

EPA finds manganese threat at 2 schools

By Blake Morrison and Brad Heath
USA Today, Thursday, October 29, 2009

Regulators have found high levels of neurotoxic manganese in the air outside two schools in Ohio and West Virginia, the latest results of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to check for chemicals outside schools across the nation.

Government scientists have determined that long-term exposure to manganese can cause mental disabilities and emotional problems, especially in kids.

The preliminary results, to be released today, found average manganese levels at least 70% higher than what the EPA considers safe for long-term exposure outside Warren Elementary School in Marietta, Ohio, and Neale Elementary School in Vienna, W.Va. The schools are about 10 miles from each other.

In both cases, EPA officials stress the results are preliminary, and that drawing conclusions about long-term health dangers from a small number of samples is impossible. Regulators will take at least six more samples at the schools. "This entire effort has been about sound science, transparency and the responsibility EPA has to ensure our children are protected where they play and learn," says EPA spokesman Brendan Gilfillan.

The results worry experts. "That's definitely something we don't want to see in the air near schools," says Gina Solomon, a senior scientist for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

One reason: Manganese can accumulate in the soil. That means kids at elementary schools can also be exposed by playing in the dirt, Solomon says.

"I'm very concerned," says Stephen Lester, science director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, a group that focuses on children and schools. "It speaks volumes to the need to address these problems."

Manganese is often emitted by metalworking plants, Solomon says. If monitoring continues to show problems, she says, the "priority is figuring out where it's coming from" and reducing the emissions. That's the hope of Tom Gibbs, superintendent of the Ohio school's district. "We're optimistic that the monitoring will result in some action," he says. "This is something that the community is going to need to work together to address."

Neale Principal Michael Fling says he plans to let the parents of his 389 students know later this week what the EPA is finding. "I'm glad that they're doing it," Fling says of the EPA. "There are a lot of people in the community who had questions."

The 63-school monitoring effort is part of a \$2.25 million EPA program launched in response to a USA TODAY investigation that identified hundreds of schools where chemicals appear to saturate the air.

NASCAR, rooted in fossil fuels, turning over new, green leaf

By Nate Ryan, staff writer
USA Today, Thursday, October 29, 2009

When the green flag waves in a Sprint Cup race, 43 cars begin belching exhaust full-bore.

The man in charge of spearheading stock car racing's push to shed its gas-guzzling image realizes that's what many might say passes for a green initiative in NASCAR.

"We're not attempting to take any high ground," says Mike Lynch, hired as NASCAR's first director of green innovation last fall. "Go out and ask 10 people, and they'll say, 'OK, you're green, now what about the cars? You're burning fossil fuels.' This is a pragmatic approach to green, and what we're doing now is just the beginning."

The concept might seem incongruous in a sport inherently tied to an internal combustion engine that many find synonymous with global warming, but NASCAR, despite cars with an eye-popping 5 mpg, is trying to embrace its eco-conscious side as the federal government has begun prodding the racing industry to become leaders in efficiency.

Racetracks are building solar farms to power their air-conditioned suites and planting trees to offset their carbon emissions. Teams such as Roush Fenway Racing are outfitting their race shops to meet stringent standards for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification and being careful not to leave their 18-wheel haulers idling. Sponsors are ramping up recycling programs and marketing hybrids and high-efficiency products through racing.

NASCAR has consulted with former vice president Al Gore and held summits with sponsors to organize efforts to reduce its carbon footprint in campgrounds and grandstands at tracks. Using a formula for competition- and fan-produced pollution, Carbonfund.org calculated the carbon footprint of the 2008 Daytona 500 as 14,163 tons. In 2007, sponsor Carfax made an environmental donation to offset more than 4,200 tons of emissions for a Nationwide Series race at Michigan International Speedway.

On the competition side, NASCAR is exploring the replacement of its carburetors with more efficient fuel injection (perhaps as early as 2011) and the use of alternative fuels in at least one of its national series.

A potentially lucrative byproduct of going green is more green in the coffers of NASCAR teams whose multimillion-dollar budgets, largely dependent on the largesse of corporate America, have been devastated by the recession. An economic recovery might be predicated partly on companies seeking a marketing platform to publicize more eco-friendly products. Datamonitor research projects more than 1,500 sustainable product launches in 2009, triple the number in 2008.

"There are a lot of major companies' marketing dollars that have gone into the green movement," says H.A. "Humpty" Wheeler, who runs the motor sports consulting firm The Wheeler Co. "We're not there, and that needs to be addressed."

Other circuits go extra mile

Some other racing series, though, have gotten a head start. The IRL uses ethanol to power its cars, and the American Le Mans Series employs alternative fuels. The ALMS also holds a Green Challenge at each event, rewarding the team that goes the fastest the farthest while minimizing its use of energy, petroleum and greenhouse gas emissions.

The Green Challenge was developed through a joint effort by the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency to create protocols for making racing greener by promoting advanced propulsion and fuel technologies. The Department of Energy has met with NASCAR officials, and an official says the government wants racing to help develop technology that's less polluting.

"We can use the harsh environment that's present in motor sports to test out those components and prove that they are valid," says Lee Slezak, manager of vehicle systems, simulation and evaluations at the Department of Energy.

A greener Sprint Cup Series also seems likely to be embraced by its four manufacturers with federal standards for fuel efficiency expected to rise by 10 mpg by 2016. General Motors, Ford, Toyota and Dodge all are producing hybrid vehicles.

"Every company in the world is looking at hybrids, diesels and plug-in vehicles," says Lee White, president of Toyota Racing Development. "We'd be very interested in (NASCAR) formulating a green look. It makes the sport more relevant to where the business of selling automobiles is being driven."

Other sponsors already have leveraged NASCAR involvement to highlight their sustainability. Coca-Cola has brought an interactive trailer to races this year to highlight its recycling businesses and has placed more than 2,600 recycling bins at a dozen tracks that have collected more than 65,000 pounds of recyclable material.

Safety-Kleen, a \$1.1 billion company that labels itself as a "green enabler" handling oil recycling and environmentally friendly waste cleanup, collects more than 125,000 gallons of used oil and 5,000 oil filters annually from NASCAR races. CEO Fred Florjancic says the company's 20-year involvement with NASCAR has helped build business with other sponsors and increase its public profile (a new promotion enables fans to buy collectible barrels of race oil used by star drivers).

"When my marketing guys said let's see if we can work with NASCAR on the eco-consciousness side, I said, 'That's like sleeping with the devil,' " Florjancic says. "My initial reaction was incorrect. NASCAR could be a shining example of a sport that's not known for recycling and environmental consciousness by saying, 'If they can, we can certainly do it.' " Need for speed limits efforts

ExxonMobil 1 has promoted fuel conservation as a Sprint Cup sponsor and showcased Penske Racing's Kurt Busch, Sam Hornish Jr. and David Stremme driving SmartCars in a July event in Chicago. But few think racing 70-horsepower vehicles is a green option, because, as White says, "Doubling fuel mileage means half the horsepower, and putting fans in the stands requires a show."

Says Hornish: "No one is going to come watch us run battery-powered cars. I don't see anyone making enough electric power to go 200 mph." NASCAR President Mike Helton, though, says competition is part of the green initiatives. In August, NASCAR met with engine builders on cost-effective ways to implement fuel injection.

White estimates fuel injection probably wouldn't bring huge gains in efficiency (perhaps by at least 1 mpg) but says its technology would help hook "a younger audience that uses a computer every day and hasn't heard of a carburetor."

Slezak says the Department of Energy strongly encourages series to consider moving away from petroleum-based fuels toward a bio-based renewable fuel supply.

GM has experience with racing alternative fuels in the ALMS. Last year its Corvette team switched to E85, a cellulosic ethanol made from waste wood. Team manager Doug Fehan says the conversion took about six months and fuel cells were the main obstacle. "The transition is not difficult," he says.

Helton says NASCAR is considering using multiple alternative fuels in its series, which would include the Rolex Grand-Am sports cars in addition to the Sprint Cup, Nationwide and Camping World stock cars and trucks.

With attendance and TV ratings in decline this year, White suggests NASCAR consider less intrusive ways — such as shorter distances — to make races greener without rule-tinkering. "If

you're going to change something to be green, change it to affect what might be our biggest challenge, which is declining audience," White says.

With its Green Cleaner Air project, which will plant 10 trees for every caution flag at 11 races this season and all tracks in 2010, NASCAR says it will offset a race's impact by planting 20 green acres.

Recycling at tracks cuts waste

Between Goodyear recycling all tires and Safety-Kleen recycling its oil, NASCAR leaves a minimal carbon footprint in the garage, and the vast campgrounds that surround many tracks are where NASCAR has focused many of its green initiatives.

"Do our cars need to be more fuel efficient? Absolutely," says Red Bull Racing driver Brian Vickers, who buys renewable energy at home. "But I think as a whole there's a lot bigger low-hanging fruit we can go after as a sport. There are a lot of fans that come to these races, and there's a lot we don't recycle that we could."

Many tracks are publicizing renewed efforts toward sustainability. Pocono Raceway is building a three-megawatt solar farm to power the track and some surrounding residences. Infineon Raceway has recycled more than 73 tons in the past five years, and Michigan reduced its landfill waste last year by recycling more than 153.5 tons of material (including cardboard, concrete, plastic and steel).

Michigan President Roger Curtis bristled when he saw reports labeling his track's efforts as "greenwashing," a term applied to companies with disingenuous strategies for being environmentally friendly.

Curtis, whose track is building a solar-powered media center and suites and has plans for wind turbines, says, "Way too often people look at NASCAR fans and think they're not interested in anything green. NASCAR fans love the outdoors.

"NASCAR is evolving, but why wait until when the competition can be green? We shouldn't be planting trees to neutralize carbon until that day comes? We're not going to do nothing."

Chesapeake won't drill in NYC watershed

By Mary Esch, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, October 29, 2009

ALBANY, N.Y.—Chesapeake Energy, one of the nation's largest natural gas producers, said Wednesday it won't drill in the New York City watershed in upstate New York because of opposition from politicians and environmental groups.

The announcement came hours before the first of four public hearings on the state Department of Environmental Conservation's new gas-drilling regulations, which critics call insufficient to protect the city's water supply.

"We have made the business decision not to drill in the New York City watershed," Chesapeake spokeswoman Maribeth Anderson said.

Concern over drilling in the Catskills region that provides water to the city's eight million residents has become a "needless distraction from the larger issues" of gas development in the state, she said.

Anderson said Oklahoma City-based Chesapeake is the only leaseholder in the 1 million-acre region, which includes a corner of the gas-rich Marcellus Shale formation. It's an area of forests, lakes and streams.

Earthjustice, an environmental group, welcomed the news from Chesapeake but said the decision needs to be backed up by a state ban on drilling in the watershed to ensure permanent protection.

The new rules, released Sept. 30 for a 60-day comment period, were drafted as a supplement to existing state regulations on oil and gas exploration in response to concerns about gas extraction from deep shale formations using horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing. In that process, millions of gallons of water combined with chemicals are injected after a well is drilled, fracturing the shale to release the gas.

Hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," is widely used in the Marcellus Shale formation, a layer of rock about 6,000 feet below ground that extends from southern New York, across Pennsylvania, into eastern Ohio and West Virginia.

Environmentalists and residents worry about accidents that could result in contamination of water supplies by chemicals added to the fracking water or brought up from the shale thousands of feet underground.

Although hydraulic fracturing is generally safe, the technique has been blamed for a number of water pollution cases around the country.

New York's 804-page report spelling out the regulations describes the substantial economic benefits of natural gas development in the Marcellus Shale as well as the potential adverse effects. It outlines requirements designed to protect water resources, air quality, wetlands, roads, and community character, among other things.

Permits to drill in the Marcellus region of New York have been held up for about 18 months while the generic impact statement, which will substitute for individual environmental impact statements, was produced.

K&L Gates, a law firm representing Halliburton and other energy companies, calls the proposed regulations "the most stringent requirements on horizontal drilling and high-volume fracturing activities of any state."

The proposed regulations could be modified after the public comment period. A spokesman for New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the administration was still evaluating the proposal and formulating a public comment.

Burning home fires will be a crime on bad-air nights in Bay Area

By Denis Cuff, staff writer

Contra Costa Times, Thursday, October 29, 2009

Light a fire at home, pay a \$400 fine.

Burning wood fires in home fireplaces and stoves on bad air nights in the Bay Area becomes illegal again as of Sunday, when the region enters its second cold-weather season with lighting up banned during Spare the Air alerts.

The crackdown, aimed at protecting public health from smoke, has two significant changes this year, the Bay Area Air Quality Management announced Wednesday:

The district will slap a fixed fine of \$400 on second-time violators, who received a written warning the first time they burned on a dirty-air night. Violators last year were subject to an indeterminate fine that could have been in the thousands of dollars. In the end, only person in the region — a Santa Rosa resident — ended up with a \$400 fine.

"We don't want to stomp on people's Norman Rockwell experience, but one neighbor's smoke can end up causing another neighbor's visit to the hospital. Smoke can trigger an asthma or heart attack," said Mark Ross, a Martinez city council member on the nine-county air pollution board. "Wood smoke is a public health threat."

The air district also will give the public more advance notice this year of no-burn alerts — 10 hours instead of two hours.

During the cold weather season beginning Sunday and lasting through Feb. 28, the air district will announce at 2 p.m. when the predicted air quality is bad enough to institute a ban starting at midnight and lasting for 24 hours.

The air district will continue to alert people who sign up for automated e-mails or phone calls.

"We think more notice will increase compliance with our rule," said Kristine Roselius, an air district spokeswoman.

She said the public complied for the most part last year with the new rule that barred burning wood fires in fireplaces, stoves or outdoor pits during Spare the Air alerts. The district issues the notices 15 or 20 times a year when cold, still air traps smoke near the ground.

Last year, the air district sent out 254 warning letters to people whom pollution inspectors witnessed burning on Spare the Air nights. Contra Costa and Marin counties tied for the most warning notices, with 55 sent out in each county.

Once a person gets a warning in any year, he is subject to a \$400 fine for a second violation. The fine for subsequent violations depends on the duration of the smoke, and whether it annoys or sickens neighbors, Roselius said.

"The slate is not wiped clean this year," Roselius said. "Warnings issued last year count as the warning."

Health officials say fine particles in smoke act like tiny razor blades, bypassing the body's defenses against larger particles and penetrating deep into lungs.

While motor vehicles spew fine particles, up to half of the particles in Bay Area air can come from wood fires on bad air nights, the air district estimates.

Earlier this month, the federal Environmental Protection Agency announced that the Bay Area has been given a failing grade for not meeting the public health standard for fine particles. The wood burning rule is part of the district's strategy to meet the health standard.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., Oct. 28, 2009:](#)

Air monitors go crazy with dust

By Mark Grossi

One look at the local air district monitor readings and you know the wind was blowing crazy on Tuesday.

In Corcoran, the PM-10 monitor -- which measures dust and other small particles -- showed eight times more stuff in the air than on Monday.

The federal standard for PM-10 is 150 micrograms per cubic meter of air. The Corcoran monitor measured 417 Tuesday.

There was no display for Fresno, so I don't know what the reading was here. But Bakersfield was 189.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has achieved the PM-10 standard. Could this exceedence knock the Valley out of attainment? Not likely. Usually, the high readings are waived if there is a big wind event, as there was Tuesday.