

Sierra wildfire may send smoke to the Valley

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Valley air officials are cautioning residents in mountain and foothill communities of Fresno and Tulare counties to avoid prolonged exposure to smoke from the Sheep wildfire in the southern Sierra Nevada.

Shifting wind patterns over the next few days may extend smoke impacts to other parts of the Valley, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The Sheep fire in Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Forest has burned more than 2,000 acres since it was started by a lightning strike in mid-July.

Smoke from wildfires contains dangerous soot and ash particles, which can trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis.

If you smell smoke, you should limit your outdoor activities.

People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice during unhealthy air episodes. Older adults and children should avoid extended exposure and strenuous outdoor activities.

For air-quality information, call (800) 766-4463 or go to www.valleyair.org.

Porterville City Councilmen question railroad plan

By Jenna Chandler

Porterville Recorder, Friday, Sept. 3, 2010

TULARE — A couple of Porterville City Councilmen are skeptical of the results of the first draft business plan meant to justify the revival of railroad in Tulare County.

The plan, developed by Railroad Industries Inc., was unveiled Wednesday during a special meeting of the Tulare County Association of Governments to give members an indication of the line's marketability, as well as the current condition of the tracks and potential funding options to either purchase segments of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, or the right of way, essentially the land beneath the tracks.

"Based on volume today and using per car revenue, this railroad actually makes money," Gary Hunter, the chairman and CEO of Railroad Industries Inc., said. "There's a lot of potential out here, but a lot of things would have to happen."

Given the information Hunter provided, most of it promotional of the light rail, TCAG members said they will chug forward in their attempt to salvage the East Side Rail, which the draft business plan states will cost between \$13 million and \$39 million to rehabilitate. It's the costs associated with bringing the tracks up to par, the ability to create jobs and turn a profit that worry at least two members of the Porterville City Council.

"This consultant was hired to make the project look as possible as possible," Vice Mayor Cameron Hamilton said. "I got a real problem believing that with four users now that there is a built in profit of 15.7 percent, according to [the plan's] figures."

Greg Shelton put it more directly: "It's a waste of money."

The current owners of the railroad, which stretches 39 miles from Jovista north to Dinuba, also apparently haven't found the line to be profitable. According to spokesman Dave Siegel, San Joaquin Valley Railroad acquired the railroad 19 years ago from Southern Pacific, which it said didn't maintain the tracks, and as a result had few customers.

"Years of marketing efforts failed to turn this segment around," he said.

But Hunter said his consulting firm believes that with a strong marketing drive, the line could prosper. The firm has reportedly surveyed 13 potential shippers who said they would use it if the rail were more reliable.

"We don't want to be shortsighted. This county here, Tulare, has a lot of growth potential. The commodities that move here are very conducive to rail," he said.

According to Hunter, train cars can only travel as fast as 10 mph and are subject to frequent stops and derailments as it has “suffered over \$13 million in deferred maintenance.”

“The general consensus among shippers and TCAG is that they believe rail service was intentionally deteriorated by SJVR,” he said. “Rail transportation helps the county, the state, the country” in terms of fuel costs, air pollutants and highway safety, he said. “You’d be surprised how big the difference is when you talk about rail versus truck transportation.”

If the line were to be repaired and someday connected to major railroads such as Union Pacific along Highway 99 and then to ports in Northern California, rail enthusiasts like First District Supervisor Allen Ishida believe short-haul railroad could be a major component of economic development in Tulare County, and the Central Valley.

But it’s the poor conditions of the track and the infrequent use that reportedly compelled SJVR to file for abandonment — approved by the State Transportation Board last year.

Despite negotiations with TCAG to enter into a private-public partnership to revive the line, SJVR is set to remove the tracks by this winter. And, as a result, TCAG has pulled out of the 16-month long negotiations.

“As railroaders, abandonment and removal of track is the last thing we want. It is pursued only when the traffic on a line cannot support continued investment and the costs of normal service,” Siegel said.

TCAG must now look to other funding alternatives, which Hunter said could include partnering with Fresno County — where the line continues to the north— securing money from the [Air District](#) — which may find benefits in getting trucks off the roads thereby reducing air pollution — or lobbying lawmakers to appropriate state or federal dollars.

Additionally, TCAG has appropriated \$3 million in voter-approved Measure R money to buy either the right of way or the actual fixtures, such as the railroad ties, ballast, tracks and signals.

Still, Shelton and Hamilton — and they’re undoubtedly not alone — question whether short haul rail can be successful in Tulare County without the rest of the Central Valley, or even on the state, on board. Although the state has big plans for high speed rail, there is no such scheme for light rail across California and thus no financial incentives such as grants.

Hamilton said he supports the purchase of the right of way, but not the tracks. He believes preserving the corridor would be a good investment in the future, when the rest of the Valley may be ready to jump aboard.

“I’m a proponent of keeping the right of way, but I’m not a proponent of keeping the line operating,” he said. “Right now, the business plan is strictly a draft. When there is an actual business plan attached to it and it shows what they’re trying to do, we can figure out if it actually makes sense.”

Hydrogen power plant passes first part of assessment

Taft Midway Driller, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2010

Taft, Calif. — The California Energy Commission released the first part of the preliminary staff assessment (PSA) for the proposed 250-megawatt Hydrogen Energy California (HECA) project near Tupman in western Kern County.

In Part One of the PSA released Tuesday, Commission staff concluded that with the implementation of recommended mitigation measures described in the proposed conditions of certification, the proposed project will not have significant adverse direct, indirect or cumulative environmental impacts in the areas of air quality, efficiency, facility design, geology and paleontology, hazardous materials, noise and vibration, public health, reliability, socioeconomic resources, traffic & transportation, transmission line safety nuisance, transmission safety engineering, worker safety and fire protection.

The areas of biological resources, cultural resources, soil and water resources, visual resources, land use, and waste management will be addressed in Part Two of the PSA, which is scheduled for release in early October.

Part Two will also include an analysis of the project alternatives and the greenhouse gas emissions appendix, which will include an analysis of the carbon dioxide enhanced oil recovery and the sequestration proposal.

The PSA serves as the staff's initial evaluation of the environmental, engineering, and public health and safety impacts of the proposed facility. There will be a public comment period and a community workshop on the document. After both parts of the PSA are issued, a final staff assessment (FSA) will be released. The FSA will serve as staff's testimony at the evidentiary hearings by the committee of two commissioners reviewing the proposed project.

Why: The HECA project, proposed by Hydrogen Energy International, LLC, is an integrated gasification combined cycle power plant that will capture and permanently store 90 percent of its carbon dioxide emissions.

The proposed facility will be located on a 473-acre site currently used for agricultural purposes. The project site is located approximately 15 miles north of Taft near the town of Tupman. The site is near a hydrocarbon-producing Elk Hills Field.

The HECA project will gasify petroleum coke, or blends of petroleum coke and coal as needed, to produce hydrogen to fuel a combustion turbine operating in combined cycle mode. The hydrogen is used to generate electricity. The carbon dioxide is compressed and piped to the neighboring oil reservoirs and injected for storage to enhance oil recovery.

If licensed by the Energy Commission, the facility would begin construction in December 2011 with commercial operation starting September 2015.