

Ammonia leak at Ruiz Foods in Dinuba prompts evacuation, 9 sent to hospital for exposure to fumes

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, April 23, 2009

An ammonia leak at the Ruiz Foods facility in Dinuba early this morning prompted the evacuation of approximately 200 employees from a building and a response by Dinuba firefighters.

The leak, first reported about 1:20 a.m. at the facility in the 500 block of South Alta Avenue, was later identified as coming from malfunctioning equipment near the exterior of a large building, said Dinuba Fire Engineer Richard Marquez.

A ventilation system on the building may have sucked some of the ammonia-laced air into the building where employees were working, Marquez said.

By the time firefighters arrived, the employees had been evacuated. About 35 people complained of chest pains, shortness of breath or irritation of their eyes, symptoms that are consistent with exposure to ammonia fumes, Marquez said. Of those, nine were taken to local hospitals for evaluation, Marquez said.

The source of the leak was located sometime before 3:45 a.m., when firefighters left the scene. The plant is back in operation this morning, according to news reports.

A spokeswoman for Ruiz Foods declined to answer questions this morning before she released a company statement about the incident, which was expected before 8 a.m.

Turlock schools go green

By Fiona Chin

Turlock Journal, Wednesday, April 22, 2009

On Monday, seven elementary schools within the Turlock Unified School District will kick off Go Green Week 2009. Until May 1, students of Crowell, Cunningham, Wakefield, Julien, Walnut, Osborn and Medeiros elementary schools will participate in various activities and programs to learn earth-friendly behaviors.

Go Green Week is part of the City of Turlock's efforts to encourage environmental stewardship. The City's Municipal Services department believes that a school-age public education campaign will create eco-conscious citizens.

"I think it's important to start with the kids. If you start at a young age, they're raised on this information and this way of living. It stays with them and they will go back and share it with their parents," said Toni Cordell, staff services technician for City of Turlock, Municipal Services.

The information the students will receive includes tips for conservation and pollution prevention strategies such as recycling, composting, water conservation and waste reduction activities.

To reinforce their newly-acquired knowledge, throughout the week local business representatives will visit school sites to give presentations to the students, there will be recycling contests, a school campus tree planting activity and a Wear Green Day. The tree planting will be held in conjunction with the City of Turlock's Arbor Day Tree Planting Celebration.

And as a reminder of the lessons of Go Green Week, green bracelets will be distributed to every student to be worn to acknowledge their environmental awareness.

Cordell hopes that in the future, Go Green Week will be expanded to include junior high and high schools.

"That is our intent, but since the program is two years young, we will solidify what we have going

on and focus on those areas first," she said.

"It's amazing to me how quickly it's (conservation and environmental awareness) caught on. Everywhere you look, every business is going green so I think the concept will be very well taken. We hope that the kids enjoy it."

State: OK to use more fumigants

Environmentalists object to new regs

By E.J. Schultz, Bee Capitol Bureau

Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, April 23, 2009

SACRAMENTO — State regulators this week finalized looser pesticide rules that environmentalists say will slow efforts to clean the valley's smoggy air.

The Department of Pesticide Regulation will allow more emissions from "fumigants" — pesticides that are injected into soil to kill pests and disease.

The ruling is a victory for farmers, who feared that stricter limits would force some growers to stop using pesticides in years when the region approaches the limit.

Pesticides contribute to about 6 percent of the smog problem in the valley, according to state figures. Fumigants are just one type of pesticide.

The department "claims that this is not a big deal because it's such a small amount," said Alegría De La Cruz, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. But "this, from our perspective, is not making good on a promise that they made to valley residents to protect their health."

The center is considering filing a lawsuit to change the rules. The regulations cover the prime growing season of May 1 through Oct. 31.

The department said the looser limit will still "meet our obligation to reduce pesticide emissions, but do so in a way that avoids placing an unreasonable or disproportionate burden on fumigant pesticide users," according to regulatory documents.

The rule covers smog-making gases, called volatile organic compounds, emitted by pesticides.

For the valley, the rule sets the emissions limit at 18.1 tons per day, 2.1 tons higher than what clean-air activists wanted.

Other regions still face a 20 percent cutback, the department said.

Scientist points to environmentally helpful oil production

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, April 23, 2009

Oil producers -- including some in Kern -- can play an important role in efforts to reduce greenhouse gases, a Wyoming scientist told students at Cal State Bakersfield Wednesday.

Carbon sequestration, the existing technology focused on in Geoffrey Thyne's seminar, pumps carbon dioxide into underground geological formations, where it is expected to remain, safely, for thousands of years.

This keeps the gas out of the atmosphere, reducing an emission that many believe contributes to global warming. And when used in tandem with oil production, the gas makes crude more fluid and therefore easier to extract.

The technology is already used by some Kern oil producers. Such activity would be expanded under a proposal by BP and Rio Tinto to build a \$2 billion clean energy plant near Taft. It would convert petroleum coke and coal to hydrogen fuel, and then put most of the carbon dioxide byproduct to use enhancing nearby oil production.

Thyne, senior research scientist at the Enhanced Oil Recovery Institute in Laramie, Wyo., called the companies' joint proposal a "no-brainer" for Kern.

"I think it would be an ideal project," he said after the seminar.

While promising, such efforts are insufficient to cap atmospheric carbon at current levels, he said. That's because U.S. oil fields have room for only about 10 years' worth of carbon emissions.

So, beyond using carbon in oil production, the country would have to spend about \$1 trillion a year to store carbon underground, he said.

Some audience members expressed doubts about the technology's viability. Thyne acknowledged that he, too, is skeptical, but that it is worth testing on a large scale.

"They said we couldn't put a man on the moon, either," he said.

Cement industry: EPA pollution plan not achievable

By John Flesher, AP Environmental Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Wednesday, April 22, 2009

Traverse City, Mich. (AP) -- A group representing the U.S. cement industry says a federal government plan for cutting emissions of mercury and other air toxins at its plants is unrealistic.

The Portland Cement Association said Wednesday a regulation drafted by the Environmental Protection Agency would cause some plants to close. The group said there would be shortages of cement, the key ingredient in concrete.

The industry also predicted more cement imports from countries with weaker standards.

EPA's proposed rule would require the nation's 99 cement plants to make steep reductions in releases of pollutants such as mercury, hydrochloric acid, hydrocarbons and soot.

The agency says cement kilns are America's fourth-largest source of airborne mercury. It says the proposed limits would save up to 1,600 lives a year.

House panel probes climate bill's downsides

By Dina Cappiello, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee and other papers, Wednesday, April 22, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Democratic leaders pushing legislation to curb global warming are hearing from anxious industry and union representatives on how to ease some of the possible downsides: higher energy costs and job losses.

Representatives of electric utilities, unions and other energy-intensive industries were to appear before a House subcommittee hearing Thursday to discuss ways to craft a bill so it protects consumers from higher electricity rates. They also will advise the panel how the U.S. can keep manufacturing jobs and its competitiveness when other countries will not be paying the extra costs to limit the greenhouse gas emissions blamed for climate change.

These two issues loomed over the first two days of hearings this week. They also represent significant stumbling blocks for Democratic lawmakers and the Obama administration, which both want to pass global warming and energy legislation this year.

Obama administration officials on Wednesday signaled support for the bill, saying it would create jobs and invest in clean energy technologies.

Thursday's hearing of a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee will be the third held this week, as the House looks to put the finishing touches on a bill so it can be ready for a vote by the end of summer.

But just how much the draft bill would increase energy costs remains unclear.

A preliminary analysis released by the Environmental Protection Agency found that the average American household would pay an extra \$98 to \$140 a year to achieve the emissions reductions called for in the bill. That estimate assumed that 40 percent of the money collected from auctioning off emissions credits would be returned to American households to help pay energy bills.

The draft bill is silent on how these credits would be distributed to companies that emit large amounts of greenhouse gases. That's critical in determining how much the legislation - which will put a price on global warming gases - would increase energy costs.

Jim Rogers, chairman of Duke Energy Corp., one of several industry executives to appear before the House panel on Tuesday, said the allocation of emission permits is the "elephant in the room" - one that will determine the success of the program.

"It is not going to be cheap, and we need to face up to that," Rogers said.

The draft bill calls for a reduction of greenhouse gases by 20 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, and 83 percent by mid-century. It also includes measures aimed at reducing the use of fossil energy such as requiring utilities to produce a quarter of their electricity from renewable sources, and calling for tougher standards to promote conservation.

Increased pressure is on Congress to act since the EPA last Friday declared that greenhouse emissions endanger public health and safety - the first step in regulating climate-changing pollution under the federal Clean Air Act.

Obama calls for new era of energy exploration

By Philip Elliott and Mike Gover, Associated Press

Modesto Bee and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, April 23, 2009

NEWTON, Iowa -- President Barack Obama, standing Wednesday in the shell of a once-giant Maytag appliance factory that now houses a wind energy company, declared that a "new era of energy exploration in America" would be a crucial to leading the nation out of an economic crisis.

With pieces of wind turbine towers as a backdrop, Obama touted the small manufacturing firm as a success and as a step toward reducing the United States' reliance on polluting fuels. But as the president on Earth Day set a goal for wind to generate as much as 20 percent of the U.S. electricity demand by 2030, legislation to make that a reality faced a challenge back in Washington in the Democratic-led Congress.

"The nation that leads the world in creating new energy sources will be the nation that leads the 21st century global economy," Obama said in a state that launched him on the road to the White House with a surprise upset over one-time rival Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"America can be that nation. America must be that nation. And while we seek new forms of fuel to power our homes and cars and businesses, we will rely on the same ingenuity - the same American spirit - that has always been a part of our American story."

It's an American spirit, though, that has been damped with economic downturn and financial crisis.

The president left Washington for a few hours Wednesday to visit this small Iowa town, which took a huge economic hit when Maytag Corp. shut its doors in 2007. The Maytag plant employed some 4,000 in a town of 16,000 residents in jobs that paid about \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year.

In its place is Trinity Structural Towers, a 90-person manufacturing firm that makes parts of wind turbines the president hopes to expand on land and at sea through the government's first plan to harness ocean currents to produce energy.

"Now, the choice we face is not between saving our environment and saving our economy," Obama said. "The choice we face is between prosperity and decline. We can remain the world's leading importer of oil, or we can become the world's leading exporter of clean energy."

In Washington, the president's plan to increase alternative energy sources and create environmentally friendly jobs hit some snags despite Obama's fellow Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress. Energy Secretary Steven Chu, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood reinforced Obama's message in testimony to a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on Wednesday.

The administration's draft bill is designed to help stem the pollution blamed for climate change by capping greenhouse gas emissions and reducing the nation's reliance on fossil fuels. The goal is to reduce greenhouse gases by 20 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, and by 83 percent by mid-century.

The White House wants to see movement on the legislation by Memorial Day. To help that along, aides said the president plans to personally make his case that the costs of dealing with climate change can be reduced dramatically by adopting programs that will spur energy efficiency and wider use of non-fossil energy such as wind, solar and biofuels.

In Newton, Obama proclaimed that "once-shuttered factories are whirring back to life," although the facility he toured is a shadow of what it replaced here about 30 miles east of Des Moines.

"Today this facility is alive again with new industry," Obama said, while noting that "this community continues to struggle and not everyone has been so fortunate as to be rehired."

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Wednesday, April 22, 2009:](#)

Plans only as strong as our backbone

What happened to old plan? Politicians

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

I tried. OK? Really, I did.

I was all set to write a happy column about Earth Day (which is today, so pick another day to dump your battery acid down that gopher hole) and how government agencies are going ever "greener."

Then I got to reading about the city/county general plan update discussions and cracked open the background reports to see how things are proceeding.

The bottom line is if you are at all interested in better planning for this community, you need to get involved, do it NOW and stick with it, because this will be a long haul.

Otherwise, the powers that be will succeed in getting a namby-pamby plan approved, we'll get sued, a plan will be forced on us and our politicians will worm out from under it every chance they get.

That will continue to happen until we citizens make it very clear we are watching.

In case you blinked and missed this, a "growth concept" map was floated by a joint meeting of the city and county Planning Commissions Monday night. Developer whining quickly ensued.

The concept involves growth boundaries, which other communities have had for many years. Somehow those cities still have survived.

Our boundaries would be huge.

The "core" would extend from 7th Standard Road on the north to Highway 119 on the south and from the mouth of the Kern River canyon on the east to Heath Road on the west.

Inside that vast core, developers could build higher densities and pay lower infrastructure costs.

Unlike other communities, which have simply said no growth beyond the core, this plan would allow development at a future date. If someone wanted to build sooner, he or she could, but at a much greater cost.

That only makes sense as leapfrog development costs taxpayers far more to stretch services out to sprawling neighborhoods.

This watered-down version of growth boundaries was met with skepticism, concern and outright wheedling Monday night as some developers and property owners argued their land (outside the core) should be exempted.

"People here haven't seen anything like this," said Bakersfield Planning Director Jim Movius.

When I spoke with the Sierra Club's main local activist, Gordon Nipp, he was not enthralled with the boundaries -- mostly because he fears they're on the verge of being breached.

The county Planning Commission on May 14 will study at least one massive project, Nipp said, that's far outside the core. And that doesn't even count all the many acres already entitled to be developed during the boom whose owners are now waiting out the bad economy.

"It's astounding to me," Nipp said. "They should put a moratorium on development if they're considering these type of boundaries."

Despite new state laws that give anti-sprawl efforts teeth, Nipp said he's not very positive about what the new general plan will look like.

"As you know, the devil is in the details," he said.

That's also where the real fighting begins -- writing the policies that back up the plan.

As tedious and time consuming as that part will surely be, that's where we citizens need to be most vigilant.

"The policies are going to have to be real strong to make the growth plan work," Movius agreed.

Right now, our general plan policies "encourage" certain types of growth and "discourage" others.

Those words will need to be replaced by "require" and "prohibit."

That's how the settlement agreement between Stockton and the Sierra Club reads after the environmental group (with the backing of the attorney general) successfully sued over Stockton's general plan.

Sierra Clubbers have two hefty new hammers in the form of SB 375, which mandates more sustainable growth, and AB 32, which mandates the state roll back greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels.

We could have been well on our way if our general plan hadn't been treated like a pile of used Kleenex over the last seven years.

When it was written back in 2002, it envisioned mini city centers, or hubs, of retail, commercial and other job zones surrounded by high-density housing and then lower-density housing, so no matter where you lived, you could walk or bike to work or shop. No ugly block walled neighborhoods. And, oh, taking the bus would actually have worked.

"It had some pretty sexy ideas in it," Movius said of the old plan.

What happened?

Politicians, that's what.

Developers said "jump" and our public servants said "how high?"

This time around, let's make sure we the people are holding the bar.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Thursday, April 23, 2009:](#)

Sensible state bill on fuels' greenhouse gases

California should continue to lead the way in the fight against climate change by requiring cleaner-burning fuels in this state.

The state Air Resources Board is scheduled to vote today on whether to force refiners and distributors to reduce the "carbon intensity" of the transportation fuels they sell, starting in 2011. The so-called Low Carbon Fuel Standard represents a critical step toward this state's commitment to reduce overall emissions of heat-trapping gases by a third by 2020.

Passage of a California cleaner-fuels standard would intensify the pressure on Congress to make a national commitment to promote lower-carbon options to gasoline and diesel. Fuel standards are among the proposed elements of legislation by Reps. Ed Markey, D-Mass., and Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, that is expected to advance through the House Energy and Commerce Committee by Memorial Day.

Mary Nichols, chair of the state air board, told The Chronicle editorial board last week that state regulators have been "in close touch" with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that a pioneering state law would be compatible with possible federal action.

The proposed low-carbon rule has run into intense opposition, not only from the oil industry, but from ethanol producers, who object to the state formula for determining the carbon impact from fuels. For example, in calculating a fuel's carbon intensity, the air board - quite reasonably - considers the greenhouse gases released from production, distribution and changes in land use. Some forms of ethanol score very well in that formula - but not ethanol produced from Midwest corn in a coal-fired plant, which can be even more carbon intensive than gasoline when the direct and indirect impacts are included.

If the goal is to curb global climate change, then even the indirect impacts of a policy - such as calculating the effect of deforestation abroad - must be considered.

The state air board's approach makes sense. It deserves to pass.

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Thursday, April 23, 2009:](#)

Our View: Ambitious goal to cut fuel carbons

State's new rules would be risky, so regulators must be prepared to modify them, if necessary.

Back in 1975, California launched the modern era of clear air regulation when it mandated the use of the catalytic converters.

Now California has poised to take an equally historic step when the California Air Resources Board votes on a proposed low-carbon fuel standard.

If the Air Resources Board approves the controversial standard, a complicated regulatory scheme designed to reduce the carbon content of motor fuels, it will become the first governmental agency in the world to do so.

The goal of the ambitious plan is to cut the emission of planet warming greenhouse gases emitted by cars and trucks 10 percent by 2020.

Will it work? Frankly, no one knows for sure.

What the air board is proposing has never been tried before. The assumptions built into its proposed regulations require the commercialization and substantial expansion of some emerging and still experimental technologies.

Even the ARB technicians who have designed the regulations acknowledge that their full impact can't be known until the program has been up and running for a while.

Still, it is worth trying.

The consequences of global warming -- from rising sea levels and longer, more damaging droughts, among other things -- are real and frightening. So is the nation's dependence on foreign sources of oil.

The low-carbon fuel standard the state air board seeks to impose is designed to reduce both.

Its most controversial feature is its effort to look beyond just what comes out of the tailpipe but at the whole production cycle when assessing the carbon footprint of a transportation fuel.

That's why producers of corn ethanol, the most common non-petroleum fuel, oppose the standard.

ARB scientists have concluded that in rare cases the production of corn can result in more carbon emissions than simply using oil.

And, in general, corn ethanol has a larger trail of carbon emissions than other kinds of biofuels. That's true, in part, because carbon absorbing trees and natural grasses are cut down often to plant the corn.

Other critics of the program want the air board to go further when assessing not just the potential carbon emitting consequences of growing more corn but the economic and social justice implications as well.

As more corn is grown to fuel cars, the price of corn as a food source for some of the world's poorest people has soared. But the board has stopped short of such considerations, which is just as well given the complexities it already faces.

By design, California's proposed low-carbon fuel standards favor the still somewhat experimental cellulosic ethanol (produced from grasses, crop waste and eventually perhaps even algae) as well as hydrogen and electricity. These fuel sources tend to emit less carbon.

The plan foresees a robust market of trades, with oil companies bidding for blends of the alternatives that have the lowest possible carbon footprint.

In the past, every time the price of oil has dropped, investment in research and development of less environmentally damaging alternatives has dried up.

ARB seeks to alter that dynamic by giving investors an economic incentive to put their money in the most planet-protecting fuel available.

While the new rules should be approved, they are risky. Impacts must be monitored closely. If they fail to achieve their goals or create some unintended consequence, regulators must be prepared to adjust or jettison them as needed.

[Tri-Valley Herald and Contra Costa Times editorial, Thursday, April 23, 2009:](#)

New day at the EPA -- it's about time

Since the Bush administration departed Washington an interesting shift has taken place at the Environmental Protection Agency. And we are delighted.

The latest change in policy came Tuesday. It was a full reversal from the Bush rules concerning the reporting of toxic pollution. Companies will be required, starting in July, to fully disclose the toxic chemicals they release into the air, onto land and into the water; something one would expect a government environmental agency to require all along.

That was the standard for two decades until President George W. Bush decided these industries needed to be saved at the expense of our environment. He turned soft on those who stored or released smaller amounts of toxic chemicals; in 2006, facilities using 5,000 pounds of toxic chemicals or releasing less than 2,000 pounds were only required to submit less-detailed information. Only ones that released the most dangerous chemicals were required to submit detailed information to the EPA.

More than 3,500 facilities were off the hook — we can only guess as to how much pollution went undetected.

Now, as part of a spending bill signed by President Barack Obama in March, strict toxic pollution reporting will be required across the board.

Called the Toxics Release Inventory, the information is valuable to society so that we can see who the worst polluters are and where they are located.

Residents and officials can act accordingly, perhaps fight together to enact tougher local restrictions of toxic pollution and make their communities more safe.

This policy change came a few days after the EPA declared five greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide sent off by automobiles and industrial plants "endanger public health and welfare." Also, some members of Congress are trying to follow through with cap-and-trade legislation, even though some Republicans are set to put up a fight.

Still, we are seeing a great change in the EPA with new Administrator Lisa Jackson at the helm.

The agency is beginning to show signs that it will no longer be merely a rubber-stamp for presidential policy, despite the risks. The EPA is regaining its identity as a policymaker to benefit our environment and public health.

It's about time.