

It's time to tune in, tune up and smog out

By Mike Eiman

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, May 28, 2011

Everybody knows the Valley has an ongoing battle against bad air quality, but not everybody can afford to do something about it.

In an effort to eliminate pollutants from older cars, Valley Clean Air Now (Valley CAN) will be providing free car emissions tests and diagnostic inspections June 4 at West Hills College Lemoore.

The "Tune In & Tune Up" event seeks to help people who have older cars without smog certificates. Only the first 525 vehicles will be tested. If vehicles don't pass the test but can be repaired, the drivers will receive a voucher good for up to \$500 in emissions-related repairs at a local Gold Shield certified smog check station.

"There are a lot of people who want to do this because they have cars that are so old that they almost don't run anymore," said Diana Jackin, a Valley CAN staff member.

Vehicles must be in running condition, but don't necessarily have to be drivable. At an event held in Fresno earlier this year, Jackin said, people lined up overnight and within two hours they had more than 500 cars lined up. Some of them had to push their cars up to the testing station.

Valley CAN spokesman Jose Marin said many of the program's success stories are about people who couldn't otherwise get their vehicles repaired.

"In Bakersfield, we had a gentleman who had a 1933 Chevy truck and he couldn't get it fixed," Marin said, adding that cars made before 1976 aren't legally required to pass a smog test. "So he had been struggling for 12 years, and he just wanted a good, clean truck to drive."

To qualify for the free diagnostic test, drivers must have a 1995 model vehicle or older and have owned it for at least six months.

"According to the cars that have been tested, cars that are 1995 or before are more likely to be gross polluters," Marin said.

As for the 525-vehicle limit, Marin said it's based on simple logistics.

Each test takes two to three minutes and the event includes two technicians.

"If we start at 9, by 3 o'clock everybody's tongues are hanging out," he said.

Tune In & Tune Up will also feature free food and drinks, as well as booths from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the American Lung Association and other community organizations.

Even if your vehicle isn't a smokestack on wheels, it's important to keep up with regular maintenance like oil changes to prevent later problems.

"If people keep their cars in tune, they reduce the emissions part of pollution in the Valley," Marin said.

Since 2003, more than 2,000 cars have been repaired and brought up to state smog standards because of the program.

Through a grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, funded by the Foundation for California Community Colleges, Valley CAN will host 15 of these clean air events during the next year.

Valley CAN is a nonprofit organization focused on improving air quality in Central Valley communities.

Tune In & Tune Up car clean-up

- When: June 4 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

- Where: West Hills College Lemoore (555 College Drive) in parking lot 'A'.

Kings County dairy the first to go solar

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, May 31, 2001

From the top of a huge feed pile covered in plastic tarp weighed down with recycled tires, Mike Monteiro takes in the sweep of his 7,000-cow dairy and 1,000 acres of farmland south of Hanford. He can see the manure separator removing solids, which are used as bedding for the cows. He can see front loaders scooping large helpings of hay for the daily feeding. He can see methane bubbling out of a large manure lagoon.

As of Feb. 9, he's been able to see something new – four acres of photovoltaic panels that make Lakeside Dairy the first solar-powered milk farm in Kings County history.

"It was really a no-brainer thing," said Monteiro, co-owner of a family operation that runs the Lakeside Dairy and two more in Tulare County. "It will be all done paying for itself in seven years."

Many dairy operators are content to rely on the grid for their power, used to run water wells, manure separators, milking machines and other equipment. Monteiro wanted to take the idea of self-sufficiency to a different level with his solar system.

But he needed the bottom line to pencil out. It did. He locked in Pacific Gas and Electric incentives in 2009 when they were especially favorable. His lender, Rabobank, was enthusiastic about financing the \$3.5 million project that generates 75 percent of the dairy's annual electricity needs.

PG&E credits Monteiro for the extra electricity generated by the panels on sunny days. The whole thing is designed to come close to, but not exceed, his annual power demand. Under existing state law, he can't sell surplus power to the grid.

Monteiro said it cost him virtually nothing out of pocket to build the system. What he really likes about it - along with PG&E - is that it generates power during the hottest part of the day, when he would otherwise be paying the highest electricity rates.

"The main thing I'm looking forward to is cutting my power bill by about 75 percent at the end of the payoff [period]," he said. After 2018, Monteiro's power bill will drop from \$22,000 a month to \$30,000-\$40,000 for the entire year.

"Everybody says, they want to go green," Monteiro said. "For me, it has to pencil out."

Which begs the question: Why haven't more large dairies gone solar?

"The opportunities that solar presents may not be widely known yet," said Gianluca Signorelli, Rabobank vice president of renewable energy finance. "Mike Monteiro is to be applauded."

Monteiro thinks the reluctance had a different source – the big dairy downturn of 2009-2010, an extended period of falling milk prices that put producers in the red for months.

Now there's a further reason for hesitation. The PG&E program that gives Monteiro a lower electricity rate has expired, leaving would-be solar projects with one less financial benefit in the mix. But a 30 percent federal cash grant for projects remains in effect through December, Signorelli said. The price of solar technology is also dropping, he said.

Signorelli thinks solar remains a good sell in Kings County.

"Solar energy technology is established. It's low risk," he said. "It's been proven to perform in the field."

One reason Monteiro went solar is because he didn't need to bother with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Dairy operators that have tried to run generators with methane gas coming from manure have run into all kinds of problems getting permits from the district.

Monteiro envisions even more self-sufficiency in his operation. He looks at his manure water lagoon and sees the potential for capturing methane and using it to run his diesel-powered vehicles.

"We're do-it-yourselfers. We like doing our own thing," Monteiro said.

Avenal power plant prevails in lawsuit

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, May 28, 2011

A federal judge in the District of Columbia this week harshly chastised the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in a case involving a proposed power plant in Avenal. The court ordered the agency to make a final permit decision for the project by the end of August.

Almost immediately, the EPA issued the permit on Friday for the project mired in controversy not only because of its potential impact on nearby impoverished communities, but also because the EPA earlier this year exempted it from the newest air and climate rule.

While company officials welcomed the EPA action, environmental activists vowed to appeal the EPA's permit decision, saying the last thing the area needs is another polluting project.

Such are the latest developments in the ongoing dispute surrounding the proposed natural gas-fired power plant in Avenal.

Facing a long delay in federal approval, Avenal Power Center, LLC sued the EPA last year, seeking a court order to force the federal agency to make a permit decision.

Delivering the order on Thursday, U.S. District Court Judge Richard Leon sided with the company and rebuked the EPA, saying its regulatory process made the Congress-mandated one-year time limit meaningless.

Leon also ruled that the EPA's legal interpretation that the agency's policy trumps the Congressional rule is "self-serving" and "absurd."

"In essence, the EPA contends that Congress' statutory mandate is subservient to EPA's regulatory review process, and as such, this court has no authority to require the administrator to comply with this statutory requirement. How absurd!" Leon wrote in his memorandum opinion.

In his footnote, Leon added: "The EPA's self-serving misinterpretation of Congress' mandate is too clever by half and an obvious effort to protect its regulatory process at the expense of Congress' clear intention. Put simply, that dog won't hunt."

Company officials said they were notified that the EPA issued the permit for the 600-megawatt energy project on Friday.

"We're pleased with the court's decision. It means the process that's been delayed quite a while can move forward," said Frank Wilson, spokesman for the project. Just as word of the permit approval came in, Wilson added, "We've not reviewed the permit, and therefore have no comment on its content, but we're pleased to see the EPA continues to move forward with the process."

EPA officials could not be reached for comment Friday.

The permit is still subject to administrative appeal, although Thursday's ruling now requires that the EPA issue a final, non-appealable decision by Aug. 27. That is also the earliest the company can break ground on the project, because construction cannot start while an administrative appeal is in effect.

Avenal Power Center - a subsidiary of Australian-based Macquarie Group - wants to build a \$530 million plant that would generate enough electricity to power 450,000 homes. The company touts the project as one of the cleanest in the region.

Oakland-based environmental justice group Earthjustice vowed to fight the project.

"I think it's a horrible decision," said Paul Cort, staff attorney for Earthjustice. "This is one of the worst places in the country to put a new major power plant. They may claim it's state of the art, but this is not a community that needs additional pollution."

Cort also called EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson's decision this spring to exempt Avenal and other power projects from a new nitrogen dioxide standard "illegal and nonsensical."

"We will file an administrative appeal of the permit," Cort said. "If we're unsuccessful, we will appeal to the federal court."

EPA exempts Calif. plant from pollution standards

By The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Sacramento Bee and other papers, Monday, May 30, 2011

AVENAL, Calif. — The Environmental Protection Agency has approved a natural gas-fueled power plant in California's agricultural San Joaquin Valley, exempting the facility from current air quality standards.

The permit authorizes Avenal Power Center, LLC to build and operate a 600-megawatt plant near the rural communities of Avenal and Kettleman City, about 70 miles south of Fresno. The area already houses the biggest toxic waste dump in the West.

The plant won't be held to air pollution requirements adopted in 2009 for nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide emissions.

Environmental justice groups say the EPA's decision sets a precedent for other projects in the pipeline across the country. The EPA estimates that 10 to 20 other proposed major industrial projects could be similarly "grandfathered in."

The San Joaquin Valley has some of the country's highest ozone and particle pollution levels, the EPA says.

EPA OKs new SJ Valley power plant

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, May 28, 2011

AVENAL, Calif.—The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has okayed construction of a natural gas-fueled power plant in California's San Joaquin Valley, and have exempted it from current air-quality standards.

The permit authorized Friday allows Houston-based Avenal Power Center LLC to build the 600-megawatt plant near Avenal, a town about 68 miles south of Fresno.

Environmental groups vowed to appeal the decision, and have raised concerns over EPA's decision to exempt the plant from 2009 pollution standards that require cuts in greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.

The San Joaquin Valley has some of the highest ozone and particle pollution levels in the country.

Avenal Power spokesman Frank Wilson told the Fresno Bee that the plant has been given the go-ahead from local air quality regulators and will "employ state-of-the-art equipment."

Guzzlers B Gone: New fuel economy labels for cars

By Sandy Bauers - The Philadelphia Inquirer

In the Sacramento Bee, Monday, May 30, 2011

For years we've had great efficiency labels for washing machines, for refrigerators, for dishwashers and more.

Now, federal officials have unveiled new efficiency labels for cars. They'll show not only the miles per gallon the car is expected to get, but how much a year's worth of fuel will cost (based on certain averages) and, if it's an efficient car, how much you might expect to save in fuel costs over five years.

So if you're looking at a car that costs \$5,000 more than a less-efficient counterpart, will you save more than \$5,000 in fuel?

For the first time, the label also will factor in environmental attributes, giving each car a greenhouse gas rating and a smog rating. It will enable shoppers to compare the vehicle they're looking at with the overall pool of cars. On a scale of one to 10 for smog rating, for instance, is yours a three, a seven, a 10?

You probably won't see the labels until the 2013 year models come out. Automakers can voluntarily use them ahead of time, but starting with those 2013 models the labels must be affixed to all new passenger cars and trucks, including not only regular old gasoline versions but also hybrids and plug-ins.

Officials say the new labels come just in time to dovetail with the 2010 fuel economy rule, which will increase the energy efficiency of cars and trucks built for 2012 and beyond. Officials say the new standards will save the average car-buyer \$3,000 in fuel costs.

You can find more information about the new labels here:

<http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/label/index.shtml>

The Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation had originally floated two fuel economy labels to the public, and while some preferred the other version - one that gave cars a letter grade, such as A or B or C - environmental groups praised the move.

"Information is power - in this case, the power for Americans to choose the cleanest new cars," said Nathan Willcox, Federal Global Warming Program Director for Environment America. "These new labels are an important step toward getting cleaner, more fuel-efficient cars on the road, which will cut air pollution and ease Americans' pain at the pump."

"At the end of the day, we need all of our cars to be clean, and the biggest step the Obama administration can take toward that goal is to move clean cars into the fast lane by making sure that new cars and trucks meet a 60 miles per gallon standard by 2025," Willcox said. "This is the single biggest step we could take toward getting off of oil - protecting our shores from oil drilling, cleaning our air and saving Americans billions at the gas pump."

The National Automobile Dealers Association had fought the letter grades, and its statement focused on that: "For decades, car and truck buyers have relied on miles per gallon or MPG to compare the fuel economy of different vehicles. With gasoline spiking to over \$4 a gallon and alternative fuel vehicles hitting dealer showrooms, rolling out a totally unfamiliar 'letter grade' label would have only served to confuse and frustrate consumers. NADA applauds the Obama administration's decision to drop the ill-advised 'letter grade' in favor of one that prominently displays a vehicle's MPG. By doing so, car shoppers can make informed comparisons on dealers' lots, allowing them to take advantage of new technologies, which will ultimately put more fuel efficient vehicles on the road."

Winds prompt air warning in Valley

By The Record

Stockton Record, Sunday, May 29, 2011

Gusty, dusty winds in the San Joaquin Valley have prompted air-quality cops to issue a health warning effective through Memorial Day weekend.

Exposure to tiny particles in dust can cause health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and increase the risk of respiratory infections, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said.

The warning says people with heart or lung disease, young children and the elderly are most susceptible and should take precautions when it's especially dusty.

Winds prompt health advisory

By Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Friday, May 27, 2011

The breezes that have been blowing through the area and keeping the temperatures down are also stirring up some health concerns.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a cautionary health advisory for the Memorial Day weekend because of the gusty winds that are blowing up high levels of dust.

Blowing dust can result in unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller, or PM10.

"Residents should be aware of their local conditions, and take their particular health issues into account," said Samir Sheikh, director of the Air District's Strategies and Incentives department, which includes air quality forecasting and analysis.

Exposure to particle pollution can cause health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections. People with existing respiratory and coronary disease, young children and the elderly are particularly susceptible to the effects of particle pollution.

Valley residents are advised to use caution through Sunday night. People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with exposure to high levels of particulate matter where warranted.

Daily air quality forecasts by county are available at www.valleyair.org and at 1-800-SMOG INFO (766-4463).

