

Burn-ban exemptions OK'd -- with bow to Florez

State regulators take note of Dean Florez's objection.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

The Fresno Bee, Friday, May 28, 2010

State air regulators on Thursday approved exemptions to the Valley's crop-burning ban, but with a catch -- they will revisit the changes if state Sen. Dean Florez can prove they aren't needed.

At a meeting in San Diego, the state Air Resources Board by a unanimous vote concurred with a finding by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that the final phases of the ban need to be delayed for some crops because alternatives to burning are too costly.

But the state board kept some control over the process by setting a 2012 expiration date, at which time officials said they would reconsider the exemptions. Regulators said they would act sooner if

Florez can prove that alternatives are indeed feasible.

The added conditions are a partial victory for the senator, who had pushed the board to delay its approval of the rules until he holds a legislative hearing on the matter.

But Valley district officials said they are also satisfied.

The state board "did the right thing," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "It essentially concurred with the district findings but gave the courtesy to Senator Florez to hear from him."

Florez, D-Shafter, said he will hold a legislative hearing June 16 and looks forward to proving that the district's calculations are "false, and inflated to support pollution."

The burn ban, contained in a law Florez wrote in 2003, began taking effect in 2005 and was scheduled for full implementation June 1.

The exemptions approved Thursday will allow burning of some crop waste including uprooted citrus orchards and grape vineyards.

The Valley district said alternatives to burning those crops are too costly, such as moving the waste to biomass plants.

In a letter to the state board, Florez said the Valley district made "many serious errors in math." He said officials overestimated costs by, for instance, spreading them over a 10-year time frame when a longer period is more appropriate. Sadredin said in an interview that 10 years is the standard time for which regulation costs are calculated.

Farm representatives testifying at the state hearing accused Florez of meddling.

"This process [is] being hijacked because Senator Florez wanted to further his political agenda," said Shirley Batchman, director of government affairs for California Citrus Mutual. Florez responded in an e-mail interview: "I'm a termed-out senator whose 'agenda' is clean air for my kids."

District officials say that the amount of acreage burned each year has been reduced by 70% as a result of the ban and that would soon reach near 90%. State regulators said the proposed exemptions would have a negligible effect on air quality.

Florez disagrees with that assessment. He is seeking removal of some state funding from the district if it goes forward with the exemptions. He is also pressing the state to approve \$10 million to help defray costs of moving waste to biomass plants.

Calif officials postpone ban on burning ag waste

By Juliana Barbassa, Associated Press Writer

San Diego Union-Tribune, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Friday, May 28, 2010

SAN FRANCISCO — Farmers can keep burning some agricultural waste after California air authorities voted Thursday to postpone a full ban on the polluting practice for two years.

The California Air Resources Board's decision pushed back a June 1 deadline initially set by pollution-control legislation targeting air quality problems in the San Joaquin Valley and other rural areas.

The move allows the burning of prunings, clippings and rice field stubble that would be too expensive to dispose of in any other way, board spokesman Stanley Young said.

Agency officials intend to revisit their decision in 90 days, after the state Senate Select Committee on Air Quality conducts a June 16 hearing.

Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, who authored legislation aimed at curbing pollution, questioned estimates of disposal costs presented by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The report argued that a full ban on burning ag waste would not be economically feasible for some farmers.

The Senate committee meeting will reassess those estimates while bringing together farmers, scientists and others with a stake in the process, Florez said.

"We're going to have the meeting the air board should have had today," he said.

Meanwhile, the Senate Budget Committee voted Thursday to approve \$10 million for developing alternate methods to dispose of ag waste. Florez pointed out that if the funding receives final approval, it could help farmers transition to cleaner methods.

Young said progress has been made against particle pollution, with a two-thirds reduction seen between 2002 and 2008, mostly due to previously imposed limits on burning.

Huge study aims to find origin of Calif. pollution

By John Anciaz, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Friday, May 28, 2010

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- A huge study of air quality and climate is under way in the skies and off the coast of California.

A slew of instrument-laden aircraft and a research ship are involved in the state and federal project.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says the goal is to understand the origin of pollutants and greenhouse gases, where they go and what becomes of them.

Scientists showed off the NOAA research vessel Atlantis on Friday in Los Angeles harbor. The ship has been gathering data about the exhaust from cargo ships and will move on to spend 10 days off the Northern California coast and San Francisco Bay.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Friday, May 28, 2010:](#)

Bullet-train debate hits 220 mph

In a report made public last month, State Auditor Elaine Howle expressed concerns about the viability of California's \$43 billion high-speed rail system, which is set to begin construction in 2012. Howle reported that the authority overseeing the rail system might well fall billions of dollars short of what it needs to complete the project, despite California voters' OK of billions in loans to help pay for it.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority is figuring on as much as \$19 billion from the federal government but has guarantees for only \$2.25 billion. That funding -- along with the \$9 billion in borrowing authorized by voters -- will be essential. So will billions in private investment, a vital component in the funding plan that represents one of Howle's chief concerns.

In response to the auditor's report, HSR Authority Chairman Curt Pringle, the mayor of Anaheim, acknowledged many of the problems and said his staff is working to rectify them. In some cases, he noted, the HSR Authority is already implementing some of the audit's recommendations.

The bullet-train system would send passenger rail cars speeding at up to 220 mph between Southern and Northern California, with a key stop in downtown Bakersfield.

Proponents say the project will create more than 600,000 new construction-related jobs while the system is being built over several years, and as many as 450,000 permanent jobs statewide at build-out.

Once it's completed, if it's completed, travel time between Bakersfield and Los Angeles would be 54 minutes; Bakersfield to Sacramento would take one hour and 29 minutes -- and thousands of vehicles that might otherwise be polluting the air would still be parked in driveways.

We asked members of The Californian's Sounding Board about Howle's contentions regarding the "vague" and "optimistic" plan to pay for the 800-mile rail system. Do people believe the high-speed rail system will become a reality for California? Will it be supported by riders and be a boom to the economy? Do the big-picture benefits, including temporary and permanent jobs, cleaner air and ease of travel, override the auditor's concerns? The responses:

ALL THE BENEFITS of the high-speed rail system sound too good to be true. So much so that I think they're all pipe dreams and most would never really come to fruition. The "cleaner air" thing would almost be enough to spur Bakersfield residents' thinking, but overall, the price tag on this pie-in-the-sky project is so far out of California's fiscal reach that I really doubt that it will ever get off the drawing boards. I also believe that were it to pass it would take decades to make up the severe fiscal loss to our budget.

Jeff Hathorn of Bakersfield is retired from the Navy.

A HIGH-SPEED RAIL SYSTEM for California is inevitable. The only question is when. Will we do it sooner, in which case we can begin to pay off the costs and reap the benefits earlier, or will we do it later -- when the costs will be higher?

A bullet train system is inevitable because California's population is growing faster than our already crowded highways. More cars will mean dirtier air.

It is inevitable because our need for imported oil makes us too vulnerable to shortages and rising costs. Rail travel uses less energy per passenger mile. Every Californian who is able and willing to leave his or her car at home will save money.

The jobs required to construct the project are needed now, to help California's economic recovery. Labor costs after a recovery will be higher than they are currently.

A bullet train will be used, because its convenience, speed and cost will make it competitive with air travel.

Let me add a historical note: Americans all over the country benefited for decades from the bridges and other infrastructure projects that were built during the Great Depression. We have an opportunity again to reap similar benefits. Let us not delay!

Bruce W. Jones is a retired Cal State Bakersfield professor.

BEING A BORN OPTIMIST, I believe in the proposed "bullet train" and its potential to benefit California and our valley. Lax oversight, we don't need. California's two- and four-year election cycle doesn't bode well for steady, clear-eyed oversight.

I would rather that the budget be spent on a modern intrastate cargo-moving system. There's no doubt that taking most of the trucks off our highways will save us billions in fuel costs, provide payback and clean up our air. Alas, that's not very sexy.

Gerald Sutliff of Bakersfield is retired from a career in labor relations.

I BELIEVE THE CALIFORNIA High-Speed Rail System will become a reality. The project, authorizing \$9.95 billion in bonds for construction, was approved by California voters in November 2008. Since then, an additional \$2.25 billion has been awarded to the project through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The CHRSA projects that the project will create tens of thousands of jobs, and the Los Angeles-San Francisco routes will create a profit of \$1 billion annually.

But the real benefit lies in the savings, in money not spent for new airport runways, gates and expanded highways for the same number of travelers; in travel time saved and in the reduction of vehicle emissions.

The high-speed rail system is in league with the kind of visionary thinking that created our university system, built the first freeways and protected nature's wonders as state parks. Yes, we have terrible financial issues at present, but that should not keep us from being the can-do visionaries for which California is famous.

Carolyn Ziegler-Davenport is a freelance writer.

"INADEQUATE PLANNING, weak oversight and lax contract management." So says the state auditor's report on the CHSRP. Common sense says these are a prescription for huge cost overruns and years of schedule slippage. It's time to rethink this project.

Primary question: While nice, do we really need it? We are repeatedly told about all the potential benefits, new jobs, cleaner air, ease of travel, etc. Fine, but this is a transportation project (isn't it?), not a jobs bill or an environmental bill or a clever way to snag some (nonexistent) federal dollars.

Second, can we pay for it? California is structurally bankrupt, with a budget deficit exceeding \$20 billion and unfunded state pension liabilities exceeding \$500 billion. With the federal coffers also tapped out, can we really afford to borrow and tax to the extent required?

How reliable is the CHSRP itself? From its website: Train speed: up to 220 mph. Sample trip: Fresno-L.A., 155 miles, four interim stops, 1 hour 24 minutes.

Allowing only six-minute stops to load/unload passengers, luggage and freight (obviously unrealistic) leaves one hour to travel 255 miles, an average of 255 mph. Given acceleration/deceleration times the train would need even higher peak speeds to reach that average. Oops!

Their numbers are simply wrong. If they cannot get even this right, how can we have any confidence in their planning, engineering and cost estimation? Any decision to proceed must come following comprehensive answers to all critical questions. Think about it.

Doug Savage of Bakersfield is retired from a career as an electronics engineer for the Navy..

THE REPORT BY State Auditor Elaine Howle does not surprise me at all. Anyone truly interested in how these projects develop should research the chain of events leading up to the construction of the east-west freeway. The project's missed time frames, expense to obtain right-of way and bureaucratic wrangling all caused the costs to shoot up like our temperatures in summer. History tells us this is the norm with large governmental projects.

What are the realities of high-speed rail for California? While the vision of traveling effortlessly up and down our beautiful state looks good in Powerpoint presentations, questions still remain. Assumptions being made now cannot realistically take into account where the route will be able to go without opposition from some group, the reality that most affected cities do not have metro systems to support the rail, a need for adaptation by Californians who have grown up with cars, and the perceived -- or real -- lack of dependability of most existing public transportation systems.

I think that it would be more feasible to start in the metro areas with intra-city systems that, when utilized by a majority, would develop the ridership for a state system, while also helping the environment and providing jobs.

Finally, estimated cost by the High-Speed Rail Authority is \$45 billion, but others say a more realistic cost is between \$65-\$81 billion, or close to double. According to Authority website information, federal funds committed amount to a measly \$2.35 billion. The current pressing financial issues should, by necessity, put projects such as this on the "back burner."

California cannot afford a big gamble with taxpayer dollars until we can pay our bills.

Karen E. Wass of Arvin is a retired real estate broker.

DO I BELIEVE THE HIGH-SPEED rail system will become a reality for California? Yes, I certainly hope so. With more concern about the environment and use of oil, it is very important for this to become reality.

I certainly would support taking a high-speed train versus putting up with the hassles of air travel. "If they build it, people will come" seems to fit this scenario. With the rail line will come businesses at the various stops along the route.

I think the big-picture benefits have to be the main concern. The longer we wait the higher the costs, so it is time to move ahead on this. We voted for the high-speed rail at least a year ago, and the longer it takes the more it will cost.

Kathy Van Reusen of Bakersfield is a public health educator.

WITH THE STATE IN DIRE economic straits, the bullet train is a little like a man who finds himself wading in the water, up to his hips in alligators, having forgotten that the objective was to drain the swamp.

The concept of the train is solid; it would eventually become a "green" solution to critical transportation needs, and would be supported by riders. However, the financial alligators are closing in fast. As much as I would personally thrill to see a bullet transportation system, does anyone have the stomach to fund a new train along with the obvious cost overrides that will surface, when we cannot even afford to pay the bills?

California seems to always want champagne on a beer pocketbook. Let's be real: The train needs to wait a few years.

Paul Lewis of Bakersfield is a nurse..

I'VE EXPERIENCED THE TGV in Europe. It's like flying first-class. In California, it would be wonderful. However, upon review of the CHSRA business plan, I've drawn these conclusions, all negative:

- Fundamental planning flaws are evident. Elements missing from CHSRA's business plan are their stated mission, vision and values -- all essential to avoid "lax management" and "weak oversight."
- Moreover, these statements are not reinforced by long-term strategic goals to accomplish the project's mission, vision and operational objectives (including funding).
- Another fundamental flaw is not following the critical rule that "structure follows strategy". Absent strategic goals, it's no wonder management is found lax and weak.
- Admittedly, jobs will be created. This project will be a boon to California's economy. Cleaner air and easier travel will result. Yet none of these benefits override the auditor's concerns because:
- Our state, national and global economies are in horrendous condition. Now is not the time for a project of this magnitude.
- Without clearly defined mission, vision, values and strategic goals, the project becomes micro-managed without essential strategic leadership.
- Ridership is unpredictable. With fares at 83 percent of airfare, this is less value than most expect. Fares need to be lower.

This project should be deferred until economic conditions are restored and improved project management skills are demonstrated.

Admittedly, "sunk costs" will be astronomical. My hope is our economy can be restored, and leadership deficiencies offset, so this important project can be resumed with full funding and all earlier investments recovered.

John Pryor of Bakersfield is a risk management consultant.

I KNOW THAT IN THESE POLITICAL times it has not been prudent to use reference to Japan and France as a way to win a political and economic debate in this country, or even in California. However, I believe the comparisons are still valid.

Both Japan and France have highly touted high-speed train systems, from the bullet train to the TVG. Even China and several countries in Europe have such train systems, including the Czech Republic.

Why is it that countries that were economically devastated during World War II, with their infrastructure completely ruined, were able to develop such financially and environmentally friendly means of mass transit? Well the answer has several parts.

One is our love affair with the automobile, an affair that was tainted with General Motors' successful plan to remove an early version of mass transit, the Red Car train system in Los Angeles. A second factor is that people made their car, now called an SUV, an extension of their home. From TV/DVD players to refrigerators and iPhones, one can actually live in an SUV comfortably.

One trip on I-5 can teach anyone that this love affair is killing us! Our air! Our nerves! Our farm land! Our cities!

We need a rapid train system. We need to copy others. We need to return to the idea that more is not better and efficiency is best. A high-speed rail makes us place our wealth not in a vehicle. Our wealth now becomes enjoyment of travel.

Harry Love of Bakersfield is a retired high school teacher and is active in the Sierra Club and Audubon Society.

WILL THE BULLET TRAIN ever happen in California? Yes, if:

- They take the program out of the hands of the government and put it up to private investors to make a profit;

- And the airlines between L.A. and S.F. get a cut of the action to eliminate competition. They probably don't want the competition, and may be working to prevent it.

It will have riders if it only has one stop in each direction.

Having a bullet train stop in Bakersfield is pure stupidity. Amtrak is adequate.

State Auditor Elaine Howle's contention is right on. The high-speed rail authority has got to be a bunch of nitwits with \$43 billion to play with.

Having a high-speed train in California will, of course, be a benefit to the state in all categories -- jobs, air, economy. It will not pollute the air as airlines do.

Ken Cannon of Bakersfield is retired from a career with a telephone company..

AS A BOARD MEMBER of the Asthma and COPD Education Center and fervent cyclist and supporter of mass-transit for many decades, I am thrilled with the "concept" proposed by the California High-Speed Rail Authority and similar systems frequented by travelers throughout the European continent.

However, as with cycling in Bakersfield, we have a mindset we are fighting first and foremost, and not secondarily a phenomenal budget crisis rivaling only the Great Depression.

Nothing new here, I know. More importantly, as with anything our government has ever touched this, too, will turn into a tremendous story of cost overruns, timelines failed to be met and ultimately political boondoggles and finger-pointing rather.

Additionally, what many, I dare say most, have failed to consider is the small towns where high-powered street gangs have yet to penetrate will then be quite easily accessed, pushing guns and drugs amongst our young population and ruining what is left of small-town California.

While I enjoy doing my part to clean up our air and improve our way of life, I do not believe that includes another huge burden of debt to be repaid by generations to come. Additionally, the commission has yet to demonstrate potential high-speed ridership substantially greater than that of our ever-subsidized and failed Amtrak system, which only recently has shown a significant ridership increase.

No bullet train right now. It's time is absolutely coming, but certainly not in the midst of the financial meltdown that California is experiencing.

Arin D. Resnicke is a Bakersfield architect.

CALIFORNIA IS A "love of free movement" state. We like to jump in our cars on our own schedules without waiting for a bus or train. California already has Amtrak, and I think that it would be interesting to do a survey on how successful that is before making a judgment on high-speed rail. Bus travel is successful, but the only way high-speed rail would become the way of travel would be to take away cars.

China wants to build this system. If we are to build a rail system, then the contracts should go to American citizens. If not America, then no one. I do not think that cleaner air will play a part in this.

People will try the rail and then go back to their more convenient way of travel, the car, because we are Californians.

As for ease of travel, we have a beautiful airport that has lost how many flights out of Bakersfield? Why? It will cost far more than the estimated costs. It always does. I believe that there will be major padding of budgets. There always is. I believe that at this time in our lives that as much as we need the jobs, we do not need the headaches that would come with this project.

It is not something that would benefit the people in a timely manner. It would cost the people money that they cannot afford because someone always has to pay for the "new costs" that arise.
Irene Edmonds of Bakersfield is retired.

IF THE BULLET TRAIN project is really going to mean having a 5-story track though Bakersfield along the lower side of Truxtun Avenue/upper California Avenue, it would be a real eyesore. How could our city fathers allow such a things to be built? To me, that's a bigger issue for Bakersfield than some misappropriated funds. Of course, Bakersfield is sort of an eyesore in itself, so one more 5-story one wouldn't make too much difference.
Jon Crawford of Bakersfield is a petroleum engineer.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, May 28, 2010:](#)

Ban leaf blowers

For years, I have been one of those who complained about the dangers of leaf blowers.

We all agree on how leaf blowers are a menace on three levels -- noisy, creating pollution, and unhealthy for the workers and for people in the vicinity.

Recently, I witnessed a very unusual scene. As usual, the gardener blew the grass clippings into the street, but instead of leaving them there to be blown about by passing cars, he actually raked them up and took them away! While I applaud the man's actions, I still believe strongly that these machines must be outlawed.

I'm tired of just complaining. It's time for action! Please join me in writing to our City Council and state Assembly for a new law.

Sam Zutler, Fresno