

Industries form group to ease pollution woes

Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, November 21, 2002

Representatives of industries targeted for polluting the San Joaquin Valley's air have formed a group to address the problem and speed the cleanup.

Clean Air Now, a private nonprofit group funded by ChevronTexaco, doesn't yet have any specific plans on how it will clean the air. But the group plans to do so by promoting voluntary projects by individuals and businesses throughout the Valley.

Members of the farming, oil and construction industries dominate the board of directors. Those industries are likely to face greater regulation as the Valley attempts to clear its skies of some of the nation's worst pollution.

No members of the board are from Merced County, but Robert Maddux of Fresno, the group's president, said a Merced representative will be appointed within the next three weeks. "That's a priority for the board right now," he said.

Maddux, vice president of Gary MacDonald Homes, Inc., also said he doesn't know if any projects will be in Merced County. He added, however, "Whatever we do will have an impact for the whole Valley."

One environmentalist has criticized the effort as "greenwashing" the air pollution problem by trying to make industry appear environmentally friendly when it is responsible for much of the pollution.

"What I see is a replay of what happened a decade ago," said Kevin Hall of the Sierra Club. "Industry hammered the air board and drove loopholes into the process. I think what they'd like to accomplish is to set the whole process back another 10 years."

Hall, who is part of a group called the California Clean Air Campaign, has led the effort to force regulators to begin taking action after neglecting air pollution in the Valley for a decade.

Fresno leads the state in childhood asthma, and the Valley was ranked this year as the second smoggiest place nationally by the American Lung Association. Air pollution is blamed for asthma, other respiratory ailments and heart problems.

The problem is so severe that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is preparing to ask the federal Environment Protection Agency to reclassify the Valley as being in "extreme" noncompliance with provisions of the federal Clean Air Act. Los Angeles now is the only air basin in the nation that is in "extreme" noncompliance.

If the EPA agrees to the reclassification, as expected, the air district will buy more time to submit a plan to clean the air. Such a move would also increase regulatory fees for new and expanding businesses.

Clean Air Now is another voice in an growing chorus trying to address the problem.

Octavia Diener, a board member who owns a large farm and runs a business that rebuilds engines, said the group has only met once and does not have specific proposals for how to reduce the pollution.

But she said cleaning the air will likely involve sacrifices by everyone: fewer fires, less driving, maybe even fewer trucks rumbling up Highway 99 and Interstate 5.

Diener rejected criticism that the group is trying to avoid stricter regulations. "We have to stop pointing the finger and get involved in the solution," she said. "I hate to see naysayers before it even starts going."

Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman for the air district, said her agency welcomes comment from anyone who is interested in addressing the air pollution problem.

For years, air district meetings have been dominated by agriculture, petroleum and construction interests. Only recently have citizens begun to speak out and demand cleaner air.

Other members of the Clean Air Now board are: Gus Freshwater, vice president and general manager, Elk Corp.; Fred Ruiz, chairman and co-founder, Ruiz Foods; K.C. Bishop, manager of strategic projects, ChevronTexaco; Joe Drew, vice president, Tejon Ranch; John Harris, president, Harris Ranch; and Rick Schellenberg, president, Schellenberg Farms.

Associated Press Writer Brian Melley contributed to this article

Reporter Mike Jensen can be reached at 385-2453 or mjensen@mercedsun-star.com

Homeowner alert

Traditional, wood-burning fireplaces soon to be part of 'remember when'

Stockton Record Editorial, November 21, 2002

The Central Valley has some of the dirtiest air in the United States. Its causes are many: industry, agriculture, automobiles, homeowners and simple geography.

Federal and state environmental agencies have taken aim at many of the sources, and politicians have managed to keep the tug-of-war alive between individual rights and the greater public good.

Next month, one of the worst wintertime offenders -- older model, wood-burning fireplaces and stoves -- will take center stage in the heated debate.

Not unlike farmers, carmakers and factory managers, homeowners soon will be called upon to do their part.

It's as it should be.

The ever-increasing millions who call the Valley home will never enjoy clean air if changes on many fronts aren't made.

As personal as the fireplace inside your own home may be, the truth is it contributes mightily to the area's air-pollution problem on winter days. According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 30 percent of the particulate pollution in December, January and February comes from chimneys concentrated in urban areas.

For the 500,000 or so Valley residents who own wood-burning fireplaces and stoves built before 1993, the issues of new rules and tighter restrictions are going to get nasty.

Telling someone what to do inside his or her home is akin to invasion of privacy or an attack on individual freedom. Valley residents who've scarcely noticed while we've asked farmers to make adjustments are up in arms. People who've been mildly put out by Smog Check II are now feeling under personal assault.

The reality is it's our turn, and the air-pollution district already has shown signs of willingness to work with residents on the new regulations. One proposal -- that homeowners hoping to sell their property would have to retrofit their wood-burning fireplaces first -- has been dropped. Older fireplace inserts that are not federally certified will still have to be replaced before a home sale.

Air-pollution officials need to be ready to make other changes. So far, there's been no clear explanation for monitoring violators. Nor have penalties been adequately addressed. There's a real problem of fairness looming.

The district is holding a series of three Valley meetings about the changes; the closest will be in Modesto. Those who care deeply about this issue will have an opportunity to speak and maybe influence public policy. The changes are scheduled to take effect next year, so offering your input now is crucial.

Few welcome the kind of cost and intrusion these policies bring, but with 6 million residents sprawling from one end of California's interior to the other, fireplace limits are necessary and inevitable.

Those who rely on wood-burning devices for heat are exempt, and the regulations as proposed will place restrictions only on those days with particularly bad air -- estimated at 20 per year.

We don't expect everyone to embrace limits with open arms, but we do hope those who feel strongly about their rights will participate in the workshops, will make their feelings known and will at least have an understanding of the issues at hand.

How you can be heard

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is conducting a series of residential wood-burning workshops next month. The schedule:

*** Tuesday, Dec. 3:**

1990 E. Gettysburg Ave.,
Fresno, 6:30 p.m.

*** Wednesday, Dec. 4:** 2700 M St., Suite 275, Bakersfield, 2 p.m.

*** Thursday, Dec. 5:** 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, Modesto, 1:30 p.m.

Each of the workshops will be part of a video teleconference hookup to the other two sites.

The public comment period regarding the new wood-burning rules ends Dec. 20. Those interested

can e-mail their
comments to

tom.jordan @valleyair.org

Editorial: Fireplace ban hard to swallow

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday November 20, 2002, 06:15:09 PM

The timing is pathetic. With a deep funk of fog sinking over the San Joaquin Valley, families are hunkering down in their homes many gathering around crackling fireplaces to warm their hearts and drive away the evil chill.

So what does the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District do?

Air pollution officials announce plans to forbid the lighting of fireplaces on foggy nights and at other times when pollution levels and atmospheric conditions warrant the ban.

First things first. We agree with air pollution officials that the burning of wood in fireplaces should be curtailed on some winter nights.

Wood-burning fires spew particulates into the air. When the air is already too polluted and a heavy layer of fog shrouds the valley, trapping even more health-threatening pollutants, people should not burn wood in their fireplaces.

Presently, SJVAPCD officials issue warnings and ask valley residents to voluntarily curb burning during these conditions. Rules being proposed by the air district would make no-burn days mandatory and restrict the inclusion of wood-burning fireplaces in new homes. The installation and use of alternatives, including gas-burning fireplace inserts, would be encouraged.

Judging by letters that have appeared in the Opinion Section, the proposed fireplace ban is about as popular as a skunk in an elevator.

A smart strategy would have been to drag this skunk out and try to sell it to valley residents in the summer when no one uses a fireplace to heat a home and when the bright valley sun has erased memories of the thick fog.

But a more long-term and enlightened strategy would be to retain the voluntary no-burn program, while creating incentives for builders to include clean-burning fireplaces in new homes and for existing homeowners to replace wood-burning fireplaces with clean-burning systems.

Fees collected for the air district and other grants provide money for all sorts of innovative, anti-pollution incentive programs. These funds should be directed to programs that encourage the installation of gas-

burning fireplace inserts. Cash incentives should be given to builders and home owners to convert to clean-burning systems.

Non-polluting inserts can be just as cheery and just as warming as a wood log crackling in a cozy fireplace.

A classic song coos over "chestnuts roasting over an open fire." Visions of eggnog, freshly scrubbed children in their flannel pajamas and the comforts of home hang on the mantels of residential fireplaces.

Air pollution officials are kidding themselves if they think passing a no-burn rule is going to dash the visions of fireplace-bliss that dance in valley residents' heads.

The rule may be scientifically valid. But it will take a lot of sugar spell that "incentives" for the public to swallow it.

Biodiesel plant to move in

By ERIN WALDNER, Californian staff writer, Wednesday November 20, 2002, 10:50:06 PM

The operators of an Adelanto plant that produces biodiesel, an alternative fuel derived from vegetable oil, plan to relocate to Bakersfield.

American Bio-Fuels has signed a joint venture agreement to move its biodiesel plant to Hondo Chemical Inc., located on Stockdale Highway.

Hondo currently manufactures organic fertilizers.

Biofuel production from the Hondo facility is set to begin in February.

Biodiesel is made from renewable and recyclable resources. It's nontoxic and biodegradable. Its physical and chemical properties are similar to petroleum diesel but because it contains virtually no sulfur or carcinogenic benzene, it's cleaner burning.

This is the second biodiesel facility to find a home in Bakersfield.

In August, fuel tank manufacturer Bryant Fuel Systems formed an alliance with Las Vegas-based Biodiesel Industries Inc. to develop and test a prototype of the equipment that makes biodiesel. The facility is located on Gilmore Avenue in Bakersfield.

The first biodiesel unit is ready to go, said Bryant's general manager, Frank Wisniewski.

The joint venture between Hondo and American Bio-Fuels includes an existing 12,000-square-foot building with its own railroad spurs. Other facilities include loading docks, office space, fully equipped chemical labs, biofuels storage tanks and utilities.

Officials with American Bio-Fuels said the 36-acre Hondo site offers room for expansion.

The biodiesel plant in Adelanto, a small desert town in San Bernardino County, produces 2.5 million gallons of biodiesel per year. The initial joint venture calls for the Bakersfield plant to produce 15 million gallons per year as the market develops.

"Bakersfield is an ideal location because most of the oil refineries in California are located there and the area has extensive infrastructure to transport fuels all over California via rail, truck and pipeline," American Bio-Fuels said in a release.

Wisniewski said Bakersfield also offers biodiesel businesses professionals with oil experience and the necessary engineering and craft skills.

American Bio-Fuel and Hondo plan to market the biodiesel they produce to farmers in the central valley. Farmers can use the fuel to power combines and other equipment, said American Bio-Fuel officials.

No engine changes are needed to burn biodiesel.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has not been contacted about the project, said district spokeswoman Kelly Malay. As to whether the facility will need air quality permits, she said it will depend on the size of the facility, its operations and what permits Hondo already has in place.

Officials with American Bio-Fuels said one reason they wanted to come here was because Hondo has most of the necessary permits.

Hondo, which currently manufactures organic fertilizer, signed on with the project because of biodiesel's environmental benefits, said the company's president, Jess Karr.

Hondo expects to hire six additional employees in February.

American Bio-Fuels is an affiliate of Green Star Products Inc., which owns 35 percent of the company.
American Bio-Fuels is a member of the National Biodiesel Board, as is Bryant's partner, Biodiesel Industries.

[Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, November 21, 2002](#)

Rights go up in smoke

Get out the arm bands and the hob-nail boots; the Fireplace Gestapo is unfortunately alive and well. Like all oppressive governments or agencies, they start out by taking just a few rights away. Along with well-funded propaganda to explain why taking something away is "good for you," and telling you that only bad people oppose their plan, the Gestapo gets its way.

These Gestapo leaders are going to protect us from ourselves, because Big Brother always knows best! Well, get out the citation book and kick in my door, because I'm burning in my fireplace. They even have a tip line for "Hitler Fireplace Youth" to report neighbors and family members.

The valley air police also have workshops in December to explain how painless losing our rights is. Heil San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District!

RAY McDANIEL

Modesto

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee, November 21, 2002](#)

Upgrade fireplaces

By Marian Clifton, Selma

Instead of punishing us for trying to save money by heating our homes with wood, the government ought to do like Pacific Gas & Electric and offer financial incentives to upgrade to newer, more efficient fireplace inserts and woodstoves.

That way everybody wins, and we won't have to freeze on "Spare the Air" days because we refuse to spend hundreds of dollars a month heating our homes with gas, electricity or propane.