

Madera schools get 6 new natural gas-powered buses

By Charles McCarthy

The Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2006

MADERA - A brief parking-lot ceremony Tuesday welcomed six new 84-passenger buses, powered by compressed natural gas instead of conventional diesel, to Madera Unified School District's fleet.

The district's transportation director, Sam Armentrout, hailed the shiny yellow buses costing about \$145,000 each as a step toward cleaner air for the smog-plagued Central Valley.

"They don't drive any differently," Armentrout said before the ceremony. "The big difference is the emissions out of the tailpipe."

The natural-gas buses will produce less particulate pollution. That is expected to especially benefit children whose lungs might be more vulnerable to sooty diesel exhaust.

"That's what diesel produces -- particularly older diesel engines," Armentrout said about the smelly fumes.

The new buses will join Madera Unified's already rolling fleet of 76 conventionally powered buses. Each day, pupils are taken to and from schools in urban Madera and the surrounding rural area.

Armentrout, a Madera City Council member, said the fume-free buses were financed mostly with federal clean-air grant money. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District covered about 10% of the bus bill with a matching local grant.

"I think that school buses are symbolic of the whole public education system," said Madera Unified Superintendent Dr. Julie O'Kane. "We have to make sure that children get to school on time so they're ready to learn."

The new buses will be refueled at Tesei Petroleum on Gateway Drive. Madera Unified doesn't have its own pressurized gas refueling system.

Each bus will run about 350 miles on a full tank, Armentrout estimated.

Users offered quieter blowers

Machines a way to bypass noise

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer

LA Daily News, Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2006

LA CRESCENTA - In an effort to rid residential neighborhoods of air and noise pollution, air quality officials Tuesday launched the first in a series of leaf blower exchanges for landscapers, gardeners and other yard work enthusiasts.

About 300 people paid \$200 each to ditch their outdated, ear-splitting, cough-inducing machines for quieter, low-polluting brands that retail for \$460. The event, sponsored by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, took place at Toro's Lawnmower, Garden and Chain Saw Center off Foothill Boulevard.

"A lot of professional landscapers and gardeners know they get a lot of flak about blowers," said Laura Toro, owner of the garden shop. "Anything that offers cleaner fuel, that is quieter and is very lightweight will make a lot of difference."

Dan Andrus was among those who made the switch.

"It's quieter," said the landscaper, one of the last customers of the day. "You're not going to have the ear problems in 20 years."

Andrus, who runs All American Landscape in La Crescenta, said shelling out an extra \$200 for the tool was a good compromise to meet various regulations on leaf blowers still imposed in some cities across the state.

"I think the biggest danger (of a ban) is landscapers are going to go back to hoses and waste precious water," he said.

The AQMD's goal is to retire 1,500 blowers and cut 14 tons of pollution. A typical backpack-style blower can pollute the air as much as 80 new cars driven during that same year, experts say. Five more exchanges will be held throughout Southern California in the next few days.

Garden equipment generates about 6 percent of the region's smog-forming pollutants, compared to the 76 percent created by vehicles, including cars, trucks, trains and planes, AQMD officials have said. In recent years, state regulators have cut pollution from lawn mowers and chain saws as well.

Barbara Alvarez, owner of Golden State Landscape Inc. in Valinda, said she purchased a half-dozen blowers seven months ago, and already her crew of 10 has given them a thumbs-up.

Alvarez has worked to get statewide legislation that would make it illegal for cities to ban blowers, an essential tool for gardeners, she said.

"It is an excellent blower," she said. "I haven't had one complaint from any customer. I myself can stand next to it and have a conversation."

China Toughens Stance on Environmental Protection

By Ching-Ching Ni, Times Staff Writer
Los Angeles Times, February 22, 2006

BEIJING - Turning a blind eye to environmental degradation could now cost Chinese officials their jobs, state media announced Tuesday. However, environmentalists raised concerns about enforcement of the new regulations.

The government announcement comes in the wake of a string of embarrassing pollution incidents that forced Beijing to grapple with the downside of a runaway economy: its effect on the ecosystem and public health.

"By cracking down on corruption and environmental destruction, we are correcting the wrong principle of pursuing fast economic growth by sacrificing environmental quality," Li Yufu, vice minister of supervision, told the Chinese media.

Local corruption has been a major stumbling block for the central government's effort to rein in environmental violators.

The new rules say that officials who fail to shut down projects that cause widespread pollution, reduce or cancel fees imposed on those who illegally discharge industrial waste, or cover up environmental accidents will be disciplined. The exact nature of the punishment was unclear. The government said it would range from disciplinary warnings to dismissal.

Environmentalists said the announcement was a good sign that Beijing recognizes the urgency of adopting a more sustainable development policy.

"The Chinese government knows if we continue at this pace of development, the harm to the environment can only be greater," said Kevin May, toxics campaign manager with Greenpeace China based in the southern city of Guangzhou. "There have always been laws, but very little enforcement. Now we have new laws. How will they be different? That remains to be seen."

To show that this time it means business, Beijing also last week announced Cabinet-level directives to clean up the country's damaged environment in the next 15 years. At the top of the agenda is improvement of the nation's water, [air and soil quality](#). By the government's own admission, most of China's rivers are polluted and more than a third of the country is ravaged by acid rain.

"The issue of pollution has become a 'blasting fuse' of social instability," Zhou Shengxian, director of the State Environmental Protection Administration, or SEPA, told the New China News Agency last week, referring to the rising number of public protests over the country's environmental problems.

Zhou's predecessor was forced to resign after a chemical spill into the Songhua River in November caused millions of people in northern China to go without drinking water for days. The river flows into Russia, and the accident raised fear there about contamination.

Since fall, SEPA has tried to flex more political muscle and rectify its image as a toothless watchdog without enforcement power. This month the agency demanded that toxic spills be reported within an hour. The Songhua spill was not made public for days, adding to the difficulty of crisis management.

SEPA threatened this month to shut down 11 companies and 10 factories, including riverfront smelters and chemical plants, if they failed to control contaminants.

But the toxic discharges continue. Since the November spill, SEPA has received about 45 reports of pollution accidents, according to state media. Last week, industrial waste from a power plant was flushed into a river in Sichuan province, forcing the shutdown of water supplies to 28,000 residents for at least four days.

To help the agency in its work, the central government plans to link local officials' performance ratings not just to their ability to promote economic development but also environmental protection.

"China went from the relentless pursuit of class struggle to GDP [gross domestic product] growth; now it's environmental protection and the so-called green GDP," said Zhou Xiao-zheng, a sociologist at People's University in Beijing. "Officials who want to get promoted will follow whatever the new slogan is. Why not? They don't want to breathe bad air or drink dirty water either."

[Modesto Bee, Editorial, Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2006:](#)

Contaminant designation reminds us of secondhand smoke's danger

The California Air Resources Board quietly pulled off another first three weeks ago. The board declared secondhand smoke a toxic air contaminant.

The board's action puts tobacco smoke in the same category as the toxic fumes that spew from car tailpipes or factory chimneys. It's the only such designation in the world.

For years, state air regulators have been required to monitor and reduce exposure to those harmful pollutants. Now they must devise a means to reduce human exposure to secondhand smoke.

The science behind the tobacco designation is irrefutable. According to the air resources board, smokers release 40 tons of nicotine into the air in California each year, 365 tons of soot and ash and 1,900 tons of carbon dioxide. Beyond the millions of smokers who die or are sickened by their own addiction, the smoke they send into the air has been linked to 400 additional lung cancer deaths a year in nonsmokers and 31,000 asthma attacks in children. Women exposed to smoke are far more likely to get breast cancer -- though tobacco companies refute the data.

Still, regulating tobacco use any further will be a tough challenge. Smoking in public indoor settings -- including restaurants bars, offices and other workplaces -- already is banned. Even outdoor smoking is restricted. Most of the state's major outdoor sports arenas either ban smoking or severely limit it.

The next major challenge might be to restrict or ban smoking in private settings where nonsmokers cannot escape harmful exposure to the smoke. For instance, it might be permissible to ban smoking in an apartment that has a common ventilation system with other apartments. Some jurisdictions have created nonsmoking sections in senior apartment complexes, or banned smoking in common areas. Such restrictions are expected to expand in coming years.

Bills to ban smoking in cars when young children are present have failed in the Legislature several times. But the air board's most recent action might give the proposal new impetus.

If nothing else, designating smoke as a contaminant should remind smokers that their habit can hurt a lot of people -- not just themselves.

[Tulare Advance-Register, Editorial, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2006:](#)

Global warming ceases to be myth

Environmental scientists no longer disagree on whether the Earth's climate is turning warmer. Global warming has become an accepted fact in the scientific community. The only disagreement is whether the damage done so far is irreparable or reversible.

The evidence — in rising sea levels, melting of polar ice, changes in wildlife behavior, increase in ocean temperatures — all point to something profound changing the climate of our planet.

So why is the public so hard to convince?

Some members of the public continue to declare that global warming is some kind of liberal conspiracy to separate Americans from their creature comforts. Those who consider global warming bogus seize on any short-term data they can to prove that the world is actually growing colder.

Sorry, the evidence is piling up the other way. It includes a report last week that the glaciers in Greenland are melting twice as fast as they have previously.

It's odd that global warming could be the most intractable problem of all. This is not just a regional or national phenomenon. This is a global force, and when it gathers enough momentum, it could reach a point where it could not be stopped. Where once the trend was decades or even centuries in developing, recent evidence of global warming indicate that changes are now taking place annually.

Even so, the change is so undetectable to most people in the course of their daily affairs that it is unnoticeable. A temperature drop of 10 degrees over the course of a day is palpable. A drop in average annual global temperature of 1 degree over the course of 10 years is not detectable to humans. But it is already doing enough damage that we will feel it.

Another issue with a problem such as global warming is that there is little that an individual can do that would be effectual, or even a large group of people. This isn't going to be solved by everybody turning their thermostats down. Global warming requires global solutions, a commitment by nations, industries and scientific agencies.

What can individuals do? In the first place, they can become educated about the problem and accept that global climate changes are taking place that could be detrimental to our planet. They can also accept that, as in the solution to any other environmental problem, it will require a change in behavior. They can support official research and initiative into solutions, because no nation will embark on strategies to solve global warming if they don't even believe their citizens think there is a problem.

Last week, The Talk of the Town lecture series at College of the Sequoias in Visalia sponsored a forum on Global Warming and the Central Valley, featuring keynote speaker Erin Rogers of the Union of Concerned Scientists. As a community, we need more public discussions and teaching sessions of that kind to take place. The more we talk about the weather, the sooner we'll be willing to do something about it.

Eventually, the evidence will be overwhelming. Some scientists predict it will be cataclysmic, with floods, hurricanes, drought and other natural disasters threatening the planet. Earth can't afford to wait that long.