

Air officials: Regulations not enough

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, July 24, 2009

Public participation in rideshare and other types of transportation habit change are key to curbing the region's air pollution in years to come, Valley air officials said.

Few residents turned out Thursday for a session designed to educate them about the state of the Valley's air problem and tell them about ways people can help reduce air pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is in the middle of a new public outreach this summer going around the region spreading the word about its new campaign, "Healthy Valley Living." This is one of many public relations channels they use, but they wanted to cover all the bases.

Only two members of the general public showed up Thursday evening.

Officials acknowledged the challenge but said that's precisely why they have launched the campaign.

"It's become clear in the Valley that we can't meet the standards by regulation alone. We need to make air quality everyone's day-to-day decision," said Tom Jordan, the district's senior policy advisor.

While encouraging people to take part in alternative transportation, such as carpool, vanpool and bike riding, the district provides incentives to people who want to replace gas-powered lawn mowers with electric ones or replace wood stoves with natural gas heaters, Jordan said.

The district also helps people scrap old polluting cars with cleaner-burning cars.

Jordan likes to stress that an air quality-conscious lifestyle is "win-win" for people who live in the Valley.

"It promotes energy conservation. People actually save money and improve air quality," Jordan said.

The San Joaquin Valley has long registered some of the worst air quality in the country, partly because of its topography that traps bad air, a number of trucks running on its interstate highways, and its car-cased culture. Despite popular notions, air pollution from the Bay Area is a small part of the problem. Pollution generated in the Valley violates air quality standards on its own, according to the district.

The Valley also faces peculiar challenges: It's the fastest growing region in the state. The population jumped 13.3 percent between 2000 and 2005, and is expected to double by 2050.

Cleaning up air is expensive, but it's far more expensive not to do it.

A recent study by California State University Fullerton indicates the societal cost of air pollution in the Valley reaches \$5.6 billion a year. Air pollution accounts for some 812 premature deaths, 584 non-fatal heart attacks and 68,740 lost work days, the study says.

The Valley still does not meet the federal air pollution standards for particulate matter and ground-level ozone. Continued violation could lead to a loss of \$2 billion a year in federal highway funding and businesses facing severe sanctions, Jordan said.

For more information about Valley air pollution, visit www.valleyair.org.

Heat - but no record - and unhealthy air settles in Sacramento region

By Bill Lindelof

Modesto Bee, Monday, July 27, 2009

Today is expected to be the hottest day of the work week with 104 degrees predicted for downtown Sacramento.

While very hot, the forecast high is far below the all-time high for the day, 110 in 1933. However, National Weather Service forecaster George Cline noted "it's not going to seem that much better" than the all-time high.

After today, a low-pressure system is expected to produce a slight cooling trend in the Sacramento region with 99 predicted for Tuesday, 94 on Wednesday, 92 on Thursday and 93 on Friday.

Other high temperatures forecast for today are 103 in Loomis, 102 in Placerville, 102 in Woodland, 103 in Roseville, 105 in Folsom and 103 in Elk Grove.

Here's another reason to stay inside today: In addition to 100 degree temperatures, the air is expected to be unhealthy for certain groups of people.

Air quality is expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups, based on the index issued today by the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District. Yolo and Solano counties are at the lower end of that grouping (101-150) with an index of 111, while Eldorado (135), Placer (137) and Sacramento (147) counties inching toward the higher end.

Active children and adults and people with respiratory disease, such as asthma, are advised to limit long stretches of outdoor exertion.

The air quality scale is composed of Good (0-50), Moderate (51-100), Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups (101-150), Unhealthy (151-200) and Very Unhealthy (201-300).

Turlock lauded for eco-friendly ways

By Alex Cantatore, Civic Desk

Turlock Journal, Saturday, July 25, 2009

It's not easy being green, but Turlock excels at it, according to the non-profit National Resources Defense Council.

Earlier this month the NRDC announced that Turlock is the 17th best small city in the country in the fields of environmental sustainability and livability, according to research conducted for its annual Smarter Cities Study.

The 2008 Smarter Cities Study is "intended as a tool for identifying, for the purpose of spotlighting, those cities that are taking the lead in addressing the major environmental challenges of our time, from global warming to clean air and water," according to the NRDC Web site.

The Smarter Cities Study began in 2005 as an independent investigation of environmental sustainability and livability conducted by the Green Guide, which is now a part of National Geographic. This year's study is the first to include the small cities category.

Every small city in America — more than 400 with populations between 50,000 and 99,999 — were ranked in areas such as air quality, green building, and standard of living by the NRDC for the Smarter Cities Study.

In addition to its 17th place ranking, Turlock claimed seventh overall in the field of recycling, thanks to the efforts of Turlock Scavenger, and ninth overall in energy production and conservation due to the Turlock Irrigation District's work.

"TID has a proven history of environmental stewardship by securing renewable energy through innovative strategies and will continue to seek additional, appropriate ways to keep the communities it serves green," said TID Public Information Division Manager Michelle Reimers.

The NRDC highlighted TID's status as one of just four publicly owned irrigation districts in the state to also provide electricity to residents.

The renewable nature of much of TID's energy generation — ranging from the massive Tuolumne Wind Project in Klickitat County, Wash., to California's largest fuel cell, installed to convert methane gas from Turlock's Regional Water Quality Control Facility into electricity — was a key component of the city's success in the Smarter Cities Study.

TID was also lauded as the first utility in the state to develop small hydropower plants in the 1970s.

"In addition to renewable energy, TID continues to help customers achieve energy savings through the implementation and promotion of a variety of programs that provide rebate opportunities for all rate classes to encourage customers to conserve energy," Reimers said.

Turlock Scavenger did their own part to send Turlock to the top of the rankings, thanks to their extensive recycling program, which they operate through an agreement with the City of Turlock.

Scavenger makes use of three colored trash bins for consumers to sort their own waste for recycling purposes.

All trash collected from blue cans — those intended for all recyclable goods — is taken to Stockton where it is sorted and recycled. Green can contents — primarily yard waste — is taken to Grover Landscaping's compost operation where it is repurposed.

Even the black can waste — the complete trash — is kept away from the county's Fink Road Landfill as much as possible. Since 1989, Scavenger has worked with the Stanislaus Resource Recovery Center, a City of Modesto and Stanislaus County joint effort, to burn trash and generate enough energy to power 18,000 homes.

According to Turlock Scavenger Assistant Manager Art Machado, between 10 and 12 truckloads of Turlock's waste are diverted from the landfill to the recovery center each day. Only unburnable trash such as concrete, metal, and sheetrock end up in the landfill.

"We've been trying to work our operation into where we can recycle as much as we can and divert it away from the landfill where it would be buried," Machado said.

Despite helping the city to become the seventh best recycling small city in the nation, Turlock Scavenger still sees a few areas for improvement.

Scavenger does not currently provide a comprehensive recycling solution for commercial customers or apartment complexes, due to difficulties of installing three separate can types at such locations. While some recyclable materials are sorted out, much of the trash ends up contaminated with food waste and becomes unusable.

However, going forward, Turlock Scavenger sees its partnership with the City of Turlock improving, making the city a greener place for all.

"We have a really close working relationship with the City of Turlock and they're always about going above and beyond the minimum requirements," Machado said.

Environmental scores not ready for prime time

By Rita Beamish, The Associated Press

In the San Diego Union-Tribune, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Saturday, July 25, 2009

The federal government pointed with pride to a sweeping national database that identifies pollution-stricken poor and minority neighborhoods to help officials better target billions of economic recovery dollars.

But it's a tool that doesn't exist – yet.

The elaborate system to assign "environmental justice" scores by Census tract, already years in the making, is still on the drawing board at the Environmental Protection Agency. It could take more than a year to finish because it's still being tested and the agency is asking business, academic, state and environmental advisors to weigh in on it.

That didn't stop administration officials from listing it on an EPA Web site among several "best practice" tools for spending of billions of government dollars to stimulate the economy – a message in line with Obama administration pledges to help poor and ethnic victims of pollution. The system is called the Environmental Justice Strategic Enforcement Assessment Tool with the acronym EJSEAT.

"Census tracts in each state are assigned an EJSEAT score," the Web site said. The scores combine data such as cancer rates, poverty levels, child mortality, toxic emissions, education and racial characteristics and density of industrial facilities, it said.

When The Associated Press recently asked to see the national scores, EPA officials acknowledged they are still working on the draft version of the tool. The Web site description, they said, "was only intended to inform the public and our stakeholders about EPA's latest thinking on the tool."

The AP's inquiry "brought to attention that the website gave the misimpression that EJSEAT scores were available for public use," said the e-mailed explanation from press aide Deb Berlin. The wording was changed, leaving a description of the tool in development, along with other information about environmental justice issues.

The system was envisioned as a way to identify minority and poor neighborhoods with disproportionate pollution and environmental health issues. Concern that many of the nation's toxic and industrial sites are located in minority areas prompted a 1994 presidential order urging government agencies to address the issue.

Local governments need consistent criteria to identify these areas for land-use and permit decisions, said Vernice Miller-Travis, a Maryland environmental consultant and member of an EPA advisory committee on school air pollution. The scoring system could remove debate about whether a community fits the bill, she said.

Miller-Travis and other advocates nonetheless anticipate strides from the Obama administration on environmental justice. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson has pledged to protect the poor and minorities, and the White House has reached out to Miller-Travis and other advocates for specific recommendations.

Among the advocates' priorities are getting more teeth into the 1994 presidential order, and strengthening industrial waste disposal rules.

U.S.-China talks to focus on global economy, environmental policy

The meeting is likely to highlight Beijing's unease about its U.S. bond holdings, Washington's desire to reduce China's reliance on exports and the need to reach consensus on tackling climate change.

By David Pierson and Don Lee, staff writers
L.A. Times, Monday, July 27, 2009

Reporting from Washington and Beijing -- The United States and China today kick off talks in Washington that are expected to highlight Beijing's unease about its massive holdings in federal bonds, Washington's desire to reduce China's reliance on exports and the need for both sides to reach consensus on tackling climate change.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner will lead the American side in the two-day U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. It's the latest in an increasingly high-level series of meetings between the two countries this year that could have significant bearing on the global economy and international environmental policy.

A week after Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke outlined strategies to stave off inflation, Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo and Vice Premier Wang Qishan are expected to seek assurances that the dollar will remain strong and thus protect China's record \$801.5-billion holdings in U.S. Treasuries.

"As an important investor, China is deeply concerned about the U.S. economic situation and hopes the U.S. stimulus policy could make effective progress," said Zhu Guangyao, China's assistant finance minister, at a recent news conference.

China's foreign reserves increased in the second quarter to an all-time high of \$2.13 trillion. About 65% of that amount is estimated to be in U.S. dollars. The bump has been credited not to a rebound in exports but to the increased value of China's non-dollar holdings and more incoming investment.

China has attracted more capital because of robust growth in the face of the current global downturn. Massive government stimulus and record bank lending expanded China's economy by 7.9% in the last quarter.

But while Washington welcomes China's recent success, there's concern that it cannot be sustained unless Beijing reforms its economy toward more domestic consumption.

For years, China's Treasury purchases financed America's buying binge, which included Chinese exports. Beijing also helped make possible the low interest rates and loose credit that paved the way for the U.S. housing bubble.

Now that the U.S. has been hit by the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, American households are increasing their savings rate. The U.S. trade gap has narrowed to its lowest level since 1999. China can no longer rely on American consumers to buy enough Chinese exports to keep the Asian nation's economy growing, officials say.

"Our message to the Chinese is going to be 'If you want to achieve your growth objectives, you're going to have to find a different way of doing it than through export-led growth,'" said a senior Obama administration official briefing reporters about the talks.

This is not news to Chinese policymakers, who have tried to stimulate consumption through modest healthcare reforms and purchasing programs for autos and household appliances. Creating a social safety net is widely agreed to be one of the best ways to make ordinary Chinese secure enough to spend some of their savings.

But countering the progress is the fear of destabilizing unemployment. Beijing will not sacrifice its export sector because no better alternative has been identified to keep millions of migrant workers employed.

To move forward, China will need to modernize its service sector to keep more profits within its borders.

"The export sector still has to rely on [American] companies like Wal-Mart and UPS to sell their goods and for logistics," said He Fan, an international finance scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Although leaders on both sides have been stressing the importance of cooperation, Chinese leaders have not been shy lately about expressing concern about the dollar's dominance. China has introduced about \$95 billion in currency swaps with other countries since December and floated the idea of an international currency for trade. The moves signal a sharper tone out of Beijing.

Nicholas R. Lardy, a China expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, said American officials used to lecture the Chinese on how things ought to be and what they should do to open up financial markets.

But with U.S. economic power damaged by the financial crisis, Lardy said the Chinese "are taking a more aggressive posture and are not willing to be lectured to. . . . Now they are emboldened to do some lecturing."

In recent economic talks, Americans had often focused on the Chinese currency, pressing Beijing to let the undervalued yuan rise against the dollar to reduce the price advantage of Chinese exports and boost sales of U.S. goods to China.

The pressure had some success from mid-2005 to mid-2008 as the yuan appreciated. But since then China has held the value of the yuan steady against the dollar.

Still, Lardy doesn't see U.S. officials pressing the Chinese as hard on this issue as they did before. He said China's massive holdings of U.S. debt would hang over the dialogue, and noted that U.S. officials had been less critical of China leading up to the talks.

"Maybe it's not in your self-interest to fight your banker," Lardy said, noting that one-fourth of all foreign dollar holdings are in the hands of China. "I think it does give China leverage, even if it's more political than hard leverage."

Experts say China has no real alternative other than to park most of its foreign reserves in dollars. Its holdings in federal securities have risen 58% in the last 12 months. So long as Beijing wants to keep the yuan from naturally appreciating by being traded on the open market, it will need to rid itself of the greenbacks that keep piling up.

"There aren't that many places you can invest such huge amounts without massively affecting prices" of commodities such as oil, said Clay Dube, associate director of the U.S.-China Institute at USC.

This latest summit also comes at a time when both sides have been trading barbs over protectionism. The U.S. wants China to sign a World Trade Organization agreement to open up government projects to

foreign firms. China wants the U.S. to share more green technology. Both countries view innovation in cutting emissions as a major growth market.

"This can clearly be a win-win situation," said He of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "But if they only focus on their own interests, it will turn to lose-lose."

The two sides still appear to be at loggerheads on what to do about climate change. China recently surpassed the U.S. as the world's chief polluter, but together, the two countries are responsible for 42% of Earth's emissions.

A climate change bill calling for caps on pollution has stalled in the U.S. Senate, probably awaiting signs of a similar commitment on the part of Beijing. The Chinese are reluctant to do so for fear of limiting their economic growth. They also believe that America should commit to greater reductions in emissions than those outlined in the bill.

An agreement between the two sides is essential, experts say, if there's any hope for an international climate change treaty in Copenhagen in December.

Boom in hydropower pits fish against climate

The renewable energy could ease global warming, but the dams and turbines could result in mass killings.

By Kim Murphy, staff writer

L.A. Times, Monday, July 27, 2009

Reporting from Wenatchee, Wash. -- The Rocky Reach Dam has straddled the wide, slow Columbia River since the 1950s. It generates enough electricity to supply homes and industries across Washington and Oregon.

But the dam in recent years hasn't produced as much power as it might: Its massive turbines act as deadly blender blades to young salmon, and engineers often have had to let the river flow over the spillway to halt the slaughter, wasting the water's energy potential.

The ability of the nation's aging hydroelectric dams to produce energy free of the curse of greenhouse gas emissions and Middle Eastern politics has suddenly made them financially attractive -- thanks to the new economics of climate change. Armed with the possibility of powerful new cap-and-trade financial bonuses, the National Hydropower Assn. has set a goal of doubling the nation's hydropower capacity by 2025.

Expanding hydropower is fraught with controversy, much of it stemming from the industry's history of turning wild rivers into industrialized reservoirs struggling to support their remaining fish. The emerging boom in hydroelectric power pits two competing ecological perils against each other: widespread fish extinctions and a warming planet.

The issue has been particularly contentious in the Pacific Northwest, where some are calling for actually breaching dams on the Snake River in an effort to bring back the declining salmon and steelhead.

"Hydropower does have pretty significant and serious impacts on rivers. We know that. The industry knows that," said John Seebach, director of the Hydropower Reform Initiative launched by the conservation group American Rivers. "It also provides some pretty significant benefits in terms of power production. So it's a tricky balance to get those benefits while trying to minimize those impacts."

Across the country, there are about 82,600 dams, but only about 3% of them are used to generate electricity. Hydropower produces about 6% of the nation's electricity, and nearly 75% of all renewable electric power.

The increasing mandates for power utilities to expand their portfolios of renewable energy are prompting dam operators to take a second look at thousands of dams now used for flood control, irrigation, navigation, recreation and industrial water supply that might also be used to generate electricity without further harm to fish.

"Most of the bang for the buck is at existing dams and reservoirs without hydropower facilities, and hydropower facilities that need to be upgraded for additional capacity," said Norman Bishop, vice

president of MWH Americas Inc., which designed the dam improvements in Chelan County, Wash., home to the Rocky Reach facility.

The U.S. Department of Energy estimated that there are up to 30,000 megawatts of potential energy at 5,677 undeveloped sites across the nation, more than half of which already have dams.

Newly added to the equation is the emerging market for so-called carbon credits. The credits are part of a strategy to place "caps" on damaging greenhouse gas emissions while allowing companies that can't meet the restriction to buy credits from ones that achieve significant savings. The cap would be gradually lowered to reduce overall emission levels.

Hydroelectric power is a prime candidate to sell credits because it is largely emission-free. The credits typically would be granted only for new or additional power.

The market for the credits is tiny now, but legislation is moving forward that would create caps and a national market that could ultimately reach \$120 billion a year.

Even without a national cap-and-trade law, markets such as the Chicago Climate Exchange now allow companies to voluntarily limit their carbon emissions and lower their carbon footprint by purchasing credits, traded on the market like stock.

This added incentive has made building or upgrading hydroelectric facilities a more alluring prospect.

The small rural Chelan County Public Utility District last year became the first hydropower facility in the U.S. to begin trading carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange.

The money the district has made from selling credits -- about \$1.6 million so far -- is going back to Chelan County and its customers for new investments in carbon-free electricity. The district has invested heavily in making sure its new electricity results have no net harm to salmon -- a key requirement for trading on the Chicago exchange.

But the possibility of more hydroelectric construction around the world has set off alarm bells among some groups of environmentalists.

"Rivers in the U.S. have been seriously impacted by dam construction," the conservation group International Rivers said in urging California authorities to disqualify hydropower projects producing more than 10 megawatts of power from receiving carbon credits.

"Fortunately, some of this damage is now starting to be reversed by dam removals," the group said. "California climate action should not act as an incentive to increase damage to rivers and prevent efforts to restore them."

California gets about 9.6% of its power from large hydro generators. The state has said it will consider as renewable energy only those hydro projects smaller than 30 megawatts that do not require the diversion of any new water.

Climate-change activists particularly balk at the idea of offering carbon credits in the U.S. for large hydropower projects in developing countries, such as Chile, Peru, Uganda and elsewhere, where environmental protections may be lax and the overall contribution to global welfare dubious.

But here at Rocky Reach Dam, engineers say they believe there is a way to reduce emissions, increase power output and save fish at the same time -- although at a cost.

The Chelan County utility district spent \$292 million overhauling Rocky Reach's 11 aging generators and installing new, more efficient turbines and an expensive mile-long safe-passage tunnel for up to 3.5 million young salmon and steelhead that navigate the dam each year.

With the juvenile-fish passage facilities -- along with commitments to improve habitat and expand hatchery production for salmon -- the district could meet its targets for healthy fish and allow much less water to spill over the dam.

Five years ago Rocky Reach had to spill up to a quarter of its water over a 31-day period during the height of the spring salmon juvenile migration, but last spring it got permission to spill no water at all.

Yet more than 90% of the young salmon and 94% of the steelhead are surviving their trip past Rocky Reach Dam, according to district records.

The result is that the dam has been able to produce an additional 1.75 million more megawatt-hours of electricity over a recent three-year period, the equivalent of 702,204 metric tons of carbon if the electricity were generated at a natural-gas-fired power plant.

"What we have been able to do is provide more power with the same amount of water," said Tracy Yount, the Chelan County utility district's external affairs director. "We're saying, let's skip the new facilities, skip the regulatory issues associated with new dams and go to our existing facilities and get more value from them."

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Sunday, July 26, 2009:](#)

Healthiest place to breathe so far? Stockton

By Mark Grossi

Let's look at the ozone violations for this month and announce some of the best places to breathe in the San Joaquin Valley.

Look north. Turlock has three violations this month. Merced has two. Tracy and Modesto have only one in July.

But Stockton is the real winner so far. The California Air Resources Board says Stockton hasn't had a bad ozone day yet during this warm season.

Arvin is the hot spot for ozone, as usual. The online records show 17 bad days this month and 42 for the season so far.

[N.Y. Times editorial, Sunday, July 26, 2009:](#)

Mercury and Power Plants

When it comes to the environment, Washington's attention is fixed these days on the Congressional battle over legislation to control greenhouse gas emissions. But there are other pollutants — so-called ground level pollutants, as opposed to those that rise into the atmosphere — that also need urgent attention, starting with toxic mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants.

For various reasons — mainly heavy industry lobbying — these emissions have escaped federal regulation, whereas mercury emissions from other sources like incinerators and cement kilns have not. But the prospects for regulating power plant emissions have greatly improved since President Obama came to town.

Lisa Jackson, the Environmental Protection Agency administrator, has begun a rule-making process that could require some power plants to reduce mercury emissions by as much as 90 percent. The Government

Accountability Office has just produced a report showing that such reductions are not only technologically possible but affordable — refuting industry's longstanding claim that mercury controls would be too expensive.

This is good news for the environment and for consumers. Mercury is a toxin that has been found in increasingly high concentrations in fish and poses human health risks, including neurological disorders in children.

The nation's coal-fired power plants produce 48 tons of it a year, a little more than 40 percent of the total mercury emitted in the United States.

The Clinton administration talked about regulating mercury but failed to do it. The Bush administration issued a weak rule in 2006 that was struck down in federal court as not only inadequate but invalid.

The gist of the court's argument was that the Clean Air Act clearly stipulates that power companies must install state-of-the-art, on-site pollution equipment at each plant to control toxic substances including mercury. The Bush plan would have allowed power companies to escape such controls by purchasing

emissions “credits” from power plants in other parts of the country. A trading system can make very good sense for greenhouse gas emissions, which disperse widely into the atmosphere. But mercury tends to deposit locally, and the Bush approach would have done nothing to reduce the pollution of local lakes and streams.

Fortunately, 18 states have laws or regulations requiring mercury reductions at coal-fired power plants. And in four states — Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and Delaware — a number of plants have already deployed new control technologies. The G.A.O., which studied 25 boilers at 14 plants with advanced technologies, found that, in some cases, mercury emissions had been reduced by as much as 90 percent at an average cost of \$3.6 million, or pennies a month on consumers' electric bills.

That is a mere fraction of the cost of the equipment necessary to control other ground-level pollutants like sulfur dioxide, the acid rain gas. Ms. Jackson should issue a tough rule to control mercury, knowing that it is essential to protect Americans and that the power companies can certainly afford to do what is needed.

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, July 25, 2009:](#)

Clean energy bill brings us to future

The clean energy bill that's in the Senate brings America to an important crossroad for our future.

We can fall back on the same old tired jobs-killing policies of special interests like Big Oil and Dirty Coal or we can move toward a more prosperous future and develop clean, safe sources of energy.

The old way holds our energy future hostage and keeps us at the mercy of foreign oil and fossil fuels that pollute our air every day. A new clean energy bill can provide resources that never run out and can help us provide millions of green jobs that will give our country an economic boost.

Our senators must support a strong clean-energy bill in the Senate to create clean-energy jobs for America, cut global warming air pollution, and move our economy away from the dirty fuels of the past.

We need to take the road toward a clean-energy future, and our senators need to lead the way.

Renee and Robert Pound, Concord