

Dust from tractor did not cause 99 wreck

BY JORGE BARRIENTOS AND FELIX DOLIGOSA JR., Californian staff writers
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, May 30, 2008

A plowing tractor blowing dust did not cause a multiple vehicle wreck on Highway 99 last week that left one man in a coma, California Highway Patrol officials said.

Blowing dust hurt visibility and was blamed for two wrecks that shut down Highway 99 at Highway 119 on May 20. One of the vehicles in the crash carried farmworkers, shown here on the side of the freeway.

"You're living in a dusty climate," said Highway Patrol officer Greg Williams. "It's human beings that cause crashes."

Seven cars and a semi-truck crashed on a dust shrouded southbound Highway 99 near Highway 119 at on May 20, Witnesses said.

Drivers on that stretch of the highway have complained in the past about dust from working tractors. And many of those involved in the May 20 accident blamed the crash on a tractor.

One such driver was Tom Gutcher, who slowed down on the highway and was hit from behind during the pileup, according to published reports.

He suffered a massive head injury in the crash, but before he fell into a coma Gutcher said a plowing tractor threw up the dust blowing across the road, according to his family.

Williams said the driver behind Gutcher is at fault for the accident because he did not slow down. Another person may have also been driving unsafe speeds in the dusty conditions, he said.

"You drive by a dairy, you get dust," Williams said. "You can't control the dirt. Dirt blows."

The CHP is still investigating the crash.

Gutcher remained in a coma on Thursday at Kern Medical Hospital, according to friend Vince Oddo.

Planners hear about 'Blueprint'

Commissioners ask for specifics of plan

By Corey Pride, Los Banos Enterprise
In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 30, 2008

The Planning Commission Wednesday became the latest Los Baños governmental body to hear an update on the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint.

With some commissioners less familiar with the regional plan than their brethren on the City Council, questions were posed to see how far along the plan is and whether the eight Central Valley counties involved can actually work toward a common goal.

Candice Steelman, Merced County Association of Governments' public affairs manager, said the blueprint is a plan designed to get Central Valley communities to agree on a vision for the region for the next 30 to 50 years.

"The Blueprint is our opportunity to work together, to find solutions to challenges that cannot be solved by individual counties," she said.

About two years ago counties in the Valley began to form the blueprint to deal with population growth and its impacts. Steelman said the region is expected to triple in population by 2050, essentially adding to the Valley about 11 cities the size of Fresno.

When it is completed, the blueprint will lay out specific approaches to protecting agriculture, dealing with added traffic, achieving cleaner air quality, job creation and making infrastructural improvements.

Planning Commissioner Erasmo Viveros wanted to know how the project will remain focused.

"Given that this is a 40-year plan, how do you keep everyone on track for 40 years?," Viveros asked. "I know we change government officials all the time. How is that done?" Steelman responded.

"Local decisions will remain local. It's not planned out to the last parcel. It's saying (for example) let's preserve ag land. If we want to preserve ag land then we have to preserve our environmental resources, then where do we put 11 cities the size of Fresno?" Steelman said, emphasizing the Blueprint's ability to deal with that type of issue.

Commissioners Ann McCauley and Tom Mello wanted to know what components there are in the plan to preserve prime ag land.

Stelman said that is an issue that presents challenges to Merced County.

"Unfortunately in this county, because what isn't prime farm land not developed on is usually environmentally rich, it leaves little place to grow," she said.

Stelman said there is also another problem.

"The challenge is about preserving farm land, how do you preserve it if the owners of that land wish to sell it. Certainly they have their rights too," she said.

Commissioner Shirley Napolitano said she has heard Steelman's Blueprint presentation a few times and she's wondering when some specifics will be discussed. By August or September MCAG will be back in front of city officials with detailed plans, Steelman said.

The presentation on the Blueprint that Steelman gave commissioners was given to the City Council earlier this month. Commission Chairman Steve Hammond asked Steelman how well it is being received.

Stelman said it depends.

" Everyone agrees with the concept. Everyone knows we need to plan. It's when you get to the specifics and say this is what we need to do, then people take a step back... look at it, decide if they can support it. So that's where we are now," Steelman said.

High-speed rail, air fee bills advance

Vehicle registration may go up to help cleanup programs; Valley gets a boost in transportation plans.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau
Fresno Bee, Friday, May 30, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- The Valley air district could raise vehicle registration fees by up to \$23 a car to pay for clean-air programs under a bill that passed the state Assembly on Thursday.

Lawmakers in the lower house also approved a bill that redefines the statewide high-speed train measure on November's ballot. If voters approve the \$9.9 billion bond measure, all segments of the 800-mile route would be eligible for first-phase funding -- not just the route from Los Angeles to San Francisco through the Central Valley. Valley officials remain confident the region won't be left behind.

Both bills must still be approved by the state Senate and signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger.

The air pollution legislation -- Assembly Bill 2522 by Assembly Member Juan Arambula, D-Fresno -- is supported by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The bill would allow the district's board to raise per-vehicle fees from \$7 to up to \$30, through as long as 2024. If board members approve the full increase, nearly \$80 million would be raised annually by 2010.

Most of the new money would go to replace and retrofit polluting cars and trucks, helping the Valley meet federal clean air standards, district officials have said.

The bill passed 43-29, with Republicans opposed, including Assembly GOP Leader Mike Villines of Clovis. The legislation got support from a rare alliance of farm and environmental groups.

The Nisei Farmers League in Fresno supported the bill because it spreads air clean-up costs to drivers, instead of just businesses, said Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the league.

"Everybody is going to have to carry the cost -- not just industry anymore," he said.

Opponents include California AAA Clubs. The motorists organization argued in written testimony that the bill is not a fee, but a tax that should require voter approval.

The high-speed rail bond, AB 3034 by Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani, D-Tracy, passed on a 57-0 vote, including "ayes" from all Valley lawmakers.

As envisioned, the rail line would eventually run from San Diego to as far north as Sacramento, with trains reaching top speeds of more than 200 mph. Under the bill, route segments that draw the most financial support from local governments and private and federal sources would get top priority.

The provision could potentially delay some Valley segments -- if nonstate financial support does not materialize. But Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the High Speed Rail Authority, said the Valley remains a top priority because the wide-open region is the only place where trains can reach top speeds.

"We cannot do 220-mile [an hour] service or test the 220-mile-an-hour train without building a significant section in the Central Valley," he said.

Galgiani's bill drew support from San Joaquin Valley leaders because it increases the likelihood that a Valley-to-Sacramento route will be included in the first phase.

The bill also opens up the possibility for funding rail service through the Altamont Pass, also a Valley priority. The more southerly Pacheco Pass has been selected as the preferred mainline route to the Bay Area.

Schwarzenegger does not have a position on the air-pollution bill or the bullet-train bill, his staff said.

The governor has pushed for private sources to pay for a good share of the bullet train. At one time, Schwarzenegger had sought to remove the rail bond from November's ballot, but he has shown no such desire this year.

"He is a big supporter of high-speed rail and believes strongly that California would benefit from a network that would connect communities throughout the state," said Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Rachel Cameron.

How much CO2 do we spew?

Staff and wire reports

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, May 30, 2008

Bakersfield is a case in extremes when it comes to the amount of carbon dioxide we spew, according to a study out Thursday.

We landed smack in the middle - 53rd - in a national ranking of carbon output per capita in the nation's 100 largest cities, according to the Brookings Institute.

The study calculated the amount and sources of carbon emissions from home energy use and transportation in 2005. One is best, 100 is worst.

Despite a major housing boom, we emitted the least carbon per capita from residential energy use. But we emitted the most from cars and trucks.

"You may have the most interesting carbon footprints," said Mark Muro, the Brookings Institute's metropolitan policy program director.

While cities are hot spots for global warming, the study found that people living in them turn out to be greener than their country cousins.

Each resident of the largest 100 largest metropolitan areas was responsible on average for 2.24 tons of carbon dioxide in energy consumption and transportation each year, while the U.S. average was 2.6 tons. Bakersfield came in at 2.5 tons.

Metropolitan area emissions of carbon dioxide are highest in the eastern U.S., where people rely heavily on coal for electricity, the researchers found. They are lower in the West, where weather is more favorable and where electricity and motor fuel prices have been higher.

Muro talked to The Californian about how our region fared in the study.

Question: We've just experienced a major housing boom, so how can we have the lowest carbon output per capita when it comes to home energy use?

Answer: On residential side, you benefit from the relatively mild climate of California and relatively clean fuel mixes. (California) has been advanced in improving its utility generating fuel mix. You also benefit from fast growth, which has created new housing stock that is better insulated and more energy efficient.

In this sense, newness is an advantage. It's not the buildings themselves ... it's buildings in the wrong place. It's no secret the region is sprawling, which drives up auto vehicle miles traveled.

Yours is a profile of sprawl, too many trips being needed, long trips and no big mass transit systems.

Q: OK, so we drive our cars a lot. But how could we be pumping out more carbon than gridlocked cities like Los Angeles?

A: Your ranking is also owed to Bakersfield being part of a major interstate corridor. You have a massive trucking, freight and logistics presence, and a lot of pass-through interstate traffic.

You're penalized by the sprawl but you're really penalized by your position as a freight crossing point.

That really underscores one of the points we were making, which is that metropolitan areas cannot be expected on their own to reduce America's carbon footprint. We need federal policy that develops transportation corridor planning. It's going to require national solutions.

Read the report yourself at Brookings.edu.

- Staff writer Stacey Shepard and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

Metro areas with the smallest and largest per capita carbon footprint in 2005:

Smallest footprint

1. Honolulu
2. Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana
3. Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton (Oregon-Washington)
4. New York-northern New Jersey-Long Island
5. Boise City-Nampa, Idaho
6. Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, Wash.
7. San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara
8. San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont
9. El Paso, Texas
10. San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos

Largest footprint

1. Lexington-Fayette, Ky.
2. Indianapolis
3. Cincinnati-Middletown, Ohio (Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana)
4. Toledo, Ohio
5. Louisville (Kentucky-Indiana)
6. Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro, Tenn.
7. St. Louis
8. Oklahoma City
9. Harrisburg-Carlisle, Pa.
10. Knoxville, Tenn.

Environmentalists say EPA approved faulty pollution plan

By NOAKI SCHWARTZ, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee, Sacramento Bee, Contra Costa Times and L.A. Daily News and other papers, Friday, May 30, 2008

LOS ANGELES — Environmentalists asked a federal appeals court Thursday to reject the Environmental Protection Agency's approval of regional emissions limits on cars and trucks, saying the restrictions don't go far enough to protect the public's health.

On Thursday, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Coalition for a Safe Environment and East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice and Endangered Habitats League filed a petition for review in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. The groups say the EPA has approved a faulty regional emissions plan that is the first hurdle the state must clear in applying for funding needed to expand freeways.

"We believe the EPA did this even in light of the fact that these budgets don't protect the health of 1.5 million people who live near freeways," said Adrian Martinez, an attorney with the Defense Council.

EPA spokesman Francisco Arcaute declined to comment, saying the agency does not discuss pending litigation.

The EPA reviews a regional plan that caps the amount of allowable pollution from cars, trucks and other vehicles. The model used to measure air pollution levels includes both areas near freeways where the particulate matter pollution levels are very high and areas much farther away where soot levels are lower, said David Pettit, a senior attorney with the Defense Council.

Such measurements skew the results, he said, adding it isn't fair to include the pollution levels of people living next to a busy freeway with those of people in a coastal zone where sea breezes blow pollution away.

But Lynn Terry, deputy executive officer for the state Air Resources Board, said the federal Clean Air Act requires that air quality be measured regionally.

"We believe the EPA was clear as to what the procedures are," she said, adding her agency doesn't believe the legal action will be a problem.

Southern California is already in violation of clean air standards for ozone and particulate matter. Ozone and airborne fine particles have been blamed for causing asthma and aggravating other respiratory ailments.

The environmental groups are hoping for a decision within the next year. A decision in their favor could force the state to reevaluate its plan.

Researchers: City residents produce less carbon

By H. JOSEF HEBERT, Associated Press Writer
in the Modesto Bee, Friday, May 30, 2008

WASHINGTON — While cities are hot spots for global warming, people living in them turn out to be greener than their country cousins.

Each resident of the largest 100 largest metropolitan areas is responsible on average for 2.47 tons of carbon dioxide in energy consumption each year, 14 percent below the 2.87 ton U.S. average, researchers at the Brookings Institution say in a report being released Thursday.

Those 100 cities still account for 56 percent of the nation's carbon dioxide pollution. But their greater use of mass transit and population density reduce the per person average. "It was a surprise the extent to which emissions per capita are lower," Marilyn Brown, a professor of energy policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology and co-author of the report, said in an interview.

Metropolitan area emissions of carbon dioxide are highest in the eastern U.S., where people rely heavily on coal for electricity, the researchers found. They are lower in the West, where weather is more favorable and where electricity and motor fuel prices have been higher.

The study examined sources and use of residential electricity, home heating and cooling, and transportation in 2005 in the largest 100 metropolitan areas where two-thirds of the people in the U.S. live. It attributed a wide disparity among the 100 cities to population density, availability of mass transit and weather.

Lexington, Ky., had the biggest per capita carbon footprint: Each resident on average accounted for 3.81 tons of carbon dioxide in their energy usage. At the other end of the scale was Honolulu, at 1.5 tons per person.

Carbon dioxide is released from burning fossil fuels and is the leading "greenhouse gas." It drifts into the atmosphere and forms a blanket that traps the Earth's warmth. About 6.6 billion tons of carbon dioxide are released into air annually in the United States.

From 2000 to 2005, carbon dioxide from transportation, electricity use and residential heating in the largest metropolitan areas increased 7.5 percent. For the entire nation, it rose 9.1 percent. The average per capita footprint in those 100 cities rose at an annual rate of 1.1 percent a year, half the average yearly increase of 2.2 percent nationwide.

In explaining differences among cities, the researchers cited weather, the type of fuel used for heating and cooling, the development of rail transportation, the amount of urban sprawl and the cost of energy.

Cities with the largest carbon footprints are mostly in the eastern half of the country from Indiana to western Pennsylvania - areas that rely heavily on coal for electricity production and natural gas for heating.

The smallest carbon footprint was in cities in the West and New England.

Half of the dozen cities with the stingiest carbon output were in California, where electricity prices and motor fuels are expensive. Also cited was the Seattle-Portland, Ore., region, which relies heavily on hydropower.

Cities in Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana dominated the bottom tier of high carbon emitters.

These urban areas are "kind of a poster child of what high carbon intensive growth looks like," said Brown. She noted their reliance on coal for electricity and natural gas for heating, a shortage of mass transit, and often older, energy-inefficient buildings.

White House issues climate report 4 years late

By SETH BORENSTEIN, AP Science Writer
in the Modesto Bee, Friday, May 30, 2008

WASHINGTON — Under a court order and four years late, the White House Thursday produced what it called a science-based "one-stop shop" of specific threats to the United States from man-made global warming.

While the report has no new science in it, it pulls together different U.S. studies and localizes international reports into one comprehensive document required by law. The 271-page report is notable because it is something the Bush administration has fought in the past.

Andrew Weaver, a Canadian climate scientist who was not involved in the effort, called it "a litany of bad news in store for the U.S."

And biologist Thomas Lovejoy, one of the scientists who reviewed the report for the federal government, said: "It basically says the America we've known we can no longer count on. It's a pretty dramatic picture of all kinds of change rippling through natural systems across the country. And all of that has implications for people."

White House associate science director Sharon Hays, in a teleconference with reporters, declined to characterize the findings as bad, but said it is an issue the administration takes seriously. She said the report was comprehensive and "communicates what the scientists are telling us."

That includes:

- Increased heat deaths and deaths from climate-worsened smog. In Los Angeles alone yearly heat fatalities could increase by more than 1,000 by 2080, and the Midwest and Northeast are most vulnerable to increased heat deaths.
- Worsening water shortages for agriculture and urban users. From California to New York, lack of water will be an issue.
- A need for billions of dollars in more power plants (one major cause of global warming gases) to cool a hotter country. The report says summer cooling will mean Seattle's energy consumption would increase by 146 percent with the warming that could come by the end of the century.
- More death and damage from wildfires, hurricanes and other natural disasters and extreme weather. In the last three decades, wildfire season in the West has increased by 78 days.
- Increased insect infestations and food- and waterborne microbes and diseases. Insect and pathogen outbreaks to the forests are causing \$1.5 billion in annual losses.

"Finally, climate change is very likely to accentuate the disparities already evident in the American health care system," the report said. "Many of the expected health effects are likely to fall disproportionately on the poor, the elderly, the disabled and the uninsured."

The report was required by a 1990 law which says that every four years the government must produce a comprehensive science assessment of global warming. It had not been done since 2000.

Environmental groups got a court order last summer to force the Bush administration to produce the document by the end of this month. Hays said the White House has preferred issuing studies on individual global warming issues, such as an agricultural effects report that was released on Tuesday.

"It's totally begrudging," said Rick Piltz, director of Climate Science Watch at the nonprofit Government Accountability Project, a whistleblowers' organization. "It's important the government go on record honestly acknowledging this stuff."

Ask AP: Jet pollution

in the Modesto Bee, Friday, May 30, 2008

What happens to all the jet fuel exhaust that's deposited high in the atmosphere, where airliners and other aircraft fly? Given the amount of fuel the world's jets collectively consume - and the fact that the temperature is well below zero at an airliner's typical cruising altitude - it seems unlikely that the exhaust would just harmlessly dissipate.

So where does it all end up? Is there a growing layer of spent fuel around the planet at 35,000 feet? And is this contributing to global warming?

*Michael A. Terminiello
Plantsville, Conn.*

Just like car engines, jet engines burn fossil fuels and produce emissions that add to global warming. And they are spewed at higher altitudes, which increases the heat-trapping properties of the pollution, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In 1999, this panel of international scientists produced a special report on airplanes and global warming. It found that airplane emissions add to global warming directly by producing the chief man-made global warming gas, carbon dioxide. That's the biggest global warming effect from planes - and it's relatively small compared with the net effect from power plants and cars, said Jerry Mahlman, a retired top federal climate scientist and expert on the upper atmosphere.

Airplanes' condensation trails, or "contrails," also contribute to global warming. And planes spew nitrogen oxides, which increase the global warming effect of ozone in the atmosphere - but also fight global warming a bit by reducing the amount of methane in the atmosphere.

In 1992, airplanes were responsible for about 3.5 percent of the global warming effect, according to the science panel. But the group predicted that by 2050 that figure would increase to 5 percent.

And no, planes don't produce their own stratospheric belt of carbon dioxide - they don't fly high enough for that to happen. Instead, jet emissions mix with all the other carbon dioxide produced closer to the ground, Mahlman said.

Seth Borenstein
AP Science Writer, Washington

Mapping a blueprint for Valley's future

Planners hear from students in third of 14 planned events

By Luisa Morenilla - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Thursday, May 29, 2008

San Joaquin Valley regional planners heard new perspectives Wednesday about the future of the Valley's growth from students at a Franklin High School.

The San Joaquin Council of Governments, a coalition of San Joaquin County's government leaders, sponsored the workshop as part of ongoing efforts to gather input and opinion from residents in order to construct a "blueprint" for what the Valley will look like in 2050. The workshop was the third of 14 planned events throughout the county.

The initiative is part of the larger project known as the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Process, which includes similar efforts in each of the San Joaquin Valley's eight counties.

Regional planners Michael Swearingen and Anthony Zepeda met with more than 100 sophomores in the school's International Baccalaureate program, and asked them what they liked about the Valley, what they disliked about it and what changes they think should occur.

"Put yourself in a hot air balloon floating over San Joaquin County in 2050," Swearingen said. "When you look down, what do you want to see?"

Students volunteered a wide range of concerns from lack of entertainment for their age group, to poor air quality and misuse of welfare funds. Zepeda wrote down the students' comments on large pads of paper, so that they can later be considered by local leaders.

Swearingen then explained four possible growth scenarios to the students, each plan progressively more committed to preserving farmland through denser urban zoning. The higher-density scenarios also called for a greater investment in public transportation.

Swearingen said that while preserving agriculture was a desirable goal, there were trade-offs to consider in planning a more densely populated community.

"It's not all roses as you get smaller and smaller," he said of the areas that would be designated for development. "There is a point of diminishing return."

When asked to vote for their favorite approach to future growth and development, the Franklin students overwhelmingly opted for more compact housing.

Marssa Hernandez, 16, said that she thought the workshop was worthwhile. "It made us feel like our voices do count, like our opinions are important," she said. Hernandez also felt reassured that local leaders are working toward the same goals that many Valley residents share.

Philip Preeo, 16, agreed that the workshop was productive and said the proposed changes in the directions of growth for the Valley "have merit."

"It's a good idea, since most of us are gonna be around in 2050," Preeo said. "It's our world, so we have to take care of it."