet distillers grain, which is a byproduct of creating ethanol.

"We expect to begin breaking ground on Nov. 3," he said.