

Class makes semifinals in environmental contest

By Jennifer Torres

Stockton Record, Saturday, May 21, 2005

TRACY - When Hirsch Elementary School student Muhammad Khalid biked to school earlier this year, he helped cut down local air pollution by about 50 pounds and also helped his classmates earn recognition in a statewide environmental-education contest. This week, fifth-graders in Kathleen Teixeira's class learned they were semifinalists in the 2005 Environmental Challenge, sponsored by the Walt Disney Co. and the California Environmental Education Interagency Network.

About 1,300 other schools participated, and Hirsch finished in the top 20. Basically, this program encourages fifth-grade students to think and act environmentally at school and at home and in the community, said Ed Wong, an air pollution specialist with the California Air Resources Board.

Students were to design and carry out a major project that would address an environmental issue, Wong said.

Teixeira's class chose to tackle air pollution with their project, Air Pollution Dudes! If people pollute their air too much, the air is going to be too thick and too dirty to breathe, said Muhammad, 10.

The students measured air pollution at various campus locations, developed computer presentations on the issue and organized a "spare the air" day in which parents and teachers were encouraged to bicycle, walk or carpool to school.

Ally Vigil, 10, wrote a play about a family of environmental heroes called to save their community from the dark Mr. Smog and his sidekicks Sulfur and Ozone. Wong read an introduction to the play. "The town was always a happy one," Ally wrote. "They cared about the environment, but they didn't always know how to do it. That's when they turned to the Air Pollution Dudes."

Maddie Lau, 10, said she was surprised to find out about polluted air's potential health effects. "I learned how much air pollution we have where we live," she said. "It's healthier with better air."

Muhammad said he probably lives too far away from school to bike there often, but he said he will encourage his family to carpool whenever possible.

Anthony Presto, of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, visited the award's ceremony held for Teixeira's students this week and congratulated their efforts. "We send our kids to school and expect them to learn things that are really important," he said. "What we don't expect is that they're going to bring it back home and teach us."

Annual calendar contest begins

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, May 24, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is accepting drawings for its 2006 annual calendar contest.

The contest is open to students from kindergarten to grade 12.

Drawings must be in color and should contain a message about ways to help clear the Valley's air. Entries may be in crayon, marker, colored pencil or watercolors, and must be submitted on 8 1/2-by-11-inch unlined white paper.

Entries must have the student's name, telephone number, address, school, grade and age on the back of his or her drawing. Do not fold or staple entries.

Mail entries to Calendar Contest, Valley Air District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, CA 93726.

Entry deadline is Sept. 30.

Details: (559) 230-6000 or on the Internet at www.valleyair.org.

Something to choke on: Sequoia, Kings Canyon worst parks for air

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, May 25, 2005

It's another "bad list" for the Central Valley.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon have the worst air of any national park in the country, according to the June issue of Smithsonian, which came out today.

Using the U.S. EPA's "unhealthy air" standard for ozone, writer Charles Petit found Sequoia and Kings Canyon had 305 unhealthy air days from 1999 through 2003. That's 68 fewer than Los Angeles, Petit writes in his article, "Hazy Days in our Parks," and more than double the number of unhealthy days at Joshua Tree National Park, the second runner up with 138.

California is home to four wilderness areas on Petit's list of 10 national parks with the worst ozone pollution. Yosemite took fourth and Death Valley, ninth.

Officials at Sequoia and Kings Canyon could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon.

"(The air has) already gone from a broth to a stew, and if we're not careful our stew will turn into a chowder," said Bill Tweed, Sequoia and Kings Canyon's chief park naturalist, in Petit's article. "On a fair number of days, it is not even healthy to get outside and walk. That is a most direct assault on our mission."

Quarry OK'd after 20 years

Kaweah River Rock gets permit from supervisors

By David Castellon, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Wednesday, May 25, 2005

A controversy that has brewed 20 years over whether to allow construction of a rock quarry in Woodlake may have come to an end with Tuesday's vote by the Tulare County Board of Supervisors to grant a permit for the project.

Officials with Kaweah River Rock, the company that plans to build the quarry, whooped and had broad grins on their faces after the board voted unanimously to let the project go forward despite last-minute pleas by some people at the meeting to deny the permit.

After the vote, company officials - who first proposed the quarry project back in 1985 - were already discussing their next steps: obtaining permits, building an access road to the planed 280-acre site east of State Route 245, and setting a goal of 2006 to begin construction.

Del Strange, a member of Valley Citizens for Water, a group of neighbors fighting the quarry project, said Tuesday's vote was "disappointing, but it may not be the end. We'll have to look at what we do next."

He wouldn't comment on what that might be.

Strange's group opposes the quarry project for numerous reasons that range from concerns about the quarry's potential damage to wells and groundwater supplies to the potential effects on the flow of groundwater feeding wells in Woodlake and Visalia.

"They failed to consider a number of issues," Strange said, including what he sees as a lack of a groundwater monitoring program and failing to set sufficient procedures for property owners to seek restitution from Kaweah River Rock if wells are contaminated or lose water because of the quarry operation.

But Patrick Ford, a project manager for the Tulare County Resource Management Agency, said the permit has a provision for Kaweah River Rock to pay for a third party to monitor the groundwater.

And Kaweah River Rock officials said that the project has undergone numerous changes over the years to mitigate concerns about water, traffic and other issues.

"It's all been designed with cutoff walls and [groundwater] recharge systems ... all proven techniques," said Dave Harrald, general manager of Kaweah River Rock.

Ford said the original project proposal involved an 800-acre quarry in which Kaweah River Rock could dig 80 feet down over 30 years. Now it's been reduced to a 280-acre site with a depth limit of 45 to 55 feet.

Feinstein pushes plan for truck toll

Highway 99 traffic could be included in the senator's proposal to clean the air.

By E.J. Schultz / The Fresno Bee

Wednesday, May 25, 2005

Large pollution-spewing trucks passing through the San Joaquin Valley would pay toll fees under a clean-air proposal being pushed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

The Democratic senator wants to get the measure added to the massive federal highway spending bill, Feinstein spokesman Scott Gerber said.

Versions of the highway bill have been passed by the House and Senate. The two chambers must now agree on a final bill that will be forwarded to President Bush.

"We will be working with members of the conference committee to try and get this provision in the final bill," Gerber said.

The amendment at this point is short on details and will likely face stiff opposition from the trucking industry, which generally opposes tolls.

A version submitted to the Senate does not detail exactly who would pay tolls or precisely how proceeds would be used, though local officials say money could be used for clean air initiatives such as vehicle-replacement programs.

Gerber said details would be worked out by the state of California, which would have the ultimate say on the proposal.

"The goal is to target those trucks with the dirtiest engines," he said, suggesting that trucks coming from outside California are most likely to be assessed fees because other states have looser emissions rules.

With large gas tanks, many out-of-state trucks are able to make it through the state without buying California's cleaner-burning fuel. The amendment states that tolls could be collected at interstate weigh stations and that variable fees would be established "taking into account the amount of emissions generated."

Tolls would apply to trucks with a gross vehicle weight of 14,000 pounds — about one size larger than the average pickup — or more, according to the amendment. No specific highways are named but language suggests fees could be collected on state Highway 99.

Tolls, according to the amendment, could be collected in "an extreme [clean air] nonattainment area, including on a state highway that is regularly used for interstate commerce and is used as [an] alternative route to an interstate highway."

The proposal was put together as a result of meetings in recent weeks between Feinstein and Fresno officials, including Mayor Alan Autry.

Trucks, Autry said, are "running through this Valley leaving nothing behind but pollution."

About 18,360 trucks daily drove by downtown Fresno on Highway 99 in 2003, the latest figure available, according to the California Department of Transportation.

Stephanie Williams, senior vice president for the California Trucking Association, said tolls would do little to clean up the air.

Interstate trucks are among the cleanest-burning trucks on the road, she said. Because the trucks travel so many miles a year, out-of-state companies buy new, cleaner-burning vehicles frequently, she said.

"Our problem isn't the age of the interstate trucks," Williams said. "It's the age of the trucks in California."

The state has the strictest fuel standards in the nation, meaning trucking companies based here pay more for fuel, Williams said.

With higher costs, they buy new trucks about every 13 years, compared with the national average of about every six years, she said.

Ganduglia Trucking of Fresno has a goal of replacing trucks in its 60-vehicle fleet about every five years.

But owner Jim Ganduglia said with the state's high fuel costs and other expenses, such as workers' compensation insurance, he's only been able to replace some trucks every 10 or 12 years.

Ganduglia recognizes the problem of out-of-state-trucks: "If you come from Mexico, we don't even know what they're burning."

But, he said, toll rules would be hard to enforce. Instead, he supports a national fuel standard that would level the playing field for all companies.

Williams said the toll proposal could violate interstate commerce laws that prohibit different rules for out-of-state and in-state trucks.

"The toll is a Band-Aid," she said. "It'll get shot down in the courts and we'll be back to the same problem. The problem is fuel prices."

Pete Weber, co-chairman of the Regional Jobs Initiative, a mostly volunteer job-creation group in Fresno, supports the toll proposal on the basis that it is a way to attack one of the largest sources of air pollution.

Toll proceeds, he said, could be used to replace older trucks and accelerate the conversion of school bus fleets.

Most pollution comes from mobile sources, "yet very little is being done to address that problem," he said.

Rules, instead, focus on stationary sources, such as farms and other industries, which are "being squeezed by regulation to the point where their ability to compete is being threatened," Weber said.

Unless something is done, he said, the Valley is going to be "very constrained in our ability to develop economically."

Autry agrees. "We've hammered ag; we've hammered the dairy industry," he said, but governments have little say over mobile sources.

Something must be done to limit pollution from trucks, he said. "It's an environmental and transportation catastrophe waiting to happen."

Cal-OSHA launches inspection

State examines handling of chemical preservatives at Fresno City College.

By Russell Clemings / The Fresno Bee
Tuesday, May 24, 2005

State inspectors began going through two Fresno City College buildings Monday, opening their second investigation this year into the State Center Community College District institution's handling of chemical preservatives.

Clyde Trombettas, a district manager with the Concord office of the state Division of Occupational Safety and Health, said the inspectors would spend two days at the college's Math-Science building and Forum Hall.

"I'm anticipating closing this investigation out at the end of June," Trombettas said.

In April, Cal-OSHA's Fresno office levied a \$20,100 fine against the district, alleging poor ventilation and failure to provide adequate control of hazardous chemicals and regulated cancer-causing agents in the college's chemistry and biology departments. The fine has been appealed.

Trombettas and two inspectors began their work Monday in a biology laboratory, peering into cabinets and questioning college officials about procedures for storing laboratory specimens and handling the preservatives in which they are packaged. They also observed a contractor removing preserved specimens for disposal.

The officials had been refused entry last Wednesday when they arrived at the college to begin their inspection. District chancellor Tom Crow attributed that refusal to "a lack of understanding" about the reasons for the inspection and the involvement of the Concord staff.

At a meeting Friday, the district agreed to allow inspections. But the same day, Cal-OSHA officials secured a warrant from a Fresno County Superior Court judge, Trombettas said.

The warrant, which would force the college to allow the inspections, was served Monday morning, a development Crow termed a surprise, "but we'll work through it."

The warrant cites evidence that conditions at the college "are not in conformance with the requirements for maintenance of a safe and healthful workplace" as required by state law. It allows inspectors to collect evidence and samples, interview employees in private, and conduct tests. Cal-OSHA officials have declined to describe the complaint that prompted the new inspections and will not immediately make their findings public.

However, a faculty union leader said last week that he filed a recent complaint alleging that the district failed to notify faculty members and others about chemical exposures.

Debate Over Concentrated Fuel Comes to Long Beach

Industry says it can be shipped conveniently, cheaply and safely. But critics see a proposed Long Beach terminal as a public safety threat.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer
LA Times, May 24, 2005

Q&A / LNG

Cities on the East and West coasts have been debating the safety of building dozens of liquefied natural gas terminals to increase U.S. imports of the popular fuel.

Tonight that debate will come to Long Beach, where the City Council will consider whether to cut off talks with a Mitsubishi Corp. subsidiary that wants to build an onshore LNG terminal at the city-owned port.

City officials are predicting a standing-room-only crowd at the 5 p.m. meeting. Union members applaud the \$450-million project and the jobs it will bring, while some residents and environmentalists fear the flammable liquid could cause catastrophic damage if it ignites.

The debate brings home a question that is central to the current national debate over energy policy.

Natural gas is an attractive fuel because it can be applied to many tasks - from lighting a kitchen stove to turning the turbines of an electrical power plant - all without the breath-choking pollution created by its fossil-fuel cousins, oil and coal.

As world oil prices soar, natural gas has become a more cost-effective fuel to import from wells around the globe. But it can only be shipped overseas in a liquefied form known as LNG - a tricky proposition because the substance is highly combustible.

Now, state and federal authorities are dueling over who should have the ultimate say on whether onshore terminals such as that proposed for Long Beach should be built.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger weighed in last week with a letter to federal officials, and the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is expected to take up the issue this week.

Lost amid the furor are some of the basic facts about liquefied natural gas, the science behind its transportation and why so many people disagree over its safety.

Question: What is liquefied natural gas?

Answer: LNG is natural gas that has been cooled to minus 260 degrees Fahrenheit - so cold that it turns into a liquid that is clear, colorless and odorless. The chilling shrinks its volume by about 600 times, which allows it to be transported by ship. That means it can be brought to the United States by sea from natural gas sources in countries such as Australia, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and Russia. The liquid is later converted back into gaseous form and distributed to customers.

Q: Why is it controversial?

A: The highly concentrated nature of LNG is both a benefit and a curse. It can be shipped conveniently and cheaply. But it packs so much potential energy that if it were to escape, it could ignite and create a massive fire.

Industry experts say LNG transport has an excellent safety record, and that ships and terminals alike contain safeguards to prevent gas from escaping and catching fire. They note that LNG vapor is flammable only when it is in a 5% to 15% concentration in air. Critics counter that LNG is a public safety threat, pointing to a January 2004 fire at an export facility in Skikda, Algeria, that killed 27 people and injured many more.

In Long Beach, an additional concern is residents' fears that the LNG plant and the massive tankers servicing it could become a prime target for terrorists seeking to shut down the nation's second-busiest seaport. If a tanker were attacked, the fire could cause serious injuries to people and damage buildings within a third of a mile, according to a December 2004 report by Sandia National Laboratories. People as far as a mile away could suffer second-degree burns.

Q: How popular is LNG as a fuel?

A: Although LNG has been used widely for decades in Europe and Asia, only five import terminals operate in the United States, all on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Now, confronted with rising natural gas prices and dwindling domestic natural gas sources, energy companies are rushing to build new U.S. terminals so they can import gas from overseas. Forty new terminals have been discussed or formally proposed, although only a dozen may actually be built. They include four in California - the onshore plant in Long Beach, two offshore terminals in Ventura County and one off the coast of Camp Pendleton in northern San Diego County.

The speed with which proposals are surfacing is causing some alarm in coastal communities nationwide. Already, protesting residents have prompted the cancellation of planned terminals in the Bay Area community of Vallejo and in Eureka on the North Coast.

Q: How would the Long Beach terminal operate?

A: LNG would be brought into port in large, double-hulled tankers, many built in a distinctive design with bulbous tanks that look like giant eggs resting in a long container. An estimated 120 tankers each year - or one every three days - would visit the terminal, which would consist of a single berth, two 160,000-cubic-meter receiving tanks, a "regasification" facility and an LNG

supply depot. After being transformed back into a gaseous state, the fuel would leave the plant in pipelines to eventually be used to heat and cool homes, offices and factories. Some gas still in liquid form would be moved out by truck.

Q: How safe are LNG terminals?

A: Some advocates argue that LNG technology has proved itself in Europe and Asia, and they point out that last year's Algerian blast was the first major catastrophe since 1944, when LNG escaped from a storage tank, leaked through Cleveland-area storm sewers and ignited, killing 128 people. Some believe that offshore terminals are preferable and others contend that even offshore sites are too close to populated areas.

The Long Beach terminal would be built about two miles from the city's downtown and a cluster of tourist attractions, including the Queen Mary, the Aquarium of the Pacific and the new Pike waterfront dining and entertainment complex. That is far too risky, according to a coalition of residents who want city officials to end talks with Mitsubishi.

A recent study by Sandia National Laboratories found that accidental LNG spills can be prevented with current regulations, but warned that intentional attacks would be harder to avoid.

A new report by former White House anti-terrorism expert Richard Clarke concludes that terrorists could "relatively easily both obtain the needed capability and conduct an attack" on an urban LNG facility, with a high risk of "generating catastrophic damage, with which the region could not adequately cope."

Q: What are the effects on the environment?

A: Mitsubishi has presented LNG as a means to improve air quality in the Los Angeles Basin, where diesel-burning trucks and other equipment have been linked to serious health concerns. The terminal would supply ample amounts of LNG for heavy-duty vehicles, they say, sharply reducing emissions of nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and other pollutants that can harm health.

Such cleaner-burning fuel would not be available from offshore terminals such as those proposed off the Ventura County coast because LNG would be converted back to its gaseous form offshore, Mitsubishi officials say. BHP Billiton, which has proposed one of the projects off Ventura County, says it has not ruled out providing some liquid fuel.

A number of environmental groups say that dependence on LNG could distract industry and governments from developing energy sources that are not based on fossil fuels.

Q: What comes next?

A: The Long Beach City Council tonight will debate whether to continue negotiations with Mitsubishi.

In Washington, D.C., a controversial proposal giving the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission final say in the siting of LNG facilities is expected to be scrutinized by a Senate committee later this week.

Two bills pending in Sacramento, backed by environmental groups, would create new regulatory hurdles for LNG facilities.

And late this summer or in early fall, the release of draft environmental documents for the Long Beach plant is likely to stir even more debate about LNG safety.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Wed., May 25, 2005:](#)

OPEN FORUM

BART financial crisis threatens region

By Jim Wunderman

The best advice for those stuck in a hole is first, stop digging. It's advice that BART should take to heart.

Whether you drive the roads of the Bay Area or ride BART, you'd better sit up and pay attention, because the decisions BART will soon make on budget and labor agreements will affect BART fares, the traffic on Bay Area roads and the amount of air pollution in our region. They will determine whether BART will thrive in the Bay Area or enter a death spiral of declining ridership, rising fares and endless deficits.

For the Bay Area Council and its members -- who drove the creation of BART more than 50 years ago -- the choice is clear: BART must regain control of its spending.

The simple problem is that BART's finances are out of control. Here are some numbers from the past four years to consider:

-- Bay Area inflation rose 8 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while median salary of Bay Area employees rose 9 percent.

-- BART fares climbed 15 percent -- nearly twice the rate of inflation.

-- BART salaries jumped 24 percent, and BART employee benefits rose 66 percent.

These numbers should not mislead you to think that this is an anti-union statement. BART has some of the best employees in the public transit world; last year, in large part due to the hard work of employees, the American Public Transportation Association ranked BART the No. 1 transit system in the United States.

So who is at fault for BART's financial mess? The unions? Management? The answer is neither and both. The fact is these kinds of pay and benefit increases are not sustainable and have placed the BART system, and people who depend on BART, at a true crossroads. Because of these pay increases -- the average employee now has a yearly pay/benefits package of \$102,000 -- BART now faces years of ongoing "structural" deficits that jeopardize the system that you depend on.

For next year, with no changes, the system needs \$53 million more than it has. BART is already planning another fare increase of 3.7 percent, plus lumping on another five to 10 cents per ride regardless of trip length. That may seem outrageous, but fares can still go higher -- much higher. If fare increases are used to pay for the current deficit, they need to rise an additional 10 percent, and if they are used to cover a future pay-increase proposal on the table, they would have to increase yet another 27 percent.

This has to stop. BART fares are already among the highest in the nation on a per-mile basis, and passengers can't and won't continue to absorb fare increases: Passengers will abandon BART in favor of driving; traffic and air pollution will increase; and declining ridership will doom BART.

The answer to the financial crisis must come from improved system management and operational efficiencies, such as relaxing antiquated work rules, and from controlling and reducing personnel costs that account for 75 percent of the budget.

BART must protect its riders from unfair cost increases or service reductions, restore fiscal integrity and operational efficiency to BART, and share the pain. Specifically:

-- No new fare increases, except 3.7 percent to offset inflation.

-- No further fare increases until BART demonstrates that it has reduced costs and increased efficiency, and then only for the purpose of offsetting inflation or to invest in protecting and improving the system.

- Plan responsibly for the future by putting aside money for known future expenses, such as pension obligations.
- Reduce personnel costs and supply an employee-benefits package (health care, retirement, vacation, etc.) to BART managers and employees that is comparable to what BART passengers get on their jobs.
- Require BART managers, Board members, and employees to pay to ride BART, just like every other member of the public.

These are hard times for BART, owing in part to previous missteps that mortgaged the future of the organization. Now the bills are due. Because BART has already raised the fares so high, the solution must come from within. BART riders, the region's roads and the region's environment cannot afford any other option.

Jim Wunderman is president and CEO of the Bay Area Council, a federation of the CEOs of 275 of the largest employers in the Bay Area who advocate for a stronger economy and a better quality of life