

Fresno Unified OKs later start

School will begin on Aug. 25 because of air concerns and to match Clovis Unified.

By Anne Dudley Ellis

The Fresno Bee

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Parents concerned about air pollution are hailing as a victory the Fresno Unified School District's decision to start classes a week later in 2003-04.

Schools on traditional schedules will start Aug. 25 and end June 3, 2004. The decision to push back the date was controversial among high school students and employees, who prefer to begin earlier so the semester concludes before the Christmas break.

Fresno Unified governing board members said a combination of factors led to the 5-2 vote March 12, including air quality, air conditioning costs and a desire to match Clovis Unified School District's start date.

"I'm overjoyed that we're starting one week later. I think they're finally hearing us," said Carrie Zulewski, a parent who lobbied the board on the issue.

Armed with research indicating that August brings the highest temperatures and most toxic air, a group of parents pushed for more than two years for an early September school start, with school ending in June.

With the election of four new board members in November, a majority emerged that was willing to consider a later date.

"An awful lot of elementary parents contacted me that they would really prefer a later-starting calendar," said Patricia Barr, one of the new board members.

She was swayed by concerns that Fresno's pollution was harming children, who are more vulnerable to bad air because they spend more time outdoors when air quality is low and they have immune systems and lungs that are still developing.

Of the 11 health advisories issued in 2002 by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, five were in August. Outdoor recesses and sporting events are canceled when such notices are issued.

While some school officials have argued it's safer for children without air conditioning or coolers at home to be in school during bad air days, many parents have said they want control of their children's activities when pollution peaks.

"The air's like syrup in August," Zulewski said.

The next step, Zulewski said, is to push the start date back one more week, until after Labor Day.

Barr said she would have preferred Sept. 2, which was one of the options studied by the district calendar committee, but decided Aug. 25 had a better chance of board approval.

With August generally the hottest month of the year, Barr said, the later date also makes financial sense, considering the cost of running air conditioners: "We figure just shaving one week in August will save us a fair amount of money, at least \$100,000."

The later date aligns Fresno Unified with Clovis Unified's start for the first time in years, easing attendance problems for the Center for Advanced Research and Technology, a half-day high school program catering to Clovis and Fresno students.

The two districts still will not end on the same date because Clovis Unified takes a full week of vacation at Thanksgiving, compared to Fresno Unified's two days.

But at least the first day of school will match. In past years, Clovis Unified students had to voluntarily come to classes at CART a week before their high schools began, with about 20% not showing up, said Steven Ward, chief executive officer.

"It's the way to start school, to have all your kids there right from the beginning," said Ward, a member of the calendar committees for both the Clovis and Fresno districts. "The more in sync the two major school districts can be, it's better overall for the community."

The Fresno Unified calendar committee, made up of 50 administrators, employees, parents and community members, had recommended sticking with a calendar similar to this year's, with an Aug. 18 start. Committee members found that more campuses and departments preferred that calendar over the Aug. 25 and Sept. 2 options.

High schools lobbied for the earlier first day so the semester ends earlier, and testing and projects could be completed before Christmas vacation.

"That way, when we came back from semester break, we could just start fresh," said McLane High School senior Shelby DeWitt, a student trustee and member of the calendar committee.

School board members first took a vote on the Aug. 18 option recommended by the committee, rejecting it 4-3, with Richard Johanson, Michael O'Hare and Manuel Nunez in favor.

On the second vote, Johanson joined Barr, Tony Vang and Luisa Medina in approving the Aug. 25 option. Medina said: "I think the [Aug. 25] option was a good compromise."

Let the process work

Spat over Operation Clean Air is premature, at best.

Editorial, Fresno Bee

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Cleaning up the Valley's dirty air is the principal public policy task of this decade - and clearing the air between various forces in that effort may be No. 2 on that list.

A group of political and business leaders, joined by a smattering of health and environmental organizations, has embarked on what they call Operation Clean Air. Many community and medical activists have already expressed loud and forceful skepticism about the effort. The clash, though understandable in some respects, is troubling nonetheless.

Operation Clean Air will make its big splash April 23 at the Fresno Convention Center, when business, political and some health leaders from up and down the Valley will gather for an inaugural summit. Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston have been the driving forces so far. The idea behind the group is to come up with voluntary means for cleaning up the air -- and, in doing so, try to avoid the stiff sanctions and penalties that await the Valley if it fails to reduce what has become the nation's second-worst air pollution problem.

The skeptics complain that their input wasn't taken seriously in the organizational effort to put the summit meeting together. They also fear that that "voluntary" efforts on the part of business and industry groups are really meant to mask efforts to further delay or derail enforcement of the Clean Air Act, which has mostly been honored in the breach here in the Valley. And they point to the involvement of the oil industry, among others, which has provided funding for Operation Clean Air, and which is not widely regarded as being in the environmental vanguard.

Those fears are not without foundation -- similar tactics have been used in other places by groups less concerned with clean air than with protecting economic interests, especially their own.

But making that accusation now, about this Valley group still trying to get itself to the starting line, is a bit premature, at best. If this is, in fact, a charade designed to preserve the status quo -- and we don't believe it is -- that will emerge clearly before too long. There are a number of reasons to take the Operation Clean Air group at its word, including the fact that its members live here too, and are every bit as much at risk as any of us from the foul air. There is also the fact that the community's awareness of the problems is enormously greater than it was just a few months ago, and any business or political leader seen as an obstacle to progress runs a grave risk of public opprobrium, or worse.

The critics sometimes seem to dismiss the notion that even small incremental gains against air pollution are worth the effort, arguing that the problem is so severe that drastic measures are called for immediately. They have a point, but it's not yet widely shared, despite the growing public awareness of the problem. That makes quick fixes unlikely, however attractive they may be to some among us.

In any case, incremental gains add up, and any improvement in our air quality is, well, an improvement.

The people bringing us Operation Clean Air deserve a chance to make it work. And the critics deserve to have their input heard at the April 23 summit meeting. The entire effort will get plenty of scrutiny. And more intense means, including the full enforcement of the Clean Air Act, are available if and when the big hammer is needed.

Plan to manage soot, dust pollution is ready

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

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The public will hear about plans Monday to control dust, soot and chemical specks in the San Joaquin Valley, one of the unhealthiest places in the country for such particle pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has enforced rules for so-called particulate pollution during the past decade, but the air has never achieved federal health standards.

The plan, being presented at the air district's Fresno headquarters, features measures that should clean up the air by 2010, officials said. Environmentalists and industry representatives are expected to comment at this and other meetings scheduled this week in the Valley.

The cleanup plan will have to be submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency by Aug. 28 or the Valley will face sanctions, beginning with extra fees for large new or expanding businesses.

Without a plan, billions in federal road-building money could be frozen by February 2004.

The half-inch-thick planning document is considered a blueprint from which air authorities will create controls for many pollution sources, such as farms, residential fireplaces, construction and industrial processes. Officials will include such high-profile measures as the residential-burning rule, which will stop wood burning in fireplaces on the worst air days during cooler weather.

Particle pollution can trigger asthma and other breathing disorders, and it has been associated with heart attacks and heightened mortality rates.

Farming operations and other farm-related activities, such as field burning and driving on unpaved roads, produce about 150 tons of particle pollution daily, according to state estimates. Farming sources account for about half of the particle problem, officials said.

In the plan, farmers will have a choice of several methods to help control dust, such as fewer plowing passes on dusty fields and chipping farm waste to avoid field burning.

Critics of air summit call for more input

But the 'Operation Clean Air' coalition believes voluntary actions will work the best.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Friday, April 4, 2003, 1:20 PM)

A coalition dominated by industry and public officials is launching an innovative attack this month on the San Joaquin Valley's dirty air, but skeptical community and medical activists call the campaign a distraction from real cleanup plans.

"Operation Clean Air" will kick off April 23 at the Fresno Convention Center, gathering business, political and some health leaders at the inaugural summit. People will discuss voluntary ways of clearing the air in the Valley, the nation's second-worst place to breathe.

Coalition leaders -- including Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston -- already have traveled to Washington, D.C., to ask

federal officials for millions to help pay for the bold ideas. Officials say they think the air can be cleared with a major dose of voluntary action while minimizing rules that might repress the Valley's already suffering economy.

"We don't think you have to choose between clean air and economic growth," said Autry. "We can do it if we get everyone involved."

But critics say this is a carefully orchestrated attempt to make it appear that all Valley interests are involved. Many groups, such as the Sierra Club, Latino Issues Forum and the Association for Irrigated Residents, were left out of the process.

They say the effort is being sold as comprehensive approach, and they fear it will distract from the Valley's legally required cleanup. They say other cities, such as Houston and Los Angeles, attempted similar efforts driven by industries and public officials and had little success.

"It is a fragmented process that prevents public input and diverts attention from plans being put together by the [San Joaquin Valley] Air Pollution Control District," said the Rev. Walt Perry of the Fresno Metro Ministry. "This process is not inclusive. We need to enforce the Clean Air Act."

The local air district has struggled for a decade to devise cleanup plans that will make the Valley's air healthy to breathe. Years after previous plans failed to achieve standards, the district is again attempting to craft two major plans -- one to clean up particle pollution and one for smog.

The Valley now faces tough deadlines, expensive sanctions on businesses and possible loss of federal road-building money. Yet, officials point out, the local air district does not control about 60% of the smog-making sources -- cars, trucks and other vehicles, which are regulated by the state and federal government.

The Valley coalition suggested federal officials turn the Valley into a special "clean air empowerment zone," focusing the nation's innovation here. For instance, when the federal government offers support for fuel cell development, the Valley will be at the front of the line for such support and technology.

The group asked the federal government for \$7 million to install clean-fuel facilities, such as compressed natural gas filling stations. The money also would help pay for operating biomass-energy plants, which would reduce open-field farm waste burning.

In the future, business, industry, residents and local agencies would receive money and tax incentives to develop voluntary pollution-reduction measures. Officials said the idea is to involve all sectors of society.

For health and environmental interests, the coalition lists the American Lung Association and Tree Fresno among its steering committee members.

But those two organizations don't represent all interests, the activists said. Christine Foster, representing the Tulare County Asthma Coalition, said she would like to see a forum bringing together residents.

"I thought the process would include a lot of people," she said. "I don't see the regular Joe."

Sierra Club activist Kevin Hall, who has been involved in several lawsuits over the Valley's air, said he was excited about the effort last September when it was announced. He asked to become part of the steering committee that was forming goals and principals for the coalition.

Instead of being included on the steering committee, the coalition contacted Hall a few months later for his involvement after the goals and principals had been decided.

The coalition decided industry groups, organizations and agencies should make suggestions about voluntarily trimming pollution in their own areas, not others. For instance, the medical community would be discussing ways to cut back pollution at hospitals, but not at power plants.

That isolates and protects the larger pollution sources, Hall said.

"Some of the very same people who have been undermining the Clean Air Act on behalf of industry for the last 12 years were on the steering committee," he said. "Why not balance the committee while the coalition is still a blank slate?"

Coalition leaders, who said they tried to involve the Sierra Club, bristle at Hall's criticism.

"Kevin Hall was focused on disrupting the process," Waterston said. "We don't need someone who is not a team player."

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Air bills aim at farmers

One limits pollution, other offers incentives

By Will Shuck and Audrey Cooper

Record Staff Writers

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SACRAMENTO -- A Central Valley lawmaker hopes voters around the state will give him a \$4.5 billion carrot to offset the stick he's holding over farmers as he

pushes for a sweeping package of air-quality reforms.
State Sen. Dean Florez,

D-Shafter, knows his controversial clean-air bills would cost agriculture and other Valley industries billions of dollars.

So he wants to offer them billions of dollars in incentives to help ease their pain.

"Our issue is how far can we push ag without taking them out of business," said Florez, who has introduced legislation that would end agricultural burning and stiffen rules on fireplaces, dairies and old cars.

Especially onerous to farmers is his Senate Bill 700, which would repeal a state law that exempts farmers from many anti-pollution rules.

"(SB) 700 is the stick," Florez said.

Now he's introducing Senate Bill 701, "the carrot," a \$4.55 billion bond measure that would offer a wide range of subsidies to farms and businesses forced to undertake anti-pollution measures under SB700.

Some clean-air advocates question whether taxpayer money should be used to subsidize the cleanup of the farm industry. For their part, farm-industry officials say they won't be able to cope with the barrage of new regulations unless they get some financial help.

"If 700 takes effect, you'd better pray that 701 gets passed by voters," Florez agreed.

Introducing 701 begins a complicated dance in the Legislature. The bill will likely sit in the Senate, Florez said, unable to garner the two-thirds majority needed to pass a bond measure. He doubts he can get enough votes from Republicans and ag supporters unless they believe that his reform package will pass.

The California Farm Bureau wants Florez to go a step further. Cynthia Cory, a Farm Bureau lobbyist, said she wants a promise that the tougher air rules won't go into effect unless the bond passes.

"If you want to have this incredible load of change all at once instead of doing it gradually, then farmers are going to need some monetary assistance," she said.

Brent Newell, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said the bond issue seemed to include some good ideas. However, he said some of the ag programs would amount to a taxpayer handout to farmers.

"It's cost-effective for farmers to do some of these things. In the end, the dairymen may see a windfall. Why should they get that money and not schools or someone else?" he said.

The bond measure also would offer \$400 million for diesel truck retrofitting; \$600 million for farm-technology upgrades; \$400 million for dairies; \$400 million for agricultural conservation; \$250 million for farmland preservation; and several other large chunks, which, frankly, won't sound like ballot magic in the state's biggest cities.

That's why Florez has included some plums for voters in Los Angeles and San Francisco who might otherwise balk at a huge air-pollution bond that largely funds benefits for the Central Valley.

He's included \$500 million for clean-vehicle credits to help offset the cost of the state's emission-reduction plans.

"This seems to go very well in our urban centers -- in San Francisco, in Los Angeles, in Santa Monica," he said. "This is a statewide bond, and you have to have things in this that incentivizes others as well."

He's also included \$500 million for asthma prevention -- "a major sell for the bond" -- and \$300 for school-bus replacement, a perennial favorite with voters. "We think that's a real plus."

If the agriculture community manages to kill his air-quality measures, Florez said he'll withdraw his bond proposal.

"Why would I want to move it?" he said. "We'll be at a stalemate."

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Air district workshops target plan to cut soot, dust pollution

By MATT WEISER,
The Bakersfield Californian
Friday April 04, 2003, 11:17:05 PM

A long-awaited plan to control pollution from dust and soot in the San Joaquin Valley will be unveiled in a series of public workshops next week, including a host of related new regulations.

The so-called "PM10 Plan" aims to control particulate pollution smaller than 10 microns in size, or less than one-seventh the diameter of a human hair. Sources of this pollution are numerous in the San Joaquin Valley, including dust raised by tilling and harvesting on farms, traffic on dirt roads, grading for development sites and wood burning on farms and in residential fireplaces.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control district has been under a federal order to control particulate pollution since 1987. But it has never been able to meet federal standards for particulate pollution and has missed numerous deadlines to develop a plan for compliance. It now faces the threat of federal sanctions under the Clean Air Act if an attainment plan isn't approved by Aug. 28.

The first of five public workshops on the draft plan will be at 1 p.m. Monday in Fresno. The meeting will be simultaneously broadcast by videoconference at the air district's Bakersfield office, 2700 M St., Suite 275. A live workshop will be held at the Bakersfield site at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Particulates are a major health threat and a leading contributor to the valley's air pollution. The smallest particles can penetrate deep into the lungs, causing asthma, bronchitis, shortness of breath and even premature death. Periods of high particulate pollution in the San Joaquin Valley have been linked to increased hospital admissions and work absenteeism.

Controlling particulates is a unique challenge in the valley, where the diverse farming industry stirs up thousands of tons of dust every year from routine harvesting work and activity on dirt roads. Open burning of field prunings is another major source. But urban activities are also a big contributor, including dust from construction activities, residential wood burning and vehicle exhaust.

The PM10 Plan proposes a number of new rules to control particulate pollution. Agriculture, considered the biggest source of particulates, would be required to adopt new "conservation management practices" to reduce soil disturbance and control dust on roads and parking areas. These controls will be mandatory, but farmers would be allowed to select the control measures that work best for them, and effectiveness will be monitored on the industry as a whole and not on a farm-by-farm basis.

Other new controls are proposed on cotton gins; commercial dryers, boilers and heaters; and steam generators used in oil fields.

Residential wood burning, responsible for 20 to 30 percent of winter particulates in urban areas, would also face restrictions. The air district has already held separate workshops on this proposal, which includes mandatory no-burn nights, a ban on fireplaces in new housing, and removal of older woodstoves when existing homes are sold.

Florez pushing \$4.5 billion bond measure to clean up air

By VIC POLLARD

The Bakersfield Californian

Thursday April 03, 2003, 11:43:29 PM

SACRAMENTO -- State Sen. Dean Florez wants to ask California voters for \$4.5 billion in bonds to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's dirty air.

The money would help farmers pay for reducing emissions from diesel trucks, tractors and pumps and eliminating open-field burning.

It would also help fund a variety of anti-pollution and clean-air research programs for dairies.

Florez, who chairs a special Senate committee on valley smog, said he hopes the bond issue will help enlist support from farmers and other valley businesses for a series of other bills he has proposed that call for a dramatic series of steps to reduce valley air pollution.

They include such things as an end to open burning, which farmers say they support but probably can't afford.

"Clean air is not free," Florez told reporters Thursday. "We have to look at ways to incentivize folks."

Florez acknowledged it will be an uphill battle to convince fellow lawmakers to put the measure on the ballot next year and then sell voters statewide on it when much of the money would go to farmers, dairies and other businesses in the valley.

But he said a number of the programs will be statewide in nature, such as funding to upgrade pollution-spewing old diesel school buses and expand asthma screening for children.

He also said the large concentration of dairies in the San Bernardino area would be eligible for anti-pollution funding.

A special sweetener for urban dwellers, he said, is \$500 million to subsidize purchases of electric cars or ultra-low-emission electric-combustion hybrids and eliminate vehicle license fees for them.

"A lot of this is statewide," he said.

He also said the measure is still being finalized and he is open to negotiations on additional funding that might broaden support in the Legislature and among voters.

Major items in the proposal so far:

- * \$1 billion to boost funding for an existing program to help farms and other businesses upgrade diesel truck engines and expand it to cover diesel tractor and pump engines.
- * \$500 million in incentives to convert more agricultural waste to electricity, rather than burning it in the fields.
- * \$400 million for grants and other incentives to reduce air pollution from dairies, including installation of equipment to convert manure into electricity.
- * \$400 million for programs to reduce fugitive dust from farms and encourage other conservation practices.
- * \$500 million for health agencies and schools to improve asthma screening for children and vulnerable adults.
- * \$300 million to help install cleaner engines on school and transit buses.

Mud starts to fly in battle over Kern River bluffs

By JAMES BURGER

The Bakersfield Californian

Sunday April 06, 2003, 12:51:23 AM

An old battle is starting up again in the foothills east of Bakersfield.

At stake is control of the Kern River bluffs -- some of Bakersfield's most scenic, and potentially valuable development ground.

The fight for control has exploded recently into personal confrontations, finger-pointing and accusations of double-dealing.

Pressure is mounting as property owners and developers begin to draw tracts of homes and shopping centers over land treasured by hikers, bikers and environmentalists.

When emotions are boiled away all that is left is a simple question -- What will the Kern River bluffs look like in 20 years?

The land

Most of the Kern River bluffs, a sweeping curve of clay ridges along the south side of the river near Hart Park, are privately owned by a wide range of companies and individuals.

What they want to do with their land is about as varied as they are.

Clay Maynard, who lives north of Sacramento, bought a sizable chunk along the ridge 25 years ago to build his retirement home.

Corporations like General Holding, Inc. of Sacramento and developers like Tom Carosella and Craig Carver of Bakersfield own square miles of bluff land where they plan to build homes.

Construction has begun recently, in small pockets, and city planning maps show much of the bluffs spider-webbed by planned tracts of homes.

The bluffs seem fated to move from rural to urban use at high speed.

Until recently, grazing sheep on the green hillsides has been the most intense use property owners have made of their bluff property.

But the land is far from underused.

The hillsides, vistas and open feel of the Kern River bluffs have attracted recreational users for decades.

They see the land as the city's back yard -- a public recreation area for thousands of people.

Motorcyclists have carved hundreds of trails into the bluffs. Hikers and mountain bikers have used those trails and made some of their own.

Equestrians ride along the bluffs and hang gliders have flown from 960-foot tall Ant Hill so often that most people now call it Hang Glider Hill.

All those people are trespassing.

"They have trespassed for so long that they think they own the land," said Pat Leddy, whose mother, Stephanie Stockton, owns Ant Hill.

And that is the basic conflict on the bluffs, a conflict that has lain largely dormant for decades.

Two years ago, that conflict came awake in a near explosion.

Open-space plan

In late 2000, Bakersfield teacher Michelle Beck went public with a plan to turn the bluffs into an open-space area filled with parks and trails.

A map of the plan, backed by hikers, mountain bikers and local trail groups, made it into The Californian's story about the idea.

When property owners saw the map they lost their tempers.

How dare a trespasser ask the city to help take their land away from them?

Councilman Mike Maggard calmed the waters by pulling everybody who owned or used the bluffs into talks.

A compromise plan was created that everyone was able to support -- then.

The city would move forward with a trails and open-space plan but city leaders promised never to take land from owners who were unwilling to sell.

Everyone was happy when the plan was approved in fall of 2001.

The peace lasted a little more than a year.

Development comes

This month, 20 million gallons of Kern River drinking water will begin flowing each day from a new California Water Co. treatment plant just south of the bluffs.

A lack of water had been a major barrier to development. It isn't any longer.

The grumble of heavy earth-moving equipment has already been heard on sections of the bluffs.

And the city's building department has been swamped by paperwork from property owners and developers who want to lock down their rights to build on the bluffs.

In response, environmentalists and trails advocates are starting to raise concerns.

Where will trails go?

Will homes sit on the edge of the bluffs, cluttering the view and threatening to cause landslides?

What rules will developers have to follow?

Beck and Craig Smith, representing the Bakersfield Bluffs and Open Space Committee, have asked the city to consider creating a new ordinance to control building on the bluffs.

They say they want property owners involved, but have suggested some new rules that have those land owners howling in frustration.

The big stinker, from the owners' point of view, is a request to set all structures 100 feet back from the edge.

Developers hate the idea, which would put large sections of prime scenic property off-limits to construction.

"I find that Michelle Beck, she has a dream in her head," said Pat Leddy. "On the other side of the fence there are (land owners) just as concerned as she is. They will protect the future (of the bluffs)."

Beck's request for a study was forwarded to the Bakersfield City Council's Urban Development Committee. One meeting on the idea, filled with accusations and flaring tempers, has already been held.

"They're all violating people's private property rights," said General Holding project manager Robert Kapral. "They shouldn't be trying to get the city to change the regulations to undo agreements."

Kapral, Leddy and others feel that Beck and Smith are trying to break agreements they made when Maggard crafted the open-space compromise back in 2001.

"Michelle Beck and her associates have recently rallied around new ways to obstruct development," wrote Clay Maynard in a letter to The Californian. "These actions are exactly what the property owners were assured would not happen and we are very upset that these people have not been honest with us."

Need for a plan

But Beck and Smith said their latest request is not about the open-space area. It is about development.

"It's not a singular issue," Smith said. "We want the city to study the concept of bluff development. They haven't studied the uniqueness of the bluffs."

Both point to developments done along the bluffs in the past, projects where homes lean off the edge of cliffs and ugly, chain link fences are draped down the hillsides.

Pools on the bluffs promote landslides, they argue, and a lack of rules allows homeowners to give those areas a slipshod, cluttered look.

"We know developments are coming, that's no problem," Beck said. "We just want to learn from past city mistakes."

She said they aren't trying to tell the city what the rules should be; or have the rules decided without the property owners being part of the process.

They just want the beauty, and the safety, of the bluffs preserved.

"We want people (living on the bluffs) to be able to walk out their door with a picnic basket and their kids and walk along the bluffs to a park and play on the toys," Beck said.

Rules is rules

In the end, what the bluffs could look like comes down to rules.

There are two documents and one set of codes that control development.

The first is the Metropolitan Bakersfield General Plan, the blueprint for the city's growth, which generally treats development on the bluffs the same as that on flat land.

The second document is Bakersfield's hillside ordinance.

Although the ordinance states its purpose is to preserve and maintain "hillsides as a scenic resource of the city," it actually focuses on making it possible to fight hillside fires in housing tracts above steep slopes.

The only nod to scenic preservation on the bluffs is a requirement for builders to contour hillsides to look as natural as possible after constructing homes.

The city also requires that new development meet California's 2001 Building Code, which has specific rules about how hillside homes are built.

For example, according to the code, structures near hill tops must be set back from the edge a number of feet equal to the height of the hill divided by three. Forty feet is the maximum setback that the code requires.

City Assistant Building Director Jack Leonard said the code is the minimum standard for protecting property and people from fires, floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters.

"They call it a living document because, every time there is a fire or an earthquake, it changes," he said.

Beck and Smith want more.

"What (they're) talking about are more aesthetic values. You're talking about a more subjective study or investigation," Leonard said. "I'm not saying we're hesitant to do it. It's at the right place -- the council committee."

Mike Maggard, who crafted the first bluffs compromise, is a member of the Urban Development Committee..

He's confident he can solve this disagreement.

"There are different groups that have very different self-interest in what development can do there. Some people don't want development at all. And some people don't want any control on development," he said. "It's somewhere in the middle that we'll find a solution."

Maggard says he is committed to keeping the previous open-space agreement. But he realizes that it gives land owners control of the situation.

"We won't have one piece of open space unless people who own the land elect to sell it to us," Maggard said.

And it appears owners and developers will fight the city if it tries to take greater control of their property.

"Going beyond (current rules and codes) will be a detriment to development in the northeast," said Craig Carver. "That's why nobody develops out there. It's easier to go convert farm land."

Maggard said it is most likely that the Bakersfield Planning Commission and City Council will handle each development on a case-by-case basis.

He said that may be the best way to ensure the area remains attractive and open to the public without trampling on private property rights.

"It will be something beautiful when it's done," he said. "But I don't think it will be what the people on the extremes of the issue want it to be."

Ground battles

Reaching agreement between those extremes will be far from easy.

The Bakersfield Bluffs and Open Space Committee proposal is before the Urban Development Committee.

But while everyone is talking, developments are already under construction on the bluff areas in dispute.

And the land battles are starting.

Two weeks ago, bluff property owners Stephanie Stockton and Beth Silberman pulled out of talks with the county of Kern, which was hoping to buy their property for plant and animal habitat that would be added to the open-space area.

The move came as General Holding, Inc. also tried to buy the land, planning to use it for a road that would serve a square mile of homes the Sacramento company wants to build on the bluffs.

Even Maggard, as focused on consensus as he is, expressed frustration.

"If Mr. Kapral is indeed working to undermine the open-space plan we are working on, then I am very disappointed," Maggard said.

City and county planners worried the open-space plan might fail if government has to try and outbid the private sector for bluff land.

At the same time, Carver and Carosella's bluff development came under heavy fire from the Sierra Club and other local preservationists.

Those groups said the city wasn't doing enough to prevent the project from creating more traffic congestion and air pollution.

Sierra Club speaker Gordon Nipp has made it clear that the local chapter plans to fight other bluff projects on the same grounds.

And he kept his promise this week by mounting the same attack against a tract map for 558 homes at Highway 178 and Miramonte Drive before the Bakersfield Planning Commission. The tract was approved by the commissioners, despite Nipp's objections.

Maggard said, "The Sierra Club clearly wants to tell people what to do with their land -- none of which they own. They've said for years that we should move off the farmland and now they are saying we shouldn't develop here. That's inconsistent to me."

Carosella was asked to pretty up his project with artfully placed boulders, oak trees on hillsides, wrought iron fencing on the ridge tops and buildings set well back from the edges.

Carosella didn't have to agree to the conditions, but he did.

That, Maggard said, is the way he wants to ensure that the bluffs become a jewel for the city.

Beck and Smith want more consistent rules to be applied to all projects.

The Sierra Club seems likely to object to every project that comes along.

And land owners and developers will fight any effort to control how they use their land.

The first shots have been fired in the growing battle over the bluffs.

And, as the conflict grows, it promises to become harder to answer the basic question -- what will the Kern River bluffs look like in 20 years?

Public silent on latest Wal-Mart plan

By JAMES BURGER

Bakersfield Californian

Thursday April 03, 2003, 11:55:24 PM

Greg French thinks a Wal-Mart Supercenter in northwest Bakersfield is a good thing.

He's a regular shopper at the Wal-Mart in the Northwest Promenade and likes the idea of the bigger store located at Meany Avenue and Coffee Road, closer to his home.

French came out to the Bakersfield Planning Commission meeting Thursday to see what was going on with the 245,000-square-foot store being planned there.

Thursday's meeting was the beginning of a review process that will determine if the project will negatively impact the city of Bakersfield's environment. It was intended to provide the public with an opportunity to ask questions the study should answer.

But nobody from the public shared problems they wanted examined in the environmental report.

That was a bit of a surprise to city planning staff -- since an anti-Wal-Mart community group is currently suing the city for failing to do an adequate job of evaluating the environmental impact of two Wal-Mart Supercenters planned in south Bakersfield.

"For as controversial as the first two cases were, that there was absolutely no public involvement in the beginning of this process is stunning," said city planner Marc Gauthier.

The consultant in charge of the report for the city -- Michael Houlihan of Michael Brandman and Associates -- outlined the issues that will be studied in the report.

Those include protected species, the possible presence of hazardous materials, site drainage and geology, noise, air quality and traffic.

What won't be studied, city Planning Director Stan Grady said, is the economic impact that a Wal-Mart might have on other businesses in the area.

Planning Commissioner Murray Tragish asked Grady if the environmental report could look at economic impacts.

The question came because that is the issue that has prompted the lawsuits filed by the Bakersfield Citizens for Local Control group against the other two Wal-Mart Supercenter projects in town.

Group attorney Richard Harriman said the Bakersfield Citizens for Local Control believes that Wal-Mart Supercenters will hurt other businesses.

"They come in and predatorially price their products," he said.

When other businesses fail because of Wal-Mart's influence, Harriman said, they leave behind empty stores and unemployed workers.

And that is a blight on the city, he said.

The city didn't study those impacts from the first two Wal-Mart projects, he said, and therefore its approval of those projects does not meet the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act.

Mike Hogan, the San Diego attorney who will defend the city from Harriman's suits, said he's heard that logic before.

"It's a common argument against large retailers," Hogan said. "I haven't seen it argued successfully before."

That is because the California Environmental Quality Act does not count economic or social factors as environmental concerns, Hogan said.

The Act doesn't see lost jobs and empty businesses as environmental concerns, he said.

The city won't have to pay for its defense against the group's lawsuit because the developers of the two Wal-Mart projects agreed to defend the city if it was sued. That promise is one required by the city of all developers when their projects are submitted for city approval.

Representatives of Harriman's office and the Bakersfield Citizens for Local Control attended Thursday's comment hearing on the third Wal-Mart Supercenter but did speak.

The city will take written comments from the public about what should be reviewed in the environmental report until Tuesday.

Then Houlihan will begin working on his study.

A first draft of his report is due to be released to the public on May 30, and that document will be open for public comment until July 17.

The commission and the Bakersfield City Council will consider approval of the project between that date and November 2003.

In other Wal-Mart action Thursday, the commission approved a sign plan for Castle & Cooke California's Gosford Village project at Gosford and Harris roads. The project is anchored by one of the two Wal-Mart Supercenters that prompted the lawsuits from the Bakersfield Citizens for Local Control.

Bill Sampson, of Castle & Cooke, said the company is moving ahead with the project by getting items like the sign plan approved by the city.

But there is no definite schedule for when the project will begin construction, partly because of the lawsuit, he said.

"From what I understand, the city is prepared to issue us building permits because they believe we are entitled (to start work)," he said.

Valley leaders weigh plan to clear the air

Operation Clean Air based on self-regulation

By Amee M. Thompson

Bakersfield Californian, Originally published Saturday, April 5, 2003

Staff writer Cleaning the air is about volunteering solutions.

That is how Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston and his Operation Clean Air initiative are going to help the San Joaquin Valley come into compliance with federal air emissions.

For example, Waterston said, the trucking industry isn't doing anything to cut down on its air pollution because it hasn't been forced to. "We're trying to get people to [regulate themselves] before they are forced," he said.

Operation Clean Air covers the nine counties of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Mariposa, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern. Waterston has

visited each county except for Tulare, which he will visit Tuesday when he speaks to the Board of Supervisors.

Friday, he spoke to the Great Valley Center joint leadership forum at the Edison Agricultural Technology Applications Center in Tulare as part of a panel on water quality and air pollution.

"I'm tired of studying," Waterston said. "It's time to do something."

The mission statement of Operation Clean Air is to create a five-year action plan that will clean the air and increase the economic prosperity in the San Joaquin Valley.

EPA not waiting

The latest U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations that came out of a settlement with environmentalists go into effect soon.

Farmers who have stationary diesel-fuel engines, such as those who run irrigation pumps, need to obtain a permit by May 14. The permit will allow them to emit a certain amount of pollution each day.

However, the California Farm Bureau's appeal of the settlement is to be heard May 13 by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco.

Farmers argue that they are already regulated with other monitoring programs and that the new permit is just more paperwork and money. Farmers also argue that their engines don't run year-round, so they don't pollute as much as the EPA estimates say.

New water regulations are also facing controversy.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board has tried to help farmers get waivers from the irrigated ag land permit by letting them join watershed groups, said Lonnie Wass, a supervising engineer for the water board. However, he said, environmental groups are not satisfied with that; they would like to see each farmer named individually.

What's next

Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston will make a presentation about Operation Clean Air at the 9 a.m. Tuesday Tulare County Board of Supervisors meeting in chambers at 2800 W. Burrell Ave.

Community Voices / Richard Merkin: Anti-pollution bills welcomed

The Bakersfield Californian

Saturday April 05, 2003, 09:55:08 PM

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has introduced a package of bills targeting pollution in the Central Valley. Specifically, those bills would impose strict pollution regulations on our state's farms and dairies, would remove vehicles from the road that emit excessive exhaust and limit wood-burning fireplaces. Coming from a legislator representing the heart of California's farmland, this could be perceived as a risky political move. But understanding the very real

health risks being felt by the people in our community, Florez is taking a courageous stance. He is choosing to put the health of our residents first -- striving for cleaner air for San Joaquin Valley residents to breathe.

The eight-county San Joaquin Valley is home to some of the dirtiest air in the country. Concentrations of ground-level ozone (smog) and airborne particles such as soot and dust regularly exceed federal health standards in the San Joaquin Valley.

Last year, the Environmental Protection Agency classified the Central Valley as a "severe" ozone region, which is a ranking shared by few major metropolitan areas.

The American Lung Association has reported that three Central Valley areas -- Bakersfield, Fresno and Visalia-Tulare-Porterville -- were among the top four smoggiest cities in the country.

A four-year study completed recently by the California Air Resources Board and Fresno-area's Kaiser Permanente demonstrated a direct link between increased smog and increased hospital visits. The study documented that for people with chronic breathing difficulties such as emphysema, hospitalization increased as much as 7.5 percent and emergency room visits climbed 6.5 percent for every 10-microgram increase in particulate pollution.

For those with acute breathing problems such as asthma, hospitalization increased by 4.1 percent and emergency room visits by 5.2 percent.

This analysis confirms locally what academics have discussed for years and what practicing doctors have dealt with anecdotally for decades. The medical community knows that during summer months, when air quality tends to be at its worst, doctors throughout the Central Valley can expect to see more than 40 to 50 asthma patients a day due to people experiencing shortness of breath, pain during deep breaths and impaired lung function.

According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 42,849 of Kern County's 642,495 residents were affected by asthma in 2002. That is 6.7 percent of our population.

I strongly support our senator's politically gutsy step in clean-air reform.

It is time to stop merely recognizing our current air-quality problem. It is time to move forward with a plan to improve the air we breathe.

Florez has presented a viable and significant solution to us that aims to protect the health of everyone in the San Joaquin Valley.

Yes, this is the boldest plan to curb air pollution presented to the San Joaquin Valley, but the results of a combined effort by all will result in cleaner air to breathe; and there is no question that better air will result in better health.

Dr. Richard Merkin is founder of Bakersfield Family Medical Center. Community Voices is an expanded commentary that may contain up to 500 words. The Californian reserves the right to republish contributed commentaries in all formats, including on its Web page.

Florez will need luck

Letter to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian

April 7, 2003

State Sen. Dean Florez came to town to solve the air pollution problem. Or was it the Music Man? "We've got a whole lot of trouble right here in River City."

After four hours of participating experts saying should have, could have, can't, can, new report in 2004, meaningless pie charts and graphs and a dazzling slide show on how they farm in Arkansas, the general public got their turn -- all 2 1/2 minutes each!

That's about enough time to say good to see you Senator Florez -- Oops time is up. If the politicians had listened to the public 20 years ago, we wouldn't have this cruddy air problem today.

No doubt Sen. Florez is sincere in his effort to reduce air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley. However, he still has intercourse with agribusiness, oil business, manufacturing business and the trucking business. This makes it difficult for him to bring about sacrifices and changes needed by them in order to protect the public's health. Walking that "tightrope" between campaign contributors and voters is a political balancing act.

I wish him well and to be successful. He is the first politician that has had the courage to attack our cruddy air problem head on. Hope springs eternal.

Unfortunately, there are too many people out there putting jobs ahead of the public's health.

KENNETH M. CANNON, BAKERSFIELD

Dairy buffer not needed

Letter to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian

April 4, 2003

My nose tells me that sewage sludge is back. Undoubtedly people will again be blaming the odor on dairies, but I can testify that I was on most of the dairies southwest of Bakersfield when the odor appeared and can vouch that it was not coming from them.

University of California at Davis studies have found that dairy dust, odors and flies do not travel more than one-quarter mile in still weather and one half mile in wind. There is no scientific justification for a three-mile buffer zone between dairies and residential areas. Tulare County has worked closely with UC Davis scientists in establishing its dairy permit requirements now in use for more than 30 years. One of the requirements is that dairies be no closer than one mile downwind or one-half mile upwind from residential areas. This requirement has stood the test of time and has never had to be revised.

Believe it or not, some people actually choose to live close to dairies. In Kern County, these are mostly people that want to raise livestock themselves on so-called "horse properties" of 2 1/2 acres or more. These are choice properties that command premium prices.

A three-mile buffer zone would effectively stop development in Chino and severely restrict the development choices in Kern County. But then, if limiting development would ever stop people and their cars from moving in, that would do more toward improving air quality than all the restrictions on dairies ever could.
ROBERT C. HARGREAVES, Bakersfield

Work together to clean the air

Merced Sun-Star

Monday, April 07, 2003

Editor: Thank you to the Merced Sun-Star for its leadership on the issue of convincing the California Air Resources Board to retain the Zero Emissions Program as a realistic tool available to Californians in the fight for cleaner air. After a series of news articles on the issue, the Sun-Star convened an editorial board and published a powerful and persuasive editorial in its Weekend edition. I am sure CARB members saw the editorial and that it had a positive effect regarding their policy decision.

Along with the Sun-Star, the Merced County Board of Supervisors and the cities of Merced, Atwater and Los Banos got on board and expressed their support for leaving the current ZEV timelines in place. This is a good example of what we can do when we all pull together. After a two-day hearing, the air resources board gave direction to staff to integrate into its recommendations the suggestions advanced by local government officials and zero emission vehicle proponents, which will preserve the ZEV program as a usable tool in the fight against pollution.

We will see in the next few days and weeks whether CARB keeps its commitment. We all need to work together to make the Central Valley a better place in which to work and live.

Again, thank you for your efforts towards better and cleaner air.

Jerry O'Banion

Merced County supervisor

District gets grants for clean-air buses

Thursday, April 3, 2003

Tony Biasotti

Tracy Press

Tracy Unified School District officials hope to add more than half a million dollars of clean-air technologies to the district's bus fleet using grants from state and federal agencies and private businesses.

On Wednesday, Tracy Unified's board of trustees accepted a grant of about \$250,000 from the California Air Resources Board to retrofit 27 of the district's 32 diesel-powered buses with emission-reducing filters.

"There's no doubt that diesel vehicles are the main contributors to particulate

pollution in the state of California," said Richard Varenchik, a spokesman with the California Air Resources Board. "It's pretty expensive to get rid of all your diesel buses and change to compressed natural gas, so this is absolutely a good move."

Tracy Unified will also pursue grants of up to \$300,000 from the Valley Clean Cities Coalition and the California Energy Commission to replace five diesel buses with natural gas-powered buses and install a new natural gas filling station. The slow-fill station the district has now for its only natural gas bus takes up to 26 hours to fill a 40-gallon tank, and a new station would take about five minutes, said John Heerema, Tracy Unified's director of transportation.

The slow-fill station is inconvenient with one bus, and it would be unworkable with a larger fleet, Heerema said. "We're experimenting on what route it should go on so it will have enough fuel every night," he said.

A new station would be open to the public, so the district could sell natural gas to neighboring districts like Jefferson, Banta and Lammersville. Heerema said it would be a self-serve station, and refueling trips would be quick and scheduled so as not to create a traffic problem at Tracy Unified's headquarters.

Grants for the new buses and the filling station could require up to \$210,000 in matching funds from the district, but that would be covered by the GWF Tracy Community Charitable Foundation, a fund established by GWF Power Systems when its Tracy Peaker Plant was approved. The foundation also helped Tracy Unified cut costs by processing the grant application, said Susan Sarvey, a member of the foundation committee.

"Diesel is very polluting, and school buses in particular have a problem with fumes, with all the children around," Sarvey said. "We could not only clean the air for everyone, we could make it healthier for the kids on the bus."

If every grant comes through, the only out-of-pocket expenditure for Tracy Unified would be \$25,000 toward the purchase of a new natural gas bus. The California Energy Commission would cover the rest of the expense, or about \$115,000, Heerema said.

Tracy Unified bought its only natural gas bus with the same grant. If the district secures grants to purchase five more, they would be used to bus students in the under-construction Mountain House community west of Tracy, Heerema said.

The district is trying to stay ahead of the curve and adopt natural gas and "green diesel" technologies before they are required, which could happen by 2006 for "green diesel." But the curve is always moving, said Casey Goodall, Tracy Unified's assistant superintendent for business services.

"The state was going with natural gas as the answer, but then we had natural gas shortages," Goodall said. "They don't like the idea of green diesel because natural gas is cleaner, but with the gas shortages, they're going ahead with it for now. And hydrogen cells will come along, but they won't be available to us for a while. There's going to be a lot of debate and change in the next decade over what constitutes a clean bus."

"Green diesel" refers to new low-sulfur diesel fuel. A bus burning low-sulfur fuel and retrofitted with a filter in the exhaust line emits about 85 percent less

particulate matter than a traditional diesel bus, said Chris Acree, an air-quality specialist with the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District.

The grant the district has secured for bus retrofitting also pays \$500 per bus to offset the higher cost - about 7 cents a gallon - of low-sulfur diesel.

To reach reporter Tony Biasotti, call 830-4221

Committee urges air quality study for sports park project

Thursday, April 3, 2003, Bob Brownne

Tracy Press

The committee keeping track of the air quality mitigation agreement with GWF Energy is hoping the city takes a closer look at potential health impacts of the peaker plant and neighboring industries on a proposed youth sports park.

"We feel it would be prudent, before putting a youth sports facility in an industrial area, to do an air quality study," said James Minor, chairman of the advisory committee.

He said the group voted unanimously March 27 to recommend a study for the "antenna farm" site on Schulte Road west of town. The city is working on a proposal to turn the former Federal Aviation Administration antenna field into a community park for youth soccer and baseball.

Mayor Dan Bilbrey couldn't say what the council will do. Because the matter came up during the unscheduled public appearance portion of the meeting, the council, in accordance with state open meeting and disclosure laws, did not discuss the resolution.

"Staff will review that, and it will come back to us as some sort of formal presentation," Bilbrey said.

The council heard from a few critics of the antenna farm as a youth sports park. In this case, though, a city committee was making a recommendation against the advice of Gabrielle Whelan, assistant city attorney.

"It would be like the planning commission taking a vote on salary increases for police officers," she said, noting that she told committee members that matters like this are out of their purview.

Whelan said the committee is responsible for monitoring the air quality mitigation programs offered by GWF Energy, which is building the peaker plant.

Whelan said she was at Thursday's meeting to talk to the committee about open meeting law - following a recent meeting where the committee had to adjourn because a citizen pointed out that agendas had not been properly posted - and had left before the committee took a vote.

Minor said the committee listened to Whelan's advice, which was echoed by the representative of GWF Energy, then took a vote anyway.

"When it comes to the health of children, a certain amount of leeway is needed," he said, noting that the committee hadn't seen any other public entity calling for

such a study. He said the study should cover cumulative air quality impacts from the peaker plant and from Owens-Brockway Glass Container and Tracy Biomass Plant.

"If there is a certain group of citizens that would have an understanding of the issue, we would be that group," Minor said. "My concern and the concern of the committee is air quality."

Whether the council would order the study could be moot. Tracy Parks and Community Services director Karen McNamara said the city will complete an environmental review before any work can begin, but the planning work, which is under way now, must be completed first.

"My understanding is that before you can do some kind of environmental impact report, you have to know what you're going to do with the site in terms of use and intensity before you can say yes, no or maybe regarding environmental impacts and the mitigations that might be required," McNamara said.

The council heard from some other folks who questioned the wisdom of a youth sports park at the antenna farm. Susan Sarvey, also on the peaker plant oversight committee, told the council that it's not too late to consider other uses. Her recommendation was to put youth sports fields at 11th Street and Chrisman Road on the city-owned site long planned for a community park. The antenna farm, in turn, could be used for transportation maintenance yards for the Tracy Unified School District and for the city's public works department.

She suggested the city also consider paving part of the site for overnight big-rig parking.

"This would get all of these trucks with no home off the side of Corral Hollow, Byron and Grant Line roads," she told the council.

She said later that she is opposed to putting youth sports in an industrial corridor but also wanted to offer a positive solution. "There are all of these possibilities, but before they can happen, people have to think that there are better moves we can make."

McNamara said the 11th Street site is not out of the question, though the council will have a chance to review the master plan for the antenna farm site during a joint workshop with the Parks and Community Services Commission on May 1.

"I don't believe any formal action has been taken," she said. "You'll probably see on May 1 that when you line up the needs, you'll quickly notice that 150 acres is probably not enough."

News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley

From the Modesto Bee

Published: Friday, April 4th, 2003

The Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) - A coalition of business, health care and political leaders in the San Joaquin Valley will launch an effort this month to clean up the valley's dirty air.

The group will kick off 'Operation Clean Air' on April 23 at the Fresno Convention Center to look at ways to voluntarily clean up the air while minimizing rules that may suppress the valley's faltering economy.

'We don't think you have to choose between clean air and economic growth,' said Fresno Mayor Alan Autry. 'We can do it if we get everyone involved.'

Environmental groups say they fear the summit, which they say is being disguised as a comprehensive approach, will distract from federal mandates to clean up the air.

The valley faces stringent deadlines, expensive sanctions on businesses and possible loss of federal road-building money if it doesn't come up with a tough cleanup plan.

'This process is not inclusive. We need to enforce the Clean Air Act,' said Rev. Walt Perry of the Fresno Metro Ministry, one of several environmental and air activist groups not invited to the conference.

Critics say other cities, such as Houston and Los Angeles, attempted similar efforts driven by industries and public officials and had little success.

Panel saves mandate on Zero Emission

Published: April 4, 2003, 06:45:13 AM

An effort to back away from continued production of electric cars -- and a broader commitment to

nonpolluting cars -- was turned back last week by the California Air

Resources Board.

That's good. Accepting the proposal from the CARB staff would have brought the state's historic Zero Emission Vehicle mandate nearly to an end.

Instead, the board told its staff to revise the proposal to preserve the requirement that at least a few hundred zero-emission vehicles be produced by

2008.

The CARB staff wanted to drop the requirement that 2 percent of all new cars sold in California after 2005 produce no tailpipe emissions. As a substitute, the staff urged that major vehicle manufacturers be required to produce a total of 250 fuel-cell-powered vehicles in the next five years.

Automakers and others -- including the Bush administration -- now argue that fuel-cell technology represents the future. That's the same thing they were saying about electric-powered cars a few years ago.

But many argue that fuel-cell cars powered by hydrogen are still years away from being produced at a practical price. The proposed 250 vehicles would be demonstrator models that currently cost about

\$1 million each; they won't exactly be rolling off the showroom floor.

Nor are electric cars the failure that some fuel-cell proponents suggest.

About 2,500 battery-powered vehicles such as General Motors' EV-1 and the Honda Insight are on the road today, although their leases are expiring as emphasis shifts to hybrid and fuel-cell cars.

In Stanislaus County, officials would like to incorporate 150 to 200 electric or hybrid vehicles into their 650-vehicle fleet. The demand spurred by the county in turn could entice a private investor to build an electric-car assembly plant here, according to county Chief Executive Officer Reagan Wilson.

The proposal could bring both new jobs and cleaner cars to the pollution-choked Northern San Joaquin Valley. To help counties like

Stanislaus achieve such gains, the state should maintain its policy of favoring no specific technology.

Regulators should not dismiss electric cars, any more than fuel cell vehicles should be abandoned because they aren't yet available. When it comes to promoting cleaner-running vehicles, the technology eggs should be distributed among as many baskets as possible.

Solar power shines in state agriculture

In the Modesto Bee, Sunday, April 6th

By ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

THE FRESNO BEE

Published: April 6, 2003, 07:35:56 AM PDT

MENDOTA -- Longtime farmer Danny Locke doesn't think of himself as a pioneer. But Locke and his family are blazing a new trail in the San Joaquin Valley by using solar energy to power a 50-horsepower irrigation pump.

Locke showed off the pump and its technology recently at his Mendota cotton farm. Those on hand included executives of the company that designed the system, WorldWater Corp., and state and local representatives.

Locke, whose family farm is going on its fourth generation, said the switch to solar made sense as the cost of utilities continues to cut into his operation's budget.

"We looked at this hard and decided we could make it work," Locke said.

D.T. Locke Ranch manager Gary Martin said the 108-foot-long solar system produces enough energy to run the irrigation pump, a nearby farmhouse, a workshop and water well.

On average, the farm's utility costs are \$18,000 to \$20,000 annually. It's possible the ranch will save that much with a solar system. "Who wouldn't want to pocket that much?" Martin said.

Equally significant, Martin said, is that the system is connected to the state's power grid and produces electricity even when the farm isn't using it. The extra electricity is essentially banked, and the farm is given credit for what is produced.

The Lockes estimate it will take six to seven years to recoup their \$145,000 investment. The system cost about \$290,000; state grants paid for half.

"Solar is here, solar is now and it will be a big part of California's future," said Guy Phillips, president and CEO of WorldWater California.

Based in Pennington, N.J., WorldWater is a solar engineering and water management company working in developing countries. Along with designing, developing and marketing solar technology, the company advises farms, dairies, ranches and authorities on water issues.

WorldWater officials said the Lockes' solar-powered 50-horsepower pump is the world's largest.

Furthering the cause of solar technology, WorldWater has signed an agreement with the International Center for Water Technology in Fresno. The water technology center is launching a solar initiative this year aimed at encouraging farmers and water districts to use solar energy.

California farmers brace themselves for piles of air-pollution paperwork

From the Modesto Bee, Monday, April 7th

By KIM BACA

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: April 7, 2003, 06:30:03 AM PDT

After being exempt for a quarter-century, hundreds of California farmers are preparing to file air-quality permits next month.

Large farm operators have until May 14 to comply with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Title V program, a permit process to monitor air pollution from stationary sources.

Farmers who have stationary diesel fuel engines, such as those that run irrigation pumps, and are considered to be heavy polluters will be subject to the program.

Cranes, bulldozers, harvesters, tractors or mobile generators are not part of the new rules.

Large farm operators who have natural gas engines have until Aug. 1 to file. Dairies and poultry farmers have to submit animal waste permits in August.

"It is going to be a headache," said Roger Isom, vice president of the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association. "Most are thinking, 'My God, it's more paperwork and what is it really doing to clean the air?'"

The process is part of the EPA's settlement with environmental groups in May 2002 to hold farms accountable for pollution from diesel irrigation pumps and animal waste. Farms have had a break from Clean Air Act regulations for more than 25 years.

Not all farmers would be subjected to permits, EPA engineer David Wampler said. Out of the state's more than 30,000 farmers, the EPA expects only a few hundred would be required to apply because they might be considered a heavy polluter, he said.

Permits will be issued after a farmer calculates how much nitrogen oxide pollutant is emitted from stationary diesel engines. Calculations are based on the year of the engine, horsepower and hours of operation in a year.

The threshold for nitrogen oxide emissions varies throughout California. Farmers in the San Joaquin Valley will be subject to tougher rules because the region is more heavily polluted than other regions of the state.

The permits may heavily affect farmers who switched to diesel fuel from electric to operate irrigation pumps after energy prices shot up in recent years.

"In other words, since I changed to diesel, I'm being penalized. If I had stayed with electric engines, I would be OK," said one farmer before leaving a recent EPA workshop in Fresno.

State officials estimate farms produce as much as 20 percent of smog-making gases in the valley. The region is one of the most polluted air basins in America.

Animal waste alone is on track to become one of the largest sources of smog in the next three years, according to the state.

Kings County grower Craig Pedersen is trying to figure out how much the permits will cost him on his 2,000-acre farm, where he grows alfalfa, corn, wheat and water-intensive cotton.

He is disturbed that the process comes at a time when he's dealing with decreasing crop prices, increasing fuel costs and rising workers compensation rates, which have climbed to \$53,000 a year for his seven full-time employees.

Pedersen said too much emphasis is placed on pollution from ag, excluding other sources.

This issue has gotten "very political to the extent many state legislators who are following this issue seem to be grandstanding," he said. "It's unfortunate because it plays upon those folks who really don't understand the issue, but they may have a sick child and point the finger at ag, and that is unfortunate."

But Sierra Club member Kevin Hall said the EPA's new permit process is a tiny step in the right direction to control air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley. He said more needs to be done to control other types of pollution, such as dust from farms.

PERMITTING WORKSHOP

A workshop on the new permitting process will be held April 14 at the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District, 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, in Modesto. Diesel pumps that will be impacted by the new rules often are used to pump irrigation water from canals or wells. Engines that produce more than 25 tons of emissions per year in the San Joaquin Valley require permits, according to the California Farm Bureau Federation. For information, contact the Environmental Protection Agency, (800) 810-9798 or farmpermits@epa.gov.

From Modesto Bee, Local News, Monday, April 7th

Fresno leaders praise air plan

By MICHAEL G. MOONEY

BEE STAFF WRITER

Published: April 7, 2003, 06:25:17 AM PDT

Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston insists "Operation Clean Air" will create more than just another layer of unresponsive bureaucracy.

The goal is to develop a five-year plan that cleans the Central Valley's filthy air and increases economic prosperity as well.

At the heart of the idea, Waterston said, is reducing harmful emissions from mobile sources of air pollution -- trucks, cars, buses -- through innovations such as the creation of an air pollution empowerment zone.

Such a designation, Waterston said, would make available tax credits and other incentives for government and businesses throughout the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that reduce harmful emissions from cars, trucks and buses.

The district stretches from Lodi to Bakersfield.

"We've got all nine counties in the valley working together to clean up our air," Waterston said. "We're going to work on this. We're going to get better and we're going to win this."

More ideas to clean the valley's dirty air will be tossed around April 23 at a meeting in the Fresno Convention Center Exhibit Hall. Stanislaus County is expected to send a representative.

Waterston wants to build a coalition of businesses, government, environmentalists, developers and the public to work to find solutions.

Earlier this week, Waterston brought the plan to the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors, where he found a receptive -- if noncommittal -- audience.

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry is behind the plan.

"We're going to need to tap into federal money," Waterston said, "because there's no money in California for this."

"If all nine counties aren't on board, it isn't going to work. If all the cities aren't on board, it isn't going to work."

Ray Simon, chairman of the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors, said the valley needs to be more aggressive in finding ways to clean the air. One example he gave is installing filters on trucks.

Waterston said one trucking company representative told him that "soot traps" would catch about 90 percent of the particulate pollution spewed from diesel-powered trucks.

"I asked him, 'Why aren't you using them?'" Waterston said, "and he said, 'Because nobody told us we had to.'"

Waterston said that's a situation where an incentive program could help.

Incentives also might help solve other problems, he said, like the office supply store in the Fresno area that makes up to 20 deliveries to one business simply because different departments order their supplies independently of each other.

"Just think about what you're doing," he said. "If one trip could take care of it, you'd save 19 trips per day."

Particulate pollution, no matter the source, is of particular concern in the air district.

That's because the district faces onerous sanctions, including the possibility of no-drive days, if a cleanup plan isn't in place by Aug. 28.

A draft version of the proposal -- dubbed the PM-10 Plan -- is circulating for public comment and will be the subject of a number of public workshops in the coming days.

The plan developed by the air district staff focuses on stationary sources -- not the mobile sources Waterston said "Operation Clean Air" emphasizes.

Among other things, the air district is looking at wood-burning fireplaces, stoves and fireplace inserts.

The district is working to develop a rule -- which would be included in the overall PM-10 Plan -- that would ban the use of fireplaces and stoves on days when pollution is at its worst.

Waterston is not a fan of the proposed no-burn rule.

"How do you tell people who use wood to heat their homes that they can't burn?" he said. "How do you tell people who can't afford anything more than the smog burner they're driving that they can't use it to drive to work?"

Bee staff writer Jeff Jardine contributed to this report.

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