

Off-road diesel engines pollute Valley, report says

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee

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Off-road diesel engines in tractors, bulldozers and other equipment produce a larger share of vehicle-related pollution in the central San Joaquin Valley than elsewhere in the state, a new report from the Union of Concerned Scientists shows.

Issued Monday, the report is intended to build support for tightened off-road diesel standards proposed two months ago by the Environmental Protection Agency, said its author, Patricia Monahan, a senior analyst in the national advocacy group's Berkeley office.

"EPA has issued a proposed rule-making to reduce pollution from some of these engines," Monahan said, "and we wanted to highlight the contribution that these engines make to pollution in both urban and rural areas."

The report drew upon existing inventories of air pollution sources to show the extent to which off-road diesel vehicles are responsible for producing fine soot, known as PM10, and nitrogen oxides, or NOx, a gaseous fuel combustion product that contributes to both summer ozone and winter particle pollution.

For California as a whole, off-road diesels accounted for 41% of vehicle-related PM10 and 29% of NOx, according to the group's reckoning. The numbers were lower in major urban counties such as Alameda, Los Angeles and Sacramento, but higher in central San Joaquin Valley counties.

In Fresno County, for example, off-road diesels accounted for 50% of vehicle-related PM10 emissions and 32% of NOx. Merced County was even higher, with 52% of PM10 and 34% of NOx coming from off-road sources.

The report urges a greater commitment to clean diesel technology, including exhaust traps for tiny soot particles and special absorbers to scrub emissions of nitrogen oxides, which are gases.

"These so-called off-highway sources, whether you're down on the farm or downtown, are major sources, and they can be controlled effectively," Monahan said.

EPA's proposed standards, which were announced in mid-April, would reduce off-road diesel emissions by about 90% from current levels, with the changes taking effect in stages between 2008 and 2014. Similar standards for on-road trucks and buses are taking effect by 2007.

Monahan called the proposed standards "a great step forward" but said that her group is worried that the recent resignation of EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman will lead to their weakening: "We can't be sure that what we saw in the proposal is what we will see in the final rules."

A leading agriculture spokesman said Monday that he had not seen the report but said he hoped farmers would get credit for their efforts to reduce pollution through such efforts as the state's cost-sharing program for replacing high-polluting diesel irrigation pumps.

"I think we recognize that agriculture does have diesel emissions here in the Valley," said Roger Isom, vice president of the Fresno-based California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association, "but we've also done something to address it."

A state Air Resources Board official said that the agency had provided data to Monahan's group but had not reviewed the report for accuracy.

At the local level, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Janis Parker said the district believes that off-road diesels are not the highest priority for control: "We realize that we have an air-quality problem here in the Valley, but there are other sources that we are looking at that are causing greater problems."

The reporter can be reached at rclemings@fresnobee.com or 441-6371.

Bills addressing mobile polluters pass Senate

Modesto Bee Editorial

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One of the objections heard from several quarters to legislation aimed at cleaning up the valley's filthy air has been the complaint that one or another sector of the local economy is being singled out. Farmers feel put upon, homeowners gnash their teeth over restrictions proposed for fireplaces, yard care companies cry doom at the thought of a ban on leaf blowers.

All of them point to the big offender -- so-called "mobile sources of emissions," mostly gas- and diesel-powered vehicles -- and wonder aloud why we aren't addressing them. Good point.

And now we are. Last week the state Senate approved two bills related to mobile sources from a package of 10 air-quality bills offered by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter. Both now move to the Assembly.

Senate Bill 708 would, among other things, make it easier to get "gross polluting" vehicles off the roads. Such cars and trucks can spew as much as 100 times the pollution emitted by well-tuned vehicles. The bill would allow counties to monitor and cite such vehicles, first with a "fix-it" ticket, then with increasingly stiff penalties for scofflaws.

SB 709 would give the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District greater power to order and fund air-quality improvements in the valley. The air district would have the authority to levy development fees and require businesses with 100 or more employees to establish ride-share programs, a power already possessed by the South Coast air district. SB 709 would also enable the valley district to help local farmers and business owners meet the requirements of all these new air-quality measures.

The measures will help, at least incrementally, to improve the valley's poor air quality. They deserve quick approval by the Assembly. The sooner the governor signs these bills into law, the sooner we'll start to breathe better.

There is a setback looming for this effort that must be noted. One of the 10 Florez bills would put a bond measure on the state ballot to help pay for many of the changes we need. In the current state budget climate, there is an understandable reluctance growing among legislators to add any more to California's existing debt burden.

We may have to live with that fiscal reality for now, but when things get better, fixing the valley's air should be at the top of the list for new funding.

Why punish ag over air pollution?

OPINION

Tulare Advance-Register

Monday, June 9, 2003

We all agree air pollution is a problem in the Central Valley, but come on folks, our approach must be reasonable.

There is a pack of bills moving through the state Legislature that addresses air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley. While the intent of these bills may appear harmless, the practical impact would be devastating.

Just this past week in the Senate, Sen. Dean Florez succeeded in repealing a decades-old hard-fought air-pollution exemption for agriculture with SB 700. Florez has also sponsored SB 707 which establishes a three-mile buffer zone

between dairies and cities. Both pieces of legislation are part of a 10-bill package of ambitious legislation that unfairly targets farms and dairies by blaming them for the air quality of the San Joaquin Valley.

Ending the agricultural exemption would require farmers and dairymen to obtain permits for their diesel-powered engines, such as the ones utilized in irrigation pumps, and, for the first time ever, require air regulators to issue pollution permits to dairies and operators of other animal-feeding operations. Let's keep in mind that this goes even farther than what the federal Environmental Protection Agency thinks is either necessary or appropriate. The Senate voted to end the exemption over the objection of the California Farm Bureau, which correctly argued the measure unfairly punishes the \$27 billion agriculture industry more than other industries.

Combined, these two Senate bills represent a major attack on agriculture in California. Make no mistake -- these bills will bring increased costs and eliminate jobs. Not only will these costs be passed along to the consumer, they represent yet another increase in the already excessive operating costs forced upon farms and dairies. In addition, this onerous legislation places California farmers at a distinct disadvantage with farmers in other states.

Meanwhile, in the Assembly, Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes managed to get AB 170 to narrowly pass out of the Assembly on a vote of 44 to 32. This particular bill deals with the same theme of pollution in the Valley.

We should ask the question: Why did the bill survive by such a narrow margin? AB 170 is not that complex; it simply requires all city and county general plans that operate within the boundaries of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to include an air-quality component in elements of their general plans. The problem is that this bill will be especially costly to local government, and it will kill jobs in both agriculture and related commercial enterprises -- another state mandate without question.

AB 170 is a job-killer for both farm and nonfarm payrolls aimed at appeasing overzealous environmentalists such as the Sierra Club and Environment California at the expense of commercial development and agriculture -- California's No. 1 industry. So much for economic development in a Valley that is largely agriculturally based and already hard hit with consistently high unemployment rates.

Moreover, according to the League of California Cities, air pollution recognizes no border. One county may not have a "problem" because it originates in a neighboring jurisdiction -- like the Bay area or Los Angeles. The air quality element is unduly and unfairly prescriptive.

AB 170 creates more pressure for additional land to be precluded from economic development because the open space element already ensures less

development. Government-initiated open space proposals are expensive and take tax revenues that could otherwise be devoted to schools, roads, law enforcement, fire protection, and other vital services. Housing, a scarce resource, becomes even more expensive for the present generation of first-time homebuyers. Including an air quality element is an ill-disguised attempt to assault growth with oppressive regulations -- all while saddling the taxpayer with the bill.

In light of the state's economic condition and budget crisis, should we really consider legislation that will harm farms and dairies? The Florez legislation will harm more people than it purports to help. Too many of the farms and dairies are already teetering on financial collapse. Agriculture has long played an absolutely essential role in the San Joaquin Valley and has been wisely protected by legislators until now. It is dangerous to toss aside farmers and dairymen by passing legislation with an end result that is questionable at best.

Not only can we find more workable solutions to minimize pollution in our Valley without penalizing a particular group, we should be mindful that we don't further jeopardize an already precarious Valley economy -- one heavily dependent on agriculture. That said, let's work together to find a reasonable approach.

Bill Maze, R-Visalia, represents the 34th Assembly District, which includes all of Tulare County.

Serious about air quality? Start with those leaf blowers

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Don Lovell

Fresno

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Leaf blowers -- excuse me, I mean dust blowers -- are incredible polluters. Two-stroke engines (the lubrication of the engine by mixing oil with gas and igniting it) and the cloud of dust and pollen that the blowing causes makes for an awful air pollutant.

Remember the Crippen fire, when school administrators decided to curtail student events outside? Every morning as I dropped off my daughter at Hamilton School there would be the maintenance workers, with leaf (dust) blowers in hand, stirring up a small dust storm at the same time children were arriving at school.

Every day of the week there is a gardener in my neighborhood blowing dust and fumes into the air.

It is ironic to read about the air quality issue and at the same time look out the window at an obvious "gross polluter" making the air quality that much worse. How serious can we be about our air quality when eliminating this obvious and unnecessary source of pollution does not receive immediate attention?

Start with the things that can be accomplished now and move on to the more difficult problems.

'Worse and worse'

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By Alex Sherriffs, M.D.

Fowler

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On June 3 at the Fresno City Council meeting I asked if we are serious about improving our air quality. This is not only about the color of our sky or how often we can appreciate a view of our majestic Sierra only 30 miles away.

We have the worst or second-worst air in the nation. The more we learn, the more we find how dangerously our air quality impacts our health -- in terrible and increasing rates of asthma, in heart disease and even in birth defects. As we continue with business as usual, the air, the numbers, the personal realities of breathlessness continue to get worse and worse.

On June 3 the Fresno City Planning Department reported that the Copper River Ranch development plan as submitted would "result in significant regional impacts" worsening air quality. No one disputed this. No one.

This flawed plan begged to be improved. Instead, the City Council passed the plan and thereby added to our burden -- our children's burden -- of bad air. We don't have to continue doing things as we have for the past 50 years. The Los Angeles basin has more people and more cars and more homes, but in the past decade they have improved their air quality. Surely we can do better.

Those who care about air quality, how it demeans Fresno's image, our quality of life, our economy, our health and the health of future generations must write and call our elected officials and tell them this has a high priority. They don't get it yet

Electric cars and future tourism

Merced Sun-Star Letter to the Editor
Tuesday, June 10, 2003

Editor: I was reading about the use of the electric cars in Merced and thought to share my thoughts on the subject.
I believe that the current proposal to rent them should be reconsidered.

The use of the electric cars to improve the experience of Merced visitors is excellent in itself, but renting them to visitors will prove to be a bad idea resulting in the failure of their use.

People who rent the vehicles will be an easy mark for anyone wishing to target tourists, and tourists should not be strapped with the responsibility of the vehicles while visiting our town.

And, why limit the use of the vehicles to YARTS ticket holders?

I propose that the vehicles should be manned by drivers who will work for minimum wage and tips. Retrofit the long bed vehicles with a top for sun/rain protection and add a double seat in the back while saving some space for luggage and shopping bags.

Most foreigners are used to this type of service. A lot of countries have what they call "cyclos," similar vehicles that are manned by drivers who help you explore their city. For a small fee they take you where you want to go.

In the case of tourists, most people don't know where they want to go. But, the cyclo driver knows where everything is, and knows how to get there and back, safely.

A person(s) should be able to jump into one of our modern day cyclos here in Merced and ask the driver to take them to a good restaurant, a hotel, or to wherever else suits their fancy.

Stephen Cooper
Merced