

Public transit gets \$3.7B to woo riders, adopt green fleets

By Hope Yen Associated Press

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, March 7, 2022

WASHINGTON (AP) — Public transit systems straining to win back riders after being crushed by the COVID-19 pandemic are getting a \$3.7 billion boost to stay afloat and invest in new fleets of electric buses.

With mask restrictions fading and workers beginning to return to offices, the Biden administration said Monday it was awarding \$2.2 billion in coronavirus relief funding to 35 financially strapped transit agencies in 18 states. The money would be used to prop up day-to-day operations, including staffing and payroll as well as cleaning and sanitization to limit the spread of illness in public transportation. A federal mask mandate for public transit remains in effect until at least March 18.

Another \$1.5 billion in grants will be available under President Joe Biden's infrastructure law — a total of \$7.5 billion over five years — for transit agencies to purchase low- or no-emission buses and build bus facilities. That's more than double the combined amount from the previous year.

Transit agencies will have until May to apply for the Transportation Department's infrastructure grants, which will be awarded by fall. About 5% of the money must be used for workforce training to help transit workers prepare for the technological change.

"We're making the largest ever investment in this program for buses and bus facilities, helping to deliver better commutes and cleaner air to American communities," Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said.

Buttigieg was joining Vice President Kamala Harris, who has pushed the need for electric school buses, along with EPA Administrator Michael Regan and other officials at the White House on Monday. They were unveiling efforts to promote green-friendly transit and announcing a proposed rule aimed at reducing emissions from dirty diesel trucks. Transportation is the biggest U.S. contributor to global warming.

Several transit systems already are moving in the direction of electric buses. California has committed to all-electric bus fleets by 2040, as well as New York City and Boston. Washington, D.C., has set a target of 2045.

The effort comes at a challenging time for public transit.

Only about 55% of transit riders nationwide have returned compared with pre-pandemic times, according to the American Public Transportation Association. The biggest losses have been in commuter rail systems serving white-collar suburbanites traveling to downtown workplaces.

As COVID-19 cases decline, Biden has urged Americans to shed remote work, describing a return to offices as necessary to boost economic growth. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said about 90% of the U.S. population lives in counties where the risk of the coronavirus is posing a low or medium threat, meaning residents don't need to wear masks in most indoor settings.

"It's time for America to get back to work and fill our great downtowns again with people," Biden said in his State of the Union address.

Among the recipients of COVID-19 relief funds Monday were big-city transit systems that had been hit hard from revenue losses due to decreased ridership. New York City's transit system, the nation's largest, garnered \$769 million to steady its operations, while San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit got \$270 million to bolster service and safety protocols.

Others receiving grants were the Washington, D.C., metro system at \$120 million as it anticipates a return of federal employees to offices and Houston's public transit at \$137 million, which has significantly added rapid transit bus lines.

"These funds are crucial to avoid drastic service cuts and layoffs that would damage the economy and public health," said Nuria Fernandez, head of the Federal Transit Administration, which oversees the grants.

At the start of the pandemic, transit agencies cut payroll and slashed services. That came even as essential workers, who are disproportionately nonwhite and lower income, continued to rely on public transportation to get to work. But three rounds totaling nearly \$70 billion in federal COVID-19 emergency assistance, including \$30.5 billion that Biden signed into law last year, pulled transit agencies from the brink of financial collapse.

"The COVID funds will be vital to keeping workers connected to their offices, but, even more importantly, the long-term funds in the bipartisan infrastructure bill will provide generational change," said Paul P. Skoutelas, president of the American Public Transportation Association. He said the money will allow transit systems "to re-evaluate routes and service plans, address equity issues and place more alternative fuels vehicles on the road to help address our global climate crisis."

Kern launches California's first carbon capture project review

By John Cox

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, March 4, 2022

In preparation for what could be a new avenue in California's fight against climate change, the state's first environmental review of a carbon capture and sequestration project kicked off Friday in Kern County.

The review will focus on a plan by local oil producer California Resources Corp. to gather carbon dioxide from various industrial sources and bury it in depleted oil reservoirs using half a dozen injector wells 26 miles southwest of Bakersfield in the Elk Hills Oil Field.

The project is the furthest along of several such proposals geared toward helping California reach its goal of carbon neutrality by 2045. It would earn state and federal financial incentives if operated as envisioned by Santa Clarita-based CRC.

Carbon TerraVault I, as the carbon capture and sequestration project is known, would bury more than 1 million metric tons of CO₂ per year — the equivalent of taking 200,000 passenger vehicles off the road — up to a total of 48 million tons.

"CCS projects can have immediate and long-lasting environmental, economic, and employment benefits to our nearby communities — and we are excited our first CCS project EIR is kicking off in Kern County," CRC said in an emailed statement.

Although the oil industry has increasingly embraced CCS as a way to remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, environmental groups remain skeptical, in part because the installations require large amounts of energy and the transport of CO₂ over long distances.

The notice of preparation issued Friday by county government said the review will evaluate potential impacts to local air quality, biological and cultural resources, energy usage, seismicity, soil erosion, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology, water quality, mineral resources, hazardous materials, transportation, noise and public services such as fire and police.

The document released Friday says that, before operation may begin, CRC would need injection well permits from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and, from the county, a zone change from limited agriculture to exclusive ag and a conditional use permit.

The project would also require a habitat conservation plan, a waste discharge permit, building and grading permits, plans for fire safety and dust control, an operating permit and a monitoring and reporting program.

Kern has been identified as an ideal place for CCS because of its wealth of depleted petroleum reservoirs. In addition, the county is equipped with a pipeline network that could be helpful in bringing CO₂ to injection wells, though CRC's proposal says trucks and rail could also be used to haul in the gas.

Friday's notice did not specify potential sources of the carbon dioxide CTV I would bury. It said those sources will be identified and analyzed in the draft review.

CRC said it has identified a list of reservoirs in California capable of storing up to 1 billion metric tons of CO₂. It added it expects to spend about \$85 million this year on its carbon management business. It said

those costs account for work to advance pending permit applications and begin early-stage development work.

Lorelei Oviatt, Kern's top planner and director of the county's Planning and Natural Resources Department, confirmed the review that began Friday is the first for a CCS project in California.

Public input on the project's draft review is due by 5 p.m. April 4. Anyone may email comments to hooverc@kerncounty.com.

A scoping meeting on the county's environmental review is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. March 18. Information is available online at https://psbweb.co.kern.ca.us/planning/pdfs/notices/carbon_terravault1_nop.pdf.

Editor's note: This story has been corrected to state the project is proposed in the Elk Hills Oil Field. It has also been revised to clarify the review is evaluating potential environmental impacts.

When it comes to future wildfires, 2 California congressmen want them all suppressed — right away

By Kurtis Alexander

San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, March 4, 2022

Amid fears of another grueling fire season ahead, two congressmen representing rural California districts introduced a bill last week that would require the U.S. Forest Service to quickly put out all wildfires everywhere in the country.

The proposal, by Reps. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale (Butte County), and Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove (Sacramento County), is a seemingly commonsense measure to ensure public safety. But it comes as forestry experts are increasingly questioning the value of trying to remove fire from forests — a policy responsible for the long-term buildup of vegetation driving today's record infernos.

While few doubt that fires often need swift suppression, many experts say some should be allowed to burn to reduce the dangerous overgrowth and make wildlands more resilient.

The new legislation strikes at the core of the continuing debate over how to deal with the nation's wildfire crisis and who should be calling the shots.

On Friday, LaMalfa told The Chronicle that it's just too risky, with so much overcrowding of forests and the continuing drought, to give the Forest Service the option of letting wildfires burn.

"As much of a tinderbox as the West is, we really can't afford to take that chance," he said.

LaMalfa's legislation would still allow prescribed burning to be done, meaning federal land managers could light fires intentionally, to help with forest restoration. But wildfires, even when deemed beneficial by foresters, would have to be extinguished within 24 hours, when possible.

The bill takes the additional step of scrutinizing "backfires," a firefighting tactic that involves intentionally burning vegetation to slow an approaching wildfire. Under the proposal people harmed by backfires, those who lose a house, for example, could file civil suits against the federal government to ensure accountability, LaMalfa said.

He was among several people who criticized the Forest Service last year for not responding more aggressively to fires, notably the Tamarack Fire. The blaze, south of Lake Tahoe, started with the ignition of a single tree, which smoldered for days before exploding into a 69,000-acre conflagration that threatened the community of Markleeville.

Forest Service officials last year defended their response, saying they were putting out fires elsewhere and simply didn't have the bandwidth to cover the remote ignition. But critics jumped on the blaze as an example of irresponsible "let-it-burn" policy.

"When we're not getting the performance out of the agencies (we oversee) we have to take action," LaMalfa said. "And we're not seeing the performance. We have to prod these guys along and get the job done."

The Forest Service declined to comment, citing a policy of not talking about proposed legislation.

But Kelly Martin, a former fire manager who worked for the Forest Service and National Park Service, including 14 years in Yosemite, said it's not good when politicians take away tools from foresters and firefighters.

"Just because you're not doing 100% suppression of a fire, it doesn't mean it's a let-burn fire," she said. "It can still be a fire that is being managed for protection purposes."

At Yosemite, where Martin worked as chief of fire and aviation, she sometimes fought fires on one flank, where there was a threat, and allowed them to burn on another, where combustible vegetation was safely incinerated.

She also said it doesn't always make sense to send hot shot crews to extinguish far-flung flames when they could be protecting areas closer to homes.

Jeffrey Kane, an associate professor of fire ecology and fuels management at Cal Poly Humboldt, formerly Humboldt State, said the new legislation marks a perilous regression.

"This just hearkens back to the major reason we're in this issue," he said. "We've suppressed fires aggressively for so long. You just can't just use that same model to move forward."

Kane was among a few dozen scientists last year who petitioned the Forest Service to reverse a temporary policy it enacted to suppress all fires. The agency, which adopted the policy amid political pressure from LaMalfa and others — including some Democrats like Gov. Gavin Newsom — only dropped the practice once fire season ended.

The new legislation seeking full wildfire suppression would need Democratic buy-in in Congress, which will be tough to obtain. LaMalfa said he was already beginning to seek that support.