

In Search of Farm Equipment to Lessen Air Pollution

New California rules are prompting growers to find alternative and innovative products

By Jerry Hirsch, Times Staff Writer

[Los Angeles Times, Saturday, Feb. 12, 2005](#)

TULARE, Calif. — Deteriorating air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is bringing tougher pollution controls for the region's farmers, which in turn is creating a growing market for environmentally friendly farm equipment.

Struggling to comply with the new rules, farmers are turning to innovative products and methods such as almond harvesters that kick up less dust, wood chippers as alternatives to burning orchard prunings and tractors steered by satellite-based global positioning systems to reduce the use of fuel, pesticides and fertilizers.

Even the venerable equipment maker Deere & Co. will come out with a line of more fuel-efficient, less polluting John Deere tractors this year, in part because of California's increasingly stringent regulations.

"What happens in California percolates across the country, even in agriculture," said Craig Weynand, Deere's Western sales office branch manager.

Air quality has become a vexing issue for the valley, which health officials say has one of the highest asthma rates in the nation. In response, the state Legislature removed the air pollution exemption for farms in 2003.

What's more, since December, growers must submit plans for controlling dust to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. And farms that emit more than 12.5 tons per year of certain smog-producing chemicals have to obtain permits from the district, which has missed multiple federal deadlines for cleaning up air pollution in the region.

Starting in June, there will be a prohibition on burning orchard prunings and other agricultural waste related to several dozen major crops, including peaches, plums and citrus fruit.

The new rule sent sales of wood chippers, which chop up trees into tiny pieces of mulch, up 10% last year at Cal-Line Equipment Inc. in Livermore, said Bruce Bartling, a company spokesman.

"But we think the real impact will be later this year when the restrictions tighten," he added.

Cotton grower Cannon Michael is one farmer who has already made a sizable investment in environmental cleanup. His Bowles Farming Co. is using a new 45-foot long, 50,000-ton farm implement known as the Optimizer, which reduces the number of passes that tractors have to make through his fields near Los Banos.

Developed by Turlock-based Tillage International, the Optimizer is an immense gray machine that resembles an upside down battleship. It can hold up to nine types of implements, including a row of discs that cut and turn over the soil, an eggbeater-like leveling and blending device and a line of heavy barrels that smash dirt clods and firm the seedbed. Another attachment drops seeds into the ground.

"Before we would have to do six operations through the fields to get ready for planting," said Michael, a co-owner of Bowles. "Now we can do that in two."

Fewer passes mean less dust kicked up into the air and a reduction in diesel emissions from Bowles' fleet of tractors.

But what Michael really likes about the equipment is that it saves thousand of dollars in fuel and labor expenses. He says it can be used on about two-thirds of the farm's 6,000 acres each season, saving the company about \$50 an acre, or \$200,000 a year.

The Optimizer also qualifies the farm to apply for a special U.S. Department of Agriculture payment of up to \$112,500 for converting to less polluting growing practices.

For a large operation, the tiller pays for itself, said Michael, even without a federal environmental quality payment.

The Optimizer was among the 100 acres of harvesters, combines, tractors, sprayers and other equipment on display this week at the World Ag Expo in Tulare. Other farmers viewing it seemed impressed.

"We could prepare and plant our 600 acres of hay with this, all in one pass," said Gary Collins, a Petaluma grower.

Collins also could collect about \$50,000 in federal Environmental Quality Program Incentives if he used the tool on his entire acreage. But even with that, Collins questioned whether his operation could ever support the tiller's \$189,000 list price and the \$200,000 expense of the massive 450-horsepower tractor required to pull it.

Almond growers in particular are under pressure to reduce air pollution caused by the dusty nature of their harvesting technique.

On display at the Expo were newly developed almond-gathering machines from Modesto-based Exact Harvesting Systems. The harvesters, which resemble big yellow canister vacuums, use a closed-air loop to separate nuts from ground refuse. That reduces dust emissions by up to 70%, said Doug Flora, Exact's co-owner.

It works like this: A pickup chain grabs the crop off the ground along with dirt, grass and leaves. The heavier nuts fall back to the ground, to be collected later, while the refuse is dropped to the ground in separate piles instead of being blown into the air.

The three pieces that make up the Exact system will retail for \$230,000, about 20% more than conventional equipment.

Although lots of farmers were kicking the tires of the various eco-friendly machines at the Expo, such price tags remain a hurdle for many.

"I'm here to keep up with technology," said almond farmer Tom Caswell of Modesto as he looked at Exact's machines. "But I don't think we will buy this type of stuff until we are forced to."

Zoning sometimes restricts developers

By MISTY WILLIAMS, Californian staff writer
[Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Feb. 13, 2005](#)

Developers have drastically changed their views in the past decade.

They say neighborhoods filled with cookie-cutter houses -- like those that dot much of southwest and northwest Bakersfield -- aren't the future.

Lifestyles and values are changing, said Bruce Freeman, president of developer Castle & Cooke.

People want to simplify -- smaller homes and yards, less maintenance, more mobility, Freeman said.

So developers like Castle & Cooke are planning self-contained communities filled with shopping centers, parks, schools and a variety of housing within walking distance of homes.

That includes high-density housing like townhomes, condos and small-lot homes, which is important, he said.

"We're running out of land in good locations," he said.

The hope is that these tighter-knit communities will help conserve land, ease traffic congestion and [reduce air pollution](#), said Hans Johnson of the Public Policy Institute of California.

Similar concepts have already found success in large metropolitan regions such as the Bay Area and Sacramento, which are promoting high-density housing near transit centers and infill projects, Johnson said.

But is Bakersfield ready for it?

Some researchers see the city with its leapfrog and low-density developments as a poster child for suburban sprawl, he said.

The Central Valley seems more resistant to change than other areas, according to a recent survey by the institute.

Fifty-three percent of Californians would choose to live in a small home if it meant a short commute to work, according to the survey.

That figure drops to 43 percent in the Central Valley.

A majority of valley residents, 58 percent, also prefer neighborhoods where homes are far apart even if it means driving to parks, according to the survey. Statewide, 49 percent of adults say they'd rather live far apart.

Bakersfield City Councilman Mike Maggard said the city wants to discourage sprawl.

"The San Joaquin Valley is undergoing an explosion," Maggard said. "We have to find a way for people to live here and consume less land."

People may not be ready for high-density housing; they haven't had the experience, Freeman said.

But they shouldn't think high density and envision barracks, he said.

Castle & Cooke's next big project, three square miles west of Buena Vista Road, will include townhomes, condos and small-lot homes and will be more focused around a commercial center.

These types of communities not only address political hot buttons like air pollution but also create healthier neighborhoods, said local developer Gregory Petrini.

Large bike lanes and pathways encourage active lifestyles and give neighbors a chance to interact, he said.

Petrini, who is master-planning a southwest community with his brother, said he was inspired by Castle & Cooke's success in Bakersfield.

"People will pay more to live in an area that has an identity to it," he said.

Castle & Cooke communities such as Seven Oaks have proven successful.

They've also tested smaller-lot homes in a few neighborhoods, though finding places to do it is tough, Freeman said.

According to city ordinances, houses can't be built on lots smaller than 6,000 square feet using a typical single-family home, or R-1, zone.

For that, a builder needs an R-2 zone, which allows both single-family homes on smaller lots or multifamily housing.

That's frustrating, Freeman said.

Castle & Cooke can't build smaller, more affordable homes in R-1 zones that cover much of the southwest.

Neighbors often fear developers will automatically build apartments in R-2 zones and sometimes protest those changes, said city planner Jim Eggert.

But builders have options, Eggert said. Planned unit developments, which have their own special zoning, allow for smaller lot sizes.

The zone change can slow things up a bit, but its more specific requirements hold developers -- especially those who change their minds often -- more accountable, he said.

Castle & Cooke is working closely with the city on its next project.

Bakersfield needs more integrated neighborhoods, places where people can walk to the corner store, Freeman said.

"Otherwise everybody is always in their car," he said.

Coalition seeks aid to ensure housing

Fresno group wants decent homes for all

By Sanford Nax

[Fresno Bee, Saturday, Feb. 12, 2005](#)

A coalition dedicated to preserving affordable housing is raising its profile in an attempt to seek more financing, land and programs that could lead to more apartments and houses for low- to middle-income families.

The 8-month-old Fresno Housing Alliance is a coalition of community, nonprofit and church groups that wants to ensure families live in adequate housing.

Members also worry about the effects of rising real estate prices and cuts in federal funding on the cost of housing in the central San Joaquin Valley.

"This is everyone's issue," the Rev. Steve Ratzlaff, pastor of Mennonite Brethren Church and an alliance member, told 150 people who gathered Friday at Hope Lutheran Church.

The participants heard from representatives of the city's housing agencies and from nonprofit developers such as Habitat For Humanity and Self-Help Enterprises. The discussion was a first step in the effort for more affordable housing, they said.

Many of the people came from churches and other groups that assist the city's poorest families, many of them immigrants. Southeast Asians and others who endure substandard housing seldom complain and their plights have largely gone unnoticed, until recently.

"The silence became deafening," said the Rev. Sharon Stanley, who works with Southeast Asian refugees.

But the affordable-housing issue has extended beyond the refugee groups.

Home prices have climbed faster than wages, and only about 27% of the households in Fresno County can afford a median-priced house, compared with 59% in 2000.

Ratzlaff expressed concern that today's children won't be able to buy a house tomorrow, while other participants noted that few housing-assistance programs target middle-class families.

Thus, the coalition is setting its sights on ensuring that existing houses and apartments are not substandard. It is pledging to work for increased land, financial resources and nonprofit developers devoted to affordable housing.

Members also talked about the need for inclusionary zoning, which requires developers to set aside a portion of their new tracts for affordable housing, and for trust funds that earmark money for low-income housing projects.

But the challenges are many. Inclusionary zoning is controversial, and government agencies that provide housing for low-income families are having their funds cut.

For example, the Section 8 program of the Housing Authorities of the City and County of Fresno, which provides rent subsidies, lost \$2.5 million for 2005.

City officials Nick Yovino and Michael Sigala said affordable housing has become a top priority.

Yovino, the city's planning director, said the new general plan encourages growth to the south, west and downtown in an effort to curb sprawl.

It also mandates higher densities and more developments that incorporate commercial and residential uses in the same project or building. That reduces sprawl and cuts air pollution by reducing the number of vehicles on the road.

Sigala, manager of the Housing and Community Development division, said his agency earmarks \$10 million annually for construction, rehabilitation and home buyer assistance programs.

Last year, 316 new affordable housing units were constructed or committed for construction, 100 units received some form of rehabilitation, and 74 families received home-buying assistance, according to a draft housing element progress report. Those numbers don't include projects by the Redevelopment Agency.

In addition, the city is buying three parcels totaling 20 acres in southeast Fresno for affordable-housing developments, and a housing resource center is planned at Manchester Center.

Still, more needs to be done, city officials admit.

The quest for additional funding continues, Sigala said, and housing advocates called for a change in traditional thinking.

Yovino noted some contradictions: People decry urban sprawl but oppose an apartment complex planned for next door, and everyone says air pollution is bad, but few are willing to get out of their vehicles.

Muni diesel deadline passes without action

Charlie Goodyear, Chronicle Staff Writer

[San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, Feb. 14, 2005](#)

Disappointing environmentalists and public health advocates, San Francisco's Municipal Railway has missed the first of three deadlines to phase out about 150 highly polluting diesel buses.

The first deadline, mandated by last year's voter-approved Proposition I, expired last month and required Muni to replace a quarter of the buses. The Board of Supervisors' land use committee will hold a hearing on Wednesday to examine how the transit agency is complying with the terms of Prop. I.

But environmentalists are already crying foul.

"It's a cause for concern that the first deadline for complying with a voter-approved measure has come and gone without any compliance," said Jon Golinger, spokesman for a coalition that includes the American Lung Association, the Sierra Club and the National Resources Defense Council. "It just means more pollution every day. And this raises questions about whether Muni is willing to comply with the will of the voters."

Under Prop. I -- passed last March by more than two-thirds of San Francisco voters -- Muni must replace by 2007 its pre-1991 diesel buses, which number about 150 out of the 454 diesel vehicles operated by Muni. The transit agency maintains the fifth largest bus fleet in the United States.

"We are very concerned with getting the 1988 diesel buses off the road as soon as possible," said Linda Weiner, a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association. "These buses are so old they cannot be retrofitted with any modern technology, and in the meantime continue to spew toxic emissions of particulate matter that can lead to lung cancer and premature death."

Under the first deadline, diesel buses dating from 1984 and 1988 were to be phased out and replaced with cleaner vehicles.

"You see them, you taste them," Golinger said of the buses, which blow sooty exhaust into the air. "They're there every day. We're still concerned that Muni is not complying with the letter of the law."

Muni officials said they are trying to satisfy the requirements of Prop. I, which, they note, did not provide for any funding for the new buses. The agency uses the older diesel buses only when needed as part of a reserve fleet of vehicles.

"The problem is the legislation did not come with any money," said Muni spokeswoman Maggie Lynch. "We are trying to comply with Prop. I. Over 50 percent of our daily fleet is nonpolluting," Lynch said, referring to Muni's full range of transit vehicles, diesel and electric trolley buses, electric trains and cable cars.

Environmentalists had urged Muni to buy natural gas buses. The transit agency signaled last year it was interested in buying hybrid diesel-electric vehicles after they were certified for use in California.

But last week, Lynch said Muni instead is working on a deal to buy 45 used and less polluting "clean" diesel buses from AC Transit for \$4.1 million. Muni is expected to acquire the buses -- built in 1993 but fitted with upgraded engines -- within the next 60 days, she said. A best-case scenario has the buses going into service at the end of this year after they are repainted and refurbished.

Muni is also looking at longer-term plans to buy hybrid diesel-electric buses.

Supervisor Tom Ammiano said he hopes Wednesday's hearing, which was requested by environmentalists, will provide some resolution of the controversy.

BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Pollution-clogged Pakistani city welcomes a bar that's geared to the trendy elite, even though alcohol is illegal

Declan Walsh, Chronicle Foreign Service
[San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday, Feb. 13, 2005](#)

With its velvety sofas, discreet lighting and mellow music, Pakistan's first public bar has the look and feel of a fashionable New York lounge. But instead of wineglasses or beer bottles, the counter is cluttered with tubes that dispense a cocktail more befitting a sober Muslim country -- scented oxygen.

For \$8.33 a hit, well-heeled Pakistanis at Lahore's Oxygen Bar insert a neon cannula up their nostrils and stretch back for a 10-minute oxygen rush in a range of aromas from cinnamon to spearmint to the house blend called Relaxing.

"It's like a natural high," explained Irfan Khan, 31, a biomedical engineer turned lounge-lizard entrepreneur. And in Pakistan, where alcohol is -- by law, at least -- prohibited, it's one of the few highs available. "You feel refreshed because your cell reactions are faster," he said, "and the free radicals are taken care of."

In Pakistan, where terms like "cell reactions" and "free radicals" evoke images of armed Islamic militants who hate America and profess loyalty to Osama bin Laden, such language inspires anxiety. But for Khan, the Oxygen Bar represents a less-publicized side of his country.

In cities such as Lahore and the commercial capital, Karachi, middle- and upper-class Pakistanis are prospering financially, and many of them like to flaunt it. Down the street are a new BMW dealership and several trendy clothes boutiques. Elsewhere, male beauty salons have sprung up offering pedicures, manicures and facial massages.

"We are a Third World country, but the elite has a lot of money and don't know what to do with it," he said. "We can help them."

Early clients included actors from the local "Lollywood" film industry -- the smaller cousin of India's famed Bollywood -- and others working in creative fields.

"I had already been to an oxygen bar in the U.S., and I thought it was really good," said actor Haider Sultan, speaking by telephone during filming of a local production.

For Khan, the inspiration for an oxygen dispensary came from a business trip to Singapore.

"I saw this air bar, and it was a real attraction. Everyone wanted to try it. I thought, 'This is something we need at home.' "

After doing some research, he discovered that the concept was pioneered in Japan and popularized in trendy Los Angeles bars frequented by movie stars.

He figured there was no better place to sell gulps of fresh air than in his hometown of Lahore -- a wheezing, belching South Asian metropolis of more than 5 million inhabitants. Traditionally known as the "city of gardens," Lahore has in recent years become notoriously choked with pollution.

The streets are clogged with beat-up cars and rickshaws that swerve around, spewing plumes of foul-smelling exhaust amid a deafening cacophony of horn blowing. On the sidewalk, men crouch near the ground to smoke the hookah, a water-based tobacco pipe that is popular with young people.

But the Oxygen Bar, which also sells 16 blends of green tea, has no intention of catering to the unwashed masses. Its target clientele is unabashedly healthy and wealthy.

"We are targeting the elite 'A-class' -- actors, models, people from the fashion world," said Khan. "Taking oxygen is a fashion statement."

It is also a financial statement in a city where a few minutes of breathing through one of Khan's aromatic tubes costs as much as many families make in a week. According to the most recent U.N. Human Development Report, Pakistan is among the world's least developed nations, with 65 percent of its 150 million people surviving on \$2 or less a day.

But hunger is not a concern to the Oxygen Bar's customers, who can stretch back listening to a Beethoven symphony or use headphones to bliss out to the sound of crashing waves. Optional extras

include eye massagers -- plastic goggles that vibrate -- imported from Japan, cups of green tea and a rich chocolate cake made by Khan's sister.

The trendy joint is a coup for Lahore in its battle for cosmopolitan cool with Pakistan's largest city, Karachi. Eventually, the bar will be members-only, said Khan. "Well-traveled Pakistanis have already seen this idea abroad. Now they don't have to go around the world to get their oxygen."

A more important question, however, is whether they want to travel across town. In its first four weeks of business, the Oxygen Bar drew just 68 customers, a slow start that Khan said was normal. Some were enthusiastic, but others felt the bar is not quite up to snuff.

"A good effort, but the ambience could be more serene," said local fashion designer Ather Ali Hafeez in a phone interview. "It needs to be more Zen or whatever."

Others who showed up apparently thought they might get served a cold beer.

Khan offered them a cannula and green tea instead. "It's wishful thinking," he said with a sigh, "that just because there's the word 'bar,' there might be some alcohol."