

Company ready to tear down Modesto tallow site

All evidence of reeking rendering soon to be gone

By Adam Ashton

Modesto Bee

The Modesto Tallow Co. could tear down its defunct rendering plant on Crows Landing Road by February, according to notices it filed last week with two government agencies.

That's good news to south Modesto business owners who want to see the 91-year-old tallow site spark more commercial development in their neighborhood.

"It's good for Crows Landing Road," said Maggie Mejia, a representative from Comerciantes Unidos, a south Modesto business group. It makes "more reasons to come out here to shop."

Modesto Tallow Co. executive William Shirley did not return calls for comment Monday. He has said the tallow site likely would be used for commercial projects once the rendering plant comes down.

Shirley's Texas-based company shut the tallow plant in late 2006 after a spate of complaints from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and neighboring residents who couldn't tolerate the stench of dead animals.

Modesto Tallow opened its plant decades before the surrounding neighborhood developed into an urban community.

The tallow company received a demolition permit from Modesto last week. The document gives the company six months to start work, said Will Crew, Modesto's chief building official.

Crew said the city is eager to see the site renewed.

"We're really wanting to work with them, because this is going to be a valuable thing for the city to have that abated," he said.

John Cadrett, compliance manager for the air pollution district, said the tallow company has removed asbestos from 10 buildings.

The demolition plan the company submitted to his agency calls for the work to be done in four phases beginning Oct. 29 and ending in February.

"The eyesore will be gone," Cadrett said.

County declares chemical use safe, will support refinery expansion

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Oct. 21, 2008

County planners have recommended approving the Big West of California refinery expansion after a last-minute analysis showed the use of a controversial chemical there is safe.

After consulting with refining experts, planners said the occasional use of a low concentration of hydrofluoric acid at the facility should be allowed to continue. However, they suggested any other use of the chemical at the facility be prohibited.

"We feel this is a safe process," said Kern County Planning Director Ted James. "We've concluded the use of this acid at such as low (concentration) is appropriate."

The \$700 million expansion will go before the Board of Supervisors Tuesday for final approval.

Big West's hard-won support for the project hung in the balance last week after it was revealed that a solution containing 1 to 5 percent HF is used to service the facility's injection wells.

Big West had initially proposed to use pure HF in the expansion but faced major opposition from community groups and politicians due to its hazards.

In pure form, HF poses serious risk due to its ability to vaporize when spilled, forming a toxic cloud that can spread to surrounding areas. In recent weeks, the company agreed to an alternative expansion plan that doesn't use the chemical.

After learning that a low concentration of HF was already in use at the facility, Supervisor Mike Maggard called a news conference and accused Big West of not being "truthful enough" with the public.

The head of a community group that praised Big West's decision not to use HF in the expansion also said she felt betrayed.

Big West officials said the HF solution is used by a contractor that services wells at the refinery a few times a year. Unlike pure HF, the diluted form cannot vaporize and form a toxic cloud.

"It really is a totally different kind of HF acid use because it's only 5 percent and it's in an aqueous solution," said Big West Health, Safety and Environmental Director Bill Chadick.

Kern County Environmental Health Director Matt Constantine confirmed that the risks of aqueous HF were not as serious as pure HF.

Still, county planner Lorelei Oviatt said Big West should have been up front about the chemical's use. Oviatt said she repeatedly asked refinery officials if HF is in use or being tested at the facility and they said no. Under state environmental review laws, the public had a right to know about the chemical's use, she said.

"We rely on (Big West) to tell us about their project," Oviatt said. "They didn't understand the extent to which they needed to describe what they do so we could tell that to the decision-makers and the public."

Chadick said the environmental review process doesn't require the company to conduct risk assessments on every chemical it uses. Because of the low risk of aqueous HF, the company didn't think it was worth the effort to analyze its dangers, he said.

Maggard said Monday that he remained concerned about Big West's ability to communicate important issues to the community. He plans to propose additional measures today to ensure the company acts transparently.

"The issue for me was never the fact that the diluted mixture is not manageable," Maggard said. "The issue is they need to fully cooperate and disclose when we make inquiries of them."

Catalytic converter developer honored for car contribution

By Sharon Silke Carty

USA TODAY, Tuesday, October 21, 2008

GROSSE POINTE SHORES, Mich. — Early in his career, Dick Klimisch realized he wasn't going to be satisfied working as a chemical engineer figuring out how to make synthetic underpants for 5 cents cheaper.

It was the late 1960s, and then he saw an ad in a trade journal saying General Motors was looking for chemists to work on catalysis.

It was odd. GM generally hired mechanical engineers to build engines and powertrains, not chemists.

Klimisch jumped at the opportunity and soon led a team to develop what is arguably the device most responsible for cleaning vehicle tailpipe emissions: the catalytic converter.

"The catalytic converter has had a profound impact on our environment," says Jim Kliesch, senior engineer for the Union of Concerned Scientists. Advances in the catalytic converter, which rolled out on GM's 1975 model-year cars, and computer-controlled fuel injection technology have all but eliminated tailpipe emissions, he says.

Today, that team of engineers will be honored for the first time for developing the catalytic converter, receiving the Great Moments in Engineering Award from information technology group GlobalSpec at a dinner in Detroit.

"It was the first generation of ecological and green technology relative to the automotive sector," says Jeff Killeen, CEO of GlobalSpec. "The timing of it was rather perfect."

For the technically challenged, the catalytic converter looks like a second muffler but is actually a contraption filled with platinum-coated ceramic beads that chemically clean exhaust before it leaves the car.

And it is nearly perfect: credited with keeping 98% of carbon monoxide emissions, 99% of nitrogen oxide and 99.5% of unburned hydrocarbons from being expelled into the air. With just 1/10 of an ounce of platinum, it forces these emissions to convert into water and carbon dioxide.

It had another surprising upside: It increased fuel economy by 10% to 20%.

Parallel challenges today

Engineers today are racing to meet fuel-economy rules that will raise the required average to 35 miles per gallon by 2020. A phase-in period will push fuel economy on cars from 27.5 mpg today to 35.7 by 2015 and on trucks from 23.5 to 28.5 in the same period.

In the early 1970s, the auto industry faced similar pressures. The 1970 amendments to the Clean Air Act called for a dramatic cut in many pollutants spewing from car tailpipes. Smog had grown from a Los Angeles problem to a national concern. Also, the government had only recently begun regulating emission of lead into the air.

Engineers were struggling to meet the new standards. Many attempted to tweak the engine performance, hoping that would lower emissions. Often, it just resulted in more problems.

"Today, engineers are facing similar challenges, except rather than addressing how to deal with (tailpipe emissions), they are asking how can they cut down on the amount of greenhouse gases a vehicle puts out," Kliesch says. "It may seem like an overwhelming challenge."

It was late GM president Edward Cole who came across research that showed chemical catalysis — using one chemical to speed up a reaction of other chemicals — could help burn off the excess gasoline that made its way out of the tailpipe and caused most pollution concerns. He hired Klimisch and others to work on a catalytic device for GM.

Klimisch downplays his role as leader of the team, saying it was Cole who had the foresight to look at alternative solutions. "I was just the first person in GM who knew how to spell catalysis," he says.

One problem: At that time, the industry used leaded gas to improve the power of its engines. GM discovered that lead coated the insides of the catalytic converter, making it useless.

So in 1971, in front of the Society of Automotive Engineers, Cole boldly declared GM would no longer use leaded gasoline.

As the auto industry today tries to move away from gasoline to alternatives such as ethanol or hydrogen, they are struggling to get oil companies on board to help.

But in those days, GM had such huge clout in the country that oil companies scrambled and had unleaded gas on sale in time for the 1975 cars.

"I was tremendously lucky to be in the right place at the right time," says Klimisch, who continued working for GM until retirement and now teaches part time at a charter junior high school in Detroit. "What an incredible opportunity to work on a problem like this."

Eco-friendly schools offer students fresh lessons

By Wendy Koch

USA TODAY, Tuesday, October 21, 2008

GERMANTOWN, Md. — On the outside, Great Seneca Creek Elementary School looks much like any other. But inside, it is unmistakably green.

This was the first public school in Maryland to receive certification as "eco-friendly" — a concept catching on in schools around the nation. Eco-friendly schools offer ways to save energy, improve air quality and educate students about the environment.

Great Seneca fifth-grader Eddie Graves explains it best. "It doesn't use as much water," he says, citing the waterless urinals and motion-activated faucets. He's standing in the library, where a slanted ceiling helps light bounce off the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"In most classrooms, teachers don't need the lights," says another fifth-grader, Catie Cornell. She says the cabinetry is made from wheatboard, which is recycled wheat grass, and the bathroom partitions are made of recycled bottles.

The U.S. Green Building Council, a private group, has certified or is considering certification for more than 1,000 schools around the country, most within the past few years, says the council's Taryn Holowka. Other schools, such as Little Bennett Elementary in Clarksburg, Md., have been built green but did not seek certification.

This year, Florida, Maryland and Anchorage approved policies requiring that new schools be green.

Six other states — Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, Ohio and Washington — also require new schools to meet green-building standards. More than a dozen cities — including New York, New Orleans and Washington — do the same. Other states — including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and California — offer financial incentives.

"Momentum is really starting to pick up," says Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association. He says green schools give kids a living laboratory to learn about the environment.

Concepts aren't new

As energy costs rise, the greening of America's schools is part of a larger trend toward more energy-efficient construction, from homes to shopping malls, city halls and office buildings.

The building principles are not new. For years, they've been called "sustainable," "high-performance" or "energy-efficient." Now, the popular term is "green," and dozens of green-building programs have sprung up in the past decade. The Green Building Initiative, for example, began in 2005 to award "Green Globes" to buildings that meet its criteria.

Two organizations are the most active in certifying schools as eco-friendly, a process that typically costs a few thousand dollars to pay for inspections. They are the Collaborative for High Performance Schools and the U.S. Green Building Council, which launched a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program for schools last year.

Each program varies, but they have common criteria that emphasize recyclable materials, large windows, water conservation, efficient heating and cooling systems, and natural light.

Another hallmark of green building is well-insulated exterior walls, windows and doors. That tight envelope raises concerns about whether such construction is necessarily healthier, because it can limit air circulation, says Rebecca Morley of the National Center for Healthy Housing, a non-profit group.

Her organization studied some of the nation's largest green-building programs, including the council's, and said in a report last month that each has features meant to improve air quality.

"Sometimes the up-front costs can seem prohibitive," but they are offset in the long term by improved health and lower energy bills, says C.H. "Sunny" Savoie, president-elect of the National School Boards Association.

Those savings explain why "we haven't seen much opposition," the council's Taryn Holowka says.

Kids pick up life skills

Summerfield Elementary School in Neptune, N.J., which received the second-highest LEED certification in 2006, uses 40% less water and 30% less energy than the school it replaced, says David Mooij, superintendent.

He says it even cost less to build: \$181 per square foot, which is less than other new schools in the state.

"It started as an energy-efficient project but turned into a curriculum project," he says. Teachers use it in their lesson plans. Students take care of the plants in the water retention area and check the rainwater gauge.

Mooij says the school has better attendance and fewer visits to the school nurse.

"Because of the natural light, there's a positive feeling," says Deborah Waters, principal at Kersey Creek Elementary School in Mechanicsville, Va., which received a LEED rating in August 2007.

"The children have really bought into it," she says. They recycle newspapers, plastic bottles, cans, cellphones and printer cartridges.

At Great Seneca Creek, 120 signs teach kids about the school's green features, including its geothermal heating and cooling, and remind them to "turn off the lights."

The kindergarten bathroom has a dual-flush toilet that tells kids to hit one button "if it's brown" and another that uses less water "if it's yellow." The waterless urinals in the boys' bathrooms have created a slight problem at home for some parents.

"I can't get them to flush," Principal Greg Edmundson says of his two sons who attend the school.

Still, Edmundson says, the students are learning vital life skills. "I'm confident the kids who go here are more environmentally friendly than those who don't."

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Saturday, October 18, 2008:](#)

Our View: State needs rail project

Now more than ever state needs jobs, cleaner air, easier travel; yes on Prop. 1A.

A great deal is at stake with Proposition 1A, the high-speed rail bond on the November ballot. Jobs, cleaner air, reduced dependence on oil, a convenient and efficient alternative to driving and flying -- for all these reasons, a "yes" vote makes perfect sense for Californians.

Some of the opposition to the \$9.95 billion bond comes from predictable sources -- groups backed by the oil industry, for instance. They seek to defend a status quo that is crumbling rapidly.

Sadly, much opposition has come from people who say they like the idea of 220-mph trains zipping up and down the state, but don't think we can afford it right now, in a time of budget disaster and economic crisis.

That sounds prudent, even reasonable, but it ignores an important fact of American history: Many of our most important public works projects have come in times of deep economic distress -- and they have been crucial elements in our recovery in those times.

Recall the Great Depression, when voters in the Bay Area passed bonds to build the Golden Gate and Bay bridges -- projects that lightened the impact of the Depression on that region and

were critical to the postwar economic boom. Shasta Dam was built during the Depression and remains a linchpin of the state's water system.

The greatest public works project in the nation's history -- the transcontinental railroad -- was set in motion by Abraham Lincoln at the outset of the Civil War, the most troubled period of our history.

The other gap in the reasoning of high-speed rail opponents is their nearly universal belief that we save money by not building the high-speed system, with its estimated price tag of \$40 billion to \$45 billion.

Sure, we'd save that money, but those "savings" would carry a steep price:

We'd lose 160,000 construction jobs -- and all the economic stimulus of that vast payroll.

We wouldn't have 400,000 new permanent jobs once the system begins to operate.

We wouldn't see a reduction in our dependence on oil.

We wouldn't get cleaner air, and we'd keep spending added millions each year in health costs attributed to air pollution.

We'd lose a chance to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 12 billion pounds each year.

In short, the cost of not building the high-speed system is not zero.

In fact, in order to meet growing transportation needs, we'd have to spend two or three times as much money to expand highways and airports. Expanding Highway 99 in the Valley to an eight-lane interstate, for example, would cost as much as \$25 billion alone.

We'd also lose federal funding that now appears on the horizon, as a growing bipartisan coalition in Congress seems ready to find the money to match state and private sector funding for such projects.

Other areas -- the Midwest, Texas, Florida, Colorado, the northeast corridor from Washington to Boston -- are working on their own high-speed rail plans. Right now, California stands at the head of the line for any federal funding, which Proposition 1A will require. But if the measure fails, we'll go to the very end of that line -- perhaps for decades.

The high-speed rail project is immense, and that can be daunting.

The current economic situation is likely to get worse before it gets better.

In the past, Californians have risen to such challenges with vision and determination. Voting "yes" on Proposition 1A is a declaration that we still possess those qualities, and have not surrendered them to a timid faith in a status quo that is no longer sustainable.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Editorial, Tuesday, Oct. 21, 2008:](#)

Prop 1A: Conflicting claims

With Proposition 1A, California voters are being asked to make the first significant contribution to what will eventually be a statewide network of high-speed rail lines.

Whether voters choose to approve 1A depends on which side in the debate you believe more.

A couple of things are not in dispute: 1A would sell nearly \$10 billion in general obligation bonds. That means the state would have to pay the money from its general fund over the course of 30 years at a rate of about \$667 million a year.

It should be noted the state can afford it. Its bonded indebtedness is still well below the recommended 5 percent of its general fund revenues. Even with the other general obligation bonds on the ballot, the state can absorb this expense.

Also not in dispute: A high-speed rail line system would move people at speeds up to 220 mph from Los Angeles to San Francisco in a little more than two hours.

After that, however, the claims about Proposition 1A are suspect from either side.

Supporters claim:

- A ticket on the high-speed rail line from Los Angeles to San Francisco would be \$50 per person. That's hard to believe, considering estimates to run the system run to about \$1 billion per year. That would mean the system would need to generate about 20 million passenger trips a year. That would mean moving more than a quarter million people back and forth across the state every business day of the year. The numbers simply don't compute.
- High-speed rail will reduce pollution by 12 billion pounds of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere per year and require one-third the energy of air travel and half that of auto travel. Those might be true. But most of the air pollution generated by vehicles in the Central Valley comes from long-distance diesel-powered trucks. These vehicle-trips would not be reduced by high-speed rail, which would carry passengers only. Trucks carry freight.
- The high-speed rail project would generate jobs and stimulate the economy. Probably true. Analysts fear, however, the stimulus will land in the Bay Area and in Southern California.

Opponents claim:

- The state can't afford this now. Actually, the state might as well start building the project now, because the longer it waits, the more it will cost.
- The project will never get built. If the money is there to build it, it will get built. It's likely, however that the state will ultimately spend as much as \$100 billion for a system it now estimates will cost \$40 billion.
- California should spend the money on local rail projects instead. Maybe not instead, but it should spend money on local rail. The fact is that without educating Californians on using public transportation, any rail project will end up being underused and a waste of money.

Local angle

The current plan for the route for the rail line through the Valley would go through Hanford, not Visalia, but Visalians are making a strong case for it. What concerns us is how the rail system will accelerate local growth.

If high-speed rail brings more people to the region, increasing the number of local vehicle trips, it could actually increase air pollution and congestion in our area rather than relieve it.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Oct. 21, 2008:](#)

Green jobs will fuel clean-energy economy

We can address the climate crisis and put people to work at the same time with a clean-energy economy fueled by green jobs. A clean-energy economy will create millions of new green jobs that America desperately needs, jobs that can't be outsourced and use the skills of today's workers. Green jobs aren't just the jobs of the future, they are the jobs of today.

The oil and coal companies have spent millions in lobbying and advertising to block the switch to clean energy. We need to take back this country and let our leaders know that we want this new clean energy economy now! We can revitalize our economy with good jobs, clean, renewable energy and a healthy climate.

Merrily Davies, Porterville