

Air officials want tougher fireplace rules

Changes would target fine-particle pollution

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Valley air officials want to triple the number of days that residents are banned from burning wood in their fireplaces -- and it's not because the no-burn days are popular.

The bans, which began five years ago, have been a major reason the region achieved the federal standard for coarse specks of pollution, called PM-10, such as soot and ash from fireplaces.

Now, the staff of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District wants a far stricter fireplace rule to help control more dangerous fine particles -- PM-2.5, which include the tiniest bits of soot and ash.

Five years ago, the district's first no-burn rule encountered waves of protest from residents who objected to the \$50 fines and the intrusion into their lives.

That sentiment still is alive. People who prefer to warm their homes with wood fires are complaining about the latest proposal.

"We cannot afford to pay \$500 a month for PG&E," Sandi Murray of Bakersfield wrote in an e-mail to air officials this month. "I see that you guys have gotten an inch from us homeowners, and now you are trying to simply cut off burning in our fireplaces."

The district proposal would ban burning on 25 percent to 30 percent of the days from November to the end of February in the counties with more pollution, officials said.

Under the current rule, Kern and Fresno counties are ordered to stop burning on an average of fewer than 10 percent of the days each season, according to district figures. Orders are even less common in Stanislaus County.

A stricter fireplace rule is only one of many proposals in the plan to clean up PM-2.5, which medical research has linked to lung disease, heart problems and early death.

About 30 of these specks would fit across the width of a human hair. The valley has some of the worst fine-particle pollution in the state.

A public hearing on the plan is slated for April 30. The cleanup completion is expected by 2014.

Before any new fireplace rule could be passed, the district must develop a detailed rule and hold public meetings in the coming months. It might be 2009 or later before the rule could take effect.

The district in 2003 became the first in the state to pass a fireplace rule.

Since then, a similar rule has been approved in the Sacramento and South Coast air basins. A fireplace rule also is being discussed in the San Francisco area.

District has avoided violations

Valley officials defend their latest fireplace proposal by saying the district has avoided many violations in the past five years by stopping wood fires on bad-air days.

"This control lets us stop a problem at a time when we really need to," said Donald Hunsaker, district plan development supervisor.

The proposed rule would be triggered by forecasts of actual pollution instead of the air-quality index, which is a prediction based on temperature, moisture, wind, pollution and other factors. Activists long have considered the index too lenient and dangerous for people who have breathing problems.

The index is a health-based rating of air quality, from a healthy 0 to a lung-searing 300 and above. When the index reaches 100 -- unhealthy for those with lung problems -- the district asks residents to refrain from burning wood.

At 150 -- unhealthy for everyone -- residents are ordered not to light wood fires.

The new approach would ban burning in any county where actual air pollution is forecast to exceed healthy levels. The air district would use a standard of 35 micrograms of tiny particles per cubic meter of air.

The Sacramento Air Quality Management District last year passed a similarly structured rule. It went into effect in late 2007.

John Crouch, spokesman for the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association in Sacramento, said he had not studied the valley district's proposal. But he said wood smoke is not the only source of PM-2.5.

In the valley, a major part of the PM-2.5 problem is ammonium nitrate, a speck that forms when ammonia from dairies combines with nitrogen oxides from vehicle exhaust.

That pollutant has nothing to do with fireplace burning, Crouch said.

"Somebody's going to have to decide if we're forecasting 35 micrograms for wood burning or for something else," he said. "There has to be more of a judgment than just the federal standard."

Air district brings back rebates for fireplaces

Agency's new rules likely will make it easier for residents to qualify

By Denis Cuff, Staff Writer

In the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Bay Area residents have another chance at a \$600 rebate if they replace wood-burning fireplaces with gas stoves or fireplace inserts, and they might make it easier to qualify for the money this time.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District will begin accepting requests next week for the next round of rebates aimed at reducing unhealthy soot in the air.

On Monday, the air district will post online application forms, which can be returned electronically or by mail, in order to reserve a rebate that will be paid by the district after installation.

Consumers will have more opportunity and advance notice than they did in the first round in January, when all \$100,000 for rebates was used up in about 30 hours.

This time, the district has allocated \$400,000 for rebates -- enough for about 666 fireplace changeouts.

"We feel the initial program was a successful, but we need to make some refinements," said Karen Schkolnick, an air district spokeswoman. "It was like 'Ready. Set. Go.' for the first program. That was a pilot for us."

This time, the district is providing the public nearly a week's advance notice before taking applications. This gives consumers time to visit hearth and home product stores and pick which gas stove or insert they want, Schkolnick said.

Once the air district accepts an application, the consumer will have until July 6 to submit proof that the gas stove or insert has been installed. Then the air pollution district will send out a \$600 check. In the last round of rebates, homeowners were given little notice to get to a retailer and pay for the fireplace alternative. The rebate was paid on-the-spot by the retailer.

Also in the last round, no retroactive rebates were given to homeowners who had installed a cleaner fireplace alternative before the program began.

But in the next round, people who replaced fireplaces with a gas stove or fireplace insert on or after Jan. 15 will be eligible for rebates.

Only residents of the nine Bay Area counties are eligible for the rebates.

HOW TO APPLY

Starting Monday, application forms for fireplace replacement rebates will be posted online at <http://www.sparetheair.org/community/changeoutprogram.htm>.

Driver fee would help fight warming

L.A. County motorists would pay at pump or on vehicle registration.

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

LA Times, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- Motorists in Los Angeles County could end up paying an extra 9 cents per gallon at the gas pump, or an additional \$90 on their vehicle registration, under proposals aimed at getting them to help fight global warming.

Voters would be able to decide whether to approve a "climate change mitigation and adaptation fee" under legislation being considered by state lawmakers and endorsed by the board of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

The money would fund improvements to mass transit and programs to relieve traffic congestion at a time when transportation dollars from Washington and Sacramento are hard to come by.

"At this point the people of the Los Angeles region have just had it when it comes to traffic and air quality," said Assemblyman Mike Feuer (D-Los Angeles), author of the legislation, AB2558.

But opponents already are rallying against the measure, saying it exploits public concern about climate change to tap taxpayers for the MTA's regular services: providing bus and rail lines.

"This seems to be a cashing in on public sympathies on global warming to generate additional funding for programs that already exist," said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn.

Coupal also objected to the measure's being called a "fee" -- which requires a simple majority for approval -- instead of a "tax," which requires two-thirds approval.

Feuer's bill would allow the MTA board to ask voters either for a fee of up to 3% of the retail price of gas, or for a vehicle registration fee of up to \$90 per year. The money would pay for programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The registration fee would be higher for cars, trucks and SUVs that produce more carbon emissions, a feature that backers said would discourage drivers from using higher-polluting vehicles.

Either alternative could produce \$400 million a year for public transit projects, according to Roger Snoble, the MTA's chief executive.

The MTA board supports the bill.

"With the state budget deficit and dwindling federal transportation dollars, we must look at local revenue sources," said a board report signed by Snoble.

The board has not decided whether to put such a measure on the ballot or which of the two revenue alternatives it would seek, said Michael Turner, government relations manager for the MTA.

Gerry Miller, chief legislative analyst for the city of Los Angeles, said he supported the bill in concept. In a report to the City Council, he described it as essentially a tax on the carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels.

Few government agencies have imposed such a charge, Miller said.

"Currently, the prices of gasoline, electricity and fuels include none of the costs associated with climate change," Miller's report says. "This omission suppresses incentives to develop and deploy carbon-reducing measures. . . ."

County Supervisor Mike Antonovich was the only MTA board member to vote against Feuer's bill. "The supervisor believes we are already taxed enough on gas," said Tony Bell, an Antonovich spokesman. "Gas taxes aren't going to their promised target anyway."

In addition, Antonovich believes the MTA board is stacked in favor of Los Angeles and that the city has received more than its fair share of money, shorting other areas of the county.

Coupal said not everyone agreed that man-made carbon emissions are causing global warming, but even if they are, he questioned the idea of the MTA asking local taxpayers to address the issue.

"We would definitely oppose it," Coupal said. "To the extent that something like climate change is a problem, it should be addressed on a global basis."

The proposal is gaining support among environmentalists, who believe local and state action is justified in the face of what they see as an inadequate response by the federal government.

"People will support it if they know it's something that will not only fight global warming but improve their quality of life," said Tim Frank of the Sierra Club of California.

Hydrogen highway stuck in slow lane

Despite governor's backing, program for fueling stations makes little progress

By Paul Rogers, MediaNews Staff

Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

SACRAMENTO — Four years ago this month, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an executive order to create a "hydrogen highway" — a network of hydrogen fueling stations where California motorists could fill up fuel cell cars that release no smog, only water vapor.

The issue became an environmental hallmark of his governorship.

But not a single fueling station has been built under the program. The reasons vary, depending on who is offering the explanation.

Large corporations, like the oil companies that have developed a network of gasoline stations statewide, have not stepped forward to take the state's matching money to build hydrogen stations. Some experts say there are not enough hydrogen cars yet to justify the expense, which can run as high as \$3million per station.

Others say Democratic lawmakers in Sacramento put so many restrictions on the money — requiring that renewable energy be used to make the hydrogen, for example — that they hamstrung the program and scared away partners. A federal program to subsidize hydrogen stations with fewer restrictions has helped some in the state get built, including one that's opening today in Sacramento.

Currently, there are 24 hydrogen stations in California — three in the Bay Area.

Some believe Schwarzenegger overpromised and didn't do his homework.

Mary Nichols, chair of the state Air Resources Board, said the "hydrogen highway" program is behind schedule but still on track.

"Hydrogen vehicles are definitely going to be part of our future. They are just not as big a part today as was hoped in 2004," Nichols said.

Fuel cells produce electricity by taking in oxygen and hydrogen, then separating protons and electrons in a membrane and routing the electrons to create an electrical current that powers a vehicle's motor.

Nichols predicts her agency will meet its goal of having between 50 and 100 stations built with a partnership of state funds and private money — not by 2010 as originally envisioned, but by 2015.

There are two reasons, Nichols said. First, state contracts are cumbersome, complex and take time to work out with private partners. Second, automakers have been slow, she said.

"Fuel cell vehicles have rolled out more slowly than had been hoped for," Nichols said.

There are just 175 hydrogen vehicles in California, nearly all of them experimental and in government fleets. Retail sales are about 10 years away by most expectations.

General Motors last year began leasing its Chevrolet Equinox, a hydrogen fuel cell car with a 180-mile range. It plans to lease 65 in California by the end of 2009. But the company is leasing them only to people who live near Burbank and Irvine, where ample fueling stations exist, said GM spokesman Dave Barthmuss.

"Before we can put these vehicles in San Jose, Silicon Valley and San Francisco, we have to be sure we have the refueling infrastructure to fill them up," he said. "It is the classic chicken-and-egg."

Similarly, Honda plans this summer to begin leasing its FCX Clarity, a hydrogen fuel cell sedan that goes 270 miles on a charge. But the leases will be offered only in Southern California.

The lack of stations is due to restrictions on state funding, said Steve Ellis, Honda's national manager of alternative fuel vehicles.

"It was well-intentioned, but misguided," Ellis said. "Saddling hydrogen with an expectation of perfection is like asking a newborn infant to walk out of the hospital and be able to change its own diaper."

Since 2005, the Legislature has provided \$19 million to the state Air Resources Board. About half the money, \$9 million, has been spent staffing eight positions and issuing grants to cities to buy 22 hydrogen buses and other vehicles. The rest is unspent.

In 2005, Democrats in Sacramento refused Schwarzenegger's request of \$12 million to get the \$53 million plan started. Some didn't like the idea of giving state money to oil companies. Others worried that if coal or other high-polluting fuels were used to make the electricity required to create hydrogen from water or natural gas, smog and greenhouse gases would increase, defeating the whole point of the program.

Democrats eventually agreed to release just \$6.5 million — and as a condition, they mandated that no money could be given out unless the stations used 33 percent renewable energy, reduced greenhouse gases 30 percent compared with gasoline and were open to the public.

Terry Tamminen, Schwarzenegger's first EPA chief, said the Legislature should relax the state rules for the first 100 stations.

Nevertheless, Tamminen, who drives a Honda hydrogen car, predicted 50 stations will be open by 2010.

"Would I be happier if people had taken some of our money and we had 40 stations instead of 24? Sure," he said. "But there is real momentum, and real products are on the road and the hydrogen highway network is largely responsible."

Some environmentalists suggest the state should pass rules forcing oil companies and utilities to build a certain number of hydrogen fueling stations.

"The energy companies aren't willing to participate, so the car guys are hung out to dry," said John White, a former lobbyist for the Sierra Club in Sacramento.

The oil industry will fight mandates, said Tupper Hull, spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association.

Meanwhile, the state this month is offering a new round of funding — \$7.7 million — to any partners who will help it build three stations.

California's electric car goal could be cut again

By Matt Nauman, San Jose Mercury News
In the Modesto Bee, Monday, March 31, 2008

SAN JOSE, Calif. — California's once-ambitious, always-controversial plan to require automakers to sell electric cars faces a vote this week that, advocates say, would effectively gut the program.

On Thursday, the state Air Resources Board meets in Sacramento to consider a plan to cut the number of pure electric vehicles that carmakers would be required to sell over the next few years from 25,000 to 2,500.

When the state enacted this zero-emission vehicle mandate in 1990, it called for 10 percent of new-vehicle sales from big automakers to be all-electric by 2003, or about 100,000 cars or more a year. That requirement was eventually delayed by several years and reduced to the current level.

At the board's request, the ARB staff revisited the mandate and produced a 52-page proposal concluding that battery-electric and hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles remain too costly and still face too many hurdles for mass sales in the state. Instead, requiring automakers to sell a mix of cleaner-burning gasoline cars, hybrids and plug-in hybrids would be more realistic.

The changes "keep our commitment to zero emissions alive while appropriately reflecting the pace of the technology," said Analisa Bevins, chief of the air board's sustainable transportation technology branch.

But advocates aren't so sure. "The low numbers do turn the clock back on progress and certainly send the wrong signals to the public and the technology producers," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, policy director for the American Lung Association of California.

If the board approves the changes, said Ze'ev Drori - chief executive of Tesla Motors, the San Carlos, Calif., company that put its \$100,000 electric roadster into production this month - it would "make a mockery of CARB itself."

Even Mary Nichols, chair of the 11-member board, isn't sure.

"We're all looking for ways that we can strengthen the staff report to make it a little bit more aggressive in terms of numbers of vehicles," she said.

Asked directly if she would vote to approve the amendments, she said, "I'm going to be supporting some changes."

The original mandates were written when there was much less awareness of greenhouse-gas emissions and California hadn't enacted its groundbreaking global-warming legislation, AB 32, which requires dramatic cuts in the state's total production of greenhouse gases.

Nichols wants a "rethinking of the whole ZEV mandate program in light of our AB 32 needs."

That echoed a comment by Holmes-Gen, whose group funded a study that suggested that weakening the ZEV mandate would be bad for the health of Californians.

"It's disappointing that the proposal is not linked to the aggressive statewide targets for greenhouse gas reduction by 2050," she said.

Tesla's Drori said the changes to the ZEV mandates would "needlessly weaken" the program.

He takes particular umbrage at the fact that reducing the number of required electric cars would cut the number of credits his company could earn - and sell - for making them. Those funds would help defray Tesla's development costs, he said.

California once seemed poised to change what people drive when the Air Resources Board issued the ZEV mandates in 1990.

But automakers launched a legal battle against them, delaying their implementation.

Ultimately, a few thousand electric vehicles from General Motors, Honda, Toyota and others were sold or leased in the state. And, as the '90s ended, first Honda, then Toyota, and later other automakers introduced hybrids, higher-mileage cars carrying both gasoline engines and electric motors.

In 2003, ARB shifted direction, saying the electric-car technology wasn't progressing and instead agreeing to let automakers make cleaner gasoline cars and hybrids while they worked toward pure electrics.

That decision, along with GM's move to stop leasing its EV1 and to crush many of the vehicles that it took back, led to "Who Killed the Electric Car?," a documentary by Chris Paine.

One star of that movie, Chelsea Sexton, is now executive director of Plug-In America, which advocates for production of plug-in hybrid and electric vehicles.

The air board staff listens too much to automakers, she said, who tell it that batteries are and will remain too expensive. "Certainly there's a history here of automakers low-balling CARB. No industry wants to be regulated, so they want to make this look as difficult as possible," Sexton said.

If the changes are approved, Sexton said, CARB will render itself irrelevant in future discussions about alternate-fuel technologies. "This is a fairly toothless piece of policy," she said.

Gore announces anti-warming effort

By Travis Loller, Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Former Vice President Al Gore launched a three-year, multimillion-dollar advocacy campaign Monday calling for the U.S. to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

The Alliance for Climate Protection's campaign, dubbed "we," will combine advertising, online organizing and partnerships with grass-roots groups to educate the public about global warming and urge solutions from elected officials.

"We're trying to get a movement happening to switch public opinion so that our leaders feel, 'Wow! We really need to make this a top priority issue,'" alliance CEO Cathy Zoi told The Associated Press.

An advertising campaign will equate the climate-change movement with other grand historic endeavors, like stopping fascism in Europe during World War II, overcoming segregation in the United States and putting the first man on the moon.

Some advertisements will feature bipartisan pairs, such as the Rev. Al Sharpton with Pat Robertson and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with former GOP Speaker Newt Gingrich, Zoi said.

Robertson spoke Monday on "The 700 Club," his long-running Christian news and talk show, about his involvement, saying he was honored to be asked by Gore to participate.

"It's just common sense that we ought to be good stewards of the environment and do everything within our power to protect this fragile planet that we all live on," he said.

Gingrich spokesman Rick Tyler said the former congressman is participating because he agrees on the need for a bipartisan approach to climate change. In Gingrich's new book, "A Contract with the Earth," he argues that conservatives are natural environmentalists.

Prominent Republicans also serve on the alliance's board of directors.

"This is not only an environmental issue. It's an issue of energy independence and it's an issue of national security," said Lee Thomas, head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President Ronald Reagan. "We need to all come together on this and the time to move on it is now, not later."

The alliance will initially spend \$300 million over three years, although Zoi said more could be spent in the future.

Some of the money for the campaign comes from Gore himself. Zoi said he contributed his personal profits from the book and movie "An Inconvenient Truth," a \$750,000 award from his share of the Nobel Peace Prize and a personal matching gift. She declined to provide the total amount.

"When politicians hear the American people calling loud and clear for change, they'll listen," Gore, the former Tennessee senator and 2000 presidential candidate, said in a statement. Gore's staff did not respond to calls seeking further comment.

Zoi says research suggests that many Americans are concerned about climate change but don't know what to do about it.

The "we" campaign Web site hopes to change that by offering ideas on conserving energy at home and work and guidance for those who want to do more, like writing to their elected officials.

"Some steps can be taken by individuals, but the biggest, most important decisions are going to be coming from government and corporate leaders," Zoi said. "We need to have people saying, 'We want you to take bold steps.'"

The campaign is also working through partnerships with groups like the Girl Scouts. The group's 2.7 million members will take a climate action pledge and the alliance will provide them with kits offering suggestions for projects they can do in their neighborhoods.

Dominion Gets Initial Approval For Coal Plant

By Tim Craig and Sandhya Somashekhar
Washington Post, Tuesday, April 1, 2008

RICHMOND -- Dominion Virginia Power's plan to build a coal-burning power plant in southwest Virginia cleared a major hurdle Monday when it was approved by the State Corporation Commission, despite objections from environmentalists.

Dominion is pushing to build the \$1.8 billion plant in Wise County, in Virginia's coal country, as part of a multi-pronged strategy for meeting the state's growing demand for electricity.

Dominion, which has 2.3 million customers in the state, said the plant would be "one of the cleanest" coal-fired facilities in the nation because it would have a sophisticated emissions-control system.

In its ruling, the commission said Dominion could build the plant and pass on the cost of construction to its ratepayers statewide. Company officials say there might be "nominal" increases in residents' utility bills starting next year to offset the cost of construction of the plant.

The commission designated the plant as a "conventional coal facility" instead of one that is "carbon capture compatible," which environmentalists say bolsters their argument that the plant would increase the emission of greenhouse gases that have been linked to global climate change.

"This ruling proves Dominion has absolutely no plan to capture its global warming pollution," said Cale Jaffe, a lawyer with the Southern Environmental Law Center, part of a coalition of groups opposing the project.

The plant, which would be called the Virginia City Hybrid Energy Center, still must be approved by the Virginia Air Pollution Control Board. Dominion officials hope it will be operating by 2012.

"The Virginia City Hybrid Energy Center is a vital part of Dominion's integrated strategy to ensure our customers' needs are met now and well into the future," said David B. Botkins, a Dominion spokesman.

Botkins said the 585-megawatt plant, which could power 146,000 homes, would "meet the rising demand for energy and help maintain price stability over the long term."

Environmentalists are stepping up pressure to try to derail the project before the pollution board approves it.

A group of protesters gathered outside Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's office Monday, demanding to meet with him to express their concerns about the plant. "Coal is an energy source that causes global warming, destroys mountains and needs to be phased out of Virginia's energy portfolio," Richmond activist Jason Levinn said in a statement after the rally.

Gordon Hickey, a Kaine spokesman, said the administration plans to reach out to activists to arrange a meeting with the governor in the coming weeks.

At a town hall meeting in Loudoun County last night, Kaine (D) defended his support for the plant. He said he has faith in Virginia's approval process, which he said relies on science and a thorough assessment of the state's needs rather than politics.

"We've got a need for energy, and we've got to do it in a way that's as clean and as focused on conservation as possible," he said. However, he added, that must be balanced against "the need for reliable and relatively low-cost energy."

Virginia relies on coal for too much of its energy to imagine a future without it, Kaine said. Moreover, by approving newer plants that employ the cleanest technology, the state can retire older, more polluting plants, he said.

The comments came during the ninth public input session Kaine has held this year across Virginia. About 200 people showed up at Farmwell Station Middle School in Ashburn for the event, which was his first such visit to Northern Virginia since the state legislative session ended in mid-March.

[Modesto Bee Commentary, Tuesday, April 1, 2008:](#)

Air resources board retreats

Thumbs down to the California Air Resources Board for backing off an aggressive goal to put more zero-emission vehicles on the state's roads and highways. The board reduced the number of ZEVs from the original goal of 25,000 in 2012 to 2014 to 7,500 in that period. CARB staff had recommended dropping the standard to 2,500, so the decision is better than it might have been. But it still lets the auto industry off the hook when California and the world need bold advances in automotive technology.