

New field-burning rules too costly, vineyards say

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

The Fresno Bee Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2010

A long-awaited deadline for a ban on open-field burning in the San Joaquin Valley is coming June 1. But many vineyard owners say they can't afford to follow the rule.

Alternatives already in use on many types of Valley farms — such as burning waste at a biomass energy plant — may not work on vineyards, where plant waste often is tangled in wires and wooden stakes.

Air officials will produce a report this spring before the deadline on alternatives for vineyard owners and may recommend exemptions based on financial hardship. The governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District would decide if any exemptions are allowed.

Air activists, who have not yet closely examined the options, say they hope the report seriously examines alternatives to burning.

"We want details, not a false choice between burning and going out of business," said Sarah Jackson, a research assistant with nonprofit legal watchdog Earthjustice in Oakland.

Open-field burning has declined by 70% since 2002, the year before Senate Bill 705 largely outlawed the practice in the air district, which extends from San Joaquin to Kern counties.

Some burning is allowed to prevent the spread of crop disease, and the law permits a waiver — typically for smaller farms — allowing the practice to continue until alternatives become affordable.

In 2002, there were about 476,000 acres of waste burned. Last year, the total was down to about 139,000 acres.

As a result, smoke from agricultural burning still adds a daily average of 13 tons of soot to the Valley's air-quality problems, according to the California Air Resources Board. That's more than 10% of the Valley's fine-particle pollution, called PM-2.5.

In 2007, the air district extended a waiver to tree-fruit growers with fewer than 20 acres. The air board may grant vineyard owners a similar waiver in June, depending on what the district staff's report says.

"It's tough for these options to work for everyone," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "Right now, we have a chaotic and arcane system to deal with farm waste."

Sadredin was referring to the process of shredding, collecting and trucking the waste to biomass plants, which burn the woody debris to create electricity.

The shredding and trucking mean more diesel smoke in the air, but biomass plants are more than 95% cleaner than open-field burning and they create electricity in the process. They are a preferred alternative if economically feasible.

But vineyard owners cannot easily shred and ship their waste to biomass plants because of wires that become embedded in stakes throughout vineyards that can be up to 100 years old. Most of the wires need to be removed for disposal at biomass plants. And that will probably be very expensive, said Dennis Wilt, a third-generation grower with 620 acres of grapes near Kerman.

"Until now, we have stacked the stakes and burned them, then picked up the wire to be recycled," he said. "There's going to be some real financial problems if you have to pull it out."

Phil Reese, chairman of the California Biomass Energy Alliance, said shredding and trucking pollute far less than open-field burning. He said about a dozen biomass plants in this region could accept green waste from Valley farms.

"It's much better for the air to use biomass," he said. "But the Valley needs to find some incentive money to help farmers do it."

Burn cleaner program under way

Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, February 3, 2010

Burn Cleaner, the Valley Air District's annual wood-burning device change-out program offers valuable incentives for upgrading wood-burning devices and continues a generous incentive for low-income homeowners.

It is the fourth year for the program, which encourages residents to change out older, dirtier wood-burning units for cleaner, more efficient models by offering monetary incentives.

The 2010 program began Jan. 19 and continues until all funding is exhausted. The program offers varying incentive amounts, depending on the type of device being changed out and purchased.

- \$100 to upgrade a non-certified wood-burning device to an EPA Phase II certified wood-burning device.
- \$250 to upgrade a wood-burning (including pellet stove) device to a gas-burning device; and
- \$1,500 to low-income residents for the purchase of any of the above devices (low income status as verified by tax returns, pay stubs, unemployment or disability checks or bank statements submitted with applications.)

Eligible households must be located in the eight-county air basin. People interested in participating can visit the District's website at www.valleyair.org or call the Emission Reduction Incentive Program at 559 230-5800 to learn more.

Suit filed in Fresno over fuel restrictions

By Russell Clemings / The Fresno Bee
The Fresno Bee Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2010

Groups representing oil refiners and the trucking industry filed suit Tuesday in Fresno federal court to block new state fuel standards aimed at curbing greenhouse gases.

The National Petrochemical and Refiners Association, the American Trucking Associations and two other groups say the California standards violate the Constitution's commerce clause by making it harder to use fuel produced outside the state.

The state Air Resources Board approved the standards last April as part of a wide-ranging effort to cut emissions blamed for climate change. They require fuels sold in California to cause gradually fewer such emissions per unit of energy, including emissions from production and transport of the fuels.

"Perhaps it wasn't the state's intent, but as written, the California [standard] is an example of parochial protectionism run amok," said Michael Whatley, vice president of an organization joining the lawsuit, the Consumer Energy Alliance, which issued a prepared statement with his remarks.

"We're not surprised that the oil industry has chosen to sue," responded Roland Hwang of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group. "The low-carbon fuel standard is a standard that fundamentally shifts us away from petroleum, their bread and butter."

The new lawsuit isn't the first time greenhouse gas measures have been challenged in the relatively conservative Fresno division of the U.S. District Court's Eastern District of California. In late 2007, a federal judge in Fresno threw out a 3-year-old auto industry bid to set aside state limits on greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles. The industry had argued that the state limits were superseded by federal fuel-economy standards.

Oil, trucking industries sue Calif. over fuel rule

By Samantha Young, Associated Press Writer

San Diego Union-Tribune, SF Chronicle & other papers, Wed., Feb. 3, 2010

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The petroleum and trucking industries Tuesday sued to block California's first-in-the-nation mandate for cleaner, low-carbon fuels.

The lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court in Fresno by the National Petrochemical & Refiners Association and the American Trucking Associations. It is the third suit filed in the past two months challenging the regulations, adopted by the California Air Resources Board in April.

The groups say regulators violated the federal Commerce Clause by enacting rules that interfere with interstate commerce, favor biofuels produced in California, and do little to reduce the nation's greenhouse gases.

Charles Drevna, president of the petroleum association, said in a statement that the low-carbon fuel standard is an "ineffective tool" for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

He said the more carbon-intensive fuel banned in California would simply be used elsewhere.

Beginning next year, the standard requires petroleum refiners, companies that blend fuel and distributors to gradually increase the cleanliness of the fuel they sell in California.

Air Resources Board chairwoman Mary Nichols issued a statement chastising the groups for challenging a regulation she said would save Californians \$11 billion over the next decade. It was adopted by the board two years after Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called for it.

"Their actions are shameful. This is a critical tool to help us break our dependence on fossil fuels," Nichols said. "It will protect us from volatile oil prices and provide consumers with cleaner fuels and provide the nation with greater energy security."

The board has said the low-carbon mandate will reduce California's dependence on petroleum by 20 percent and account for one-tenth of the state's goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

The regulation would not mandate specific alternative fuels. Rather, it would assign a so-called carbon-intensity score to various fuels. All gasoline and diesel fuel sold in California must be 10 percent less carbon-intensive by 2020.

The Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, the California Dairy Campaign, the Renewable Fuels Associations and other groups in December filed a similar lawsuit in the same court. Their complaint says California's regulation conflicts with the federal Renewable Fuel Standard and will close California's borders to corn ethanol made in other states.

The ethanol company POET LLC, based in Sioux Falls, S.D., filed a separate lawsuit in Fresno County Superior Court, saying the board failed to follow state environmental laws. Specifically, the lawsuit argues the low-carbon fuel standard will increase air pollution levels and do nothing to combat global warming.

Industries sue to void California's low-carbon fuel regulations

The suit by the oil and trucking industries alleges that the rules discriminate against corn ethanol and Canadian crude oil. A state official calls the suit 'shameful.'

By Margot Roosevelt, staff writer
L.A. Times, Wed., Feb. 3, 2010

Trade associations for the oil, chemical and trucking industries filed suit in federal court in Fresno on Tuesday to void California's first-in-the-nation low carbon-fuel initiative.

The regulations, which took effect last month, are aimed at slashing greenhouse gas emissions from gasoline and diesel sold in the nation's largest transportation market by 10%, and spurring the development of alternative fuels and technology.

But the lawsuit portrays the rules as discriminating "against transportation fuels and fuel feed stocks imported from outside of California with the intended effect of promoting in-state production of transportation fuels and keeping consumer dollars local . . . "

Thus, it contends, the rules are an unconstitutional interference with interstate commerce.

Low-carbon fuel is a key element of California's effort to curb the state's global-warming emissions. More than a dozen states and the federal government are also considering low-carbon fuel initiatives.

Mary D. Nichols, chairwoman of the state's Air Resources Board, called the lawsuit "shameful," adding that the carbon standard will "help us break our dependence on fossil fuels. It will protect us from volatile oil prices. . . . Instead of fighting us in court, they should be working to provide consumers with the next generation of cleaner fuels."

Under the rules, air board engineers compare the amount of greenhouse gas produced by fuels from numerous sources. They assign a high carbon content to Canadian fuel extracted from tar sands, an energy-intensive process. And they attribute a high content to Midwestern ethanol produced from corn, calculating that planting corn for energy would displace crops and result in emissions from land-use changes.

Charles T. Drevna, president of the National Petrochemical & Refiners Assn., which filed suit along with the American Trucking Assns., said that displacing those fuels "would . . . increase our reliance on energy from less stable parts of the world, and weaken our national security."

In December, the ethanol industry also filed suit against the regulations using similar arguments.

Suit seeks to halt new low carbon fuel rules

Standard called unconstitutional

By Dale Kasler
Sacramento Bee Wednesday, February 3, 2010

The oil and trucking industry sued to block California's new carbon fuel regulations Tuesday, saying the rules will raise costs but do little to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Fresno, lobbyists for oil refiners, truckers and other groups charged that the state's "low carbon fuel standard" is unconstitutional.

While not as well known as AB 32, the state's landmark climate-change legislation, the fuel standard is an important element of California's attempt to fight global warming.

It's a thicket of regulations that says transportation fuels must reduce their "carbon intensity," starting next year. It not only targets the carbon content of a fuel but also examines the amount of carbon emitted to produce the fuel and haul it to its destination.

The California Air Resources Board, which adopted the standard last spring, says it will save billions of dollars by reducing oil consumption and encouraging new biofuels and electric-vehicle technologies. While the new fuels "in the beginning are going to be expensive," eventually costs will come down, said board member Dan Sperling, a professor at the University of California, Davis.

But in their lawsuit, the National Petrochemical & Refiners Association, American Trucking Associations and two other groups say the standard is a costly disaster.

One of the groups filing suit, a Washington organization called the Consumer Energy Alliance, said the regulations will increase fuel costs by \$3.7 billion over the next decade. At the same time, the standard won't put a dent in the world's greenhouse gases because producers will simply ship higher-carbon fuels to places other than California, the alliance said.

What's more, the standard is unconstitutional because it penalizes fuels that are produced out of state and have to be hauled to California, said Michael Whatley, a lawyer for the alliance. The constitution forbids states from imposing tariffs or taxes on goods made in other states.

The Air Resources Board pledged to fight the lawsuit.

"Their actions are shameful," board Chairman Mary Nichols said in a statement. "Instead of fighting us in court, they should be working with us to provide consumers in California and the rest of the nation with the next generation of cleaner fuels."

It's the second big lawsuit challenging the fuel standard. Agricultural groups, including the Fresno County Farm Bureau and the Renewable Fuels Association, a national ethanol lobby, sued the state in December, also in U.S. District Court in Fresno.

Ethanol producers and corn farmers say the fuel standard will hurt them because it discourages the use of ethanol made from corn.

In writing the standard, the Air Resources Board declared that corn ethanol is of dubious value because farmers worldwide are chopping down trees to plant corn crops, a practice that releases carbon dioxide.

In their lawsuit, the farmers and ethanol producers say California's standard violates a 2007 federal law that requires increased use of ethanol in the nation's gas tanks.

California's climate-change initiative is under attack in other arenas. Assemblyman Dan Logue, R-Linda, is trying to organize a ballot initiative for November that would suspend AB 32 until the statewide unemployment rate falls below 5.5 percent for a year.

At the same time, the Air Resources Board continues to write the rules for carrying out AB 32 – a process that has also faced intense scrutiny from industry and environmental groups. Among other things, the agency is developing a "cap and trade" system designed to use market forces to help reduce greenhouse gases, said board spokesman Stanley Young.

Calif. to measure methane to pinpoint emissions

By Samantha Young, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee, Contra Costa Times, SF Chronicle & other papers Wed., Feb. 3, 2010

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—California plans to install a network of computerized monitors to measure methane emissions from regions that are home to dairy ranches, farms, landfills and other sources.

It will be the first network of its kind in the United States and will help the state take another step toward reducing emissions of the gases related to global warming.

By May, seven devices about the size of a personal computer will be placed in regions of the state where methane emissions are believed to be the highest. Those include the farm fields of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and landfills in the Los Angeles basin.

"What we'll be able to do is to find the identity, the location and the strength of methane emissions within the state," said Jorn Herner, the scientist managing the program at the California Air Resources Board. "This is new and pioneering work."

Picarro Inc., the Sunnyvale-based company that makes the devices, will announce Wednesday that its sale of the monitoring devices to the state has been approved, clearing the final hurdle for the program to begin.

The air board spent about \$400,000 on the devices and software modeling to analyze the data.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NASA, academic research scientists and other countries have deployed similar monitors in the last two years to track greenhouse gases around the globe.

California's approach, scientists say, is the most extensive effort to gauge local emissions. The information gleaned from the monitoring system is expected to inform state regulators who are charged with implementing the state's landmark global warming law, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed in 2006.

The monitors are considered the most precise method scientists have to monitor methane and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The first data is expected to be ready for analysis in summer 2011.

Pieter Tans, a senior scientist at NOAA's Earth System Research Laboratory in Boulder, Colo., said the information provided by the monitors should fill an information gap.

"Even though we can measure global increases precisely, we cannot say what the causes are, so we need more local measurements for that," he said.

California's global warming law, known as AB32, requires the state to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by about 25 percent over the next 10 years. Methane, which is 21 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide, is the most prevalent greenhouse gas behind carbon dioxide.

State regulators currently rely on power plants, oil refineries and others to report their own emissions. That information is used to compile California's greenhouse gas registries and will determine which polluters must buy emission permits under a state cap-and-trade system now being crafted.

Under such a system, companies that cannot cut their emissions because of cost or technical hurdles can buy pollution credits from companies that have achieved cleaner emissions.

Data from the air board's seven monitors will be combined with measurements taken from other monitors along California's coast run by NASA, NOAA and the Lawrence Livermore National Lab to provide a more complete picture of methane emissions throughout the state.

The electronic monitors are designed to verify how much methane is in California's air. Providing a more accurate accounting of emissions should build confidence in carbon-trading markets, said Michael Woelk, Picarro's chief executive.

"Inventories can be widely wrong. These devices will tell real time, minute to minute, what your emissions are," Woelk said. "The free market has to know whether this stuff is working in real time, or the credibility is pulled out from under it."

One of the state's monitors will be placed atop the Sutter Buttes, about 60 miles north of the state capital, to measure methane in the Sacramento Valley, where decomposing rice straw is left by farmers after harvest. Rice farmers used to burn the rice straw, but that contributed to ozone problems.

Paul Bettner, manager of environmental affairs at the California Rice Commission, said farmers support any effort that bases regulatory decisions on good science.

"If this contributes to them improving their understanding of all sources of methane, it's probably a good thing," Bettner said.

Carlsbad power plant emissions worry neighbors

Hearings held on new power plant

By Michael Burge, Staff Writer

San Diego Union-Tribune, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2010

CARLSBAD — Hundreds of people have shown up this week to add to the debate on whether a new power plant should be built on Carlsbad's coast.

The California Energy Commission is holding four days of hearings, which end tomorrow, on a proposal by NRG Energy to build the 540-megawatt power plant near its 56-year-old Encina Power Station. Two members of the five-member commission, which has the authority to license power plants, are holding the hearings at the Hilton Garden Inn in Carlsbad.

The Carlsbad City Council has cast a symbolic vote against the plant.

The public sessions address all aspects of the plant — aesthetics, energy efficiency and land use among them — but the topic that drew the most attention Monday evening was plant emissions.

The county Air Pollution Control District has said the new plant would not pose a significant health risk.

Many of the 69 people who spoke Monday and many of the more than 300 in the audience said they fear the possibility that a new generating station would pour more chemicals and particles into the air they breathe.

One speaker, Stacey Quartarone, blamed the old plant's emissions for causing the cancer that killed her son.

"We lost our 16-year-old son to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma," Quartarone told the commission members. "Our son just died seven weeks ago.

"The power plant has had a major impact — I know in my heart."

Her husband stood beside her, holding a giant portrait of their son.

"Would you allow this plant to be built if this were your child?" asked Quartarone, who lives two miles east of Encina. "Put this in the East County, where there's complete open space and there's no population."

The new plant, to be built next to Interstate 5 and just north of Cannon Road, would burn natural gas and be air-cooled. If constructed, its twin power plants would replace the three oldest of Encina's five steam turbines, but the old plant would remain standing for the foreseeable future while two turbines are active. Encina burns natural gas and uses ocean water to cool its generators.

Alvin Greenberg, a toxicologist who consults for the energy commission, testified yesterday that he studied the potential health effects using a hypothetical situation of a person standing 250 feet downwind from the proposed plant's twin exhaust stacks continuously for 70 years.

The risk to that hypothetical person was insignificant, Greenberg said.

"If that risk is below our level of significance, then I'm confident the true risks are less than that," he said.

"Statistically speaking, between one in three and one in four people will get cancer," Greenberg said in an interview, and the cause isn't always knowable. He said that if he believed the new plant posed a significant cancer or other health risk, "I would sound an alert."

Nearly 80 percent of the speakers at Monday's hearing opposed a new coastal power plant. Some industry groups and private residents spoke in favor of it.

"I live in Terramar; the plant is my neighbor," said Brian Goldojarb.

Terramar is the Carlsbad neighborhood nearest Encina. Many residents there don't want a new plant.

Goldojarb said the Encina plant, with its 400-foot tall smokestack, has warded off other developments, such as housing or large hotel.

"It has been our smoking dragon at the gates, and I love that dragon," he said, arguing that if no plant were there, the 95-acre site would not be a park or green space. "I do not support passing the buck to another site."

After nearly four hours of silently listening, energy Commissioner James Boyd said he sympathized with those who suggest building a plant in the desert or generating electricity through solar or wind sources.

"When you say put it somewhere else, I'd love for you to come with me to the desert where they want to put these giant solar plants and hear how passionate people are about their flora and fauna," Boyd said. "It is not simple in this state to meet everybody's needs."

The hearings continue at 9 a.m. today and tomorrow at the Hilton, 6450 Carlsbad Blvd.

Kettleman City's plight finally gets high-profile attention

By Cyndee Fontana / The Fresno Bee

Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2010

For months, Kettleman City residents and activists clamored for an investigation into a rash of birth defects and infant deaths.

To little avail. The pleas of a tiny, largely Hispanic community got little traction with distant government officials -- until the last few weeks.

Now, agencies ranging from state health department to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are rushing to examine the concerns of a poor Kings County town situated only a few miles from the largest hazardous waste landfill west of the Mississippi.

Why the sudden flood of interest? Academic, political and other experts say the issue finally reached a boiling point -- influenced by a lawsuit over landfill expansion, in-your-face activism by residents and environmental groups and a crescendo of publicity about the town's complaints.

"It just becomes a critical mass," said Simón Weffer-Elizondo, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California at Merced.

Robin DeLugan, assistant professor of anthropology at UC Merced, said the families' now well-publicized stories are too compelling to ignore: "It's hard for the appropriate levels of government to turn a blind eye."

But -- to hear the residents and activists tell it -- that's exactly what had happened. They say they repeatedly asked government agencies to investigate why six babies were born with birth defects in a 15-month period starting in late 2007. Three babies died.

Complaints became more public and heated last year as activists and residents in the town of about 1,500 protested expansion of the Waste Management Inc. landfill about three miles away. Some suspect birth defects are linked to toxic waste stored there.

Kings County officials approved the expansion in December. Environmental groups countered with a lawsuit to block those plans.

Over the past few months, news media outlets -- including The Bee -- carried stories and pictures of babies born with cleft palates. Photos and videos of protests and families surfaced on YouTube and Facebook.

While few official pronouncements were made, the issue was gaining steam in government offices. A new EPA regional administrator started work. And the governor -- following a briefing on a health department review of the birth defects -- on Friday ordered an investigation.

Today, Jared Blumenfeld, the EPA's new administrator for the Pacific Southwest region, is expected to tour the landfill and meet with several families. It is one of his first site visits since starting work Jan. 4.

Blumenfeld has said that he will place special emphasis on historically underserved and vulnerable communities such as Kettleman City, and also will address inequitable environmental burdens.

He also has ordered an internal investigation into the EPA's handling of complaints about the landfill. Blumenfeld declined to be interviewed for this story.

Experts watching the drama unfold have similar theories about why agencies now are reacting at lightning speed.

Professor Julie Sze, founding director of the Environmental Justice Project for UC Davis' John Muir Institute for the Environment, said Kettleman City's history is an important factor.

Back in the 1990s, Kettleman City protests helped block plans for a toxic-waste incinerator. In 2006, Pacific Gas & Electric Co. agreed to pay \$295 million to settle claims in Kettleman City and other areas that water supplies had been contaminated by chromium 6, the cancer-causing chemical made famous in the movie "Erin Brockovich."

In the environmental justice movement, Kettleman City's story is familiar -- and demonstrates residents' organizing skills.

"The residents have been politicized around the issue of environmental health and inequality," Sze said. "The birth defects fall into that already pretty defined experience and framing of the issues."

DeLugan, the UC Merced professor who is involved in the area of environmental justice, said the community's ability to network with other groups gave it more clout.

"All of a sudden, their voice is stronger," she said.

Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, based in San Francisco, is one of the groups working with the Kettleman City community. Bradley Angel, the group's executive director, believes sustained protests and media attention eventually galvanized agencies into action.

Tom Holyoke, assistant professor of political science at California State University, Fresno, agreed.

"They've been able to make use -- politically -- of the birth defects," he said. And "nothing gets attention like a lawsuit."

The issue rose on the EPA's radar because the Obama administration, after a year to settle in, is ready to look at companies with possible environmental problems, Holyoke said.

County and landfill officials say they also played a role in the recent state and federal response.

Kit Cole, spokeswoman for Waste Management, said the company has pushed since last summer for an investigation into the birth-defect cases. The fact that the company and Greenaction agree on that "is something the regulators can't ignore," she said.

Multiple studies show that the landfill is not a hazard to human health or the environment, Cole said. But, she added, "the reality is these families in Kettleman City deserve answers."

Richard Valle, who represents the area on the Kings County Board of Supervisors, said he has long listened to residents' concerns. He also noted that the board formally asked the state to investigate birth defects in December --the same month supervisors approved the landfill expansion. He believes that request helped propel the state's recent announcement.

"This has been a long, drawn-out process ... this is the safety net that I've been looking for," Valle said.

Obama set to outline biofuels strategy

By Jeff Mason, Reuters

In the Washington Post Wednesday, February 3, 2010

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Barack Obama on Wednesday will outline a government strategy to boost development of U.S. biofuels and address their environmental challenges, an administration official said.

The strategy will be laid out in a report by the Biofuels Interagency Working Group, a body the president established to help spur investment in biofuels and make the industry more environmentally friendly.

Obama and members of his Cabinet are scheduled to meet on Wednesday with a handful of state governors to discuss energy policy and the "opportunities and challenges presented by the transition to a clean energy economy," the official said.

The president is pushing for the United States to overhaul its energy habits by switching to less-polluting fuels and reducing its dependence on foreign oil.

Coinciding with Obama's announcement, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also could issue new rules on measuring carbon dioxide emissions from biofuels such as ethanol.

Under a 2007 energy law, ethanol made from corn must emit less of the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, than gasoline over the life cycle of the fuel, from production to being burned. Cellulosic fuels, made from crop waste and the woody bits of nonfood crops, would have to be even cleaner.

The struggling biofuels industry is concerned that the Obama administration will move too quickly away from ethanol, which is mostly made from corn, to more difficult techniques using wood chips and other biomass.

ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

Boosting production of home-grown biofuels such as ethanol would help achieve more energy independence while also creating jobs in rural regions of the United States as the country battles double-digit unemployment, the administration argues.

Obama's push for ethanol could also shore up his support in farm states where ethanol helps support demand for corn. The president may touch on other energy policies such as technology for capturing and storing carbon emissions during the meeting with governors.

Since his State of the Union Address, the president has been embracing a range of fuel alternatives including nuclear and clean coal technology in a move likely to win support of some wavering Democrats in coal states and Republicans.

Some expect that Obama will seek to lump the energy initiatives in a climate change bill in order to win broad bipartisan support for a bill to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

Obama charged the biofuels working group, which includes the leaders of the Department of Agriculture, Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency, with retooling the nation's policies toward biofuels in many areas. The group was asked to develop a strategy to increase biofuels production, investment in the industry, and the use of "flex fuel" cars, which can run on either gasoline or fuel that is mostly ethanol.

Biofuels, which are made from biomass -- organic matter such as wood, crops and animal waste - are used to power vehicles, but critics do not see them as the perfect replacement to high-polluting fossil fuels.

Environmentalists and some scientists say production of U.S. biofuels from corn and other grains can drive out production of other crops, forcing farmers in other countries to burn down forests and clear land to grow those crops -- creating new sources of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas blamed for global warming.

Obama pushing clean coal and green jobs

By Philip Elliott - Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, Wednesday, February 3, 2010

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama is meeting with governors from coal-producing states, hoping to earn their support for a languishing energy bill and to bolster his image as a leader willing to work with Republicans as well as Democrats.

Obama planned to announce on Wednesday new steps to increase the role of biofuels in powering the nation and to release a report detailing how Washington could increase investments in green technologies, an administration official said. The president was also expected to discuss so-called clean coal technologies, said the official, who spoke ahead of the announcement only on condition of anonymity.

Many pieces of those proposals were likely to win Republican support on Capitol Hill, where GOP allies have been elusive for a Democratic White House looking to pass controversial cap-and-trade legislation that would limit the nation's emissions. Wednesday's plan also was likely to find support from GOP governors in states rich in coal and corn, which can be used to produce ethanol.

Republican Govs. Jim Douglas of Vermont, Bob Riley of Alabama and Mike Rounds of South Dakota were scheduled to meet with Obama and Vice President Joe Biden at the White House.

Energy has served as a major plank of the president's domestic agenda, finding places on his travel schedule, in his speeches and in his budget proposal released on Monday. In that plan, Obama's team called for tangible accomplishments that Democrats can champion as they head into a 2010 campaign season that has become more perilous since Republican Scott Brown won a special election to replace the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

"Well, you're not going to get any argument from me about the need to create clean energy jobs," Obama said Monday in a YouTube forum. "I think this is going to be the driver of our economy

over the long term. And that's why we put in record amounts of money for solar and wind and biodiesel and all the other alternative clean energy sources that are out there."

The president added: "In the meantime, though, unfortunately, no matter how fast we ramp up those energy sources, we're still going to have enormous energy needs that will be unmet by alternative energy. And the question then is, Where will that come from?"

That was a question Obama asked a group - led by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Energy Secretary Steven Chu and Environmental Protection Agency Lisa Jackson - to explore.

Officials said their recommendations would build on some \$786 million allocated for environmental projects ranging from ethanol research to pilot programs at biorefineries. The plans also would mesh with Obama's budget proposal, which called for ending oil and gas subsidies, a move that could save \$36.5 billion over a decade.

The Obama budget proposal, meanwhile, would retrofit 1.1 million housing units to improve energy efficiency through next year and increase batteries for plug-in hybrid vehicles to 500,000 a year by 2015. Both are examples of a tangible program that could help residents' pocketbooks and Democrats' chances at the ballot box.

Obama's political team is already making that case. He toured a company that produces energy-efficient light bulbs in Nashua, N.H., on Tuesday and late last month visited an Ohio community college that trains students to work on wind turbines. He has also been talking up the energy sector's potential to move out-of-work Americans off unemployment rolls.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Wed., Feb. 3, 2010:](#)

A new health care plan for America - clean air

By Martin Schlageter and Bill Magavern

As federal lawmakers grapple with how best to bring decent health care to the tens of millions of Americans without it, the Environmental Protection Agency is bringing forth its own proposal to improve the public's health. Earlier this year, the EPA proposed a new standard that would reduce the amount of ozone - better known as smog - in the air. Smog is a silent killer, responsible for rampant rates of asthma, respiratory illnesses and reduced lung function.

Californians will have the opportunity Thursday to publicly comment on the EPA's proposal. It is our communities' responsibility to ensure that the air we breathe is clean, clear and safe for future generations.

The new proposal is based on scientific research that was ignored by the Bush-era EPA. In 2008, a scientific review panel unanimously recommended strengthening limits on smog pollution. This year, science may win out over politics, and that's the way it should be. After all, the EPA's responsibility is to protect the environment and public health, not to protect polluters.

Smog is ground-level ozone formed when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds mix with sunlight. The worst contributors to the problem are emissions from vehicles, trucks and ships right here in California and coal-fired power plants across the country. To meet a smog standard such as the one proposed, cleaner and more efficient cars and sources of energy are required. This standard couldn't come any sooner.

Children and seniors are the most vulnerable to smog pollution, which some scientists have compared to getting a permanent sunburn on one's lungs. Smog is incredibly hazardous, not only to human health but to our environment as well.

Most Californians know smog as that thick line of dirty, brown soot that haunts our otherwise beautiful horizons. High smog levels - especially during the summer - stunt and kill forests and stifle agricultural productivity. Included in the proposed EPA rule is a secondary standard for

smog that would help ensure the protection of our natural places and the economies that rely on them.

By protecting public health and the environment, the proposed smog standard will also have positive economic impacts for Californians. Air pollution puts a monumental drain on our economy; by some estimates, breathing bad air costs Californians more than \$50 billion every year! The price of dangerously dirty air - in medical costs, lost work and premature death - can be reduced with attainment of the EPA's proposed standard.

Cleaning up dirty air is an investment that will benefit our health, our environment and our bank accounts. Your voice is needed to ensure the new standard gets approved.

Speak up

Tell the federal EPA why Californians' health, environment and economy depend on the implementation of this proposed standard. This hearing is the only opportunity in the western United States for public comment on this matter.

When: 9:30 a.m., Thursday, Feb. 4

Where: Sacramento, Four Points Sheraton Hotel, Natomas Ballroom

Martin Schlageter is the interim executive director of the Coalition for Clean Air, and Bill Magavern is the director of Sierra Club California.