

Refinery expansion plans focus of hearing

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2007

The first public hearing on the proposed expansion of the Big West of California oil refinery on Rosedale Highway will be held Wednesday.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hold an informational meeting and public hearing on an air pollution permit needed in order for the \$600 million project to increase gasoline and diesel output to move forward.

The EPA permit deals with gases such as carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide that are emitted from refinery equipment.

The refinery has been cited by local air regulators for the release of high levels of carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide on more than a dozen occasions in the past two years. However, EPA officials said Monday they did not find any cases where the refinery violated federal standards for those gases.

"That doesn't mean the local agency is not working on some issues," said Gerardo Rios, a supervisor with the EPA's permit office. "If a local enforcement office is taking action then they deal with it first. If they're not being effective, then we get involved."

The San Joaquin Valley issued the refinery at least 11 violations for carbon monoxide releases and eight for sulfur dioxide releases since January 2006, the district's violations records show.

Short-term exposure of high levels of sulfur dioxide in the air can make breathing difficult for people with asthma, while long-term exposures can contribute to respiratory illness and can aggravate heart disease, according to the EPA's Web site. In low concentration, carbon monoxide can cause fatigue and chest pain. At high levels, it can be lethal, preventing the body from taking in oxygen.

EPA's Rios said the agency recommended granting the air permit because the San Joaquin Valley air basin is in compliance with federal standards for gases like carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide, and an EPA study showed new emissions won't jeopardize that status.

The release of those gases has been due to electrical outages at the refinery, said Bill Chadick Big West's health, safety and environmental director.

An upgrade to the electrical supply for existing equipment at the refinery that will help curb future releases is already under way, he said. The expansion will also include added controls to prevent future releases.

The company's track record when it comes to safety has been in the spotlight ever since plans released earlier this year showed the expansion would involve the use of hydrofluoric acid, a highly toxic chemical that most other refineries in the state have stopped using. When spilled, liquid hydrofluoric acid can form a toxic cloud that has been shown in industry studies to travel up to five miles from the location of the release.

Bending to pressure, refinery officials later said they would use a safer form of the hydrofluoric acid that contains an additive that suppresses the acid's ability to vaporize.

Then in April, the county cited the refinery for venting a potentially lethal gas, hydrogen sulfide, into the air in late 2006. The gas migrated to nearby businesses and several residents living nearby reported getting ill, according to the county. While investigating the incidents, the county also discovered the refinery hadn't updated its safety plans in a timely manner.

"Why are we going to trust them with a more dangerous substance when they can't control the substances they've got?" asked David Wolf, a Kern County deputy district attorney who lives in northwest Bakersfield and has children that attend an elementary school near the refinery.

"They have a bad safety record and I think before they can expand, they should show us they can handle what they've got," Wolf said.

Along with the EPA permit, the expansion will also require two others -- a conditional use permit from the Kern County Planning Commission and a permit for from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District for new smog-forming emissions and particulate pollution the expansion will create.

The San Joaquin Valley air basin is not in attainment for national standards for smog and some types of particulate pollution.

As part of the permitting process, Kern County officials released an environmental impact report on the refinery expansion earlier. They later decided to postpone public hearings on the issue until the report had been revised by an outside consulting firm familiar with refinery processes.

The revised report is expected to be made public in mid-January, at which point the public comment period and public hearings will take place.

Air district officials said they are waiting to review the county's environmental impact report before they proceed with a decision on granting an air pollution permit.

How to go

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hold the following meetings related to the refinery expansion on Wednesday at Discovery Elementary School, 9500 Vaquero Ave., Bakersfield:
An open house to provide information on the project will be held from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
A public hearing to accept comments on EPA's recommendation to approve an air pollution permit EPA has recommended granting takes place from 6 to 9 p.m.
Information will be provided in English and Spanish. More information on the project can be found on EPA's Web site at www.epa.gov/region09/air/permit/big-west.

Controlled burn set for Greenhorn Mountains

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2007

A controlled burn in the Greenhorn Mountains is scheduled for Wednesday or Thursday. In all, about 40 acres will be burned.

In 1970, the Red Mountain fire burned more than 25,000 acres. The area was replanted, but now the trees are competing with each other for nutrients, which makes them vulnerable to drought, beetle infestations and fires.

The trees' crowns -- their limbs and leaves -- were thinned, but that left shredded plant material on the ground, which could threaten the trees during a wildfire. Researchers want to study how

well thinning worked or if it's more effective to use that technique combined with prescribed burns.

Crews will use hand-held drip torches to start the fires and use temperature sensors and video to gather data. Fire managers will work with the county's Air Pollution Control District to manage smoke production.

During the day, smoke should flow over Lake Isabella. At night, the smoke should drift to the west side of the Greenhorns, down Little Poso Creek and into Lake Isabella.

Bay Area wood-burning ban at critical mass

Bay Area pollution control agency seems poised to enact a ban on fireplace and stove fires on bad air days

By Denis Cuff, staff writer

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, December 3, 2007

Livermore resident Bruce Griffing regards a proposal to ban wood fires on bad air nights in the Bay Area as a government intrusion into his hearth and home

"I don't want some fireplace Nazis telling me I can't burn," he said.

Tom Foley, who has asthma, yearns for a ban to spare him from a neighbor's fireplace smoke that leaves him coughing and choking.

"When I come home from work at night, it's like walking into a cloud of smoke," the Redwood City resident said. "What about my right to breathe clean air?"

A proposal to regulate indoor wood fires in the Bay Area for the first time has put the region's air pollution agency in a hot spot: balancing public health with public desire to enjoy warm, cozy fires

After months of talks and seven public workshops, air pollution board members and administrators say they will look into revising, but not dropping, the proposed rule.

A new round of public meetings will be scheduled in three months or so by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

"We may put the damper on some aspects of the plan," said Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman who leads the 22-member air board, "but this is a public health problem we cannot ignore. Wood smoke is dangerous, and we have to do something about it."

Wood smoke in winter accounts for as much as a third of the region's fine particle air pollution, the district estimates. The soot can irritate healthy people and harm children, the elderly and those with lung and heart problems.

Several air board members have said they favor some form of a ban on burning wood fires in fireplaces and stoves on the 20 to 30 nights a year when particles are projected to create unhealthful air.

Ross said last week that he and other board members would be willing to consider a staged approach to the ban, like one Sacramento enacted last month.

Under this approach, fires on moderately dirty air nights would be banned in fireplaces and old stoves, but not in low-emission EPA-certified stoves, fire inserts or fire boxes.

On dirtier nights, all wood burning would be banned.

Representatives of the fire appliance and heating industry say the two-tier approach gives homeowners an incentive to switch to cleaner burning devices.

Or, they say, homeowners could switch to gas-heated ceramic logs, which are common in new homes.

"Some people are going to want to burn no matter what. It goes back to the cavemen. It makes sense to give them an incentive to burn cleaner," said Greg Harris, owner and operator of Buck Stove, Spa and Fan Center in Walnut Creek.

Not everyone supports the two-tier no-burn system.

"It will be harder to enforce and harder to understand," said Jenny Bard, a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association of California.

Besides, she said, even low-emission stoves and fireplaces emit some fine particles.

The San Joaquin Valley air district bans all wood-burning devices -- low emission or not -- on its no-burn nights, Bard noted.

Ross and fellow air board member Gayle Uilkema, a Contra Costa County supervisor, said they want to look closely at how the smoke rule would be enforced in the Bay Area.

Some critics said the proposal encourages neighbors to snitch on illegal burners.

How else, they ask, could an air district with 70 inspectors responsible for thousands of pollution sources take on the extra duties of watching over 1.7 million fireplaces and stoves in the region?

To help the inspectors, Ross said the district is looking into the feasibility of using detection devices to pick up on smoke in valleys where soot is trapped on cold nights.

"In some places, the problem is localized to certain valleys," he said.

During the air district's seven public workshops, nearly 190 people took part, either in person or via the Internet.

Critics said the health risk from smoke is not large enough to justify telling people to give up the cozy ambiance of fires.

"I try not to burn on Spare the Air nights, but I don't like someone telling me not to burn," said Griffing, the Livermore resident.

Some critics also grumbled that a ban would deprive them of chances to burn fires to pare their heating bills.

Families without access to natural gas for heating homes would be exempt from the bans.

In the other camp, many people argued that a smoke rule is long overdue to protect the public from elevated health risks of getting or aggravating lung and heart problems.

"I start choking some nights when people light fires," said Albert Rothman, an 83-year-old Livermore resident who likes to hike outdoors but has asthma.

Foley, the Redwood city resident, said the smoke rule would help him because it has a year-round ban on releasing thick dirty smoke from unseasoned wood.

"One neighbor burns constantly eight months a year. Going in my yard is like standing in front of a smoky barbecue," Foley said.

He said he suspects the smoke contributed to the lung cancer death of his 7-year-old terrier two years ago.

"No one can help me," Foley said. "The city wasn't interested. The air district said all they could do was provide an educational pamphlet for my neighbor to read about clean burning."

proposed rule

? Would ban wood fires in fireplaces, stoves or outdoor fire pits on Spare the Air nights when fine particle pollution is expected to reach unhealthful levels. As currently worded, the ban also would apply to EPA-certified stoves and fireplace inserts and boxes.

? Homes with no alternative to heating their homes with wood fires would be exempt.

? Would set a year-round limit for chimney smoke density at 20 percent opacity -- except for short periods during starting or refueling fires. Opacity could be accomplished by burning seasoned, or dry, wood.

? Would require commercial firewood to meet a dryness standard limiting moisture to 20 percent.

? Would ban burning of garbage, plastics or treated wood.

? Would ban installation of open hearth fireplaces without emission controls in new or remodeled homes. (Many cities and counties already do this.)

? Rule violators could be assessed a small fine or given the option to attend a clean-wood-burning class.

? No date for putting the rule into effect has been proposed, because the proposal has yet to come before the Bay Area air board.

For more information, visit <http://www.baaqmd.gov>.

Source: Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

How green is your mountain? Ski resorts rated on environment

Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, December 4, 2007

The Kirkwood Mountain Resort might be pretty nifty in the ski department, but it is hell on the environment, according to an annual scorecard of California ski areas, which gave the wooded resort an F.

In fact, many of the most popular and beautiful Sierra ski resorts are at the bottom of the hill when it comes to impact on the environment. The Bear Valley Mountain Resort and Northstar-at-Tahoe were second and third from the bottom with D's. And Heavenly Mountain Resort is far from heavenly in Mother Nature's eyes, according to the grade card, getting a C from the panel as the fourth-worst environmental steward.

The good news is that nature-loving skiers and snowboarders won't have to put biodegradable bags over their heads at Alpine Meadows and Squaw Valley, which ranked 1 and 2, the only California ski resorts to get A's in the complicated scoring system.

The eighth annual Ski Area Environmental Scorecard ranked 19 ski resorts in California on such things as storm water runoff, wetlands destruction, the amount of energy burned and how many pollutants are spewed into the forests and atmosphere. The idea is to encourage the snow-loving public to stop spending money at resorts that, according to the scorecard, shirk their responsibilities as protectors of the alpine environment.

"Skiers love the outdoors, and we hope they will support the resorts that do the right thing and are helping the environment," said Autumn Bernstein, the California representative of the Ski Area Citizens' Coalition in Colorado, which conducted the study. "A skier who cares about the environment and protecting the Sierra Nevada would not be skiing at Kirkwood. We hope they will support resorts like Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows, which are doing the right thing."

Companies that earned poor grades dispute the scorecard, saying it is unfair and biased.

However, it was no surprise that wooded Alpine Meadows scored at the top of the heap. The resort, which has led the pack since the scorecard began in 2000, uses biodiesel in its snow cats, has thrown its support behind climate change legislation and has never attempted to expand into environmentally sensitive areas, Bernstein said.

The big surprise, she said, was the A grade for Squaw Valley, which recently scored D's for a variety of damaging practices, including the off-season filling and ripping out of streambed vegetation so that skiers would have no obstacles when swooping through the gullies during ski season.

Bernstein, who also works on land-use issues for the Sierra Nevada Alliance, said the resort illegally filled wetlands in 2001 and 2002. But since then, Squaw Valley has reversed its policies, has repaired the damage and has done wetlands restoration. In addition, she said, the resort has begun retrofitting old buildings instead of building new ones, uses biodiesel and has invested in more energy-efficient snow guns.

"Their grade has continued to go up as they've done expansion because they weren't doing it on environmentally sensitive areas," she said. All recent development at Squaw has been over existing parking lots and in previously built-out areas, she said.

Rounding out the top five resorts in the state were Mountain High Resort in Southern California, Boreal Mountain Resort and Mount Shasta Board and Ski Park, all of which got B's.

Kirkwood has been a regular at the bottom of the list. Popular for its remote, wilderness feel and fine snowpack, Kirkwood has suffered in the rankings for its use of diesel and its plans to develop on sensitive wetlands, Bernstein said.

The resort plans to build 500 housing units, expanding the overnight capacity of Kirkwood to 6,558 people. About 2 acres of that development would be in Kirkwood Meadow, a rare alpine wetland that is home to endangered species, including the mountain yellow-legged frog, the Yosemite toad and the fisher, a fish-eating predator in the weasel family, Bernstein said.

The resort was fined \$55,800 by the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District between 2002 and 2006 for emissions reporting and other violations. The California Regional Water Quality Control board also investigated storm-water management problems.

"It is pretty bad," Bernstein said. "They've been last place every year since we started the evaluations in 2000."

David Likins, Kirkwood's CEO attributed his resort's ranking to a bias on the part of the panel against any and all development.

"We've been on the bottom of the list for a number of years, and I guarantee we'll be on the bottom of the list for a number of years in the future," Likins said. "Those of us who are in a growth mode are at the bottom of the list because of an inherent anti-growth bias in the compilation of scores."

Likins said the vast majority of the development at Kirkwood is in-fill development. He said the resort has also drastically reduced energy consumption and preserved huge swaths of wetlands.

"We've made tremendous strides in conservation and preservation," he said. "Yes, we have growth, but they don't talk about the 200 acres of wetlands that we put into a conservation easement."

The citizen's coalition rankings did not include many of the smaller ski resorts. The California rankings were part of a larger scorecard of all the major resorts in the western United States. The best in the West was Aspen Mountain Ski Resort and the worst was Copper Mountain Ski Resort, both in Colorado.

The group has evaluated 77 ski resorts throughout the western United States since 2000. This year it also evaluated 14 ski resorts in western Canada, which is gearing up for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

The annual evaluation, which uses public records and surveys, is the only independent review of the environmental performance of ski resorts.

Online resources

Read the scorecard:

www.skiareacitizens.com

[Letter to the Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, December 4, 2007:](#)

Stop ignoring population growth

In the Nov. 30 article "State crafting plan to reduce gases," I read that the state's current emissions of greenhouse gases now stand at the equivalent of 500 million metric tons of carbon dioxide annually.

While I am glad that the Air Resources Board has already identified ways to cut emissions by 70 million metric tons by 2020, I am not at all happy by the sad fact that, absent new regulations, population growth and economic expansion are expected to boost emissions by 100 million metric tons by 2020.

When is the public going to elect leaders who are willing to change state and national policies so that we stabilize human population growth and natural resource consumption? If that doesn't happen very soon, controlling carbon emissions will be a continuing uphill battle.

In addition, demand for water and environmental degradation will continue to increase and remain as major problems for society.

The business community, including the California Chamber of Commerce, needs to realize these threats as well and cooperate with conservation groups in solving them to the fullest extent possible.

California cannot do it alone because this is a worldwide problem, but we can at least take the lead.

Arthur C. Knutson, Sacramento

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2007:](#)

Time to 'do away with these blasted things'

In response to Dave Buchan's letter (Nov. 25) on banning leaf blowers:

In our cul-de-sac, here's the schedule: Monday through Friday the yardmen mow, edge, then blow leaves and debris from whatever property line they're clearing, so it ends up in the street. This process is repeated until all of the trash and debris ends up on our property. On the weekend, my husband cleans up the mess, only to repeat the pattern the following weekend.

Leaf blowers are a public nuisance and contribute to noise pollution. In addition, they're bad for the environment and pollute with their exhaust. They also increase our risk of contracting Valley fever. Leaf blowers unearth settled and mutated spores, making them airborne. They also wreak havoc on anyone sensitive or intolerant to allergens. These things are a health risk to Valley residents.

When is the City Council going to take notice and do away with these blasted things once and for all?

Janet Cotton, Fresno

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the attempt to regulate the high levels of pollution from cargo trucks in the Port of Oakland by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports. For more information, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Ambientalista tratan de regular la contaminación en puertos de California

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, December 4, 2007

Los grupos ambientalistas Concilio de Defensa de los Recursos Naturales y Coalición para puertos Limpios y Seguros encontraron que los niveles de contaminación del aire cerca de los camiones de carga que transportan desde el puerto de Oakland, California, son dos mil veces mayores que los que recomiendan autoridades estatales y nacionales.

Los resultados del estudio fueron presentados apenas un día después de que las alcaldías de Los Ángeles y Long Beach anunciaran un acuerdo conjunto para regular la contaminación de miles de camiones en sus puertos.

La autora del estudio de los grupos en Oakland, Diane Bailey dijo que "queremos destacar el problema para que se haga algo al respecto".

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the imposed deadline for thousands of trucks and ships in California. The Long Beach and Los Angeles Boards of Harbor Commissioners have voted to ban the oldest, dirtiest trucks from operating at the Port of Long Beach and the Port of Los Angeles. For more information, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Imponen plazos a la contaminación de miles de camiones y barcos en California

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, December 3, 2007

Las alcaldías de Los Ángeles y Long Beach dispusieron que dentro de unos meses ninguno de los miles de camiones de carga que transportan desembarcos en los puertos de ambas ciudades podrá circular si fue construido antes de 1989.

Ese es el primer paso de las dos alcaldías para reducir la contaminación de los puertos que ocasiona unas cuatro mil muertes prematuras anuales, según cifras oficiales.

El segundo paso es que dentro de cinco años los cientos de barcos que llegan a diario a ambos puertos desembarquen cargamentos en alta mar, sin llegar a los astilleros.

Esa región conjunta tiene el aire más contaminado en Estados Unidos y el principal foco de deterioro son ambos puertos.