

Brown seeks to reduce environmental protections for bullet train

With legal challenges mounting, governor circulates legislation designed to diminish the possibility foes could stop the project with an environmental suit.

By Ralph Vartabedian

Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, June 5, 2012

With legal challenges to the California bullet train mounting, Gov. Jerry Brown on Monday began circulating proposed legislation designed to significantly diminish the possibility that opponents could stop the project with an environmental lawsuit.

Brown's office sent the proposal to a group of powerful environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, the Planning Conservation League and the Natural Resources Defense Council, hoping to win their support for the special legal protection.

The proposal puts environmental groups in a tough spot. Brown is asking them to agree to water down one of the most important pieces of environmental legislation in history, but for a project they support because of its potential to help reduce vehicle emissions and global warming.

The legislation would most immediately affect suits brought by Central Valley agricultural interests, which have been among the project's leading critics because of potential effects on farms, dairies, processing plants and other holdings.

Brown's proposal would modify the California Environmental Quality Act solely for the bullet train project. It would "prohibit a court" from issuing an injunction or other stop work orders unless those filing the lawsuit show their damages substantially outweigh the harm to the state and those employed by the \$6-billion initial phase of the project.

The potential loss to the state could include more than \$2 billion in federal funds. The proposal would apply to any action filed since January, including a lawsuit brought last week by Merced County and the Madera and Merced farm bureaus.

Brown may be asking too much of the green lobby.

"There is a good deal of skepticism even among groups who want to support the high-speed rail," said Bruce Reznik, executive director of the Planning Conservation League.

Even before the draft language had been circulated, Sierra Club Director Kathryn Phillips said, "It is astounding that the governor and his appointees to the high-speed rail authority are resorting to weakening environmental review."

Gusts shroud Valley in dust as cold storm arrives

By Ezra Romero and Lewis Griswold

Fresno Bee, Monday, June 4, 2012

Wind gusts of up to 40 mph pushed huge clouds of dust across the San Joaquin Valley on Monday, briefly shrouding cities and roadways, triggering a 10-car pileup in Tulare County and prompting a health warning from air quality officials.

"You could see the dust cloud from space," said Jim Dudley, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Hanford. "For the geographical area covered, it was a big dust storm even though it did not last a long time."

The storm knocked down trees and power lines and contributed to a number of collisions across the region. Highway 152 at Road 17 in Madera County was closed for a time because of zero visibility and multiple crashes, the California Highway Patrol said.

Farther south, the dust storm triggered a chain reaction of four collisions with 10 vehicles on Highway 99 near County Line Road in Delano around 5 p.m., the CHP said. The crash resulted in minor injuries that were treated without hospitalization.

The winds, and the rains that followed, were the product of a cold front from the Gulf of Alaska, Dudley said.

The storm is expected to stick around today, keeping temperatures cooler than normal. Fresno's high is expected to reach just 75 degrees -- well below the 89 that is typical for this time of year -- and wind gusts could hit 28 mph, the weather service said.

By Wednesday, however, sunny skies, gentle breezes and spring-like temperatures should return to the Valley, the weather service said.

Fresno's daytime high should reach 82, on its way to the upper 80s by the end of the week.

Blowing dust from Monday's storm prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue an air pollution alert from Madera County to the south end of the San Joaquin Valley.

The air district warned that the blowing dust could aggravate lung diseases, and advised residents to avoid outdoor activity or prolonged exposure to the dust.

Gusts blew down trees in Fresno, Hanford and Visalia, and at the peak of the storm more than 6,000 customers of Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Southern California Edison were left without power in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Heavy rain began to fall in Merced earlier in the afternoon and made its way to Fresno around 5 p.m. The heaviest rain fell in Merced, which recorded about 0.37 of an inch, the weather service said.

Only a trace of rain fell in Fresno, Dudley said.

An inch or two of snow fell Monday in the Sierra Nevada above Tuolumne Meadows.

SJ Valley residents warned about unhealthy air

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee, Sacramento Bee and other papers, Late Monday, June 4, 2012

San Joaquin Valley officials are warning residents that gusty winds have created unhealthy levels of air pollution.

The valley's Air Pollution Control District issued a health advisory Monday because of high concentrations of blowing dust in parts of Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties.

Officials say the gusty winds could produce unhealthy levels of particle pollution that can cause serious respiratory and heart problems.

The agency says residents should avoid strenuous activities, heavy exertion and prolonged exposure to outside air Monday. People with heart or lung diseases are urged to follow their doctor's advice for dealing with unhealthy air.

Dust Storm blows through Valley

Porterville Recorder, Tuesday, June 05, 2012

An unusually cold storm for early June moved into the South Valley with a vengeance Monday afternoon creating a huge dust storm and downing numerous trees, power lines and even a street light.

Porterville City Manager John Lollis said city crews responded to numerous calls, but nothing major. He was not aware of the report of a city street light blown over in front of the Porterville Post Office.

Tulare County fire crews were scrambling as well.

The wind, and dust, arrived in Porterville about 5:30 p.m. Downed power lines and power outages were reported throughout Tulare County.

The storm hit most of the Valley, wrecking havoc in Fresno County about an hour before doing the same in Porterville.

National Weather Service meteorologist Dan Harty in Hanford said the storm was not a complete surprise.

"It's not typical, but not a rare occurrence," he said.

The dust storm prompted the Valley Air District to issue a health cautionary statement through this evening for all of the Valley. Winds in Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley air basin portion of Kern counties produced areas of localized blowing dust. Blowing dust can result in unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller, or PM10.

Exposure to particle pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections. For people with heart disease, short-term exposure to particle pollution has been linked to heart attacks and arrhythmia, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Residents in these areas are advised to use caution through this evening. People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion. Everyone else should reduce prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion.

"It's pretty much throughout the Valley," said Harty. He said gusts up to 40 mph had been reported and Merced got nearly four-tenths of an inch of rain.

The strong winds were expected to taper off Monday night, but today will be breezy. "Maybe not quite as strong, but definitely breezy," said Harty.

It will be much cooler today with the predicted high in Porterville just 72 degrees. It will be a chilly 47 degrees Tuesday night.

"We'll be back to normal (88 degrees) by Thursday," said Harty.

George Fire continues to grow

Porterville Recorder, Tuesday, June 5, 2012

The George Fire burning in the Giant Sequoia National Monument of Sequoia National Forest did not grow as fast Monday as it had on Sunday, but still has burned nearly 2,000 acres since Friday.

The fire, which was discovered just before 4 p.m. Friday near the Freeman Creek Giant Sequoia Grove, was only 35 percent contained as of late Monday, but was no longer threatening the Freeman Sequoia Grove that contains the George Bush Tree.

A small army is now battling the fire in dry brush and some timber in mostly a wilderness area. Raj Singh, fire information officer with South Central Sierra Interagency Incident Management Team, said the number of people on the fire had grown to more than 500.

Singh said strong winds Monday pushed the fire in a southerly direction, the reverse of its direction Sunday. "The fire has made some runs," he said, but did not appear to be as strong as it was Sunday.

Because of the crash of a federal air tanker on a fire in Utah Sunday killing two men, all federal air tankers were grounded Monday. Singh said two more large sky canes were added to the two already on the fire. Smaller helicopters were also being utilized.

Another reason for using the helicopters over the air tankers is helicopters only drop water. Because the fire has moved into the Golden Trout Wilderness, the forest service is trying to avoid using retardant on the blaze.

"We've had a lot of resources come today," said Singh. A fire camp has been set up at Johnsondale.

Lloyd Meadow Road, Freeman Creek Trail and Jerkey Meadow and Forks of the Kern trailheads are still closed.

The cause of the George Fire is under investigation. If anyone has information on the fire cause they are asked to contact the Forest Service hot line number at: 294-4894. Officials have ruled out lightning as a cause and believe it was man caused.

At least five Hotshot crews, two hand crews, 16 engines and a water tender are working to suppress the fire.

Freeman Creek Grove (4,192 acres), is the easternmost grove of giant sequoias and is considered to be among the most recently established. The giant sequoias are mainly south of Freeman Creek with approximately 800 large trees (10 feet in diameter or more). There are several large sequoias in the grove.

