

Workshops explain \$20 million farm air funding

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, May 26, 2009

More than \$20 million is being made available to California farmers and ranchers as part of a new program to help reduce air quality emissions from agricultural sources.

A series of 15 workshops will be held over the next few weeks to explain how the program works. The first meetings will be held today at 9 a.m. in Firebaugh at Thomason Tractor, 985 12th St.; 2 p.m. at Fresno County Farm Bureau, 1274 W. Hedges Ave.; and 6 p.m. at the Madera County Fairgrounds, Van Alen Hall, 1850 W. Cleveland Ave.

The program is run by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service as part of a new air quality provision of the 2008 federal Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Under the program, agricultural producers can apply for money to help pay to replace, repower or retrofit existing combustion engines. The deadline to apply is June 26.

Other covered air quality practices will include conservation tillage, dust control on farm roads, precision pest control and manure injection.

Producers in 36 counties are eligible to use the funds to help reduce ozone and particulate matter emissions. Priority will be given to replacing older, higher-polluting engines with newer, reduced-emission engines that meet or exceed current emission standards.

Stationary, portable and heavy-duty off-road mobile systems are eligible.

Representatives from the USDA's NRCS and Farm Service Agencies, regional air district, agricultural associations and farm equipment dealers will be at each workshop to answer questions and help producers determine if they are eligible for the program.

Tejon Mountain Village, Frazier Park Estates projects up for comment

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, May 29, 2009

Details of two master-planned communities proposed near Frazier Park are about to undergo public scrutiny.

The county Planning Department on Wednesday released a draft environmental impact review of Tejon Mountain Village, a project spread over 26,417 acres that would include up to 3,450 homes, 750 hotel and resort units and 160,000 square feet of commercial space, as well as two golf courses and open space.

Sometime next week the department plans to circulate a draft environmental review of Frazier Park Estates, an 846-acre development that has been scaled back to contain 662 homes, a 41-unit housing complex and 104,475 square feet of commercial space.

A 45-day public comment period ending July 13 has been scheduled for the Tejon project's draft environmental impact review. County planning chief Lorelei Oviatt said the Frazier Park Estates draft review would be released as soon as Wednesday, and that public comments would be accepted for 45 days after that.

Both draft reviews are expected to look at the respective projects' impact on aesthetics, air quality, global climate change, noise, seismic factors, public services, land use, traffic growth and "cumulative environmental effects," according to a news release Thursday from the county.

The draft reviews are to be available on the Internet at www.co.kern.ca.us/planning. Oviatt said a "technical breakdown" had prevented the online posting of the Tejon project until today, but that

members of the public could obtain a copy by calling staff planner Craig Murphy at 862-8739, or by stopping by the department's offices at 2700 M St.

After the close of the public comment period, the county Planning Commission is to consider each proposal and make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors, which then would decide whether to approve the projects.

Tejon Mountain Village is a joint proposal by Lebec landowner and agribusiness company Tejon Ranch Co., and Arizona real estate developer DMB Associates.

Located east of Interstate 5 near Lebec, the Tejon project would set aside 21,335 acres -- 80 percent of the total area -- as permanent open space.

According to a Thursday news release from the project's partners, the project would create 1,500 permanent jobs, 1,600 construction jobs, three new fire stations and a new sheriff's station, among other local benefits.

Frazier Park Estates was proposed by Paso Robles developer Fallingstar Homes, with the help of Bakersfield's Cornerstone Engineering. The project would be located at the southwest corner of Peace Valley and Frazier Mountain Park roads.

The project's upcoming draft review is a "recirculation" of an assessment released in early 2006. That review laid out plans for 6 percent more homes and 29 percent more commercial development than is proposed now.

Oviatt said that earlier review was met with "significant" public comments relating to the project's biological and water resources, and that the new version reflected more recent mitigation measures.

Fallingstar and Cornerstone could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Lawmakers criticize retrofit of gas pumps

By Mark Glover, staff writer

Sacramento Bee, Friday, May 29, 2009

A state-mandated vapor recovery system retrofit at thousands of gas pumps statewide has pitted the California Air Resources Board against some state lawmakers.

The air board says it's working to protect the health of millions of Californians, but agitated lawmakers accuse the board and the state's air districts of riding roughshod over small businesses and the jobs they provide amid the economic downturn.

A recent state Senate report said nearly \$1 million in fines have been issued against station owners and more than 60 have been driven out of business.

State Sen. Dave Cox, R-Fair Oaks, contends the board's actions amount to the state saying "that it's OK to take (away) these small businesses."

The air board counters that it has been considerate of owners' needs -- that fines have been minimal and no stations have gone out of business because of the regulation.

"Absolutely, we will continue as we have been. ... The preponderance of gas station owners have shown a willingness to comply," said air board spokesman Dimitri Stanich.

The gas station retrofit has been in the works for nearly a decade, as the air board sought to limit emissions that escape from gas pump nozzles when motorists fill their vehicles' fuel tanks at service stations.

The state ultimately mandated improved nozzles, vapor processors and other equipment, which the air board said would eliminate the daily release of up to 10 tons of smog-forming compounds as a result of spillage and fumes escaping at gas stations.

Gasoline vapors are primarily made of hydrocarbons, which react with other air pollutants to form ozone that can contribute to respiratory problems, including asthma. The state also said the enhanced vapor recovery, or EVR, systems will reduce exposure to benzene, a carcinogen.

The retrofit, however, is pricey – about \$11,000 per pump, or an average of about \$80,000 for a typical service station, the industry says.

As the April 1 deadline for the retrofit approached, the air board said it was prepared, along with 35 air districts statewide, to levy fines and close stations not in compliance. The board estimated that 5 percent of about 11,000 California stations facing the deadline ultimately would close.

Just before the deadline, however, the board said station operators could avoid fines if they showed "a good-faith effort in reaching compliance," including filing applications to start the retrofit.

By the middle of this month, Stanich said that 9,723, or 93 percent, of 10,403 stations statewide had applied. And of that total, 7,310 stations, or 70 percent, already had installed the required equipment.

He acknowledged there are "holdouts," some perhaps waiting for legislation to spare them the cost of the retrofit.

Stanich said that, as of mid-May, no station "has been closed for this regulation," although some had received notices of violations. Stanich said fines have been limited and the board is providing leeway to those not in compliance.

That's a far cry from a report lawmakers produced.

On April 30, a state Senate release – topped with the names of Sens. Cox; Ron Calderon, D-Montebello; and Rod Wright, D-Inglewood – cited information gleaned from regional air control districts. That research reported fines totaling \$943,815 against 149 California stations and claimed that 64 stations had been closed as of April 17.

Senators also claimed that regulations differed among regional air districts.

Wright said he's an "advocate for clean air, but we are talking about the closing of viable businesses and the loss of thousands of jobs for rank-and-file workers. Many of the stations that are trying to comply are being hampered by high fees and difficult local permitting processes."

Calderon, who warned of high job losses before the April 1 retrofit deadline, noted, "Whether local air control districts are directly shutting down gas stations or the stations are closing because of the high fines, the end result is the same – stations are closing, workers are out of jobs and gas prices will go back up."

Cox responded with Senate Bill 507, which would extend the date of retrofit enforcement for a year. However, that bill died last week in the Senate Environmental Quality Committee. Other bills still making their way through the Capitol propose limiting fines or providing some financial assistance to station owners struggling to do the retrofit.

About the only point of agreement in the debate is that scores of gas stations ultimately will close. What is unknown is exactly how many will go under and over how long a period of time.

Hydrogen Road Tour pauses in W. Sacramento to make case for fuel-cell vehicles

By Ed Fletcher, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Friday, May 29, 2009

Rather than the expected shot in the arm from the Obama administration, backers of ultra-clean hydrogen vehicles got a punch in the gut earlier this month when the federal government recommended a dramatic cut in funds for fuel-cell research.

The proposal, cutting fuel-cell research grants 59 percent, came as industry leaders in a dozen fuel-cell vehicles prepared for a 1,700-mile, 28-stop press junket.

While it would be a stretch to say the Hydrogen Road Tour became something of a funeral procession, the news did dampen the parade.

"We're on the verge of having fuel-cell vehicles as a practical alternative," said Dave Barthmuss, spokesman for General Motors' environment and energy group, as the vehicles rolled toward Sacramento.

The group stopped in West Sacramento on Thursday to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the Fuel Cell Partnership. The partnership serves as both a shared research station and a public relations hub educating the public on emerging fuel-cell technology.

Barthmuss and others say they are hopeful that Congress and the Department of Energy will restore funding.

The Obama administration has proposed cutting \$100 million from the current-year budget of \$169 million to free up resources for technologies that appear more promising.

Major obstacles remain for hydrogen-powered vehicles, even after decades of research into their promise of zero-emission transportation. Energy Secretary Steven Chu said hydrogen production and storage, as well as cell durability and massive infrastructure requirements, are obstacles.

"We asked ourselves, is it likely in the next 10, 15 or 20 years that we will convert to a hydrogen car economy? The answer, we felt, was 'no,'" Chu said during a budget briefing.

The administration proposal makes short-term sense, said Bradley Berman, editor of HybridCars.com.

"All eyes are on better technologies," said Berman. "In that light, it makes total sense. The quest for a robust, powerful auto battery ... is immediate. It's right now."

Battery-powered and plug-in hybrid cars seem today's technologies, Berman said.

Those in the hydrogen industry, however, say fuel-cell cars are imminent.

"We're there. We really need state government and federal government to stay in the game," Barthmuss said by telephone as he made his way to Sacramento.

The Hydrogen Road Tour is taking 12 vehicles from seven different automakers from Chula Vista to Canada over nine days.

Toyota is "committed to the technology" regardless of what happens with government funding, said Justin Ward, the advanced powertrain program manager for the Japanese automaker.

But Ward, who is also on the route in a Highlander look-alike FCHV-ADV, said Toyota's concern is that without government support, creation of needed hydrogen fueling stations will lag.

Filling stations are popping up in areas of Northern and Southern California, but there's not enough infrastructure yet to allow the tour to roll without an assist from mobile fueling stations. To date there are 26 fueling stations in California; 10 more are planned.

Even without ubiquitous filling stations, the vehicles have come a long way, Ward said.

Early on, demonstration cars would break down, fall behind traffic or struggle up steep roads, Ward said.

"You didn't know if you could make it from one stop to the next," he said. The 12 vehicles now trekking up California are loaded with gear and moving just fine.

"It really shows how far the vehicles have matured," Ward said.

Hydrogen industry officials said fuel-cell fleets are five to 10 years away.

Hydrogen cars and his call for a hydrogen highway were early items on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's green agenda. On Wednesday he caught up with the tour near Los Angeles to offer his support.

"California set out to prove to the nation and to the world that hydrogen vehicles can use now the roads and the highways," Schwarzenegger said. "They are safe, they are affordable and they're viable."

Mary Nichols, chairwoman of Schwarzenegger's California Air Resources Board, sent a letter asking federal officials to reconsider fuel-cell funding.

"Today it is not possible to know which technologies will be the market winners, but given that our global climate and future mobility are at stake, we must pursue all promising options," Nichols wrote.

Roland Hwang of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a nonprofit environmental advocacy group, agreed with Nichols' assessment.

"It would be premature to pull the plug on any one of (the technologies)," Hwang said. "In the long term, we have to kick the petroleum habit."

Plans for farm carbon credits developing

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 29, 2009

While Congress debates a federal law regarding greenhouse gas emissions, California researchers are already working to implement a similar state law passed in 2006. Farm groups are working with researchers to find a way farmers can sell credits for carbon absorbed by their crops. Growers face increased costs for diesel, fertilizer, electricity and other inputs because of new rules.

UC Berkeley researcher: Climate change hitting poor in the U.S. hardest

By Douglas Fischer, Daily Climate Editor

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Friday, May 29, 2009

Climate change is disproportionately affecting the poor and minorities in the United States - a "climate gap" that will grow in coming decades unless policymakers intervene, according to a University of California study.

Everyone, the researchers say, is already starting to feel the effects of a warming planet, via heat waves, increased air pollution, drought, or more intense storms. But the impacts - on health, economics, and overall quality of life - are far more acute on society's disadvantaged, the researchers found.

"Climate change does not affect everyone equally in the United States," said Rachel Morello-Frosch, associate professor at the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley and lead author of *The Climate Gap*. "People of color and the poor will be hurt the most - unless elected officials and other policymakers intervene."

Watching this unfold is akin to watching a movie where disparate and seemingly unrelated storylines converge to denouement that is "decidedly tragic," the researchers wrote.

For instance, the report finds that African Americans living in Los Angeles are almost twice as likely to die as other Los Angelenos during a heat wave. Segregated in the inner city, they're more susceptible to the "heat island" effect, where temperatures are magnified by concrete and asphalt. Yet they're less likely to have access to air conditioning or cars.

Similarly, Latinos make up 77 percent of California's agricultural workforce and will likely see economic hardship as climate change reworks the state's highest-value farm products. The dairy industry brings in \$3.8 billion of California's \$30 billion agriculture income; grapes account for \$3.2 billion. Yet climatic troubles are expected to decrease dairy production between 7 percent and 22 percent by century's end, while grapes will have trouble ripening, substantially reducing their value.

Other impacts, according to the researchers:

Households in the lowest income bracket spend twice the proportion of their income on electricity than those in the highest income bracket. Any policy that increases the cost of energy will hurt the poor the most.

California industries considered heavy emitters of greenhouse gases have a workforce that is 60 percent minority. Any climate plan that fails to transition those workers to new "green energy" jobs threatens to widen the racial economic divide.

Minorities and the poor already breathe dirtier air than other Americans and are more likely to lack health insurance. As higher temperatures hasten the chemical interactions that produce smog, they're going to feel the most impact.

The findings, the researchers say, underscore the need for policymakers to consider environmental justice when addressing climate. Ignoring the climate gap, they warn, could reinforce and amplify current and future socioeconomic and racial disparities.

"As America takes steps to prevent climate change, closing the climate gap must also be a top priority," said Manuel Pastor, a co-author and director of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California's Center for Sustainable Cities.

"If we protect those who are most vulnerable, we will protect all of us."

Current debate on Capitol Hill and in many statehouses favors programs that cap emissions and lower the cap over time, using permits to ensure compliance. But many of those programs propose to allocate all or some permits for free, depriving public coffers of revenue to help families living in poverty absorb the higher costs for food, water and electricity.

The researchers also found most emissions trading and fee programs are blind to the location of the source: It makes no difference to climate change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a dense urban neighborhood or an unpopulated rural area. But it can make a huge difference in public health, they noted, particularly as many urban greenhouse gas emitters also pollute the air and are located in poor neighborhoods.

"By choosing policies that shield against the very real dangers facing low-income neighborhoods and people of color," Pastor said, "we will insure that climate policy will be effective for all of us."

Douglas Fischer is editor of www.DailyClimate.org.

EPA: Miss. companies sold illegal Chinese engines

By Timothy R. Brown, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Thursday, May 28, 2009

Jackson, Miss. (AP) -- Three Mississippi companies are accused in a federal lawsuit of illegally importing and selling more than 78,000 small engines made in China.

The engines did not meet federal air pollution standards, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice said Thursday in a joint news release.

The lawsuit marks the government's first court action in an effort to enforce emissions standards for portable generators, water pumps and other small engines, the EPA said.

The lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., against PowerTrain Inc., Wood Sales Co. Inc., and Tool Mart Inc., all based in Golden, a northeast Mississippi town near the Alabama state line.

A search of the Mississippi Secretary of State's Web site found Oneal Wood of Golden listed as president of all three companies.

Wood did not immediately return a phone message left at his home.

"That's just the government for you," a Wood Sales spokesman told The Associated Press about the lawsuit. He did not give his name and immediately hung up the phone.

A phone listing could not be found for PowerTrain Inc. and a message left with a spokeswoman for Tool Mart was not immediately returned.

EPA spokesman Dave Ryan said the engines were sold across the country online and through telemarketing. EPA estimates the 78,000 engines have contributed to excess emissions of more than 150 tons of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides and more than 5,000 tons of carbon monoxide.

The complaint says the "non-road" engines were imported and sold by the companies from September 2002 through at least May 2007. The engines emit carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides, that contribute to smog.

The lawsuit seeks civil penalties and for the companies to remedy the violations.

EPA chief: US should take lead on clean energy

By Angela Charlton, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Thursday, May 28, 2009

PARIS, France (AP) -- The top U.S. environment official says it's time for the United States to shed its energy-wasting image and lead the world race for cleaner power sources instead.

After several years with a relatively low profile under President George W. Bush, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency "is back on the job," EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson told The Associated Press on Thursday during a trip to Paris.

What the EPA does domestically this year will be watched closely overseas. Nations worldwide are working toward a major meeting in Copenhagen in December aimed at producing a new global climate pact. The U.S. position on curbing its own pollution and helping poor countries adapt to global warming is seen as key to any new pact.

Jackson was in Paris for international talks on how rich governments can include global climate concerns in overall development aid.

She dismissed worries that economic downturn was cutting into aid commitments or investment in new energy resources. She said the United States should take the lead on clean energy technology, recession or no.

"We have to get in the race now — and win it," she said. "I don't expect a moving backwards because of recession."

At climate talks in Paris earlier this week, European environment ministers welcomed greater U.S. commitment to environmental issues under the Obama administration — but said it still wasn't aiming high enough in its targets for cutting U.S. emissions.

Jackson said a shift in the American mindset is only beginning.

Talking about energy efficiency and saying companies should pay to pollute — "that's a revolutionary message for our country," she said.

For a long time, she said, "People didn't even expect the EPA to show up" at events, much less set policies that could be seen as examples for the rest of the world.

"Now it seems like every day we're rolling back or reconsidering a Bush era policy on clean air," she said.

She said it was time for the United States to take a more active role in limiting chemical pollutants, after falling behind Europe in that domain.

The U.S. also has lessons to learn from countries such as the Netherlands, she said, after visiting its low-lying, flood-prone lands to study ways cities like her native New Orleans can better manage water.

The mineral is a key part of a Santa Monica firm's proposed alternative energy project in the desert. The technology was proved workable in a pilot project near Barstow in the 1990s.

A solar plant that's worth its salt

By Peter Pae, staff writer

L.A. Times, Friday, May 29, 2009

Just past Barstow on Interstate 15, Las Vegas-bound travelers can eye a tower resembling a lighthouse rising out of the desert encircled by more than 1,800 mirrors the size of billboards.

The complex is often mistaken for a science fiction movie set, but it is actually a power plant that once used molten salt, water and the sun's heat to produce electricity.

Now a storied rocket maker in Canoga Park and a renewable energy company in Santa Monica are hoping to take what they learned at the long-closed desert facility to build a much larger plant that could power 100,000 homes -- all from a mix of sun, salt and rocket science once believed too futuristic to succeed.

The Santa Monica-based energy firm SolarReserve has licensed the technology, developed by engineers at Rocketdyne.

"Molten salt is the secret sauce," said SolarReserve President Terry Murphy.

It is one of at least 80 large solar projects on the drawing board in California, but the molten salt technology is considered one of the more unusual and -- to some energy analysts -- one of the more promising in the latest rush to build clean electricity generation.

"It's actually something we'll likely see in a few years," said Nathaniel Bullard, a solar energy analyst with New Energy Finance in Alexandria, Va. "It's moving along in a nice way, and they have good capital behind it."

SolarReserve, which is financing and marketing the project, said it is working on agreements with several utilities to buy electricity generated from the plant. It hopes to have several announcements in a few months that could help jump-start construction of the first plant, which

would probably be on private land in the Southwest, Murphy said.

The company last fall secured \$140 million in venture capital.

The plant could begin operating by early 2013. It would use an array of 15,000 heliostats, or large tilting mirrors about 25 feet wide, to direct sunlight to a solar collector atop a 600-foot-tall tower -- somewhat like a lighthouse in reverse.

The mirrors would heat up molten salt flowing through the receiver to more than 1,000 degrees, hot enough to turn water into powerful steam in a device called a heat exchanger. The steam, like that coming out of a nozzle of a boiling tea kettle, would drive a turbine to create electricity.

The molten salt, once cooled, would then be pumped back through the solar collector to start the process all over again. "The plant has no emissions, and if you have a leak or something, you can just shovel it up and take it home with you to use for your barbecue," Murphy said.

The molten salt can be stored for days if not weeks and then used to generate electricity at any time. Many other solar technologies work only when the sun is shining. Storing electricity in a battery works for cars and homes but not on a massive scale that would be needed to power thousands of homes.

"You can put that into a storage tank that would look much like a tank at an oil refinery," Murphy said. "We can store that energy almost indefinitely."

While there are high hopes for the technology, some environmentalists have criticized solar-thermal plants for requiring vast tracts of land as well as precious water for generating steam and for cooling the turbines.

The array of the mirrored heliostats for the SolarReserve plant would take up about two square miles. Transmission lines would also be needed to transport the power where it's needed. With dozens of solar, wind and geothermal projects planned for California's deserts, some fear that this unique habitat will be destroyed.

But SolarReserve officials said that the plant would use one-tenth the amount of water required by a conventional plant and that mirrors will be "benign" to the environment.

The technology, with the exception of using salt, is similar to those that Rocketdyne engineers developed for the nation's more notable space programs.

At the sprawling Canoga Park facility, the engineers who came up with the SolarReserve technology also developed the power system for the International Space Station, the rocket engine for the space shuttle, and the propulsion system for the Apollo lunar module.

Rocketdyne's aerospace heritage stretches back to the earliest years of rocket development, when it was founded shortly after World War II to study German V-2 rocket technology. After becoming part of Rockwell International in the late 1960s, the company was sold to Boeing Co. in 1996.

United Technologies bought the Rocketdyne unit from Boeing for \$700 million in 2005 primarily for its expertise in rocket engines. It didn't know about the solar project until after the acquisition.

Now Rocketdyne believes it can generate \$1 billion in revenue from making the components for the plant, including the tower that would collect the sun's concentrated heat from thousands of mirrors.

The solar collector in many ways is similar to the inside of a rocket nozzle that has to withstand

thousands of degrees of heat, said Rick Howerton, Rocketdyne's program manager for concentrated solar power who previously worked on the space station program.

The solar-thermal technology was proved workable more than a decade ago at the Barstow pilot plant. But the complex was shuttered in 1999 when the cost of natural gas fell to one-tenth of what it is today.

Also there wasn't as much concern for the environment then, Murphy said. "It was ahead of its time. The market hadn't caught up to it."

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 29, 2009:](#)

Outside interests

Editor: The Sun-Star's May 2 editorial about the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center is on the right track.

"(Wal-Mart) must provide mitigation for those concerns that warrant and need solutions," wrote the editorial board.

Unfortunately, the editorial board is worried about "opposition ... fueled by out-of-town, anti-Wal-Mart interests."

Many southeast Merced residents remain opposed to the project, and many more across Merced have expressed concern.

The real concerns about the proposed distribution center that truly "warrant and need solutions" have been made very clear by residents over the past three years. They include local hiring, air quality, traffic, health, and accountability to those of us who will be most affected by the project.

Who will address these concerns? We know it won't be Wal-Mart.

Take a look at the comments submitted by Wal-Mart's law firm on the draft environmental impact statement. The comments weren't about how to strengthen their much-publicized environmental efforts or guarantee benefits to the community, but how to get out of any commitment to their fair share of mitigation.

They argued that even the inadequate measures proposed in the draft EIS are somehow not "feasible" for the largest corporation in the world.

The project's real impacts on our neighborhood should decide mitigation, not Wal-Mart's ideas of "feasibility."

Since Wal-Mart won't do it voluntarily, we need our City Council to negotiate adequate conditions to the project that guarantee us jobs and a decent quality of life. Decades of poor planning and now Wal-Mart have put Merced residents in a painful position: trade the health and well-being of our families and the future of our neighborhood for the hope of some jobs.

With some political backbone, we don't have to choose one over the other; we can have both.

Joel Knox, chairman, Golden Valley Neighborhood Association, Merced