

High-speed rail in California

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Jan. 23, 2012

The California High-Speed Rail Authority proposes to build 520 miles of tracks between San Francisco and Los Angeles, via the central San Joaquin Valley, for electric trains traveling as fast as 220 mph. The cost is estimated at about \$98 billion.

Supporters say high-speed trains will ease freeway congestion, improve air quality and cut travel time. Opponents say the plan is unproven, extravagant and disruptive to farms, homes and businesses.

Work could begin late this year in Fresno on the first section, between Merced and Bakersfield, described by planners as the backbone of the statewide system and scorned by others as a route unlikely to see many passengers.

No high-speed trains would run on the system until it reaches either the Bay Area or the Los Angeles Basin, and those sections could be built only as money becomes available. Ultimately, plans call for service to Sacramento in the north and through the Inland Empire to San Diego in the south.

For the first leg, the authority has more than \$3 billion in federal stimulus and transportation money and hopes to match that with nearly \$3 billion from Proposition 1A, which California voters approved in 2008. But first, the state Legislature must decide whether to authorize the sale of Proposition 1A bonds.

EPA turns its attention to San Joaquin Valley

Central Valley Business News.com, Saturday, Jan. 21, 2012

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld is scheduled to conduct a whistle stop tour through the Central Valley next week to announce millions in funding to protect public health.

Mr. Blumenfeld is launching a strategic plan for the San Joaquin Valley that the EPA says will address serious issues including air and water quality, enforcement of public health standards and environmental justice.

He'll do it riding as Amtrak train, making stops in Stockton, Modesto, Merced, Clovis, and Fresno. He will also visit local universities, explore new technologies, discuss water issues and conduct a Q&A with local students to discuss campus sustainability and pressing environmental issues.

No-burn-day violations skyrocket

High cost of utilities, weak economy possible factors.

By Joshua Emerson Smith

Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, Jan. 21, 2012

Despite Valley air pollution laws that restrict wood burning, many people this season continue to rely on their fireplaces for warmth during no-burn days.

In response to severe air pollution this winter, officials have enacted an eye-popping number of days on which residential wood burning has been prohibited.

This season, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has already issued 330 no-burn days for all counties combined. That's more than double the number of restricted days issued last year, and the wood-burning season doesn't end until February.

At the same time, the number of no-burn-day violations has also skyrocketed.

So far this year, 760 violations have been issued for burning wood on restricted days. That's up from 263 violations last year.

Merced County's no-burn days nearly tripled over last season, rising to 33 from 13. Violations in the county increased to 124 from 21, the second-highest jump in regional violations behind San Joaquin County.

It's hard to pin down exactly why some people are ignoring the rules, but several factors seem to stand out, including the high price of utilities and a weak economy.

"What we have is this incredible tension between a need to protect public health and the economic incentive to go ahead and burn anyway," said David Lighthall, health science adviser for the Valley Air District.

However, Lighthall tempered that scenario, saying that ironically the increase in citations could also be because of growing concern about the effects of air pollution, and intolerance for neighbors who burn illegally.

"A lot of our violations don't come as a result of our inspectors driving around," he said. "It comes as a result of people calling in to complain. There's been an absolute onslaught of people with health conditions as a result of poor air quality. It's a life-and-death issue for certain people."

A first-time offender receives a fine of \$50, with the option of completing a short examination in lieu of the ticket. A second offense carries a fine of \$100. Fines increase up to \$1,000.

People can apply for an exemption if a wood stove is their sole source of heat or if they don't have access to natural gas. The number of exemption applications has steadily increased in recent years.

In 2008, the valley air district tightened its regulations around air quality, resulting in a jump in no-burn days and an increase in air quality.

"This season is a fluke," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the air district. "We haven't seen meteorological conditions like this since 1989. Wind is the main thing that will clean the air and circulate the pollution. Since the beginning of December, nothing has moved."

As regional scientists like to say, Central Valley air quality is routinely poor because of a perfect storm of environmental factors. But recently air quality has been abysmal because the region simply has had no rainstorms.

While air pollution is more easily trapped in the Valley compared with other regions, such as the Bay Area, windy conditions go a long way to help sweep away pollution. So far, Valley residents continue to wait -- but not necessarily by the fire.

Cal Fire lifts suspension of burning on private land in Madera County

Sun-Star staff

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Jan. 20, 2012

Effective at 8 a.m. Friday, Cal Fire lifted the suspension of burning on private lands in Madera County.

Open burning will be allowed on permissive burn days as established by the Air Pollution Control District in each county.

Wetter, windier weather kicks in for Modesto area

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Friday, Jan. 20, 2012

The first winter storm of the year brought a steady drizzle to the Northern San Joaquin Valley on Friday, but more was expected overnight, with forecasters predicting about a quarter- to a half-inch of rain in the Modesto area.

The National Weather Service also predicted wind of 18 to 21 mph with gusts as high as 36 mph into this morning. Forecasters said showers were likely in Modesto today, with a mostly cloudy sky and high near 58 degrees.

The wind today was expected to calm to about 14 mph with gusts reaching 26 mph, according to the weather service.

Through 10 p.m. Friday, downtown Modesto had received about 0.11 of an inch of rain, bringing the season total to 2.37 inches, according to the Modesto Irrigation District.

The region has experienced an unusually dry winter, causing problems for some farmers and creating dangerous conditions for firefighters in the Sierra Nevada foothills east of Modesto.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection on Friday lifted the suspension on burning debris in Tuolumne and Calaveras counties and the eastern edge of Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties.

The recent rainfall and the forecast for more rain have improved conditions for burning in the foothills. Snow-covered mountains and rain-soaked hillsides typically keep the fire danger relatively low during the winter, but the prolonged dry spell had kept the threat of wildfires at a high level.

Cal Fire officials urged residents to clear flammable material and vegetation from burn piles and to keep a water supply close; residents also are urged not to burn household or commercial trash, tires, plastic or other garbage, or pine needles.

"Even if it is a permissive burn day high, gusty winds are not safe conditions to conduct a burn project," said Cal Fire Chief Brian Kirk of the Tuolumne-Calaveras Unit. "It is critical that the person conducting the burn keep close watch on the fire at all times. If the fire gets away, that person can be held liable for the damage and suppression costs."

[Burning will be allowed on permissive burn days marked by the Air Pollution Control District in each county.](#)

Court tosses San Joaquin Valley air pollution control plan

Central Valley Business News.com, Friday, Jan. 20, 2012

A federal appeals court has shot down the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's approval of an air pollution cleanup plan for the San Joaquin Valley.

"We should not silently rubber stamp agency action that is arbitrary and capricious in its reliance on old data without meaningful comment on the significance of more current compiled data," says the decision Friday by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. "We hold that EPA's failure to even consider the new data and to provide an explanation for its choice rooted in the data presented was arbitrary and capricious."

The court says the EPA needs to conduct its approval process anew. It says the EPA "stands on shaky legal ground" because its approval relied on "significantly outdated data."

The court says that EPA, in its final rule, "did not bother to address substantively" apparent disparities between the 2007 emissions inventory data and 2004 emissions inventory data for the level of ozone pollution of the air in the San Joaquin Valley.

The San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District does not expect any significant impact from the ruling, says Seyed Sadredin, the District's executive director and air pollution control officer.

He says the ruling reached back to a time well before other plans were put together and approved.

Mr. Sadredin says "it will cause added paperwork by the EPA and the District. It's a bureaucratic paper exercise at the end of the day. Not a lot of real consequences in terms of new regulations or new measures that we have to put in place.

"We're five steps ahead of EPA and the courts on this," he says.

Judge sends Calif ozone plan back for revision

The Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Friday, Jan. 20, 2012

FRESNO, Calif. -- State and local air pollution districts in California's Central Valley must come up with a new plan to meet ozone emission standards after a federal appeals court ruled that the data used was out of date.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved the plan in 2010. But Earthjustice sued arguing that the plan and emission projections didn't match reality. To measure diesel emissions, the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District had considered where trucks were registered - not whether they drove through the region.

On Friday, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the EPA's decision to use that data was "arbitrary and capricious."

Officials say the agency will need at least two years to rewrite a new plan for reducing the lung-damaging pollutant.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Monday, Jan. 23, 2012:](#)

As California drives, so drives the nation

By William K. Reilly

These days, people seem surprised when government works the way it was intended. This week, in San Francisco and in Los Angeles, we have the satisfaction of witnessing firsthand government working exactly as it is supposed to. A state agency is working in concert with not one, but two federal agencies, supported by many local ones. Businesses are pleased with the outcome of a government regulation, consumers will save money, and they will be healthier as a result. I was fortunate to have been there when the achievements we will observe this week were but a vision.

A cross-country series of hearings focusing on the next round of national standards for cleaner, more fuel-efficient cars will wrap up in San Francisco this week. That's appropriate. California has long played a leading role in ensuring cleaner, more efficient cars for all Americans - not just Californians.

The hearings, hosted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, will gather public comments on a proposal to require automakers to hit a fleet average of 54.5 miles per gallon by the year 2025. It is an ambitious goal, yet a doable one - and it is the right step for consumers, for automakers, for the environment, and for our economy overall.

Raising the bar for autos helps to protect the health - and the wallets - of America's families. It also drives innovation and investment, as automakers look for ways to make vehicles that run more cleanly and more efficiently. The drive toward innovation will help create jobs and an American automobile industry that is more competitive in the international marketplace.

A goal of 54.5 mpg would have seemed all but impossible when I was EPA administrator for President George H. W. Bush. Back then, average mileage hovered around 20 mpg. For years afterward, the United States made little progress on gas mileage, as the rest of the world passed us by.

After decades of stagnation, President George W. Bush got the ball rolling again, ratcheting mileage standards upward. When President Obama announced the 54.5-mpg goal last year, executives at the major automakers stood by his side in a show of support.

Make no mistake: We would not be where we are today if California had not kept up the pressure for cleaner cars.

Later this week, the California Air Resources Board will hold a hearing on the state's Advanced Clean Car Program. Had California never introduced its groundbreaking clean-cars standards in 2002, we would not be where we are today as a nation - cruising toward 54.5 mpg and growing healthy markets for hybrid vehicles, plug-in hybrids, clean diesels, electrics and other innovative technologies.

California's tailpipe emissions standard for carbon is set at the same level as the federal standard. Automakers will have a single, clear target that they have said publicly they can meet. Meanwhile, the air board will continue to press for improvements in California.

This is the kind of leadership California must continue to demonstrate if we, as a nation, hope to create a vehicle fleet that is cleaner, more efficient, safe and innovative to compete in the 21st century global vehicle market.

William K. Reilly is a San Francisco-based adviser to TPG Capital.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, Jan. 23, 2012:](#)

It's not fireplaces

I certainly sympathize with Wendy Carraway's militant concern over our Valley's air quality (letter Jan. 15). However, I think the focus of her anger is misplaced. She should be pointing an accusing finger at herself, and me, and anyone who drives anything but an electric vehicle -- because anything else is spewing out carbon monoxide.

This is what is befouling our air -- not a few hundred fireplaces -- but the hundreds of millions of gasoline, diesel and hybrid vehicles (not to mention all the lawnmowers, leaf blowers, generators, forklifts, planes, trains, boats ad nauseam) pretty much going nonstop.

Drive down Shaw or Blackstone avenues at 5 p.m., and then multiply all that smog that all those petrol-burners are creating by all the other Shaws and Blackstones in all the other cities all over the world. We are wreathing our beautiful planet with a noxious halo.

We are poisoning the water with pesticide runoff, the atmosphere with carbon monoxide and chem-trails, and -- with fracking -- we are poisoning the very bowels of the earth.

Therefore, the coming ecological cataclysm cannot be blamed, no matter how convenient or "hip," on fireplaces or even on nefarious cigarette smokers.

Faustine A. Guerrero, Porterville

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, Jan. 21, 2012:](#)

Mining on the mountain

With our horrible air quality being the worst in 10 years, anyone who would allow the mining of Jesse Morrow Mountain I would consider extremely irresponsible. Valley residents don't need more pollutants in the air, which would come from the blasting and drilling for the next 50 to 100 years. The hundreds of trucks traveling back and forth on Highway 180 will add to the problem.

To Cemex, the environmentalists, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board and the Fresno County supervisors who will vote on this project, please put the health of Valley residents ahead of the greed for money. The mining of JMM will only send more children and elderly to the emergency room with respiratory illness. You can prevent future health problems by just saying "No."

Bonnie Locke, Sanger