

Group receives grant to study Frazier Mountain-area air

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 15, 2010

The environmental group TriCounty Watchdogs recently received a \$25,000 grant to independently monitor air quality in the Frazier Mountain communities.

"This is a big deal for our local group," said Mar Preston, TriCounty Watchdogs vice president. "Our plan is to create our own 'bucket brigade' and provide valuable air quality information to our mountain communities residents."

Watchdogs members have recruited an international environmental justice nonprofit to train them in air testing.

Watchdogs wants to understand the region's air pollution better. Data is already available on smog and particulate matter (PM 2.5) in the Frazier Mountain region. PM 2.5 consists of very small unseen particles that hang in the air and make their way into respiratory systems.

Watchdogs members are especially interested in the potential exposure of diesel soot to students who attend schools along Interstate 5.

The Watchdogs will host a public meeting 7 p.m. Friday at Cuddy Hall, 335 Lakewood Drive in Lake of the Woods, to introduce people to the project.

The next day at the same place there will be training for community members to learn different ways they can participate in the air monitoring project.

For more information call 242-8529 or go to www.cuddyvalley.org/tcwdogs.

Visions of green work in valley

Study: Energy projects could bring 100K jobs

By Marijke Rowland

Modesto Bee, Friday, October 15, 2010

A study by a University of California at Merced professor suggests that renewable energy projects could bring more than 100,000 jobs to the San Joaquin Valley over the next decade.

The study by economics Professor Shawn Kantor looked at large and small utility projects that are under way, have been approved or are in the regulatory pipeline. Positions created by the proposed California High-Speed Rail Authority plan are included. The jobs would be a mix of construction and production work.

"There is a lot of activity going on right now in renewable energy and there is a lot of activity planned," Kantor said. "This could have a big impact on our economy. This could serve as a job creator in our region. We have a lot of (clean energy) resources in the Central Valley, and we can be a significant player in this sector."

The study, commissioned by the California Business Alliance for a Green Economy, looks at ongoing, approved and pending projects stretching from Stockton to Bakersfield. None of the renewable energy utility projects is in Stanislaus County.

The majority of the potential jobs are in construction of renewable energy utility projects. About 24,000 of the estimated 103,510 total jobs created would be from the high-speed rail plan.

While the numbers are encouraging, Bill Bassitt, chief executive officer of the Stanislaus Economic Development and Workforce Alliance, said the reality may turn out differently.

"It's always good having someone put pen to paper and make projections, but I don't get too excited until I see the rubber meet the road," he said. "I don't want people to be misinformed or deceived about the number of permanent jobs associated with renewable energy. It's not the panacea."

The vast majority of the jobs created would come from construction. About 4,500 of the total positions would be long-term production jobs.

Still, for an area that has seen its unemployment rate skyrocket into the high teens and in some counties past 20 percent during the recession, any kind of optimistic jobs outlook is welcome.

Stanislaus County's unemployment rate was at 16.4 percent for August and hit a 17-year high of 19.2 percent in March. The mortgage crisis and housing collapse ravaged the area's construction industry.

Susan Frank, coordinator for the California Business Alliance for a Green Economy that commissioned the study, said the valley's geographic and demographic figures make it a prime location for renewable energy growth.

"The valley has been hardest hit by the economic downturn," she said. "So there are well-trained workers poised and ready to take on this work that, along with the sunny weather and land opportunities, make the valley perfect for this kind of clean energy job growth."

The utility projects largely are private companies producing solar, wind and biomass energy.

The majority of the projects are in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. Most of the wind projects are near the Tehachapi Mountains. San Joaquin County has one biomass plant and Merced County has a smaller biomass plant included in the report.

Kantor said Stanislaus County could position itself as a solar or biomass destination.

On Tuesday, the Modesto Irrigation District rejected a proposal for a biomass plant in the Beard Industrial District. Designed to burn wood chips from orchards, the MID pulled out of the project after hearing public concerns about its impact on air quality and the cost of buying power from the plant.

Kantor also said that while booms in the information technology and biotech industries largely passed by the San Joaquin Valley, the area has kept pace with the rest of the state in renewable energy growth.

Based on last year's "Next 10: Many Shades of Green" study, statewide green energy employment grew 36 percent from 1995 to 2008. San Joaquin Valley employment in green energy grew by 48 percent over the same period.

Kantor said even discounting the high-speed rail project, which faces significant political obstacles, the potential for job growth in renewable energy is impressive.

"One thing that really strikes me is that whenever I approach studies about the San Joaquin Valley is how far we lag behind the state and what it will take to catch up with the rest of the more prosperous regions," he said.

"If you think of the other developments that swept through California, we've been largely left behind," Kantor said. "But I'm hopeful about this industry. With renewable energy, we have this advantage: We have the natural resources here."

Valley's attractive for green industry

Region has natural benefits -- plenty of land and sun -- for clean energy.

By Jamie Oppenheim

Sacramento Bee, Friday, October 15, 2010

For years, the San Joaquin Valley has sat on the sidelines and watched as Southern and Northern California received most of the play from the state's economic engines -- the biotechnology and computer technology industries.

But in a few years, the San Joaquin Valley may be home to more than 100,000 new jobs -- all in service of clean energy technology, according to a study released Thursday by Dr. Shawn Kantor, a UC Merced economics professor.

Kantor's study focuses on the two "green" economic engines for the Central Valley, the California high-speed rail system and planned and pending-approval renewable energy projects.

Kantor studies economic development and what causes economic growth. He was approached by the California Business Alliance for a Green Economy to show the Valley would be affected by that growing sector, he said.

Citing the California High Speed Rail Authority, 24,000 jobs could be created with the construction of the rail system, according to Kantor's study, "The Economic Opportunity from Clean Energy Jobs in California's San Joaquin Valley."

Lee Boese, co-chairman of the greater Merced high speed rail committee, said the construction of the rail will bring clean air and jobs. "All things that the county is lacking," he said.

Post-construction, 1,500 ongoing jobs would be created at the heavy maintenance yard for the rail system, advocates maintain.

The location for the yard has yet to be determined, but communities throughout the Valley are lobbying for it to be built within their reaches.

Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey said she hopes it comes to the former Castle Air Force Base in Merced County, but lately she's heard there's a lot of competition, mainly from Madera County.

"We do have a good package and the most competitive bid, but I've seen that go by the wayside when it comes to politics," she said.

The Kantor study also showed that 6.5 percent of the renewable energy projects in the state are produced in the Valley.

"If we were to assume that all current, approved, and pending projects within the state were all to come online instantly, then the San Joaquin Valley would constitute 10 percent of the renewable energy produced in the state," according to the study.

These renewable technology projects that have either been approved or are pending approval will generate 68,000 to almost 80,000 jobs throughout the Valley, said Kantor's report.

The majority of these projects use solar, biomass or wind as energy sources.

Merced has one biomass facility, but it's also home to UC Merced, which is a laboratory in itself for green technologies, Kantor added.

Kern and Tulare counties are home to most of the clean energy projects.

"If 24,000 jobs will be created in the San Joaquin Valley to build out the rail network in the region, the clean energy sector has the potential to increase employment in the region by 72,000," the report speculates.

Kelsey said even farmers are moving toward green technology. The Valley's geographic constraints make it so the greener practices people keep, the better the Valley is environmentally.

Some practices farmers have employed in the past, such as burning prunings, are bad for air quality, she said. Biomass conversion shows a lot of promise.

"Every region is trying to be the next clean tech hub, and not everyone can be," said Jeffrey Michael, director of the Business Forecasting Center at the University of the Pacific.

That said, he pointed out that the report is right in that there's potential in the Valley and that the area has some advantages.

One major asset is that it's sunny, has lots of land and is close to major transmission lines. Those lines lead to big cities that are going to be mandated to get more and more of their electricity from green sources.

Once projects are completed, Kantor said they'll have a spillover effect and will be a magnet for other business to supply goods and services to the green technologies.

"In other words, success begets success," he said. "That's something the San Joaquin Valley really needs."

Obstacles or hurdles to job growth could be getting regulatory approvals for the high-speed rail or energy projects that are in the regulatory queue. Raising capital -- billions of dollars -- is another hurdle facing high-speed rail.

"California voters approved almost \$10 billion with a bond in 2008 and the federal government gave \$2 billion to the project," Kantor said. "Things are looking good, but we still need several billions of dollars from the public and private sectors before that sees the light of day."

As with most things in a capitalist society, it's capital that shapes the outcome.