

In Calif., a Crackling Controversy Over Smog Illnesses Fuel Central Valley Plan to Ban Fireplaces

Washington Post, Page A03

By Rene Sanchez, staff writer

Sunday, February 16, 2003

FRESNO, Calif. -- All day long, patients trudge into health clinics here complaining of constant coughs, rubbing badly irritated eyes and struggling, sometimes desperately, to catch their breath.

"We see as many as 50 people a day this time of year," said Kevin Hamilton, a respiratory therapist at one of the sites. "All for pretty much the same reason."

What ails them is not a stubborn cold or the flu. It's the air.

California's vast Central Valley, home to one of the largest farming regions in the world, is getting ever more choked by smog and haze. Its skies have become by some measures the most polluted in the country -- often dirtier and more hazardous than even the longtime smog capital of Los Angeles. And the problem could soon get worse, because the 300-mile corridor between Sacramento and Bakersfield is also the state's next frontier for growth, a once-pastoral place where subdivisions are now sprouting faster than any crop.

The air is so bad that the valley is about to take a drastic step to help clean it up: Banning fireplaces.

Air regulators here say nearly one-third of the valley's air pollution problem comes from burning wood. The potentially harmful microscopic particles released by wood fires become trapped in dense fog that blankets the region during the winter and then lodge inside human lungs.

The looming crackdown on fireplaces is hardly the first attempt the valley has made to improve its air, but it is the most extreme. And it is provoking a public uproar.

Under the plan, developers would be blocked from installing wood-burning fireplaces in nearly all new housing. Homes that already have fireplaces could not be sold until the units were removed, permanently disabled or replaced with gas-burning devices. Other residents with fireplaces would be fined for lighting them on days that are intensely smoggy.

More than a half-million homes in eight counties would be affected by the restrictions, which the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is likely to approve this spring. Over the past decade, a few other western cities also have limited use of fireplaces to improve air quality, but none have gone as far or cover as large an area.

Advocates for the policy change say the region has no other choice. Last year, the valley violated federal clean-air standards more than 100 times and averaged only one "good" air day a week. Media campaigns urging residents to limit or stop burning wood, officials say, have not worked. Last fall, schools here canceled some outdoor sporting events for the first time because of threats from air pollution. And growing numbers of residents are plainly suffering from all the smog. The valley has some of the nation's highest rates of childhood asthma. In Fresno County,

16 percent of children are now afflicted with that chronic condition, more than double the national average.

"We've reached a point where we have to act," said Charles Sant'Agata, executive director of the American Lung Association's Fresno chapter. "There isn't a family in this valley not being affected by the bad air. I think people are finally understanding the gravity of the problem and are ready to make this sacrifice."

But some local leaders and residents are calling the proposed ban too severe and say they fear that "smoke police" will soon begin roaming neighborhoods and encouraging neighbors to tattle on each other. At public hearings last month, some fireplace owners accused valley air regulators of trampling on private property rights. Others warned that the restrictions would hurt poor residents who rely on fireplaces to heat their homes. Opponents do not dispute that the valley's air is bad, but contend that homeowners are being asked to solve too much of the problem when other culprits, such as the agricultural industry, bear as much or more responsibility for it.

"I don't think we've promoted the voluntary programs enough," said state Sen. Jeff Denham (R), whose legislative district includes part of the valley. "If we mandate this, it's going to take away important rights and hit many people who are on fixed incomes really hard. Fireplaces are a major form of heating for people here in the winter."

In its long, losing battle against smog, the valley has been burdened foremost by its geography. It is bordered on three sides by mountain ranges and cannot naturally disperse either the pollution it creates or that which Pacific winds regularly blow in from the San Francisco Bay Area. Some days, it is impossible to see any of the mountains because of the smog.

"Our environment has been described as the perfect ozone chamber," said Tom Jordan, a senior air quality planner for the valley's pollution control board. "The air just stagnates. We don't ever get any cleansing breezes."

Anxiety over air quality has come to pervade daily life here. Local radio and television stations broadcast "Please Don't Light Tonight" warnings to fireplace owners. Air regulators sometimes ask residents not to barbecue with charcoal, use motorized boats or trim their lawns with gas-powered mowers. Hundreds of residents have received rebates of up to \$3,000 from the valley's pollution control board in the past two years for buying cars that run partly on natural gas. The board is also paying some diesel truck owners to equip their rigs in ways that burn fuel more cleanly.

Some police departments in the valley have begun patrolling streets in electric carts instead of cars. Some schools do not let students with asthma play outdoors, and keep everyone inside whenever the sky looks too dirty. Asthma is the leading cause of absenteeism in Fresno's classrooms.

"Children are having to learn at a very young age that even though it's a relatively clear day you can't go outside because there are things in the air that can hurt you," said Jill Marmolejo, a spokeswoman for the Fresno Unified School District. "That's the new reality for this generation of kids."

And it may only be the beginning. The region, which has added nearly a half-million residents over the past decade, is projected to grow faster than any other part of California because many people can no longer afford to live along the state's coast.

Still, even some residents who say they realize the valley's priorities have to change are uncomfortable with outlawing fireplaces.

Holly Morton, a school cafeteria worker who lives near Fresno, is among them. She has asthma and had so much trouble breathing when she lit her own fireplace that she and her husband replaced it with a costly gas-burning device a few years ago. Neighbors still use fireplaces, though. Sometimes the smoke makes her feel sick.

"But that's their right," Morton said. "Maybe there's something else we can do."

The valley is running out of time. It has made some progress reducing smog, but it is not close to meeting federal requirements for air quality. And unless the region shows dramatic improvements in the next two years, it could lose more than \$2 billion in federal highway funds as punishment.

Valley leaders may soon even accept the stigma of being declared an "extreme" violator of federal air quality standards, because doing so would give them a few more years to fight the pollution problem without penalty.

Environmental and public health groups say that for too long the valley has avoided hard choices, such as limiting growth or adopting tougher pollution regulations on the agricultural industry. Its processing plants -- and its giant stockyards of cows -- emit chemical waste that also contribute significantly to fouling up the air.

But the emerging ban on fireplaces, they say, is a sign of hope.

"We're so far behind that even if everything possible were implemented right away to clean up the air, it would still take many years," said Hamilton, the respiratory therapist. "But at least now we have some momentum. People are tired of this problem. They are desperate for some kind of change."

County to tackle compost

By JEFF JARDINE

MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER

Posted: February 20, 2003 @ 06:00:19 AM PST

A valley landscaper wants to expand his composting facility near Vernalis, a move some West Side residents oppose.

Mark Grover, owner of Grover Landscape Services Inc., tonight is expected to ask the Stanislaus County Planning Commission to rezone 57.7 acres to add to his 40-acre site on Gaffery Road.

Grover's existing composting yard is at the former Vernalis Naval Auxiliary Air Station, on the north side of Gaffery Road and alongside the Delta Mendota Canal.

The addition would be on the south side of Gaffery Road.

Grover processes green waste and other organic materials, selling the compost under the name Wonder Grow to wholesalers and agricultural customers.

The state allows Grover to process no more than 200,000 cubic yards at a time.

"This is the same volume we are requesting for this new location," he wrote in documents related to his permit. Grover could not be reached for comment.

He would handle the same amount of waste over nearly 100 acres that he now processes over 40 acres, county senior planner Bob Kachel said.

"He's kind of cramped where he is now," Kachel said. "He's looking for some room to breathe."

Breathing room also is an issue for those opposing the expansion. Fifty-nine people, mostly from Vernalis, Westley and Patterson, signed a petition asking the county to deny Grover's permit. They cited issues involving mold, dust, odors, truck traffic and flies, and believe he will increase the volume.

"The proposal to rezone 57.7 acres and allow Grover Landscape Services to expand their operation is not acceptable to any of us who live downwind of the site," according to a letter to the Planning Commission signed by four people. "Mold spores already have impacted our health. We will be put more at risk when the amount of compost grows from 100,000 tons to 250,000 tons (annually)."

For about a year, Grover has been using wastewater from Tartaric Manufacturing in Newman, mixing the water with green waste.

Tartaric Manufacturing extracted tartaric acid from winemaking dregs, with the acid being sold for use in the making of bread, sodas and other food items.

Tartaric Manufacturing shut down in 1999 after pleading no contest to 11 misdemeanor counts and agreeing to pay \$1.3 million in fines for pollution and odors.

Grover has taken about 9 million gallons of wastewater from the facility, with about 3 million gallons to go, Tartaric plant foreman Don Walton said.

Tonight's Planning Commission meeting is set to begin at 6 o'clock in the basement chamber at Tenth Street Place, 1010 10th St., Modesto.

Bee staff writer Jeff Jardine can be reached at 578-2383 or jjardine@modbee.com.

Debate on blaze smolders

Senator, mayor to try to clear the air of issues lingering after junkpile fire.

By Pablo Lopez

The Fresno Bee

Published Thursday, February 20, 2003, 7:33 AM

State Sen. Dean Florez and his air quality committee arrive in Fresno today with a list of tough

questions for Mayor Alan Autry and his staff about the smoky Archie Crippen Excavation site fire in southwest Fresno.

Autry and Florez, D-Shafter, called a truce Wednesday, saying they both want to learn whether Fresno was at fault for allowing Crippen to amass acres of demolished homes and junk before the pile ignited by spontaneous combustion Jan. 11.

A rift between the two began brewing Feb. 13, when a Florez staff member and the public were barred from attending the first meeting of the mayor's task force that is investigating the Crippen fire.

Deputy Mayor Roger Montero, co-chairman of the task force, said the meeting was private to establish the ground rules and goals. Florez complained that his staffer, Alicia Jacobo, needed to be at the meeting to research the Crippen fire in preparation for today's hearing.

City Council Member Cynthia Sterling, the other co-chairman, invited Jacobo to Tuesday's task force meeting. The public, however, still was barred.

The mayor and the senator agreed Wednesday to talk frequently about issues that affect Fresno.

"We both want to get to the same place," Autry said. "We have nothing to hide."

Florez also told the mayor that he would be asking tough questions tonight, "so don't take it personally." The mayor said that was fine as long as Florez did not convict city officials without evidence.

High on Florez's list of questions is how long it took for firefighters to respond to the emergency calls and whether officials did everything in their power to control the potentially dangerous smoke.

The senator also wants to know whether public officials acted immediately in treating the health of residents, especially children and the elderly.

The blaze in the 25-foot-tall pile of junk on Crippen's property at Marks and Nielsen avenues cost about \$2.5 million to contain. Because the state paid a big chunk of the cost, Florez said his Senate committee has oversight of the city's handling of the fire.

State Sens. Jeff Denham, R-Salinas, and Mike Machado, D-Linden, are committee members. Denham's 12th District includes the city of Madera and Merced County. The cost of the fire is important, Florez said, "in light of our current budget situation. Will resources from this fire take away from other county services? Say, for example, health care or education?"

Florez also plans to ask for an explanation as to why the mayor's task force has private meetings.

"What input has been sought from the general public to help in finding facts about this fire?" the senator asked.

In addition to city officials testifying, Florez will ask southwest Fresno residents to speak. Among them will be Harlan Kelly Sr., who took evidence of Crippen's pile of debris to City Council nearly two years before it ignited.

City records show Kelly took his complaints to City Hall four times. The city in March 2001 investigated his complaint and found Crippen's operation had no zoning or code violations at the time, authorities said.

Also testifying will be Crippen, who has said Fresno's sky would not have been filled with dangerous smoke if the city had not ignored six emergency calls, allowing a delay that turned a small fire into a huge blaze.

"In a month since the fire started, what do we know now to prevent fires like this in the future?" Florez asked.

The reporter can be reached at plopez@fresnobee.com or 441-6259.

IF YOU GO

What: Public hearing of the state Senate Select Committee on Air Quality in the Central Valley

Subject: Fire at Archie Crippen Excavation

When: 6 p.m. today

Where: Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.

Air district staff advises board on smog status

Board faces decision on whether to volunteer for worst-offender rating.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

Published Thursday, February 20, 2003, 5:55 AM

The San Joaquin Valley air district should decide by Sept. 18 on whether it will volunteer for dubious status as a worst-offender of federal smog standards.

That advice comes from Valley Air Pollution Control District staff members, who are scheduled to make the pitch today before the district's governing board.

The board is not supposed to vote today. The staff's update is the board's first official discussion of the worst-offender status since June.

"We still think we should bump up [to the status]," said senior planner Dave Jones.

The main reason: Officials say the air simply can't be cleaned up fast enough to meet the deadline, and federal sanctions for being late would cost many businesses dearly. Changing the status will extend the Valley's cleanup deadline from 2005 to 2010.

But northern Valley officials worry about their community image if the district approves the status -- known as extreme noncompliance for the one-hour ozone standard. Only the Los Angeles-area South Coast Air Basin has such status with the federal government.

North Valley officials don't want to risk losing new businesses and growth in their tax base. The north Valley has far fewer violations of the ozone standard than the central or southern areas.

Many businesses and some farmers support the move, fearing federal sanctions and loss of local control over the air-cleanup process. At some point, the federal government is supposed to take over the planning process in areas that miss cleanup deadlines.

District planners last year said the Valley needs to reduce ozone-forming emissions by 300 tons a day, or about a third of the current emissions for those chemicals.

"That number has come down a little because of new information," Jones said. "But we still need a huge chunk of reductions that will come from [cars and trucks] after 2005."

The Valley district has no authority over vehicle emissions. The federal and state governments control standards for fuels and engines.

The next big wave of pollution reduction will take place in 2006 and 2007, timed to help the Los Angeles area make the 2010 deadline. By shifting to the Southland's status, the Valley will have the same timeline and advantages.

District staffers are recalculating the estimated emissions and the amount of needed pollution reductions, using the latest research. Jones said some of the updated numbers should be available at a public workshop tentatively scheduled in late April.

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com <<mailto:mgrossi@fresnobee.com>> or 441-6316.

IF YOU GO

What: San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board meeting

When: 9 a.m. today

Where: 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave.

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

'Help find solutions'

By Allan Shapet

Coarsegold

Published Thursday, February 20, 2003, 4:51 AM

The Crippen refuse fire was not a wood chip or compost pile, it was a pile of twisted-together junk. Piling the the junk there made more money for the owner than trying to recycle it.

But instead of placing blame (The Bee is the best at this), credit should be given to all agencies that worked together to contain the fire and particulates. In a no-win situation like this fire, it would be more of a benefit to the community if all involved, including The Bee, would help find solutions to the problems at hand. Pointing fingers and placing blame doesn't help anybody.

[Fresno Bee Editorial](#)

Perea still can stir up controversy

By John Ellis

Published Saturday, February 8, 2003, 4:25 AM

It's barely been a month since Henry R. Perea left the Fresno City Council. Though he no longer sits on the dais, he's still able to shake up his former colleagues.

Some were angry Tuesday after Mayor Alan Autry said he had appointed Perea to the task force looking at the Archie Crippen Excavation fire in southwest Fresno. "You can fry eggs on council members' heads right now," one City Hall insider said.

Perea will play a prominent role on the task force. Some people are worried he will use the calling to reward friends and punish foes. Others speculate that the high-profile post allows him to keep his name in the news as he gears up for a run next year for Fresno County supervisor or mayor.

"I am concerned about the potential of this becoming very political," says Council Member Jerry Duncan.

Autry dismisses the concerns. "The council being upset at a mayoral decision," he quips. "How unusual."

The mayor says Perea knows his way around City Hall. As for wielding power in the position, Autry says, Perea is just one member of the task force.

Perea says he's heard none of the concerns, so there's nothing to comment on. His son, Council Member Henry T. Perea, says all the murmurs just show his father is a taskmaster who knows how to shake things up.

[Modesto Bee Editorial](#)

Health, farming do battle over valley's air rules

Posted: February 18, 2003 @ 05:25:09 AM PST

There is an effort under way in Sacramento to change the rules on agricultural sources of pollution -- or not change them.

The outcome will be a revealing lesson in how the health of people living in the valley stacks up against powerful economic interests, and it will further measure the extent to which our elected representatives are actually prepared to lead.

On the ag side, lobbyists are preparing a bill that would permit local air districts to regulate -- for the first time -- the emissions from diesel engines that are used to power irrigation pumps and other equipment. But other sources of ag pollution would remain unregulated.

Those include dust and particulate matter thrown into the air by plowing, disking and using unpaved roads in rural areas, and organic pollution, mostly from livestock.

Agriculture has enjoyed an exemption from the rules everyone else must follow for more than a half-century. Perhaps that made a sort of sense many years ago, when the air quality problem was less evident and pervasive. But times have changed, and agriculture -- along with everyone else in the valley -- is going to have to make some major changes in the way it conducts its business.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says that ag sources already produce a significant portion of the valley's smog-causing pollution in the summer. And in less than two years, district officials predict, livestock waste will replace motor vehicles as the No. 1 source of the reactive organic gases that make up smog.

Among other things, the bill that emerges from this convoluted political process will tell us much about who calls the shots in state government. Valley legislators may be asked to vote against the wishes of well-funded and powerful constituents -- and friends, in many cases -- in the ag community. Some are understandably reluctant to do so, and may vote, in the end, to preserve an increasingly unhealthy status quo. But if that turns out to be the case, the growing constituency for cleaner air may have the last say.

It won't be easy for farmers and growers to give up a luxury they've enjoyed for so long. It won't be cheap, either. But it will happen. The only question is how. Will agriculture join the rest of the valley community in this effort, enduring a fair portion of the pain for the sake of cleaner air? Or will outsiders force a solution on agriculture -- and the rest of us -- that we may like even less? Setting aside these indefensible exemptions for ag pollution won't be any easier for the Legislature and the governor. But it will be the right thing to do.

