

Driving alone still prevalent in region New rules aim to cut commutes in Central Valley

By Eiji Yamashita

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Carpooling - something less than popular in the car-happy Valley – awaits a new surge over the next three years, as the local air regulator begins requiring large employers to do more to discourage workers from driving alone to work.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says the new rules will cut nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compound emissions by 1.2 tons a day. The agency predicts the rules will increase the number of people per vehicle from today's 1.14 people per vehicle to 1.25 people per vehicle by 2014.

Passed last year to meet state health regulations and federal Clean Air Act, the rules will require about 1,800 employers with more than 100 workers at a single work site from Merced to Bakersfield to get on the program.

July 1 marked the first deadline for these employers to register with the air district. They have until September 2011 to submit a set of strategies to help carpooling take off as a preferred mode of commute.

"If you look at how people commute in the Valley over the past 20 years, people have been commuting further to work and they've been less likely to carpool," Jessica Fierro, senior air quality specialist with the air district. "That's a bad trend. We want to reverse that."

On average, American workers commute 12 miles each way. Carpooling enlists a small minority of the car-dependent population, particularly in the Valley, Fierro said.

As the Valley struggles to rein in emissions from its biggest pollution sector, mobile transportation in which one of the biggest culprits is the single-occupant vehicle, ride-sharing remains key to reducing emissions as well as congestion and commute costs.

Although the rule doesn't require carpooling, they promote a mechanism that encourages it, Fierro said.

Employers are required to institute practices at the workplace that make it easier for workers to choose on their own to use ride sharing and other alternative means of transportation. The rules include a reporting system to help the district verify regulations have been followed.

"There's plenty of examples of programs nationwide and in the Valley where when you put a variety of elements in place; it does lead to changes in commute behavior," Fierro said. "This is very important in the Valley. A lot of our air pollutants come from mobile sources, yet we as a district cannot regulate the tail-pipe emissions. If we want to decrease motor vehicle emissions, we need to look at how we're using our vehicles."

The South Coast Air Quality Management District in Southern California is the only other district in California that has a similar program already in place.

The program there is participation based and requires employers that don't reach a certain target to pay fees. The Valley program won't require that, although employers who fail to follow their own plans could face penalties, including fines.

Valley air officials aren't rushing into the program, either.

Of some 1,800 work sites potentially subject to the rule, about 460 actually met the deadline to complete the registration, Fierro said. The district will spend the next few months reaching out to targeted large employers to make sure they are aware of the new rules, she said.

Kings County is one of many employers who have registered with the district.

County officials cautiously supported the new program, while stressing that the county's vanpool program should give them a head start in meeting the requirements.

"Additional regulations by their definition are always something we don't necessarily like, but given that the concept is to spare the air, then obviously, we don't think it's a bad thing," said County Administrative Officer Larry Spikes. "It's going to put some requirements upon us, and we'll comply. To the extent we can illustrate we're doing good things already in that particular arena, like the vanpool, we'll use that to get points so we can make sure we meet the requirements."

Allies Against Asthma event Sunday at Hanford Mall

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The Allies Against Asthma Health Fair will be from noon to 3 p.m. Sunday at the Hanford Mall.

The fifth annual event will feature free asthma screenings, asthma and allergy information and opportunities to speak one on one with a doctor or other health care provider. There will also be prize drawings, children's activities and music.

"Although asthma cannot be cured, most people with asthma can control it so that they have few symptoms and can lead active lives," said Joan LaPorte, 2010 co-chairwoman for the Kings County Asthma Coalition.

In an effort to raise public awareness of the risks faced every day by 23 million Americans living with asthma, the Asthma Coalition is joining many local business sponsors to educate Kings County residents. The 2009 Allies Against Asthma Health Fair was supported by Adventist Health, Anthem Blue Cross, Avenal Community Health Center, Baz Allergy and Asthma, C&H Productions, Environmental Health Institute, Hanford Mall, Pat and Jerry Harder, Hoffman's Nursery, Health Net, Kings County Health Department, Earl Malarchick, Ph.D., Dr. Buddiga, Robinsons Carpet One Floor Coverings, Mr. Balloons and The Sentinel. Other organizations that partner with the coalition include the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, American Lung Association and Family HealthCare Network.

The mission of the Kings County Asthma Coalition is to provide asthma education to every community in Kings County to improve the quality of life for our asthma sufferers and to raise awareness about the chronic illness that affects so many in our Valley. Funds raised at the Asthma Health Fair will support the Kings County Asthma Coalition to offer public education programs throughout the year.

For more information about the Health Fair or Kings County Asthma Coalition, visit www.kingsasthma.com or call 584-1411.

[L.A. Times commentary, Thursday, July 8, 2010 \(also in the Sacramento Bee and other papers\):](#)

Breathing the filth

Hydrocarbons in the air are more toxic than oil in the gulf.

By Gary Polakovic

What a relief it will be when the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico gets plugged, ending the colossal mess caused by gushing crude.

Or will it?

Once the spill stops, oil will resume flowing as it always has, to be burned in engines, released to the sky and breathed deep into our bodies. We know now that these emissions contribute to a longer-term and perhaps ultimately more dangerous form of pollution — climate change.

As deadly as the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe is, the pollution pales in comparison with the hydrocarbons spilling into the air over our cities, farms and highways. The oil spill ranks as the nation's worst environmental disaster only if you ignore the great ongoing spill in the sky.

Air pollution is so ubiquitous that we accept it as part of the modern urban tableau with little fuss. Smog doesn't rivet attention as it did 62 years ago when an inversion layer trapped pollutants in Donora, Penn., killing 20 people in a few days and sickening thousands, or when smog was

hazardous for everyone most of the time in Los Angeles. Images of a blazing oil rig and glop-coated birds skew our sense of proportion and risk.

The numbers reveal that the dangers we accept as familiar are worse in the long haul than sudden disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon.

Experts estimate that the oil spill now spews as much as 60,000 barrels of crude a day, equivalent to about 8,820 tons.

Californians alone disgorge about 2,215 tons of hydrocarbons into the air every day; what Deepwater Horizon does to the Gulf of Mexico in one day, we do to the air in four days.

It takes the smoggy Los Angeles region less than two days to match the pollution the Deepwater Horizon blowout produces in one, if you count the 4,740 tons per day of various emissions from combusted fossil fuel such as carbon monoxide, microscopic particles, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds.

Worst-case estimates place the total oil spilled in the gulf at about 126 million gallons over two months. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates the country disgorges that much hydrocarbon pollution to the air in 10 days.

If TV cameras swooped in on Southern California emergency rooms during summer's smoggy days, they would find, instead of dead fish or birds, asthmatic children and elderly patients gasping for breath. A recent study by researchers at Cal State Fullerton shows that at least 3,860 people die prematurely from smog annually in California.

If you could somehow film events inside a placenta, you might see the moment when carbon monoxide gas and ozone — both directly related to fossil fuel combustion — cause a fetus in a smoggy city to be three times more likely to develop heart defects than other babies, according to research by UCLA and the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program.

The economic losses resulting from air pollution, measured in missed days of school, lost workdays or healthcare costs, number in the billions of dollars. Yet, unlike the \$20-billion restitution fund for victims of the Gulf of Mexico spill, no remuneration exists for victims of hydrocarbons dumped in the air. While the goal in the gulf is to stop the mess, the goal for the air is to limit the discharge to a conscionable level of damage.

It's true that clean-air regulations have led to substantial reductions in smog-forming emissions released to the sky. There are tangible benefits as a result.

But the more we learn about the effects of the great spill in the sky, the more we learn how dangerous the emissions are. Ultrafine particles — so tiny thousands could fit on the dot of this i — from diesel combustion have been linked to heart attacks, birth defects and cancer. And black carbon, or soot, from diesel exhaust is proving to be a major greenhouse pollutant with a unique heat-trapping ability to settle on and heat ice sheets like an electric blanket.

Unlike in the past, when clean-air laws had broad bipartisan support, lately the political will to tackle the great spill in the sky has faltered. President Obama's recent Oval Office speech invoked a national military emergency for oil spill response, yet the country seems more willing to unite against enemies abroad than to respond to threats to our environmental health and safety.

To wit, 47 U.S. senators sought to block the EPA from regulating greenhouse gas emissions last month. Not a single Republican lawmaker supported the energy bill in the Senate, and only eight GOP lawmakers supported the House-approved bill reckoning with greenhouse gas pollutants earlier this year. Half the country was chanting "Drill, baby, drill!" just 18 months ago while Obama and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called for expanded offshore drilling.

California voters will consider an oil industry-sponsored ballot measure Nov. 2 to suspend the state's pioneering program for a modest reduction in global warming pollutants, a program that has the potential for a renaissance of clean-tech innovation, economic growth and gains against multiple air pollutants.

Will the oil spill in the gulf become an inflection point similar the 1969 spill off the Santa Barbara coast, which ignited a groundswell of environmental support? Not until we gain a sense of proportion about all the hydrocarbons we discharge, and a reckoning with our petroleum dependency

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