

Bill brings tougher smog tests to Bay Area to curb Central Valley smog

Bakersfield Californian

SACRAMENTO (AP) - Gov. Gray Davis will decide soon if more costly smog checks are coming to millions of Bay Area motorists to help curb smog in the Central Valley.

The state Assembly gave final passage Wednesday to a Smog Check II program for the Bay Area, ending an exemption the region earned during a brief time when it complied with federal air quality standards.

Supporters say the more stringent checks will trim Valley air pollution by up to 10 percent, reducing migrating smog that blows through the Carquinez Straits and Altamont Pass.

"Smog knows no boundaries," said Assemblyman Dennis Cardoza, D-Atwater, the bill's author. "It affects the rich and the poor and the old and young alike, the San Joaquin Valley farmer and the Bay Area dot-comer."

The bill, AB 2637, passed the Assembly 61-3.

Smog Check II is a tougher test than the traditional visual inspection and tailpipe probe. The newer test will cost Bay Area motorists about \$10 more than their customary smog checks and put some cars on a treadmill to check for nitrogen dioxide, a key ingredient of ozone formation.

While bringing the new program to the Bay Area it also exempts more cars statewide from having to contend with it. Presently, cars less than four years old are exempt. The new law extends that exemption to cars less than six years old.

Electrical generators pollute air

Thursday, August 29, 2002

By [Mike Jensen](#) , [Merced Sun-Star](#)

Hundreds of backup electrical generators throughout the San Joaquin Valley could be exposing thousands of schoolchildren to unhealthy fumes, according to a report just released by Environmental Defense.

The 92-page report states there are an estimated 964 diesel backup generators throughout the San Joaquin Valley and 11,344 statewide. Those figures were verified by state and local air officials, who added that 48 of the diesel generators are in or near Merced and Atwater.

The environmental group's report cites data from the California Air Resources Board and the California Energy Commission.

Environmental Defense hopes the report will pressure state regulators to reduce smog emissions from heavy polluting diesel-fueled generators that became popular for businesses during the state's power crisis.

The group also hopes its report will ensure that money in the state budget for cleaning up the generators' emissions won't be cut as legislators try to fill a \$23.6 billion budget shortfall.

The report, "Smaller, Closer, Dirtier: Diesel Backup Generators in California," claims that 23,460 students at 34 schools throughout the Valley are considered to be at risk because of their close proximity to the generators.

The report defines a "risk zone" as ranging up to 118 acres from a generator site.

The generators have been largely unregulated by air officials, according to Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The San Joaquin Valley's air is already considered to be in "severe" noncompliance with the federal Clean Air Act, and air officials are expected to ask the federal Environmental Protection Agency to reclassify the air in "extreme" noncompliance.

Merced Bello said that when California's energy crisis hit, Gov. Gray Davis instructed air districts to relax restrictions on the generators. In the Valley, generators may run for up to 200 hours per year.

In turn, payments were made to air districts to offset the impact to air quality.

To date, the Valley air district has received \$1.2 million in payments that have gone to various air improvement programs, including replacing gas-powered lawn mowers with electric ones.

The report notes that despite the dire predictions two years ago, rolling blackouts have not continued, "But some experts predict California could face more shortages."

Jeremy Carl, a spokesman with the environmental group, said the generators are still heavy polluters because they often run for maintenance reasons.

He also said there's "evidence" that some businesses may not be using the generators just for backup and are using them instead to save money on electricity bills.

"They end up running a lot," he said.

He said the state's proposed budget includes between \$15 million and \$20 million for inspections and programs for local air districts to replace the oldest and worst-polluting diesel generators with new, cleaner-running models.

Carl said his group wants to ensure the money stays in the budget so the local air districts can crack down on the generators.

The group is sending the report to the state air board and energy commission, as well as to state legislators.

Gennet Paauwe, a spokeswoman with the state air board, said she hadn't seen the report and can't comment on it.

However, she did verify the number of generators the group says are in California. She also acknowledged that the diesel generators are heavy polluters.

"The are, in general, a dirtier form of electrical generation," she said.

Charlie Goldberg, a spokesman with the Valley air district, agreed diesel generators are heavy polluters.

He confirmed the group's figure for the number of generators in the Valley, but he questioned if businesses would actually save money by using a generator.

"They're expensive to operate," he said.

A February 2001 letter sent to local air districts from Michael Kenny, executive officer of the state air board, warns that diesel generators are a "significant source" of pollution.

"Use of these units as a routine replacement for power from the state's electrical grid is inappropriate," his letter states.

Methane suspected in death

By MIKE CONWAY

MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER

GUSTINE -- A Patterson man working at a dairy here died after he was apparently overcome by methane fumes and fell into a pipe used to drain dairy waste.

Firefighters threw a rope around Sergio Ortiz and hauled the unconscious man from the bottom of the pipe.

Ortiz, 42, was taken by helicopter to Memorial Hospital Los Banos, where he was pronounced dead shortly after 4 p.m. Tuesday, a little more than an hour after the accident was reported.

If authorities establish a methane link in Ortiz's death, it would be the area dairy industry's third such fatality in a year and a half.

Ortiz and Anthony Garcia of Turlock Irrigation Contractors were working at the bottom of a 12-foot-deep standpipe at Rego Dairy, 30747 W. Snyder Road. The pipe, about 4 feet wide, carries dairy waste into ponds, where manure settles to the bottom.

As manure decomposes, it produces methane, which is highly toxic when concentrated.

The workers had finished installing a valve gate, and Ortiz was climbing up the ladder out of the hole when he fell, Merced County sheriff's Detective Jason

Goins said. "He slumped over and was immediately unconscious. That was established by the second worker."

Ortiz landed in 12 to 15 inches of water, and Garcia propped him up against the concrete wall. "In the process, Anthony becomes dizzy and feels he's going to pass out," Goins said.

Garcia climbed out with the help of dairy owner Frank Rego, and they called 911.

"We suspect possibly methane gas was in the standpipe where they were," Goins said.

The pipe is considered a "confined space," requiring a rescue team with air tanks, ropes and harnesses, gear that the county Fire Department's Gustine unit does not have.

"It's kind of a helpless feeling if you can't do anything," said Capt. Bert DeCosta, who summoned help from Los Banos.

Instead of waiting, DeCosta tried a different approach. "You try to makeshift something that might work, without getting yourself involved in the accident," he said. "We actually used a pipe pole to bring his legs out of the water and were able to lasso him."

Firefighters then pulled Ortiz out of the pipe and began performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Goins said the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating the accident.

In February 2001, methane fumes overcame two employees working at the bottom of a 30-foot-deep sump pump at the Aquiar-Faria Dairy in Gustine. Both died at the scene.

Trains, buses, cars are preferred mode

Labor Day traffic will be thick

By Francis P. Garland

Lode Bureau Chief

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ANGELS CAMP -- Travel-industry experts say more people than usual will ride trains and buses to reach their Labor Day destinations this year.

But Amtrak and Greyhound don't go to most of the camping spots popular with Valley and Mother Lode residents. So despite a slight decline expected in travel overall, vacationers should be prepared for heavy traffic on the road to summer's end and full campgrounds when they arrive.

Reservation campgrounds in high-profile getaway spots such as Yosemite National Park and Calaveras Big Trees State Park figure to be chock-full this weekend.

First-come, first-serve spots there and elsewhere also are expected to be brimming with visitors looking to squeeze in one final fun fling before settling down to school and work.

Sandra Sayersdahl, a park aide at Calaveras Big Trees, said things were slow earlier this week, but the park's reservation sites likely will be full soon. "And with first-come, first-served (campgrounds)," Sayersdahl said, "there's no guarantees."

According to the American Automobile Association of Northern California, about 4.6 million Californians -- or about one in seven -- will travel at least 50 miles during the extended weekend. That's about a 1 percent drop from last year.

And this year, more travelers will either ride the rails or hop a bus. AAA predicts 172,000 Californians will use one or the other, a 7 percent increase from last year.

Nearly 80 percent of travelers will go by car, and 759,000 will fly, a drop of nearly 6 percent.

Those looking for last-minute deals on airline tickets likely will be disappointed, said Sharon Gruwell of Stockton Travel Service.

"When you don't have any lead time, the fares always have been really high," she said. "It's tough to get a decent price at the last minute."

Although more than three-quarters of a million Californians are expected to fly, Gruwell said Labor Day is not a big weekend for airline travel.

"People traditionally take more car trips," she said. "It's more 'go to the park and barbecue' or 'go to the lake.' "

A few heading to the lake will do so in rented recreational vehicles. Naiel Ammari of Best RV Center in Manteca said Labor Day weekend is busy, "because people want to enjoy that last vacation of the summer."

But about 90 percent of his business this week is from those attending the Burning Man spectacle in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. "You should see the (RVs) when they come back," Ammari said. "They're covered in dust."

Those looking for a wetter experience, meanwhile, have plenty to choose from in the Mother Lode. New Melones Reservoir, for one, is expected to be hopping, said Kriste Reinhard, an administrative secretary at the reservoir.

Reinhard said Labor Day isn't as big as Memorial Day or the Fourth of July "but we do expect our day use -- our boating -- to be very heavy."

Reinhard said campers have taken most sites the last couple of Labor Day weekends, so those looking to camp should call **536-9094** first to see if any spots remain.

Although camping opportunities might be tough to find at places such as Calaveras Big Trees, Yosemite and New Melones, all offer plenty of day-trip fun.

"We have wading and fishing and picnicking -- all those good outdoor activities," said Vince Sereno, a Big Trees ranger. "But people need to be patient -- there might be some congestion with traffic."

The weather certainly will be ideal, as daytime temperatures figure to range from the mid-80s to mid-90s through the weekend, with nighttime lows in the mid-50s to mid-60s.

At Yosemite, park rangers will lead two-hour walks to an active fire in the White Wolf area, off Highway 120, at 3:30 p.m. daily. An additional 9:30 a.m. walk will be offered today and Friday. The walks, which start at the White Wolf Lodge, will "challenge your perceptions about fire," park spokeswoman Deb Schweizer said.

For those intent on sleeping under the stars this weekend, the Stanislaus National Forest offers plenty of opportunities.

In addition to a number of developed campgrounds, the forest features numerous primitive sites throughout its nearly 900,000 acres.

Pat Kaunert, a Forest Service spokesman, refers to the dispersed sites as "emeralds in the rough." They're free, but they have no potable water, restroom facilities or trash receptacles.

Still, if one wants a sense of solitude and doesn't feel like camping next to a Fremont family reunion, the dispersed sites could be the way to go.

"That's what I like to do: I like to get away from the crowd," said Roy Morris, an information specialist at the forest's Calaveras Ranger District station in Hathaway Pines.

Morris said those looking for "true solitude" should stop at the ranger station on Highway 4 for guidance. "We could show them the main access roads off the highways and possible waterways they could drive near," he said. "We'll tell them about the fire restrictions, give them their campfire permits and let them go."

Morris said he likes to pick out a lake that "looks like it's off the beaten path" for his camping outings. "I've found a lot of spots that not a lot of people go and visit," he said.

For example, he'll send solitude-seekers to the Cabbage Patch area off Highway 4. "It's out of the heat, it has some nice scenery, and they can get away from people," he said.

Kaunert said fire restrictions mean no campfires or barbecues are permitted in undeveloped campsites from the 1,250- to 6,500-foot elevation areas.

"Right now, conditions are such that even one spark can touch off a disaster," he said. "We need everyone's cooperation to prevent fires before they start this year."

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Getting away

- * About 4.63 million Californians are expected to travel 50 or more miles from their homes this holiday weekend, down 1 percent from last year's Labor Day weekend.
- * About 1.75 million people from Northern California, including 170,000 people from Sacramento County, and 224,000 Fresno-area residents are expected to get away.
- * About 3.7 million travelers are expected to get to their destinations by automobile, 759,000 by plane (down 6 percent from last year) and 172,000 by train or bus (up 7 percent from 2001).
- * The most popular destinations, in descending order: small towns and rural areas, 22 percent of travelers; oceans and beaches, 21 percent; cities, 19 percent; mountains and lakes, 11 percent; amusement parks, 6 percent; and state and national parks, 4 percent.

38-day McNally blaze 100% contained

The Fresno Bee

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After 38 days, the McNally fire in southeastern Tulare County is 100% contained, fire officials said Wednesday.

Containment, which means the fire is encircled within a confined space, was announced at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday. Fire officials were expecting to contain the fire at 6 a.m. today.

The McNally fire, which has burned 150,696 acres, began when a campfire started without a permit spread July 21 near Road's End Lodge.

The final area contained Wednesday was in rugged terrain in the Golden Trout Wilderness just south of the Toowa Range inside Inyo National Forest, said Capt. Michael Lindbery, a McNally fire information officer.

Even with containment, hot spots still are burning.

"We do have 100% containment, and that is a relief for us and a feeling of accomplishment, but there is still a lot of hot brush and debris out there, and we have large piles of logs still burning," Lindbery said. Those hot spots may be burning for months, "until we get rain or snow," he said.

There were no serious injuries to firefighters during the 38-day battle, and large trees in the Giant National Monument were spared by firefighters after getting within a few thousand feet of the historic Giant Sequoias.

"You can definitely tell the firefighters were getting tired near the end because of the types of injuries, many from heat exhaustion and sprained ankles," Lindbery said. "A lot of those crews are on their third stretch of 14 days [shifts]."

There were 1,143 firefighters still battling the blaze Wednesday. The number of firefighters peaked at nearly twice that number.

Through Wednesday, the fire has cost \$45.7 million to fight.

Peri Van Brunt, 45, of Bakersfield, is accused of starting the fire. She pleaded innocent last week to charges that she started the blaze.

Damage included three residences, five commercial properties, including Road's End Lodge, and six outbuildings.

A second fire that began Monday in Kings Canyon National Park has led to closure of a four-mile portion of the John Muir Wilderness Trail.

The Palisade fire, at 8,800 feet in elevation, covers 160 acres and is believed to have been started by lightning. Park staffers will inform visitors of other trail options.

Bullet train bond grows

Price tag nears \$10b as projects are added to woo urban voters.

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO -- The Assembly could vote today on legislation that aims for a November 2004 vote on whether the state should borrow nearly \$10 billion to begin building a bullet train system.

On Wednesday, the price tag on a bond measure for high-speed rail was raised to \$9.95 billion, close to \$1 billion more than what passed out of the Assembly Appropriations Committee last week.

The amendments to SB 1856 are among hundreds being made to bills in the final chaotic days of the legislative session that ends at midnight Saturday.

Sen. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who wrote the bond measure, has been working frenetically to secure the necessary two-thirds vote he needs in the Assembly. If it passes the lower house, the Senate must approve the amendments before sending the bill to Gov. Davis.

Winning votes, particularly from Democrats in Southern California, required Costa to add an additional \$950 million to the bond that would benefit other rail projects, including the state's three Amtrak lines and commuter trains in urban areas.

"This broadens the base of support for voters who won't benefit immediately from the first phase of high-speed rail," Costa said.

First proposed last spring, the bond was slated at \$6 billion to cover the construction costs of building the first 400 miles of the bullet-train system through the Central Valley that would connect Los Angeles and San Jose.

The bond amount was increased to \$9 billion to include a connection to San Francisco in the first phase. Areas such as the Inland Empire and Sacramento would have high-speed connections extended to them in a second phase of construction.

Total cost for completing the first 400 miles has been pegged at \$12 billion, with federal funds and private investment expected to cover the remaining \$3 billion not covered by the bond.

Finishing the 700-mile system for trains that travel up to 220 mph will cost \$25 billion, according to state officials planning the project.

In the amendments to Costa's bill, nearly \$200 million would go to the state Department of Transportation and would be allocated for upgrades on the Amtrak routes that run from Bakersfield to Sacramento, the Bay Area to Auburn and San Luis Obispo to San Diego.

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