

Air rule delay sets off activists

Board votes to hold off on requiring clean diesel buses

By Mark Grossi

[Fresno Bee, Friday, May 20, 2005](#)

Sparks flew between activists and the local air district again Thursday when the governing board delayed new rules while tweaking a plan to clean up dust, soot and other airborne specks.

The board unanimously approved an amendment to the 2003 plan, and it included a delay in a requirement to clean up dirty diesel school buses.

Officials explained the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is ahead of schedule, reducing extra particle pollution from other sources and remaining on track to meet standards. They defended the district against activists' objections, saying the plan is working.

But the district is playing a shell game with public health, activists said. They pointed to high childhood asthma rates as well as a state study blaming the tiniest particle pollution for the deaths of more than 1,000 Valley residents annually.

"Any delay in rules literally kills people," said Sierra Club member Kevin Hall. "I call this Enron accounting." Sharp exchanges have happened often in the last four years as the Valley has emerged as one of the nation's worst places for smog and tiny particle pollution. Largely successful activist lawsuits over the disagreements have forced many changes and rule updates.

Besides the Sierra Club, local activists include Medical Advocates for Healthy Air, Latino Issues Forum and Fresno Metro Ministry. Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund and the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment handle the legal action.

Activists, hinting at a lawsuit, said the district legally can't shift surplus pollution reductions around to fulfill federal law. The board listened to their arguments but was not swayed.

Board members said they were pleased the Valley has had two consecutive years without violations of the standard for PM-10, particulate matter 10 microns and smaller in width (about one-seventh the width of a human hair). With one more good year, the district could be considered clean for PM-10.

"I'm perturbed by the statements I've heard because we should be in celebration," said board member J. Steven Worthley, a Tulare County supervisor. "Instead, we're being told, 'same old, same old.'"

Dave Mitchell, district planning manager, added: "With two clean years of data, the health emergency might be overstated."

Lawyer Anne Harper of Earthjustice said the Valley has a history of missing every single deadline for PM-10 since the early 1990s.

She said it was particularly disappointing to see the school bus rule delayed, saying children need to be protected from diesel fumes. "Numerous studies have demonstrated that the air quality inside school buses often contains unsafe levels of diesel exhaust," she said. "Although the total emissions reduced by this rule may be small, the enormous benefits that it would provide to children's health should have made it a priority."

Dave Crow, district executive director, said the district did not want to force a bus rule that many poor Valley school districts could not afford. The costs of cleaning up older buses might persuade some districts to stop using buses altogether. He said more funding is needed to help districts.

"I can appreciate the impatience," Crow said. "But we need to do it right."

S.J. air pollution regulators add more ag burning limits

Vote came just weeks before state deadline

By Dana Nichols

[Stockton Record, Friday, May 20, 2005](#)

MODESTO -- San Joaquin Valley air pollution regulators Thursday banned the burning of dozens of kinds of crops and farm waste -- from cherry tree prunings to oat stubble.

The unanimous vote by the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District board came less than two weeks before the state's June 1 deadline to ban such burning.

The board granted exemptions for only a few crops. In the case of apple, pear and quince prunings, farmers can still burn, because it's necessary to control diseases such as fire blight. The board also granted a break to rice growers, because those in the San Joaquin Valley don't have adequate access to other methods for clearing stubble.

Prunings from nut crops that have to be harvested on the ground -- almonds and walnuts, for example -- can be burned until 2010. Chipping prunings in those orchards would create a rough surface that would interfere with the harvest.

Board staffers and farmers say many growers here have already switched to using equipment to chip prunings and other farm waste.

"It's going to cost more money, but it's going to work," said John Thoming, who grows fruit trees on the 2,000-acre Ed Thoming and Sons farm near Tracy.

Thoming said he's already hiring a neighbor to chip his prunings.

The board also voted unanimously to delay for at least a year action on several rules intended to clean up deadly particulate pollution, including a rule on diesel exhaust from school buses and another that would hold developers responsible for the new pollution generated by vehicle trips to their projects.

Both rule delays were for the district's PM-10 plan, which concerns deadly particles measuring 10 microns or less across, about one-seventh the diameter of a human hair. Such small particles can lodge deeply in human lungs and are associated with a variety of health problems, including heart attacks and asthma.

District staff members reported that it's now ahead of schedule in meeting its goals for reducing PM-10 by 2010. Staff called such reductions that exceed what the board is required to do "surplus" reductions.

Staffers reported that the district thus can use the "surplus" reductions to date to justify delaying some rules, because overall, the district will still meet 2010 objectives. State and federal regulators set the clean-air goals the district must meet.

The surplus-reduction argument enraged clean-air advocates.

"I can only describe it as Enron accounting," said Kevin Hall of the Sierra Club.

Hall criticized the close relationship between air board staff members and the various industries that generate pollution.

He noted that a number of agriculture industry representatives handed out award certificates to air board staffers earlier in the meeting.

He said he'd like to see that level of cooperation extended to those who are pushing for cleaner air.

"We want you to do with health advocates what you do with industry on a daily basis," Hall said.

Board Executive Director David L. Crow defended his staff, saying it's working as quickly as possible on rules to reduce pollution.

Crow said in some cases, as with the diesel school bus rule, rushing too quickly could be counterproductive.

School districts already struggle to pay for buses, and making an expensive rule might prompt them to cancel their bus programs, he said.

That, in turn, would force more parents to drive their children to school and create more pollution.

"There is no mandate that children be transported to school through a bus system," he said.

Hirsch Elementary students honored for 'environmentality'

By Aaron Swarts, STAFF WRITER

[Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, May 18, 2005](#)

TRACY - Over the last two months, 10-year-old Courtney Martinez has had a simple message for her parents. "Just because you know how to drive, it doesn't mean you have to," she has been telling them. "There are plenty of other ways to get around if you need to go somewhere."

Martinez and other fifth-grade students at Hirsch Elementary School have been participating in a program called, "Jiminy Cricket's Enviromentality Challenge." The objective is to give young students a keen sense of the world around them through projects that meet state academic requirements.

Over the last two months, the students have written and performed a play about air pollution, charted the pollution levels at different areas on campus and organized a "Spare the Air Day," where they calculated that they saved 50 pounds of pollution from going into the atmosphere.

It is great to see students taking what they have learned in the classroom and using it to help the community," said Superintendent Jim Franco, who was on hand for a special ceremony honoring the students' achievements Tuesday morning. "They have a great group of kids here at Hirsch School."

Representatives from Enviromentality Challenge were also on hand at the ceremony to hand out special hats and bags to the students who participated in the program. As for Martinez, she says that she will continue to do all she can to help the planet ... even if it means doing more walking.

Park the car, ride the bus

Tulare Transit Express offers free trips Friday

By Julie Fernandez, Staff writer

[Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, May 19, 2005](#)

Tulare residents are invited to leave their cars at home and ride free on Tulare Transit Express on Friday as the city observes its second annual Dare to Spare Day.

The City Council agreed Tuesday to waive bus fees as part of an effort by the cities of Tulare and Visalia to encourage residents to take the bus, carpool, walk, ride bicycles or use other alternative methods of transportation.

The goal is to make people aware of the need to help reduce the San Joaquin Valley's ozone and pollution problems by changing transportation habits.

Residents who need further motivation might want to talk with Cheryl Smith and her fiancé, Larry Bailey, who were at the Tulare Transit Center on Wednesday.

"It's so much cheaper now to ride a bus," Smith said, reporting she decided on May 10 to park her Ford Taurus and ride the bus instead.

"It was my first bus ride in 15 years," she said. "I can get from here to Visalia on 75 cents. It cost us \$5 if we wanted to go in our car."

Paul Echevarria, transit analyst for the city of Tulare, said the number of people riding the bus is on the increase. In April, the six routes handled 3,200 more passengers than they did the same month in 2004.

"We're pretty happy about that," Echevarria said. "I attribute that to more reliability. [The buses] are running more on time and the maintenance is more reliable."

Faced with financial issues and passenger complaints about buses breaking down and running behind schedule as a result, the city began contracting with MV Transportation for transit services last July 1.

Tulare resident Donald Galante, who began riding the bus years ago, said he has noticed the increase in the number of people riding the bus.

"The gas prices — it helps a lot," Galante said.

Transit Express rides are normally 75 cents each way. A \$22 monthly pass provides unlimited rides.

The city also operates a Dial-A-Ride system. Fees for that door-to-door service will not be waived Friday.

Nuts come out of win smelling like a rose

Modesto beats Blaze in tallow plant stench

by Brian Vanderbeek

[Modesto Bee, Sports, Thursday, May 19, 2005](#)

A south breeze filled John Thurman Field with the noxious odor of the adjacent tallow plant, so fly balls to the outfield weren't being knocked down so much as they were wilting.

That air flow seemed to permeate everything about Modesto's 4-3 victory over Bakersfield on Wednesday -- from the way balls hit in the air were descending at strange angles, to the amount the D.A.R.E. Day gathering of 2,828 was able to enjoy the mild afternoon.

And that part is too bad, since the Nuts and Blaze put on an excellent show for the school kids, one in which the game-winning run came home on Erik Dean's sixth-inning suicide squeeze.

But the lingering memory for all involved undoubtedly will be the pungent Eau de Thurm.

"It was terrible, just awful," said Modesto center fielder Jordan Czarniecki, a Nuts newcomer getting his first whiff of what the storm wind can bring to a game. "I was gagging in the outfield. We need the wind to blow the other direction here, that's for sure. That was a bloody stench."

Dean's bunt capped a two-run rally off Bakersfield reliever Clint Brannon (3-3), and was the last in a string of successful situational hitting by Modesto.

Jud Thigpen started the uprising with a one-out single, then Seth Smith's soft fly to right sliced away from the defense for a double.

Needing only a ground ball to tie the game, Joe Gaetti singled hard to center to score Thigpen and move Smith to third. On the next pitch, Dean placed his bunt toward the third base side of the pitcher to score Smith with the go-ahead run.

It was the first time manager Stu Cole had called for the squeeze this season.

"The sign surprised me," Dean said. "He did it so nonchalant that I had to ask for the sign a second time. I got a pitch I could handle and I got it down."

Modesto sliced into Bakersfield's early 3-1 lead with a run in the fifth, also a product of good situational hitting.

Dean led off the inning with a pop fly to left that caught the wind and sailed away from left fielder Vincent Sinisi for a double. Dean advanced to third on Rick Guarno's ground ball to second base.

Randy Blood, looking for a pitch to hit in the air, picked on a fastball and drove it into left-center. Blaze center fielder Larry Grayson misjudged the ball in the breeze, and it flew over his head for an RBI triple.

"We talked about it today before the game, how we were 2-for-11 in (RBI) situations yesterday," Cole said. "It goes back to not trying to do too much. Blood needed a fly ball in that situation, and Gaetti, with two strikes, just tried to stay up the middle."

The Modesto bullpen took over from there. Eudy Morel (1-1) worked a perfect sixth, Jason Burch held the Blaze through the eighth and Jim Miller finished to earn his league-best 11th save, getting a double play grounder with runners on the corners to end the game.

And then everybody left the ballpark, hopefully retreating to more fragrant places.

"I hope it doesn't get worse than this, because today was brutal," Dean said. "You wanted to go out there wearing a doctor's mask. It just smelled so bad."

Natural gas cuts districts' fuel costs

By Elizabeth Hume -- Bee Staff Writer

[Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 19, 2005](#)

Filling the gas tank on a family vehicle costs plenty these days. Try fueling up a school bus.

School districts in the Sacramento area, facing their own fuel price sticker shock, are scrambling to limit the miles their yellow buses cover.

Sacramento City Unified School District board members are discussing redrawing their boundaries and cutting 15 non-mandated routes, leaving the 48,000-student district with almost no bus service. Elk Grove Unified adjusted school boundaries earlier this year, cutting bus service and laying off about 40 employees last month.

Elk Grove administrators say the new boundaries will save more than \$3 million from the \$10 million transportation budget. The changes will require many students who once took the bus to find other ways to get to school.

"It's been happening across the state but not to the degree that it happened to us," said Vic Guerra, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 256, which represents Elk Grove bus drivers.

With 136 diesel and 26 compressed natural gas buses, Elk Grove Unified is seeking other ways to trim fleet costs.

Starting in the fall, the district will begin charging many of its students to ride the bus - one of the last districts in the Sacramento region to do so. Officials already altered school start times to allow bus drivers to handle more than one route. And since 1992 Elk Grove Unified has purchased only buses that run on natural gas.

"We've tried to keep current with having the most fuel-efficient buses and cost-effective buses," board member Priscilla Cox said. "But there's a lot of areas in transportation where there isn't any way of saving."

The natural gas vehicles save money in several ways. They cost more to buy -- about \$135,000 per bus vs. the roughly \$110,000 for a diesel-run vehicle -- but the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Control District offsets the cost with grant money for natural gas equipment.

Other districts also have benefited from clean air grants. Roseville Joint Union High recently qualified for a Clean Air for Kids grant that will enable a retrofit of 17 buses with particulate traps.

Then there's the price of fueling up. Diesel was \$1.97 a gallon this week. Natural gas sells for \$1.11 a gallon.

Even with new boundaries limiting ridership, Elk Grove Unified can't avoid buses. With its booming population and wear on old buses, officials in previous years have had to buy four new buses per year. The vehicles last about 20 years.

And the cost of purchases is rising. A July law requiring school buses to have seat belts will add about \$5,000 to \$8,000 per bus - and reduce the number of students who can ride on it. A full-sized bus now seats up to 84 students, three students to a seat. Seat belts reduce the capacity to two riders per seat.

The seat belts have been a contentious point of debate. According to California Highway Patrol officials, school buses are the safest way to get students to school - with or without the seat belts. District officials agree.

"A school bus is 80 percent safer than a family car," said Wade Derr, director of transportation for Natomas Unified. "We don't have catastrophic crashes."

Still, after years of pressure, the Legislature approved seat belts on buses in 1999, though its implementation was delayed to give manufacturers time to adapt the vehicles.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, May 19, 2005:](#)

Air board blame game targets methane

The May 16 letters package had a reply on the cow methane issue from a local veterinarian who attempted to make some sense out of a nonsense issue ("Let sanity prevail in cow-gas debate"). Could it be this air quality board is spewing verbal methane to the valley people?

The regional board has 25 percent of the valley's air pollution coming from diesel engines on wells, 15 percent to 30 percent from small engines, another percent from this another from that. I think they are more than 100 percent in the blame game.

Does the board do its own studies? Does it rely on data supplied by universities and environmental groups. The problem, as I see it, is the bias of intent. How do we show cow methane is affecting air quality? I would suggest that common sense be the No. 1 requirement to be on the board.

HOWARD HARTVICKSON

Turlock

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, May 19, 2005:](#)

Look at the traffic, not the Valley's cows

I am writing about the article about cows passing gas and polluted this valley ("Dairy cows pass gas, but how much?" May 7, Page A-1). The cows have been here long before all the autos that are here. I think that is the biggest crock I have ever heard.

Those people should look at the traffic on our streets and highways. That is what causes the problem, not the poor cows! And the people that spend their time studying all this should find something else to do; leave the cows alone.

LAURA HOWARD

Modesto