

Sludge plant gets permit extension

By Seth Nidever, Sentinel Reporter
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HANFORD - Los Angeles sludge producers requested -- and received -- a two-year extension for a sewage processing plant permit from the Kings County Planning Commission Monday night.

They did it without opposition. Several Kettleman City residents arrived too late to have their say during the public hearing preceding the decision.

The finished plant will operate approximately 4 miles southeast of Kettleman City. The treated sludge will be spread on nearby farmland.

Marylou Mares said she wanted to tell commissioners to "stop dumping on Kettleman City."
"It's a lot of waste. I don't care how processed it is," Mares said.

Mares said she is a founder of a Kettleman City environmental group called People for Clean Air and Water. She objected to Monday's meeting being held in Hanford instead of Kettleman City.

"Hanford is the county seat, and that's where the planning commission holds its meetings," said Bill Zumwalt, county planning agency director.

Unless Mares and her group appeal in the next eight days and win, planning for the composting facility should continue unimpeded.

At full capacity, the site will process 500,000 tons of treated Los Angeles County human and industrial waste.

That's 80 percent of the sewage and gray water waste produced by 78 southland cities, according to Michael Sullivan, a supervising engineer with the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County.

The sludge will be combined with green waste and heated to kill bacteria.

Westlake Farms, a large company that owns thousands of acres near Kettleman City, sold the district a rectangular 12,000-acre swath extending northward from the plant for land application of the waste.

The district will lease the land back to Westlake for farming operations. The acreage will produce crops for animal consumption only.

Supervisors found the composted waste safe when they finally approved the project on April 20, 2004.

Others disagreed. The board denied appeals from three separate groups. Two of those groups, The Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment and Valley advocates, sued.

Both groups have since settled with the district, which agreed to provide clean-burning vehicles for virtually all truck trips associated with the operation.

The settlements cleared the way for permits from several state agencies.

The district cleared its first hurdle when the California Integrated Waste Management Board issued a solid waste permit on Oct. 18, 2005.

But delays in the air and water permits led the district to request the extension it received Monday night.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District is taking longer than its normal 180-day review period because of the newness and complexity of the task, Sullivan said.

An application to the Regional Water Quality Control Board filed in March last year has yet to gain approval.

Sullivan said the board wanted a test hole drilled 100 feet deep to verify that there is no underground drinking water the sludge could potentially contaminate. Westlake Farms, the district and the Kings County Planning Agency have long maintained that only shallow, briny, undrinkable water unconnected to any aquifer lies beneath the application site.

"They're thorough, I'll give them that," Sullivan said, a reference to the air district and the water quality control board.

Sullivan said he was confident that the composted sludge - dubbed "exceptional quality" by Kings County Supervisor Alene Taylor - was safe.

"The use of (exceptional quality) compost, the comparison has been made to stuff you can buy at Home Depot," Sullivan said.

But critics believe unknown health threats lurk in the heavy metals and pesticides contained in the mix.

Acting on such concerns last year, Kern County supervisors authorized staff to study the possibility of an all-out ban on land application in Kern County.

That pits Kern against powerful sludge producers and southland sanitation districts.

Kings County supervisors have defended the Westlake project, noting that land application of treated waste has long been deemed safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Ceil How Jr., Westlake Farms president, believes the sludge can revitalize marginal company soil. He also insists that it is safe.

District officials are hoping the permitting and design phases will be finished by October. Construction could start in early 2007.

Mares said her group is considering an appeal and will continue protesting. "Until they're laying the stuff down on the ground, we're keeping this up," she said.

[Sacramento Bee, Editorial, Wednesday, April 5, 2006:](#)

Editorial: Up in the air

If feds won't act, then the states must

EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson is well aware that California's trend-setting environmental laws have helped clean up cars and motor fuels nationwide, providing benefits for the entire country. Johnson now has a chance to let California lead again. Whether he will -- or will be allowed to -- is another matter indeed.

To combat global warming, California approved rules two years ago requiring auto manufacturers to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from their vehicles. Under the rule, pollution from cars and light trucks would need to drop 25 percent by 2009. Emissions from heavier trucks and sport utility vehicles would need to drop 18 percent.

With the federal government refusing to act on global warming, 10 other states have adopted California's standards. Auto manufacturers have sued in response. That's no surprise. Nor is it surprising that the Bush administration is giving them plenty of cover.

This week, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta issued what he called "ambitious" new fuel standards on cars and trucks. What he didn't mention is that his 371-page rule includes a section that overrides any fuel standards set by individual states. The Bush administration contends that California's emission rules represent the equivalent of new fuel economy standards. It's an artful interpretation, and one that mirrors the legal arguments of the automakers.

That is where Stephen Johnson comes in.

Because California began regulating air pollution before the federal government did, it has special authority to set its own vehicle pollution standards. But to do so, it needs a waiver from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Johnson could quickly issue such a waiver, and he is being urged to do so by 21 U.S. senators, including those from California.

Johnson is in a tough spot. News reports suggest he was left out of the loop while Mineta's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration came up with its rule. Now Johnson must make a decision that will

either anger his bosses or undermine a group of states that are taking a proactive, innovative approach toward a serious environmental threat.

We have little hope Johnson will make the heroic choice, but he might with enough pressure from wings of the Republican Party, such as that occupied by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The governor should use some of his clout in Washington, if he hasn't already.

Ideally, states such as California wouldn't need to be setting their own rules on greenhouse gases if the Bush administration were taking the problem seriously and working to reduce emissions through international treaties. Sadly, President Bush is like Nero on the topic of climate change: He is fiddling while the planet burns.

[Merced Sun-Star, Editorial, April 4, 2006:](#)

Our View: Study underscores need for clean air

Cost for breathing without inhaling toxins with our oxygen has a price tag -- \$3.2 billion annually

A new study has put a price tag on the health problems Valley residents face because of air pollution, and it's a whopper -- \$3.2 billion annually.

That's the total cost of medical bills, student absences from school, sick days for grown-ups, chronic suffering and early death caused by pollution in the Valley, one of the nation's most polluted regions. The average is about \$1,000 for each person in the Valley.

The study was conducted by Jane V. Hall and Victor Brajer, economics professors at California State University, Fullerton, and air expert Frederick W. Lurmann of Sonoma Technology Inc. Its scope was the eight counties that make up the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The \$80,000 cost was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The \$3.2 billion figure represents how much would be saved, according to Hall, "If you snapped your fingers and suddenly had clean air," which the researchers defined as meeting current federal standards for the tiny particulate matter known as PM-2.5, as well as smog-forming ozone.

The figure doesn't represent the entire savings available to us if we can manage to clean up our air.

The study, for instance, did not address costs such as the loss of crops to air pollution -- a figure measured in the many millions annually -- or the cost of sick and dying trees in the Sierra Nevada.

The researchers did lay out some specific estimates of the annual benefits of compliance with existing federal rules:

- 460 fewer premature deaths among those age 30 and older.
- 325 fewer new cases of chronic bronchitis.
- 188,400 fewer days of reduced activity in adults.
- 260 fewer hospital admissions.
- 23,300 fewer asthma attacks.
- 188,000 fewer days of school absence.
- 3,230 fewer cases of acute bronchitis in children.
- 3,000 fewer work days lost.
- More than 17,000 fewer days of respiratory symptoms in children.

The study's authors and local health advocates said the research demonstrates the need for the Valley's leaders to move aggressively to clean up the air. Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the Valley air district, agreed: "The essence of the study is important. There is an economic cost." Yes, there is, and it's huge.