

Local opinions differ on if it will help agriculture

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

For agriculture, the rosy scenario goes something like this: Farmers, who grow plants that suck carbon dioxide out of the air, will rake in billions of dollars of greenhouse gas reduction credits under climate change legislation working its way through Congress.

Then there's the less-than-rosy scenario: Farmers will be stuck with higher fuel costs under the bill, while the carbon credits they get won't amount to much.

It depends on who you talk to.

Local grower and dairyman Dino Giacomazzi, who has been using low-pollution tractor techniques for five years, doesn't support the legislation. Giacomazzi fears that he ultimately won't get much credit for his methods.

Essentially, by tilling less ground and by using equipment that does several things in one pass, Giacomazzi cuts down on fuel costs, reduces his labor expenses and saves on maintenance. As an added benefit, less plowing of the ground may keep more carbon in the soil that would otherwise be released to the atmosphere.

Some believe that could translate into big cash for farmers if the bill passes.

The legislation would cap emissions from major industrial sources, including power plants, factories, refineries and electricity and natural gas distributors. Emissions from agriculture would be excluded.

In theory, the dirtier industries that have to reduce their emissions would buy carbon "credits" from farmers like Giacomazzi.

But the science of carbon reduction on farms isn't well established, and Giacomazzi doubts that it will ever work out to farmers' benefit.

"So far there's been a lot of talk about agriculture and their role in getting carbon credits, but I have yet to see any way to capture that. I'm not very enthused about the program," he said.

And Giacomazzi is skeptical that ag's exemption under the bill will hold up.

In any case, he emphasized that environmental gains are a spin-off benefit of conservation tillage, not the main reason for him doing it.

"I'm not doing conservation tillage to reduce greenhouse gases. If it is sequestering carbon, then that's great, but I'm doing it because of the economic benefit to the program," he said.

He worries that higher fuel costs under the bill will cut into profits.

"We'll never get enough carbon credits to offset the additional costs of doing business," he said.

But some aren't as pessimistic.

Joaquin Contente, another Hanford dairy farmer, is supporting the bill because of the exemption for emissions from agriculture and because he thinks will get some financial benefit out of the deal.

Contente is president of the California Farmers Union, a state chapter of the National Farmers Union.

The NFU backs the legislation, providing that the U.S. Department of Agriculture administer the offset program and farmers already practicing carbon-reducing techniques get rewarded for their efforts.

"These guys that are screaming that it's going to drive costs through the roof ... all of the credible economic research that's been done really disproves that," said NFU president Roger Johnson.

Still, Contente said he's not sure how much benefit farmers will ultimately receive.

"The exemption is the biggest plus out of this whole thing," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

SoCal smoke may sour Labor Day weekend plans

By David Castellon

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

Smoke and ash from major Southern California wildfires may make for an uncomfortable trip if you have plans to head to Southern California during the Labor Day weekend.

Similarly, the 7,200-acre Big Meadow fire in Yosemite National Park has generated heavy smoke that could make camping and hiking difficult particularly for people with high sensitivities to smoke and dust.

Still, the National Park Service reports Yosemite will be open to visitors Labor Day weekend.

"Yosemite has been smoky most of the day," Jennifer Ridgway, an air-quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said Thursday.

She added that campgrounds and local communities in the park area have been affected by smoke, and a smoky haze is visible on some of the park's online web cameras.

Ridgway said winds are blowing much of that smoke east toward Nevada, so communities on the Valley floor aren't being affected much by it.

Station Fire smoke

Similarly, smoke from the massive Station Fire, which has burned more than 144,000 acres northeast of Los Angeles, is blowing over the Valley. But that smoke is staying high, creating hazy conditions, without settling on the ground, so it hasn't had much effect on people, according to air quality and weather experts contacted.

The effects of the Station and other, smaller, wildfires down south have generated massive amounts of smoke over most of Los Angeles County, though on Thursday ground-level particulate matter in the air was only moderate, said Dimitri Stanich, a spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

"In all areas of visible smoke or where there is an odor of smoke, residents are advised to avoid unnecessary outdoor activity," according to a statement issued by Los Angeles County Public Health.

It also warns people suffering from heart disease, asthma and other respiratory disease to stay indoors, even in areas where smoke and ash aren't evident.

Ridgway said that based on satellite images she viewed Thursday, the areas with the most low-level smoke appeared to be in Los Angeles and Ventura counties while the smoke seemed to be drifting higher similar to here over Irvine, Anaheim, Torrance, Orange, Pasadena, Glendale and Catalina Island.

Whether the smoke situation will change over the weekend isn't clear, and California's air districts wouldn't provide air quality forecasts past today.

Additional Facts

Checking the air

To find out the air quality wherever you plan to be during the Labor Day weekend, check these sites:

- www.aqmd.gov
- www.valleyair.org
- www.airnow.gov

Schools tackle energy bills

Manteca Unified hires consulting firm, creates 2 new positions in effort to save money

By Keith Reid

Stockton Record, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

MANTECA - Victoria Brunn and Kimberly Wright have spent the past couple of weeks scaling the roofs of Manteca Unified School District high schools to inspect air conditioning units, detail thermostats in

classrooms and post small electronic devices on school walls that will collect temperature and air-quality data.

"I follow the janitor about campus and we look for anything we can that might be a way to conserve energy at our schools," Brunn said. "It could be turning off equipment, or finding out that an AC unit is running all night."

Wright and Brunn are the Manteca Unified School District's newly appointed energy education specialists, a position formed June 23 when the Board of Trustees approved a contract for the services of Energy Education, Inc. in an attempt to save what could amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars over the next four years.

Manteca Unified spends more than \$400,000 a month to power its 27 school campuses, said Trustee Manuel Medeiros, who voted against adopting the energy-saving program because he's skeptical it will save money.

District Superintendent Jason Messer, however, said he expects the district to initially "save 10 percent, ... with additional dollars saved as the program is implemented."

The consultant will be paid \$25,000 up front. Once the district saves that amount on energy costs, the consultant then earns a small percentage of what the district saves each year on energy costs.

The program includes computer software that tracks spending and can calculate where savings are being made.

"I'm skeptical, but I hope it succeeds," Medeiros said. "If we can save \$300,000 or \$400,000 a year, great. I'll gladly admit I was wrong."

Since starting their new duties, Wright and Brunn - both former teachers - have begun touring every school in the district with the janitorial staff to observe how the school operates and monitor gas and electricity meters. Air conditioning units and thermostats are also being closely watched and entered into a computer database that will ultimately provide hard data for how much the district is overspending on energy bills.

"We also look for anything obvious that might contribute to energy consumption, and we track that," Wright said, pointing to a window in the East Union High wrestling room that is covered by a grate but does not close. "I don't know if they use the AC in here, but if they do, that's something we're looking for."

After making their rounds through the district's schools, Wright and Brunn will analyze their data and start to implement what they call "behavioral changes."

District staff will be required to fall in line with new guidelines for energy consumption in order to help the district save each month.

Energy Education Inc.'s Web site states the company has helped save 1,000 school districts and churches a combined \$1.8 billion over 23 years.

Foes hope lack of permit stalls power plant plan

By Eric Kurhi, The Oakland Tribune

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

HAYWARD — Opponents of a proposed power plant are hoping the lack of an air pollution permit will be a problem for developers of the 600-megawatt facility.

While lawyers for Citizens Against Pollution declined to divulge details, representatives of the group acknowledged that they are questioning whether a permit issued by the California Energy Commission is valid because it may have been granted on the basis that the air permit already had been approved.

Last month, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District released a document that states such a permit was never issued.

An energy commission spokeswoman said she could not comment on the matter.

The Russell City Energy Center would be a natural-gas fired turbine facility located at the corner of Depot Road and Cabot Boulevard.

No one says it wouldn't pollute — annual emissions would be capped at 127 tons of nitrogen oxides, 330 tons of carbon monoxide and 77.8 tons of particulate matter.

But Calpine says it is using the most up-to-date technology, which is 40 percent more efficient than most gas-fired plants, and building Russell City would allow older facilities to be shut down.

Wednesday night, opponents and power plant boosters spoke at a final public hearing before the air district. Discourse was civil, and some new supporters emerged.

"We've heard both sides, and Calpine has spoken to each issue," said Hayward firefighter Eric Vollmer, who was accompanied by a group of his colleagues. "Hayward firefighters support the plant as a sound investment into our future."

Vollmer added that they appreciated Calpine's "quiet support" for Measure A, which raised utility taxes to preserve the city's public safety services.

Cal State East Bay professor Laurie Price shared a similar sentiment as many other speakers who said fossil fuel plants are not appropriate for Hayward, or anywhere in this day and age.

"That is so last century," Price said. "It's still dirty energy and there are many cleaner alternatives being developed. Russell City is not needed."

The air district issued a draft permit in June, and since has adjusted it to reduce the emissions produced, limit the startups and shutdowns that release more pollutants, and maximize the efficiency of the plant. It also has expanded a study of biological effects of the plant.

Kristine Roselius, spokeswoman for the district, said it has received about 75 comments so far, but since it is accepting them through Sept. 16, there's no way of knowing how long it will take to address them all.

"We take all the comments very seriously," she said, "and if we can incorporate anything into the permit, or tweak it at all, we will look into it."

Roselius said permit approval is "absolutely not" a done deal, and added that the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Fish and Game also have to be consulted before the plant can go in.

Comments may be submitted to Weyman Lee, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, 939 Ellis St., San Francisco, CA, 94109.

UCLA will play at Rose Bowl despite wildfire

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times, Washington Post and other papers, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

LOS ANGELES — UCLA plans to play its scheduled game against San Diego State at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena on Saturday despite the giant wildfire burning to the north in the Angeles National Forest.

Athletic director Dan Guerrero said in a statement Thursday that the decision was made based upon information from local air-quality officials and Pasadena city fire and health authorities.

Guerrero says there were also consultations with the university's own medical staff.

A university statement also quotes an air pollution official as saying that weather conditions are expected to improve on Saturday.

The school said all firefighters and their immediate families are being offered free tickets to either Saturday's game or the Sept. 19 game against Kansas State at the Rose Bowl. Firefighters may show their ID at either the stadium ticket office on game day or at the school ticket office in advance.

Developer Celebrates How 'Green' Is Its Building Rockville Structure Gets Environmental Kudos

By Rick Rojas, Staff Writer

Washington Post, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009

Two Thousand Tower Oaks Boulevard off Interstate 270 in Rockville looks like most modern suburban office complexes. It's a sleek and shiny metal and glass structure that seems to have plopped down like an alien spacecraft on a freshly mowed plot.

What's special about this building, its developers say, is the technology inside, which earned it the superlative from the state government of being the "greenest" office building in Maryland.

Walking into the building, made of an assortment of recycled items including old bluejeans and wheat products, visitors might think they are entering an office with dirt floors, joked Marnie Abramson of the building's developer, Tower Companies, which is based there.

The building's insulation is made of recycled denim. A composite of wheat products makes up the doors. The floor is old carpet that has been shaved down.

But, Abramson said, the structure has the amenities of the average office building and then some.

The building has a fitness center, a three-level underground parking garage and flat-screen televisions embedded in its elevator walls. Every work space has an outside view. The air-conditioning system circulates fresh, filtered air in the building every 51 minutes.

Abramson said the building challenges preconceived notions about environmentally friendly structures, such as that having a green building involves sacrificing certain conveniences or that environmental friendliness is counterintuitive to business success.

Tower Companies received \$1.6 million in a state tax credit for the building, Abramson said, and dangling carrots like that in front of the business community is a simple and effective way to encourage them to take part.

Because of the tax credit, the idea of green practices as the norm "permeates into the marketplace," she said. "In the long term, we can build our way into a sustainable future."

The tax credit, which was created in 2001, allows developers to recoup 6 to 8 percent of construction costs if a building qualifies for platinum status in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, rating system.

Reaching platinum status includes using 100 percent wind energy, limiting water and electricity consumption, reducing air and light pollution and making sure 90 percent of occupants have outside views.

Tower Oaks was the first building in Maryland to qualify and was named the greenest office building in Maryland by state Comptroller Peter Franchot (D) last month.

Joe Shapiro, a spokesman for the comptroller, said the building is a "shining example for the rest of the state . . . because it has an economic value and an environmental value."

Shapiro said LEED platinum buildings save on utility costs and increase productivity. State officials hope the tax credit encourages prospective businesses to reach for platinum status, he said.

Abramson said prospective tenants have told her, " 'I don't know if I can afford the premium for a green building.' " Her response: "I don't think you can afford not to." Constructing something like Tower Oaks isn't just environmental citizenship; it's smart business, she said.

Going green increased overall construction costs by slightly more than 1 percent, she said. But employee productivity has increased, and fewer employees called in sick this past winter than in any other year, Abramson said, crediting the fresh air and natural light.

Debbie Webb, director of property management for Tower Companies, has taken notice of the difference in her own work space. She has been at Tower Companies since it moved in February and worked for other property management companies for 18 years.

"You start off in the basement or in some place where no one wants to rent," she said of the standard property management work area. And, she said, with the lights flipped off and the midday sun flowing in, "it's just such a healthy environment."

Abramson said the company is looking toward the next step: finding a way to generate its electricity on site.

"We're superheroes," she said. "It's our job to save the planet through real estate."

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009:](#)

Earth: Another legal salvo over air quality?

Activists this week told federal officials they should reject the San Joaquin Valley's 2004 ozone cleanup plan, based largely on an issue that's out of the local district's hands.

The issue: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency won't review 124 state rules regulating cars, trucks, boats and construction equipment -- even though everyone acknowledges these so-called mobile sources are the biggest air pollution problem in California.

The activists are led by the Valley-based Association of Irrigated Residents. Lawyer Brent Newell with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment sent the letter. And it would not be surprising to see another lawsuit over yet another air quality issue.

What's the background? The federal government has granted waivers to California so it can create tough pollution standards for vehicles. These rules account for huge amounts of pollution reduction that the local Valley district and others use to project when they will clean up the air.

But EPA has made a practice of approving cleanup plans without even reviewing these important vehicle rules, according to activists.

Without reviewing the rules, how does the EPA know whether they meet minimum Clean Air Act standards? It's a good question that I will ask federal officials.

Without some kind of federal action one way or another, activists can't challenge these rules in federal court. But they can sue EPA in an attempt to force the agency to review the rules.

The discussion in many ways mirrors other Valley issues that activists have brought into federal court over the last nine years.

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, Sept. 4, 2009:](#)

Natural gas not clean

Calpine's proposed Russell City power plant would greatly damage the environment.

Bill Quirk's Aug. 19 My Word misrepresented the situation.

Quirk stated that Russell City will "preserve Bay Area air quality by replacing power generated by plants that produce nearly twice the greenhouse gases and up to 10 times the amount of other pollutants." But Quirk and Calpine refuse to identify plants that would close.

Natural gas is not clean. The 145-foot Russell City towers would spew out nearly 4 billion pounds of carbon dioxide annually, 143,000 pounds of particulates and multiple known carcinogens.

Russell City should not be framed as a choice between dirty petrochemicals and clean sustainable approaches.

Energy conservation is working and Russell City isn't needed. Solar and wind technologies are more feasible. Green investments create far more jobs than Russell City. The public comment period (e-mail weyman@baaqmd.gov, or jbroadbent@baaqmd.gov) lasts until Sept. 16.

Laurie J. Price, Hayward