

Demand for firewood sparks pollution concerns

By Bobby Caina Calvan, Globe Correspondent
The Boston Globe
November 26, 2005

RIPON, Calif. -- A spike in demand for firewood and wood-burning, spurred by an expected jump in home-heating costs, is prompting renewed concern among air-quality officials about soot and ash spewed into the air by antiquated hearths and wood-burning appliances.

Wood burning is of particular concern in California's San Joaquin Valley, a vast region hemmed in by mountains that is home to some of the country's most productive farmlands but also produces some of the country's most polluted air, rivaling Los Angeles farther south.

The valley has less than two months left in its three-year plan to attain compliance with the Clean Air Act. In 2002, the US Environmental Protection Agency ordered the valley to draft the plan because of habitual violations of federal air-quality standards.

"If we have a clean November and December, we come into [compliance]. But with the expected constraints on natural gas and a jump in prices, we are being very proactive in getting the message out" about the pitfalls of wood burning, said Jaime Holt, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District, which monitors air quality in a region that stretches 250 miles from Stockton, just south of the California capital, to Bakersfield.

In the summer, mountains prevent winds from sweeping away tailpipe smog from cars and trucks traveling along Highway 99 and Interstate 5, the region's main traffic corridors. Deep, stationary layers of low-lying air trap dust, chemicals, and naturally occurring noxious gases from dairy farms.

The winter months produce cold, stagnant air and a dense, slow-creeping fog that cause smoke from chimneys and flues to hang thick and low in neighborhoods.

A surge in the price of cleaner-burning natural gas is fueling demand nationwide for firewood, as consumers look to ease the sting from home-heating bills that could jump by at least a third in the Northeast and by more than half out West because of hurricane-related gas-production problems.

While sweaters and blankets help, the inclination may be to throw more logs on the fire, which means more carbon monoxide, soot, and ash billowing into the air.

In the San Joaquin Valley, residential wood burning produces 24 tons of pollutants on especially bad days -- accounting for a third of winter pollution.

To remind the valley's 3.2 million residents of the extraordinary stakes, the air district is using billboards, radio, and television in a \$200,000 campaign to reduce wood smoke.

Telephone hotlines keep the public apprised of wood-burning alerts. The district prohibits wood burning when the air is projected to be especially bad, and inspectors fan out looking for smoke-belching flues. Violators are fined by mail.

Across much of the West, including the San Joaquin Valley, traditional wood-burning fireplaces are now prohibited in most residential construction. In some communities, homeowners are being pushed, if not required, to replace old woodstoves with newer ones certified by the EPA as meeting clean-air standards.

The San Joaquin air district has gone further by requiring homeowners to replace old units before they can sell their homes.

"We are not taking anything for granted," Holt said.

While much of the focus on wood smoke has been centered in the environmentally conscious West, East Coast officials are also showing renewed concern.

Vermont, Connecticut, and New York officials worry that the rising popularity of wood-burning furnaces housed in outdoor sheds could discharge tons of additional pollutants.

New York has asked the EPA to set emissions standards for the units, much like the agency did a decade ago for woodstoves.

Emissions from old, unregulated woodstoves, which can no longer be sold, release about seven times the amount of pollutants EPA-certified units do, said John Crouch, a spokesman for the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, which has been trying to persuade consumers to replace older models.

While acknowledging increased demand for woodstoves and wood, Crouch says concerns about pollution-laden smoke may be overstated.

"I think it remains to be seen if it will be a problem," Crouch said.

According to industry estimates, however, as many as 30 million wood-burning fireplaces and 17 million woodstoves are in use in the United States -- of which at least three-fourths were installed before the EPA's certification program.

"We have millions of woodstoves out there with emissions that don't meet EPA standards," said Philip Johnson, a public health scientist in the Boston office of the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, which advises six New England states, as well as New York and New Jersey.

"Many people feel they have a right to burn wood. It's akin to owning a gun. It's an apple pie issue," said Lisa Rector, a senior policy analyst for the advisory group.

In some communities, wood is the preferred home-heating method.

In Libby, Mont., which is not served by natural gas lines and where more than 80 percent of winter air pollution comes from chimneys and flues, a demonstration project is underway to illustrate the benefits of installing clean-burning stoves.

In cooperation with the government, the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association is donating about \$1 million to replace the town's old stoves, perhaps as many as 1,300, with new ones. Some 300 new stoves will be given free this year to the town's poorest families.

Farmer surrenders on Kern dairy

Man seeks place where he doesn't 'have to listen to people complain'

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005

The owner of a large Wasco-bound dairy is giving up on Kern, choosing to send his cows to a neighboring county or out of state.

Amos DeGroot, who owns dairy farms in Texas, Nevada and California, spent about three years trying to set up Rex Ranch Dairy, a 10,270-cow farm on 2,200 acres near Wasco.

"I'm very discouraged with Kern County," DeGroot said Monday. "I'm going to have my dairy somewhere where I don't have to listen to people complain."

That place could be near Corcoran in Kings County, where a local entrepreneur is planning the next generation in milk operations. David Albers, a Bakersfield attorney who owns a dairy in Fresno County, wants DeGroot to join his "dairy park," a new style of milk farm in which independent dairies share water, waste and energy infrastructure.

DeGroot hasn't decided if he'll join the dairy park, which would house about eight dairies and 12,000 cows in remote Kings County. Albers said he'll apply for county permits in the next two to three months.

DeGroot has already moved most of his cows out of state, he said.

"Other parts of the country, they just welcome me with open arms," he said.

Dairymen are feeling less welcome in California, with its strict air and water protections, and particularly in Kern, where county supervisors stalled the influx of more than 214,000 cows last year. The county launched an 18-month environmental study to figure out if Kern's landscape could absorb 24 new dairies, many of them within miles of the city of Wasco.

Kern is currently home to 304,900 dairy cows, according to county documents.

DeGroot's departure is good news, said Wasco City Councilman Larry Pearson, who helped lead a ballot measure in which more than 80 percent of Wasco voters said they wanted dairies at least 10 miles away.

"I think it's great," Pearson said of DeGroot's decision. "I hope some other people follow suit."

They just might, according to dairy industry leaders. State air and water regulations are in flux, and most local governments have their own rules for dairies. Kern is among the most difficult, they said.

"Kings County has adopted a permit process that I think makes sense. Kern County hasn't," said Albers, explaining why his company, American Dairy Parks, isn't setting up shop in Kern.

Kern County has yet to establish guidelines for where dairies can locate, how big they can be and what smell and pollution-cutting measures they'll be required to install.

Those rules are still being written, and when they're done, dairymen like DeGroot could find their property off-limits to the dairy they spent years planning.

Meanwhile, they could be participating in -- and paying for -- county environmental studies of potentially moot projects.

"People want to see the controls before they jump in," said John Dunlap, who represents the California Dairy Campaign, the Dairy Action Network and the Milk Producers Council.

Dairymen have money to spend in California, he said, but they're investing in out-of-state operations until state and local regulations are established, Dunlap said.

The county knows it's asking dairymen to sign on to an uncertain regulatory process.

"We fully expect that some may (drop out)," said Ted James, director of county planning. "We understand if they see there is a place they could (be processed) more expeditiously."

Without DeGroot, the county has 23 dairies in the queue. The first six will likely reach the board of supervisors this spring.

DeGroot lives in Southern California near his milk bottling plant, Rockview Farms. He'll likely turn the Wasco property, which a Realtor once assured him would be perfect for a dairy, into an almond or pistachio farm.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, worked with DeGroot to find a new home for his dairy.

"We see this DeGroot thing as a bellwether move for other dairies in the future in Kern," Florez said. "People in Kern don't want them. I'm just glad they get the message."

State Looks to Lead Pollution Fight

Breaking with the Bush administration, officials from California propose new fees on greenhouse gas emitters and call for use of alternative fuels.

By Miguel Bustillo, Times Staff Writer

LA Times, December 6, 2005

MONTREAL - As diplomats from 189 nations meet here this week to discuss the world's response to global warming, California is unveiling a new set of initiatives to control greenhouse gases that would put it in the forefront of a burgeoning campaign by state and local officials to begin regulating the root causes of climate change.

California's action plan - which includes proposals to cap greenhouse gases and force industries to report emissions of carbon dioxide - sharply contradicts the official position of the Bush administration, which has dispatched a delegation to Montreal to reiterate its message that the United States opposes all mandatory limits on heat-trapping gases because, the administration says, such limits would hamstring the economy.

"We can't control what the national government is doing, but we can control what California is doing," said Alan Lloyd, the state's environmental protection secretary, who is leading a California delegation in Montreal. "We are big enough to effect change, and we are still looked upon as a leader on these issues due to our decades of work on air pollution."

Indeed, the United Nations' Montreal conference on climate change - the largest gathering of its kind since most of the world's nations adopted the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gases in 1997 - is attracting state and local officials eager to share the message that some parts of the U.S. have begun to address global warming.

Among the state officials scheduled to attend the Montreal talks are Vermont Gov. James H. Douglas, Connecticut's top environmental official, Gina McCarthy, and Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley. New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who has pledged to reduce his state's emissions, plans to address the conference by videophone.

Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, who has organized a grass-roots campaign to tackle global warming that has enlisted the mayors of more than 180 cities, including Los Angeles, plans to meet today with a coalition of international mayors.

He said the goal of his campaign is not just to place pressure on the federal government but to show U.S. politicians that global warming can be good politics. Opinion polls in many states, including California, have shown strong public support for action against global warming, Nickels said.

"Our ultimate goal is to make it impossible for the federal government to continue ignoring this issue," Nickels said. "We want to show that it can be done without devastating impacts on our local economies ... and we want to show other politicians that this is safe."

Earlier this year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger pledged to slash California's greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050. Schwarzenegger has yet to endorse the ideas that state officials have outlined to reach his target, however, making it uncertain whether the proposals set to be officially released Thursday will translate into real policies.

At the same time that Schwarzenegger was promising to lead the world's fight against global warming at a U.N. event in San Francisco earlier this year, his top energy advisor was working on an equally ambitious proposal to build an electricity highway that would move coal-fired power from Wyoming to California.

Coal-burning power plants are the leading emitters of carbon dioxide, which is the most abundant greenhouse gas.

California already receives more than a fifth of its electricity from out-of-state coal-fired power plants in the West. The state's demand for coal power has grown in the last decade despite a state law requiring investment in renewable energy, environmental groups said in a report released last week.

In response to criticism that the Schwarzenegger administration appeared to be contradicting itself, state officials have acknowledged that better coordination - and stricter electricity-buying policies - will be needed to achieve the governor's goals.

The California Public Utilities Commission and Energy Commission have adopted policies that make it more difficult for in-state utilities to purchase new coal power, citing coal's contribution to global warming. The policies have led to legal threats from officials and power plant operators in other Western states, who contend that California is violating constitutional provisions on interstate commerce.

Environmentalists said it remained to be seen whether California's ambitious proposals - which include a new fee on major greenhouse gas emitters to fund state global warming programs, and a renewed push to produce cleaner-burning ethanol as an alternative to gasoline - would survive what is expected to be a fierce lobbying push by oil refiners and other affected industries.

A highly publicized plan by eight Northeastern states to set a ceiling on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants was recently thrown into turmoil when Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney raised concerns about electricity costs and asked that the proposal be delayed.

The seven other states, which include New York and New Jersey, may move ahead without Massachusetts.

Nonetheless, environmentalists said they were encouraged by what they see as a sincere effort by Schwarzenegger administration officials to examine potential solutions.

"This is where Arnold starts to think about his legacy," said V. John White, a veteran Sacramento air quality lobbyist. "There may be some people around him that will try to change his mind, and we know Exxon and the coal companies will try, but there are enough businesses supporting this that it will happen."

Representatives of Calpine, a private power company that generates most of its electricity from natural gas, are in Montreal as part of the state's delegation.

Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr, who has provided seed capital for several of the state's biggest technology companies, has also expressed support for the state proposal to enact a "cap and trade" system that would not only place a ceiling on emissions, but also allow businesses that cut more than their share of the gases to profit by selling "pollution credits" to businesses that do not cut emissions enough.

California's proposals are part of a groundswell of global warming initiatives by state and city leaders nationwide, who are promising to boost clean energy sources and cut greenhouse gases in response to what they see as a failure to act by officials in Washington.

Although the Bush administration contends that setting a ceiling on greenhouse gases would damage the economy, some states disagree, arguing that taking early action to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and conserve energy will save money.

To hammer home the point, California and the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo released a study this week showing that their clean-energy programs over the last two decades, which had the unintended effect of reducing greenhouse gases, have helped to improve their economies.

"In the absence of any congressional leadership and action by the Bush administration, we have decided to set climate change goals on our own," said New Mexico Gov. Richardson in an interview with The Times last week.

Their stands sharply differ from the position of President Bush, who rejected the Kyoto Protocol, the current international treaty to combat climate change. Bush's delegation is telling other nations that the U.S., the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, does not want to negotiate a new global warming treaty.

The Kyoto Protocol requires developed nations to reduce greenhouse gases by roughly 5% below 1990 levels. The United States and Australia are the only large developed nations that have not ratified the treaty. It expires in 2012, and most of the world's nations this week are discussing whether to set a deadline of 2008, 2009 or 2010 for agreement on the treaty's successor.

"Our position has been consistent now for some time: We do not support a new negotiation," said James L. Connaughton, the president's senior environmental advisor, in a recent interview. "We are pursuing a broad domestic strategy and an even broader multinational strategy of trying to advance technologies while improving air quality and strengthening our economy."

Air advisory

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005

People in Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties are asked to refrain from using fireplaces and older wood stoves today because of concerns about air quality. Forecasters say air will be unhealthy for sensitive groups, such as those with chronic breathing problems. The "burning discouraged" advisory comes from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and is in effect in all eight counties. Today's advisory is the first step: a voluntary request. The next step is a mandatory prohibition.

Rail workshop today

Modesto Bee, Dec. 6, 2005

Workshops on a regional rail plan will be held today, giving the Northern San Joaquin Valley a rare opportunity to help shape rail service over the next 50 years. The plan will try to identify improvements and extensions needed for railroad, rapid transit and high-speed rail services. It is a collaboration of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission; Caltrain; the Altamont Commuter Express; California High-Speed Rail Authority; and Bay Area Rapid Transit system. The workshops will be at the DoubleTree Hotel in downtown Modesto. The first session will be from 3 to 5 p.m.; the second from 6 to 8 p.m.

Automobiles running cheaper, cleaner on vegetable oil

Conversion kits make it possible to fuel up with used fast-food products

By Erin Pursell, Correspondent

Tri-Valley Herald Mon., Dec. 5, 2005

OAKLAND - Jill Fuss' navy-blue 2001 diesel Jetta might look like any other Volkswagen. Only the license plate, reading Vegi VW, or the running on pure vegetable oil bumper sticker give away clues that the car is a little different.

It runs on 100 percent vegetable oil, a fuel technology still relatively new and experimental, with side effects ranging from difficult use in cold temperatures to an interior smell that is reminiscent of food.

Straight Vegetable Oil, also known as SVO, is a renewable resource that can only be used to fuel diesel engines. Still, more people are going veggie.

Fuss, 33, is a postdoctoral researcher in molecular biology at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. She says her reasons for switching to veggie oil-powered transport a year ago were both environmental and political.

Our veggie car satisfies our desire to drive a more environmentally and politically friendly vehicle, while helping to reduce our fuel costs. It's really a win-win, she said. Plus, it has a really great stereo.

And then there's the smell. Fuss Jetta doesn't smell distinctively of hamburgers or stir-fry, but has an aroma that is definitely foody. It has a fried-food-type smell, reminiscent of greasy french fries or tempura, and lingers as if the car recently transported such snacks.

"People tell me it smells like food," Fuss said from behind the wheel.

Running a car on vegetable oil can cut sulfur dioxide emissions, which are a proven primary cause of acid rain, industry experts said.

Reduces carcinogens

Additionally, Fuss estimated veggie oil has reduced the carcinogens her car emits by 95 percent. These benefits could lead to a reduction in smog, global warming and better human health.

Not to be confused with biodiesel fuel, which is vegetable oil with chemicals added, SVO has no additives. Since it's new and experimental, the effect SVO has on engines hasn't been tested as long as biodiesel. And modifying a car to an SVO system voids the warranty.

The distinction between biodiesel and SVO is often inaccurately represented in the press, so it is no wonder the public is confused, says Gretchen Zimmerman, a worker and owner of BioFuel Oasis in Berkeley.

"SVO is a lot more hassle for the average person than pulling up to a biodiesel pump," Zimmerman says, pointing out many people simply lack the time, money, ability and interest level to maintain an SVO system. "But the main draw: Its free ... most of the time."

"Your choices are to pick up used cooking oil from restaurants, which typically pay about 80 cents a gallon to have it hauled away," said Craig Reece, co-owner of PlantDrive, a division of Neotric Biofuels, which supplies kits to convert cars to run on SVO. Or he says, "Go to Costco, Sam's Club, etc., and buy new soy for about \$2.60 a gallon."

Restaurants often have a surplus of oil, which they pay rendering companies to cart off, after which it ends up in landfills or is used for other less environmentally friendly purposes such as feeding livestock or making cosmetics.

Fuss and her husband get their oil from a Japanese restaurant in Oakland's Rockridge neighborhood, where they've been picking up about 9 gallons a week since they got the car.

Your car runs on that?

She said when she first approached the manager of the small restaurant about their oil, he thought she wanted new oil. "He told me to go to Costco," she said. "Then I told him I want used oil, and he was like, 'Your car runs on that?'"

Fuss isn't alone in her enthusiasm.

Reece agreed the cars are growing in popularity. Based on sales of PlantDrive veggie conversion kits, plus their leading competitors and owner-built conversions, he estimated there could be up to 50,000 people driving on plants in the United States.

The number in Europe, by comparison, is even higher, with higher fuel taxes to discourage driving.

And with the future of gas supply and prices at the pumps uncertain, who can disagree with them? SVO conversion kits run between \$750 and \$1,100, depending on the size of the car's engine, make and model.

For more information on SVO conversion kits, visit plantdrive.com.

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005:](#)

Increase freight rail

Freight volumes in California are expected to double by 2020. By 2030, the population of Bakersfield and the surrounding region is also expected to double. Over the same period, highway capacity in the region will grow minimally.

According to the California Department of Transportation, Highways 43, 58 and 46, all of which run through or are adjacent to Bakersfield, have among the highest share of truck traffic of any route in the state.

Already the Bakersfield metropolitan area is faced with severe transportation problems that will get exponentially worse as population and freight volumes continue to increase.

It is my strong belief that increasing the hauling capacity of the freight rail system will help alleviate some of the pressures associated with the rapid rise in freight volumes.

This sentiment is supported by a study done by the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) in 2003. Their report concluded that public investments in freight rail enhancements would improve a number of quality-of-life issues such as congestion, [air quality](#), public safety and the economy.

If congestion is allowed to increase at its current rate, it will serve as a disincentive to other corporations and industries that might otherwise look to relocate to the Bakersfield/Kern County region.

This will inevitably cost us numerous jobs and additional revenue sources. Furthermore, by improving the rail capacity, our farmers and businesses could increase their shipments by rail, which would provide them with a substantial economical benefit that could be passed on to consumers.

I encourage Congress to develop policies to expand the freight rail hauling capacity as a means toward a stronger local and global economy.

HARVEY L. HALL, Bakersfield mayor

[Fresno Bee editorial, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005:](#)

Like parents, like children

Adults at home must take on the responsibility for kids' fitness.

Too many Valley children are flabby and out of shape, unable to run a mile in 12 minutes, do seven push-ups at a time or touch their arms behind their backs. That's the latest troubling report from California schools, which conduct the tests in flexibility, upper-body strength, aerobic capacity and so on.

But the messenger, in this case, should not be singled out as the source of -- or the solution to -- the problem.

No matter the grade level, physical education is only a small part of a public school curriculum, which appropriately emphasizes reading, writing and other academics.

If physical fitness is a shortcoming -- and it is -- the ones who should be most alarmed and chagrined are parents. They are responsible for their children's health, which includes their fitness.

This isn't the first time the Valley has ranked below other parts of the state in health matters. Our counties have higher rates of coronary heart disease and diabetes, for example.

Fresno Unified's numbers are particularly poor. Statistics show 14.8% of Fresno Unified fifth-grade students met the fitness standards, compared with 37% at Central Unified, 25.5% at Visalia Unified and 24.5% statewide. The good news for Fresno Unified is that the numbers of students meeting the standard is improving among the seventh-graders and ninth-graders.

There's a connection between the lifestyles of the adults and those of the children.

Parents receive written results of how their child fared on the physical fitness tests, just as they do for academic tests. Physicians also need to point out to parents when there are early signs of obesity or poor physical stamina.

Collectively, Valley communities must assure that there are safe routes for children to walk to school, adequate parks for them to play in and [clean air](#) for them to enjoy. High schools will help the cause as they are forced to phase out fast food and sodas.

But ultimately, the responsibility for children's fitness falls to the parents, who need to set the example and the rules to promote active youngsters.

Results from the 2005 physical fitness tests are available on the California Department of Education Web site. It includes results by school district, plus advice to parents on encouraging fitness.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005:](#)

More time needed for EIR

Editor: We recently learned that a request to extend the comment period for the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Riverside Motorsports Park was denied by the

Planning Department of Merced County. The raceway project is a vast undertaking, with potential impacts on air quality, water resources, traffic, noise and waste disposal, to mention a few. The DEIR is a three-volume document of more than 2,000 pages. The public has been given 45 days to review it and submit comments, which will be responded to in the final EIR. Many citizens submitted written requests that the period be extended to 90 days. Such a request is reasonable, given the magnitude and complexity of the project. After all, the DEIR has been several years in the making. Wouldn't lay people deserve a few months to review it?

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) mandates that citizens be given the opportunity to be involved in projects that affect their environment and quality of life. All of us should have a fair chance to learn about the Riverside Motorsports Project and work together to decide whether it will be good for our county. Extensions of comment periods are perfectly legal under CEQA, and they are routinely granted. Even 60 days would be helpful, especially at this holiday time, when so many activities compete for our time and attention.

Many of us had understood that Bill Nicholson, director of the Planning Department, was favorably disposed to granting an extension to the middle of January (the current date is Dec. 23). Somewhere along the line, other parties must have exerted their influence, causing Mr. Nicholson's denial. Who may have done so? Board of Supervisors? Chief Administrative Office? Riverside Motorsports staff and lawyers?

We view the denial as a particularly unfriendly act. There are many citizens who wish to be involved in the environmental review process for the raceway. We are residents of the county and will be directly affected by the raceway project. We need more time!

Tom Grave, Merced