

Group urging Central Valley to pursue fuel-cell test fleets

By MATT WEISER

The Bakersfield Californian

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Local businesses and government agencies are being asked to get aboard the fuel-cell bandwagon, and the carrot dangling before them is a chance to operate one of the nation's first fleets of fuel-cell vehicles.

The California Fuel Cell Partnership is urging San Joaquin Valley businesses and governments to fill out a fleet vehicle survey on its Web site. Information gleaned from the survey will help automakers decide where to place fleets of fuel-cell vehicles for testing over the next four years.

Joe Irvin, spokesman for the Sacramento-based partnership, said automakers plan to put 300 fuel-cell fleet vehicles into service over the next four years. He admitted most will go to California's three major urban centers -- Los Angeles, Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay area -- simply because of the infrastructure available there.

But Irvin said the recent Rally Thru the Valley, which brought a caravan of fuel-cell cars to Bakersfield, convinced carmakers there is more interest here than they anticipated.

"Our partners are very interested in the possibility of the Central Valley. That really includes everything from Sacramento to Bakersfield," Irvin said. "I absolutely think the valley should take a strong look at this and see how best to participate and make that known to the automakers."

The California Fuel Cell Partnership is a unique organization formed to promote and accelerate fuel-cell technology, which converts hydrogen into energy and emits only water vapor as exhaust. The partnership consists of eight automakers, plus fuel-cell manufacturers and energy companies.

The technology holds great promise for cleaning up smoggy skies in the San Joaquin Valley, where about 60 percent of the region's air pollution is caused by vehicle exhaust.

The automakers themselves will decide where the fleet cars are placed, Irvin said, so he advised cultivating relationships directly with them via the partnership. Fleets have already been placed with the city of Los Angeles and on University of California campuses in Irvine and Davis. One factor that makes the valley more attractive, Irvin said, is a concept for a "hydrogen corridor" of refueling stations stretching from Canada to Mexico. This corridor would pass through Kern County on either Interstate 5 or Highway 99.

The partnership will make a presentation on its fleet programs at a Fresno meeting of the San Joaquin Valley Clean Cities Coalition on Tuesday. Linda Urata, coordinator of the coalition, urged fleet operators interested in fuel cells to attend the meeting and complete the survey. She said the valley has a rare opportunity to get in on the ground floor of hydrogen-fueled transportation.

"Mainly, they're looking for previous experience with alternative fuels and a commitment on behalf of the community and fleet drivers themselves," Urata said. "Our coalition is a good fit because we did carve the way out for natural gas on buses, for instance. Our school districts and transit people went through the first generation of buses that, honestly, had a lot of breakdowns. They're the people that need to get involved in fuel cells."

News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley

The Associated Press

In the Bakersfield Californian

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MERCED, Calif. (AP) - Several counties in the north San Joaquin Valley want to split from their more polluted southern counterparts to set their own rules and regulations for reducing air pollution.

Merced County voted Tuesday to join Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties in devising their own regional air quality plan for the north Valley. The three counties have now each approved resolutions that support creating a separate planning area within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Officials believe a new northern planning area could save them from costly fines if federal clean air standards aren't met by 2005. A report published last October by the Sierra Nevada Air Quality Group found that if the three northern counties formed a planning area within the existing Valley district, that area "would likely have an easier time attaining the state standards" for air pollution.

County officials in the southern part of the Valley don't think the move is a good idea.

Supervisor Judy Case, who has served on the San Joaquin Valley Regional Air Pollution Control Board for five years, said she was not in favor of the plan.

"I see it as (a way) to avoid dealing with the issue," Case said. "The consequences are tough, but the bottom line is we all want clean air."

Even with the resolutions, it could be tough for the northern counties to secede.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the California Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would all have to agree to the split.

"It's going to be very difficult to argue that they are a separate planning area, because in the San Joaquin Valley they do share the same air basin," said EPA spokeswoman Lisa Fasano.

North Valley seeks own smog plan

San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced counties want to escape stigma.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, August 14, 2003, 5:36 AM)

Three northern San Joaquin Valley counties again are campaigning to escape the stigma of dirty air, which officials believe will unfairly stifle business and development.

San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties, which have few violations of air standards compared with the cities of Fresno and Bakersfield, will approach Valley air authorities next month seeking a study on a smog cleanup plan just for the northern area.

Last year, officials from northern counties considered secession from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, but the idea fizzled. Critics said the northern counties contribute pollution to the district's five southern counties -- Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern.

All eight counties form the 25,000-square-mile district, which runs from Stockton to Bakersfield. The district ranks alongside Houston and Los Angeles as the most unhealthy air basins in the country.

Northern Valley advocates abandoned last year's breakaway attempt and now just want their own cleanup plan, which would hold them responsible only for the violations in their area. Stockton, for instance, hasn't had a smog or ozone violation in three years, but some Fresno and Parlier smog monitors get several each summer.

One violation anywhere in the Valley counts as a violation for the whole air district. A violation of the one-hour ozone standard occurs when the air contains 125 parts per billion of ozone, an invisible, corrosive gas that can trigger respiratory problems.

If the northern Valley gets its own plan, the five other Valley counties would be grouped in a separate cleanup plan.

"I think it makes sense," said Doug Wilhoit, chief executive officer of the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce. "We're not talking about seceding. This is not meant to take a shot at Fresno or Bakersfield."

Though the air district board has not discussed the idea, at least one board member, Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case, is opposed.

"Why should we split up our resources on two plans?" she asked. "They're part of the problem; they need to be part of the solution. I think they're just trying to avoid responsibility."

The northern counties have considered ways to insulate themselves from the dirty-air stigma since last year, when the air district suggested moving into the worst federal category for smog offenders. The category, called "extreme," is occupied only by the Los Angeles area.

The air board is expected to discuss the extreme designation at its September meeting.

Leaders throughout the district fear the category would discourage businesses from coming to an area with such dirty air. But they have accepted the idea because the category would extend the cleanup deadline from 2005 to 2010 and avoid sanctions, including the possible holdup of billions of dollars in federal road-building money.

Leaders in the cleaner-air northern counties are not mollified. If the northern counties had a separate cleanup plan, they probably would be classified in a cleaner category.

Such an idea is not unprecedented. For more than a decade in the Sacramento Valley, northern communities such as Chico and Yuba City have been in a separate planning area because they have cleaner air.

The Sacramento metropolitan area is classified as a "severe" offender of the federal standard, but the northern communities are "marginal," which is almost in attainment of the standard.

The only problem in the comparison: The prevailing winds differ between the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

In the Sacramento Valley, the wind blows smog from southwest to northeast, meaning the cleaner communities are downwind of the more-polluted metropolitan area.

In the San Joaquin Valley, the wind blows smog northwest to southeast, taking pollution from the cleaner areas, such as Modesto, into the dirtier ones, such as Fresno.

Wilhoit of Stockton argued that the air district would not allow fewer controls in the north if a significant amount of pollution is still floating south.

"I'm sitting on the marina overlooking the deep-water port [on the San Joaquin River]," he said. "It's beautiful. It's unfair to label our air as bad."

The northern counties also could provide the Valley district with a success story, said Julia Greene, executive director of the San Joaquin County Council of Governments.

"I think we could attain the standard," Greene said. "We have incredibly better air than the rest of the district."

But the idea may need more support than the comparison between the San Joaquin and the Sacramento valleys, said Jerry Martin, spokesman for the state Air Resources Board, which supervises all air quality districts in California.

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com or 441-6316.

[Fresno Bee Editorial, August 14, 2003:](#)

Farmers fight for air High-tech wizardry and low-tech innovation help reduce pollution.

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It's very encouraging to read of the efforts being made by some farmers in the Valley to reduce the amount of air pollution their operations cause. Such efforts will be critical in the larger task of cleaning up the Valley's air.

Bee staff writer Mark Grossi told us in his Aug. 10 story of Keith Nilmeier, who uses peach pits on his eastern Fresno County farm roads to keep dust down. On the western side of the county, Ted Sheely is using high-tech gadgets to help fight air pollution by making his tractors more efficient, thus reducing the amount of fuel they use. There are, of course, many more examples of farmers trying every sort of technique and process to help in the fight.

There is the Los Gatos Tomato Products plant, which has managed a reduction of a quarter-million diesel truck-miles in less than a year, ever since a rebuilt rail line nearby became available for shipping the plant's tomato paste.

And the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reports that more than half of the 4,000 older, dirtier diesel engines used to pump well water on Valley farms have been upgraded in recent years with help from a state incentive program that pays part of the cost.

It's not all about altruism, to be sure. Sheely acknowledged that he doesn't "do it to reduce air pollution. I'm doing it to become more efficient ..." Reducing costs, especially in a business with margins as tight as farming, is a constant effort. And if it also helps reduce air pollution, that's great.

We should not depend solely on such economic motivations for help with the air, though. The bottom line for a Valley farmer -- for any Valley business person, for that matter -- rarely includes the social costs of operations. For instance, what industry factors into its balance sheet the cost to taxpayers of treating respiratory illnesses caused by the pollution that industry's operations create?

But that's a larger argument for another day. For now, let's hope the efforts of the farmers highlighted in the Bee's recent story are widely and successfully imitated. Every one of us has a part in the struggle for cleaner air in the Valley.

[Editorial, The Merced Sun-Star, August 14, 2003:](#)

Don't split up pollution district

At first blush, it sounds pretty good: having Merced and two northerly counties split from southern San Joaquin Valley counterparts and form a separate planning area within the air pollution control district. By having a northernmost entity with less ominous smog statistics, some hope we might escape likely federal sanctions if Valley air quality isn't markedly improved in the next two years.

While it's widely believed Merced County's air quality isn't nearly as bad as Fresno or Bakersfield, for example, splitting the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District wouldn't work out and shouldn't be pursued.

The split is not such a good idea. In a nutshell, Valley air - unfortunately - is a shared commodity whether it's good or bad. Smog blows north to south, but all eight San Joaquin Valley counties have a common problem with poor air quality and it doesn't make much sense to single out San

Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties because they pollute slightly less than their southerly neighbors. There are no physical barriers, significant weather patterns or demographics that distinguish Merced County from counties to the south as far as air quality goes.

Furthermore, it's highly unlikely the northern planning area proposal, which Merced County supervisors endorsed this week, will receive approval at the three levels it needs. Directors of the entire Valley air pollution district would have to sign off on the split, along with the California Air Resources Board and the federal Environmental Protection Agency. An EPA spokeswoman doubted that agency would ever approve such a split and it looks like the proposal has three strikes against it already.

Then you've got to consider all the costs involved in setting up a separate planning area, in terms of staffing, office and equipment costs. That could be a sizable outlay - perhaps in the millions of dollars - and it will duplicate programs and personnel already dedicated to battling air pollution. That's not fiscally prudent in these lean financial times.

The entire Valley needs to pull together and work to improve our air quality. This is necessary on several fronts: we'll all breathe easier and live better, as well as continue receiving federal funds to continue essential transportation and road construction projects.

Transit idea falls flat due to its cost

Supervisors agree to explore alternatives to fund casino transit

By Glenna Jarvis, staff writer, The Madera Tribune, Wednesday, August 13, 2003

A study to determine the needs and feasibility of a transit service for employees of the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino was presented Monday to the Madera County Board of Supervisors, and the supervisors agreed to continue seeking alternative funding sources.

The county and city retained the services of Moy and Associates in May to prepare the study of transportation alternatives and to assess the costs of services that could be offered to casino employees.

Amid the search to cut the budget because of the state fiscal crisis, questions centered around cost, and who should pay. The study prepared by Ellen Moy, principal of Moy and Associates, basically suggests the taxpayers of Madera County foot the bill.

While suggestions and questions were batted back and forth between board members and Ellen Moy, perhaps the most important question to rise from Monday's discussion was whether anyone had considered asking whether the casino would pay for transporting its employees and guests.

While Moy said the assumption was that the city of Madera would contribute to the transportation costs, Supervisor Ronn Dominici said the city didn't propose any money "due to the constraints of their budget."

"They see the need," Dominici said. "But at this time, the monies were not readily available to them."

"The partnership, in conjunction with us, should be the casino," Moss said, adding that the casino was getting "the biggest reward out of this," and added that if the county were to establish a program where people were transported to the casino to gamble, "the service is first to Chukchansi."

"Has anyone, at this point, even asked Chukchansi if they will pay for it? I think we should ask first before we say we'll pay for it," Moss said.

In July, a survey was conducted in cooperation with the casino's human resources department.

That survey revealed that of the 697 employees - 54 percent of the casino's 1,300 total workforce - that participated, 57 percent drive alone, 24 percent carpool, and 15 percent are driven to and from work. Of the employees who do not have private transportation, 38 percent stated they would prefer using a public transit system. Thirty-one percent would prefer to carpool, and 28 percent would prefer to be driven to and from work.

All employees said they would like to see some sort of employee transportation system, and the casino human resources staff expressed concerns about employees commuting, including the high cost of commuting, safety issues regarding driving along State Route 41, and employees possibly getting stranded on rural roads.

Of the employees who work at the casino, 53 percent live in Madera, 21 percent live in Fresno, 7 percent live in Coarsegold, 5 percent live in Oakhurst, 5 percent live in Chowchilla, and 2 percent live elsewhere in Madera County.

Additionally, 2 percent live in North Fork, 1 percent live in Bass Lake, 1 percent live in Yosemite Lakes Park, and 1 percent live in Raymond.

Three plans were discussed: Public transportation provided by Madera County Connection, private express bus service for casino employees only, and implementing a ridesharing program.

Bus fare for the public transportation plan would be \$2.25 one way, Moy said. This would generate annual fare revenue of \$18,000. However, the annual cost, operating 7.5 hours a day, would be \$172,000.

Funding for this proposed method of transporting employees and the public could come through the Madera County First 5 program, Moy said, as well as the State Transportation Development Act Funds, Federal Transit Administration funds, and farebox revenues.

The second proposal, private transportation for casino employees only, would generate \$22,500 annually at a fare of \$2.25 one way. The cost would be \$219,000.

Because this proposal does not open up the transportation services to the general public, no federal or state funds can be considered. Private contributions, Moy said, and farebox revenues would be the primary source of funding.

Ridesharing, or carpool programs are already in place throughout the Central Valley, and is funded by a combination of state and local funds. The cost, Moy's study report shows, is minimal to both employees and the casino.

Funding is available for the ridesharing program through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, Moy said.

Chairman Vern Moss brought up the fact that due to weather conditions, not as many people may use the transit system during the colder, winter months. This, he said, needed to be taken into consideration because the cost to the county would increase as the fare revenues decrease.

"We're facing very rough times with the phasing out of Measure A funds," Moss said. "I think we may be putting ourselves in a position where, if we're not careful, it's going to be dipped into funds that are needed just to keep our own roads - the roads that lead to the casino - in tact."

While the project would benefit air quality, Moss said, "we also have to figure out whether we can financially afford (this project)."

"The way this (study proposal) reads right now, there's so many unanswered questions that it bothers me," Moss added. "If we're in a position where we're talking about possibly laying off

people, and then turn around and make a commitment for a couple hundred thousand dollars - We'd better be careful."

Supervisor Ronn Dominici suggested that the highest possible representative from the Chukchansi casino attend a transportation committee meeting where representatives from the county, and the cities of Chowchilla and Madera, would be present. Moy said she would extend an invitation.

"I would like to see somebody go back and talk to the Chukchansi and see what they're willing to do before we even take action," Moss said. "I'm not opposing the concept, but I know two weeks from now we're going to have to talk budget, and we're going to have to decide how many jobs that we can protect."

Moss agreed that the board needed to "investigate a sharing agreement between the county, cities and the Chukchansi," then bring the issue back to the board for approval.

[Editorial, The Madera Tribune, Aug. 14, 2003:](#)

Officials right to beware of new transit

Both the Madera City Council and Madera County Board of Supervisors are looking askance at a proposal to provide heavily subsidized transit service for the employees of Chukchansi Gold Casino, and we can see why they are.

The service would cost taxpayers - or somebody - \$154,000 a year more than it would collect from riders, according to the study by transit consultant Ellen Moy - about \$19.50 a ride.

Moy also suggested various sources of public funds to subsidize the service, but public funds are in short supply these days, even if they do seem to come from "somewhere else."

The casino may be willing to subsidize the service if the county runs it, and that might make sense, provided the county doesn't find itself holding the bag.

Public transit already is a loss leader in Madera County. None of the public transit systems comes even close to paying its own way, and while that isn't unusual, one does wonder how long we will continue to pump money into public transit before the realities of it set in.

These include:

- Despite claims to the contrary, an underused transit system does not reduce air pollution. It only reduces air pollution when buses run full or nearly full. The rest of the time, when buses are empty, their bigger engines actually add to pollution.
- Public transit could deliver service at a far lower cost, and with a far lower subsidy if it were privatized. (We have proof in this city - the buses which transport agricultural workers.)

[Manteca Bulletin editorial, August 12, 2003:](#)

Regional air quality fee on new building in the works

Regional fees may soon be slapped on the creation of "new vehicle trips" in a bid to clean the San Joaquin Valley air that consistently rates among the top five dirtiest basins in the country.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is exploring the establishment of an indirect source mitigation fee that would be applicable to all development projects that generate motor

vehicle trips whether it is the construction of a new home, the establishment of a Super Wal-Mart or the building of a distribution center.

Although still in its infancy as to what form it will take, one scenario is a "garage fee" charging so much per vehicle space inside a residential garage. The fee would be added on top of others leveled by cities and counties on new construction but it would be sent directly to the air pollution control district.

The money would then be used on programs that are the most effect at reaching federal-mandated deadlines to improve valley air quality. The Environmental Protection Agency has declared that the San Joaquin Valley has "severe" air quality problems which means it has until 2005 to improve conditions. If that doesn't work and the air worsens bringing about an "extreme" air quality situation, the air quality district would have until 2010 to reverse things. The additional time allowed due to the potential for conditions to worsen between now and 2005 comes at a huge price. The additional time basically is a "do or die" period. If air quality isn't better by 2010, the federal government would then start imposing mandatory rules and eliminate any local input. The EPA has the authority to go as far as mandate "no drive" days.

The fee collected could go toward the pollution control district's more effective pollution reduction program including converting heavy equipment engines, Spare the Air Day efforts, rebates for hybrid of electric cars and deep discounts on electrical lawn mowers and other non-gas powered yard equipment for people who turn in gas powered equipment.

"It makes sense that we face pollution problems now and not pass it on to future generations to solve," said David Brown, a Manteca resident who serves on the district's citizens advisory committee.

Brown stressed he has no opinion on what form or shape the mitigation fee should take.

"It is important that the people who are going to be impacted by this have a chance to have input before it gets too far down the road," Brown said.

Brown noted the district staff has only spoken on the mitigation fee in broad, vague terms.

An open public scoping meeting is being scheduled sometime in September.

The mitigation fee language contained in the proposed 2003 PM10 Plan aimed at developing a strategy to deal with air pollution states the valley "population is expected to continue to grow rapidly. As more people settle in this region, and use motor vehicles as their primary means of transportation, vehicle miles traveled also increase. The greater motor vehicle use offsets a significant amount of progress achieved by tailpipe and fuel controls."

If ultimately a \$1,000 fee is put in place, Manteca residential building would yield \$700,000 alone on an annual basis based on 2002 construction levels. That doesn't factor in commercial or industrial construction.

By DENNIS WYATT

Managing editor of the
Manteca (Calif.) Bulletin

[Letters to the Editor for Aug. 14](#)

Submitted by readers of The Bakersfield Californian

Get predictions right

Air quality is a major topic for Bakersfield. One solution for improvement is to stop burning in fireplaces in the winter when poor air is predicted.

How accurate is your air quality prediction for the following day? Recently, you predicted the air quality would be an unhealthy 161. Actually, it turned out at the moderate level of only 87. And I notice from daily readings that the predictions are almost always significantly higher than realized.

We are all interested in improving air quality, but let's start with accurate predictions before considering cutbacks.

JAMES A. KURFESS, Bakersfield