

More fuss than dust?

Leaf blowers not big polluters, study says.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

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Like the "Pigpen" character in the Peanuts comic strip, a dust cloud follows folks using a leaf blower. And so do air quality complaints.

The dust has long been a nuisance to neighbors and activists who say air authorities should do something about it. With zero science to argue over, there hasn't been much of a discussion — until now.

The first dust study ever done on leaf blowers portrays them as an insignificant polluter in the San Joaquin Valley, one of the nation's dirtiest air basins.

The \$68,000 study released last month says there's so little dust stirred up by leaf blowers that authorities don't need to regulate it. The results are not surprising, said the main researcher, Dennis Fitz of the University of California at Riverside.

"Leaf blowers run for only a few minutes a week per house," he said. "People are interested because it is very noticeable. The cloud of dust looks bad. But in the big scheme of things, it's not significant."

By comparison, there's 100 times more dust caused just by daily driving on paved Valley roads. Construction sends up 20 times more dust than leaf blowers.

That doesn't mean leaf blowers are suddenly in the clear. They make noise, and more than 20 California cities, such as Berkeley and Beverly Hills, have outlawed them because of it. Eighty other cities in the state have ordinances restricting either the time of use or the noise level, or both.

And that's not the only bad rap. Gasoline-powered leaf blowers are a source of smog-making gases. State officials regulate the gasoline-powered engines and encourage people to buy electric-powered leaf blowers.

By contrast, the argument over dust created by leaf blowers has been vague and never-ending. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had estimated a wide range of pollution — less than 1 ton to 12 tons of dust per day from leaf blowers.

After listening to complaints for years, the district board committed the money for a study. And Fitz went to work inside a tent.

He and his associates gathered dust, leaves and other debris from several Valley counties. They spread the debris on the ground inside a tarp-covered area where they installed pollution-sensing equipment.

Then they blew, raked and swept on the concrete, coming up with the amount of dust stirred up by each action. They repeated their experiment on grass and asphalt.

One interesting result: Sweeping with a broom on concrete can create as much dust as a leaf blower.

"The broom used on concrete can really launch dust into the air," Fitz said. "But it's not nearly as bad as a leaf blower on asphalt, because leaf blowers get into every nook and cranny of asphalt." Leaf blowers also get the dust into the air faster, said Scott Nester, planning director for the air district. They are far more efficient than brooms at creating the dust plume, he said.

"It would take a long time for a broom to get as much dust into the air as a leaf blower," Nester said.

The air district still would investigate complaints about leaf blowers and dust if several people complained about the same incident.

The air district plans to make a list of leaf-blower guidelines for the public. One guideline would suggest people avoid using leaf blowers around children to protect their health.

Researchers have connected dust and particle pollution with lung and heart problems. Dust is considered particulate matter, which experts say is emerging as a bigger air pollution health risk than ozone or smog.

While dust created by leaf blowers is not a big contributor to pollution for the 25,000-square-mile air basin, it is a concern for anyone near the plume. Fresno cardiologist John Telles said people need to be careful when using leaf blowers.

"You get around a house, school or an office where a leaf blower is being used," he said, "and you can get a pretty good whiff of dust."

One opponent still sees wisdom in banning leaf blowers. Clovis resident Susan Osborn, whose husband uses a leaf blower, said the combination of noise and neighborhood dust should be enough to concern any city council.

"I don't know why we can't outlaw leaf blowers," she said. "It's a contributing factor to our air pollution. It's adding to what we already have in the air."

Power Plant Is Opposed

A poor Riverside County area would be hurt by the project, says a group planning to sue.

By Janet Wilson, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Times, Thursday, February 23, 2006

A power plant touted by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and General Electric for its ability to reduce air pollution will actually spew nearly three times more unhealthy particulate matter into the air than older facilities, a coalition of environmental and labor groups said Wednesday.

The plant, under construction in the impoverished, largely Latino Riverside County community of Romoland, will sit about 1,000 feet from an elementary school, in a region that already suffers from the highest soot levels in the state.

"Any power plant built so near schools and families must follow clean air laws and not make our air quality any worse," said Roland Skumawitz, superintendent of the Romoland School District. He said he recognized the need for power in the fast-growing Inland Empire, but preferred that GE and another company that has applied to build a second plant nearby help pay to move the school to a new site.

"This whole area is being targeted for these kinds of facilities," said Penny Newman, executive director of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice in Riverside. She said GE's application to the regional air district showed that while the new, so-called H-style turbine plant might reduce greenhouse gas-causing emissions slightly, it would nearly triple particulate emissions.

"You can't trash a local community just because you may save a little somewhere else," she said.

Riverside County already suffers from some of the state's highest levels of particulate pollution, which studies have found can cause or worsen lung disease, childhood asthma and other illnesses.

Late Wednesday, the coalition mailed 60-day notices of intent to sue for violation of the Clean Air Act to the GE subsidiary building the \$1-billion plant and to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which in August issued a permit for the plant. But the group's attorney, Marc Joseph of Adams, Broadwell, Joseph & Cardozo in South San Francisco, said it would prefer not to sue and just wants the project changed.

"We would be very happy if GE's claim that this is a power plant that's good for the environment were true, but at the moment, it's not. What we are seeking is for GE to live up to its advertising.... The technology exists to have power plants which don't increase downwind pollution illegally."

Spokesmen for both General Electric and the air district said they had not received the complaint and could not comment.

GE Energy spokesman Dennis Murphy said the Romoland facility was the first of its kind in North America, and the second globally after a similar plant in Wales.

He said it was a demonstration plant to show that greenhouse gas emissions could be cut by increasing the efficiency of natural gas used.

"We're very optimistic about the future of the technology," he said. "The project is designed to be more environmentally compatible."

As for the location, he said, "this was a very solid place to site the plant, to meet the needs of the entire area, which is very hungry for power."

The plant has no commercial customers yet, but the power it generates could be sold on the state's grid to serve 600,000 households, according to company officials and its website.

Greenhouse gas emissions are different ingredients of air pollution than particulate matter and are not regulated, said air district spokesman Sam Atwood. Particulates are regulated, but the notices allege that the agency ignored its own particulate standards to give special treatment to GE.

Countered Atwood: "We did a thorough review of their permit application, along with detailed modeling we required of them, and it did meet our requirements."

The documents and Joseph also allege that the air district illegally allowed GE far cheaper "emissions offsets," or payments for pollution, than market rate offsets that could cost millions more. The cheaper offsets were established for emergency providers such as hospitals, police and fire stations.

Atwood and attorneys for the air district noted that any application for a new power plant deemed complete by the California Energy Commission by the end of 2003, during the state energy crisis, could qualify to use the lower rates.

Calpine Corp., a power generator and the original site owner, applied for a traditional turbine plant permit that year, then sold the site, project name and approvals to GE last year. Schwarzenegger praised the agreement between the two utilities for a 775-megawatt power plant last year, saying in a statement that it was "fantastic news for California.... The plant's planned use of state-of-the-art turbine technology will produce more power with lower emissions than any power plant in its class."

Darrel Ng, the governor's spokesman on energy issues, said Wednesday: "We're going to decline comment on a lawsuit we are not party to."

Bob Balgenorth, president of the California Building Trades Council and chief of a group known as California Unions for Reliable Energy, which is funding the legal challenge to the site, said the two groups have "no fight with the governor" and that Schwarzenegger may have been misinformed by the power companies.

"They claim they're using state-of-the-art technology here. That's what GE told everybody when they first filed the application, but their own numbers show a violation of federal laws. It's crazy," he said. "They promised us a diamond and they're giving us zirconia. What you've got is a plant that actually produces more pollution than a whole previous generation of plants."

[Modesto Bee, community column, Thursday, February 23, 2006](#)

Farming, agricultural land face long list of serious threats

By Janie Gartman

Wow, what a learning experience this has been. I did not foresee the response my first community column ("Urbanization of prime farmland is exaggerated, inevitable," Jan. 13) would garner, though it appears to me both exaggerated and inevitable.

Only a handful of those who responded to my column really understood my point. I think I need to take a step back and clarify.

It is a verifiable fact that urban growth has taken about one-half of 1 percent of Stanislaus County's farmland out of production each year in the past couple of decades. Some may see this as alarming, while some may think this is a nonissue. It's all a matter of perception, and I agree a little with both perspectives.

I hate to see prime farmland removed from production by any residential use. However, I also understand that our population is growing, and people need to live somewhere. Urbanization has been vilified perhaps more than it deserves. There must be a balance of residential and farming uses, each using the land efficiently enough to maximize agricultural production and residential occupation. This, sadly, is not happening.

Rural residential, or ranchette, growth has exploded in our area. Although ranchettes look rural, most of them remove farmland from agricultural production just as surely as a residential subdivision, and at a higher rate. Most new ranchettes are destined to become a 3,000-square-foot villa with complementing irrigated pasture for one or two pet horses. It may look pretty, but it's not agriculture.

Rural ranchettes may be responsible for taking twice the farmland out of production when compared with urban development. In the past year, 40 ranchettes of 10 acres apiece were sold in the small farming area between Ripon and Valley Home. That's 400 acres that have been removed from agricultural production in just one year. And using 10 acres for one house is not an efficient residential use of valuable farmland.

The urbanization of prime farmland is an issue of concern to me, but it's way back on the list of imminent threats to farmland and farming as a whole.

Land values have skyrocketed and go far beyond the income-earning capacity of the farmland, making it difficult for farms to grow.

Rural residential growth is taking more farmland out of production than urbanization and is inflating land prices for surrounding farmland. Governmental regulations, water quality and availability, energy costs and air quality are all current issues of concern.

In addition, labor, insurance and input costs continue to rise, while farmers have no control over the prices they receive for their commodities. There is no way to pass on higher costs to consumers. All of these stifle opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers, forcing many out of agriculture entirely.

If we save the prime farmland but fail to allow farmers and the next generation to continue farming, then what's the point?