

Air district eyes pollution from composters

The Associated Press

Sacramento Bee, S.F. Chronicle and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, August 14, 2008

VISALIA, Calif. -- Central Valley officials combating some of the worst air pollution in the country are focusing their attention on composting.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says up to 2 percent of all volatile organic compounds emitted come from decaying green waste.

By 2009, the district wants commercial companies processing at least 50,000 tons a year to contain emissions by installing digesters. Officials have set a goal of reducing compost emissions across the valley by 15 percent.

At a recent meeting in Visalia, the president of the College of Sequoias argued that more strict regulations would do little to help because naturally decaying matter is responsible for half of all emissions.

Others argued that decreasing composting would send green waste back to landfills.

Calif. to review global warming effects of highway

The Associated Press

Sacramento Bee and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, August 14, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- State transportation officials say a Sacramento highway project is on hold so they can study its potential effect on global warming.

The Department of Transportation wants to add lanes to the congested Highway 50 corridor west of downtown Sacramento.

But a judge last month ruled the state had failed to analyze the greenhouse gas emissions that could be produced if the project goes forward.

The proposed lanes would be designated for car pools, buses and high-mileage vehicles during morning and afternoon commutes. Critics who favor public transit say the additional lanes could encourage more car use and pollution.

The delay means commuters along the Highway 50 corridor won't get additional lanes for at least another six years.

Formaldehyde worries delay vote on funeral home site

Jennifer Morita

Modesto Bee, Thursday, August 14, 2008

The City Council delayed a decision Tuesday night on a proposed funeral home after an e-mail from a state health official indicated the cancer risk from formaldehyde emissions might be higher than first estimated.

Council members said they would wait for John Finnell, senior engineer for the county Air Pollution Control District, to check the calculations.

Ron Harder wants to open Rocklin's first full-service funeral home in an office complex adjacent to Antelope Creek Elementary School.

Nearby residents oppose the project because formaldehyde would be vented outside from the embalming preparation room.

Finnell used a computerized air model to assess the health risk and found that under the worst-case scenario, the cancer risk is only about 1 in a million.

But opponent Mark Crabtree contacted the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, which estimated the cancer risk from long-term exposure would be about six per 10,000 based on the highest estimate of formaldehyde concentration.

Psychologists determine what it means to think 'green'

By Sharon Jayson, USA Today

August 14, 2008

Those who make human behavior their business aim to make living "green" your business.

Armed with new research into what makes some people environmentally conscious and others less so, the 148,000-member American Psychological Association is stepping up efforts to foster a broader sense of eco-sensitivity that the group believes will translate into more public action to protect the planet.

"We know how to change behavior and attitudes. That is what we do," says Yale University psychologist Alan Kazdin, association president. "We know what messages will work and what will not."

During a four-day meeting that begins today in Boston, an expected 16,000 attendees will hear presentations, including studies that explore how people experience the environment, their attitudes about climate change and what social barriers prevent conservation of resources.

Among the yet-unpublished findings:

- Walking outside rather than inside — even for just 15 minutes — makes you feel happier, more energetic and more protective of the environment, found two studies involving 220 students conducted by psychologists at Carleton University in Ottawa. Researcher Elizabeth Nisbet suggests the findings have broader implications for well-being and mental health.

"People know outside is going to feel much better for them but underpredict how happy they're going to feel after being outside in nature even 15 minutes," she says. "The people inside overestimate their happiness about being inside. It's this error in judgment people have about how happy they are in a different environment that may explain why people don't spend more time in nature."

Behind the research

- Negative feedback can backfire. In two studies, psychologist Amara Brook of California's Santa Clara University and colleague Jennifer Crocker of the University of Michigan asked 212 undergraduates about their ecological footprint. For those not heavily invested in the environment, negative feedback about their ecological footprint actually undermines their environmental behavior, they found.

"Rather than changing their ways to protect the environment, the results of this study suggest that these (people) may give up on their efforts to protect the environment," they report.

But negative feedback for those more invested in the environment promotes more sustainable behavior, they found.

- News stories that provided a balanced view of climate change reduced people's beliefs that humans are at fault and also reduced the number of people who thought climate change would be bad, according to research by Stanford social psychologist Jon Krosnick.

His presentation will detail a decade of American attitudes about climate change. His new experiment, conducted in May, illustrates what he says is a public misperception about global warming. He says there is scientific consensus among experts that climate change is occurring, but the nationwide online poll of 2,600 adults asked whether they believe scientists agree or disagree about it.

By editing CNN and PBS news stories so that some saw a skeptic included in the report, others saw a story in which the skeptic was edited out and another group saw no video, Krosnick found that adding 45 seconds of a skeptic to one news story caused 11% of Americans to shift their opinions about the scientific consensus. Rather than 58% believing a perceived scientific agreement, inclusion of the skeptic caused the perceived amount of agreement to drop to 47%.

American Psychological Association leaders say they want to launch a national initiative specifically targeting behavior changes, including developing media messages that will help people reduce their carbon footprint and pay more attention to ways they can conserve. They want to work with other organizations and enlist congressional support to help fund the effort.

A USA TODAY/Gallup Poll last year found that people know they could do more. Of 1,007 adults surveyed, only about half thought they personally did a good job of protecting the environment; less than 10% said their efforts were "excellent."

Messages that tell people to "be green" or encourage them to follow a more ecologically aware way of living aren't necessarily having the desired effect, psychologists say. Although people know the buzzwords — "sustainability," "carbon footprint" and "global warming" — they aren't really sure what they mean or what they personally can do.

Confusion abounds

"I think most people recognize we face a severe environmental crisis, but it's hard to deal with that head-on because most people feel helpless to do anything about it," says Douglas Vakoch, a clinical psychologist at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco.

"If we look at the nature of the problem, it is so big it's hard to know what any individual can do in their own life to make a difference," he says. "The tendency when people are confronted with an overwhelming problem is to run away from it, so psychologists are very experienced in dealing with that."

Paul Stern, a researcher at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., says people generally want to do the right thing but don't know what it is. And he says they have "mistaken impressions" about what will actually affect energy use.

At the meeting, Stern will present a preview of a report he co-authored that outlines the behaviors that matter most in terms of energy consumption. The report, which will appear in the September/October issue of *Environment* magazine, is the latest update of a list initially analyzed in 1981.

"One of the first things you think of is turning off lights when you leave a room or changing the thermostat settings in the house. They don't think first of caulking windows or upgrading your furnace," Stern says. "More insulation in the attic and tight windows make more difference than changing the thermostat setting. Having a more fuel-efficient car makes more difference than any amount you're likely to decrease driving."

Because Stern's research was on energy use, he didn't look at recycling. Social psychologist Jessica Nolan studied the issue at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville.

Nolan, who this fall will be an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, examined global warming, recycling and improper disposal of used motor oil with three studies involving a total of 289 students.

She found that students are not particularly inclined to disapprove of the non-sustainable behavior of others.

"People showed strong approval for other students who recycled. You would hope to see people disapprove of people who don't recycle, but they didn't disapprove," she says.

But, she says, the response was stronger if the activity was perceived as more harmful: More students said they would scold someone if they saw that person improperly disposing of motor oil.

Vakoch says more research is needed to encourage greater sensitivity to the natural world.

"We are recognizing that environmental problems have a tremendous impact on many aspects of our lives, but we need a lot more work," he says. "We can't afford to let this increased environmental concern become just another fashionable trend."

[Tulare Advance-Register Editorial, August 14, 2008](#)

Bad air from compost: It's always something

Ronald Reagan once infamously declared that trees cause air pollution.

He was widely derided for that statement, but there is a germ of truth to it: Trees emit oxygen, which in the right circumstances can be converted both to carbon dioxide and to ozone, both of which are contributors to greenhouse gases and poor air quality.

Or put another way, in the words of the late Gilda Radner's classic character, Roseanne Roseannadanna: "It just goes to show you: It's always something."

It's always something. If it's not your car engine, it's aerosol cans. If it's not fireplaces, it's barbecues. If it's not bovine waste, it's gases from landfills. If it's not dust from construction, it's particulate matter from cooking exhaust. It's always something.

There are few human activities that don't have some effect on our environment, and we are only learning about some of the effects of some of those activities. It seems another target arises every day.

The latest is compost.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is seeking a 15 percent reduction in emissions from composting operations in the Valley. One of the district's air pollution control officers, Rick McVaigh, says composting contributes up to 2 percent of all volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, emitted into the atmosphere. The district would like that number to be lower.

We're not sure what a VOC is, but it's probably something that smells bad.

And you thought composting was a good thing.

As Visalia City Councilman Greg Collins noted after hearing McVaigh sound the alarm at a City Council meeting, it appears that "Environmental objectives are colliding."

Composting has been touted as a good thing for decades: It's a way to use natural forces to break down organic waste and restore it into something useful. Farmers and gardeners have known of its benefit for years: Take bio refuse, add some water and garbage, maybe mix in some worms and microbes, and after a while you have nutrient-rich fertilizer. Yes, the process is messy, smelly and emits some noxious chemicals, just like curing manure for fertilizer. But it keeps the stuff out of the landfill, saves energy and returns the product back to the nitrogen cycle.

The air pollution control district wants to clean up the process.

Cleaner composting is practical, especially on a large scale, but using a closed system and sealing it, returning emissions to the process. But it's more complicated and expensive. Commercial composters say it would put them out of business.

Maybe, maybe not. But we think the air pollution control district ought to be looking elsewhere to get a fraction of a percentage point reduction in emissions, which in the case of composting are almost completely natural gases, like those from trees: Sure, they might contribute something, but is it really a problem?

Before dismissing the air pollution control district's request, however, we should note that the district has been derided in the past for targeting emission sources that people now accept as polluters that deserved to be cleaned up. The district has targeted stationary diesel engines, dry-cleaning operations, dust from construction and ag sites, charcoal barbecues, paint and other chemicals, fireplaces, gas-powered gardening machines, school buses and other fleet vehicles, classic cars, smoking cars, restaurant-vented cooking emissions and agriculture burning in the open.

People generally howled at each of those suggestions and complained that they would ruin our California way of life. But you know what? Some of those things, such as open burning, stationary diesel engines, construction dust, smoke-belching cars, etc., have been virtually eliminated.

Other causes have been greatly reduced. It's a fact that the efforts of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District have contributed to cleaner air in our Valley.

It's not clean enough yet. In fact, it is still among the most polluted air in the nation, which is why the district is now citing composting.

The district next needs to go after the major sources of pollution. It has nibbled around the edges and made great progress on many sources of pollution. Now it's time to go after No. 1: The trucks and cars that traverse our Valley every day. We would feel much better about supporting the district's campaign against compost if that were also taking place.

The Valley is obviously a still long way from achieving the clean air that we need to live in health and safety. It's important to use multiple strategies on many levels to make a difference. Because it's always something.

Washington Post Commentary Thursday, August 14, 2008

Power Failure

THE BUSH administration is not known for undying concern for the environment in general or clean air in particular. That's why it was a stunning setback when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia last month struck down the administration's single boldest move in favor of clean air: a regulation from its Environmental Protection Agency that sought to clean up the air from power plants. In an odd twist, the ruling was handed down on the same day the EPA opted to avoid issuing rules to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. In both cases, the action now turns to Congress.

What the court invalidated because of "fatal flaws" was the Clean Air Interstate Rule (CAIR). This 2005 directive from the EPA sought to reduce the amount of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide from power plants in one state that then settle downwind in another. The regulation covered the District of Columbia and 28 states in the Midwest and the East. Sulfur dioxide would have been cut by 70 percent, and nitrogen oxide by 60 percent from 2003 levels, starting in 2015, using a cap-and-trade system. Utility companies, and even states such as North Carolina, picked at pieces of the rule in lawsuits, from the equity of the distribution of emission allowances to the lack of assurance that upwind states would take measures to reduce pollution downwind.

For six years, Sen. Thomas R. Carper (D-Del.) has been trying to pass legislation similar to, but more far-reaching, than CAIR. The Senate isn't planning to consider it until next year. The Democratic-controlled 110th Congress roared into Washington last year promising aggressive action on the environment and climate change. It succeeded in boosting motor vehicle fuel economy and increasing the amount of renewable fuels in the fuel supply. And that's about it.

Passage of Mr. Carper's bill, which would make regulation of pollutants from the power sector nationwide a matter of law rather than agency rules (as with CAIR), could be the next Congress's chance to fulfill the promise of aggressive action.

Tri-Valley Herald, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, August 14, 2008

Carbon curbs pose threat to way of life

Joel Achenbach's article "Not so fast — don't get blown over by the rush to blame global warming" (Times, Aug. 8) glibly describes the dire results of various "models" of the future climate.

However, Achenbach does not discuss the dire results of proposed carbon emission controls in terms of transforming our economy and culture back to the poverty-stricken levels of the early 1800s.

If that sounds unbelievable, check EPA's Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking as a response to our learned Supreme Court's determination that greenhouse gases (GHG) are now included in the Clean Air Act: www.epa.gov/climatechange/anpr.html.

The preface from Stephen L. Johnson, the EPA administrator, is a warning, and says in part "if EPA were to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from motor vehicles under the Clean Air Act, then regulation of smaller stationary sources that also emit GHG, such as apartment buildings, large homes, schools, and hospitals could also be triggered." The annual cost per employee for small businesses would be \$7,447— Small Business Administration.

This is a totalitarian proposal to chain the American people. If implemented, it would effectively trash the Bill of Rights and as well as wipe out the national electric power system. EPA invites public comments.

Ron Kilmartin, Pleasant Hill