

**EPA to investigate cluster of birth defects in Kettleman City, Calif.
Some residents blame a nearby toxic waste dump for health problems. U.S. says the study shows the Obama administration's commitment to environmental justice.**

By Louis Sahagun, staff writer

L.A. Times, Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday that it plans to investigate a cluster of facial birth defects and other health issues among migrant farm workers in the impoverished California enclave of Kettleman City as part of the Obama administration's pledge to shift the agency's attention toward issues of environmental justice.

Residents suspect the facial deformities are linked to a nearby toxic waste dump. The dump is set to be expanded to accommodate waste from large population centers, including Los Angeles, and residents have filed a lawsuit against the Kings County Board of Supervisors challenging its approval of the expansion.

In an interview, Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for the EPA's Pacific Southwest region, said the case meets the standards of the Obama administration's decision this month to make environmental justice a priority.

"Kettleman City is a very vulnerable community at the confluence of large agriculture and pesticide use, heavy truck traffic, a chemical waste facility accepting PCBs and a proposed 600-megawatt power plant," Blumenfeld said. "This is also a community trying to be represented in a way to get its voice heard.

"Our job is to make sure that we look under every rock and try to see if there is a causal relationship between all these activities and the health impacts on the ground," he said. "We need to provide real information, based on science, not just from the company proposing a project."

When informed of the EPA's announcement, Kings County assistant administrator Deb West said: "Wow. Wow. Jeepers. I need to find out more about this."

The EPA's announcement was welcomed by Chemical Waste Management, which owns the toxic waste facility about 3 miles southwest of Kettleman City, according to company spokeswoman Kit Cole. "We think our site is very protective of human health and the environment," she said. "But we also recognize that the families of Kettleman City need and deserve answers."

Blumenfeld cautioned against unrealistic expectations of the federal government's study of Kettleman City, a town of about 1,500 mostly Spanish-speaking residents located just off Interstate 5 about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. "We may not find a smoking gun when we do our health analysis, or pinpoint the exact causal relationship between the environment and harm," he said. "But that should not hinder our ability to act."

Blumenfeld also vowed to use the EPA's influence to "strongly recommend" that state and local regulatory authorities "step up to the plate" and share some of the expenses for environmental reviews at Kettleman City and at other "environmental hot spots."

Blumenfeld was expected to address a protest today on the steps of the EPA's San Francisco headquarters, which will include hundreds of Kettleman City residents.

"We believe the new EPA leadership, with support from Washington, can start fulfilling the EPA's mandate to protect health and environmental justice," said Bradley Angel, a spokesman for Greenaction, which is leading the protest. "But we are not taking a wait-and-see attitude toward this situation -- people are getting sick and dying in these communities."

Chemical Waste Management has made some concessions to residents. In September, the

company voluntarily decided not to accept solid or hazardous wastes from the Santa Susana Field Laboratory in Ventura County because of concerns about possible radioactive content in the materials.

The company continues to accept carcinogenic PCBs from old transformers under a special permit that has been under EPA review since it expired about 12 years ago. The company blamed the EPA for delays in the approval process.

"The EPA issued some kind of permit extension that allows us to legally continue to take those materials," said Cole, the company spokeswoman. "We continue to operate in a legal manner while the new permit has been in progress."

Kings County medical authorities were doubtful that the EPA would pinpoint the cause or causes of at least five cleft palate or cleft lip cases among 20 live births in a 14-month period beginning September 2007. That amounts to about 250 cases per 1,000 live births, far above the national average of about 1 per 1,000, calculated by the National Institutes of Health.

"Each of these cases is different, and it has been my contention from the beginning that there is no science that will answer the question of why those five events happened within that time period," Kings County health officer Michael MacLean said. "No matter what resources you put into it, the problem is that the number of cases is so small."

County officials said the California Department of Public Health recently turned down their request to investigate the cases.

FOR THE RECORD:

A spokesman for the California Department of Public Health on Tuesday night disputed that characterization. He said the agency is actively looking into the concerns of the community and will be making its findings known in the coming weeks.

Blumenfeld said the EPA's intervention in Kettleman City underlines the agency's commitment to, as he put it, "revolutionize the way we do business" by channeling resources into "often forgotten" areas, including urban communities, the U.S.-Mexico border and tribal nations.

MID electricity goes up 7%

Average residential bill rises \$9; surcharges might be next

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, January 27, 2010

Electricity customers of the Modesto Irrigation District will get a 7 percent increase next week, less than the 11 percent hike that was on the table.

But the district board's 3-2 vote in favor of the increase Tuesday left a couple of issues unsettled.

First, the board will consider creating monthly surcharges that would go up or down to reflect certain costs, such as wholesale power from elsewhere.

Second, the MID could have to pull out of a partnership planning a power plant fueled by natural gas in Lodi. The district had counted on the full 11 percent increase to stay in that project.

The 7 percent increase, effective Monday, will raise the average residential bill from \$130 to \$139 a month.

"I know that it's difficult for all of us," Director Tom Van Groningen said. "No one likes to increase rates."

He and Directors Paul Warda and Glen Wild voted for the increase.

Director Cecil Hensley said the increase is too much in a time of high unemployment. Director John Kidd favored delaying the vote so the board could further discuss the district's finances.

Several ratepayers said the district should trim its spending. Dave Thomas, president of the Stanislaus Taxpayers Association, said MID employees make an average of \$125,160 in salary and benefits a year.

"The ratepayer is supporting \$125,000 and change for the average MID employee," Thomas said. "That's a good gig."

District spokeswoman Melissa Williams said the pay and benefits "are in line with the marketplace of the electric utility business."

District officials said they have reduced the MID work force by 10 percent, to 422 employees, by leaving nearly 50 vacancies unfilled.

They said they have trimmed small capital projects but need to boost reserves so they can issue bonds for major projects at low interest rates.

This includes the 255-megawatt Lodi plant. The MID has a one-quarter share and has contributed about \$10 million for planning and design.

MID General Manager Allen Short said the 7 percent rate increase will leave the district short of the reserves that bond-rating agencies demand. High reserves are considered a sign of financial health and usually translate into low interest rates on bond issues.

Short said the district's financial adviser is recommending the MID pull out of the Lodi project. He said the \$10 million spent so far could be recouped if another agency takes the MID's place.

The Lodi plant is intended to help meet peak summer demand, which can approach 700 megawatts. Short said it also would fill in when wind and solar plants are not producing.

The MID will continue with construction of a 50-megawatt addition to its gas-fired power plant on Woodland Avenue.

The district is expanding its generation capacity to reduce reliance on power purchases from outside parties, which can be especially costly on hot summer days.

But these purchases will still be needed to some degree, and that's one reason the board is considering surcharges on customer bills.

When costs rise, as happened with gas in 2008, the surcharges would go up. When costs drop, customers would get a break.

Surcharges could rise and fall with the availability of cheap hydroelectric power. And they could cover the higher cost of wind and solar power compared with conventional sources, or the cost of rules aimed at [curbing climate-changing emissions from fossil fuels](#).

The Turlock Irrigation District enacted a surcharge tied to wholesale power costs in 2005.

The MID board plans to discuss surcharges, including possible amounts and purposes, at an informal workshop before voting at another meeting.

This extra income would not come in time to keep the MID in the Lodi project, which is moving quickly, district officials said.

Kurt Danziger, a customer in Escalon, urged the district to forgo that project.

"We have to live within our means," he said. "That's going to mean some hard choices."

California Northern Railroad converts to green locomotives **New Locomotives cut emissions, fuel**

By Mark Glover

Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, January 27, 2010

Historically, massive locomotives have been the antithesis of quiet, environmentally friendly machines.

But the Davis-based California Northern Railroad Co. has converted its locomotive fleet to environmentally friendly GenSet N-ViroMotive locomotives, which have lower emissions, emit less noise and are more fuel-efficient than standard locomotives.

"Now that all five of California Northern Railroad's locomotives are ultra-low emitting and more fuel-efficient, having an average fuel savings of 20 to 30 percent, we are able to further reduce our carbon footprint while continuing to provide customers with efficient means of freight transportation," said California Northern General Manager Don Seil.

California Northern is a short-line railroad operating about 260 miles of track in segments of the Sacramento, San Joaquin and Napa valleys. The railroad transports agricultural, food and construction products, interchanging with Union Pacific lines at three sites and facilitating coast-to-coast transport of goods.

The local railroad's conversion to green locomotives is a California story from top to bottom.

The N-ViroMotive locomotive is produced by the Illinois-based National Railway Equipment Co. The company said locomotive design did not change much from the 1950s to 2000, but National Railway developed the N-ViroMotive between 2001 and 2005 in response to stringent California Air Resources Board regulations.

The first N-ViroMotive engine went into service in 2007.

National Railway said it replaced the old "single engine prime mover" locomotive design with three 700-horsepower generator sets coordinated by a computer and electronic controls.

The company claims its N-ViroMotives exceed the capacity of prime movers, but with reductions of up to 85 to 90 percent in emissions (nitrogen oxides and particulates), 85 percent of noise, 40 to 60 percent in fuel consumption and 35 to 50 percent of maintenance costs.

The firm said its locomotives are certified by the Environmental Protection Agency and meet its three-tier emissions standard.

California Northern was able to purchase four N-ViroMotives through California's Carl Moyer Memorial Air Quality Standards Attainment Program, which covered 85 percent of the cost.

The Moyer program offers grants to owners of heavy-duty diesel-powered vehicles and equipment to reduce air pollution. It's a partnership between the air board and local air districts statewide, such as the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

The local air district provided funds for California Northern's locomotives, valued at \$1.6 million each. California Northern has said it will retire its old locomotives.

"The public funding provided through the grant program made it financially feasible for California Northern to completely convert to energy-efficient locomotives in less than eight months," said the railroad's Seil.

Jim Wurtz, National Railway's vice president, said the state air board was "very instrumental in helping facilitate" the development of N-ViroMotives. "

Wurtz said there are now more than 300 N-ViroMotives operating around the globe.

California Northern is under the ownership umbrella of Jacksonville, Fla.-based RailAmerica Inc., which has a portfolio of 40 railroads operating on nearly 7,500 miles of track in 27 states and three Canadian provinces.

Irvine spending \$19 per rider on city-run bus system

By Sean Emery

O.C. Register, Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010

IRVINE – The city spent nearly \$19 per rider to keep the Irvine-run iShuttle on the road during the summer and fall months, as local leaders have scaled back the bus service to focus solely on commuter traffic.

Envisioned as an environmentally friendly way to reduce vehicular traffic and test the waters for a more comprehensive Irvine-wide transportation system, the iShuttle has yet to draw a following outside the commuter crowd. It connects the Tustin Train Station and John Wayne Airport via a pair of routes winding through the Irvine Business Complex, the city's largest employment area and urban core.

An estimated 31,643 riders boarded the iShuttle buses between July and November, according to a recently released city report, raising about \$15,400 from fares, and requiring about \$615,500 to run the system. That doesn't mean that 31,000 separate people rode the buses, however, since nearby employees may ride on a regular basis, or even multiple times a day.

While the overall cost of the iShuttle has dropped – from \$818,000 during the same period in 2008 – the amount the city has spent per rider has risen nearly \$2, from about \$17-a-rider a year prior.

First launched as a free service in early 2008, iShuttle ridership peaked at 12,500 riders in July of that year as gasoline prices soared above \$4 per gallon.

Ridership soon began to drop, however, and by September of 2008 city officials began cutting back, first doing away with weekend service.

City officials in March 2009 began charging a \$1 fare, except for Metrolink commuters, who still ride the iShuttle for free. At the same time, city leaders cut the number of mid-day routes by half.

Finally, in late April 2009, city leaders decided to do away with the remaining mid-day routes to focus solely on commuters.

Despite the cutbacks, the council majority of Mayor Sukhee Kang and council members Beth Krom and Larry Agran described the iShuttle as an important learning experience, one that city staffers say had helped take thousands of cars off the road. They also agreed to earmark \$1.8 million toward the shuttle line for the 2008-09 fiscal year.

Not everyone was convinced, with resident Eric Hall posting a series of YouTube video's spotlighting empty iShuttle buses, and resident Francine Verbarg emerging as a vocal critic of the city's decision to continue subsidizing the bus service, particularly as a dwindling economy forced a dip into city reserves to balance this year's budget.

City officials in a draft business plan are suggesting that the iShuttle receive about \$1.7 million in funding during the upcoming fiscal year, although the council has yet to weigh in. That cost would be off-set by \$850,000 in air quality management district and Irvine Business Complex developer fees, city officials said.

Irvine officials are also continuing to reach out to Irvine Business Complex tenants, who include 4,500 businesses and 82,000 workers, to convince them to hop on the bus, Irvine spokesman Craig Reem said.

Irvine leaders eventually expect the iShuttle to play an integral part of an expanded transportation system, with a \$250 million, 30-year transit study envisioning four new routes from the Tustin Train Station to residential neighborhoods, as well as new routes from the Irvine Train Station to the Irvine Spectrum and the Great Park.

Texas agency releasing gas-drilling air tests

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010

FORT WORTH, Texas—Texas environmental regulators are set to release results of widespread air testing on the Barnett Shale.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality plans to publish the results Thursday afternoon in Fort Worth.

Fears of pollution over the 5,000-square-mile North Texas gas field have been heightened after regulators found elevated amounts of the cancerous chemical benzene near the small town of Dish. Other towns on the shale—which lies beneath Dallas, Fort Worth and about 20 counties—also have expressed concerns about gas-related emissions.

The head of the TCEQ's toxicology department and other top officials will announce the findings.

Money will keep Rail Runner weekend trains

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010

SANTA FE, N.M.—New Mexico's Rail Runner Express will continue to run on the weekends.

Gov. Bill Richardson on Monday announced a plan to move federal money from one fund to another to keep the commuter train running between Belen and Santa Fe on Saturdays and Sundays.

New Mexico had expected to cut weekend service by Feb. 15 because of a \$750,000 budget shortfall, which officials blamed on the national recession.

Under the plan, the state Department of Transportation will shift \$750,000 in federal money from a flexible surface transportation fund to an air quality fund.

Transportation Secretary L.J. Giron says that will keep Rail Runner weekend service intact.

Officials also are considering two other actions—a fare increase and a reduced Saturday schedule.

Iceland Leads Environmental Index as U.S. Falls

By Elisabeth Rosenthal, staff writer

N.Y. Times, Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010

A new ranking of the world's nations by environmental performance puts some of the globe's largest economies far down the list, with the United States sinking to 61st and China to 121st.

In the previous version of the Environmental Performance Index, compiled every two years by Yale and Columbia University researchers, the United States ranked 39th, and China 105th.

The top performer this year is Iceland, which gets virtually all of its power from renewable sources — hydropower and geothermal energy. It was joined in the top tier by a cluster of European countries known for their green efforts, including Switzerland, Sweden, Norway and Finland.

“Countries that take seriously the environment as a policy challenge do improve, and those that don't deteriorate,” said Daniel C. Esty, director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, who oversees the index project. “Both the U.S. and China are suffering because they're industrial and haven't been paying much attention to environmental policy.”

The index, viewable online at epi.yale.edu, assigns each country a cumulative score based on its performance in areas that include environmental health, preservation of habitat and reductions in greenhouse gases, air pollution and waste.

Costa Rica and Colombia remained in the top ranks. Costa Rica has made important efforts to conserve its rain forest, and Colombia has led the way in shifting to fuel-efficient mass transit.

Yet the new rankings, which are to be presented Thursday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, cannot be precisely compared with the 2008 index, researchers said. The scientists have shifted their methodology slightly as they seek to zero in on the fairest way to quantify the broad and nebulous area of environmental performance.

Because most of the data are from 2007 and 2008, the index does not fully reflect new efforts by the Obama administration or China's government to improve environmental performance.

It also does not fully capture the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in many countries resulting from the current recession.

One reason that Iceland scored so well, beyond its energy policies, may be its economic tailspin, one of Western Europe's worst, which began with a banking crisis in 2008, Mr. Esty said.

Another crucial caveat is that the researchers rely heavily on data that the countries themselves report to international groups like the United Nations and the World Bank. The researchers said that countries like Cuba, in ninth place, are thought to score artificially high because the data is either collected poorly or massaged to signal progress.

The lack of reliable environmental data is a major challenge, the researchers said. "There are so many countries that are not collecting even minimal data sets," said Christine Kim, a researcher at Yale who is program manager of the project. "The state of the data hasn't gotten much better in the last 10 years. We have better data on baseball than we do on climate change."

Developing a system to quantify and track environmental performance would be essential to the success of any global climate treaty requiring industrialized countries to cut their emissions and emerging economies to reduce their emissions growth. Negotiators from around the globe failed to produce a binding agreement in Copenhagen last month, but plan to meet again in Mexico City in late November.

Discord over how to measure, report and verify climate data was one factor that stymied progress in Copenhagen. The Chinese, for example, use their own scales to measure factors like air pollution, and it is hard to translate their readings into accepted Western scientific scales.

Because a country's final ranking is based on so many environmental factors, the devil is often in the details.

Extenuating circumstances may distort the data.

Countries like Slovakia, Serbia and Montenegro performed well in part because severe economic slumps in these places shut down polluting factories, Mr. Esty said.

Some countries that score extraordinarily well in one area may not perform well over all because of unusually lackluster performances in another. The United States scores well in forestry and the provision of safe drinking water, but its ranking is low because of poor scores in areas like heat-trapping emissions and urban air pollutants like sulfur dioxide.

Denmark, known as an environmental trailblazer, comes in at a surprising 32nd place. Although it has pioneered alternative energy sources like wind power, it still uses a fair amount of fossil fuel and has poor scores in protecting its fisheries.

"This data requires people to dig in and see why they are where they are," Ms. Kim said. "For every country there are strengths and weaknesses."

Glass maker to shell out \$114M in settlement

By Business Journal Staff

Business Journal Friday, Jan. 22, 2010

A glass manufacturer has been slapped with a \$2.25 million civil penalty over alleged violations of the federal Clean Air Act that include a plant in Madera

Saint-Gobain Containers, Inc. must also spend \$112 million through 2018 to reduce pollution emissions by about 6,000 tons each year at 15 of its plants in 13 states, including its Madera furnace plant, which is one of Madera County's largest private employers.

The Madera plant produces glass wine bottles.

Saint-Gobain Containers agreed to take these steps as part of a settlement agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA alleges Saint-Gobain Containers made modifications to "some or all" of its furnaces resulting in increased emissions without first obtaining pre-construction permits and installing pollution control equipment.

According to the EPA, the Madera plant must meet new limits for emissions of nitrogen oxides. Implementation of sulfur dioxide and particulate matter controls at the Madera plant took place after a 2005 settlement of an enforcement action.

The global company issued a statement to the media: "While Saint-Gobain Containers continues to deny the alleged Clean Air Act violations, we are nonetheless pleased to work with the EPA as the first glass container company to come to agreement under their glass enforcement initiative," the statement reads."

The \$2.25 million civil penalty will be split up with \$1.15 million paid to the U.S. Treasury and \$1.1 million divided among the twelve state and local regulatory agencies that joined the settlement, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the dispute of Milan because of the high levels of air pollution. There is a request for vehicles to stop circulating for three consecutive days and that they be limited to a speed of 80 kilometers per hour in order to reduce PM10 levels. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Polémica en Milán por el alto nivel de contaminación del aire

El Periodico de Mexico, January 27, 2010

MILÁN, (AFP) - El nivel de contaminación del aire en Milán (norte), que supera desde hace catorce días el límite fijado, suscita este martes fuertes polémicas y preocupaciones en la capital financiera de Italia.

Pese a que la alcaldesa de Milán, Letizia Moratti, sostiene que el nivel ha disminuido en los últimos años, el partido populista Liga Norte exige que se limite la circulación de vehículos según el número de la placa durante todo el mes de febrero.

La oposición de izquierda pide igualmente que se impida por tres días consecutivos la circulación en la ciudad y se limite la velocidad a 80 kilómetros por hora en las autopistas para luchar contra el elevado nivel de partículas PM10.

Debido a la fuerte contaminación que se registra en la ciudad fue abierta una investigación judicial contra el alcalde de Milán, el presidente de la región y de la provincia tras una denuncia de las asociaciones de consumidores.

"El aire de la ciudad ahora es mejor que en el pasado", declaró Moratti a la prensa, quien recordó que la alcaldía estableció en 2007 un peaje para los automóviles que más contaminan y que quieren entrar en el centro de la ciudad.

El problema de la contaminación del aire en Milán se debe en buena parte a razones geográficas y también a las políticas públicas ineficaces, según Damiano Di Simine, presidente de la organización ecologista Legambiente de Lombardía, la región de Milán.

Lombardía es una de las "zonas de Europa menos ventiladas" y más pobladas e industrializadas, lo que "favorece" la contaminación, explicó Simine a la AFP.

"Nuestro modelo de vida se basa en el automóvil. Tenemos más coches que un residente en Londres", lamentó el ecologista que pide mayores inversiones para mejorar el transporte público y que se extienda el peaje para entrar al centro de la ciudad a todos los vehículos.

Milán será la sede de la Exposición Universal de 2015, cuyo tema será "Alimentar el planeta, la energía para la vida", por lo que actualmente es muy sensible a todo lo relacionado con asuntos de defensa del medio ambiente.