

Farmers increasingly counting on sunshine for energy production

By Juliana Barbassa, Associated Press Writer

In the Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday June 22, 2005

CLOVIS - Pat Ricchiuti has always counted on California's steady sunshine to bring out his peaches' red blush and juicy, tangy sweetness.

Now, the second-generation farmer is also counting on the sun to run the conveyor belts that fill his packing shed, sorting, sizing and packaging 1.5 million boxes of fruit a year.

The farmer is tiling the roof of his 150,000-square-foot shed with 7,730 solar panels, each 40-by-48 inches.

By July 8, the solar rooftop will begin producing 1 megawatt of energy - enough to cut Ricchiuti's \$1.5 million annual energy bill in half.

"It's the right thing to do," Ricchiuti said. "This is agriculture doing its part to clean the environment. But it also makes economic sense."

Ricchiuti's P-R Farms may be installing one of the state's largest privately financed solar energy systems, but many other smaller agricultural operations around California have already been looking to the sun to run irrigation pumps, produce coolers and other energy-hungry equipment.

Solar power is also making inroads farther north, among the vineyards of Napa and Sonoma, where wineries like Fetzer Vineyards, Rodney Strong Vineyards, and Domain Carneros have been turning to sunshine to satisfy their energy consumption. Some, like Long Meadow Ranch winery in Napa, rely on solar power to meet 100 percent of their energy needs.

Solar energy has the potential to be an important part of California's energy future, together with conservation, and traditional large-scale power plants, said Jim Tischer, a regional program manager for the Center for Irrigation Technology at California State University, Fresno.

"We really have the sunny days, and the growth in population," he said. "Those energy needs are going to have to be met somehow."

Solar power works well in rural areas like the Central Valley -- one of the nation's dirtiest air basins -- because it doesn't pollute, it can produce power right where it's needed, and it's most available during the long, hot summer afternoons when farm machinery is running full throttle, Tischer said.

Farmers, packers, shippers and others said they liked the independence that having their own system gave them, and welcomed the clean air benefits. But many said they turned to solar because it was a good investment.

During the hot, dry summer days when cotton grows best, irrigation pumps can work 24 hours a day, said Gary Martin, the foreman at the 1,250-acre D.T. Locke Ranch.

After the 2000-01 energy crisis sent electricity bills soaring and brought rolling blackouts, threatening the crop and the farm's profit margin, it made sense to try a system that would give farmers control over their energy production, Martin said.

"We'd just spent too much money on power," Martin said. "It was out of control."

The ranch installed a 36-kilowatt system that went live in 2003. It cost \$290,000 to build, but state rebates and a one-time state and federal tax credit reimbursed half the cost. Martin expects the system to have paid for itself in seven years.

"After that, it's money in the pocket," he said.

Ricchiuti also credited the state's incentive program with making his investment in solar energy possible. His project cost \$6.4 million -- a prohibitive sum that was cut in half by state rebates and tax incentives.

California has offered businesses interested in going solar a tiered system to recoup their investment.

The California Energy Commission pays back projects up to 30 kilowatts a rebate of \$2.80 per watt, while larger projects like Ricchiuti's are given \$3.50 per watt. State and federal tax credits help further defray the large initial cost of installing the solar system, leading to total rebates that can cover half the original investment.

A bill sponsored by Sen. Kevin Murray, D-Culver City, would simplify the rebate process, and provide a decade's worth of incentives to help Californians install 1 million rooftop solar energy systems by 2018. The bill has passed the Senate and is awaiting a hearing in the Assembly.

"It's cheap, it's clean, it'll significantly improve our air quality," Murray said of solar power. And best of all, he said "no trader in some trading room can set the price on the sun."

These incentives help make a practice that many growers chose because it meshes with their ideology of sustainable farming into something that works in the real world of dollars and cents.

When Long Meadow Ranch vineyards' 50-watt solar system went live in January, it was "the latest addition to underscore our sustainable philosophy at the ranch," owner Ted Hall said in a statement.

His 650-acre operation, nestled in Napa's Macayamas mountains, produces organically certified wine, olive oil, grass-fed beef and heirloom fruits and vegetables.

The property already relied on cleaner-burning, renewable biodiesel fuel to run tractors. Now its 50-kilowatt solar power system supplies all the electricity used on the grounds, and even feeds some power back to the grid. This makes the meter run backward, giving Long Meadow ranch energy credits it can use at night, or on cloudy days, ultimately turning the system into a "profit center," Hall said.

Southeast Fresno project faces 2 lawsuits

By Russell Clemings / The Fresno Bee

Tuesday, June 21, 2005

One month after its approval, southeast Fresno's big Fancher Creek project faces two court challenges over potential effects on traffic, air pollution, noise and the city's supply of affordable housing.

Medical Advocates for Healthy Air filed suit in Fresno County Superior Court on Friday in an effort to reverse the City Council's unanimous May 17 approval of the project.

One day earlier, Madera County — already locked in a court fight with Fresno over its approval last year of a subdivision along the San Joaquin River opposite Lost Lake Park — filed its own lawsuit over the Fancher project.

Slated for 424 acres roughly bounded by Clovis, Belmont and Armstrong avenues and Kings Canyon Road, the project would include a first phase of 687 new homes. More homes and about 3million square feet of office, commercial and light-industrial space would be built in future phases.

But Medical Advocates, a local environmental advocacy group, says in its lawsuit that the project also will "pump an additional 320 tons per year" of smog-producing gases and small particles of soot and dust into the local air. The group also alleges that the project falls short of meeting affordable housing goals in the city's general plan, adopted in 2002 as a blueprint for future growth.

"None of the project units would serve very low (up to \$13,557 per year) or low-income (up to \$21,900 per year) families," the lawsuit states. "It seems questionable whether even moderate income families (with incomes up to \$34,700 per year) would be able to afford new homes in Fancher Creek."

The likelihood of the Medical Advocates case going to trial may not be high: "We're working on settlement," said Patience Milrod, the Fresno attorney representing the group.

Madera County's lawsuit attacks the project on grounds that its environmental review did not address potential regional impacts on air quality, traffic and noise levels.

For example, it said, the "traffic study does not even address traffic impacts of this project on the County of Fresno, the City of Fresno, and the County of Madera."

It notes that Fresno's lawsuit against Madera County's approval of the San Joaquin River tract makes similar allegations about the failure to deal with regional impacts.

Assistant City Attorney Michael Slater said city officials had not reviewed the lawsuits and would not yet comment on them.

Developers Tom Richards and Ed Kashian, whose Fancher Creek Properties proposed the project, did not respond to requests for a comment.

Greens lose in Senate

By H. Josef Hebert, Associated Press
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WASHINGTON -- The Senate endorsed President George W. Bush's climate-change policies Tuesday, approving a measure that avoids mandatory reductions of heat-trapping pollution while still boosting government support for cleaner energy sources.

In a second setback for environmentalists, the Senate agreed to conduct an inventory of offshore oil and gas resources that some senators called a prelude to drilling in coastal waters now off limits to energy development. An attempt to strip the inventory from a broad energy bill failed 52-44.

On climate change, Republicans rallied around a measure offered by Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., that would rely on voluntary industry measures to slow down the growth of heat-trapping emissions through an expansion of "private-public partnerships" to develop ways to produce energy with lower carbon emissions.

Carbon from burning fossil fuels is the principal heat-trapping gas that many scientists believe is warming the Earth.

The Hagel amendment was approved 66-29 and inserted into the energy legislation that Senate leaders hope to finish this week.

Senators later began debate on a more ambitious climate-change measure that would require industry and power companies to reduce heat-trapping emissions -- mainly carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels -- to levels they were five years ago by 2010.

A vote on that proposal, offered by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., was scheduled for today. It was given slim chance of being approved.

The inventory of oil and gas resources beneath the nation's Outer Continental Shelf was strongly criticized by some coastal senators who said it would lead to drilling in areas that have been off limits to energy development since the 1980s.

"It's the first step to drilling. It's the proverbial camel's nose under the tent," declared Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., who said the Interior Department already is conducting an inventory of offshore energy resources every five years.

Proponents of the inventory said the country needs to know what offshore oil and gas resources might be available in future years.

Hahn's Harbor Pollution Plan Faces an Uncertain Future

Panel rushes to complete work before Antonio Villaraigosa takes office as mayor.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer
LA Times, June 22, 2005

A long-awaited plan to reduce air pollution at the Port of Los Angeles will land on Mayor James K. Hahn's desk after a task force completed its work Tuesday, outlining 68 pollution control measures estimated to cost more than \$11 billion over the next 20 years.

But the future of the ambitious plan, which air regulators project will prevent 2,200 premature deaths from pollution-related diseases, remains uncertain.

Hahn leaves office on June 30 and Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa has not said what he will do with the proposal. And port-related businesses, such as the railroads, have expressed concerns about the cost and effectiveness of the measures.

A blue ribbon panel, named by Hahn last year, finished the report after a grueling eight-hour session that featured intense debate between industry attorneys and air pollution officials.

As hopes dimmed that the group would agree on all aspects of the final report, its co-chairwoman, Harbor Commissioner Camilla Townsend, announced that she and co-chair Thomas Warren, another harbor commissioner, would forward the report to the mayor with the recommendation that it be sent to the Harbor Commission to take action. That meant the 21-member group did not take a final vote in which the five industry representatives probably would have dissented.

The plan won praise from regulators and community, environmental and union representatives.

"This is a great start for the new era of responsible growth at the port," said task force member Gail Ruderman Feuer, a senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Wayne Natri, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, praised the report in a letter, saying that its control measures "provide a road map for ports throughout our nation and around the globe."

Others on the task force said they are concerned that some of the suggested ways to reduce pollution may prove too expensive or unfeasible.

"We were asked to come up with reasonable measures," said task force member Sharon Rubalcava, an attorney representing Pacific Energy. "Some of the measures are realistic measures, but others are speculative."

Representatives of the two major railroads serving the port, Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe, were outspoken in their criticism of the proposed measures to reduce locomotive emissions. They maintained that the South Coast Air Quality Management District did not account for the fact that the same locomotives serve the Los Angeles port and the Port of Long Beach, meaning the entire fleet would need to be retrofitted or replaced, railroad attorneys said.

"We will present a document to the mayor as we agreed," said Union Pacific attorney Carol Harris. "But there needs to be a lot more review of the measures for our industry."

But Norman Tuck, who represents the International Longshore and Warehouse Union on the task force, said it is time for industries operating at the port to pay to reduce pollution significantly. "I wanted the whole industry's feet to the fire," he said.

The Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex has emerged as the region's single largest air polluter in recent years, amid the sharp increase in imports from Asia that has made it the largest seaport in the United States.

But as the ports have played an increasingly important role in the Los Angeles-area economy, the public's concerns have grown about the health effects of diesel emissions from ships, trains and trucks. Diesel fumes in high doses have been linked to lung cancer as well as cardiac problems.

Hahn pledged to rein in future increases in port emissions.

The Harbor Commission charged the port staff with creating a so-called no net increase plan to keep pollution at 2001 levels. Hahn, however, rejected the plan and appointed the task force.

With Hahn about to leave office, task force members rushed to complete the report, exchanging drafts by e-mail and conferring in lengthy conference calls.

The sharpest divisions between industry representatives and other members arose over the projected costs of the measures and how to calculate their effects on human health.

That debate mapped out an unusually stark cost-benefit scenario, balancing a price tag estimated at \$11 billion to \$15 billion for the antipollution controls against a projected \$20-billion benefit in prolonging human life.

Regional, state and federal regulators strongly endorsed calculations prepared by the state Air Resources Board.

Tuesday's meeting was scheduled to be the last for the task force. But Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents the harbor area, announced that she wants the group to continue. "I would like to get you connected to the larger audience of the city of Los Angeles," she said.

Pollution Task Force to Meet for Last Time on L.A. Port

Hahn's panel will outline initiatives to cut harmful air in the region to 2001 levels.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer

LA Times, June 21, 2005

Shortly after taking office in 2001, Mayor James K. Hahn pledged to curtail air pollution at the Port of Los Angeles, where diesel-belching ships, trains and trucks have stirred fears over the impact on public health.

But as he prepares to leave office next week, Hahn has yet to put a comprehensive plan in place to cut port pollution. Indeed, the Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex has emerged as Southern California's single worst air polluter in the last five years despite mounting evidence of serious long-term risks for cancer, asthma and other respiratory ailments throughout the region.

Toxic air linked to port operations hovers over freeways and rail lines that stretch from the port to the rail yards of East Los Angeles and the storage warehouses of the Inland Empire.

Today, Hahn's clean air task force - which includes top air regulators and industry representatives - will meet for the last time to complete its recommendations on how to fulfill Hahn's pledge and roll back pollution to 2001 levels at the fast-growing port, the nation's largest. Some of the 68 initiatives outlined in the group's report would require major investment in new ship engines, electric "plug-ins" for docked vessels and replacement of older trucks and locomotives with cleaner models.

The health benefits for the region could be profound. Significantly reducing diesel emissions and nitrogen oxides would result in 2,200 fewer premature deaths by 2025 and thereby save billions in healthcare costs, according to a study by the state Air Resources Board prepared for the task force.

"We hope very much that this plan is going to be carried forward," said Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District. "If we're going to have any hope of cleaning the air, it's got to start at the port."

But implementing the clean-air plan could take up to 20 years and cost at least \$11 billion, which would be shared by industry, the port and government, officials said. At the same time, industry concerns have mounted over the ballooning costs of the plan and its effectiveness.

"Most of the assumptions regarding technology availability, emissions, performance and costs are speculative ... and not well-documented," Union Pacific attorney and task force member Carol A. Harris wrote in a letter last week to port officials.

Others disagree. Matt Haber, deputy director of the air division at the regional headquarters of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said his agency plans to support the recommendations, adding that the task force "shows amazing leadership in coming this far." He said it could serve as a national model for reducing pollution.

"It certainly lays out what can be done," Haber said.

At its meeting today, the 21-member task force is expected to approve a report that will reach the mayor's desk Friday, just six days before he leaves office.

Hahn spokesman Yusef K. Robb said the administration remains committed to seeing emissions at the port reduced to 2001 levels.

"If the report delivers what we asked for, which is a viable, real way to accomplish 'no net increase,' we'll forward it to the commission forthwith and recommend that they pass it," Robb said.

Whatever Hahn decides, Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa will soon find himself at the center of the port debate. Villaraigosa officially takes office July 1, after winning a May runoff election.

"We are reviewing the group's work and look forward to reviewing closely their recommendations," said Joe Ramallo, a Villaraigosa spokesman. "I know they've been working very hard on this."

'Diesel Death Zone'

Port air pollution was hardly an issue in the spring of 2001 when Hahn, a San Pedro resident, began stumping for votes in the Los Angeles Harbor area. But a handful of residents told him they were alarmed by a 1999 study that found the lifetime cancer risk from air pollution in the port area to be higher than 2,000 cases per million people.

The study by the South Coast Air Quality Management District included a map showing a sharply higher cancer risk in San Pedro, Wilmington, Long Beach and portions of the freeway corridors that serve the port. The mapped area spawned the nickname "Diesel Death Zone."

Ships, trucks and railroad locomotives all burn diesel fuel, and experts blame diesel fumes for 71% of the cancer risk tied to air pollution in the Los Angeles region.

Residents pressed Hahn for a promise to reduce port pollution. In October 2001, in response to a request from Hahn, the Board of Harbor Commissioners established an environmental policy aimed at achieving one ultimate goal: no net increase in air emissions or traffic operations from future port operations.

The port's staff was directed to return to the commission with a clean-air plan within 60 days.

But officials were only beginning to grasp the magnitude of the problems they faced when a wave of Asian imports helped push air pollution levels at the port higher and faster than anticipated. Since 2001, cancer-causing particles from diesel emissions at the port have soared by nearly 64%, and nitrogen oxides increased almost 42%, according to the task force's report.

It wasn't until March 2003 that the anti-pollution effort got a jump-start when the port settled an environmental lawsuit by agreeing to spend \$50 million on emission controls. This included using new technology that allowed giant container ships docking at the port to plug into on-shore power lines, allowing them to turn off their diesel engines.

The port also installed exhaust-cleaning equipment and paid millions of dollars to truck drivers to help them upgrade to cleaner-burning vehicles.

But air pollution levels continued to climb, as scientists documented links between pollutants such as diesel fumes and an array of respiratory ailments, including asthma.

Long-term exposure to diesel exhaust "is likely to pose a lung cancer hazard to humans, as well as damage the lung in other ways, depending on exposure," according to one EPA assessment.

A study published by USC researchers last fall found that air pollution can stunt the growth of some children's lungs so seriously that they may face lifelong health problems or even premature death. Fine particles of the kind found in diesel fumes were determined to be of special concern.

And a separate report from a USC researcher last fall found abnormally high levels of two kinds of respiratory cancer in some areas downwind of the ports in southeastern Los Angeles County. High levels of mouth and throat cancer were detected in Long Beach along the 710 Freeway, the most popular freeway for trucks serving the ports.

When the port's clean-air plan was released last July, it was immediately criticized as narrow and simplistic by residents and Hahn. The mayor responded by creating the task force, which includes representatives from the EPA, the state air board and the regional air district.

But since the team crafted its 68 potential clean-air initiatives in March, opposition has been slowly building among industry representatives. Issues range from the cost of implementing the plan to the effectiveness of new technology.

Concerns that the panel may be overstating future air pollution have been repeatedly raised by the Pacific Maritime Shipping Assn., which represents shippers and terminal operators. If future pollution levels are inflated, all other findings built upon those estimates are unreliable, said Vice President Michele Grubbs.

"I don't think the task force is going to be able to achieve the goals of Mayor Hahn," Grubbs said. "Right now, we can't see how this document in its current form can be used by policymakers."

Meanwhile, the biggest fight on the port issue is expected to center on who should pay for cutting pollution.

The Port of Los Angeles cannot afford to foot that bill alone, said Charles Turner, a port finance officer. Even if the port were to commit all of its net revenue to the effort for 20 years, it would still fall short, he said.

But Wilmington activist Jesse Marquez and other area residents believe that the shipping companies, railroads, retailers and others profiting from port trade should shoulder much of the costs.

Residents "see and realize that air pollution has a significant effect on their children's health, the public's health, and these costs are being borne by the public, not the polluter."