

Air board expansion plan hotly debated

Fresno, county leaders to weigh in on membership.

By John Ellis / The Fresno Bee
Monday, May 2, 2005

Elected leaders in Fresno and Fresno County will weigh in this week on a bill that would expand the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board by giving seats to the three largest cities and the public.

A similar measure died last year in the state Legislature, but the political battle over this year's version is growing louder in the central San Joaquin Valley.

On Tuesday, the Fresno City Council will consider a resolution in support of Senate Bill 999, while the Fresno County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to reaffirm its opposition to changing the air board.

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden, would make several changes to the board. Among them:

- Expand the size from 11 to 17 members.
- Give a permanent seat to each of the Valley's three biggest cities - Bakersfield, Stockton and Fresno.
- Give the public four spots.

Of those public appointments, two members would be selected by the governor: One would have transportation or urban planning expertise, and the other would be an expert on the environmental effects of air pollution.

A third member would be appointed by the Assembly speaker and would represent the "environmental justice community." The fourth would be appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules and would be a doctor with "expertise regarding the health effects of air pollution."

The board would retain a member from each of the district's eight counties - Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Tulare.

Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case, who is putting forth Tuesday's opposition effort, said the bill is an "effort on part of state officials to have more say on appointments. They can't handle their own business per se, and they want to have say over everything else."

For City Council President Mike Dages, it is a matter of giving Fresno its due. "All of it for me is that the city of Fresno gets a permanent member," he said. "I do not understand how we have not had representation all these years."

Current law says the three city seats on the air board must each represent a region of the district -- north, center and south - as well as a population range. The ranges include cities of less than 20,000, those between 20,000 and 50,000, and cities of more than 50,000. What it means is Fresno only gets an occasional seat on the board.

Overall, supporters of the bill are environmental groups, while those in opposition are primarily agriculture and industry. One high-profile opponent is Fresno Mayor Alan Autry.

Already, a majority of the Fresno County supervisors - Case, Phil Larson and Bob Waterston - say they will vote to oppose the legislation.

The outcome in the city is less clear, though supporters are hopeful and there are indications a bare majority may support the resolution being put forth by Dages.

One who won't is Council Member Jerry Duncan. He sent a memo Friday to Autry and his fellow council members stating why the bill should be opposed.

Duncan writes that there are merits to giving Fresno a permanent seat, but he doesn't believe the Machado bill is the right way to go.

He believes an expanded board would "dilute the voice of the people" and the four public members could "in some cases represent extremist and narrow special interests."

Machado's bill gives appointment power to the councils in the three cities, but Duncan wrote that under Fresno's "strong mayor" form of government, that appointment power should be the mayor's.

Mark Stout, a member of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, which represents 45 environmental, medical and public health organizations, counters that the bill, if passed, would "give a strong public health perspective to the board." Right now, he said, the board is entirely made up of elected officials, heavily weighted toward county supervisors.

"By adding publicly appointed members to the board with medical and environmental health expertise, it would add a dimension that's not there."

Stout also said giving Stockton, Fresno and Bakersfield permanent membership would be "more fair and consistent."

Fresno, Stout said, has had no air district representative since former Council Member Tom Bohigian served in 1993.

Stockton never had a representative on the board, he added.

The bill is now in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Disposal of toxic grape stakes funded

Valley farmers get \$450,000 from the federal government to remove mounds of chemical-laced wood.

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee
Friday, April 29, 2005

The federal government has allocated \$450,000 this year to help farmers dispose of grape stakes treated with chemicals that could poison the Valley's air and water.

"This is a tremendous help," said Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno. Cunha is among those who have been seeking government help with disposal of the stakes for two years because they cannot be burned.

Cunha said the government could provide the same amount each of the next six years.

It's believed that there are 16.6 million treated stakes with a total weight of 225,000 tons in the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said Seyed Sadredin, the district's deputy air pollution control officer.

"We need to treat this as a public health hazard with significant implications for the Valley," he said. "We need to bring this to an end in a safe and cost-effective fashion."

Sadredin said the money is available because of the hazards posed by stakes treated with chromated copper arsenate.

The stakes were pulled out of Valley vineyards because of the economic challenges to raisin and wine grape growers, and the wood was often left in mounds on farms.

Farmers are not allowed to burn the treated stakes because they would release chemicals into the air that are highly toxic and leave toxic ash. Health officials say the arsenate is associated with cancer and can attack the liver and kidneys.

Chipping the stakes also would create an air quality problem, and the chemical can leach into the soil and contaminate water. "Taking the stake to a properly permitted landfill is the only viable solution," Sadredin said.

Forward Inc. Landfill in Manteca has been approved as a disposal site, and it's expected that American Avenue Landfill in Tranquillity will soon be approved.

"We need cooperation from the state Water Resources Board to streamline and expedite the process to get the landfills to accept the stakes," Sadredin said.

The federal money is from the National Resources Conservation Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Farmers and ranchers can start applying for assistance, which will be given on a 50% matching basis, on May 16. The deadline to apply is June 17.

First priority will be given to stakes pulled in the early 2000s.

The maximum amount any grower can dispose of on a cost-share basis is 310 tons - or about 160 acres - of stakes.

Cost-sharing is allowed for disposal or dumping fees, transportation expenses and costs associated with loading.

Sadredin said continuing the funding "will be a year-to-year battle."

It's expected that disposing of the treated wood will take several years.

John Beyer, the conservation service's state air quality coordinator, said it's not known how many growers will seek help through the EQIP program.

"In most of our cases, we don't have enough to cover all the growers who come in and sign up," he said. "On average, we cover 66%."

Bill Boos Jr., a Sanger grower and principal in a vine- and orchard-removal and a land-leveling business, said he plans to use the program to remove 6,000 stakes from 12 acres that he has piled on his land.

"We're grateful the government realizes we've got a problem out here," Boos said, adding that the stakes "are taking a lot of our farmland for storage alone."

"The taxpayer needs to see that there were some hidden costs to the ban on burning."

Smog Rule Tougher, but It's Symbolic

Targeting ozone, state regulators have passed the most strict air pollution standards in the country, but have no way to enforce them.

By Miguel Bustillo, Los Angeles Times, April 29, 2005

California regulators on Thursday approved the nation's toughest smog standard, citing new evidence that air pollution may be more harmful than scientists once believed, especially to children.

The California Air Resources Board voted unanimously to tighten the state's limit for ground-level ozone, the key ingredient in smog, after state officials produced a voluminous review of recent research into the health effects of the odorless, colorless gas.

But unlike federal air standards, the new state ozone rules are considered largely symbolic because the state does not enforce the rules.

State officials estimated that the tougher state standard, if it were met, would result in 580 fewer premature deaths a year, 3,800 fewer hospitalizations due to respiratory problems, 600 fewer asthma-related hospital visits among children, and 3.3 million fewer school absences for children ages 5 to 17.

The 1,000-page report analyzed the state of scientific knowledge on the health effects of exposure to ozone.

Environmentalists praised California for passing the rules, which surpass the federal pollution limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency. They said they hoped the move would lead federal officials to bolster their regulations as well.

"The ARB and its staff scientists have said very clearly that the current federal standard is not adequate to protect children and asthma sufferers," said Sonya Lunder of the Environmental Working Group, who had authored a report this month that tried to assess the costs of smog in California and advocated stricter regulations.

The state standard would limit ozone in the air to an average of 0.070 parts per million over an eight-hour period. The current federal regulation is 0.085 parts per million. However, unlike the federal ozone standard, which can result in a loss of federal transportation funding for local counties if it is not met, the

state requirement carries little legal weight. It essentially represents the state's view of what constitutes clean air.

Despite its lack of teeth, some industry groups and other critics took issue with the state's tighter ozone standard, arguing that it would prove costly for businesses while having only a minimal health benefit.

Joel Schwartz, a visiting fellow with the American Enterprise Institute, estimated that the standard would cost tens of billions a year to meet while reducing premature deaths by 0.06%, respiratory-related hospital admissions by 0.28% and asthma-related hospital visits by 0.48%.

Ground-level ozone is created in the air by a chemical reaction between two types of pollutants: nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds. Both pollutants are commonly emitted during the burning of fossil fuels.

Breathing air polluted with ozone can cause wheezing, coughing and inflammation of the lungs, and can trigger a variety of respiratory problems, including asthma. Over long periods of time, it can cause permanent lung damage, studies have found.

Fourteen of the country's 25 worst ozone-polluted counties are in California, the American Lung Assn. noted in its annual report released Thursday.

California adopts nation's toughest ozone standards

By GILLIAN FLACCUS, Associated Press Writer
in the S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, April 28, 2005

Los Angeles (AP) -- The state Air Resources Board unanimously adopted a new limit on ozone levels Thursday that gives California the toughest air pollution guidelines in the nation — a standard that critics argue is largely symbolic.

Supporters estimate that, if fully effective, the new standard could save Californians millions of dollars each year in medical costs and productivity losses linked to smog-induced illness.

They insist that while it may take years for the state to meet the new standard, its existence will force individual air quality districts to implement long-term strategies to reduce pollution.

The majority of the state currently doesn't meet the less stringent federal standard.

The eight-member board met for nearly 2 1/2 hours before approving the new limit. California has no authority to impose sanctions for violations of the rules.

Several board members said they supported the change but expressed concerns about the as-yet-unknown cost of implementing it statewide.

Bonnie Holmes-Gen, spokeswoman for the American Lung Association of California, said the new ozone standard is based on the latest research.

New evidence suggests pollution can cause a host of illnesses — heart and lung disease, asthma, premature death — and can exacerbate the symptoms of diabetes, she said.

Before the vote, she stressed to board members that they should only consider public health — not expense — when considering the new guideline.

"Today your job is to determine the level at which public health is protected," she said. "We should not settle for anything less."

Ozone pollution occurs when hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides — released as fossil fuels burn or chemicals evaporate — combine with heat and sunlight.

Clean-air advocacy groups hope the upgraded California standard will influence new ozone standards currently under review at the federal level.

California is the only state that's allowed to have its own air pollution standards because it had emissions requirements in place before the federal Clean Air Act was passed in 1971, said Sonya Lunder, spokeswoman for the Environmental Working Group.

In 2002, the board adopted the nation's stiffest air quality standards for particulate matter — particles of soot and dirt tinier than a human hair but dangerous enough to damage lungs.

Other states can choose to follow the federal standards or California's tougher standards, Lunder said.

The new standard passed Thursday calls for an average ozone level that doesn't exceed .070 parts per million over an eight-hour period. The federal eight-hour standard is .080 parts per million.

Seventy percent of California counties didn't meet the federal eight-hour standard between 2000-2003, said Lunder, and an estimated 92 percent of counties would fail the state standard, if implemented. The state already has a one-hour standard for ozone that is stricter than the federal rule.

The Environmental Protection Agency can withhold federal transportation funds from states that don't meet their ozone standards, but most states have until 2021 to fully comply, state officials said.

A coalition of groups representing the interests of the automobile and technology industries had opposed the new state eight-hour guideline.

Bruce Magnani, legislative advocate for the California Chamber of Commerce, said the proposed standard is so restrictive, it approaches limiting the amount of ozone pollution to what occurs naturally in the air — .040 parts per million.

"I think it could only have negative impacts on the economy, because it's so strict. No one knows how they're going to implement this," Magnani said.

Steven Douglas of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers said he was worried about a lack of information on the cost associated with the new standard. He also said he wanted to know how much the state would have to reduce ozone emissions to reach the new target.

"The very essence of good public policy is trying to find the balance between the costs and the benefits," Douglas said. "There isn't any discussion of the cost (here)."

Staff scientists said evaluating that cost would likely take at least until 2007 and possibly longer for areas around Los Angeles.

On the Net:

California Air Resources Board:

American Lung Association:

California Chamber of Commerce:

<http://www.arb.ca.gov/homepage.htm>

<http://www.arb.ca.gov/homepage.htm>

<http://www.lungusa.org>

<http://www.calchamber.com>

Judge rejects challenge to diesel emission rules

By Don Thompson, Associated Press Writer
in the Fresno Bee, Friday, April 29, 2005

SACRAMENTO (AP) - Truck drivers face tougher pollution regulations starting Saturday after diesel engine manufacturers lost a court battle in which they blamed state air regulators for renegeing on a legal settlement.

Sacramento County Superior Court Judge Loren McMaster refused to issue a preliminary injunction Thursday, saying he sympathizes with manufacturers' complaint but has no power to intervene because the regulations appear to be constitutionally valid.

The diesel engine makers tried to block stricter pollution regulations that apply to an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 out-of-state vehicles that drive through the state and 58,000 California trucks.

The California Air Resources Board adopted new pollution standards in December because the 1998 agreement and a voluntary program promoted by manufacturers didn't remove so-called smog defeat devices fast enough from diesel trucks.

The devices enabled the engines to pass inspection, but exceeded pollution limits on the highway. Owners of heavy trucks made in 1993-94 have until Saturday to remove the devices or face penalties of \$300-\$800. The deadline for 1995-96 model year trucks is Aug. 31; and Dec. 31 for 1997-98 model years. Medium-weight trucks must comply by the end of next year.

"I think they wasted a lot of money trying to postpone a very solid attempt to clean the air here," said Deputy Attorney General William Brieger, who argued the case.

Removing the devices from California trucks alone would trim pollution equivalent to that created by 1 million cars, the air board said. Clean air advocates want the regulations, if they stand, to spread nationwide.

Attorneys for Caterpillar Inc., the lead plaintiff, did not return telephone messages left by The Associated Press.

Caterpillar, Cummins Inc., Mack Trucks Inc. and Volvo Powertrain Corp. said they've already paid the state \$37 million in civil penalties and other costs. Recalling the trucks simply to replace the devices would cost truck owners millions of dollars in downtime for the replacement and new inspections, the companies said.

The 1998 settlement required manufacturers to replace the defeat devices only when the heavy-duty engines were overhauled, which happened far less frequently than regulators expected.

A year ago, the ARB agreed to a plan for the industry to voluntarily reach 35 percent compliance by last November and 100 percent compliance by 2008. But the board adopted the mandatory regulations when it found only about 18 percent of California-licensed vehicles had upgraded.

AP: EPA Exceeds Mercury Cleanup Projection

By JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press Writer
in the S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, April 28, 2005

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Environmental Protection Agency estimated in an internal report as much as \$2 billion in yearly benefits from cutting mercury pollution just in the Southeast — 40 times the value the agency projected publicly for the entire nation.

Critics said the report is evidence the Bush administration sought to play down the benefits of reducing mercury pollution in order to justify not requiring owners of power plants to buy the best available technology for lowering mercury emissions.

"EPA has a track record of withholding information that doesn't support their agenda, and this is the latest example," said Felice Stadler, a policy specialist with the National Wildlife Federation.

The report, a copy of which was obtained Thursday by The Associated Press, dates to January 2004. That was 14 months before the EPA released its mercury rule for power plants.

Agency officials said the report is now subject to an internal peer review. They also said it was not taken into consideration for new regulations the agency issued in March to cut mercury pollution from power plants in half by 2020, from 48 tons a year now to 24.3 tons.

Environmental and health groups said that cleanup would go more quickly if the EPA had ordered the nation's 600 coal-burning power plants to install hundreds of millions of dollars in new pollution controls and given them a firm deadline to do it.

Last month, the EPA publicly estimated the annual benefits to the country of the cleanup program at \$50 million a year. The agency said the cost to utilities and electricity users would increase annually to \$750 million a year by 2020.

The report studied the benefits of reducing mercury concentrations by 30 percent to 100 percent in marine fish and shellfish in the Southeast. It also identified an existing mercury "hot spot" — an area of accumulation — stretching across 50,000 square miles in the South Atlantic, roughly from North Carolina to South Florida.

That such a far-reaching mercury concentration exists raises questions about EPA officials' public assertions that their new rule would prevent such hot spots. They also said the biggest health threat to people was from eating mercury-contaminated fish from abroad rather than those found in U.S. waters.

In March, while announcing the regulations, the EPA's air quality chief, Jeffrey Holmstead, said, "We don't think there will be any hot spots, we're quite confident of that."

Mercury concentrations accumulate in fish and work up the food chain. At greatest risk of nerve damage from the toxic metal are pregnant women, women of childbearing ages and young children.

The wildlife federation's Stadler said the unreleased EPA report suggests mercury reductions could have a much broader impact than previously thought. "It paints a different picture — that in certain parts of the country you have a lot of Americans eating fish caught locally," she said.

Forty percent of all mercury pollution in the United States comes from coal-fired power plants. But those emissions, 48 tons of mercury pollution a year, have never been regulated.

Douglas Rae, a Boston economist who is the principal author of the internal report, said the EPA commissioned it two years ago.

"I think it's reasonable, but people can argue about that," he said in an interview Thursday. Rae called it "the kind of analysis that EPA staff do all the time. They don't intend them to be used in a rule-making, because there are a lot of uncertainties."

Jason Burnett, a policy adviser to air quality chief Holmstead, said the report "was designed as a scoping study to help us identify areas for future research."

The report said the mercury hot spot off the Atlantic coast was produced by "significant rainfall in the offshore area that washes out large amounts of mercury emitted by power plants and other sources." It said pollution from U.S. sources is responsible for 37 percent to 68 percent of the mercury deposits there.

Burnett said the agency disagrees with that conclusion.

"The question is how much of that mercury comes from U.S. power plants, and that's the quantification that we don't believe is sufficiently understood to use in a rule-making context," he said.

Environmentalists and administration critics have said that hot spots could be avoided if the EPA used the Clean Air Act to require individual power plants to install the most effective technology on the market for reducing mercury emissions from their stacks.

An EPA-commissioned study released in February by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis also estimated far higher benefits. It, too, was excluded from consideration in writing the new regulations. The Harvard study put at \$5 billion a year the potential public health benefits from cutting mercury from power plants by 62.5 percent.

On the Net:

Environmental Protection Agency:

<http://www.epa.gov/mercury> <http://www.epa.gov/mercury>

Midwest Research Projects Look to Hydrogen

in the S.F. Chronicle

Monday, May 2, 2005

Sioux Falls, S.D. (AP) -- Several research projects in South Dakota and neighboring states are looking to hydrogen as a fuel source that could reduce air pollution, global warming and dependence on foreign oil.

Hydrogen is seen as an ideal alternative to fossil fuels since it doesn't release carbon dioxide, a leading cause of global warming. But because there is no abundant natural source of pure hydrogen, it must come from other sources.

And that's where the Midwest comes in with its supplies of ethanol, wind energy and even cow manure, officials say.

"We hope this region can be an absolute leader in the production of hydrogen," Rolf Nordstrom of the Minneapolis-based Upper Midwest Hydrogen Initiative said in a speech last month to an energy conference in Sioux Falls.

Midwest researchers are working on several ideas.

_ At South Dakota State University in Brookings, scientists want to build a manure digester that would turn the resulting gas into a renewable source of hydrogen.

Plans are on hold because of a shift in federal funding. But Kevin Kephart, director of the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, said researchers are ready to build once the money is there.

_ The University of North Dakota and the University of Minnesota are trying to make hydrogen from wind power, with a working fuel station near Minot, N.D.

_ Other UND and University of Minnesota researchers want to turn ethanol into hydrogen inside a car's engine, eliminating the need to store compressed hydrogen gas.

Engineer Brad Stevens of UND's Energy and Environmental Research Center in Grand Forks, N.D., said his project could be generating hydrogen from nearby wind turbines by the end of the year.

Transmitting the electricity to a fueling station near Minot will help show the process can work even though wind turbines and fueling stations won't always be near each other, he said.

A project at the West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris, Minn., also plans to make wind into hydrogen. But researcher Mike Reese says the hydrogen will be used to generate electricity when the wind isn't blowing, potentially making wind power more reliable.

At the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus and at UND, scientists are working on ethanol-based hydrogen.

Ethanol is among the best options for on-board hydrogen production because it's easily stored and it turns into hydrogen more easily than natural gas, said Ted Aulich of UND.

The initiative has set a goal of 11 refueling stations, allowing hydrogen vehicles to travel from Madison, Wis., to Sioux Falls to Manitoba.

Nordstrom said hydrogen could mean a lot for states such as South Dakota.

"There is an enormous economic prize for whoever perfects the production of renewable hydrogen," he said.

Project: Dream city or just pipe dream?

Development between Bakersfield, L.A. seen as eventual home for 75,000

By VIC POLLARD, Californian Sacramento Bureau
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, May 2, 2005

For now, it is grazing land nestled in a remote end of the Antelope Valley on Tejon Ranch halfway between Bakersfield and Los Angeles.

But if developers have their way, it will someday be a whole new city called Centennial, more than a third the size of Bakersfield.

According to its designers, it will have a small-town feel, with a series of "villages" clustered around "town centers" where many residents can walk to shop or even work. And, the designers say, it will have a balance of jobs and housing so that most residents will not need to clog the freeways by commuting to distant urban centers.

There are critics and skeptics who say the vision of creating a self-contained, environment-friendly community from the ground up is a pipe dream. They fear Centennial will be an example of the worst kind of urban sprawl.

But the vision glows brightly in the eyes of the development partners, Tejon Ranch and three big housing companies.

"It's almost a throwback to the old small-town America," said Greg Medeiros, a Centennial project manager, "but with all the modern amenities."

"It harkens back to the days when we all walked to school or rode our bikes," said Tejon Ranch spokesman Barry Zoeller.

Plans for the development have been submitted to Los Angeles County and could come before the L.A. Board of Supervisors next year. However, final approval of the most recent development on a similar scale, the 21,000-home Newhall Ranch development near Santa Clarita, took 10 years.

Centennial is expected to take 20 years to complete after construction begins on the first phase. It is designed to eventually house 75,000 people.

Centennial planners say the new town will be a state-of-the-art example of the modern trend toward making big projects feel smaller and more intimate.

They promise seven small-town centers with basic retail and professional services clustered around open areas. Around the centers will be higher-density apartments and condominiums, based on the "smart growth" idea of pedestrian-friendly communities.

"As you move away from the town centers, densities would decrease," said Medeiros.

There will also be an area for supermarkets and other retail stores and another for "big box" retailers like Wal-Mart and Target.

The key to the development, planners hope, will be another area devoted to office, warehouse and commercial enterprises where most of the community's residents can find work.

Planners envision generous parks and open space areas, often connected by "greenway" paths and bike trails. The open spaces will utilize native plants like grasses and oak trees to reduce water consumption.

The developers have not yet filed firm plans for their water supply, as they will be required to do for final approval.

They said it will be a mix of State Water Project water from a water agency and groundwater from wells.

In wet years they hope to percolate surplus water to the aquifer below the town, to be pumped out later in dry years.

"We plan to make extensive use of reclaimed water for non-potable uses like landscaping," Medeiros added. "We will use all our water at least twice."

Moreover, the landscape irrigation system will be controlled by a satellite-based system that senses rainfall.

"So you don't have the sprinklers on timers that come on when it's raining," he said.

Critics say the developers have an unrealistically rosy view of the prospects. They are deeply skeptical about the key to the development, the jobs-housing balance the planners hope to create from the beginning.

"It's very hard to create a community like this out of whole cloth," said Stephanie Pincetl, an urban development expert at UCLA. "They're going to build a bunch of houses out there on a hope and a prayer that jobs will come."

Indeed, most of the new towns built on open land since World War II, like Reston, Va., and Columbia, Md., have taken decades to develop a significant job base. In the meantime, their residents commuted to larger cities.

In Centennial's case, that would mean getting onto I-5 and going to Los Angeles or Bakersfield, or on Highway 138 to the Lancaster-Palmdale area.

Critics fear that will create massive traffic jams on I-5, as Centennial commute traffic joins that from Newhall Ranch 20 miles to the south.

The critics include residents of Frazier Park and other areas nearby who moved to the mountains get away from the city and now see the city about to land in their back yards.

Lloyd Wiens, a Frazier Park environmentalist, said he fears Centennial's impact on the local schools and roads and the pristine back country.

Centennial planners say the critics are misguided.

They plan to try to protect the environment with energy-efficient houses, water conservation and other measures.

They also believe they are not doomed to repeat the experiences of other new towns in creating a jobs-housing balance.

It took many years for jobs to follow residents to Newhall Ranch's Valencia development, but Medeiros said that was because Valencia did not make a point of recruiting job-creating businesses from the start. "That's something we're going to do from the very beginning," he said.

Studies may determine rules for county dairies

By Bob Brownne

Lodi News Sentinel, Apr 29, 2005

San Joaquin Valley dairy farmers hope new studies will convince air quality officials that cows aren't the polluters they're believed to be.

State and regional regulators have long suspected that belching from dairy cows contributes to a large percentage of organic gases in the San Joaquin Valley. But now that dairy farmers are facing new regulations they've convinced the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to reject its old data and take a closer look at the type and amount of air pollution cows produce.

Ann Silva, a partner with Bacchetti and Silva Dairy north of town, said new laws requiring air-quality permits and emissions control means more expenses for dairy farmers.

"We're always concerned about it," she said. "You hope they use sound science and hope they have good numbers to go from ... making sure that along with the regulations that the science and technology are there to deal with the problem."

The district's Dairy Permitting Advisory Group expects to establish a new "emission factor" by next Friday based on research from University of California, Davis, California State University, Fresno, and independent studies. That could replace previous dairy air pollution estimates used by the California Air Resources Board.

CARB lists dairy cattle as the valley's top producer of total organic gases and second only to cars, trucks and other motor vehicles for production of reactive organic gases. Organic gases are mostly the "greenhouse" gases, such as methane, and include reactive organic gases that contribute to smog.

Board statistics attribute about 32 percent of the valley's total organic gases and 10 percent of reactive organic gases to dairy cattle.

Mike Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairymen, said state and regional regulators are still using data from a 1938 study. While they refer to the amount of methane gas produced by cows, 12.8 pounds per cow, per year, Marsh said those numbers have since been misinterpreted to represent different chemicals that are blamed for the valley's smog.

"Most science indicates that emissions of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) from dairies are about one-quarter the 12.8 figure that's usually cited," Marsh said.

Western United Dairymen is one of two industry groups that sued the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District last year over its implementation of a new state law requiring air quality permits for farms. One of the settlement terms of that lawsuit is that the district will use updated studies to determine the type and amount of gases produced at dairies.

Regardless of the air pollution data, all farmers will face new regulations by next summer. Dairy farmers would have to obtain permits stating how they intend to control emissions, in most cases requiring explanations of farming practices designed to reduce pollution.

"There actually are a lot of measures to be taken, and that's the next role of the Dairy Permitting Advisory Group," said Dave Warner, director of permit services for the San Joaquin air district.

"Some might be as simple as getting manure into a treatment lagoon quicker, or diet adjustments, to big engineering solutions like covering a lagoon and burning off VOCs to produce electricity."

Warner added that the numbers in the report, to be released before the May 5 meeting of the board's Dairy Permitting Advisory Group, will be subject to debate.

"There are still several areas where we don't have consensus," he said.

How's the air? Check the flag

Stanislaus County schools will soon be flying the colors to signify quality

By MICHAEL G. MOONEY - BEE STAFF WRITER

Modesto Bee, Friday, April 29, 2005

Schools throughout Stanislaus County soon will hoist color-coded "air quality" flags as a way to alert students, parents and staff of air pollution risks.

Flags of four colors will be used:

Green indicates healthy air;

Yellow, moderate air;

Orange, poor air quality for sensitive groups, which includes people with asthma, diabetes or cardiovascular disease;

Red, unhealthy air.

"By raising these flags," said Dr. Wallace Carroll, a Modesto allergist, "we hope to raise awareness and change routine behavior to help prevent or reduce the severity of asthma attacks."

Announcement of the flag program came a day after the American Lung Association gave failing grades to Stanislaus, Merced, Tuolumne, San Joaquin and Calaveras counties in its "State of the Air 2005" report.

The report lists Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin among counties with the worst air in the nation for smog and particle pollution.

Carroll, chairman of the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition, said three of the county's 245 schools will begin flying flags in May. The 242 remaining schools are expected to start raising the flags by fall.

"If it's a bad air day, perhaps we can delay mowing the lawn or lighting the fireplace," Carroll said.

"There's a lot we can all do to help reduce missed school and work days due to asthma."

The colors of the flags will be based on an air quality index that provides daily information about pollution and is issued by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Similar programs are used at schools in Merced, Mariposa, Tulare and Fresno counties.

MedicAlert of Turlock is picking up the \$20,000 to \$25,000 cost in Stanislaus County.

About 12 percent of San Joaquin Valley children have asthma, Carroll said. That's one of the highest rates in the country.

In Fresno County, Carroll said, one in every six school children carries an inhaler.

An estimated 22,000 adults and 12,000 children in Stanislaus County have asthma. About 5,000 people have emphysema and more than 14,000 have chronic bronchitis.

Carroll estimated that about half of all school absences are due to asthma.

Ozone air pollution is a powerful irritant that can cause chemical burns on lung tissue, according to the Lung Association.

Ozone triggers asthma attacks

Studies have found that ozone triggers asthma attacks, the Lung Association contends, and increases the need for emergency room visits and hospital admissions.

Particle pollution is a mixture of microscopic solids and aerosols that, according to the Lung Association, can take months to years off a person's life.

With children, the elderly and those with asthma, other lung diseases or heart disease, the Lung Association report adds diabetics to its list of groups most at risk from particle pollution.

Derek G. Shendell, an environmental public health scientist, is a booster of the flag program. Shendell also serves as interim executive director of the statewide Community Action to Fight Asthma Initiative.

"The outdoor air quality flags program is an excellent example," he said, "of how science-based environmental education and visual risk communication can reduce children's exposures to known environmental asthma triggers, namely ozone and particles, outdoors as well as inside the school."

Sit yourself down in a hybrid car or on a scooter, for up to 100 MPG

By TIM MORANBEE STAFF WRITER

Modesto Bee, Sunday, May 1, 2005

Dan Louis of Turlock has a sign on the back of his vehicle that reads, "What gas prices?"

When he goes to the Chevron station, he orders \$2 at pump No. 4. That will last him seven to 10 days, Louis figures, for his seven-mile round trip to work, and for pleasure rides in the evening.

Sound like a fantasy? Louis rides a new Yamaha Vino 125 scooter and reports getting 75 to 80 miles per gallon. The gas tank holds 1.2 gallons.

Louis is one of a growing number of people in the Northern San Joaquin Valley who are finding ways to minimize the pain of soaring gasoline prices.

Will Hansen of Modesto is another, and he's been doing it for years, he said.

Hansen rides his bicycle from his north Modesto home to work on Scenic Drive, about an eight-mile round trip. He bikes to work every day now that gas prices have spiked again.

"At the end of the month it just kills you," Hansen said of the high gas prices. "I'm an SUV owner, and it sucks."

Victor Cerqueira gets the comforts of a car while cutting gasoline purchases in half with his 2002 hybrid Toyota Prius.

The Modesto man said his main interest in buying the Prius was to help cut down on pollution. "The air quality is just crazy here," he said. Instead of joining the finger-pointing between urban sprawl and agriculture, Cerqueira figured "we're all responsible" and took action.

But he's not complaining about his mileage: 46 miles per gallon on the freeway, and 48 to 53 in town. A tank of gas will carry him more than 600 miles, Cerqueira said.

Dan Webster of Sonora has a Honda Civic hybrid — with a gasoline engine and an electric motor — and swears by it.

"The most important thing is, it's just a car. You don't have to plug it in or baby it. Just put gas in it — and not very much," he said.

He recently attended a conference in Marin County, driving from Sonora and back, 400 miles, and said he did it on eight gallons of gas.

Beth Bailey of Modesto sold a sport utility vehicle to buy a Honda Insight hybrid, and said she has averaged 61 mpg in the three years that she has owned the car.

The mileage drops to 50 mpg in the summer with the air conditioner on, but she has recorded trips when her mileage was as high as 75 mpg, Bailey said.

"I cannot understand why they are not making 75 percent of the cars this way," Bailey said.

Hybrids are selling well across the country.

George Ismail, sales manager at Modesto Toyota, said the dealership has a waiting list of about 40 people for the Prius, and 35 on a list for the new Highlander SUV hybrid.

The Environmental Protection Agency says the 2005 midsize Prius gets 60 miles per gallon of gas in city driving and 51 mpg in highway driving.

The city number is higher because the gasoline engine shuts off when the car stops at signals; the electric motor takes over and assists in acceleration. When the engine is running, some of the power recharges the electric motor's battery.

Dennis Lanigan, general manager of Mistlin Honda in Modesto, also reported high interest in hybrids, and he said he has some in stock.

EPA mileage ratings for the two-seat Honda Insight range from 56 to 66 mpg, depending on model and whether you're driving on city streets or on highways.

Hybrid vehicles retail for a couple thousand dollars more than the equivalent conventional models, but there is a \$2,000 federal tax deduction for cars bought this year.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District offered \$2,000 cash incentives a few years ago for buying hybrids, but no longer has the program.

The incentive money went quickly, district spokeswoman Kelly Malay said. The program's goal was to entice people to buy hybrids, she said, but that's no longer necessary.

'Truck and SUV country'

The Modesto Toyota and Mistlin Honda representatives noted that people are still buying larger, thirstier vehicles, too.

"The Central Valley is still truck and SUV country," Lanigan said.

Ismail said his dealership's large-vehicle sales are running about even with last year. "People have not been deterred from SUVs," he said.

Some consumers are downsizing without going for the new hybrid technology.

Bob Kensler of Modesto said he parked his van when the price of gasoline passed \$2 a gallon, and he bought a used Chevrolet Cavalier. With the four-cylinder Cavalier, Kensler said, he gets 19 mpg in the city and 32 on the highway, compared with his van's 11mpg in the city and 23 on the highway.

"At \$2.50 a gallon, it turns into a lot of money real quick," said Kensler, a retiree on a fixed income. While not as roomy as the van, the smaller car is comfortable and peppy, he said.

"It's the only way I could see getting around it," Kensler said. "My next car will be a fourcylinder, and if I find a threecylinder, I'll buy it."

Getting by on 1 cylinder

People willing to give up the comforts of a car and brave the weather can get by on one cylinder.

Scooters have become trendy in large cities for fuel mileage, maneuverability and ease of parking. They range in size from tiny 50-cubic centimeter engines to freeway-legal 400cc and 650cc models.

Stan Wyatt, a co-owner of Yamaha of Modesto, said he sells about 40 of the 50cc scooters a year, but most are not used for commuting.

Usually they are hauled aboard recreational vehicles for campsite use, he said, or to racetracks — where drivers use the scooters as "pit bikes," for running errands.

The scooters are street-legal, however, and Wyatt estimates that out of his 40 sales per year, eight to 10 of the scooters wind up on the road.

With a top speed of 30 to 35mph, the smallest scooters are strictly for city streets, not highways, Wyatt said, but the scooters are comfortable.

Wyatt and Phil Ray, owner of Honda and Kawasaki of Modesto, said the scooter craze hasn't really hit the Central Valley.

"They are great. I've been to Japan, and everyone rides scooters there," Ray said.

Louis bought his Yamaha Vino on April 1. "I've had a blast," he said. "It's perfect for me."

The 125cc engine lets him keep up with traffic on 45 mph streets, he said.

While the gas mileage is great, Louis admitted that he mostly decided to buy the scooter for the fun factor. He said he frequently takes evening pleasure rides — it negates some of his gas savings, but keeps him grinning.

"It's so much fun. I can't wait to jump on it," he said.

Hansen said fun is the main factor in his decision to ride his bicycle to work.

"I'll ride 60 miles after work. I'm an avid cyclist," he said. In addition to the gas savings, he gets the benefit of the exercise and the enjoyment of being outdoors.

Bad weather could be an issue for scooter and bicycle riders. Louis takes his Toyota RAV 4 to work instead of his scooter when it rains.

Hansen said he figures his commute is so short that rain isn't a deterrent. "I just take a rain jacket," he said.

Automobile traffic is another hazard of bicycling.

"What's scary more than anything else is the way people drive," Hansen said. "I ride back and forth to Stockton, and it's dangerous. People don't know what to do with bicycles."

If scooters or hybrid vehicles aren't appealing to you, or within your budget, and if bicycling isn't your thing, remember that 85 cents will buy a ride on Modesto Area Express.

Fred Cavanah, transit manager for the city, said increased bus ridership could be related to gas prices, but it's difficult to tell.

Ridership rises and falls due to weather conditions, school schedules and the economy, Cavanah said.

Gas prices have a bigger impact on long-distance commuting, he said. He noted that ridership has picked up in the last few months on MAX buses going to and from the Altamont Commuter Express train station in Lathrop-Manteca, and the BART station in Dublin-Pleasanton.

In any event, Cavanah added, the bus is a bargain.

"Hop on the bus and save yourself some money. We do have bike racks on the buses," he said. "You can make a multimodal trip."

Farmers battle public's misconceptions

Growers serving on committee strive to keep others informed

By TIM MORAN

Modesto Bee, Saturday, April 30, 2005

Farming has changed a lot in the past generation, according to Norman Kline, who farms almonds and peaches near Riverbank.

But the public isn't aware of all the things farmers do now to protect the environment, Kline said, and that's why he serves on the Stanislaus County Agriculture Advisory Board.

"The main thing the committee is doing is trying to emphasize that agriculture isn't the problem child everyone thinks it is," Kline said.

He has the advantage of a historical perspective on farming. His family has farmed the Riverbank land since the 1880s.

"I know, being a fourth generation farmer, we are doing a lot of things different than the generation before," Kline said. "We want to preserve the environment, the air and the soil. If we don't protect our land, the quality of the fruit and nuts, then the factory doesn't work anymore."

Kline and several other farmers from around the county serve on the ag advisory committee, along with representatives from the county ag commissioner's office, the University of California Cooperative Extension office, the county Farm Bureau and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors is represented on the committee by Tom Mayfield and Jim DeMartini, who are also farmers.

The committee meets once a month to discuss a wide range of issues facing agriculture, and how the ag community can respond before issues become a problem.

"We put together ideas of what is important to agriculture, so (the county board of supervisors) can form policies to fit ag," said Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Executive Manager Wayne Zipser.

Zipser is chairman of the committee, and refers to it as a sounding board for the county supervisors.

Among the topics the ag committee wrestles with are questions from the public on aspects of the Williamson Act; water and air quality issues; ag burning restrictions; possible revisions to the agriculture element of the county's general plan; genetically modified organisms; and animal confinement.

One topic they don't directly address is land use, Zipser added.

"It's not the committee's place to get into land use issues. The ag element (of the county's general plan) addresses that," he said. "We are very fortunate to have that, not many counties do."

Procedures driven by consumer demand?

The ag element addresses land use in a broad, policy way rather than through individual cases. The ag advisory committee is looking at recommending updates to the ag element, which was written in 1992.

"We want to continue to strengthen that document. They use it as a blueprint for growth. Cities grow in cities, ag stays ag," Zipser said.

The committee is also looking at recommending a county ordinance supporting the use of genetically modified organisms, Zipser said. Some counties have passed initiatives banning GMOs, he noted.

"Loss of GMOs would be devastating to our industry. The use of that is really important to a lot of producers. It lowers the use of pesticides, it's a great management tool. We are discussing it," Zipser said.

The Williamson Act, legislation intended to preserve ag land, draws a lot of questions from the public, Zipser said. They include whether the act is working as it was intended and how a Williamson contract might affect neighboring property.

Correcting the public's misconceptions is a vital role of the committee, Kline said. Complaints from the public illustrate misunderstandings of how farms operate, he said.

"It's hard to explain to a family if they don't think their kids should see a cow delivering a calf," Kline said.

Much of the spraying a farmer does is related to the cosmetic perfection consumers demand at the market, Kline added.

"The public thinks we are out here contaminating the air all the time. I don't want to spend \$45 an acre when I don't need to," he said.

Spraying after a rain for mildew control prevents spots on fruit that cause rejects, Kline said.

While Kline sees the value of the committee as informing the public, Bridget Riddle, another member, said information also flows to the farm community.

Riddle, who farms 1,000 acres of almonds near Newman, said the committee alerts the farm community of issues that affect it.

"It's surprising, all the little things happening that the farmers don't know about," Riddle said. "The committee is helping everyone know what's going on, so we can fix it before it explodes."

An example is the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board's redefinition of cannery processing leftovers as industrial waste, Riddle said.

The redefinition meant the leftovers — things like tomato skins and peach pits — would have to be put in a landfill rather than spread on farmland. The change would have cost area canneries hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

The county managed to mobilize a protest, and the issue is pending before the water board.

Most of all, members say, the ag advisory committee gives farm representatives a chance to research and discuss issues at an early stage, and hopefully, come up with a solution while the situation is still manageable.

More natural-gas buses for Tracy

\$750,000 grant also will provide for quadrupling size of fueling facility

By Rick Brewer

Stockton Record, Friday, April 29, 2005

TRACY -- Bus drivers in Tracy are still breaking in new compressed-natural-gas vehicles, but the city already is looking to augment its fleet.

Thanks to a \$750,000 grant from the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement program, also known as CMAQ, Tracy will add two 30-foot-long, natural-gas-powered buses, quadruple the size of its fueling facility on Tracy Boulevard and begin serving a commuter route sometime this fall.

Rod Buchanan, Tracy's deputy director of Parks and Community Services, said the buses primarily will be used to help offset overcrowding situations that occur at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. weekdays. A transit study showed that nearly half of all public-transit riders on the TRACER system board at those times, which correspond with when people are traveling to and from school.

"Up until the point when this grant became available, we were pretty much limited to providing that extra service with diesel vehicles from our older fleet," Buchanan said. "Now all those miles will go from diesel to CNG, and that's huge because we were a couple years away from being able to change those buses by ourselves."

The CNG fueling facility will grow to eight stations in the corporation yard just south of the Union Pacific railroad tracks. The first two filling stations became operational in December.

Buchanan said TRACER also is trying to line up funds for new modified minivans that will run on natural gas. The intent, he said, is to provide vehicles that can park closer to curbs and will be outfitted to help serve people who utilize motorized scooters. While most wheelchairs can be provided access to the current transit system, Buchanan said most older and/or disabled residents who ride motorized scooters don't have the same ability to enter those vehicles.

"These would be higher-response vehicles because scooters are not compatible with all buses right now," he said, adding that as more people buy scooters for mobility, "It's going to become a huge issue in public transportation."

Right now, the topic of concern is providing enough service on the street while keeping pollution to a minimum. Community activist Susan Sarvey has long lobbied for better air quality in Tracy. She said every new bus helps.

"The more CNG and the less diesel they have, I'm all for it," she said.

Once Tracy officially passed the 50,000 mark in population, Buchanan said the amount of money available to it through the Federal Transportation Administration has tripled. That has meant several upgrades to the TRACER system in the past 2½ years, including the unveiling of its CNG fleet in January.

Asbestos worries widen in foothills

Common recreational activities can sharply raise exposure, new EPA results show.

By Chris Bowman

Sacramento Bee, Monday, May 2, 2005

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that everyday recreation at El Dorado Hills' busiest park and nearby schools can significantly elevate exposure to a particularly toxic kind of asbestos, according to air test results obtained by The Bee.

Simply bicycling the nature trail through Community Park, the recreational hub of the family-oriented foothills community, can kick up the naturally occurring asbestos fibers in concentrations as much as 43 times higher than if there were no activity in the area, the EPA tests showed.

Playing baseball can elevate the asbestos level 22 times.

The hazardous exposure can be raised multiple times even for those too small to swing a bat or ride a bike. Air samplers at the toddlers' playground measured a tenfold increase in asbestos concentration as EPA technicians played on the jungle gym and bounced balls.

Not even pavement was a safe harbor. Playing basketball increased the airborne asbestos concentrations three to four times at Jackson Elementary and Rolling Hills Middle School, the data showed. The outdoor courts apparently were covered with the invisible fibers, deposited by wind or the soles of sneakers, EPA officials said.

The EPA playgrounds study, scheduled for release today, is the first in seven years of foothills asbestos investigations to show that the threat is not limited to the obvious.

The studies stem from a 1998 Sacramento Bee investigation that found home builders and gravel miners in fast-developing western El Dorado County creating a potential public health hazard by digging into asbestos veins and leaving the fibrous minerals exposed. Tests commissioned by The Bee found high concentrations of a particularly hazardous kind of asbestos in settled dust inside homes and in the dust raised by traffic on rural roads graveled with serpentinite, a native rock that hosts the asbestos.

But the new data suggest the danger extends to areas where there are no telltale signs, to neighborhood schools, parks, and even homes.

EPA officials said they found no visible signs of asbestos in the rock outcrops at Community Park, yet relatively high concentrations of the mineral showed up in air samples wherever EPA technicians kicked up dust.

The study also breaks ground by tying the asbestos hazard not to disturbances from bulldozers and graders, but to the individual activities of children and adults.

County and state air pollution regulators have adopted measures to reduce exposure to asbestos released by development, such as wetting down construction sites to keep the minerals' invisible fibers from going airborne.

But results from the playgrounds air tests suggest the protective strategies must be broader and applied to everyday activities: knowing, for example, what's in your neighborhood soil when planting gardens or installing backyard pools; learning when and where to use leaf blowers; re-routing the morning jog to avoid dust.

"The business interests, the schools, the community service providers, the county government and the public all need to get involved in how to address this issue," said Dan Meer, a top EPA official who supervised the study.

"It's similar to living in earthquake country," Meer said. "There are certain things government does and certain things individuals do, and they all come together to try to reduce the risk."

For many in El Dorado Hills, population 31,000, the reports of toxic contamination in their midst have seemed unreal or overblown. The community, after all, is home to gracious homes with views of Folsom Lake and the Sierra, not factories and railyards.

But by quantifying the asbestos exposures in the community's green belts, the EPA report makes the geologic hazard more difficult to discount. It also gives the community the kinds of information needed to devise precautions.

The threat at Community Park, frequented by hundreds of children daily, could be abated significantly, for example, by replacing tainted dirt in the baseball diamonds with clean fill or wetting the infields more often, Meer said.

Asbestos was found in almost all of the more than 400 air samples taken from Oct. 1 through Oct. 11 at the park and schools, Meer said.

The levels were "significantly elevated" in every testing scenario where test crews ran, bicycled and played sports, even under relatively wet conditions that EPA officials had thought would do more to suppress the fibers, Meer said.

The main public health concern related to such exposures is mesothelioma, an inoperable and almost always fatal cancer of the membranes lining the chest and other body cavities, according to Marc Schenker, an international authority on the disease at the UC Davis School of Medicine.

Short exposure - months, not years - can be enough to instigate the disease, though it typically takes 30 or more years before the cancer takes hold, Schenker said. That means children are especially at risk because of their long life expectancy, he said.

Scientists are not sure exactly how non-occupational asbestos exposures such as those in the foothills translate into health risks.

But they know the risk of contracting an asbestos-related disease is tied to exposure, and that the risk increases with the level, frequency and duration of that exposure.

EPA officials said it's up to residents and their government representatives to decide whether and how to further protect the community. But they stressed that something must be done.

"Reasonable and appropriate steps should be taken, and that's going to take an effort by the entire community," Meer said.

The EPA plans to present its findings to the public at 7 p.m. Friday at the Community Park gymnasium, 1021 Harvard Way.

At the same meeting, officials with the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry plan to present a report on the health risks from asbestos exposure at Oak Ridge High School, which is across the street from the park.

Both agencies also plan to have representatives available for questions from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the gym.

EPA officials said they mailed the report of the findings Friday to more than 8,000 area residents and officials. They plan to post the report today on the home page of the agency's San Francisco regional office: www.epa.gov/region09/ <<http://www.epa.gov/region09/>>. Agency officials provided The Bee an advance copy of the findings for publication today.

Last month, EPA staff privately briefed county and local school officials on the results and offered general recommendations for mitigating the public's asbestos exposure, Meer said. Suggestions included increased inspections and tougher enforcement of dust controls at construction sites and more public education about naturally occurring asbestos.

But the study doesn't answer nagging questions: Exactly how do the exposures affect human health? How much is too much?

Risk-assessment experts said the tools they commonly use to predict risk of disease from toxic substances don't work for exposure to asbestos in the general environment.

Those models assume regular, everyday exposures over a 70-year lifetime, typically on a job. In the foothills, exposures to asbestos generally are brief and intermittent, as when a Little Leaguer slides into home at the El Dorado Hills park.

Also, the model is based on a less toxic form of asbestos than the one predominantly found in the foothills study, EPA scientists said.

The asbestos fibers identified were mainly amphibole, specifically tremolite and actinolite, test results show. Most lung disease experts consider amphibole asbestos significantly more potent than the commercially used chrysotile fibers in causing mesothelioma.

The EPA is assembling a panel of independent experts to help the agency better assess the risk.

But public health experts interviewed by The Bee said the uncertainties should not keep the community from taking precautions.

"There is no known safe threshold for asbestos, so why knowingly put your kids in a place known to have an elevated risk of exposure," said Jerrold Abraham, a pathologist at the State University of New York's College of Medicine in Syracuse who has investigated diseases from exposure to tremolite.

"For public health, you are supposed to err on the side of caution," Abraham said.

Some residents already have taken steps.

Vicki Summers, who lives in a large custom-built home in El Dorado Hills, said she has been surfing the Internet and calling environmental officials for advice.

She recently started requiring family and visitors to remove their shoes at the door to prevent them from tracking in asbestos fibers. She plans to remove carpeting because vacuuming can re-suspend fibers. And she has switched from vacuuming to mopping hardwood floors to avoid churning up fibers into the air.

Still, Summers said she worries whether she's doing enough to keep her family safe.

"So do I throw my mop away after every cleanup?" she asked. "What kind of mop should I use?"

Wayne Lowery, manager of Community Park, said he, too, has questions.

Upon learning of the test results last month, Lowery said he immediately halted the use of leaf blowers in the park and got estimates on black-topping New York Creek Nature Trail, which winds two miles through the densely residential heart of El Dorado Hills.

But Lowery said the EPA doesn't know to what extent asbestos was blown into the park over the years from neighboring construction, a problem that could be repeated.

"I hate to spend a lot of the public money on something that doesn't fix the problem," Lowery said.

Jon Morgan, the county's chief environmental enforcer, had a different reaction to the EPA news.

Morgan, who oversees asbestos dust-control laws for the county, slammed the EPA's study as sloppy and alarmist given uncertainties about the actual health risks from this type of exposure.

He issued a press release in late March warning that the test results "may scare the daylights out of every man, woman and child in western El Dorado County." And he advised residents to tune in to his cable TV presentation on the asbestos hazard.

"To be more informed, watch the Foothill 7 production of Comcast television throughout the month of April for an interview with Jon Morgan," the release said.

However, Abraham, Schenker and two other university experts on asbestos who have followed the foothills studies and independently reviewed the EPA's work for The Bee said the agency's methods of sampling and laboratory analysis appeared solid.

"All in all, I am impressed with the professionalism and clear-headedness of the EPA presentation," said Bruce Case, a pathologist and epidemiologist at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, who has investigated health effects from asbestos mining.

"The most important thing folks like EPA and ATSDR can do is to provide people with the information they need to make informed choices, and although they have not always done so in the past years, they do seem to be taking the current situation you have quite seriously."

The EPA is the third public health agency since early April to complete a study of the foothills hazard.

The state Department of Toxic Substances Control on April 8 released a study showing that traffic on rural roads covered with asbestos-containing gravel significantly raises the exposure for residents living within at least 300 feet. The agency advised residents to pave the serpentine-gravel roads and driveways.

Two weeks ago, The Bee reported that the federal ATSDR found that those who played or coached sports or tended fields at Oak Ridge High School likely face an elevated risk of mesothelioma.

These findings prompted the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee last week to approve \$40 million to help communities nationwide identify areas with naturally occurring asbestos and develop protection strategies.

The EPA launched the playgrounds study last year at the request of a resident who suspected the asbestos veins found on the high school grounds also would be found across the street at Community Park.

The results are based on readings from personal air monitors worn by EPA technicians as they mimicked children's activities at the park and three nearby schools: Silva Valley Elementary, Jackson Elementary and Rolling Hills Middle School.

Scientists say the activity-based personal air sampling is a relatively new and technically superior method for assessing exposure to the amphibole fibers.

Earlier tests by state officials involving stationary samplers at dozens of sites in western El Dorado and Placer counties detected hardly any of these fibers.

But by strapping monitors directly on technicians engaged in dust-raising activities, the EPA captured significant concentrations of the amphibole fibers at levels that varied according to how much the technicians were churning up the soil.

EPA technicians, wearing respirators and protective outfits, conducted scripted two-hour simulations of children playing baseball, basketball, four square, even hopscotch. They wore air samplers at the 3-foot-high breathing zone for children and the 5-foot-high zone for adults.

Results were compared with readings from stationary "reference" samplers in areas nearby but uninfluenced by the dust-raising activities.

EPA officials said they will not be conducting further foothills asbestos investigations or cleanups such as the agency did last summer at Oak Ridge High.

"We really think it's up to the communities now to decide what protective measures to take," Meer said. "Local officials are going to have to take the lead."

Good Deeds; Good News

Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, April 30, 2005

Often good deeds and good news go unnoticed because they are not reported or they are too short to be made into news stories. This column provides an avenue to get the good news into the paper.

Here is this week's item:

Tiesiera Ford Mercury in Tulare is donating the prizes for this year's Make a Difference in Air Quality essay and poster contest for Tulare County students.

Students in grades kindergarten through 12 are invited to enter the contest, coordinated by the Tulare County Association of Governments. Prizes for contest winners will include gift certificates and cash for bicycles and bike accessories.

"We are thrilled to be involved in this year's contest," Lonnie Tiesiera said. "What could be more fun for children in our community than to learn about air quality than through art and essay."

The idea of the contest is for students to either tell in an essay or show in a poster how their families have made a difference in air quality in the San Joaquin Valley, Maria Garza of TCAG said.

Essays should run one to two pages and posters should be submitted on 8 1/2-inch-by-11-inch white paper, turned horizontal.

Entries should include contestant's name, address, grade and phone number. Mail to Rita B. & Company, 500 North Willis St., Visalia, CA 93291 by May 24. Entries may also be sent by e-mail to blk@ritab.com.

Contestants may enter in both categories.

Winners will be announced June 3 in the Advance-Register.

Fueling change

More Americans are choosing alternatives to electricity from utilities and gasoline

By Brad Foss, Associated Press

Published in the Los Angeles Daily News

Sunday, May 01, 2005

For people like Ronald Cascio, who fuels his pickup with a soybean oil derivative, and J.D. Doliner, whose home is partly solar powered, the high price of energy isn't a worry.

That doesn't mean their renewable energy preferences come cheap. In fact, it requires an extra financial commitment to wean one's home or vehicle off fossil fuels.

Nonetheless, a growing number of Americans are embracing cleaner technologies and more energy-efficient lifestyles. It makes them feel good and, depending on how high prices rise for traditional energy sources, they say renewables might even make economic sense over the long haul.

"Some people spend their money on jet-skis and boats," explained Cascio, who lives in Berlin, Md. "So, say we spend another \$1,000 a year on fuel than we have to, what's the big deal? We feel good about it. You can't put a price on that."

Cascio regularly spends about \$3.35 a gallon for pure biodiesel, chemically altered soybean oil which is fully compatible with the standard diesel engine in his 1989 Ford truck. But because diesel vehicles are nearly a third more efficient than those that run on gasoline, Cascio said his choice of fuel isn't looking so bad right now that gasoline averages more than \$2.20 a gallon nationwide.

In the case of Doliner, who lives in Arlington, Va., it may take more than three decades for the \$18,000 solar panel system she and her husband installed to pay for itself. But the former venture capitalist said the investment is worth it merely for the "psychic income" she enjoys.

The Doliners recently renovated their home to be about 50 percent more energy efficient, but they still get about two-thirds of their electricity from the grid and rely on natural gas for home heating and to back up their solar water heater.

"But we are having an impact on the number of power plants that are built," Doliner said.

That's right, said Paul Torcellini, who researches residential and commercial building designs for the Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory. Reducing the country's dependence on fossil fuels requires two behavioral changes: adopting renewables and boosting energy efficiency, he said.

"It is much cheaper to save energy than it is to make it, by at least a factor of two to one," Torcellini said. Anyone considering solar panels should buy the most energy-efficient appliances and light bulbs and make sure their walls and windows are properly insulated, he said.

Those interested in biodiesel simply need a diesel-engine vehicle. To show its support of the technology, DaimlerChrysler ships its new Jeep Liberty off the assembly line fueled with B5, which contains 5 percent biodiesel. The most common grade of biodiesel at the pump, B20, is 20 percent biodiesel and 80 percent regular diesel.

The amount of biodiesel sold in the U.S. has grown from 500,000 gallons in 1999 to roughly 30 million gallons in 2004, said Jenna Higgins, a spokeswoman for the National Biodiesel Board. By comparison, the U.S. burns more than 100 billion gallons of gasoline each year and 4 billion gallons of ethanol, a fuel additive derived from corn. The Solar Energy Industry Association estimates there are enough photovoltaic panels installed in the U.S. to power about 286,000 homes, up from 60,000 homes in 2000. A considerably smaller group of enthusiasts - perhaps 20,000 homeowners nationwide - have erected wind turbines on their property, according to the American Wind Energy Association.

Wider acceptance of alternative energy by consumers will require a significant expansion of what is now only a limited patchwork of government refunds and tax incentives.

"If the government subsidized renewable energy the way it does oil and gas, it would be mainstream in no time," said Mark Prebilic, of Poolesville, Md. He received a \$2,000 refund from the state government and a \$2,000 tax credit from the federal government when he installed solar panels in 2001 that now provide about a third of his home's power needs. Prebilic expects to make back the \$13,000 investment he made in a little more than 20 years.

Relatively generous government incentives - and ample sunshine - in California has led to the construction of entire neighborhoods with homes that harness the sun's energy, said Rhone Resch, executive director of the Solar Energy Industry Association in Washington. In Sacramento, Premier Homes sold 95 homes over the past year in the \$250,000-\$450,000 range that were equipped with solar panels for electricity.

Indeed, Americans tanking up with biofuel or installing solar panels are hardly back-to-the-land types denying themselves modern amenities and living off the grid. Doliner's 1,500-square-foot suburban home

is "green," with roof shingles made from recycled tires, carpet made from corn starch and insulation that is partly soy-based.

"Our house isn't made of twigs and granola," she said.

[Commentary in the Fresno Bee, Sunday, May 1, 2005:](#)

Air board needs to embrace the truth

By Bill McEwen / The Fresno Bee

I wouldn't want to play liar's dice against the people who are supposed to be cleaning our dirty air.

That's because the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's governing board can swear that putrid brown haze is good for you and do it with a straight face.

For those of you who haven't spent an afternoon on a bar stool, liars dice is a bluffing test in which honesty isn't always the best policy. In the air district's version of the game, the governing board says it's doing everything possible to improve the air.

Truth is most board members are more interested in keeping their farming and oil friends happy than in solving the serious health problems caused by some of the nation's worst air.

The latest example: The air district's opposition to a bill by state Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden, that would add air, health, planning and legal experts to a board composed exclusively of elected officials. The bill also would give the district's three largest cities -- Fresno, Bakersfield and Stockton -- permanent slots on the board, instead of being represented five of every 15 years as they are now.

Given the air district's well-documented failure to come up with plans to fix the problem and its equally well-documented failure to meet air-quality standards, you'd think the board would welcome help.

Not only does the board want to remain a closed club, it claims it's doing a great job.

"We question the rationale for this legislation, since there is no evidence presented that the current system is broken," wrote air board Chairman Thomas W. Mayfield to the state Senate Environmental Quality Committee last month.

Not broken? Then how come one in six Fresno County children has asthma? How come there are an estimated 1,100 premature deaths in the region each year because of particulate-matter pollution? How come the air at mile-high Shaver Lake is as dirty as the air at a Fresno street corner?

The board's answer is that it only regulates stationary pollution sources and that 70% of emissions come from mobile sources such as cars.

While the board's math is correct, it skirts the fact that the district can indirectly control mobile pollution by imposing fees on sprawlcreating construction.

That money, for example, could be turned into grants or rebates to help citizens and public agencies purchase clean-burning vehicles. Or the fees could fund mass transit.

We've waited nearly two years for the board to start a developer fee program that helps our lungs without harming the economy. All we've gotten is hot air.

Passage of Machado's bill would change the board's dynamic. Instead of being represented by politicians whose biggest concern is campaign donations, we'd have experts asking tough questions. The appointees would be required to live in the air district. Two would be appointed by the governor; one each by the Assembly speaker and the Senate rules committee.

Other air districts in the state have benefited from public participation. It's time for our board to quit playing liar's dice with our health and finally embrace the truth.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sat., April 30, 2005:](#)

Blowing in the wind

More Valley schools will be flying flags to mark daily air quality.

More and more Valley schools will be adding flags to the U.S. and California banners they fly. The new flags will tell the students, staff and neighbors what to expect in the way of air quality each day. It's a vivid and useful method for driving home the message about the Valley's polluted air.

It's especially appropriate for schools to fly the flags, since children are by far the most vulnerable among us to the ravages of dirty air. Some 16% of Valley children have symptoms of asthma, about twice the national average.

Young, growing lungs are particularly vulnerable to the fine particles that form the bulk of winter pollution — in the middle of the school year — and that raises the rates of cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses of all sorts.

On the worst of our air days, children are routinely restricted in their outdoor activities. No recess, no physical education classes — even athletic practices and contests have been postponed because of poor air quality. So it's fitting that the schools should fly flags to alert everyone to the dangers that simple breathing can sometimes pose in the Valley.

Schools are slowly getting the sets of flags they will fly each day — yellow, orange or red flags to indicate increasing levels of danger. In Visalia, all 34 schools have the flags, and began using them last year. The Fresno Unified School District has received a grant to pay for 125 sets of flags; Clovis Unified will start using them next year at a couple of schools. Schools in Merced and Tulare have started flying the flags as well, and many others. All this comes of the heels of another bad report card for the Valley's air from the American Lung Association, which has once again — this has come to have a dreary familiarity — ranked several Valley cities and counties among the worst in the nation for air quality.

Four of the country's five dirtiest metropolitan areas are in the Valley. Only Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside ranked ahead of Bakersfield, Fresno-Madera, Visalia-Porterville and Merced.

We may see those flags flying in front of our schools for a very long time.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, May 1, 2005:](#)

Help on the way

Federal funds should help solve nagging problem of grape stakes.

Valley farmers will get a bit of help with a nagging problem soon, with federal funds coming to help pay for the disposal of old grape stakes that are piling up in the region's vineyards.

The stakes were pulled out as economic trends shifted land out of grape production. But the stakes have been treated with chromated copper arsenate, which is associated with cancer and can also cause liver and kidney problems. That means they can't be burned or chipped, because that would spread toxic chemicals into the Valley's soil, water and air. They can only be sent to designated landfills for disposal.

But that's costly, and that's where the \$450,000 in federal funds will come in handy. The money will be paid out to farmers who apply on a 50% matching basis. Similar sums could be available for the next six years.

That's good, because officials believe there may be as many as 16.6 million treated stakes stashed all around the eight counties that make up San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

That would put the total weight at about 225,000 tons. It'll take more than a couple of pickup truck loads to haul all of that off.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Monday, May 2, 2005:](#)

Sierra Club steers straight

WHEN PEOPLE THINK about the Sierra Club, the nation's oldest environmental organization, they don't link it with issues like immigration and population growth. That makes sense when you're busily pushing for clean air, water, resource conservation and other ecologically driven issues around the globe.

So it's a good sign when a grassroots organization actually sticks to its roots. And that's what the venerable San Francisco-based group did last week, when it overwhelmingly rejected a plan to support

immigration controls -- a pursuit best left to other agencies and organizations designed for such a purpose.

A small network of activists within the Sierra Club has engaged in a campaign to reduce migration to the United States under the banner of rampant consumerism. The thinking is that when immigrants come into the country they quickly adapt to the American penchant for consumption, exploiting natural resources along the way.

As Sierra Club president Larry Fahn said: "(Immigration) attracts people with agendas other than the environment" and would threaten longstanding alliances with labor and other groups.

Besides, pollution has never respected borders and limiting immigration is hardly a proven environmental remedy.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, May 2, 2005:](#)

Leaf blowers a villain in Valley's air pollution

Every year air pollution costs our state billions of dollars in health care, crop and building damages.

Leaf blowers are two-stroke engines that burn a gasoline-oil mixture, which is toxic and polluting. Leaf blowers give off particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons.

A single leaf blower gives off as much smog as 17 cars. A leaf blower creates 2.6 pounds of particulate matter (PM10) per hour of use. Leaf blowers kick up street dust that includes lead, organic carbon, elemental carbon, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, nickel and mercury.

Fine PM2.5 particles and smaller are emitted by leaf blowers and can penetrate the human defense system, causing serious health problems.

Here in the Valley, leaf blowers lift not only street dust but the pesticides and herbicides sprayed all around. Every day we inhale emissions that are potentially dangerous to our health. We need to put stricter emission standards on leaf blowers and other two-stroke engines. One simple way to clean up leaf-blower emissions is to use cleaner burning fuel that is much less polluting and much safer for our health.

Steven Aaron, Fresno

[Modesto Bee, letter to the editor, 5/2/05](#)

Down with that smelly tallow plant

Modesto Tallow Co. has got to go. No more controversy and politics in its favor. The stench is disgusting and unhealthy. Why, why, why is this stink still here?

Out-of-town visitors are appalled when told the smell comes from animal carcasses, especially on a hot summer day. This is an intolerable situation, similar to a Third World country. This has been a heated issue that keeps going away without being resolved.

There have been nightclubs put out of business for noise; the city wants to get rid of the medical marijuana store in fear of stoners milling about; but forget the kids going to school in the stench, or local diners in the area, the elderly and all the businesses, homeowners and residents.

They said it was better and not as smelly. What a lie. Get rid of it.

STEFANIE VARGAS

Modesto