

EPA proposes more stringent soot rules

By Dean Kuipers, staff writer

L.A. Times, Hanford Sentinel and other papers, Saturday, June 16, 2012

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced proposed new regulations Thursday that would further reduce legal limits for fine particle pollution -- otherwise known as soot -- in the nation's air. Gina McCarthy, assistant administrator for the EPA's Office of Air and Radiation, made the announcement in a phone call with reporters, saying that the new standard would save thousands of lives and an upward estimate of billions of dollars in healthcare costs.

The EPA was under a court order, issued earlier this month, to propose new standards for fine particulate matter under 2.5 micrometers, or PM2.5 as it's called, according to the best available science by Thursday.

The proposed regulations would reduce the acceptable amount of soot in the air from the current standard of 15 micrograms per cubic meter of air to a level between 12 and 13 micrograms per cubic meter. This soot comes from varied sources such as power plants, diesel engines and wood fires. The proposed standards will go through a nine-week comment process and must be finalized by Dec. 14.

"The good news about today's actions is that we're already on the path for 99% of U.S. counties to meet the proposed standards without the need for additional state or local action," said McCarthy on Thursday.

She went on to explain that regulations and programs already in place are projected to bring soot levels down under 12 micrograms by the year 2020 in all but six counties nationwide, according to EPA projections. Several of these programs, however, including the recently announced Mercury and Air Toxic Standards, or MATS, are being challenged in court.

"Updating these standards will protect us from the tiniest particles that can cause the biggest health problems. By limiting the smoke, soot, metals and other pollution our lungs and hearts absorb, EPA is protecting all of us from asthma attacks, lung cancer, heart disease and premature deaths," said John Walke, clean air director at the Natural Resources Defense Council, in a statement.

But not all environmentalists or trade groups were satisfied with the news.

"EPA's proposal could substantially increase costs to states, municipalities, businesses and ultimately consumers without justified benefits," said Howard Feldman, director of regulatory and scientific affairs at the American Petroleum Institute, in a statement. He went on to explain that companies will be reluctant to invest or build new plants or refineries in counties that cannot meet the new standards, thus taking an economic toll.

McCarthy disagreed, saying, "In those few areas with specific, localized challenges, like old diesel engines around ports, railyards or roadways or whether it's wood stoves in valleys, EPA will partner with those communities by providing technical assistance or other voluntary initiatives -- like our DERA (Diesel Emissions Reduction Act, which provides funds for clean diesel conversion) program -- to help them to achieve clean air standards that others will be enjoying."

The six counties currently listed as projected to fail the new standard by 2020 include Riverside and San Bernardino counties in California; Santa Cruz, Arizona; Wayne, Michigan; Jefferson, Alabama; and Lincoln in Montana.

Conrad Schneider, advocacy director at a group called Clean Air Task Force (CATF), sent an emailed statement hailing the new proposed standards, but saying the group would urge EPA to take it down yet another notch to 11 micrograms/m³. "According to our 'Sick of Soot' report, jointly released with the American Lung Assn. and Earthjustice, setting the annual standard at 11 micrograms/m³ would save an estimated 27,000 American lives more than under the current standard, and fully 12,000 more lives would be saved than setting a level of 12 micrograms/m³."

The EPA was required under the Clean Air Act to review its standards in light of the latest scientific evidence. In 2006, the Bush administration issued PM2.5 limits that were eventually rejected by federal courts in 2009 for failing to protect public health, and a court ruling earlier in June required the EPA to sign off on new proposed rules.

“A strong body of science, which includes hundreds of new studies, shows fine particles harm health,” said McCarthy. “Particles smaller than 2.5 micrograms, which we call PM2.5, can penetrate deep into the lungs to cause premature death. This pollutant is also linked to a wide variety of serious health effects, including heart attack, strokes, aggravated asthma, and increased hospital admissions and emergency room visits. Exposure to particle pollution is estimated to cause tens of thousands of premature deaths each year.”

The EPA estimates that the cost of implementing the new standards would range from \$2.9 million to \$69 million, with savings in health costs estimated from \$88 million to \$5.9 billion.

McCarthy also noted that regulations regarding visibility, or haze, and coarse particulate matter called PM10 would remain unchanged.

Summer arrives at end of Central Valley heat wave

By Donna-Marie Sonnichsen

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, June 18, 2012

The dog days of summer are still some time away, but Mother Nature is ramping up the temperatures to give a little taste of what’s to come.

The area’s first heat wave hit this weekend with the arrival of near record-breaking, triple-digit temperatures Saturday and Sunday which closed in on 110. More of the same is expected today with temperatures expected to reach between 100 and 103.

Temperatures should start dropping just in time to herald in summer on Wednesday, but don’t expect major relief because the double digits are expected to be in the high 90s the rest of the week, meteorologist Scott Borgioli said.

He said this is going to be one of those seasons when there will be an unusually high number of days when the mercury soars to 100 and beyond.

The heat is also playing havoc with air quality which was coded orange, meaning unhealthy for sensitive groups which include the young, the old, and anyone with respiratory conditions, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Mother Nature seemed to pick up where she left off Sunday morning hitting 100 before 9 a.m., which wasn’t reached until 4 p.m. Saturday.

The combination of heat and air quality seems to have conspired against outdoor celebrations of Father’s Day on Sunday, keeping many indoors with even popular Mooney Grove Park sparsely populated as thermometers reached 108 before 4 p.m.

For people who can’t find comfort in their own homes there are several area cooling centers including the Visalia Transit Center at 425 East Oak Ave. and the Tulare Senior Center at 201 North F Street.

The weekend heat fell short of record highs of 110-111 for June 16-18 in Visalia, but even Lake Kaweah gave little respite, with temperatures hitting 105 Saturday and 107 Sunday.

The hottest spot in Tulare County Saturday was Sequoia National Park. The Ash Mountain area recorded 108 degrees Saturday and 112 by 4 p.m. Sunday, Borgioli said.

Only Yosemite Valley reported double digits for the area, reaching 97, he added.

The current heat wave brings the total to four for triple-digit temperature days since June 1, but it’s not unusual for the area’s first 100-degree day to occur during the first week of June.

The record high for this timeframe in the area was set in 1961 at 111 degrees, and the highest June temperature for the area since recordkeeping began in 1898 was 115 in 1933.

Last year, the highest June temperature in Visalia was 102; July’s was 104 and last August and September hit no higher than 100.

District 21 state Assembly candidates are miles apart High-speed rail spotlights Assembly hopefuls' differences

By Joshua Emerson Smith

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, June 18, 2012

The two remaining candidates in California Assembly District 21 don't agree on much -- the merits of the state's high-speed rail project being no exception.

The state is proposing arguably the largest public works project in U.S. history, costing about \$69 billion over several decades based on the latest estimates.

Republican Jack Mobley joins many in his party blasting the project as too expensive. He said he will not vote for it.

Democrat Adam Gray argues that construction of the fast train would jump-start the state and local economies. He vows to fight for its passage.

The two candidates will compete in the November general election to represent the newly drawn, predominantly Democratic district, which encompasses all of Merced County and the southwest section of Stanislaus County, including Ceres and parts of Modesto.

The high-speed rail debate illustrates many of the differences between the political ideologies of the two candidates. For example, the candidates interpret the price for construction very differently.

The project is expected to receive a federal subsidy of roughly \$42 billion, according to the rail authority's most optimistic estimate.

Gray said this money would go a long way toward creating jobs and boosting the economy in California.

"It's absolutely a stimulus," he said. "If we want to do something about the double-digit unemployment, we've got to focus government on investing in the infrastructure that makes the community attractive for new investment."

Mobley questioned the wisdom of going after the federal funding for California.

"Where's that money coming from? That's money that's coming out of somebody else's pocket," he said. "It's going to be a zero-sum game because it's not going to be stimulating the economy in other parts of the country."

California's share of the construction cost is estimated at about \$22.5 billion dollars, or roughly an average of \$750 million dollars annually for 30 years, according to the rail authority.

"By infusing all that money, there'll be jobs for a few years but then it will go away," Mobley said. "You'll be left with a project that will be a millstone around the neck of California."

Gray said that money would be spent on roads if not on the rail project. "When you talk about the cost, transportation is a core component of what government should invest in," he said. "We're going to be investing money in transportation. The question is how?"

While the rail authority estimates the initial construction phase would generate about 16,500 construction-related jobs for the region between Merced and Fresno, recent studies suggest building the rail lines would kick up a significant amount of dust and debris into the Central Valley's already dirty air.

"The pollution that's going to be created by the initial construction, the amount of dust and carbon particles that will be released into the atmosphere, it's going to have a devastating effect for at least 10 years," Mobley said.

The rail authority, however, argues that once the trains are operating, carbon dioxide emission savings will be roughly 42 pounds a trip.

"The long-term benefits far outweigh the impact of construction," Gray said. "I guess we could stop building everything, but that's not what we're going to do. We're going to grow. Let's grow smart."

The rail projects' effect on agriculture has been center stage in the news, especially after the Merced and Madera county farm bureaus recently launched a lawsuit against the authority.

"The effect on agricultural land is going to be tremendous," Mobley said. "That's the hub that the Central Valley turns on."

Gray said he believes many in the agriculture community support the project and he would like to help the rail authority work with local farmers more effectively.

"My overarching concern with the authority has been that they haven't effectively communicated and worked with the agricultural community," he said.

Kings County frustration with HSR continues

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, June 14, 2012

HANFORD — In yet another meeting with California High-Speed Rail Authority staff members, local department heads and elected officials expressed ongoing exasperation over multiple issues they say aren't being addressed as the \$68 billion project moves closer and closer to the start of construction.

"Nothing's being resolved," said Kings County Supervisor Doug Verboon at a meeting Tuesday. "It seems to me that your staff is not prepared. We have a general plan in place. You need to conform to it."

Verboon, fellow supervisors and other county staff met at a public forum with Authority Chairman Dan Richard, Authority Vice Chairman Tom Richards and Central Valley Area Program Manager Jeff Abercrombie to discuss a list of concerns the county says hasn't been dealt with.

The laundry list, read aloud to the audience by Larry Spikes, county administrative officer, included the following:

- A request for an exact account of the decision-making process that led to a proposed route through Kings County. The Authority has rejected routes along Interstate 5 and Highway 99. The agency says Interstate 5 is too far from population centers in the San Joaquin Valley, and a route along Highway 99 would affect more land than the proposed Kings County route.
- Concern about numerous stated conflicts with the county's general plan. Officials say the route through Kings County would harm protected farmland, increase urban sprawl and go against the general plan in several other ways, including increasing air pollution and reducing traffic safety in the fog.
- Concern about what will happen to local dairies that may be displaced by the rail line. The county wants the Authority to provide an expedited process for getting dairies relocated with fresh permits.
- A series of agricultural impacts, including possible disrupted irrigation flow from wells, canals, ditches and potential pesticide drift from the bullet train zooming by. A related issue: agricultural equipment moving over new overpasses in heavy fog could potentially endanger passing vehicles because of sharp implements sticking out into the oncoming lane.
- The fate of local Amtrak service in Hanford and Corcoran. The Authority plans to run Amtrak trains on its new line starting in 2018, which would bypass Hanford and would not include a station in Corcoran.

Spikes said he wanted more concise answers than those the Authority has already provided during a series of meetings.

"We're well over a year removed from when we first started asking these questions," Spikes said.

Richard said some questions had been answered, but that it was difficult to resolve others because the Fresno-to-Bakersfield environmental impact report, due sometime this summer, hasn't been released yet.

Richard said he was pushing Authority lawyers to give more information to county officials before the EIR's official release. And he said he was delaying the release to address more of the questions raised here.

An initial draft Fresno-to-Bakersfield EIR was released last year, but was withdrawn after several complaints, including that it didn't adequately study other options.

"You have put us on notice that there are issues that need to be addressed," Richard said.

County officials said they would like their concerns addressed by the next meeting with Authority officials, scheduled for July 10.

"We don't want to be brushed off," said County Counsel Colleen Carlson. "We want [answers] here."

Lodi Energy Center will generate enough power for almost 300,000 homes

By Maggie Creamer

Lodi News Sentinel, Saturday, June 16, 2012

While driving down Interstate 5 during the last two years, Lodi residents have watched a towering structure rise near White Slough wastewater treatment plant.

The looming, metal metropolis of twisting pipes, 800,000 yards of wiring and a control center with a long panel of screens will be supplying the city of Lodi with a steady stream of electricity starting this fall.

The Lodi Energy Center is a natural gas power plant that will generate 300 megawatts of power, which is enough to power a little less than 300,000 homes on average, said Kevin Cunningham, the plant's general manager. Lodi will receive 30 megawatts.

The plant will have its opening in early August, but it will not be fully operational until the fall, after a series of tests, Cunningham said. Workers still have to finish electrical work, insulation, small bore piping, painting and paving.

The entire project costs \$452 million and will be paid for through bond financing. Lodi Electric Utility users will pay down the utility's \$41 million share of the bond debt in their electric utility rates.

The \$140 million power island was purchased from Germany-based Siemens Energy.

The Northern California Power Agency will construct, own and operate the plant, and it will pay the city of Lodi to rent the land and to use Lodi's wastewater in the plant.

The combined-cycle power plant is designed to start up in two hours, which is much quicker than the typical six to eight hours of most plants. That means there are less emissions, Cunningham said.

"It's much more efficient than the old fossil fuel-style plants. ... It's the cleanest, most efficient power plant in the country," he said.

When the plant is running, there will be several different processes going all at the same time. Natural gas is fed into plant, and then it is combined with air that has gone through a large filter, similar to the air filter in a car. When they combine, it creates combustion, just like a jet engine, and that turns a turbine. The process happens in a room that is filled with a large circular piece of metal covered in heavy insulation to keep any heat from escaping.

To use all of the resources, the plant then captures the remaining heat, which is around 1,000 degrees, and feeds it into a building filled with tubes that then boils water to power a steam turbine running at 9,000 rpm per minute. The water will come from the city of Lodi's wastewater treatment plant, and NCPA will clean it even further to the point of almost being distilled, Cunningham said.

From near the top of the 150-foot boiler-stack, the entire plant's 4.4 acres and the green fields surrounding the plant are visible.

Once the water has gone through the steam turbine, it is put into a large cooling tower that funnels it through to bring the temperature down from 130 degrees to 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

It then goes through another cleaning process and then is injected 5,000 feet into the ground, where Cunningham says it actually improves the water supply.

NCPA will employ 23 employees to work at the plant, though that number will drop down to 21 in a year. At its peak, the plant had 260 employees ranging from carpenters, boilermakers, electricians, pipe fitters, operating engineers and laborers working at the site.

Ten of NCPA's 17 members and four other public power agencies are participating in the power plant.

The plant has an advantage because when renewable power, like solar or wind, are not producing, the plant can fill in the gaps. But if there is enough power being provided, especially during the spring of good hydro years, the agency can temporarily shut down the plant.

"We can supply our own electricity and we can play the market to provide for the cities," Cunningham said.

The city already has a power plant on the site, which made it ideal for the Lodi Energy Center construction. There are no neighbors, it already had a Pacific Gas & Electric gas line, the city had wastewater to be used for the steam turbine and to cool the plant, and there were already PG&E electrical lines to send out the power.

In the future, there could even be a Lodi Energy Center II, Cunningham said.

"Everything we needed was here and we had a supportive community," he said.

Hydrogen plant workshop set for Wednesday

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, June 16, 2012

The HECA hydrogen power and fertilizer plant proposed seven miles outside of Bakersfield near Tupman is the subject of a six-hour public workshop scheduled for Wednesday in Sacramento.

Hosted by the California Energy Commission, which is reviewing the \$4 billion project for possible approval, the workshop is expected to look at HECA's technical aspects, as well as its potential impacts on things like air quality, water resources and traffic.

The hearing is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. at the Bonderson Building's hearing room, 901 P St. People unable to attend in person may participate by phone or computer. Information for doing is available online at: energy.ca.gov/sitingcases/hydrogen_energy/notices/2012-06-20_Notice_of_Staff_Workshop_TN-65700.pdf.