

Merced Spare the Air Day to help Bakersfield heat; emissions expected to hit South Valley hard

By Scott Pesznecker, Merced Sun-Star

also in the Modesto Bee

Wednesday., July 13, 2005

Merced County residents are being asked to drive less today to help clear the air in Bakersfield.

The San Joaquin Air Quality Management District deemed today a "Spare the Air Day" in Merced County. The alert is issued when a region's air quality is unsafe for breathing.

The air quality in Merced County was forecasted to rank 129 today on the air district's numeric scale.

A ranking between 101 and 150 means the air is unsafe for sensitive groups, such as people with asthma or the elderly.

However, today's alert was issued with the city of Bakersfield in mind, said Janelle Schneider, an air district spokeswoman. Air quality down south is expected to rank at 164 today, and air ranked above 150 is unsafe for anyone to breathe.

"Part of the reason for this is to make people aware of the emissions they are creating that will end up down where it's really bad," Schneider said.

Air quality officials asked people to cut out driving whenever possible on a Spare the Air Day.

The summer smog season, which started early in June, is fueled by the pollutant ozone. The pollutant often spawns from a chemical reaction between vehicle or business emissions, sunlight and heat.

Until now, Merced County has had better-than-usual air quality, ranking as moderate nine times so far this year, and unsafe for sensitive groups on July 1 -- the smog season's first Spare the Air Day. The county hasn't had a day when the air has been dangerous for everyone. By comparison, the county had 38 Spare the Air Days in 2003 and five such days last year.

Air quality and weather officials said the spring and early summer's cool weather helped suppress ozone levels.

But Jeff Myers, a meteorologist with the San Joaquin Valley office of the National Weather Service, said the recent hot weather isn't leaving anytime soon.

"There's not much change through the weekend, maybe a little cooldown starting next week, maybe Monday," Myers said. "But only back into the upper 90s, if we're lucky."

Officials tout eco-friendly budget during visit

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, July 13, 2005

The governor signed an environmentally friendly budget this week, according to state officials visiting Kern Tuesday to discuss local impact.

Statewide we'll see lower-emission school buses, hydrogen fueling stations along the "hydrogen highway," an environmental curriculum for schools and a steady stream of money to help industries replace outdated diesel engines.

"(Anemic environmental budgets are) going to be significantly more robust," said Jerry Martin, communications director for the state air board.

The budget includes \$88.5 million for cleaner diesel engines, about \$10 million of which goes to the San Joaquin Valley air district to replace old tractors, earth movers, mining equipment and locomotives. The program, named after scientist and early clean-air advocate Carl Moyer, pays the difference in price between a dirty engine and one that uses cleaner technology.

The budget guarantees money for the Carl Moyer Program through 2015, stabilizing what has been an uncertain funding source since the late 1990s. The valley's \$10 million allotment is the most it's ever gotten from the program.

Carl Moyer primarily helps farmers, builders and miners, who file grant applications with the valley air district.

State officials also touted the budget's \$6.5 million to kick-start the "Hydrogen Highway," helping construct hydrogen filling stations in anticipation of clean-burning cars. The budget also includes \$25 million for cleaner school buses, \$500,000 to study climate change and \$3.5 million to draft an environmental school curriculum.

For farmers, the round table was an opportunity to discuss agricultural burning, which is set to be phased out by next year. Without burning, farmers will have to haul away clippings in diesel trucks -- and those at Tuesday's round table questioned the net benefit to our air.

State officials will look into it, they said.

Local environmentalists were not at the meeting, but others have questioned the governor's last-minute vetoes, many of which targeted funding for natural resource management.

"We're glad there is money in there for cleaner school buses ... (but) we think the environment took a disproportionate hit," said Anne Notthoff with the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco.

Briefs

S.F. Chronicle,. Wed., July 13, 2005

FRESNO (AP) — Environmentalists, air regulators and dairy industry representatives faced off during a public hearing on a seemingly mundane question that means much to the polluted Central Valley: just how much do dairy cows contribute to bad air quality?

The valley's air regulators recently pegged the number at 20.6 pounds per cow a year — an estimate environmentalists consider too low, and the dairy industry considers too high.

The argument that there is a "lack of science" is just a tactic to delay dairy regulation, Tom Frantz, president of Association of Irrigated Residents, said during the packed Monday meeting.

Dairy cow emissions contribute to the smog that plagues the area, leading to high asthma rates and other lung disease.

But dairy industry representatives like Denise Mullinax of Hilmar Cheese Co. said her industry isn't looking for a "get out of jail free card."

She did tell the air regulators, however, that the "path you're going down is not scientifically sound."

Under a legal settlement between the city and the dairy industry, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has to come up with an estimate by August 1.

Air regulators will continue to take public comment until July 25.

Gas it right into the fast lane

With natural gas, that is. The lean, clean Honda Civic GX is too principled to sit in traffic. (It also couldn't care less about power, looks or having fun.)

By Dan Neil, Los Angeles Times, July 13, 2005

GOOD sirs, sheath your Porsche Turbos and Dodge Vipers and Saleen S7s. The Honda Civic GX is the fastest automobile on the freeway today. You don't stand a chance.

Because it burns super-clean compressed natural gas, the Civic GX permits solo drivers to use the high-occupancy-vehicle lane without the drudgery of human companionship. The Civic GX trails a series of baffling abbreviations behind it - such as Alternative Fuel Vehicle (AFV) and

Super Low Emission Vehicle (SULEV). The important thing to know is that, although there used to be a fair number of alt-fuel clean vehicles that qualified for HOV access - including electric vehicles - they are all but gone. GM and Ford, the two big players in compressed natural gas fleet vehicles, ended their programs last year.

As far as the market is concerned, the Civic GX has the diamond lane pretty much all to its lonesome.

And that's why it's the fastest. In the ordinary crush of L.A. commuting traffic, the gasping, 100-horsepower Civic GX will leave the brawniest 12-cylinder hypercars steaming in their own impotence.

Access to the HOV lane is highly coveted. Though the state would like to grant access to high-mileage hybrid cars such as the Toyota Prius, the federal government - which has authority by way of the federal highway purse strings - says no. Should that change, the Prius, the Honda Civic and Insight hybrids would all be eligible, while lower-mileage hybrids such as the Ford Escape and Lexus 400H would remain mired in traffic.

There are many good and high-minded reasons to own a Civic GX. The American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, using a method that accounts for total environmental impact, ranks the GX the greenest vehicle on the market, above even the vaunted Prius. Compressed natural gas - or CNG - technology is well understood, safe and reliable. Also, natural gas although still a fossil fuel and messy to extract - is far cleaner than liquid petroleum, which requires energy-intensive refinement and shipping. Also, unlike Arab oil, natural gas is produced domestically and its supplies are projected to last for decades. At the margins, natural gas is renewable, though the economics of so-called bio-gas are debatable.

So why aren't CNG vehicles such as the GX, and not hybrids and hydrogen, the caped crusaders of the green-car movement? Infrastructure.

Because of the scarcity of refueling stations and the vehicles' limited range - the Civic GX is good for about 200 miles per fill up - CNG vehicles have been largely limited to fleet service, because fleets can provide their own fueling stations at a central depot. The relatively few private owners who drive CNG vehicles often have had to deal with spotty service, long lines and inconvenience (many CNG stations require dedicated charge cards). And they can't range freely from metropolitan areas where stations are plentiful.

There was a time when CNG backers expected the infrastructure to expand, but that never happened. The infrastructure issue pretty much foreclosed CNG's use in private vehicles.

Honda is skinning the infrastructure cat a little differently. In April, the company began non-fleet retail sales in California of the Civic GX paired with a home refueling station, the Phill. Built by a Canadian company called FuelMaker, the Phill station is a small compressor that connects to a home's residential gas supply. GX owners can plug the pressure nozzle into the car and fill up overnight. That means drivers can have access to the HOV lane without the anxiety of finding fuel. They can fill up at the mother ship, just like the meter-reading minions of parking enforcement.

Let's run some numbers, shall we? The Phill station costs \$3,400, and installation runs about \$1,000, though a lot depends on the kind of plumbing required. There is a \$2,000 incentive from the state's air-quality agencies to defray the cost of the first 400 Phill stations sold. So, in California at least, the Phill's out-of-pocket costs are about \$2,400. There is also a \$2,000 tax break on the purchase of the Civic GX, which retails for \$21,760 with anti-lock brakes.

Why would you bother? Because home-supplied natural gas is cheap - something in the neighborhood of \$1-\$1.50 per gasoline-gallon equivalent. In other words, home CNG is half the

price of pump gas.

Let's assume a year's driving is 12,000 miles and fuel economy of 25 miles to the gallon. At \$2.50 per gallon of gas, that's an annual cost of \$1,200. With CNG, your annual cost drops to \$600. You would recoup the expense of the Phill station in four years. If, however, you had a not-unusual 100-mile daily commute - figure about 20,000 miles annually - your fuel savings would amount to \$1,000 per year.

To sum up: the Civic GX and Phill station offer the cleanest, least guilt-ridden transportation on the market, as well as huge fuel cost savings, and HOV access, which can add years to your life otherwise lost in aggravation.

Where's the downside? As I said, there are many good reasons to own a Civic GX, but driving pleasure is not among them. Styled like the dull end of a spoon, this car is boring on a scale that calls for parsecs. Cloth seats, a dinky two-speaker stereo, a trunk eaten up by the CNG cylinder, steel wheels and a 1.7-liter four-cylinder under the hood - or an asthmatic squirrel - the GX could school Savonarola on privation. The car's CVT gearbox howls for mercy at 80 miles per hour, which is how fast you have to drive sometimes so you don't get plowed under in the HOV lane. I suppose a CNG Corvette would be out of line?

Cynics might also point out that Honda's GX program amounts to only a few hundred cars and that the cars' HOV access expires in 2007 unless extended by lawmakers. The whole endeavor has a feeling of being played out after the two-minute warning.

And yet, for penny-pinching clean-air fanatics who have arduous daily commutes, don't like music or driving and are too anti-social to carpool, the Civic GX is the ultimate automobile, the fastest wheel in the urban gerbil cage. And I mean that in a good way.

2005 Honda Civic GX

Powertrain: CNG 1.7-liter SOHC inline four cylinder engine, continuously variable transmission (CVT), front-wheel drive

Horsepower: 100 at 6,100 rpm

Torque: 98 pound-feet at 4,000 rpm

Curb weight: 2,685 pounds

0-60 mph: 12 seconds

Wheelbase: 103.1 inches

Overall length: 175.4 inches

EPA fuel economy: 30 miles per gallon equivalent city, 34 mp-GGE highway.

Final thoughts: The fastest car you'll ever pass

EPA Is Faulted as Failing to Shield Public From Toxins

A federal report says the environmental agency has insufficient data on chemical dangers.

By Marla Cone, Los Angeles Times, July 13, 2005

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is failing to protect the public from tens of thousands

of toxic compounds because it has not gathered data on the health risks of most industrial chemicals, according to a report by the investigative arm of Congress to be released today.

The report by the Government Accountability Office found that chemical companies had provided health data to the EPA for about 15% of chemicals that had been introduced over the past 30 years.

In addition, the report said the EPA had sought information about health dangers for fewer than 200 of the tens of thousands of industrial compounds that had been in use since before the late 1970s.

"EPA does not routinely assess existing chemicals, has limited information on their health and environmental risks, and has issued few regulations controlling such chemicals," the report said. The investigators concluded that the environmental agency "lacks sufficient data to ensure" that the public is protected.

About 80,000 chemicals are used by U.S. industries, and scientific studies suggest that many pose health threats, such as cancer, birth defects, altered sex hormones and damage to developing brains. Included are many substances - such as flame retardants in furniture and electronics, phthalates in cosmetics and various chemicals in plastics - that people are exposed to in everyday products.

The investigators recommended that Congress amend the Toxic Substances Control Act, the 1976 law that regulated industrial chemicals, to give the environmental agency more power to require companies to provide health data about chemicals and to restrict their use.

"EPA has had difficulty proving that chemicals pose unreasonable risks and has regulated few existing chemicals under TSCA," the report said. The current law is "unlikely to address more than the most serious chemical risks," the accountability office investigators concluded.

In recent years, tests by federal health officials and others have found that human bodies contain hundreds of chemicals. Such findings have drawn attention to the toxics law and prompted Sens. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-N.J.), James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) to ask the accountability office last year to investigate the the environmental agency's efforts to regulate chemicals.

Lautenberg plans today to unveil the proposed Child, Worker and Consumer Safe Chemicals Act, a bill he wrote with Jeffords that would strengthen the toxics law. Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) plans to introduce the same bill in the House.

"In the GAO report, we will learn that [the toxics law] is an ineffective and burdensome law that often fails to protect our families," Lautenberg said. "In 29 years, the agency has formally requested health information on just 200 chemicals - out of about 80,000, according to the report."

The findings echo the concerns of many environmental scientists and health activists.

"The existing law is broken," said Andy Igrejas of the National Environmental Trust in Washington. "It doesn't protect the American public from toxic chemicals. It's arguably our weakest environmental law, and people don't realize that."

The law "tells EPA that before you can regulate the chemical, you have to amass enormous evidence to prove it guilty. But EPA doesn't have the authority to get that evidence," Igrejas said.

EPA officials, in a written response to the report, said they were "proud of the progress that we have made in protecting human health and the environment." In the last 20 years, the agency has

regulated more than 1,600 chemicals, and a similar number has been voluntarily withdrawn by companies, wrote Susan B. Hazen, the agency's principal deputy assistant administrator. She wrote that amendments to the law were unnecessary because "the EPA believes that there is currently strong legal authority" to require testing of compounds.

Representatives of the chemical industry were unavailable for comment Tuesday. But in the past, they have said that they subject chemicals to rigorous safety tests and that a stronger law is unnecessary.

In 1998, the Chemical Manufacturers Assn., now the American Chemistry Council, initiated a voluntary program to provide information on the basic properties of about 2,800 chemicals used in high volumes. But the federal report said it was "unclear whether the program will produce sufficient information for EPA to determine chemicals' risks to human health and the environment."

The environmental agency has not banned any existing industrial chemical since 1989, when it tried to phase out asbestos. The asbestos ban was overturned in 1991 when a federal appeals court ruled that the EPA had not proved it was necessary to protect human health. Since then, the agency has relied mostly on voluntary efforts by chemical companies.

The report comes as Europe debates a controversial proposal, called REACH, that would require extensive testing of chemicals. The Bush administration and U.S. chemical industry have lobbied against the proposal, saying it is unworkable, would cost the industry billions of dollars and could lead to bans on important compounds.

The accountability office report does not endorse the European Union proposal. But it suggests several options for Congress to strengthen the U.S. law by requiring testing before a chemical is introduced and reducing the burden of proof needed to regulate a chemical.

Many U.S. environmental experts agree. Joel A. Tickner, associate professor at the University of Massachusetts' School of Health & Environment, said the United States "is behind the curve" and "needs a fundamental new chemicals policy" similar to the EU proposal.

[Modesto Bee commentary, Wednesday, July 13, 2005:](#)

Move smelly Modesto Tallow, because growth won't stop

By Claude Delphia

Life is about planning, good versus bad. That's why we have zoning laws and planning commissions to control the kinds of things that can be built and where they are allowed.

Extremely bad planning happened on Crows Landing Road near the Modesto tallow plant.

I can remember as a kid in the 1940s, when we had to drive in from Patterson to shop in Modesto. We had to come in on Crows Landing Road past Modesto Tallow. I can still remember the stench. Some things you don't forget. Now we have thousands of people living with that stench. How did this happen?

Some argue that the tallow plant was there first. So? Does that mean that there should have been no planning to mitigate its offensive odors? "It was there first" is always a good ploy when you want to divert the question of solutions for a serious problem.

The legal problems of Modesto Tallow are documented. Because it was there first, does that mean its offenses are OK? Not if communities are to be governed by what's good for the majority, or even the minority.

Who allowed this problem to reach its current proportions? Setting aside the legal problems, the answer is our Board of Supervisors. Starting more than 50 years ago, they allowed the construction of houses and a school near Modesto Tallow. Since I remember the smell from my youth, I'm sure the then-supervisors knew exactly what was happening on Crows Landing Road.

They chose to ignore the fact they were allowing houses and a school near a smelly business operation. Why? The usual reasons always apply: Landowners made money selling lots. Some things never change.

You would think no one would buy houses in that area, but many no doubt bought a house on a good day when the stench wasn't present. And if you think this kind of "mistake" isn't still happening, consider the people in north Modesto who didn't realize their minimansions would back up to a major traffic artery.

The problem is a long-term planning failure, mixed with some greed and lack of foresight.

It's time for our county to bite the bullet and get Modesto Tallow moved out of there. Not only are the houses and school not going to move, but the Crows Landing Road area is growing fast with more houses, as well as with business and industry. There's no rolling that back.

The longer the county waits, the more it is going to cost. Stanislaus gave up too easily when it considered moving the plant onto county land in 1999. It had picked a piece of property near Crows Landing Road and I-5 that would affect the communities of Patterson, Crows Landing and Newman. But there are many sites in the county where this plant would affect virtually no one.

It's time to get it moved. Isn't this what redevelopment is for?

Living in Ceres, I just hope that foul air won't be coming my way.

Delphia, now a resident of Ceres, served eight years on the Patterson Planning Commission.