

Bill to cut ag burns fails vote

Reyes is only Valley lawmaker to back air bill in Assembly.

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger, The Fresno Bee Capitol Bureau
(Published Friday, September 5, 2003, 12:58 PM)

SACRAMENTO -- A bill to phase out open-field agricultural burning stalled Thursday on the Assembly floor after lawmakers questioned its feasibility and cost.

All but one central San Joaquin Valley member voted against Senate Bill 705, which sets deadlines to curb burning that pollutes already dirty Valley air.

The bill's author, Sen. Dean Florez, accused nonvoting urban Democrats of politically playing to farm advocates: "It says to me they would rather worry about the lining of these rich lobbyists' pockets than about the lungs of asthmatic kids."

Florez, D-Shafter, also said they might have held up SB 705 for leverage on another controversial bill to lift agriculture's historic exemption from air operating permits.

That bill, SB 700, is hotly opposed by farmers who say it is too restrictive and costly. Florez still is talking with agriculture officials about additional tweaks that could help win an Assembly floor vote, which is expected early next week.

Florez said about Thursday's vote, "It's a blatant political play that has little to do with policy and a lot to do with politics. "There's no other way to call it."

The bill, which needed majority approval, received 35 of 80 votes. Thirty-three members voted against the bill, 11 abstained and one was absent. SB 705 will get a second chance on the floor next week.

Assembly Member John Dutra, D-Fremont, who didn't vote, took issue with Florez's bad-politics accusations: "This is not an urban versus Central Valley issue," he said after the vote. "It's a reasonable issue as to if we're being fair for the farming community."

Dutra said Assembly Member Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, and agriculture advocates aired concerns about the bill. Dutra said he wants cleaner air but doesn't "want to put farmers out of business in the process."

Some lawmakers worried the bill doesn't include alternatives to burning or a way to help farmers pay for other disposal methods. Others questioned the viability of biomass facilities -- which can make electricity by using agricultural prunings -- of accepting more farm waste.

Many facilities take a lot of waste from Southern California developers, who can offer better prices than farmers.

Florez's SB 704, which the Assembly plans to hear next week, would provide incentives for biomass plants to take more agricultural waste. Under the bill, plants would share a \$6 million incentive pot if they significantly increase their intake of farm prunings.

Some members said Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, who presented SB 705 on Thursday, should have done so after SB 704.

"This is sort of a cart-before-the-horse situation here," said Assembly Member David Cogdill, R-Modesto, who voted against the bill. "We've got to make sure we have alternatives for agriculture."

Also voting against the bill were Assembly Members Bill Maze, R-Visalia, and Steve Samuelian, R-Clovis. "The farmers are hurting, the prices are low and we're coming in and taking away one of their most precious options," Samuelian said.

The bill would phase out burning of field crops by June 1, 2005, and all other farm waste, such as orchard removals, by 2010.

Said Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford: "The bill before me provided no incentives or no money for the agriculture industry." She also said the \$6 million incentive in SB 704 isn't enough.

Reyes was the only Valley supporter of SB 705. She has sided with Florez and his aggressive, clean-air legislation package.

Florez said Matthews and Parra had tough decisions because they represent the agriculture-laden Valley but challenged them to think more about its polluted air.

"I think they're captured by the agriculture industry," Florez said. "They ought to spend a little more time in their districts. [They're] spending too much time in Sacramento, where the air is better."

Passing the Assembly floor on Thursday was SB 708, which would increase penalties for drivers of gross-polluting vehicles and allow law enforcement to use the extra revenue to inspect more cars randomly or during DUI checkpoints.

SB 708 goes back to the Senate for concurrence, then to Gov. Davis' desk.

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Florez air bills may have to wait

Farm exemption stays unresolved as end of legislative session nears.

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger, The Fresno Bee Capitol Bureau

(Published Monday, September 8, 2003, 7:21 AM)

SACRAMENTO -- Days before a crucial Assembly vote, the political blame game intensified over a bill to end the agriculture industry's historic exemption from air operating permits.

State Sen. Dean Florez cried foul with each strike against Senate Bill 700, one of eight bills in his aggressive, clean-air package.

First, he accused urban Democrats on the Assembly Appropriations Committee of stalling his bill to keep a colleague from a controversial vote. Then, he gave a group of moderate Democrats heat for blocking a bill to phase out open-field agriculture burning, alleging allegiance to farm lobbyists.

Now, as the Assembly gears up to decide the bills' fates, opponents are charging Florez, D-Shafter, with being too much of a renegade, too inflexible and with doing his own political dance.

"If anyone is trying to politicize this, the blame can be put on the other side," said Michael Boccadoro, a lobbyist for the poultry industry. "We felt we were close in negotiation last week, and we felt we had the rug pulled out from under us."

With the session winding down -- Friday is the deadline to get bills to Gov. Davis' desk -- each side wants the other to put away its political boxing gloves. The result of deadlock on SB 700 would be a devastating loss of billions of dollars in highway funds and increased fees for some businesses.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency -- forced by an environmental lawsuit settlement -- told California last year to repeal the exemption or face statewide sanctions beginning in November.

SB 700, which is the only legislative vehicle to end the exemption, and a handful of other air bills are up for an Assembly floor vote as early as today. If they don't pass, farm advocates are to blame for the consequences, Florez said.

"Everyone must come to their senses and recognize that our backs are against the wall, that we have to get this done this year," Florez said of SB 700. "I hope they recognize they are playing a very dangerous game of chicken."

Opponents, however, said it is Florez's fault if the permit deadline is missed.

Florez "continues to play politics with the issue by not wanting to reach the compromise that is necessary," Boccadoro said. "The [lawmakers] we've spoken to ... want to see additional amendments that bring the parties closer together."

Florez said he bent a bit to farm interests Friday, changing his bill to clarify emissions monitoring and permitting of minor pollution sources and large animal facilities, such as dairies.

The concessions came after Florez; Assembly Speaker Herb Wesson, D-Culver City; Assembly Member Joe Canciamilla, D-Pittsburg; and their staffs met late last week for a final hash-out, Florez said.

"They wanted three issues. They got three issues," Florez said. "There should be no reason not to vote for this bill."

But opponents continued to ask for more and said Friday afternoon that SB 700 still wasn't in votable shape. Canciamilla said he hoped to work on more amendments during the weekend, but Florez said there would be no point.

"We've given as much as we can give," Florez said. "That's it."

Agriculture lobbyists said the bill likely won't pass in its current form, and Canciamilla said Friday he wouldn't vote for it without more changes.

"I think we're close," Canciamilla said. "I think we can get this fixed."

If not, Canciamilla and lobbyists suggested slipping into another bill legislation that would remove only the exemption, adhering to the EPA requirement but effectively zeroing out Florez's steps to further clean the air.

The rest of Florez's bill, Canciamilla said, could be worked on and rehashed when a new legislative session starts next year.

But Florez and Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, who has sided with Florez in his air-bill fight, said such a bill never would survive the Senate.

"Not a chance. Not if the world ended," Florez said.

Said Reyes: Senate President John Burton, D-San Francisco, "is not going to allow that to happen to one of his members."

Burton could not be reached to comment.

Reyes, who is presenting Florez's air bills on the Assembly floor, said she is "amazed" by blatant political play among her colleagues.

"As a result of these air-quality bills, I now know why Californians don't like us. It's the politics. ... It's the back-door things. It's the smoking rooms," Reyes said. "I would give this job up today as a result of what I've gone through for these bills."

In the end, will SB 700 pass the Assembly?

"If I had to bet today, no," Reyes said Friday. "But anything is possible around here in the last week."

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More kids needed for asthma study

By Barbara Anderson
The Fresno Bee

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A Fresno children's asthma study to see which levels and types of pollution cause the most difficulty in breathing is in jeopardy unless more children participate.

An additional 75 to 100 children must be enrolled in the study by the end of the year or the Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environmental Study, or FACES, could end early, says lead researcher Ira B. Tager.

"We're at a very critical juncture at this point," says Tager, professor of epidemiology at University of California at Berkeley School of Public Health.

Thus far, 245 children are enrolled in the five-year study, which began three years ago.

For research funding to continue, more than 300 children ages 6 to 11 are needed to gauge the consequences of breathing dirty air.

The study is the first in the country to try to identify children who are especially vulnerable to air pollution and which pollutants cause them to have the most severe health reactions.

The ability to follow children over five years also sets the Fresno-based study apart from others that have chronicled short-term health effects from air pollution.

"We know daily increases in air pollution cause certain children with asthma to have worsening conditions; there's not much argument there," Tager says.

"What we want to find out is which kids, if any, will be at risk of their asthma worsening over the long term."

It would be a shame for the research to stop because of a lack of children in the study, Tager says. The professor was in Fresno on Tuesday to talk to school officials and others about increasing children's participation.

Fresno was chosen as the location for the research because of the high rates of asthma in the central San Joaquin Valley. And the Valley's air pollution levels are some of the worst in the country.

The San Joaquin Valley rivals Los Angeles for levels of ozone, the prime ingredient of smog. Ozone forms when sunlight reacts with emissions from cars, trucks, factories and other combustion sources.

The Valley also becomes cloaked in particulates -- microscopic pieces of soot, ash and chemical solids -- during late fall and winter.

Tracey Campbell of Fresno says her daughter, Beth Campbell, 9, wanted to join the FACES study to learn what triggers the asthma attacks that make it difficult for her to breathe.

"She wanted to know more about it and why she has it. She thinks [the study] is great," Campbell says.

Children in the study are given pulmonary-lung-function tests to measure lung volume. They also monitor their own lung volume by using a small hand-held device for two weeks of the year.

Getting children to join the study is easy once parents bring them in for an interview, says Kathy Butler, FACES project coordinator.

"We make it convenient, fun, nonthreatening. It's just a matter of people knowing about us."

Children in the study receive gift certificates and other rewards for participating.

The Fresno study is part of the California Air Resources Board Vulnerable Populations Research Program.

The program was established in 1999 to identify and protect people most at risk of air-pollution-related health problems.

The board allocated \$3.9 million in 2000 for the first phase of the FACES study and renewed funding at the end of last year.

DETAILS:

Children between the ages of 6 and 11 who live in Fresno or Clovis are needed for the Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environmental Study. The five-year study of the long-term effects of air pollution on children's lungs will end unless enough children participate.

Details: (559) 294-6700 or on the Internet at www.facesstudy.com.

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Senator fights state's air effort

By David Whitney, The Fresno Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- A Missouri senator has taken aim at California's effort to reduce air pollution from lawn mowers and other gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment in an effort to save jobs at two Briggs & Stratton plants in his state.

California Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer said they will defend the California Air Resources Board's regulatory authority and fight Republican Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond's provision when it reaches the Senate floor in the next few weeks.

Feinstein sought to strip the provision from a 2004 spending bill during a Senate Appropriation Committee meeting Thursday, but she lost on a 17-12 vote, with two Democrats joining the committee's 15-member Republican majority in backing Bond.

The measure now heads to the Senate floor, where disputes over provisions in spending bills are typically fought out.

At issue is the state Air Resources Board's plan to start requiring manufacturers to equip small gasoline engines sold in the state with catalytic converters beginning in 2008.

Briggs & Stratton, the world's largest manufacturer of air-cooled gasoline engines for outdoor equipment, contends that to retool its plants to meet the new California standards would be so expensive that it might relocate them outside the country.

Bond, the Republican chairman of the Appropriations Committee panel that wrote the spending bill, said he is not going to let that happen.

"I will use every legislative tool at my disposal to stop California from trying to solve their own air quality problem at the expense of almost 2,000 workers and their families in Missouri," Bond said.

But Feinstein said that the tougher emissions standard would cut pollution by about 50 tons a day when fully operational in 2020, "the equivalent of taking approximately 1.8 million cars off the road."

The requirements build on steps the Air Resources Board took in 1990 and 1996 to lower the amount of pollutants released into the air by lawn mowers, edgers, tillers and weed whackers. Before California took action, small engine emissions were virtually unregulated.

Calls to Briggs & Stratton's corporate office were not returned.

But according to the company's Web site, emissions from its small engines have declined 70% since 1990.

Despite these improvements, Air Resources Board spokesman Jerry Martin said that small engines remain "huge polluters."

"A push-from-behind gas lawn mower cutting grass for an hour is like driving 40 cars for an hour," he said. "These [small engines] contribute 10% of the pollution generated from mobile sources, and we cannot ignore this."

Martin said that catalytic converters have been required for nearly a decade on certain gasoline-fired equipment in Europe, including chain saws. While the small catalytic converters might add a few dollars to the cost of lawn mowers, he said, it's a necessary step because the state has exhausted the cheap and easy methods of reducing its clean air problem.

"We don't have any other alternatives," Martin said.

Martin said the agency also is concerned that the Bond provision could limit the state program to replace old, inefficient diesel motors used in irrigation pumping and other agricultural operations because it applies to any engines smaller than 175 horsepower.

Jumping to the state's side Thursday was the Environmental Council of the States, which said in a letter to Appropriations Committee leaders that the Bond measure is an affront to states' rights.

"The amendment would essentially curtail states' authority to clean up diesel and gasoline off-road equipment," the organization said.

Missouri Congressman seeks to block California smog-fighting law

By GREG RISLING, Associated Press Writer, published in the Bakersfield Californian
September 5, 2003, 03:15:13 AM

LOS ANGELES (AP) - A provision slipped into a federal spending bill by a Missouri senator would thwart California's efforts to cut pollution from lawn mowers, weed trimmers, chain saws and other equipment powered by small diesel or gasoline engines.

Sen. Christopher Bond, R-Mo., inserted the provision to amend the Clean Air Act to block California, and any other states that might follow its lead, from enacting the new emissions standards. Bond said the measure would kill jobs in his state, home to two factories owned by Wisconsin-based engine manufacturer Briggs & Stratton Corp.

A bid to strike the language from the appropriations bill failed Thursday in a Senate subcommittee on a 12-17 vote, said Scott Gerber, a spokesman for Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. Opponents, including Feinstein and fellow California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, will take up the provision again when it comes before the full Senate later this year, Gerber added.

California seeks the new restrictions to aid its fight against some of the nation's worst smog. The new standards would cut emissions by 50 tons a day, the equivalent of removing 1.8 million cars from the state's roads, Feinstein said.

"California is considering a groundbreaking proposal to limit pollution from portable generators, lawn mowers and other gasoline- and diesel-powered engines, but there are those in Congress who wish to pre-empt California's efforts," Feinstein said.

Bond said the focus should be on job retention - not air pollution.

"I will use every legislative tool at my disposal to stop California bureaucrats from trying to solve their own air quality problems at the expense of almost 2,000 workers and their families" in Missouri, Bond said.

Company officials said the cost of retooling the two factories, as well as a third in Kentucky, would be prohibitive enough to force the company to shift manufacturing operations overseas. To meet the provision, manufacturers would likely have to fit their small engines with catalytic converters. The company fears other states could follow California's lead, making it de facto federal law.

"Why is it fair for California to set national standards for emissions?" Thomas Savage, a Briggs & Stratton senior vice president told the Los Angeles Times. The company heavily lobbied against the proposed provisions.

California's efforts to clean its air repeatedly have been clobbered by federal action in recent weeks.

The Environmental Protection Agency refused to commit to any emission reduction measures that the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the clean-air agency for the greater Los Angeles region, sought.

The EPA also has unveiled revisions to the 40-year-old Clean Air Act that will allow power plants and factories to upgrade without adopting the most up to date pollution control equipment; California and other states may go to court to block the revisions.

And last week, the Department of Justice threw its support behind an industry lawsuit that seeks to overturn an attempt by the Los Angeles region's clean air agency to curb pollution from buses, taxis, trash trucks and other fleet vehicles.

Change will give Valley worst air EPA is formulating tough new standards for measuring smog.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, September 7, 2003, 5:41 AM)

Move over, Los Angeles. The San Joaquin Valley soon will become the nation's worst air basin.

A new smog health standard is coming in the next few years, and the Valley already violates it more than any other place in the United States. Los Angeles, the unhealthiest place to breathe for the past half century, would be No. 2.

The new standard focuses on lower background levels of smog affecting people throughout the day instead of one-hour peaks.

In addition to boosting Central California into a dubious spotlight, it will illuminate a Valley mystery.

The Valley is dominated by verdant agriculture and pollution emissions are half the level of the South Coast Air Basin. Yet for the last four years, smog simmered at unhealthy background levels on more days than on the South Coast. Why?

"Nobody really knows why, but we know some possible reasons," said Dave Jones, planning supervisor for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Generally, you have problems if you're inland and you have stable weather."

That means the Valley, with surrounding mountains and hot, windless summers, is pretty much a perfect place for smog.

The South Coast remains the national smog king for peak measurements, the one-hour standard that has been in place for decades.

The South Coast Air Basin has 57 violations this year, more than double the No. 2 offender -- the Valley with 26 violations. Houston has 24.

Authorities have enforced only the one-hour standard since the 1970s, even though they have monitored for the eight-hour periods as well.

Six years ago during the Clinton administration, officials established a health standard for the eight-hour period. The new standard -- which sets 80 parts per billion as the unhealthy level for ozone in the air -- is about 30% lower than the one-hour level.

Years of legal wrangling with industry and environmentalists followed until a court settlement last November opened the door for the new standard.

Some areas of the country that are in compliance with the old standard will be violating the new one.

Nobody knows exactly how much the new standard will affect businesses and industry, because federal officials have not decided yet on how it will be enforced. But, years from now, new smog-reducing technology probably will be necessary.

Medical scientists and federal officials consider the eight-hour measure the better way to protect people from smog, which is filled with a lung-corroding gas called ozone. The gas, which can trigger headaches or asthma attacks, forms in sunny, warm weather as pollution emissions cook, and it hangs in the air longer when there are only light breezes.

One-hour smog peaks are quite dangerous, but people might be able to avoid them by staying indoors, federal officials say. Yet many people can't stay inside all day long. At some point, they leave their home, office or classroom and breathe the outside air.

"[The new standard] is more reflective of the needs of the breathing public," said Jack Broadbent, regional air division director for the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

The public in both the Valley and South Coast is exposed to many more days of eight-hour violations than the one-hour variety, according to state records.

South Coast and the Valley each have 90 days over the eight-hour standard this summer. September and early October are prime times for eight-hour violations.

The Valley has had more than 100 days above the eight-hour standard each year since 1999 -- about the same number it had in the early 1990s.

In contrast, South Coast has dramatically decreased its number of days over the health standard from 161 in 1990 to 96 last year. Cleaner cars and fuels have played a major role, along with many controls on industries, such as petroleum refineries.

Valley air officials estimate 35% of the area's smog-making gases have been removed, but the eight-hour violations have not dropped since 1999. In fact, the number of days above the standard increased last year.

"It's really kind of strange," said Jones.

Federal officials say the district probably will have until 2013 to unravel the mystery. EPA air director Broadbent said that year is the cleanup deadline for air districts classified as in "serious nonattainment" of the standard.

District officials are not optimistic about achieving the standard in that time frame. They said they have struggled for the past decade to get modest gains in the one-hour standard.

"The eight-hour will be even more difficult," Jones said.

The Valley would get several more years if EPA classified the district in a lower category of smog offenders, either as "severe" or "extreme." Since the Valley probably will have more days over the standard than any other place in the country, will EPA consider a lower classification?

"That's something we want to continue to look at," said Broadbent.

In the next few months, the Valley air district is expected to seek the "extreme" designation for the old one-hour standard.

The designation would move the district's cleanup deadline for the one-hour standard from 2005 to 2010.

But no one knows if the one-hour standard will be dumped when the eight-hour is implemented. EPA probably won't announce how the changeover will be made until December or possibly January.

Broadbent said federal officials are considering an option to continue one-hour plans and controls until the eight-hour plans can be completed. Those plans probably won't be complete until 2007.

Environmentalists don't want to see any deadlines delayed. They said local air officials have been working on the air problem since 1990 and have missed many deadlines. More than 300,000 Valley residents suffer respiratory problems, they said.

"We've already lost more than a decade," said Sierra Club member Kevin Hall of Fresno. "I don't think we can wait any more."

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14 fuel-efficient buses added to MAX fleet

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Fourteen new fuel-efficient, clean-burning diesel buses will start arriving this week for the Modesto Area Express. Modesto will pay \$4.49 million for them, using mostly money from the Federal Transit Administration. The buses, made by Gillig Corp., have low floors that allow wheelchairs to roll onto them via a ramp rather than a lift. Some of the buses are 35 feet long and others are 40 feet long. Eleven older-model buses in the MAX fleet -- those that emit the most diesel fumes -- will be taken out of service and sold. After all the new buses arrive and the old buses are sold, MAX will have 46 buses.

Matthews leads fight against bill

Tracy Democrat makes good on vow against clean-air bid

By Will Shuck, The Record Capitol Bureau Chief, September 5, 2003

SACRAMENTO -- Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews helped forge an unusual alliance of Republicans, moderate Democrats and urban liberals Thursday to stall a bill that would stop Central Valley farmers from burning waste in their fields.

Matthews, D-Tracy, made good on her promise of a day earlier to line up so much opposition that state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, would have to water down his clean-air bill if he hoped to keep it from dying on the Assembly floor.

An outraged Florez accused Matthews and Democrats from Los Angeles and the Bay Area of sacrificing the health of Valley children in exchange for campaign contributions from the farm lobby.

"It's amazing to me that urban liberal members of this body would go to bat for agricultural special interests," Florez said. "They are pandering in a very serious way to the ag lobby, and that's unfortunate."

Farm groups and their supporters in the Assembly say Senate Bill 705, already approved by the Senate, puts too heavy a financial burden on growers who save a lot of money by burning field waste instead of hauling it away. But Florez and his supporters say smoke from those fires is helping give the Central Valley some of the nation's dirtiest air.

Florez came to the Assembly floor thinking he had the 41 votes needed to pass the bill. But he fell eight votes short, as even members who earlier pledged support dropped off. The unexpected outcome infuriated his allies.

"I think it's offensive to those of us who live in the Central Valley that urban Democrats who vote on every liberal issue will not allow our area to have clean air," said Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, who carried Florez's bill on the Assembly floor. "I think the motivation is all politics, it's all money -- the ag lobbyists, ... the ag industry."

Florez predicted the opposition wouldn't "withstand the light of day."

But angry outbursts by Florez and Reyes only seemed to irritate the members they hoped to sway.

Assemblyman John Dutra, D-Fremont, one of the urban members who withheld his support, said the notion anyone voted to garner campaign contribution was "insulting, ... and it sounds like a desperate suggestion on the part of a member who doesn't have the ability to get his bill passed on the basis of its merits."

Dutra also bristled after Florez confronted him on the Assembly floor during debate on the bill.

"Attempting to come on the floor and attempting to threaten and coerce members is not a tactic that is well-received," he said. "This is not an urban vs. Central Valley issue, ... but a reasonable issue of are we being fair to the agricultural community."

"He doesn't like to be called an extortionist," Florez countered. "But the line is very thin on this bill."

Dutra said he and others were taking their cue from "Barbara Matthews and members who are obviously more up on those issues."

"We're looking for advice from our agricultural chair, Barbara Matthews," he said. "Barbara Matthews wants a good bill."

Florez, who a day earlier said Matthews shouldn't expect him to offer any further concessions, conceded after the floor vote that "I'm going to negotiate this bill out."

By midafternoon, Florez was willing to soften many of the components of his broad package of clean-air bills, the most controversial of which were expected to come up for a vote Monday.

Matthews said lawmakers could force California's economically stretched farmers out of business if they heap on too many expensive regulations.

Although "we need to eliminate ag burning," she argued, "we can not ask ag to do this now."

All San Joaquin-area Republican Assembly members -- Greg Aghazarian, Guy Houston and Alan Nakanishi -- voted against the bill.

County slow to make rail pitch

By Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, September 06, 2003

As efforts to build a 700-mile high-speed train across California pick up steam, some Central Valley communities are vying for a piece of the expected economic pie.

But so far Merced County doesn't appear to have asked for its slice.

Two Central Valley cities have contacted the California High Speed Rail Authority asking to be considered as a maintenance hub for the trains - if the system is built. But Merced County, the city of Merced and the city of Atwater have yet to take similar action.

That's in spite of having more than 700 acres of available land at the former Castle Air Force Base.

The proposed high-speed train system would link San Francisco and Sacramento to Los Angeles and San Diego, with stops located throughout the Central Valley. Merced residents could travel from here to San Francisco in an hour, and to Los Angeles in an hour and a half.

Before the high speed rail system can be built, Californians must first approve a \$10 billion bond in November 2004.

But if the high speed rail system is built, one or more California communities will be selected as maintenance hubs for the trains. And that's expected to provide millions of dollars in economic benefits to the communities.

One of the selected maintenance hubs will likely be right here in the Central Valley, according to Carrie Pourvahidi, deputy director of the California High Speed Rail Authority.

It also remains to be seen where the train tracks would be built, but that, too, is expected to provide substantial economic benefits to the chosen community.

The company - or companies - hired to build and operate the system will have the final say in where the trains are built and serviced.

However, the California rail authority, according to Pourvahidi, can make recommendations about the best locations.

Still, both Bakersfield and Fresno have already taken steps to request that they be considered as the maintenance hub for the trains.

Fresno County supervisors, the Fresno mayor and the Fresno Chamber of Commerce have all sent letters to the state rail authority asking that Fresno be considered as the hub.

"Fresno offers a ready labor pool and a number of available locations for a maintenance yard," wrote Fresno Mayor Alan Autry in a Jan. 28, 2002 letter. "In addition, both our political leaders and the citizens are united in support of your requirements."

At the same time - responding to a request from the state rail authority - Bakersfield has completed a study of where three different stations could be built. More than six months ago, Mayor Harvey Hall called and requested Bakersfield be considered as a maintenance yard.

But Merced County and its communities so far have taken no similar action.

And this is at a time when Merced County is trying to figure out what to do with 741 acres of land at the former Castle Air Force Base, now called Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center.

"Castle would be a great place to manufacture (the trains). And we need a place to maintain them," said Merced County Supervisor Gloria Cortez Keene, who's served as a liaison between the county and the state rail authority.

But Cortez Keene wasn't sure if plans for future development at Castle include considerations for manufacturing and maintaining high-speed trains.

"It probably doesn't - I don't think it's there," she said, deferring the question to Supervisor Mike Nelson, whose district includes the Atwater and Castle area.

Nelson said he hadn't heard of any proposals to bring the rail maintenance or construction yard to Castle.

"(I'm) always open for suggestions," he said, however.

Meanwhile, Cortez Keene said she's trying to get a spot on the governing board for the high speed rail authority.

And she noted that officials with the rail authority are slated to make a presentation Sept. 16 to the Merced County Board of Supervisors.

After that meeting, she said, it's possible the board will pass a resolution or take action to show support for the rail system.

Asked about other Valley communities that appear to be taking more significant steps to promote train manufacturing and maintenance, Cortez Keene responded, "I think it's a matter of selling it and what's available and we've got the space."

Atwater also has yet to pass any resolutions for or against the high speed rail.

However, Atwater Mayor Rudy Trevino said he's a big supporter of high-speed rail.

"I know that (Supervisor) Gloria Keene is working very hard on it," he said.

Trevino acknowledged the train maintenance yard and manufacturing center could be located at one of several locations in the state.

"I hope Castle is one of them," he said.

Merced Mayor Hub Walsh did not return calls Friday.

But according to Councilman Stan Thurston, the city has never passed a resolution or made a request to have the rail yard located here.

Thurston, also a Merced city councilman and member of the Castle Airport Master Developer Selection Advisory Board, said that developer proposals were accepted earlier this week to guide future development of Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center.

It wasn't known yet Friday if any of those proposals included consideration for a high-speed train yard.

"There are areas that would be appropriate for that," he said of Castle.

John Fowler, also a member of the Castle advisory board, said he couldn't say "anything about the train issue."

However, he did say the board would look at all options.

"Nothing's chiseled in stone yet," he said.

[Modesto Bee editorial, September 7, 2003:](#)

Almonds, money and dust

Money does grow on trees -- just ask the almond growers of Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties.

Last year, almonds harvested in the three counties were worth \$483 million (\$216 million in Stanislaus alone). That is money paid to farmers, not the value after the nuts have been embedded in candy bars or baked into pastries.

That money washes through our economy, funding purchases for new harvesting equipment, pickup trucks, payrolls, water, taxes, clothing and haircuts -- to name but a few. Perhaps some of that money could also be used to help clean our air.

It's September, and the nuts are coming off the trees again. But before we bow in praise of the almighty almond, we should recognize what is being kicked up as the nuts are knocked off: dust, around 15,000 tons of it before the end of October. While it is not the worst pollution problem facing the valley, it hangs like a brown fog over the region and adds to "particulate matter" in the air.

The almond growers are well aware of the problems of dust. The measure of PM10 -- particles that are 10 microns (that's less than 1/7 the width of a human hair) or smaller -- has been the subject of a 10-year study by the University of California at Davis and the California Air Resources Board. The study was partially funded by the growers. Now they can actually quantify how much dust is kicked up and when.

What the study found is that almond harvesting is a greater contributor of PM10 than any other agricultural activity -- producing at least three times more PM10 than any other farming activity. To be specific, the study found that at least 12 pounds of dust per acre goes into the air with

every pass of the harvesting equipment. The study also found that far less PM10 -- nearly 15,000 tons -- is emitted by farming operations than previously thought.

The bad news is that PM10 is also more harmful than many other types of airborne particles.

What can we do about it?

First, we should ask the farmers how to solve the problem. It's their livelihood and they breathe the same air everyone else in the valley breathes.

A "concept" document issued by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District proposes heavy involvement by growers in devising solutions. Patrick Gaffney, one of the authors of the pollution study, said, "The almond industry is being quite proactive to reduce emissions." He added, "It's said that farmers are very ingenious; if you tell them what needs to be done, they'll do it. It's true."

Second, we must ask how we can help. The Air Resources Board's study was released in April. While it provides a wealth of information, it also shows how little we actually know about the causes of our horribly unhealthy air. Even with this latest study, the Air Resources Board documents says, "We are still far from where we'd like to be."

In other agricultural areas, such as the South Coast Air Quality Management District in California and in Maricopa County, Ariz., programs have been implemented that have reduced PM10 emissions.

And that brings us to SB 700 -- the Senate bill up for a vote Monday. While it ends the EPA emissions exemption for agriculture as an industry, it also provides specific, reachable goals such as curtailing open-field burning, removing outdated diesel engines and finding solutions to fumes created by large concentrations of animals. This bill comes from a legislator, Dean Florez, who lives in the farming community of Shafter. It should pass.

Finally, we must be willing to help farmers fund their good ideas with our (and their) tax dollars.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program provides an excellent model. Farmers develop solutions, then submit them to a government panel that provides matching funds. This guarantees buy-in and creative thinking. More than 500 farmers are taking part, replacing polluting pump motors, coating dirt roads to reduce dust and chipping field waste instead of burning it.

Last year, under the direction of U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman, the program's funding reached \$5.5 million. The Modesto native understands that the best way to get a workable solution is to give people a stake in its success. That's what this program does. We need more programs like this and more farmers participating.

As the almond figures show, it was a very good year. They can afford to invest in cleaner air and so can we.

[The Record editorial, September 8, 2003:](#)

Matthews: Assemblywoman wins ag-waste-burning battle

We believe it is time to end the cherished, long-held practice of burning agricultural waste in open fields.

We also recognize that any other form of removal would add expense to farmers' already overregulated activities and increasingly thin profit margins.

Nonetheless, ag interests must be part of the solution to the Central Valley's dirty air. Ag burning dates to the 19th century, but pollution is a late 20th-, early 21st-century problem that we've all created.

Reducing toxic particulate matter is going to take change and adjustment by all of us.

All that said, we lament the failure of Senate Bill 705 in the California Assembly but applaud the gumption of Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy. She is chairwoman of the Assembly Agriculture Committee.

The second-term lawmaker last week made a promise to protect her ag constituency -- and then made good on it.

We'll put aside the merits of SB705 for a moment.

Matthews, a rare moderate in today's Legislature, exhibited real leadership in putting together a bipartisan alliance to stop the bill. She assembled Republicans, fellow moderates and liberal Democrats representing urban areas.

One of those who followed her lead was Assemblyman John Dutra, D-Fremont, who said, "We're looking for advice from our agricultural chair, Barbara Matthews."

The bill's author, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, was outraged. After a day of wild rhetoric, he calmed down and offered that he would "negotiate this bill out."

Given that Matthews has agreed on the need to end the practice of setting fire to ag waste, we have a thought.

Before next week's review of the bill on the floor of the California Senate, why don't the two work together on a mutually acceptable compromise measure?

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, September 6, 2003:](#)

High-speed rail leaving us behind

The greater Merced area has a golden opportunity to become a major player in a prospective high-speed rail network for California but its government leaders need to speed up their recruiting efforts before we get left behind in a cloud of dust.

Bakersfield and Fresno officials already have been lobbying to become a hub on the 700-mile system. So far, however, Merced County, Merced and Atwater representatives have been mostly silent as far as promoting this locale and the time for decisions is approaching rapidly. For the opportunity to pass us by without a major push from Merced borders on criminal neglect.

It's almost a match made in heaven: gaining the high-speed rail hub along with an accompanying maintenance base at Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center. Such a designation at Castle, with more than 700 acres available for development, could mean millions to the Merced-Atwater and Merced County economies.

Before the high-speed train system becomes a reality, however, the state's voters will have to pass a \$10 billion bond in November 2004. California, with its gridlock growing by the day, could benefit from a high-speed system that would whisk travelers from Sacramento to San Diego in a fraction of the time it takes by other means. A nonpolluting system, such as operated already in Europe and Japan, has many advantages and should enjoy popular support. It's environmentally friendly and the wave of the future in a state known for its prowess in embracing cutting-edge technology.

In fact, it's very disturbing to note many of this area's elected officials seem to be largely ignorant about high-speed rail and its possibilities here.

We'd suggest our movers and shakers mount a crash course to learn as much as they can and develop some promotional strategies before officials of the California High-Speed Rail Authority make a presentation Sept. 16 to the Merced County Board of Supervisors.

Government officials in Bakersfield already have conducted a feasibility study on locating the high-speed maintenance base in their community and that sounds like something we should do as well - and quickly. Fresno, including its high-profile Mayor Alan Autry, have made similar pitches. What's been done here? Little or nothing.

Furthermore, supervisors as well as Merced and Atwater city council members need to get moving on the issue. First, some quick study of the matter and its merits is in order and then resolutions of support should be forthcoming soon from these deliberative bodies.

This area has mounted a successful, broad-based campaign before to attract a major development - the University of California, Merced campus - and it can be done again. Other booster groups, like chambers of commerce and advocacy organizations, also need to get tracking on the issue before high-speed trains streak through Merced rather than stopping here.

[Guest opinion piece, The Fresno Bee:](#)

Go-o-o-illy! This town sure can sprawl

By Kevin Frye

Fresno

(Published Saturday, September 6, 2003, 4:15 AM)

"Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!" Gomer Pyle used to say that when confronted with the unexpected on his '60s TV show. But it usually wasn't a surprise at all.

Even the casual viewer could see it coming. So is the case with the Gomers of city hall, as they passed yet another sprawling development, Copper River. Thousands of houses and businesses will be built on hundreds of acres.

That's just what we needed, another equity refuge for SUV-driving suburbanites from San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The project's overly vague and obviously flawed Environmental Impact Report unfortunately found that the development can't help but significantly impact the air quality in Fresno. But luckily for the current residents of that area, the project will actually improve traffic flow (if people who live there just stay off of Friant Road).

Curiously, this didn't stop the Gomers from approving it. They didn't even change it, limit it or ask for more information.

This project has some nice qualities that Fresno really needed -- about 30 years ago. Since then, we have become smogtown and sprawltown USA and really need to rethink our approach to housing, take care of Fresno's people and actually act accordingly.

How long do you think it will take for cleaner trucks and cars to make a dent in this ever-worsening problem? Years? Decades? I'm thinking that in 30 years or more, you can tell your grandchildren about how we used to be able to go outside.

Ouch!

Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! The politicians on the air pollution board don't even want to tell us how bad the air is going to get before the remedies (somewhere in the future) start to turn back the pollution problem. You can only poke yourself in the eye so many times with a sharp stick before even the staunchest pro-growth Gomer says "Ouch, stop it!" But this didn't stop these myopic Gomers either.

You might think that one of our supposedly fiscally conservative Gomers might think that continued stretching of the wafer-thin city resources to the point of failure might not be the best idea. (Got a fire? Got a fire department? Got water pressure? No? Bummer). So much sprawl makes it economically unfeasible to adequately fund such extravagances. Sprawl never has paid its own way. But these myopic, financially endorsed Gomers had their minds made up long ago.

There is no excuse for this behavior. This project surely isn't in the best interests of Fresno or its residents. With the amount of air pollution generated from this development, we may as well put in a coal-fired power plant.

I watched year after year as this project was tacitly passed back and forth from the county Board of Supervisors to the city Planning Commission on to the rubber-stamping City Council. Each group expected the other to rein it in and was unable to do so. So many Gomers.

If we are to make this city work for its people, with appropriately staffed police and fire departments, well-maintained streets and decent-looking, occupied businesses and homes, then we must turn the effort, money and people back inward and upward. That is the only way that we will create a tax base that will support mass transportation and services requisite to a proud, thriving community. But, alas, this may not be Gomer's goal at all.

Gomers are very unpredictable, as the TV show's Sgt. Carter found out the hard way, over and over again, to the detriment of his health. We need a lot of things in Fresno to get on the right track. We certainly shouldn't be marketing ourselves as the equity refuge for wave after wave of San Francisco and Los Angeles retirees. They should move to Iowa, watch the corn grow and consume corn products, while we try to clean our air with corn ethanol gas additives.

Same rerun

For those who really call this city home and enjoy a little bit of diversity in its surrounding landscape, want to breathe O₂ (oxygen) not O₃ (ozone) until we die, and not be overcome by the stench of a rotting city core (that now extends past Shaw), this continued problem is gut-wrenching.

But with every channel I turn to, the same rerun is playing: Gomer, Gomer, Gomer.

Welcome to the All-America City -- Gomertown USA -- and smile when you say it.

[Fresno Bee editorial, September 6, 2003:](#)

Test of will

It's time for Assembly members to do the right thing on clean air bills.

(Published Saturday, September 6, 2003, 4:15 AM)

Come Monday, Valley representatives and others in the state Assembly will have to stand and be counted in the fight to improve the Valley's poor air quality. That's when a package of clean-air bills will hit the Assembly floor for a full vote.

The time for maneuvering and ducking is over. These bills have cleared the state Senate and various Assembly committees. Most of them have met furious opposition from the state's powerful agricultural industry, and most of them have been amended to reflect some of the concerns of agriculture and others. Most have survived more or less intact -- a good thing.

One in particular, SB 700, has been called the linchpin of the eight-bill package offered by state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter. It had a curious time in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, where it was temporarily stalled by urban and coastal Democrats -- those pesky liberals -- in an effort to protect fellow Democrats in the Valley who are under pressure from ag to vote against the measure.

In the end, the committee did the right thing and sent the bill on to the Assembly floor for a full vote.

It's still not a slam-dunk, though it ought to be. SB 700 repeals an exemption from pollution permits that ag -- alone among California industries -- has enjoyed for many years. The federal government has threatened expensive sanctions against Valley businesses if the exemption isn't revoked.

And still there is opposition, largely along partisan lines. That's a genuine shame. Cleaner air is not -- should not be -- a partisan issue. But of course it has become one.

Agriculture is not being singled out, despite the industry's ceaseless and loud assertions to the contrary. It is simply being asked to go first. Many more legislative efforts are ahead, including

some aimed at the largest and the toughest problem: Pollution from the motor vehicles we love so dearly.

And legislative efforts are perhaps the easiest. Changing our deepest-held attitudes will be even harder. Let it start now.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

A crucial air bill comes up for its first vote in the full Assembly. Are the Valley's representatives still unwilling to stand up for cleaner air?

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee:](#)

'We have the proof'

By Elaine Beyer, RN, PHN, M.Ed.
Fresno

(Published Monday, September 8, 2003, 5:09 AM)

With all due respect to Dr. G.L. Thurston [letter Sept. 3] and his many years of service in Avenal, I must disagree as to the severity of the asthma problem here in Fresno. As director of health services for the Fresno Unified School District, I have collected data on this issue for several years.

The rate of parents who identify their children as asthmatics has risen in number every year. Currently we have a student population of approximately 82,000 students. Of this number, during the years of 2002-2003, there were more than 8,800 students identified as asthmatics. These are only the children who have been identified.

Medication cabinets at every school in the district are filled with "rescue breather medication" for children who may become symptomatic while at school. Fresno Unified school nurses are ever vigilant in attempting to prevent children from suffering the severe and sometimes deadly consequences of their asthma. In some instances, however, children are transported to the hospital by ambulance and subsequently hospitalized for treatment.

Do we have a problem here in Fresno? Can we blame the air quality? You bet we can. Research supports that Fresno has some of the worst air quality in the nation. We have the proof on our campuses.

'Clean up our air'

By Rey Leon
Senior Policy Analyst Latino Issues Forum, Fresno
(Published Saturday, September 6, 2003, 5:43 AM)

In the San Joaquin Valley there is a tremendous struggle to breathe clean air. We fight daily to breathe, and we assist our elected officials and agencies to do their work to clean up our air. While advocacy for environmental health has increased throughout the Valley, the need for citizens to speak out on this issue is even more critical.

We are pleased that someone has stepped forward for the hardworking people of this Valley. Through SB 700, Sen. Dean Florez has responded to the needs of his constituents in the San Joaquin Valley. This bill will finally stop the Clean Air Act exemptions that the agriculture industry has long enjoyed.

The industry has had an opportunity to build substantial wealth. Our rural communities have been surrounded by contamination from ag operations for far too long and all people in the Valley

breathe this polluted air. Escalating asthma rates and the hundreds of deaths attributed to particulate matter are strong indicators for more accountability and action.

State elected officials should acknowledge the critical importance of this bill for the future of our families and children's health. All Assembly members should realize that a society with unhealthy people will lead to a society with an unhealthy economy -- you cannot work if you are sick. We must support SB 700.

'Must do our part'

By Sara Mirhadi
Clovis

(Published Saturday, September 6, 2003, 5:43 AM)

Vern Tote is quoted (Sept. 1) saying state Sen. Dean Florez is coming down hard on agriculture" with his package of air quality bills.

I strongly disagree. Why should agriculture continue to be totally exempt from helping to clean our air when other equally prominent industries in our area have been required to do their part for years?

We all -- and that includes ag -- must do our part to make sure our Valley air becomes healthy again. The severe state of our Valley air and its ill effects on our lives make more studies, more delays and more negotiating moot.

The time to approve these bills is now. The Assembly will be voting on the bills soon. Please join me in urging them to vote "yes" on these crucial bills.

Sen. Florez's air bills do "come down hard" -- on improving our air.

'Facts are clear'

By Dr. David Pepper
Fresno

(Published Saturday, September 6, 2003, 5:43 AM)

Dr. G.L. Thurston [letter Sept. 3] wrote: "I have been in private medical practice in the Valley for 37 years and the incidence of asthma in Valley kids is nowhere near one-in-six. Sen. [Dean] Florez's data is inaccurate and flawed."

In fact, the good doctor needs correction. The senator's "data" is from a large UCLA statewide mega-study (CHIS Data) California Health Interview Survey Homepage. From their Web site (<http://www.chis.ucla.edu> <<http://www.chis.ucla.edu>>): "The California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) provides public health information for California's diverse population. Results on a variety of health topics are produced" (August 2003).

This is statewide expert data, not one doctor's opinion. Dr. Thurston is espousing his "expert" opinion, but he perhaps has a limited view. Perhaps he does not see the asthmatic children. Perhaps he is not correctly diagnosing them.

The facts are clear -- and Sen. Florez has used them correctly. Sadly, one in six of our children have asthma. Sadly, this has risen steadily over the last 15 years. Happily, Sen. Florez is helping clear the air. Perhaps the good doctor should come to our Medical Society meetings, read the CHIS report -- or read The Bee occasionally.

Facts on asthma

By Kevin D. Hamilton, RRT
Medical Advocates for Healthy Air, Fresno

(Published Sunday, September 7, 2003, 5:42 AM)

Dr. G.L. Thurston, in his Sept. 3 letter, has confused medical fact with his political distaste for an individual.

He is welcome to argue with Dr. Ron Chapman, head of the state's asthma program about the statistics they have gathered over the last four years documenting asthma prevalence in Fresno County.

He is correct in one sense: One in six is the number of children with asthma symptoms in the last year -- and for three years in a row according to the UCLA California Health Interview Survey, which is ongoing. There are probably half again that many with the diagnosis.

The California ag exemption is illegal. Forty-seven other states have farmers who have to play by the rules. Now ours will, too.

My office sees an average of 1,500 asthma patients annually, virtually all from Fresno County. We have been going since 1994. That is not a myth or exaggeration.

Politics aside, SB 700 is just one of the many tools we need in our tool box to help solve this problem. Follow the money.

[Letters to the Editor, Modesto Bee, September 5, 2003:](#)

End sprawl, reduce immigration

Finally, the truth starts to peek out through the fog of political correctness in The Bee's article ("Report: Sprawl could be reduced," Aug. 27, Page B-1). The United States needs to drastically reduce the number of immigrants before our quality of life starts to look like that of Bangladesh. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to know that with more people coming here there will be more demand for cleaner air, housing, jobs, water, etc.

The governments (federal and state) aren't really doing anything to alleviate this problem; they seem to encourage overpopulation by not putting curbs on immigration. The federal government could start this by enforcing the existing immigration law and by stopping illegal immigration.

STEVEN WRIGHT

Atwater

Environmental reports needed

I am distressed by current proposals before the Stanislaus County Planning Commission to approve the development of 78 parcels along the Stanislaus River in Oakdale without requiring an environmental impact report. The staff recommendation is to approve the parcels despite their admission that "the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment," including water quality, flora and fauna, air quality and noise/traffic impacts on the neighbors.

One of the Planning Commission's jobs must be to protect the community and existing homes. How can this be done without all the information? When these proposals are considered on Sept. 18, environmental impact reports should be required so that the commission can fully evaluate potential negative impacts.

JOHN YOST

Vallecito

