

Boxer calls for cleaner trains

Effort to clean Valley's air

By Will Shuck, Record Capitol Bureau Chief

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SACRAMENTO -- U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer called on railroad operators Wednesday to use cleaner-burning locomotives as they chug through the smog-choked Central Valley.

Boxer and state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, want the Union Pacific and Burlington Northern railroads to commit to the same kind of emission reductions here that they promised to Southern California.

But railroad officials say there are great differences between railroad operations in populous Southern California and the agrarian Central Valley. Southern California, with its busy ports, is both a destination and a starting point for train service.

The Central Valley, on the other hand, is largely a road to somewhere else, they say. And that means that railroads don't have the kind of large freight yards in the Valley that they would need to maintain the cleaner-burning locomotives here, said Mark Stehly, assistant vice president for environmental and hazardous materials with Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.

However, both the Union Pacific and Burlington Northern railroads operate two major rail yards in San Joaquin County where shipments are transferred between trucks and trains.

The state Legislature cannot change emission rules for railroads. But Florez, whose special committee on Valley air quality hosted Boxer and the railroad officials Wednesday, is pushing for an agreement like the one in Southern California that promises to reduce diesel soot over the next several years.

In the San Joaquin Valley, trains account for about 27 tons of pollutants daily, or about 3 percent of the Valley's air pollution, according to regional air regulators.

Florez thinks the railroads could adopt existing technology to cut about 9 tons of ozone-causing emissions each day. After the hearings, Florez said he expects negotiations to be under way next month.

Boxer made a brief appearance, commended Florez for his efforts and read a statement.

"Clean air is not a luxury," she said. "It is a necessity for our people and for economic growth. I want you all to know that I will work with you as a partner so that we can make progress sooner rather than later."

Florez, who has said he may run for governor in the Oct. 7 recall election, has authored a package of air-quality reforms this year. His measures would reduce, among other things, air pollution generated by agricultural operations.

Davis urges EPA to reverse ethanol stance

Associated Press

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SACRAMENTO -- Gov. Davis on Wednesday urged the federal Environmental Protection Agency to reverse its requirement that California add ethanol or other pollution-reducing products to its gasoline, citing a court ruling last month.

The San Francisco appeals court ordered the EPA to review its decision of two years ago, when the EPA denied the state's request to waive rules that would lead to ethanol being added to most of the state's gasoline.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sent the case back to a lower court after ruling the EPA abused its discretion in refusing to consider the effect of the waiver on particulate matter pollution, along with the effects on ozone levels.

"California doesn't take a back seat to anyone in our requirements that gas burn cleanly," Davis said Wednesday in releasing a letter to acting EPA Administrator Marianne Lamont Horinko.

"We pioneered the fight against smog. The federal government should know there's simply no reason to add extra chemicals to gasoline when they don't make the gas burn cleaner."

EPA spokeswoman Lisa Fasano said the appeals court ruling and the agency's next step are under review.

Also Wednesday, Sen. Dianne Feinstein said new information from the state EPA suggests using ethanol actually would increase smog in Southern California, which is experiencing an unusually severe smog season.

"The bottom line is that it is counter-productive to force California to use ethanol in its gasoline that it does not need and is potentially detrimental to its air quality," said Feinstein, D-Calif.

Davis argued that state and private experts and the EPA's Blue Ribbon Panel on Oxygenates in Gasoline have concluded the additives are not needed in California's cleaner-burning gasoline.

The oxygenates most commonly used in gas are methanol-based MTBE and ethanol, but Davis ordered the use of MTBE banned by this year because of concerns it was contaminating groundwater.

Talks target train pollution

But rail officials say switch would be difficult.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

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The door is open for negotiations to trim 7 tons of daily air pollution from locomotives in the murky San Joaquin Valley, but it could be a rough ride.

Officials from major railroads on Wednesday told state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, they would be willing to talk about speeding up the process of running cleaner diesel locomotives in the Valley, which has the third worst-polluted air in the country.

Florez, who has introduced eight air quality measures for the Valley this year, convened a Sacramento field hearing on the topic, which caught his interest when he learned railroads agreed in 1998 to buy cleaner locomotives for the South Coast Air Basin.

On Wednesday, rail officials from Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. and Union Pacific Railroad Co. warned Florez that the Valley is quite different from South Coast. They said it would be very difficult to establish a separate group of locomotives for the Valley.

"The South Coast is an origin-destination type of place," said Mark Stehly, assistant vice president from Burlington Northern. "The San Joaquin is a flow corridor. It has fewer stops and few places to switch. It's just not the same situation."

Locomotives produce about 28 tons of smog-making pollutants per day in the Valley, state estimates show. That amounts to more than 3% of such pollutants daily.

The benefits from new locomotives would be considerable, said Mark Boese, deputy air pollution control officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. He said the seven-ton savings would be the equivalent of eight new rules being considered for other sources in the Valley.

But the local district does not have control over rail pollution. The district has authority over stationary sources such as power plants while state and federal agencies regulate engines and fuels for rail.

Boese said the local district long ago cleaned up the most obvious pollution problems in stationary sources.

"We like to say that we've taken all the low-hanging fruit," he said. "But today you might find an apple still hanging low."

Rail officials argued trains are more than twice as fuel efficient as trucks, thus saving on pollution that might be produced if trucks were used instead.

Michael Iden of Union Pacific said his company has embraced new air regulations with 1,600 cleaner locomotives, amounting to 21% of its fleet. He said a new diesel-battery hybrid is being evaluated.

Stehly of Burlington Northern added that his company will invest \$45 million in 30 new locomotives in the next few years as part of the South Coast agreement.

But rail companies didn't go far enough in their agreement with South Coast, according to Frances Keeler, deputy counsel with the South Coast Air Quality Management District. She said there is no way to enforce the agreement, which was struck with the state Air Resources Board, not South Coast.

"It is not enforceable by [the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] or by citizen lawsuits," Keeler said. "The public was cut out of the process."

Florez asked rail officials whether they would include the San Joaquin air district in negotiations.

"A lot depends on the attitudes," Stehly said. "Are we going to eventually get a 'yes,' or are we going to be in a situation where we're never quite doing enough? I would like them to be at the table."

Expansion of composting site approved

The Avenal Press, August 6, 2003

AVENAL--Many travelers as they drive east or west on the Avenal Cutoff are not even aware of the business on the south side of the road, just past the orange orchard to the north.

There is no odor and very little noise from the huge composting facility located on the 30-acre site, which is also well camouflaged behind almond trees.

The site was originally approved March 29, 1999 by the Avenal Planning Commission and then issued a composting permit by the California Integrated Waste Management Board in April 2000.

A proposal to expand the facility to 60-acres received approval from the Avenal Planning Commission at their meeting Monday evening, but the California Integrated Waste Management board still requires a full Solid Waste Facility Permit be issued before the expansion is allowed.

According to officials at the facility, the proposed expansion project is necessary due to market demand and the success of the current 30-acre facility.

According to a description of the project, the current daily operations at the facility consists of accepting green waste, produce residuals, untreated wood products and grinding feedstock. It does not accept any type of manure. The material is processed into compost.

There are no operational changes anticipated by the requested project expansion other than the amount of material the site can process and store.

As now, once the feedstock is processed through a grinder, the material will be arranged in windrows for composting. The windrows will be turned and watered regularly to keep the area clean, control dust, odors and vectors, and facilitate the composting process.

After three to six months of windrow composting the end product will be used by Kochergen

Farms and/or marketed as a beneficial amendment for soil, plant growth and crop production.

At Monday's meeting, Jim Donabed, attorney for Kochergen Farms, announced the facility had been certified as an organic composting facility. Kochergen Farms is an organic farm operation and having been certified as an organic composting facility will allow the facility to market their product to other organic farmers.

The certification comes from OMRI - Organic Material Review Institute - which is a recognized agency that can certify facilities for organic compost. Donabed explained, "this is important because even though all compost is natural, its a plant based material only certain compost facilities produce the type of compost that is clean enough and balanced enough, with the required nutrients, with the smallest amount of contaminants to be used on what is considered organic crops."

According to the proposed plan, officials estimate the maximum daily load capacity of the facility will be 1,000 tons per operating day, with a minimum of 800 tons, and between 32 and 40 trucks per day.

The facility is estimated to have an annual average load capacity of 208,000 tons or 682,240 cubic yards per year over the first five years of operation, according to the proposal.

The facility will be open six days per week from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. Deliveries will typically be made six days per week Monday through Saturday. The vehicles will have a maximum load capacity of 25 tons.

Typically, only one vehicle at a time will be present at the site, according to the site plan.

During the Planning Commission's visit to the site in July, Commissioner Lidia Gomez voiced her concern regarding all the truck traffic turning into the facility during the foggy season.

Donabed reported, the applicant had been working pro-actively with the city and the site's operator is currently working to install truck crossing warning signs and flashing devices a minimum of 400 feet in both directions from the entrance to the facility.

In order for the expansion to be approved, the applicants had several entities to answer to and requirements to meet, such as the Health Department, [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control](#), California Regional Water Quality Control, and California Integrated Waste Management (CIWMB).

One requirement placed by the CIWMB is a specific odor control plan be developed. Donabed noted standing water would be one of the sources of odor and if that happens employees with absorb the water with an absorbent material and then place that material into the composting.

The facility currently has 18 employees, 14 of them reside in Avenal, according to Donabed. He also noted several local residents are able to carpool, which is a suggestion by the EPA.

Donabed noted that once the city approves the expansion proposal and the initial negative declaration is processed, the applicant is still looking at from 90 to 120 days before the proposal can be heard by the CIWMB. The applicant has already put two years of planning into the proposal.

[Fresno Bee editorial:](#)

Breathing bad air

Valley pollution aggravates chronic asthma problems.

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Words like "spacers," "speed flow meters" and "steroids" shouldn't be in any young child's vocabulary, but thousands of Valley asthmatics can recite the definitions, use the words in a sentence and even draw a picture.

More than 300,000 people -- 10% of the Valley's population -- are afflicted with chronic breathing disorders. More than 16% of the children living in Fresno County have asthma, a higher rate than any other place in California. And all the surrounding counties are not far behind.

What that means to a community is that we must be taught to live with asthma and that was the task of the American Lung Association at a recent awareness session in Madera.

Children and their parents, in English and Spanish, learned about the illness, its symptoms, treatment and what to do in case of an asthma attack.

That is when everyone learned that "spacers" are devices designed to help with the inhalation of asthma medicine, "speed flow meters" measure breathing effectiveness and "steroids" are medicines often prescribed for asthmatics.

The Valley's notoriously polluted air makes life worse for people who suffer. The process is simple but painful: When someone with asthma inhales irritants like dust, pollen, pesticides or smoke, the airways become inflamed, producing excess mucus. The muscles that wrap the airways tighten up and eventually can block the air supply. That is a frightening thought for anyone, but it is an everyday occurrence for thousands of Valley people.

There is no cure for asthma, but the symptoms can be controlled with a physicians' care and medications. That's easier said than done for the Valley's many rural poor families, who don't always have access to reliable health education, health care and cannot afford to leave the Valley for a region with cleaner air.

The best solution, of course, is to bring those asthma rates down by cleaning up the air. Now that is something that would make us all breathe easier.

[Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, August 7, 2003:](#)

Drivers 'help' pollution

One must applaud the commitment Bakersfield drivers have to reducing pollution and gas consumption. Our dedicated drivers, apparently with the blessing of Chief Eric Matlock, achieve this by doing the following: The driver slows as he/she approaches a stop signal that is red. Then without stopping, makes a right turn. Just to make it more of a thrill, the driver does not look for oncoming traffic or pedestrians in the crosswalk. This "not stopping" saves thousands of gallons of gas a month and reduces air pollution by not idling at an intersection. This will work well until some fool actually stops and gets rear-ended!

There is one additional benefit gained by not coming to a complete stop. This forces pedestrians in crosswalks to maintain higher levels of physical fitness and agility. So drivers of Bakersfield, keep up the good work! As for you pedestrians out there, get fit and work on that agility!

MACK PHILLIPS, Bakersfield

Bad air is never 'good'

Polluting our air with harmful emissions/particulates is hazardous to residential health and welfare. However, polluting our air when air quality is classified as good is acceptable?

Exceeding the speed limit or running a stop light is hazardous to other drivers. Are these traffic violations acceptable if driving conditions, as determined by enforcing agency or violator, are considered suitable? So much for fuzzy logic!

J.M. RADEMACHER, Bakersfield