

‘A great opportunity:’ Modesto City Schools to purchase 30 electric school buses

By Emily Isaacman

Modesto Bee, Thurs., Jan. 20, 2022

Modesto City Schools will replace about half of its school buses with electric ones, a move district officials say is good for the environment and will save about \$250,000 a year in fuel alone.

Trustees approved the purchase of 30 electric buses on Tuesday evening using California Hybrid and Zero-Emission Truck and Bus Voucher Incentive Project money and general fund dollars. There’s about a 10-month wait time on the buses, according to the school board meeting agenda.

Associate Superintendent Tim Zearley said during the meeting that the buses, along with other sustainability projects including outdoor classrooms and shade structures with solar panels, will set up the district as a sustainability leader in the San Joaquin Valley.

“These initiatives will not only provide sustainability, but also stability,” Zearley said.

An electric bus can cost two or three times as much as a diesel bus, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But in addition to savings from diesel fuel costs, the district will save on the back end by not having to conduct other maintenance such as engine oil changes or smog checks.

Schools could help cut about 2.1 million tons of carbon dioxide annually if half of all U.S. school buses were electric, according to the EPA. The infrastructure bill Congress passed in November allocates \$5 million for low- or zero-emission school buses.

The buses Modesto City Schools will buy can travel about 118-120 miles per charge, bus salesperson Gabriel Hightman said at the meeting. Five of them will have wheelchair lifts, Zearley said.

Zearley said that at later meetings, school leaders will present the board with plans for covered parking made with solar panels and outdoor learning spaces that could enhance STEM, or science, technology, engineering and math.

The district received 30 vouchers amounting to \$6.3 million from the California Hybrid Zero-Emission Truck and Bus Voucher Incentive Project. Zearley said this number of vouchers is rare for a school district to receive.

After the vouchers, the district will spend \$7,491,013 in general fund dollars freed up because of coronavirus relief money, according to the presentation.

“We kind of have an opportunity now,” Zearley said.

He told The Bee on Wednesday that federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds “have given us the opportunity to consider projects like this.”

District officials plan to continue pursuing grants to replace additional school buses, he said.

Trustees expressed excitement about the sustainability initiatives.

“This is an exciting report and a great opportunity for us as a district,” trustee Chad Brown said.

Trustee Abel Maestas said he’s passionate about sustainability and excited about the projects. “This is, I think, one way to set us up for the future,” Maestas said.

California’s most flammable forests targeted by Biden wildfire plan. Here’s how they will change

By Gillian Brassil

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California’s most flammable forests will get a good sweeping as part of the United States Forest Services’ 10-year strategy for addressing wildfires.

The federal agency also hopes to convince communities in at-risk areas to be more fire resilient through protective boundaries and eliminating brush that could fuel fires.

The multi-billion dollar strategy, unveiled this week by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, includes plans to treat forests through prescribed burns, thinning and pruning to remove dead plants that have built up overtime and act as kindling.

It calls for managing up to an additional 50 million acres of land in the West across the national forest system and other federal, state, tribal and private lands. Overall, the Forest Service estimates that it will treat four times the amount of land that it does now.

Scientists working with the Forest Service identified so-called “firesheds” — areas that are likely to severely affect communities, developments or natural resources if aflame. Each fireshed is typically 250,000 acres. Maps will change overtime as the landscape changes.

Firesheds exist throughout California. Areas along the Sierra Nevada are among those mentioned as a high priority.

Cal Fire estimates that almost 3 million acres burned in California in 2021. The Dixie Fire, which burned from July to October of last year, was the second largest fire recorded in the state’s history.

“Our experts expect the trend will only worsen with the effects of a changing climate, so working together toward common goals across boundaries and jurisdictions is essential to the future of these landscapes and the people who live there,” Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in announcing the plan.

The first two years of the 10-year strategy also include bolstering water access and protecting key community assets. And it stressed working with typically underserved communities. Native American sites are an example.

Efforts will also involve replanting and care of damaged lands. The service estimates that 4 million acres of land need post-fire aid.

The agency will work with local, state, national and tribal leaders to set priorities in wildfire suppression, prevention and response on a hyper-local level. By the end of this first year, the Forest Service hopes to have a multi-faceted plan to design future projects for the next 10 years — and to extend longer-term prevention strategies that fit individual needs.

“For example, evidence suggests that Hispanic populations in the West are twice as likely as other demographic groups to live in the areas most threatened by wildfires,” the plan outline read. “Pinpointing specific cultural communities and engaging with them about opportunities to reduce wildfire risk will be key.”

In addition to funding the agency already allocated for wildfire management this year, the plan’s foundation starts with money from the bipartisan infrastructure law that passed this fall. The law provides nearly \$3 billion toward land restoration and hazardous fuel reduction to suppress fires, the Forest Service estimates.

The federal government has spent about \$1.9 billion per year in wildfire management since 2016.

The 10-year plan comes in response to President Joe Biden’s executive order, signed in the first week that he took office, which prioritized climate issues. Biden and Vilsack previously vowed to aid California in its fight against ongoing wildfire issues, with the president calling the situation a “blinking code red” on a trip to the state this fall.

California Sen. Dianne Feinstein commended the effort, noting that Congress will need to continue passing legislation to fund its aggressive strategy.

“This plan greatly expands the work that will be done and focuses on areas at greatest risk for wildfire, an approach that will benefit California,” she said.

Valley kids help make calendar with clean-air messages

ABC30, Wednesday, January 19, 2022

FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- Valley kids are taking action to reduce air pollution in Central California by inspiring others through art.

They helped contribute to a calendar promoting healthy living and it's now available for local residents.

The Valley Air District called up kids to submit artwork for its 2022 Healthy Air Living Kids' Calendar.

The full-color and bilingual wall calendar feature clean-air messages along with drawings from 14 students.

The calendars are free and distributed while supplies last to the public, schools, community groups, healthcare facilities, churches, and more.

You can also download and print your own calendar.

If you are interested in a calendar, visit their website.