

Fresno Bee column, Wed., Aug. 22, 2012:

Respectfully, some diesel truck facts

By Bill McEwen

I stirred up a hornet's nest with my Sunday column suggesting that diesel trucks using Highway 99 and I-5 pay a toll to help clean up the San Joaquin Valley's unhealthy air.

The strong and mostly negative response wasn't surprising. Tolls aren't popular. In addition, we've been seriously debating air pollution's health and financial impacts in the Valley -- and the best way to get rid of the gunk -- since at least the mid-1970s.

But I added fuel to the fire by writing that diesels rumbling through the Valley contribute little to our economy "except the driver buying a hamburger somewhere."

It was a sarcastic line that shouldn't have seen the light of day.

Transportation and distribution are vital cogs in any economy. The trucking industry in California employs more than 860,000 workers, according to the nonprofit Diesel Technology Forum website. Trucking also supports agriculture, which produced \$37.5 billion in revenue last year, according to state officials.

Other statistics from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, however, show that big-rig emissions are a big part of local air pollution.

The district says that "heavy duty trucks" are responsible for 41% of nitrogen oxides (NOx), which contribute both to ozone and tiny debris called particulate matter. The district also estimates 50% to 60% of the Valley's big-rig miles are racked up by trucks traveling through the region.

Several callers pointed out that trucking-company tolls ultimately would be paid by consumers through higher prices.

"You can add \$1 to a loaf of bread with your idea," said a man who then hung up.

I don't know if bread would rise that much, but I acknowledge that consumers would bear the brunt of a toll. In fact, that's the idea. People and businesses all over California -- and beyond -- benefit from goods carried through the Valley. How about having folks outside the region help pay for the cleanup?

Truckers who emailed me pointed to new diesel-engine technology that is lowering emissions. Bravo! But keep in mind truck owners have until 2023 to replace older trucks with 2010 or newer models. Now if only federal regulators would move to make railroads follow suit. The air district says that locomotive emissions make up 5% of Valley NOx emissions.

Nearly every time I write about air I get multiple responses fingering the Bay Area for causing our problem.

Memorize these numbers, please: Studies by the air district and the state Air Resources Board indicate that the Bay Area contributes 30% of air pollution in the Valley's north end and 6% to the south end. Here in the middle, it is 10%.

"As we get closer to meeting federal standards, the pollution increment attributable to the Bay Area becomes a more formidable challenge for us as we attempt to reach our goals," says district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

How about building big wind machines that blow the bad stuff back at San Francisco?

There I go again. Just kidding.

My goal in bringing up a toll was to generate new ideas about a complex problem that causes myriad health problems -- including premature deaths -- and drags down our economy. I only received one suggestion, and it was an old one: ban leafblowers.

People mostly aired their frustrations -- just like I did Sunday.

Air district offers electric equipment to commercial lawn care operators

Central Valley Business Times, Wed., Aug. 22, 2012

Commercial lawn care operators in the San Joaquin Valley are being invited to take part in a pilot program to use and evaluate zero-emission lawn and garden equipment.

The San Joaquin Valley Pollution Control District is accepting applications through Sept. 20 for the new "Cordless Zero-Emission Commercial Lawn and Garden Equipment Demonstration Program."

The pilot program is open only to commercial lawn care operations located in the Valley air basin and must be used in non-residential applications.

Participating companies can choose from a list of approved vendors offering battery-operated equipment that includes commercial-rated, self-propelled and cordless lawnmowers, sweepers, blowers, chain saws and trimmers.

An Air District grant program will pay for the demonstration equipment for companies and public agencies selected for the program.

Currently, zero-emission equipment is limited in the commercial sector. The demonstration is expected to give participants hands-on familiarity with the equipment and help further improve the use of clean technologies.

"Through everyday use of this cutting-edge equipment, companies will be able to evaluate its performance," says Seyed Sadredin, the Valley Air District's executive director and air pollution control officer. "We hope this study will accelerate acceptance of clean-air equipment and build upon the progress already made in the residential sector."

Eligible applicants are public agencies that have their own lawn care maintenance teams and private, professional, licensed landscape businesses, including those that contract with public agencies.

Proposed manure-to-power plant to help downwind neighbors

Central Valley Business Times, Wed., Aug. 22, 2012

The city of Tulare planning commission has obtained agreements from Colony Energy LLC to develop an advanced odor management plan to ensure that residents of the low income Matheny Tract neighborhood won't be harmed from noxious odors from the company's waste processing plant.

The Colony Energy project plans to convert cow manure into methane. It is not a novel technique and has been used by several of the Central Valley's larger dairy operations to power generators to make electricity.

There's plenty of cow manure in Tulare County, which has about 449,000 human residents and 464,000 or more cows. The average dairy cow produces about 14 pounds of manure a day.

The Matheny Tract Committee, a multi-racial coalition of residents of the neighborhood, aided by California Rural Legal Assistance Inc.'s Community Equity Initiative pushed the commission for the improvements.

Under the deal, Colony Energy LLC must also install streetlights throughout Matheny Tract, something the residents had been trying to get for years.

"The residents spoke with one voice to ensure that their community is taken into account during important planning decisions," says Ruby Renteria, a California Rural Legal Assistance community worker.

"Until recently, the city of Tulare was dismissive of the community, and now they have no choice but to listen and even support demands that benefit the health and safety of low-income residents," says CRLA CEI Director and attorney Phoebe Seaton.

The waste management plant is an anaerobic co-digester plant, which processes food waste simultaneously with manure. Since the community is downwind of the plant, there was concern among local residents about odors.