

Flagging the air

Students, parents look at flags to know air quality

By Shannon Darling, Staff writer
[Visalia Times-Delta, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

For asthmatics in the Valley, the air can be public enemy No. 1.

But help is now hanging in the air, in the form of color-coded triangles on flag poles in front of Tulare County schools.

Green, yellow, orange and red are the colors that represent the different levels of air quality, and every morning for nearly two months, school officials have been flying the flags high under the American and California flags.

On Tuesday Matthew Walther, 11, and Michael Vaughn, 11, hung a yellow flag in front of Royal Oaks Elementary School. The yellow flag advertised the air quality as moderate, meaning unusually sensitive groups should limit prolonged outdoor activity, such as running.

Early every morning, schools get information on the air quality from the Tulare County Asthma Coalition as to what color flag to fly, and schools are already applauding the program.

Crowley Elementary School Principal Tammy Gonzalez said parents and teachers have used the flags.

"We have a lot of kids with asthma," she said.

Physical education teachers use the flags at the school the most, she added.

"It tells them when to take it easy," Gonzalez said. "Some days we keep students inside, and other days we have those in the sensitive group sit out."

Officials with the Tulare County Asthma Coalition, the suppliers of the flags, say asthma is a big problem in the Central Valley, but respiratory conditions can be reduced if everyone pays attention to air quality.

That's something nearly every Tulare County school is doing with the help of the flags.

The flags take center stage every morning at one Visalia school.

Every morning at Washington Elementary School in Visalia, students gather around the flag pole to hear the morning announcements and do the flag salute.

Principal Gary Cascarano said every student sees the flag.

"They have had an affect on the adults at the school for sure," Cascarano said.

The asthma flags also fly out in the front of the school for parents to see.

Recently, Cascarano said an orange-flag day, got him thinking about limiting outdoor activity.

"I remember that making an impression on me, and I'm sure it did on the parents as well," he said.

Burn Advisory

[Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

People in Stanislaus County are being asked to refrain from using fireplaces and older wood stoves today because of concerns about air quality. The "burning discouraged" advisory comes from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which has a two-step burn advisory program. Today's advisory for Stanislaus County is the first step: a voluntary request. The next step is a mandatory prohibition.

Merced to fight bad air months with free bus rides

[Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

Uncle Sam is buying free rounds for everyone.

Rounds of bus rides, that is.

For the next two years, in August, September and October – when the Central Valley’s air quality is at its worst – people will be able to ride Merced County Transit buses for free.

Fewer cars on the road mean fewer emissions from gasoline engines. The federal government is providing \$622,500 for the bus rides under an air-quality improvement grant program.

“The idea is we’re going to have a heavy promotion toward the middle or end of spring to kick it off, to let everybody know,” said transportation manager Larry Shankland.

Outgoing Livingston Mayor Gurbal Samra first mentioned the idea of free bus rides three years ago as a way to lessen pollution on Spare the Air days. Spare the Air is declared when smog reaches unsafe levels.

Said Shankland: “The problem back then was, you never knew when a Spare the Air day was coming until it was a Spare the Air day.” With free rides every day, people can take the bus regardless of whether the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has declared a Spare the Air day.”

The Merced County Association of Governments qualified for the bus fare money by demonstrating efficient use of other federal funds aimed at improving air quality.

Here’s how the system works, according to Jesse Brown, the association’s executive director: The government gives out air quality money, local agencies line up projects – and the agencies have about a year to spend it.

The strict timeline rules out putting money into long-term projects such as highway construction. Miss the deadline and the money goes back.

The Merced County Association of Governments received \$5 million and spent it on time. Other counties were not as successful. The Merced payoff: An additional \$4 million.

“It’s a very reasonable policy,” Brown said about how counties can lose or gain air quality improvement funds. “It just means we all need to do the best job we can to keep projects moving ahead on the schedules that we set.”

In addition to free bus rides, the extra funding will allow the purchase of eight new buses. Also, buses will be fitted with global positioning system equipment, allowing transit managers to track their fleet.

New clean air rule a start

It is up to the governor, Legislature and our congressional delegation to accelerate new cleaner-fuel rules nationally

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

The state’s air quality regulators are commended for plugging a loophole in diesel fuel regulations. But we hope further steps can be taken quickly.

Contaminants in diesel fuel are a pulmonary health hazard. Diesel soot and nitrogen oxide emissions also are key ingredients in the formation of smog.

The California Air Resources Board has ordered that large diesel engines not covered by existing cleaner-fuel regulations and that are used solely within the state use low-sulfur fuel.

The new rule requires fishing boats, short-haul locomotives and similar diesel-engined vehicles to comply with the cleaner fuel standard that is already imposed on large trucks and some other commercial vehicles.

One problem with the regulation is that it goes into effect in Los Angeles in 2006 but not until a year later in Kern County.

Why not at the same time in Kern? It is true that the Southern California basin is many times larger and more populous than the Southern San Joaquin Valley. But by any rational analysis, air quality here is as lousy -- worse in some ways -- than Los Angeles', is more difficult to clean and we have fewer financial resources to deal with some of the worst health indicators in the state.

Even at the risk of potential complications caused by an earlier compliance deadline, we hope CARB considers the same implementation date for the area from here to Fresno as is required in Southern California.

Another problem is not CARB's fault, but we hope it and the governor can take a leadership role in solving it.

The federal government has sole authority over the regulation of such mobile sources of pollution as ships, trains and trucks that travel interstate.

For years, Washington has been inexcusably deficient in cracking down on commercial diesel vehicles. Suspicion always has been that the cause was political clout by major transportation companies.

In the meantime for more than a generation motorists have had to pay thousands of dollars in higher car and truck purchase prices caused by clean air mandates for gasoline and the resulting technology requirements.

That has resulted in incalculable benefits to society, but it is no longer acceptable that commercial diesel users be given a relatively freer ride until the federal rules go into effect nearly almost a decade from now.

We urge CARB to work with the Legislature and the governor to develop incentives that may entice major interstate transport companies to switch locomotives and tractors to in-state vehicles to finish their trips when they cross the border into California.

In the meantime, it is up to the governor, the Legislature, our congressional delegation to ceaselessly lobby Washington to accelerate new cleaner-fuel rules nationally.

Taxing by the mile is just a gimmick

[Visalia Times-Delta, Editorial, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

Politicians would rather resort to gimmicks than attempt genuine reform in huge problems such as energy, health care and education.

So Californians instead are treated to "solutions" such as taxing motorists according to the miles they drive, not the fuel they buy.

The idea shows innovative thinking, but it has so many holes, it will probably never get off the ground. The larger question is why policy makers do not craft better-thought-out solutions to these kinds of problems.

Joan Borucki, appointed director of the Department of Motor Vehicles by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, has proposed the idea in the past -- installing a device in every vehicle that monitors travel by satellite, then charging the vehicle owner by the mile. Taxing motorists by their mileage would replace the state's 18-cent-a-gallon gas tax.

Transportation officials such as Borucki fear that, with the rise in fuel-efficiency in automobiles, car owners would buy less gas, cutting the revenue they need to maintain roads.

Charging vehicle owners by the mile is only one innovation from the administration of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. His latest appointee, Terry Tamminen, the new secretary of the Cabinet, is writing a book about ending the use of oil entirely, calling it a "dinosaur."

He's right. But why aren't policy makers like Tamminen and Borucki providing more incentives for alternative fuel vehicles and accelerating development of technology that would make the nation energy self-sufficient?

Removing the gas tax would lead to increased fuel usage, with the subsequent increase in air pollution. It would remove the incentive for fuel-efficient cars, essentially treating SUV owners and hybrid car owners equally.

Taxing by the mile would be susceptible to fraud and manipulation. At least the current system of measuring and taxing gasoline is reliable.

There's an ulterior use that makes monitoring mileage in vehicles attractive to transportation officials: They can also discover when and where people drive. By charging a higher rate for driving at peak commuting hours, for instance, they can manipulate traffic patterns.

Of course, the government can also tell where your vehicle is at any given moment. That kind of information leads to some troubling Big Brother scenarios.

Technology that would monitor traffic and even raise revenue according to miles driven, is actually in place now. We fear what would happen if automated before the public or the technology is ready.

The Schwarzenegger administration and its top officials are good at thinking outside the box in seeking solutions to energy and [air pollution](#). The governor himself is a champion of hydrogen-powered hybrids. Fine. They should use that zeal to pursue more of those alternatives and generate enthusiasm for ideas that will really work and that the public will accept. They're out there. They need more attention than these gimmicks.

The state should pursue realistic alternatives.

Tire burning toxic

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2004](#)

I'm concerned by a recent decision made by the Kern County Air Pollution Control District to approve a request from National Cement to burn tires as fuel in our county.

National Cement is located in the southwestern part of Kern. A few months ago the facility filed a notice of preparation to substitute 25 percent of their fuel with tires. The plant has a poor environmental record. In the last 20 years, the company has received 63 violations. Fines for those violations total over \$1.4 million.

Even though the KCAPCD board was completely aware of the company's horrendous environmental record, evidently, they didn't think it was significant. County Supervisor Ray Watson, who also happens to be a director on the KCAPCD board, made the motion to approve the company's request to burn tires. It passed unanimously.

National Cement has been burning petroleum coke as fuel since the 1970s, which, admittedly, emits many toxic chemicals. Petroleum coke emits so many pollutants some toxic emissions actually went down when the factory burned tires in 2003 during a comparison test. But dioxin is one air pollutant that increased by 20 percent. Dioxin may be the worst pollutant in the list of chemicals the factory emits. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences states "The ability of dioxin to cause cancer in laboratory animals is well established."

Incidentally, Tejon Ranch leases the land National Cement sits on and the facility is very close to Tejon's proposed 23,000-home Centennial housing project. I wonder when Tejon starts promoting Centennial if the nearby tire burning facility will be in their brochure?

-- LINDA MackKAY, Lebec