

\$60 million available to diesel-truck owners

By Carol Reiter

Merced Sun-Star, late Thursday, March 10, 2011

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is accepting applications for \$60 million in heavy-duty diesel truck funds.

The funds are an incentive to replace, repower and retrofit heavy-duty, diesel-powered trucks, which will reduce air pollution from freight movement through the San Joaquin Valley.

More truck owners are now eligible for the funds and the district is holding free, regional workshops to assist owners in completing their applications. Spanish-language translators will be available.

Diesel emissions are a significant factor in the Valley's struggle to meet health-based, clean-air standards. The state's two major goods-movement corridors - Highway 99 and Interstate 5 - bisect the air basin.

Initial funds have been exhausted, signaling a need for fresh funds by heavy-duty truck owners. The program has been expanded to allow Class 7, those trucks weighing 26,001 to 33,000 pounds, along with owners of Class 8 trucks, those weighing anything above 33,000 pounds, to upgrade to newer, less-polluting vehicles.

Applications will be taken through April 29. Free workshops will be held in each of the three air district regions to assist applicants. In Fresno, a workshop will be held Tuesday, April 5 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave. in the San Joaquin Room. In Modesto, a workshop will be held Thursday, April 7 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 4800 Enterprise Way, in the Magnolia Room. In Bakersfield, a workshop will be held Wednesday, April 6, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 34946 Flyover Court, in the VTC Room.

YouTube Video Tells of Lebec Air Project

The Mountain Enterprise, Friday, March 11, 2011

Linda MacKay said she could hardly believe CalTrans statistics showing that 18,000 big rig trucks pass through Lebec's Grapevine each day.

"That's an average of 12-13 trucks per minute. I had to go count to find out for myself," MacKay said in a new video on YouTube about air pollution and risks of hazardous materials (hazmat) spills on the Interstate 5 along the Grapevine, including near El Tejon School in Lebec, which serves about 410 students in 4th through 8th grade.

Pollution pushing up from the San Joaquin Valley is a growing concern as well. As president of the TriCounty Watchdogs, MacKay has received a \$20,000 grant to conduct scientific citizen monitoring of air quality in Lebec, due to its proximity to Interstate 5, the major cargo transport route for the state of California.

Wood smoke harmful to health and DNA, study finds

Cheryl Katz, Environmental Health News

in the S.F. Chronicle, Monday, March 14, 2011

Norden, -- Nevada County - On a frosty evening in the Sierra Nevada, smoke curling from the chimney of the Clair Tappaan Lodge is a welcome sight for chilly snowshoers and cross-country skiers. Gathering by the massive stone hearth at this landmark Sierra Club mountain hostel, guests relax in the warmth and aroma of the crackling log fire.

Woodsy scents waft across the region, as millions of fireplaces and wood stoves are lit by people seeking environmentally friendly sources of heat and ambience. But new research is raising concerns about the toxic substances in that smoke.

Tiny airborne specks known as particulate matter produced by wood-burning stoves appear to be especially harmful to human health. Small enough to deeply penetrate the lungs, they contain high levels of carcinogenic chemicals. They're capable of damaging DNA and activating genes much like car exhaust

and tobacco smoke, according to a new study in Denmark. Another new study, conducted in Canada, found that infants and toddlers were significantly more likely to get ear infections if they lived in an area with a lot of wood stoves and fireplaces.

Because wood is a natural material and has been an integral part of human existence for so long, many view it as a benign, cheap and renewable energy alternative. But wood smoke can exacerbate asthma symptoms, and is especially harmful to children and older people. The emissions also have been linked to respiratory disease, atherosclerosis and other coronary problems, and early deaths among people with cardiovascular or lung disease.

"We know there's a lot of bad stuff released when wood is burned," said Dr. John Balmes, a professor of medicine at UC San Francisco and professor of environmental science at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. "It's actually not that far away from tobacco smoke and smoke from fossil fuel combustion engines. They're in the same ballpark."

Bay Area bans

March 1 marked the seasonal lifting of the nine-county Bay Area Air Quality Management District's ban on wood-burning during Spare the Air alerts. The Bay Area is home to an estimated 1.7 million fireplaces and wood stoves. The most frequent violations of the fireplace and wood-stove restrictions in the past two years came from bucolic Sonoma County.

Because the smoke vents outside, health risks from the particles given off by fireplaces and wood stoves can be greater for the neighborhood than for the people sitting fireside.

Until recently, little was known about the specific harmful agents in wood smoke. The University of Copenhagen project is one of the first to characterize the minute particles and droplets of pollution released by wood fires.

The researchers analyzed air samples from a Danish village where most homes used wood-burning stoves, and compared it to background particles outside the smoke area. They determined that wood smoke was more likely to comprise extremely small particles that can lodge in lungs and pass into the bloodstream.

When added to cultures of human lung cells, the particulates from wood smoke generated large amounts of powerful oxidants that are able to injure cells, damage DNA and trigger oxidative stress, the authors reported. This can set off an inflammatory reaction that scars tissues and interferes with the body's mechanism for fighting off infection. The researchers concluded that wood smoke particulates were more powerful in damaging DNA, activating genes linked to disease and weakening immune response than were the background air pollution particles from a variety of sources.

"In this study, we found that wood smoke ... has similar toxicity and effects on DNA as that of vehicle exhaust particles," said University of Copenhagen researcher Steffen Loft, who led the project.

Risk of ear infections

This may explain what happens with otitis media -- a painful middle-ear infection. Researchers from the University of British Columbia compared doctor visits for children ages 2 and under in the Vancouver area to wood smoke pollution levels during the same period.

Children with the highest exposures "were 32 percent more likely to visit the doctor for otitis media compared to children" with the lowest exposures, said lead author Elaina MacIntyre, a scientist at the University of British Columbia's School of Environmental Health.

The California Air Resources Board estimates that breathing fine particulates from all sources contributes to about 9,200 premature deaths from cardiopulmonary disease every year. About a third of the Bay Area's wintertime fine particle pollution comes from residential wood-burning.

Neighborhood problem

So is it safe to cozy up to that inviting hearth at the mountain lodge or fireplace at home?

"If you don't have asthma I think it's OK," Balmes said. "If it's an efficient fireplace with good updraft, it doesn't expose the people sitting near the fireplace."

Rather, "it's the people downwind" who are exposed, he said.

MacIntyre cautioned that families with young children in wood-burning areas should keep the windows closed and use a HEPA air filter.

"Parents should be aware that wood smoke is an important risk factor in the development of childhood respiratory infections and that wood-burning increases the risk of these infections, not only for their own children, but also for children in their neighborhood," she said.

At the Clair Tappaan Lodge, guests use the fireplace almost every night. The wood is dried and cut into small pieces to minimize smoke, said Peter Lehmkuhl, the lodge's general manager.

"There's just something about a fire," Lehmkuhl said. "It's very meditative to sit there and think about your day and stare at that fire and reflect on where you are. Dealing with a very primal element there, the fire."

Mixed signals: environmentalists split on high-speed rail

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, March 12, 2011

Most Kings County entities agree: They don't want the California High-Speed Rail Authority to put its tracks through prime area farmland.

But among regional environmental organizations with an interest in reducing sprawl, cutting air pollution and dropping the number of car trips taken by the San Joaquin Valley's growing population, there are mixed opinions about the benefit of the plan to build an 800-mile high-speed rail system that cuts through the heart of the Valley.

Construction on the system is set to begin in September 2012 on a Merced-to-Bakersfield segment rail officials say will eventually connect with lines linking the Bay Area to Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Diego. Two draft environmental impact reports for the first Central Valley section are expected to be made public in June.

One of the most important issues Valley environmental groups consider is air pollution. Valley air, although it has improved, has one of the dirtiest ratings in the nation. Officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District say they are working hard to figure out how to meet federal clean air regulations without shutting down the Valley's fragile economy.

Their chief target remains trucks and cars that pass through the Valley, spewing tailpipe pollution that the district has no direct authority to regulate. That's where California High-Speed Rail authority officials come in. They argue that the rail line will improve air quality by getting cars off the road.

Many environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, are sympathetic to that argument.

But there are dissenters. Take the Association of Irrigated Residents, a Wasco-based group that has long pushed for rules and regulations leading to cleaner air. Tom Frantz, president of the organization, doesn't think high-speed rail will really put a dent in the Valley's smog problem. Most of the pollution comes from diesel truck emissions that won't be affected by passenger high-speed rail, he said.

"Our air-quality problem is not from people driving ... it's from heavy-duty diesel trucks and big industry," he said. Frantz's arguments for stricter diesel regulations often put him at loggerheads with agricultural groups. But as a farmer himself, he's sympathetic to fears about high-speed rail taking out good farmland.

But there's a bigger reason for his opposition: urban sprawl. Many environmental groups oppose sprawl for a variety of reasons, including habitat destruction, greater car traffic and the elimination of open space. It's an issue farm groups can sympathize with, because they want to preserve agricultural land.

Diana Peck, Kings County Farm Bureau executive director, had expressed concern that high-speed rail, by expanding commuting ranges, could lure more people to create the kind of sprawl in Kings County that has been seen in Valley cities close to the Bay Area. Frantz shares that fear.

High-speed rail and sprawl potential remains an issue "worthy of study," said Gary Lasky, vice-chairman of the Sierra Club's Tehipite Chapter and chairman of the group's air quality/sprawl committee.

Lasky said he supports high-speed rail "in principle" because he thinks it will reduce car and airplane traffic.

"We support high-speed rail because it's a healthy alternative to cars," he said. "We believe that highways and sprawl are contributing to the terrible air pollution problem we have in the San Joaquin Valley."

Lasky also said that the jobs potential for high-speed rail is "really important."

"We need forward-thinking technology," he said. "The people in the San Joaquin Valley need some optimism. We could use the jobs and optimism that high-speed rail would bring."

Lasky said the Sierra Club has made no official decision on high-speed rail.

"There is a difference of opinion within the group, but generally we are supportive," he said.

Another group that hasn't established an official policy is the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, which brings together 70 member organizations, including Frantz's Association of Irrigated Residents.

The coalition doesn't take a position unless all member organizations sign on, said Director Catherine Garoupa.

Another group within the coalition -- Greenaction -- said that Frantz's argument about diesel truck emissions has merit.

"Overall, we're supportive of the concept," said Bradley Angel, Greenaction executive director. "[But] I actually think Frantz makes a good point."

Angel said there's been progress toward cleaner diesel engines, but it has been slowed or delayed since the financial crash of 2008. Funding for incentive programs key to retiring older diesel engines has dried up, he said.

"Diesel is really a very important issue," he said.

For Frantz, diesel remains paramount, as does the potential for sprawl.

"The high-speed rail is more to get more people to move into the Valley," he said. "It helps the Valley tremendously economically with jobs and development, if you look at it that way. But I see all the negatives associated with that that people don't always look at."

Farmers speak up on possible bullet train route through their land

By John Cox, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, March 14, 2011

Bees at work hummed from one almond bloom to the next across thousands of acres just north of Shafter Wednesday afternoon.

Every few minutes, a train sounding its horn broke up the din, a not-so-gentle reminder that this farming area so prized for its Kimberlina fine sandy loam soil also serves as a transportation corridor linking north and south.

How peacefully these dual roles can coexist may soon be put to the test as the California High-Speed Rail Authority prepares to decide whether to run 220-mph trains along existing tracks through Wasco and Shafter -- or take what could be a less complicated route through prime Kern County farmland.

Environmental review work remains to be done, and no final decision is expected until spring 2012. But ultimately, the decision could pit taxpayer savings against local farmers who argue that cutting a 100-foot-wide train route through agricultural fields and orchards would compromise their economic opportunities.

Of the many controversies surrounding the multibillion-dollar high-speed rail project, probably none have gained as much attention from the Central Valley's agriculture industry as this one.

Farmer Keith Gardiner said he generally supports the rail project because of its transportation benefits and the jobs it would create. But as a partner in Wasco Real Properties 1, owner of 3,300 acres of almond trees along Kimberlina Road, he is looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars in new costs if the rail authority steers away from the existing BNSF railroad route and instead runs through agricultural land.

The main problem as he sees it is that the proposed alignment through farmland would slice through his property at an awkward angle, forcing the partnership to invest in new wells, irrigation pipelines, pumps and water filters. Parts of the property would suddenly become isolated, posing logistical problems when the time comes to run tractors and other equipment through company orchards.

He and one of his partners, Holly King, also said such a route would reduce the company's available acreage beyond the 100-foot corridor: Because farming equipment cannot turn on a tight radius, it would not be able to reach trees abutting the railroad.

"High-speed rail should enhance a community, not degrade it," King said.

'Special stuff'

Farmers also claim to have the backing of state law, specifically AB 3034, the legislation that led to a nearly \$10 billion bond measure to help pay for the bullet train system. The measure says that the bullet train should follow existing transportation corridors if possible, and minimize impacts to the natural environment.

Gardiner, King and more than 120 other members of the Wasco-Shafter Agricultural Group have solicited -- and largely won -- the support of Kern government leaders. A local chapter of the Sierra Club has sided with the farmers, too.

Earlier this month the county Board of Supervisors sent rail authority Chairman Curt Pringle a letter stating that building an alignment along the BNSF line would minimize the loss of valley farmland while also providing certain infrastructure improvements for freight and passenger rail traffic through the area.

The city of Shafter appears to have come around after initially resisting the idea of sending high-speed trains through town. City Manager John Guinn said Thursday that the city views agriculture is its most important industry.

"Provided that it's done properly," Guinn said, keeping the alignment on or close to existing BNSF line "is probably the more preferred route that we would want."

Wasco officials could not be reached for comment late last week.

No estimates of the two proposed routes' costs have been released publicly, and rail authority staff declined even to say which proposal would cost more money. They say there remain too many details to be worked out, including how much money would have to be paid to the area's agricultural community for farmland and various mitigation measures such as new wells and tunnels for running tractors under or over the railroad.

But local farmers say they worry because, theoretically at least, building a new train track through a city costs more than building one in the countryside. That's mainly because running a high-speed train through Wasco and Shafter could require the construction of elevated or below-grade tracks, among other changes.

Project staff cautioned against concluding that the farm route would necessarily be less expensive. While deputy program manager Gregg Albright acknowledged that it can be "much less" expensive to go through farmland, mitigation will be required either way, and "it's not a matter of what's the cheapest route."

"Ag land is pretty special stuff," he said Friday.

He added that the authority's goal is to avoid intruding on resources, agricultural or otherwise. In cases where disruption is unavoidable, he said, staff will work with individual property owners to compensate them fully.

Rail authority board member Fran Florez, who lives in Shafter, said the decision on which route to take will be difficult. But it will be easier if local interests can reach consensus.

BNSF Railway Co., owner of the existing railroad, is in talks with the rail authority, company spokeswoman Lena Kent said. She declined to say which alignment the company prefers in the Shafter-Wasco area.

Impact either way

The bullet train project is expected to impact farmers in the area regardless of whether it keeps to the BNSF. High-speed trains turn more gradually than the freight and Amtrak trains using the route now, and so new track would have to be built in a way that cuts off some farmland.

County Supervisor Ray Watson said this inevitability makes it that much more important to soften the local impact as much as possible.

"If it's properly mitigated, it becomes more tolerable," he said. "In the end, somebody's going to get impacted."

Elsewhere in the valley farmland is expected to be displaced by the project, meaning that similar concerns are to be expected north of Kern County as well.

Fresno County farmer John Diener, who said his land would not be touched by the routes under consideration now, supports the project. He noted that farmers will have to be compensated for their land and paid for any necessary mitigation measures such as new irrigation systems.

To Diener, the project is worth the trouble. He said it will reduce congestion on freeways, saving farmers money and time.

"The more congestion there is, the slower the traffic, the more fuel you actually burn," he said.

Communication issues

The Kern Council of Governments is working to document the concerns of farmers and other interested local parties in an effort to speak to the authority with a unified voice, executive director Ron Brummett said.

From his perspective, the county's farmers may be justified in their frustration. He said they have sent much information to the authority but have heard very little back from the authority.

"I think it's more of a communication issue," he said.

Rail authority spokeswoman Rachel Wall acknowledged that staff has done more listening than talking at this point. But that's because of where the project is in the process, she said.

"While we may not be able to answer each individual property owner as the questions are asked," Wall said, "the intent is to take in that information and answer it for everyone."

A draft environmental review of the project's first segment, which is to stretch from north of Fresno south to about 7th Standard Road, is scheduled for public release June 11. That is to be followed by a 45-day public comment period. Construction is not expected to begin until the second half of next year.

Power plant picture becomes clearer

By TP staff, including contributions by associate editor Jon Mendelson and reporter Kevin Young
Tracy Press, Friday, March 11, 2011

This week, residents of Mountain House continued to protest the impending construction of a natural-gas power plant near the town at the foot of the Altamont Hills.

A hearing Monday and Tuesday in Sacramento was the last chance for those opposed to the Mariposa Energy Project — a 200-megawatt facility that would be built in Alameda County about 7 miles from Tracy and 2½ miles from Mountain House's western edge — to voice their complaints.

Representatives of the Mountain House Community Services District board, as well as individuals from Tracy, spoke at the meeting.

According to Morgan Groover, development director for the community services district, local residents fear that the plant — a "peaker" facility, designed to fire up and shut down relatively quickly depending on energy demands — could harm their quality of life.

"Property values and air quality are two of the main concerns for Mountain House residents," Groover said.

"The exhaust is going to go up in a plume. The winds are going to blow it east into San Joaquin County. The Bay Area is not going to get any of the negative results of the plant. Having the power plant this close to Mountain House will drop the property value."

Chris Curry, senior manager of development for Diamond Generating, responsible for overseeing the Mariposa project, countered that the plant's influence on neighboring communities would be between negligible and nonexistent.

The company will give the local air pollution control district a one-time payment of \$644,000 to help counteract the pollution the plant adds to valley skies, and the Tracy Fire Department will receive a \$70,000 payment to cover possible expenses. Station 98 in Mountain House would be the likely first responder to any emergency at the power plant

Aside from that, Curry said, Mariposa is designed to have as little effect on Mountain House as possible.

"We specifically sited our project so we could mitigate all those concerns," Curry said, explaining that since the company filed papers to build the plant in 2009, property values in Mountain House have actually risen. "We've taken great pains to minimize the impacts of the project."

He said the plant will be built on land that's not used for agriculture, for example, in a part of the hills where it should be hidden from Mountain House residents. Energy production will use a relatively small amount of water, fueled by natural gas — the same stuff used to heat homes and cook dinners throughout America.

He added that the plant's plans were reviewed by three separate entities, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, and each one decided it wouldn't harm the health of those living nearby.

"All conclude that there will be no impacts to Mountain House," Curry said.

The California Energy Commission, which hosted this week's meetings and is tasked with reviewing the construction of power plants, also determined that Mariposa wouldn't significantly worsen the area's air quality, even if it were to run at full capacity, which it's not expected to do. (The plant will be permitted to run 4,000 hours a year, but Mariposa officials expect it will be active only about 600 hours annually.)

"CEC determined there's very little, if any, health impacts because of air quality," admitted Jim Lamb, a Mountain House director who opposes the power plant.

Despite his acknowledgement of the commission's findings, Lamb said Mountain House still doesn't stand to gain anything from it.

"We have very limited interest in the Mariposa project," Lamb said. "As an elected official, there's no benefit to the community to have the power plant (there)."

Bob Sarvey, a Tracy business owner and air quality activist, agreed that residents on this side of the Altamont Hills will bear the brunt of the plant's effects.

"I will let the facts speak for themselves," he said. "Alameda County has opposed both recent attempts by power plant owners to site power plants in Hayward. Not to anyone's surprise, they have not sent any letters on this project, which is on the border of the San Joaquin County, with winds generally blowing the pollution into San Joaquin Valley. "This is the third power plant Alameda County has supported on our border, but they oppose every power plant in central Alameda County."

Sarvey said Alameda County will reap the benefits of the power plant.

"Alameda County has supported the project because they get all the benefits from the property tax, and they have a \$1.2 million cooperation agreement with Mariposa Energy," Sarvey said.

But planners over the hill stress that county officials have no real say in where power plants are built.

Alameda County senior planner Bruce Jensen explained that plants with an output greater than 50 megawatts are dealt with solely by the California Energy Commission. Essentially, a power provider suggests a place and a plan, and the commission examines the proposal's worthiness.

"The grid is considered a statewide, or at least a regional, operation," he said.

Jensen said Alameda planners merely agreed that the power plant fits that county's land use plan for its eastern edge.

The location off Kelso and Burns roads is perfect, officials associated with the project say, because of the infrastructure already on the ground.

There's water and natural gas readily available, thanks respectively to the Byron-Bethany Irrigation District and Pacific Gas and Electric Co.: A 1.8-mile water pipeline and 580-foot natural gas line are all that's needed to hook up the plant. And there are numerous power lines and substations in the area to easily transmit electricity. PG&E has already signed a 10-year power-purchase contract with Mariposa.

If the energy commission signs off on the plan, construction could begin as early as June, with the plant running by July 2012.

Curry expects the project to create as many as 177 jobs during peak construction, and between eight and 10 full-time workers will man the power facility once it's operational.

Taft Chevrolet is Energized for the Future

By Jessica G. Miller, staff writer

The Taft Independent, Saturday, March 12, 2011

Taft Chevrolet Buick's newest automotive addition is like something out of Tomorrowland. The Chevy Volt is not only amazing in and of itself, but it is also a tremendous leap into the greener future of the automobile. With the uprising of more Earth-conscious ways of life, hybrid and electric cars, like reusable shopping bags, recycling anything you can and eating organic foods, are a great way to help make a change in our world. Considering the air quality of the San Joaquin Valley, electric and hybrid vehicles are the perfect choice when shopping for a new mode of transportation.

The Volt is the first electric car of its kind. Having no transmission, it runs on its battery and an on board generator. With a full charge through a 120 volt outlet, the car can run for 40 miles on the battery alone, burning no fuel and releasing no gas or tailpipe emissions. "The big thing is that it has no transmission," said assistant manager, Norberto Lopez. "You don't feel it shifting."

Although, Taft Chevrolet's first Volt sold in the first week and a half after its arrival, they are hoping to be allocated more of the top of the line electric vehicle to sell to the people of Taft. They are even inviting licensed drivers to come down to the dealership to take the car for a test drive.

Lopez, who flew to Austin, Texas for a training class on the Volt, got a chance to drive the Toyota Prius and the Volt. "The Volt definitely outperformed the Prius," he said. "It handled great and it felt like a real car."

In addition to less gas usage, less emissions and saving money, (charging the Volt will only add about \$0.12 an hour to your PG&E bill), this astounding vehicle comes equipped with a seven inch LCD touch screen for GPS navigation, observing the battery life, DVD viewing and to also serve as a display for the rearview camera system, among other things. It also has 30 GB of audio data storage, Bose speakers, Bluetooth capability for hands-free calling, and USB ports for plugging in your cell phone. Even Imagineers from Disneyland couldn't have made this car anymore amazing and futuristic.

It's no surprise that Taft Chevrolet will be selling the Volt, which, at this time, is only available in California, Texas, Washington and New York. Since Devinder Bains took over in 2004, business has soared for the local dealership. "The times were challenging when we took over because of the gas prices," Bains explained. "Less than a year later we've excelled our predecessors by 30% by providing excellent service, selling a large number of vehicles to other communities, upgrading our service equipment such as factory tools and equipment and adding a computerized aligning machine, and with front end work, tire sales and maintenance on all makes and models."

Since Bains has been running Taft Chevrolet, they have earned many awards from GM for sales and service. "This was all possible with the help of a great local community," he said. "We are here because of the community. This is a great community to do business with."