

2 cities set pace against pollution

Tulare, Madera lead Valley in filling fleets with clean-fuel autos.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

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Here's a tale of two cities with populations under 50,000 that lead the San Joaquin Valley in cleaning up air pollution from their buses, dump trucks, street sweepers and other fleet vehicles.

Madera and Tulare, with a combined population of less than 25% of Fresno's population, have more than 100 clean-fuel vehicles between them -- about 25% of their respective fleets. Most Valley cities nudge 10% at most.

But, with air quality topping Valley political agendas and opinion polls, many cities are following Madera and Tulare. The cleanup message is becoming more urgent.

The Valley is the second-worst place in the country for dirty air. And when federal smog standards change in the next few years, the Valley will become the worst.

That prospect makes city leaders look hard at cleaning up older diesels, which are among the main contributors to the dirty air.

Madera and Tulare lean on natural-gas power, although clean, "alternative fuels" include such options as all-electric, propane, ethanol, biodiesel, chemically altered diesel, hybrid-electric and, in the future, hydrogen.

Tulare has about 70 natural-gas vehicles, including 26 police cruisers, and a \$2 million natural-gas fueling station. Madera, with 38 natural-gas vehicles, won a national award this month from the Natural Gas Vehicle Coalition.

"We're proud of it," said Madera City Council Member Sam Armentrout, who also sits on the governing board for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Whenever it makes sense for the city to buy these vehicles, you can be sure we will."

Armentrout's mantra sounds like an echo coming from Tulare.

"If it's a street sweeper, garbage truck, you name it, any vehicle available in an alternative fuel, we buy it," says Lew Nelson, assistant public works director in Tulare. "We've been doing it for years."

Though Tulare jumped into alternative-fuel vehicles six years ago, ahead of most cities, Madera is catching up. The Madera fleet will add \$450,000 worth of natural-gas vehicles this year, including two more street sweepers.

"We're very conscious of our opportunities to buy alternative-fuel vehicles," said Armentrout.

The cities of Fresno, Clovis, Bakersfield and Lodi are on the same page. They are also gradually phasing out gasoline- and diesel-powered transit buses, trucks and cars.

Fresno, the Valley's largest city, will soon replace 33 diesel garbage trucks with natural gas. The city fleet has 1,800 vehicles, which already include 49 alternative-fuel vehicles. Fresno's 102-bus transit fleet has 25 natural-gas buses and two hybrid diesel-electric buses.

Bakersfield, which has been using natural-gas vehicles for five years, has 80 alternative-fuel vehicles and plans to purchase 11 more this year. The city opened a new natural-gas fueling station in May.

This clean-air groundswell in the Valley mirrors a national campaign that has been debated among diesel manufacturers, environmentalists and lawmakers for many years.

Diesel manufacturers say their engines will be as clean as any on the road in the next several years. Environmentalists argue it makes more sense to shift investment into the alternative fuels and phase out diesel.

When Madera caught this national wave in the last few years, there was some anxiety about choosing to eliminate diesel. David Chumley, Madera director of public works, said people were skeptical of natural-gas technology, not knowing the track record for such engines.

"But it has proven to be reliable," he said. "It works fine. We buy dump trucks, street sweepers, vans and 1-ton pickups. Our next purchase will probably include a truck with an aerial bucket lift system."

Tulare officials said breakdowns and maintenance costs have been similar to diesel and gasoline vehicles, but natural-gas vehicles require fewer oil changes.

Natural gas has disadvantages as well. Vehicles don't go as far on a full tank with natural gas as they do with diesel and gasoline. When it's time to fill up, fuel is not available everywhere.

And a natural-gas vehicle is not a cheap alternative. A natural-gas bus can cost \$190,000, about \$50,000 more than the diesel version.

Cities must pursue government grant programs, both federal and state, to make up the difference. Since 1997, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has provided \$2.7 million to help replace older, polluting vehicles with cleaner ones.

The biggest chunk of the money -- \$1.25 million -- has gone to Fresno.

"We're chasing these grants as much as possible," said Bruce Rudd, Fresno transit general manager.

The money is well-spent, according to air district officials. The new engines, which are overwhelmingly natural-gas powered, will remove more than 600 tons of smog-forming pollution during their lifetimes, said Todd DeYoung, senior air quality planner.

"It's a cost-effective way to reduce pollution," DeYoung said. "We're very pleased to see more and more cities investing in alternative fuels. The smaller cities are recognizing the benefit."

The alternative fuels aren't the only ones cleaning up the air, said Fresno fleet manager John Hunt. He said many new and future gasoline and diesel engines are much cleaner than they were even three years ago.

He said Fresno owns 59 "ultra low-emitting vehicles," gasoline-powered cars that emit substantially lower amounts of smog-making chemicals than most new vehicles.

Fresno's natural-gas replacement program is aimed mainly at the garbage truck fleet, Hunt said. He also said the city uses ultra-low sulfur diesel and installs devices to cut down particle pollution.

"We use 1 million gallons of diesel each year," Hunt said. "Seventy-five percent goes to refuse trucks. The heavy-duty diesel engines is where you're going to get the biggest bang for your buck in pollution reduction."

In the smaller cities with more modest fleets, such as Madera and Tulare, the push is much broader, aiming at vehicles of all shapes and sizes.

Tulare started switching to natural-gas vehicles when Diane Mathis, a former Tulare City Council member, became intrigued with the idea. Other city leaders joined in.

Now Tulare has a fueling station, dispensing compressed and liquefied natural gas. It provides an opportunity for natural-gas-powered cars and trucks to fill up along Highway 99 between Los Angeles and Sacramento.

The city's 70 clean-air vehicles rival the number of similar vehicles in Fresno, a city 10 times larger.

"We've got 60% of our police force driving natural-gas cars," said public works official Nelson of Tulare. "It makes sense. They're cleaner engines and they last longer."

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Building Track Record

S. Valley freight line work sparks passenger study.

By Tim Sheehan

The Fresno Bee

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VISALIA --Now that South Valley officials have poured more than \$14 million into rehabilitating dozens of miles of railroad tracks between Huron and Visalia, they hope the rails will carry more than tomatoes, cheese and industrial products to market.

With the completion of rail upgrades to improve freight service, members of the Cross-Valley Rail Corridor Joint Powers Authority will start studying whether it is practical to establish passenger service on the line.

The authority is a joint effort among the cities of Visalia, Lemoore and Huron, all of which sit along the rail line operated by the Exeter-based San Joaquin Valley Railroad.

The three cities, the state and federal governments, private companies and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District ponied up \$14.2 million to replace the tracks between Huron and Visalia, said Steve Froberg, the Lemoore city manager who also is the rail authority's executive director.

The fruits of that investment were dedicated in a ceremony Friday in Visalia.

About 47 miles of rail was replaced since May 2002, along with two miles of siding, 50,000 wooden ties and 50,000 tons of ballast. Work also was done to upgrade 30 switches, 40 crossings and eight bridges, and to surface the entire rail corridor to handle heavier freight cars.

Now, Froberg said, the time is ripe to look at passenger service: "We have enough data and a little money to at least do a ridership survey ... and try to get our arms around the costs involved."

Depending on what the study shows, he added, "I'd say we're not much more than three years out from having passenger service between Visalia and Lemoore Naval Air Station."

A 1993 study during the authority's infancy reported that passenger rail service was impractical largely because of the costs involved.

"I think the difference is, now, it's more focused, and it's also on the heels of a successful project by the cities along the line," Froberg said. "No pun intended, but we've got a track record now."

Translating that success to passenger rail service "is going to take some help from the federal and state governments," said Ed Martin, the rail authority's chairman and Lemoore's mayor. While the idea wasn't feasible in 1993, Martin said it's practical now because the most expensive work -- upgrading the tracks -- is done.

Froberg said he believes a feasibility study of passenger rail could take about a year to 18 months. During that time, he said, the authority also can seek sources of money.

Martin said officials believe it initially will take between \$5 million and \$6 million to launch a pilot project.

The Visalia-to-Lemoore stretch is the most likely candidate for passenger service for three reasons, Froberg said:

It's the most populated segment of the Highway 198 corridor.

It's an obvious safety opportunity to take cars and trucks off the highway.

The state Department of Transportation already has done a lot of the environmental paperwork, having studied a proposed widening of Highway 198 between Visalia and Hanford.

Having Visalia -- the largest city in the Kings and Tulare counties area -- as a member of the authority is a key to what it has accomplished so far, as well as to any future that passenger rail may have in the South Valley.

"Had you all not come in when you did ... we'd still be struggling with this project," Froberg told Visalia council members last week as he explained the rail improvements. "Visalia is the 'big dog' among the local cities."

Visalia City Council members last week said the city would remain a member of the rail authority. Officials also are courting the city of Hanford to join the authority.

Council Member Don Landers represents Visalia on the authority's board.

"I'm real excited about the potential for passenger service," Landers said. "I think it's going to be a tremendous opportunity to relieve air pollution in the Valley ... and give the cities true multimodal transportation."

Landers said passenger rail could:

Give Visalians a way to connect to Amtrak in Hanford without having to drive their cars.

Provide an alternative for people who commute between Lemoore and the naval air station, Hanford and Visalia for work, shopping and recreation.

Reduce congestion and improve safety on Highway 198, especially in the fog season.

"Driving on 198 between Visalia and Hanford on a foggy morning is an eye-opening experience," Landers said.

The line also could provide a link for South Valley riders to a high-speed rail line that may eventually run between the Bay Area and Southern California.

But it is air quality that leaders say is utmost among the benefits of, and reasons for, pursuing passenger rail.

Officials point to the reduction in truck traffic -- and its pollution -- already being shown by industries using the rails for freight, notably Huron's Los Gatos Tomatoes, which chipped in money for the rail work, and Leprino Foods, a giant plant in Lemoore that manufactures mozzarella cheese.

Los Gatos Tomatoes reduced its truck shipments by 4,500 trips a year and hired more people to handle train freight processing, Martin said.

"Eliminating 4,500 truck trips a year in a valley as polluted as ours is quite an accomplishment," he said. "We've done a lot of talking about reducing air pollution here in the Valley, but this is a bona fide project that is succeeding."

Landers said he is hopeful that a cross-valley passenger rail project could provide a platform for demonstrating new technology. He and Froberg both talked about a project in Utah in which the U.S. Army is developing a locomotive powered by fuel cells.

Fuel cells use hydrogen to generate energy while producing only water as a byproduct instead of pollution.

"We're hoping to get investment from the entities that are funding that project," Landers said.

Jay Salyer, the economic development manager for the Kings County Economic Development Corp., told Visalia City Council members that fuel cells "give us the most bang for the buck and the most interest from public agencies."

A fuel cell capable of producing 900 kilowatts of electricity, he said, generates 1,200 horsepower.

"It's going to take years to develop, but this [passenger] project will take years to develop," Salyer said. "The timing could be good for us."

Even if fuel-cell technology doesn't develop in time, diesel locomotives continue to be made to run cleaner with less pollution, giving the authority an option down the road.

But Froberg is unabashed in his hopes for fuel cells. "I think that's where we capture the attention of local communities," he said. However, diesel engines develop, "we shouldn't ignore the concept of no-emission fuel-cell technology."

Even without the prospect of passenger rail, the improvements made to the tracks were long overdue, officials said.

Jacklyn Hardy, assistant general manager of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad, said the company operates 331 miles of track in the Valley, but that parts of the line between Visalia and Huron were impassable by trains when work began in May 2002.

"In some of the area between Lemoore and Huron, there weren't even any rails," Hardy said. But in October 2002, the railroad was able to start sending trains to Huron, opening rail as a shipping option for companies.

Companies on the Huron-to-Visalia stretch now ship at a rate of more than 2,000 rail-car loads a year, Hardy said.

The two largest rail shippers on the line weren't using rail before -- Los Gatos Tomatoes was beyond the reach of usable rails, and Leprino Foods' new cheese factory opened this year.

Froberg said the rail line originally was built in the 1870s by the Southern Pacific Railroad. Froberg described the rail service on the line as "slow and unreliable" because of the track condition. But with the upgrades, and the improvements in service, "we've got folks interested all along the line."

Visalia's Landers said the rails now can accommodate refrigerated rail cars capable of hauling 286,000 pounds each -- equal to about three tractor-trailer loads. "It gives our industrial plants another way of reaching markets on the East Coast or in Asia," he said. "It takes a tremendous amount of truck/trailer traffic off of [Highway] 198 and Interstate 5."

Froberg hopes passenger service can reduce the traffic congestion and its attendant pollution even more, but admits there may be skeptics: "I think people will look at us and say, 'What are those people talking about?' "

"It's hard to get people excited about something they don't need yet ... " he added. "But if we don't take these visionary steps, we won't be ready when we do need it."

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Carmaker showcase eco-friendly technology

Latest creations employ hybrid engines, hydrogen fuel cells

By Terence Chea, Associated Press

Published in the Tri-Valley Herald, Oct. 12, 2003

SONOMA -- General Motors Corp. calls it the Hy-wire: a car that puts fuel-cell technology in a futuristic body. It lacks foot pedals and a traditional steering wheel.

It scoots along on a skateboard-like chassis containing everything that runs the car, including hydrogen fuel cells that power an electric motor. The driver controls the Hy-wire by twisting handgrips to accelerate, squeezing them to brake and tilting them to steer. In a test drive, the ride was smooth and quiet.

"This is a reinvention of the automobile," said Scott Fosgard, GM's communications director for advanced technology vehicles.

The Hy-wire was one of the stars of the show this week when automakers displayed 100 vehicles powered by electric motors, hybrid engines, fuel cells and other eco-friendly technologies aimed at reducing pollution and boosting fuel economy.

Automakers say fuel cells could reach the market within a decade and eliminate today's internal-combustion engine as a source of air pollution.

"The industry is moving toward cleaner, lower-emission vehicles. Many alternatives for the consumer will be available as the industry continues its progress," said Ron Musgnug, project leader for the event, known as Challenge Bibendum -- named after the puffy mascot of sponsor Michelin.

But environmentalists say the auto show, complete with test-drive opportunities at Sonoma's Infineon Raceway just north of San Francisco, clouds the pollution debate.

Although encouraged by the long-term potential of these next-generation technologies, they complain that auto makers keep opposing higher fuel-efficiency standards -- and keep selling gas-guzzling SUVs.

"The auto companies are using these long-term solutions like hydrogen fuel cells to distract us from these near-term options," said Roland Hwang, a vehicle technology expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

If the auto industry was serious about reducing our petroleum dependency, it would support raising fuel-efficiency standards at the national level, Hwang added.

Carmakers are investing billions to develop more eco-friendly vehicles to meet stricter standards on auto emissions and fuel efficiency. But so far only hybrid cars, which combine battery power and the internal-combustion engine, have reached the market.

Environmentalists are impatient for more consumer choices.

There will be a market for this technology, but it's still in its infancy stages, said Mike Wall, an automobile analyst at CSM Worldwide in Farmington Hills, Mich.

Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. introduced the first hybrid cars three years ago, but the market is still small because hybrids are relatively expensive and don't perform as well as conventional cars. The hybrid's cost outweighs savings from better mileage, Wall said.

Fuel economy is not a driving factor for most consumers right now, Wall said. What's selling is higher horsepower.

Last month's event demonstrates the wide spectrum of alternative-fuel technology under development.

Several carmakers exhibited diesel-powered cars that are popular in Europe but have yet to break into the U.S. market outside commercial vehicles.

"People have this long-lasting impression of dirty, stinky diesel -- black smoke and a lot of noise," said Reg Modlin, director of environmental and energy planning at DaimlerChrysler AG. "We've made great strides with diesel in the last few years. We think the market will grow over time."

Modlin said diesel engines consume 30 percent less fuel than internal-combustion engines, release fewer emissions and feel great to drive.

DaimlerChrysler featured several prototypes of diesel-powered vehicles, including cars that run on biodiesel, which combines diesel fuel with renewable resources such as corn. Next year, the company plans to introduce diesel-powered versions of its Jeep Cherokee and Mercedes Benz.

Almost all carmakers believe hydrogen fuel cells will power the cars of tomorrow. Fuel cells generate electricity from a chemical reaction between hydrogen and oxygen and release only water as waste.

General Motors is perhaps most bullish on fuel cells. The company has invested \$1 billion and spends more than a quarter of its research budget on fuel-cell development, Fosgard said.

Our long-term vision is that the country will move toward a hydrogen economy, and fuel cells will steadily become the fuel of choice, Fosgard said.

While most car makers believe fuel cells won't hit the mainstream market for 15 to 20 years, GM targets 2010 as the year it wants to start selling fuel-cell vehicles, possibly

including a version of the Hy-wire, Fosgard said. He said fuel cells are taking the automobile out of the environmental debate.

Asked why GM opposes raising fuel-efficiency standards, Fosgard said the company doesn't have the money to develop fuel cells and more efficient gas-powered cars at the same time.

As big as car companies are, he said, there's a finite amount of resources.

Senators Oppose Waiver on MTBE

By David Whitney, Sacramento Bee

Published in the Tri-Valley Herald, Oct. 11, 2003

WASHINGTON -- National energy legislation being hammered out by a House-Senate conference committee could be scuttled in the Senate if it immunizes manufacturers of the controversial gasoline additive MTBE from liability.

Forty-two senators signed a letter to conference leaders Friday saying they are opposed to the liability waiver for the fuel additive.

MTBE, or methyl tertiary butyl ether, has been used as a gasoline additive for almost 25 years to help reduce air pollution. But the additive also is a suspected carcinogen blamed for contaminating drinking water in instances where it has leaked into the ground.

Oil companies that manufacture MTBE have focused on obtaining a liability waiver since evidence emerged in a South Lake Tahoe lawsuit that they knew in the 1980s that the product would be a contamination problem if it leaked into the ground, but they never warned anyone.

The jury later concluded that MTBE was a defective product, thus making the manufacturers liable for cleanup costs. A settlement was reached with four oil companies for \$69 million.

Since then, lawsuits have been filed by water agencies around the country. A settlement in a Santa Barbara case could top \$230 million, and some reports estimate that the total cleanup cost nationally could approach \$30 billion.

House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Billy Tauzin, R-La., and energy subcommittee chairman Joe Barton, R-Texas, are strong advocates of the liability waiver, arguing that it was federal clean air regulations that forced MTBE into widespread use.

According to the Senate letter Friday, however, MTBE was never specifically mandated by the 1990 Clean Air Act, which left it up to the oil industry to find a way of meeting the additive standard to lower emissions.

"Industry responded by choosing MTBE to meet that performance requirement," the 42 senators said. "Court documents assert that MTBE manufacturers were aware that the fuel additive posed a threat to drinking water and failed to warn their customers."

While provisions of the energy bill would end use of MTBE, the senators said that "there is no reason to shift the multibillion-dollar clean up costs to communities and citizens who were and are innocent of blame."

The MTBE provision has the potential of killing the energy package, which could be in trouble anyway if the final version opens Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil

drilling and contains other provisions condemned by critics as unwarranted tax incentives for energy production.

Under Senate rules, it takes a vote of at least 60 senators to stop a filibuster, a procedural tactic unique to the chamber to essentially delay a bill from ever coming to a vote.

Under the energy package still under negotiation, MTBE would be phased out. The bill also would require the use of corn-based ethanol as a gasoline additive.

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Valley leaders ride the rail

By Melinda Morales, Visalia Times-Delta

Oct. 11, 2003

The three rail cars parked in front of the Depot Restaurant, which was the home of the Visalia Depot in the days of regular rail service, may seem like a throwback to a different era.

But Central Valley leaders concerned with air quality and economic development think the slow-moving cars are the Valley's ticket to the future.

"This will allow us to get more commerce moving and build an industrial corridor that is tied in with our agriculture base," Sen. Dean Florez told the crowd assembled next to the train as it sat parked on Oak Avenue.

They were there to witness the dedication of the San Joaquin Valley Railroad corridor upgrade project that connects Huron to Visalia. Now used strictly to haul freight, the railway may one day carry passengers.

The project has come together swiftly since its inception in 2000 with the help of 12 public and private funding sources from Valley manufacturers, state and federal agencies and the cities the line connects, including Visalia, Lemoore and Huron.

The freight line renovation included replacing 45 miles of rail, two miles of siding, 50,000 ties, 50,000 tons of ballast, 30 upgraded switches, 40 crossings, eight bridges and surfacing for the entire rail corridor to accommodate heavier rail cars.

Companies such as Los Gatos Tomato in Huron, are eager to use the new line for its shipping and stepped up with half a million dollars to help seed the project.

Ken Burnett of Los Gatos said they started hauling tomatoes about a year ago. Compared to shipping out 20-25 truck loads a day, they now ship out about eight rail cars a day instead.

"I know it's going to improve air quality in the Valley," he said.

The Joint Powers Authority, made up of city leaders from Visalia, Lemoore and Huron, authorized the formation of the Cross Valley Rail Corridor, which undertook the renovation project.

First considered in 1993 when residents and Kings County staff tried to determine if passenger rail service was feasible, they learned it would take 20 years or more to make that happen. They also learned that the rail would fall by the wayside if no improvements were made, and the renovation idea was born.

"We did it in phases," JPA executive director Steve Froberg said. "A year ago we started the western portion of the line from Huron to Lemoore, then we moved to the Visalia portion. We did it ahead of schedule and under budget."

At Friday's dedication, some passengers rode the line from the Depot Restaurant to Shirk Street and were bused back to the starting point. Others rode it all the way to Huron stopping in Hanford and Lemoore.

Huron Vice Mayor Ramon Dominguez said the rail will be a boon to the economy of Huron.

"This will give companies a reason to come out and look at our community," he said.

Fast Facts

Project: San Joaquin Valley Railroad corridor upgrade

Cost: \$14.2 million

Rail upgrade: 45 miles completed from Huron to Shirk Avenue, east of Visalia

Funding sources: 12 public and private agencies

Ceremony caps rail upgrade

By Jim Marvin

For The Hanford Sentinel

Oct. 12, 2003

VISALIA - What an afternoon.

The fall sun was warm, there were politicians, refreshments, balloons, speeches and - perhaps most important - the best part of Friday's Cross Valley Rail Corridor dedication ceremony: a train ride for everyone!

Lemoore Mayor Ed Martin introduced dignitaries present at the dedication ceremony on Friday and kept the ceremony brief. Martin serves as chairman of the Joint Powers Authority, the legal and political mechanism which spearheaded the renovation of the railroad which runs from Visalia to Hanford, Lemoore, and on to Huron.

State Senator Dean Florez, D-Shafter, and Congressman Cal Dooley, D-Fresno, and Visalia Mayor Jesus Gamboa all took their places at the microphone to offer observations of the completion of the 44 miles of renovated San Joaquin Valley Railroad track.

All congratulated each other and added pats to Lemoore City Manager Steve Froberg, Lemoore Planner Holly Smyth and others for the three-year, \$14 million project.

But what wasn't being dedicated - future passenger service (light rail) - competed for attention with the short line's new ability to handle the 286,000-pound refrigerated freight cars used by shippers such as Leprino Foods in Lemoore and Los Gatos Tomato in Huron.

"Passenger service is next," Martin said.

"Three years from concept to completion," said Dooley, of the partnership of money and in-kind construction from the cities of Lemoore, Huron, Visalia, Kings, Fresno and Tulare counties, state and federal money to get the project on line.

"A great day for the Valley," said Florez, who, as keynote speaker, added, "the group didn't take 'no' for an answer when it decided to rehabilitate an old line. The partnership is unique and the city of Lemoore was the leader," as he nodded toward Froberg and Smyth.

But Florez picked the single fact of improving air quality as his theme.

"This project will have long-last impact as it is on the leading edge of technology," he said.

Dooley praised the railroad, owned by Rain America, for handling 1,200 rail cars from Los Gatos which removed 3,600 diesel trucks from area highways.

As Martin closed the dedication ceremony, Smyth signaled the waiting engineer on the lead engine, who answered with three toots on the train's whistle.

Dignitaries were able to ride the rails on board a passenger car. The passenger service, even if only for one day, started.

Hanford mulls getting on board with rail joint powers authority

By Eiji Yamashita, Hanford Sentinel
Oct. 12, 2003

HANFORD - The city of Hanford is hoping to catch a ride on renewed interest in a commuter rail across the South Valley.

Hanford is considering joining neighboring cities in exploring the possibility of developing light passenger services along the freight railroad between Hanford and Visalia. The line runs through Hanford parallel with Highway 198

The momentum that recently brought the renovation of the railway is now building toward the idea deemed not feasible 10 years ago.

And Hanford officials say it's worth taking a fresh look at it.

"I think there's a tremendous opportunity for making it easier for people to access other communities than getting in a car," said Hanford Vice Mayor Marcie Buford. "If I imagine being able to take a trip to Visalia with easier access than driving a car, for example, I think there's a lot of possibilities."

When Lemoore, Visalia, Hanford and other agencies came together several years ago as a joint powers authority (JPA) for the Cross Valley Rail Corridor renovation project, Hanford chose not to participate.

A private-public partnership led by the JPA has recently completed a \$14 million project

that replaced 43.7 miles of freight rail in the entire 47 mile corridor stretching from Huron to Highway 99.

But now that the JPA is turning its focus to a potential passenger service, Hanford sees a strong incentive to join, Buford said.

"When it first started, we really didn't have the kind of need the other communities had, as far as freight was concerned. It didn't appeal to the city too much," Buford said. "But now we're looking at passengers being able to connect to the north-south line."

Members of the council were inclined to join the JPA when they discussed such a prospect during a study session on Tuesday

The council is expected to adopt a formal resolution to join the JPA at a later date.

Lemoore City Manager Steve Froberg, the executive director of the JPA, was welcoming of Hanford's intention to join the JPA.

"Our JPA is very excited about getting Hanford join the team," Froberg said. "I think it's an exciting opportunity for both. It's an absolute positive for the JPA to have the county seat join the team, and it's a great opportunity for Hanford, if you look at the connectivity of the east-west line to the north-south line."

Hanford City Councilman David Ayers was mostly curious about what the feasibility study may find.

"The initial feasibility study on the light rail showed that it wasn't feasible. My question is: 'Is it now?'" Ayers said.

An alternative transit system is an appealing concept for the region facing challenges of rapid growth and air pollution, but practicality remains a main issue for now, Ayers said.

"Alternative transportation, reduction of air pollution and promotion of mass transit - they have the right idea, so it sounds good. But I want to see if it's really practical," Ayers said. "We'll see what the outcome of the study is."

Froberg said the feasibility study is expected to take six to eight months. The study will address issues such as potential ridership and safety of transporting people along what has always been used for freight transport, he said.

[Hanford Sentinel editorial, Oct. 12, 2003:](#)

Future bright with Valley rail

The San Joaquin Valley Railroad, a subsidiary of Rail America Corp., owners of the rolling stock and track for the Cross Valley Railroad that stretches through Hanford to Huron on the west and through Hanford to Visalia on the east, is almost completely renovated.

That announcement, good news for all of Kings County, came during the dedication ceremony last Friday in Visalia.

The SJVRR short line track, worn from years of service, spotty maintenance and changing transportation modes and laws, is now able to support the 286,000-pound refrigerated boxcars needed by big shippers such as Los Gatos Tomato Company in Huron and Leprino Foods in Lemoore - and at higher speeds. Such users say that without modern rail service, their products would face a disadvantage in nationwide distribution.

The renovation included crossings, bridges, rail and ties - some 44 miles of the expensive hardware - paid for by a consortium honor roll of public, private and governmental financing, including the Kings and Tulare Association of Governments, the cities of Visalia, Lemoore and Huron, the Council of Fresno County Governments, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Real people working on what became the Joint Powers Authority, the legal machinery behind the financing include (then Assemblyman, now State Senator) Dean Florez, D-Shafter, Congressman Cal Dooley, D-Fresno, Lemoore City Manager Steve Froberg, Lemoore Mayor Ed Martin, Jay Salyer, Economic Development Corporation and Kings County Supervisor Tony Barba.

(The city of Hanford did not participate in the renovation project, but is now considering joining the JPA.)

The reasons for the residents of Kings County to be interested in the \$14 million plus renovation include:

- € Improved air quality as trains replace trucks;
- € Safer highways because of less traffic;
- € Reduced highway maintenance; and, not least,
- € Economic development and job creation.

Perhaps more exciting - and certainly more interesting to the public, is information from the JPA, "the possibility of passenger service along the railroad corridor in the near future" exists.

And with the inspiring thought of running light rail service between Lemoore Naval Air Station, Lemoore, Hanford and Visalia, comes mitigation for the cutback of Caltrans funding to widen Highway 198 between Hanford and Highway 99.

The JPA estimates the cost of preparing for light rail as much as \$6 million for both the capital improvements and a two-year passenger service pilot program. Both costs, according to the JPA, "must come from state and federal sources."

If low-cost passenger service is realized, Kings County would become one of the most up-to-date transit areas in the state. Other areas contemplating light rail will look to the JPA agreements tying government and private money together, for the good of all.

The Cross Valley Railroad Project, in both increased freight and the coming passenger service, is a bright spot for the future.

Years later, McFarland cancer cluster still puzzles

By Michelle Tewilliger, Californian staff writer

The Bakersfield Californian

Sunday October 12, 2003, 10:31:00 PM

It's been nearly 20 years since McFarland became the center of a childhood cancer cluster investigation and federal researchers are still looking for possible causes.

The search led health sleuths to Rosamond where another childhood cancer cluster was discovered.

Today, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is wrapping up its studies of the McFarland environment while the California EPA is recouping costs of the soil cleanup efforts that took place in Rosamond.

It all started in 1985 when five children were diagnosed with cancer within a nine-month period in McFarland. The numbers caught the attention of local and state health experts who came to investigate.

Initial water, air and soil studies revealed no contamination by cancer-causing agents and in 1991, state researchers announced they could not find an environmental or lifestyle cause for the cancer cluster.

That was not satisfactory for some McFarland residents who watched twice as many children struggle with cancer as the normal rate for an area with the town's demographics.

The north Kern community had 21 reported cases of childhood cancers over a 21-year period, from 1975 to 1995, according to the California Department of Health Services. Since 1996, the town's reported childhood cancer figures have remained within the normal range.

In 1995, an environmental group called Greenlaw filed a petition with the U.S. EPA on behalf of eight McFarland residents and former residents.

A year later, the EPA responded by planning environmental investigations of the community, which led to soil, water and air studies.

Studies of the town's soil and water have produced no simple answers and as scientists pore over a recently completed air study of the area, it appears the results may be similar.

"They didn't see anything that initially stood out or that looked like it was a concern," said Lisa Fasano, spokesperson for the U.S. EPA.

The federal agency conducted the 18-month air study from the fall of 2001 through the winter of 2002-03. Air data was collected by two air monitors located at Browning Road School and McFarland Middle School. The monitors tested for 112 chemicals, including pesticides.

Scientists will examine whether there is anything particularly unusual in the McFarland air that makes it different from the high pollution levels throughout the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The federal agency should have an air report ready around the beginning of January, Fasano said. Then, the EPA will combine the soil, water and air studies and look at them together to see if any new clues stem from the combined results.

If nothing else, the EPA has created something they have never had: an extensive baseline look at soil, water and air in a rural farming community. McFarland has become one of the most thoroughly studied farming communities in the United States.

"One of the reasons we committed to this when we did was we didn't have good data from a typical small farming community," Fasano said. "This will give us good background data. ... It will be useful to us."

City leaders in McFarland seem ready to put the controversy behind them.

"They've been doing those studies for eight or nine years. They all keep coming up with blanks," said Don Campbell, a city councilman.

Mayor Rafael Melendez is new to city government and the EPA investigations, but already has an opinion on McFarland's environment.

"It is good drinking water and people shouldn't have to worry about it being bad," Melendez said. "Personally, I don't feel it's a concern. ... I don't see anybody getting ill because of the water."

It was the investigation into the McFarland cluster that led county health officials to discover another cluster on the other side of the county, in Rosamond.

Health officials were collecting countywide data in 1986 to help state investigators when they noticed that Rosamond had eight childhood cancer cases between 1975 and 1984, which was significantly more than what would be expected in the area.

Although never shown to be the cause of the cluster, the California EPA recognized there were a number of industrial sites in the area that had left contaminated soil. High concentrations of dioxin, lead, copper and zinc were among the toxic substances found.

The contaminants were left over from decades of smelting and incineration businesses that were built in the desert area near the Los Angeles County border after Kern's southern neighbor passed strict air pollution regulations in the 1950s and '60s.

These businesses burned everything from old railroad cars to old wires in order to recover metals.

During the late 1990s, the Department of Toxic Substances Control, part of the California EPA, dug up contaminated soils in the area and moved them into a pit lined with plastic and capped with concrete.

The department is still in the process of recouping cleanup costs from those who were involved in contaminating the site, said Ron Baker, spokesman for state toxic control.

In a judgment made in U.S. District Court last month, John Alexander Research Inc. and Dr. John Alexander were ordered to pay \$405,000 to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control for cleanup costs as well as court costs.

John Alexander Research stored nickel catalyst at the site with the stated intention of recycling it. Nickel catalyst is a chemical waste produced by manufacturing and has the potential for contamination. Hazardous levels of nickel, lead and zinc were found at the site.

Companies that sent the catalyst to the site are also being contacted to pay for cleanup costs, Baker said.

Rosamond continues to have higher than normal childhood cancer rates: seven cases from 1985 to 1999, three more than the California Department of Health Services would have expected.

But the number is not high enough to be identified as a cancer cluster, according to a fact sheet produced by the state health department.

Vice mayor intends to assist sale of Rosedale power plant

LOCAL DIGEST, The Bakersfield Californian
Friday October 10, 2003, 10:20:26 PM

Bakersfield Vice Mayor David Couch said Pacific Gas & Electric Co. will file an application on Tuesday to sell the Kern Power Plant on Rosedale Highway to North American Power Group.

The Bakersfield City Council has opposed the sale of the plant and North American Power's plans to reopen it. Council members have said they worry the plant could cause air pollution and worsen groundwater quality in the area.

The application to the Public Utilities Commission, Couch said, is a requirement of PG&E's agreement to sell the plant to North American Power.

Representatives of PG&E and North American Power could not be reached for comment late Friday afternoon.

What's New

Valley Voice Newspaper
October 13, 2003

State Senator Dean Florez is targeting diesel emissions from **train locomotives** in the Valley that contribute to high levels of particulate matter pollution in the valley. EPA must mandate cleaner fuel for all off-road vehicles and trains Florez wrote the EPA.

Tulare County's **Air Quality Summit** heard Dr. Kevin Hamilton from community Medical Center in Fresno who offered his views on the link between air pollution and increasing incidences of asthma and ER visits followed by a roundtable discussion for the solutions to the problem here with local leaders. The Visalia Chamber sponsored the event. The group promised to bring back to both the Chamber Board and community some actions that could be taken. Kaweah Delta physician Dr. Bill Winn who attended the roundtable say his biggest concern is the impact of small particulate matter that can enter the interior of our lungs. Dr. Hamilton showed statistics that there has been a steady increase in asthma cases seen in Fresno schools, a rise in ER visits due to asthma with half the cases of respiratory related ER visits are typically related to asthma-and a pattern of more ER visits when a particulate matter is worse. His advice for particulate matter pollution-worse in the fall and winter - don't go outside 'til after noon.
Sunday, Oct. 12. Modesto Bee, Letters to the Editor

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Oct. 12, 2003:](#)

BATs get blame for valley ills

Here are a few reasons why we don't want BATS (Bay Area transplants) in our valley:

This is farming country, but you think you can sue farmers for raising dust in their fields.

You raised land values so many locals can't buy a house, unless we follow you over the hill to work.

You brought smog with you; the valley used to be so beautiful.

Our mayor says the officials want to keep Oakdale small, but instead they spread the city limits out over the river, taking more land for houses. We like our valley cities to be country, orchards and farming, not a metropolitan part of the Bay Area.

My wife and I, along with other friends, have been saving for years to buy a house, but when we thought we finally could buy, the home values rose beyond our limits. I am not a welfare recipient. I have a good-paying job and my wife is working, too, just so we can make ends meet now that rents are going up.

We now have to move because our great "small" city of Oakdale is expanding the high school to accommodate all the people who have moved here from the Bay Area.

Since you want our valley, we have to relocate; maybe if we move out of state, you won't follow us.

Bill Gardner, Oakdale

Valley farmers act to spare air

By Richard T. Estrada, Modesto Bee

Oct. 13, 2003

Honor Denney begins each day looking to the mountains. If she can see the peaks that rise on either side of the San Joaquin Valley, she's comfortable going outside.

If the mountains are concealed in a haze of dust and pollution, the 68-year-old school psychologist packs two inhalers and asthma medicine and hopes to make it through.

"I resent that dust and air pollution dictate how I live my life," said Denney, a Modestan for a decade. "I was diagnosed with asthma recently and there are days I struggle to catch my breath while standing outside."

The San Joaquin Valley's air is among the filthiest in the nation, according to numerous regional and national air-quality studies. The California Department of Food and Agriculture hopes a new program to reduce dust created by cotton farming will improve the air.

The last four months of the year are considered the valley's dirty air season, according to the California Air Resources Board.

While cotton farmers are working the soil, growers of walnuts, almonds and other crops that stir up dust also are working in fields and orchards.

The CDFA will allow some cotton growers to lightly plow or disc fields after harvest with one or two passes of the tractor. Typically, the CDFA requires aggressive plowing of cotton fields, which can require four to five passes, to help control pests.

Each pass creates dust and releases diesel particles into the air. Those components are also known as PM10. Driving diesel vehicles and burning wood and crops also create PM10.

PM10 rises in the cooler months. In the summer, smog -- ozone pollution cooked by hot air -- is at its worst.

Light disking could cut PM10 emissions by 33 percent to 75 percent per acre, according to a three-year study by the University of Arizona. The reduction depends on how many fewer trips a tractor makes across the field.

Doctors say the valley's bad air contributes to respiratory problems:

The region's asthma rate of 11 percent is well above the state average of 6.5 percent, according to the Modesto-based Great Valley Center and the California State Health Department.

Nearly 12,000 people in the valley are hospitalized annually because of asthma. That includes more than 5,000 children.

"The valley has real health issues when it comes to PM10 and the role agriculture plays," said Dave Mitchell, a planning manager with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board.

"There is a natural amount of PM10 in the air, about 10 micrograms," Mitchell said, "but the rest is from farming, vehicles, burning and other activities."

Cotton is not the worst violator of air quality, the state air board noted. Its harvest generates 3.5 pounds of PM10 per acre and the plowing that follows creates another 5 pounds per acre, or about 7.65 million pounds annually.

That's well below the 40.8 pounds per acre generated each time a tractor passes through an almond orchard during harvest. That leads to about 30 million pounds of PM10, since some orchards receive multiple sweeps.

Plowing, harvesting and other farming activities account for 23 percent to 25 percent of PM10 emissions in the valley, according to studies by air-quality agencies and environmental groups.

Fearing that air pollution controls would be thrust upon them, cotton growers asked the state to develop a new plowing option, said Jim Rudig of the CDFA.

Officials are wary of promising a big impact this fall: They're unsure how much land will be in the program, though 75 percent of the cotton acreage is eligible.

Growers from Merced to Kern counties, where 96 percent of the cotton grows, will still shred plants after harvest, but they won't have to plow them under.

The CDFA required both steps for nearly four decades to destroy the pink bollworm. A caterpillar that can survive in cotton stalks, it eats cotton seeds and stains the white fiber.

"If scientists say it will control pink bollworm, I think growers will buy into it because it trims costs and saves time," said Bill Crivelli, who has 400 acres of cotton between Los Banos and Dos Palos. "We'll try it on some acres this year and see how it works."

Growers have reason to be cautious: A pink bollworm infestation would be devastating to a crop that was worth \$774 million in 2002. The CDFA estimates farmers would spray another 7 pounds of pesticide on each acre -- about 6.3 million pounds a year -- if the pink bollworm established itself.

But reducing chemicals by discing comes with a price -- dirty air.

"I fear what will happen if I'm caught without an inhaler," said Denney, who has an air purifier at home. "I feel dust as I breathe it in, but there's little I can do about it. I don't want to end up at the hospital."

For more information on the program, growers should contact their county agricultural commissioner of the CDFA at www.cdca.ca.gov.

New developments targeted

Proposed developer fee would fight commuter pollution

By Audrey Cooper

The (Stockton) Record

Oct. 13, 2003

San Joaquin Valley air regulators are trying to push through rules that would treat new homes and strip malls much the same as pollution-gushing factories and power plants.

The idea is that most new developments in the Valley are undoing efforts to clear the air. As new homes and buildings are constructed on the outskirts of cities, residents, workers and shoppers are forced to drive farther to get around.

In that sense, new development is an indirect source of pollution that clouds the Valley's skies and causes cancer, asthma attacks and premature deaths. Cutting tailpipe emissions is the responsibility of the federal government, which is slow to help control the Valley's No. 1 pollution source.

Proposals to charge fees or require developers to find new ways to reduce pollution have been hailed by environmentalists. Developers say they're open to the idea but point out that a rash of proposed and existing fees -- covering everything from habitat restoration to transportation improvements -- threatens to increase already-rising home prices drastically.

"Home buyers think the builders here are making incredible fortunes, but I can tell you that in the last 24 months, we may have increased prices by \$25,000 or \$30,000, but we haven't seen a dime of that," said David Florsheim, a Stockton-based developer.

Increased insurance premiums, construction-cost increases and fees have contributed to that rise, Florsheim said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District held a series of meetings last week to flesh out the program designed to cut development-related emissions. The agency estimates a program aimed at new developments could reduce pollution by as much as 10.3 tons a day by 2010.

Those reductions are needed if the Valley is expected to meet federal health-based pollution limits, air district officials said.

Details of the plan still need to be worked out. A small number of California air districts already charge new developments for air-pollution impacts.

Those fees range from \$25 per home in Colusa County to \$800 in Placer County.

Developers also could chose to build environmentally friendly projects. For example, they could build dense housing near train and bus stops that would discourage car trips. Developers also could include electric lawnmowers with homes or build north-and-south-facing homes that would cut air conditioning use, said Jennifer Barba, the air district's project leader.

Barba said the air district would try to find a fee amount that wouldn't make homes unaffordable. The money collected in fees would be used to cut pollution in other areas, perhaps by paving roads, retrofitting old diesel school buses or giving rebates to buyers of clean-fuel cars.

Longtime San Joaquin County developer John Verner said air pollution caused by developments is a legitimate concern but said new fees aren't the way to fix the problem.

"The answer is to create more jobs locally, and then fewer people will travel so far and burn the hydrocarbons in fossil fuels," Verner said.

"Increasing home prices isn't the way to correct the problem."

Stockton and Turlock are the only cities already collecting air-pollution fees on new buildings. In Stockton, that means an additional \$129 per single-family home, \$227 for each 1,000 square feet of office space and \$474 for each 1,000 square feet of retail space.

Jim Glaser, Stockton's community-development director, said the fee was imposed in 1991 and has been used to coordinate traffic lights and reduce car-idling time, to buy clean-burning vehicles for city fleets and to encourage city employees to carpool.

Stockton officials recently came out in opposition to another regional fee plan pushed by the San Joaquin Council of Governments, a transportation planning agency. COG wants to charge thousands of dollars for each new home and use the money for regional transportation projects.

Stockton officials said the COG-proposed fees are too high and would hurt consumers.

No decision has been made on the proposed clean-air fees, Glaser said.