

Valley air calendar contest set

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, Sept. 20, 2012

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is looking for student artists to enter the 2013 Healthy Air Living Kids' Calendar contest.

Each year, Valley students from kindergarten through high school help the air district create a colorful, engaging calendar that is distributed throughout the eight-county air basin.

The Kids' Calendar is a four-color, bilingual wall calendar that carries pertinent clean-air messages and showcases Valley students' artistic abilities. Here are the guidelines for creating a winning Healthy Air Living Kids' Calendar entry:

- Paper should be placed sideways (landscape orientation) so it is 8½ inches high and 11 inches across.
- Artwork should be in color.
- Artwork should contain a message about the importance of promoting healthy air. Some examples from past calendars are: "Clean air rocks!" "Haz un cambio. Camina en lugar de manejar"; "We can all help clean the air."
- Bilingual and Spanish messages are encouraged.

Fourteen drawings will be selected for the calendar. Artists must include their name and address, phone number and-or email contact, age, grade and school on the back of the artwork. Please mail art flat, not folded, to 2013 Kids' Calendar, Valley Air District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno 93726, or turn in your art at the nearest district office.

For more information about the air district, call (209) 557-6400.

Aging, polluting school buses remain on Calif. roads

By Kendall Taggart, California Watch
In the Fresno Bee, Wed., Sept. 19, 2012

Tens of thousands of California schoolchildren ride aging school buses that emit harmful pollutants, an analysis of state data shows.

Unlike many states, California does not require bus owners to take buses off the road after a set number of years. As a result, California has some of the oldest buses in the nation.

The emissions from older school buses are harmful to both children and air quality for the broader community.

Children riding in conventional diesel school buses are exposed to more air pollution than those riding in cleaner natural gas or low emission diesel buses, according to a 2003 study conducted by the California Air Resources Board.

Buses manufactured before 1990 can pollute as much as six times more than new buses, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. There are about 3,000 buses in the state built in the 1980s and earlier, according to a California Watch analysis of data maintained by the California Highway Patrol.

Some buses have been equipped with filters that greatly reduce the harmful health effects, but buses that are more than two decades old often can't be retrofitted because the pollutants clog

the filters or the engine. The CHP data doesn't indicate which buses - with a combined capacity to carry about 190,000 students each day - have been modified.

Newer buses also have additional safety features such as seat belts and additional emergency exits.

The state Department of Education referred a request for comment to the California Air Resources Board.

As part of a new state regulation that's currently being phased in, the California Air Resources Board is requiring districts to add filters that trap harmful pollutants to all buses or take them off the road by 2018.

The goal of the regulatory changes has been to protect children's health, said Lisa Jennings, an air pollution specialist at the California Air Resources Board.

While the retrofits can help reduce emissions, some critics argue that they're a costly, short-term solution. Although retrofits cost less than a new bus initially, they come with additional maintenance costs and don't remove as many emissions, said Stephen Rhodes, a legislative advocate for School Transportation Coalition.

"The reason we went to retrofits is there is not enough funding to replace all the buses in California," Jennings said.

Funding is tight for school transportation. Earlier this year, Gov. Jerry Brown proposed cutting all state funding for school transportation, but the money was ultimately restored.

Despite the fiscal climate, some school districts have found innovative ways to get old buses off the road.

Kings Canyon Unified School District recently unveiled the first electric school bus in the country. The district is in the Central Valley, where air quality is ranked among the worst in the nation. John Clements, director of transportation, has made it his mission to upgrade his school bus fleet and said he's brought in about \$10 million in grant money since 1993.

"Back in the '60s and '70s, districts had budgeted school bus replacement programs," he said. "That's not the case under our stiffer fiscal situations. It would be rare to find one."

While he's tried putting filters on his buses, he said they can make the buses less reliable. "I can't send them on field trips outside the district because I run the risk of them plugging up and the light turning on, which means the bus can actually shut down," Clements said. He prefers to replace the buses when he can.

An average filter costs about \$17,900, while a new bus can cost about \$150,000. Clements estimated the new electric bus costs about \$230,000, although he was able to access more funding sources than he would have for a traditional bus.

Seven years ago, there were almost 6,000 school buses in use that were manufactured before 1990, said Cassandra Hockenson, a spokeswoman for the Air Resources Board. "We are making progress in updating the California school bus fleet," she said.

(Note: The Kings Canyon Unified School District's electric school bus, the first in the nation, was funded through the Valley Air District.)

US approves California bullet train construction

From the Associated Press
In the Lodi News Sentinel, Thursday, Sept., 20, 2012

LOS ANGELES — The Obama administration Wednesday gave the first formal regulatory approval to the California High-Speed Rail Authority's plan to construct a bullet train between Los Angeles and San Francisco, clearing a major legal hurdle to starting the project in the Central Valley.

The action allows the rail authority to begin acquiring the first of nearly 1,000 parcels of land that will be needed between Merced and Bakersfield to construct about 130 miles of rail by 2017, rail officials said. The deadline is a requirement of federal stimulus funding that the state has received.

"It is a very big step and a very important milestone," said Jeff Morales, chief executive of the rail authority. "It allows us to move forward in earnest."

But the decision contains a list of costly requirements, including habitat mitigation for several endangered species and abatement of diesel emissions that will occur in the Central Valley during construction. Even with the decision, the rail authority will need permits from the Army Corps of Engineers and the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) before it puts a shovel into the ground. Those approvals would normally take six months or more, but Morales said the state is working to expedite the procedure.

The federal approvals already appear to have taken significantly longer than expected. The rail authority had said last year and earlier this year in public statements that it expected the approval to occur in June and that it hoped to begin construction before the end of this year.

Now the authority is hoping to start construction in spring 2013. The task of completing about \$6 billion of work by the 2017 funding deadline would require spending \$2.7 million to \$3.5 million per day. Construction industry officials say that would be an aggressive plan and that every day of delay makes the job harder.

Morales said the project remains on schedule and the extra time needed to obtain the federal approval was normal for such a large-scale and complex project.

"There was paperwork going back and forth," he said. "One depends on another. You think you have reached the finish line and then you have farther to go."

The 41-page approval, known formally as a record of decision by the Federal Railroad Administration, covers the section of track from Merced to Fresno, an area where agriculture interests are staunchly opposed.

The Madera Farm Bureau, along with other groups, has filed an environmental lawsuit and is seeking a preliminary injunction to stop the project. In legal filings, it contends that the authority is harassing land owners.

Anja Raudabaugh, the farm bureau's executive director, said the rail authority will have trouble buying land in her area of the Central Valley.

"Not a single one of those landowners will be a willing seller," she said.

Morales said condemnation will be a last resort. "Every effort will be made to reach a fair and equitable settlement," he said.

Quentin Kopp, a former chairman of the rail authority and a retired judge, said despite the federal decision, "It is apparent that there are substantial legal problems" facing the project.