

Draft of California 'cap and trade' due today

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, November 24, 2009

The state Air Resources Board today plans to unveil a preliminary draft of the nation's first "cap and trade" program for cutting emissions of greenhouse gases.

The release will lay out a framework for the plan, but will leave many key details to be decided over the coming year, an agency spokesman said. The system is scheduled to take effect in 2012.

The emissions-trading market is among the most controversial strategies the state is employing to meet the requirements of Assembly Bill 32, California's 2006 omnibus global-warming law.

Predictably, industry and environmental groups disagree over how the plan ought to be designed. But the proposal also has opened fissures within the environmental community.

A coalition of environmental justice groups sued the state in June, arguing that a cap and trade system would tend to concentrate air pollutants in low-income communities – and would be ineffective and unenforceable.

The Environmental Defense Fund, a national group, has defended the state's approach as a practical and cost-effective way to cut emissions. Last month, the group petitioned to intervene in the case on behalf of the state, but was denied by a San Francisco Superior Court judge.

Under the cap and trade system, the state would issue annual permits, or allowances, to entities that emit large volumes of greenhouse gases, such as power plant operators. The total supply of permits would ratchet down over time, giving polluters two options: cut their own emissions or buy allowances from other firms that have made cuts and thus have permits to sell.

Air board staff are counting on the system to deliver about a fifth of the emissions cuts required by 2020, and substantially more after that.

The agency's governing board is scheduled to vote on a final design for the state's cap and trade program by the end of next year, following a series of public meetings.

The details of the final plan will help determine who bears the cost of required cuts.

Business groups want the state to give away most of the emissions permits for free, while environmental groups generally want them to be auctioned. There's a similar split over use of carbon "offsets," which would allow industry to meet greenhouse-gas targets by funding carbon-cutting projects outside California.

Congress is considering a cap and trade program as part of federal climate change legislation.

Kettleman City parents want inquiry into birth defects

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Fresno Bee Sat., Nov. 21, 2009

KETTLEMAN CITY -- Five babies with cleft palates or other grave disabilities were born over a 15-month span in this small farming community off Interstate 5. Three died.

Many parents worry that poisons in the air, water and land are to blame. Their town of 1,500 is wedged in among agricultural fields, two highways and a hazardous-waste landfill.

Environmental-justice groups, who oppose a proposed expansion of the landfill, call it a "birth-defect cluster" -- a surge in birth defects unlikely to occur by chance. They want an investigation.

But experts say parents may never know what hurt their babies. Apparent spikes in birth defects or cancer cases are notoriously difficult to verify, especially in small communities -- and linking them to a specific cause is even harder.

Kings County health officials point out that different types of birth defects are involved, so it's not yet clear whether the birth-defect rate was high enough to qualify as a cluster. But at least four of the babies had cleft palates.

Nationally, very few reports of elevated birth-defect rates are statistically out of line enough to be identified as clusters, experts say.

Even such instances do qualify as a cluster, an investigation likely would find no clear underlying cause: Birth-defect clusters sometimes happen randomly, they say. And many factors -- genetics, nutrition, infections, the environment -- can contribute to an increase. Untangling one factor from another to find a cause can be nearly impossible, they say.

The debate in Kettleman City has taken on fresh urgency as a hearing approaches on whether to allow an expansion of the Waste Management landfill three miles southwest of town.

On Dec. 7, the Kings County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to consider the company's expansion request. The hearing is a result of an appeal by environmental groups after the county Planning Commission approved the expansion in October. Parents and environmental activists say the plans should be stopped until the birth defects have been investigated.

But investigations of possible clusters often take months, even years, said Lisa Croen, an epidemiologist who helped probe birth defects during 14 years at the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program.

"I know it's very frustrating for families who have concerns, but that's the challenge to scientists," said Croen, who now is in charge of autism studies at Kaiser Permanente's division of research in Oakland.

The landfill question

For about two decades, families in Kettleman City have voiced concerns about the nearby hazardous-waste landfill. It handles things like paints, batteries, solvents and pesticides, among other hazardous materials.

Now, they wonder whether there's a connection between the landfill and the birth defects.

"I don't say it's the plant itself, but what else could it be?" Magdalena Romero said in Spanish through an interpreter. Romero's daughter, America Romero, was born in September 2007 with a cleft palate and other problems from trisomy 13, a chromosome disorder. She died after 41/2 months.

Ivan Rodriguez, 28, said he and his wife, Daria Hernandez, both speaking through an interpreter, took walks in the hills near their home while she was pregnant with their son, Ivan Yhoel. "Once in a while, there would be some bad odors," Rodriguez said.

Their baby was born with a cleft palate. Now he's 1, but he can't eat solid food and must drink formula through a special bottle. Hernandez, 23, said her doctor asked whether she used drugs or worked around pesticides that could have caused the birth defect. She had not, she said.

The landfill is the only thing with chemicals that his wife was near, Rodriguez said.

The hazardous-waste site may have nothing to do with the birth defects, said Maricela Mares-Alatorre of People for Clean Air and Water of Kettleman City. "But we owe it to those parents to try and find out what's happening."

Waste Management spokeswoman Helen Luibel Herrera said the company is "a dedicated community partner, and as such, we want to remain sensitive to the community's concerns." Waste Management "feels for those families and what they're going through and their need for answers," she said.

But the company stands by its health and safety record of nearly 30 years in the community, she said. The proposal to expand the Kettleman Hills site has gone through extensive environmental studies since 2005, she said. The studies showed no evidence that the site is a direct risk to the community's health, Herrera said.

Critics of the proposed landfill expansion say government agencies have known about the birth defects in Kettleman City for a year because of a community study.

Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice, a San Francisco-based environmental organization, and Kettleman City organizations conducted a community health survey that documented birth defects occurring between September 2007 and November 2008. That October, organizers held a community meeting on the issue, and Kings County health officials attended, said Bradley Angel, Greenaction executive director.

They completed the study and released the results in July 2009.

By that time, public debate was already well under way. For example, Dr. Michael MacLean, health officer for Kings County, said Waste Management told him there was a concern in the community about a high rate of birth defects in July 2008.

The company asked him for birth-defect data, he said. And he asked the state Department of Public Health for a report.

County, state and federal agencies should have gone further at that time, Angel said.

"But nothing has happened," Angel said. "No one has stepped one foot in the town" to investigate.

MacLean did receive the state report, but not until January 2009. It showed low birth-defect rates for Kettleman City from 1998 to 2005 -- 2.97 per 1,000 births, compared to 14.85 per 1,000 in Hanford and a national average of about 30. The rate was derived from 337 births in Kettleman City during that period.

According to MacLean, Kettleman City has about 50 births a year. Assuming that rate held steady between September 2007 and November 2008, the five birth defects would result in a rate of about 80 defects per 1,000 babies born. Authorities have yet to issue an official rate for that period, however.

MacLean said he asked the state in July for a new report with up-to-date birth-defect rates. He has not received it.

If that report shows a spike in birth defects, MacLean said he would recommend that the county ask the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program to help investigate. The state has experience dealing with birth-defect clusters -- the county does not, MacLean said. "You need to be careful when starting out doing a study," he said.

State health officials are finishing the report, said Linda Rudolph, deputy director of the Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

Rudolph would not discuss specifics about Kettleman City or the report, but in general, she said birth-defect rates in small communities "will fluctuate quite a bit" because just a few births can skew the rates.

Zippping thru Manteca at 100 mph California high speed routes being pondered

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor
Manteca Bulletin Tues., Nov. 24, 2009

You could one day move between Stockton and Los Angeles in just less than two hours.

That is how fast the California High Speed rail trains would move passengers with time factored in for stops once the intercity system expected to cost in excess of \$50 billion is completed.

It includes possible routes that would send trains flying through Manteca at just under 100 miles per hour – that's roughly twice the speed of the fastest freight train - or else zip past Escalon at speeds approaching 220 miles per hour.

The possibilities of the high speed rail project were explained by Stacey Mortenson of the San Joaquin County Rail Commission during a recent Manteca City Council meeting.

The high speed trains would have tracks separated from all roads and highways by either using bridges or tunnels. One of the routes through Manteca would run roughly along the Union Pacific corridor which would mean roads would either go under the tracks or the trains would be elevated passing through the city. No exact route though has been adopted.

The trains would use proven technology that has been described as safe and reliable and successfully in use throughout Europe and Asia.

Trains would all be powered by overhead electrical lines to eliminate pollution.

The run time between San Francisco and Los Angeles including stops is two hours and 38 minutes, between Sacramento and Los Angeles two hours and 17 minutes, between Stockton and Los Angeles one hour and 59 minutes, and between Sacramento and Merced 43 minutes.

Train stations would be limited along the route and would be located in major metro areas or critical locations such as Stockton, Sacramento, Modesto, Merced, Bakersfield, Fresno, and Los Angeles.

A \$9.95 billion bond passed statewide in 2008 is allowing the funding for the next phase of work which is plotting exact routes. An environmental study is now underway. The goal is to formally certify the environmental documents for the Merced to Sacramento line which includes a possible route through Manteca by 2013.

EPA to limit mercury emissions from power plants by 2011

Renee Schoof - McClatchy Newspapers
Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, November 24, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The Environmental Protection Agency will put controls on the emissions of hazardous pollutants such as mercury from coal-fired power plants for the first time by November 2011, according to an agreement announced Friday to settle a lawsuit against the agency.

Many other polluters were forced to reduce emissions of toxic material such as mercury, arsenic and lead after the Clean Air Act was strengthened in 1990. Power plants, however, the largest source of mercury pollution, aren't subject to nationwide rules.

The tougher rules will clean up more than just heavy metals because some kinds of pollution controls -- scrubbers, for example -- also remove other pollutants, such as soot.

Controlling mercury is significant because the pollutant enters the food chain and ends up in fish. Children, including those who were exposed to mercury before birth, are especially at risk of developmental and learning disabilities. Adults also can experience health problems from eating too much contaminated fish.

Although the EPA has issued guidelines about eating fish, it hasn't required power plants to reduce toxic emissions. The Clinton administration, before leaving office, declared that plants should be subject to controls under the Clean Air Act, but the Bush administration reversed that decision. Instead, it set up a cap-and-trade system, which imposed limits on emissions and established a system to trade pollution allowances.

In February 2008, however, a federal appeals court overturned that approach and ordered the EPA to regulate toxic air pollutants from power plants. Then the American Nurses Association and environmental groups sued to compel the EPA to issue the regulations.

"Nurses see firsthand the negative effects the pollutants have on the patients they serve," said Alice Bodley, general counsel for the nurses association. "It's a long overdue but welcome commitment from EPA. Once finalized, these regulations should provide a higher level of protection for hundreds of thousands of people, especially young people."

The settlement requires the EPA to adopt the rules by November 2011.

"Addressing hazardous air-pollutant emissions from utilities is a high priority for EPA," the agency said in a statement Friday. It noted that the efforts began in July with the procedural step of asking for public comments on its plan to collect information on emissions from utilities.

The EPA is "committed to developing a strategy to reduce harmful emissions from these facilities, which threaten the air we all breathe," the statement said.

The decision "ends a long-running scandal" that's allowed toxic pollution to poison the air and water, said Frank O'Donnell, the president of Clean Air Watch, a nonpartisan clean-air watchdog group.

John Walke of the Natural Resources Defense Council agreed. "Coal-fired power plants are the 800-pound gorilla of air pollution problems in America," he said.

The EPA will be required to set controls for coal- and oil-fired power plants, but oil is used to generate a relatively small percentage of the nation's electricity.

Today 70 percent of the nation's power plants don't have scrubbers. Those that do have them added the equipment as a result of acid rain controls in 1990, state regulations on emissions of soot and sulfur dioxide, and mercury controls that some states began to adopt in 2006, Walke said.

Many plants, however, met the federal acid rain rules by using low-sulfur coal instead of scrubbers, Walke said.

After the new regulations go into effect, the law gives companies three years to prepare to comply, he said. He said some would make the cuts earlier, but that reductions would be huge in 2014 and 2015.

Dan Riedinger of the Edison Electric Institute, an association of electric power companies, said the settlement put the EPA on a tight schedule. The agency will ask companies for data about mercury emissions, and "this might squeeze the time we have" to provide the information, he said.

The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, reported earlier this month that scrubbers already in place at U.S. power plants have cut mercury substantially at a "relatively low cost."

The EPA's Web site includes health guidelines about eating fish. It also advises people to check local mercury-contamination advisories before eating fish they catch.

In August, the government found mercury contamination in every fish sampled in 291 streams nationwide. About a quarter of them contained mercury above the EPA's guidelines.

Washington state's only coal plant nears emissions reductions

John Dodge - The Olympian

In the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, November 24, 2009

Washington state's only coal-fired power plant would reduce its mercury by 50 percent and nitrogen oxide emissions 20 percent by 2012 under a proposed agreement with the state Department of Ecology.

"This agreement will lead to real improvements in visibility and lower health risk from airborne mercury," said Stuart Clark, Ecology's air-quality program manager.

The Sierra Club, which has mounted a national and regional campaign to shut down coal plants and halt construction of new ones, said the agreement goes too easy on the state's largest stationary source of air pollution. The agreement doesn't address the 9 million tons of greenhouse gases the Centralia plant spews into the air annually, Sierra Club's Ethan Bergerson said.

Report looks at hidden health costs of energy production

Renee Schoof - McClatchy Newspapers

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, November 24, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Generating electricity by burning coal is responsible for about half of an estimated \$120 billion in yearly costs from early deaths and health damages to thousands of Americans from the use of fossil fuels, a federal advisory group said Monday.

A one-year study by the National Research Council looked at many costs of energy production and the use of fossil fuels that aren't reflected in the price of energy. The \$120 billion sum was the cost to human health from U.S. electricity production, transportation and heating in 2005, the latest year with full data.

The report also looks at other hidden costs from climate change, hazardous air pollutants such as mercury, harm to ecosystems and risks to national security, but it doesn't put a dollar value on them.

"We would characterize our estimate as an underestimate," because it didn't include those other costs, said Jared Cohon, the president of Carnegie Mellon University and the chairman of the committee that produced the report.

The report says it's impossible to put a monetary amount on all the hidden costs of energy, in some cases because of a lack of information but also because the study had limited time and resources. It focused on the costs of air pollution on health.

Coal-fired power and motor-vehicle transportation accounted for roughly 99 percent of those costs. The other approximately 1 percent of the estimate was from heating for homes, buildings and industrial purposes, mostly from natural gas.

Electricity production accounted for \$63 billion of the damages that weren't related to climate change. Coal-fired plants, which produce about half of the nation's electricity, accounted for \$62 billion and natural gas, which produces 20 percent, produced less than \$1 billion of the damages.

The report looks at the sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and particulate emissions from 406 coal-fired plants in the lower 48 states, which produce 95 percent of the nation's coal-generated electricity.

There were wide differences among plants in the amount of pollution each produced. The estimated health damages ranged from less than half a cent per kilowatt hour to more than 12 cents. The average was 3.2 cents per kilowatt hour.

The best use of the information is to compare it on a plant-by-plant basis with the cost of installing and running scrubbers to reduce the pollution, said Maureen Cropper, a professor of economics at the University of Maryland and the vice chairman of the 19-member report committee.

"There are plants that are very clean out there, and the cost of further controls would not be worth the benefits and you wouldn't want to do anything," she said. However, there are also dirtier plants where the health benefits would outweigh the cost of pollution controls.

The report says nuclear energy produces low damages under normal conditions but that the nuclear waste issue needs more study before any estimate can be made. Wind and solar also produce low damages, but more study will be needed as they expand, it says. For example, if solar becomes a large energy source, future studies should look at the pollution damages from manufacturing, recycling and disposing of solar equipment.

The panel looked at transportation by motor vehicles, which make up 75 percent of transportation energy use, but it didn't monetize the pollution damages from air, rail or water transportation. It estimated the pollution damages from motor-vehicle transportation at \$56 billion in 2005.

The dollar amounts were mainly early deaths due to pollution, with the value of each life put at \$6 million, consistent with other studies. More than 90 percent of the costs were the statistical cost of early deaths. Other costs in studies the panel examined included chronic bronchitis and asthma, Cropper said.

Total early deaths were about 18,000 to 19,000 per year, said another member of the panel, Daniel Greenbaum, the president of the Health Effects Institute in Boston, a nonprofit organization that researches the effects of air pollution on health.

The report notes that there can be large uncertainties in its estimates. The panel of scientists, engineers, economists, and law and policy experts based its findings on presentations by experts, peer-reviewed scientific literature, and federal reports and databases.

On climate change, the panel found a wide range of estimates, from \$1 to \$100 per ton of greenhouse gases. Cohon said the range was large because the amounts depended on two variables: the relationship one assumes between increased temperature from climate change and the damages that will result; and the "discount rate," or the rate used to put future damages in present values.

The National Research Council of the National Academies is the federal government's top adviser on science and technology. The National Academies are made up of prominent scholars engaged in research in science, medicine and engineering.

Feds, Pa. county sue company over slag dumping

The Associated Press

In the Washington Post Monday, November 23, 2009

NATRONA, Pa. -- The federal government and the Allegheny County Health Department have sued Allegheny Ludlum Corp. and a contractor for alleged air pollution violations at a slag dump near Pittsburgh.

The lawsuit filed Monday in U.S. District Court, says Ludlum and Harsco, based in Camp Hill, have been violating the Clean Air Act by allowing nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide and other pollutants into the air at a slag dump. The dump is near Ludlum's silicon steel plant in Natrona, about 25 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

The suit seeks federal and state fines totaling up to \$57,500 per day for alleged violations since an August 2007 inspection.

Ludlum spokesman Dan Greenfield said the company doesn't comment on litigation. A Harsco spokesman said the company is reviewing the lawsuit.

EU: US should spell out long-term climate goal

By Robert Wielaard and Arthur Max - Associated Press Writers

In the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, November 24, 2009

STRASBOURG, France—The United States should be ready to spell out its long-term vision for reducing carbon emissions over the next two decades, not just until 2020, the European Union said Tuesday.

With two weeks to go before a global climate conference, the EU urged Washington and Beijing to come to the Copenhagen event with meaningful bids to check their greenhouse gas emissions.

All countries are being asked to report to the summit on what actions they will take over the next decade to reduce carbon emissions or curb their growth.

But Swedish Environment Minister Andreas Carlgren said the United States should go beyond 2020 to show that it is on a steep and continuous pathway of reductions.

"It's important what they will deliver in 2025 or 2030," Carlgren told The Associated Press. "It would play a crucial role if they could deliver such plans."

Carlgren, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, said he was pleased with the report from the White House Monday that the U.S. would deliver an emissions reduction target to the Copenhagen conference. Washington has resisted doing so without the backing of Congress, which is not expected to pass climate legislation until next year at the earliest.

"I welcome it, but still it needs to be sufficiently ambitious," Carlgren said. "An agreement in Copenhagen will stand or fall on sufficiently ambitious targets by the U.S. and China."

Legislation passed by the U.S. House of Representatives would slash heat-trapping pollution by 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020. A U.S. Senate bill seeks a 20 percent reduction over the next decade.

The EU has said those targets are too low and do not match the pledge by the 27-nation European block to slash emissions by as much as 30 percent below 1990 levels as part of a global agreement.

Carlsen said by outlining its plans through 2030, the U.S. could show it was on a comparable path with the Europeans.

U.N. scientists have recommended that developed countries make cuts of 25 to 40 percent in CO2 emissions by 2020 to avoid a catastrophic rise in sea levels, harsher storms and droughts, and climate disruptions.

At least 65 world leaders will attend the Copenhagen summit Dec. 7-18 as representatives of 192 nations seek to lay out the framework for a new global warming treaty. White officials say Obama is considering attending, but has not yet decided.

Carlgren said he also expected China to strengthen its emissions commitments at Copenhagen, although he acknowledged the Chinese intentions announced so far are high.

China already has set a 15 percent target for renewable energy, a greater energy efficiency target and an expansion of its forest cover by 100 million acres (40 hectares) by 2020.

Carlgren said China can dig deeper to reduce the growth of emissions in its rapidly expanding economy. A 10 percent increase in China's emissions would wipe out two years of efforts by the EU, he said.

