

Free emissions tests today

By Ramona Giwargis, staff writer
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Feb. 8, 2013

Vehicle maintenance expenses can be an added and sometimes unexpected expense -- especially in a tough economy.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the nonprofit group Valley Clean Air Now are giving Merced County drivers the opportunity to receive a free car emissions test and diagnostic inspection today.

Drivers must have owned their car for at least six months to be eligible for the Tune In & Tune Up Car Clean-up Event.

For the first 525 cars that don't pass the test but can be repaired, the driver will receive a voucher for up to \$500 in emission-related repairs at a local Gold Shield-certified smog shop.

"It's shown to be a successful program in cleaning cars in the San Joaquin Valley," said Anthony Presto, outreach and communications representative with the San Joaquin Valley Air District.

"This could be the difference between whether a driver can get their car registered or not. So this program helps people drive legally, save gas and drive clean," Presto said.

He noted that the Department of Motor Vehicles fees pay for the expenses of the event.

Long wait, free food

Event organizers say drivers should expect a wait of two hours or more, but there will be free food and drinks while supplies last.

This is the third event in Merced in the past 18 months, and organizers expect to be back in the next six to eight months.

Since 2003, more than 2,000 cars have been repaired to state smog standards by the Tune In & Tune Up program, sponsors said.

The event will be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. today at the Merced County Fairgrounds, 900 Martin Luther King Jr. Way, in the 11th Street parking lot.

Kings oil potential bigger than North Dakota?

Bakersfield company latest to drill exploratory wells

By Seth Nidever, staff writer
Hanford Sentinel, Friday, Feb. 8, 2013

HANFORD — Deep beneath Kings County soil, west of Highway 43, are untapped oil riches that could dwarf North Dakota's boom, according to an article published this week in the New York Times.

The Times story suggested that the Monterey formation has an estimated 15.4 billion barrels, more than four times the Bakken Shale field in North Dakota. The formation is mostly in the San Joaquin Valley with Kings County at the epicenter.

That's attracting numerous oil companies to the area, including Bakersfield-based Aera Energy LLC, which started drilling an exploratory well in Kings on Tuesday in partnership with Canadian company Zodiac Exploration Inc.

It's the third exploratory well in Kings since 2011 to tap into the deep formation, which technological advances have brought into play.

Two questions haven't quite been answered yet — whether it'll be economically profitable and how much blowback it'll receive from California's powerful environmental groups.

"Right now, we're not sure exactly how much oil we're going to be able to extract," said Chris Boyd, an Aera land consultant. "We really haven't drilled that many wells."

The 12,000- to 15,000-foot-deep formation requires advanced drilling techniques that include "fracking" — injecting high-pressure chemicals underground to break up the dense rock and release the oil trapped inside.

Fracking is drawing major controversy, with some environmental groups claiming that it pollutes groundwater. Aera says it would be safe in the Valley because of the depth of the drilling.

"We're all pretty confident that you'd never have a groundwater contamination issue [from the fracking]," Boyd said.

Greenaction, a Bay Area based group active in Kettleman City, is already raising objections about fracking and other potential concerns.

"We would dispute their contention that it would allegedly never be a threat," said Bradley Angel, Greenaction executive director. "We would like to ask this company, what [fracking] chemicals are you using?"

Having an oil boom in the Valley like the one in North Dakota would add to air pollution and be an "absolute environmental disaster," Angel said.

Kings economic development officials are taking a wait-and-see approach, but they are pleased at the jobs such a boom would bring to a high-unemployment area.

"If it's safe, this could obviously be a real boon," said Larry Spikes, Kings County administrative officer. "If [fracking] is below the water table, that would be great."

Susan Hersberger, an Aera spokeswoman, said it's premature to speculate about the future because exploration is in such an early stage.

But there's one thing nobody disputes — plenty of shale oil sits under Kings County, and the know-how exists to potentially turn it into a gold mine.

"Certainly, as the New York Times has indicated, the reserves are there," Hersberger said.

Toxic emissions rise in California

By Edward Ortiz, staff writer

Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Feb. 10, 2013

Toxic chemicals released into the environment by manufacturing plants and facilities in California rose in 2011 after steady annual declines since 2007, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's yearly Toxic Release Inventory report.

The TRI report also found that releases decreased in Sacramento and Solano counties, but increased year over year in Placer and Yolo counties in 2011, the latest year for which the EPA has toxic release information.

Agency data show that the Valero Refining Co.'s petrochemical refinery in Benicia – in Solano County – was one of the state's top 10 largest releasers of toxic chemicals in 2011, accounting for more than a half-million pounds of toxics released.

The largest emitter of toxics in Sacramento County was the Procter and Gamble plant on Fruitridge Road, which released more than 427,000 pounds of toxics, according to EPA data.

Nationwide, overall releases of toxic chemicals rose in 2011 for the second year in a row, the TRI report shows. Total toxics released increased by 8 percent from 2010.

In California overall, the EPA's data found a 10 percent increase from 2010 in total pollution added to the environment.

In the state report, pollution released into the air statewide fell 13 percent in 2011, but releases to water and land increased by 10 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

The TRI yearly reports are used as indicators but do not establish what caused the numbers to change.

"There could be any number of different reasons for these numbers to go up or down," said Lily Lee, toxics release inventory coordinator with the EPA.

Economics, however, could be a factor.

"I have heard from individual facilities that have told me that economic activity may explain why release amounts have gone up in their facilities," Lee said.

But Lee said the EPA analyzed a 10-year period of national TRI data in order to establish whether there is a link between economic indicators and increases or decreases in toxic releases. That analysis did not find a direct link between the two.

"The caveat is that the TRI report is a national grouping together of a lot of places and all kinds of industries," Lee said.

Established by a 1986 law, the TRI report is one of the most comprehensive U.S. public pollutant databases. It offers a big-picture look at what is released into the environment in several industry sectors that include manufacturing, metal mining, electric utilities, commercial hazardous waste facilities and petrochemical facilities.

The public report – which encompasses 682 chemicals and categories of chemicals considered by the EPA to be harmful to the environment or human health – is used as an indicator of releases and not whether, or to what degree, the public is exposed to a certain chemical.

The broad strokes of the TRI report may be its biggest limitation, said Anthony Wexler, director of the Air Quality Research Center at the University of California, Davis.

"When you're talking about any increases or decreases – that's too crude a measure," said Wexler. "Some toxic compounds may be emitted in large quantities but have very low toxicity, whereas other compounds may be emitted in small quantities but be very toxic. It's the combination of these two factors that govern how 'bad' a release is."

Some of the most problematic substances released are those that persist in the environment and in body tissue. In 2011 there was a 24 percent rise in such chemical releases in California.

One of those substances is lead, which saw a 3 percent increase in 2011, with about 4.9 million pounds added to the environment. Lead has been linked to nerve and brain damage – and other health problems – in children and adults.

For Wexler, of equal or greater concern may be what gets sent into the atmosphere under our noses daily – tailpipe emissions.

"Those kinds of releases are not like from an industry, where releases have to be reported," Wexler said. "It's you and me, as well as trucking and bus companies – these are also emitting these (carcinogens)."