

Railroads might be on track to air deal

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

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Freight trains could soon become a smaller part of the San Joaquin Valley's smog problem if negotiations are successful with two major railroads.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., have asked the major freight railroad companies to make the valley a priority area to receive the latest clean-locomotive technology. In 1998, both Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroads made a similar commitment in the Los Angeles region, and they seem willing to consider the same for the valley, which now ranks worse than L.A. in some smog measurements.

"We'd be more than willing to sit down with them and discuss options and ideas," said Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

Like any diesel-powered machine, trains pump a number of troublesome pollutants into the valley's air. Of greatest concern is nitrogen oxides, which combine with other pollutants and sunlight to create ozone, a leading ingredient in smog. The valley does not meet federal standards for nitrogen oxide pollution.

Last year, trains accounted for about 5 percent of that type of pollution from mobile sources valleywide, and about 8 percent in Kern County.

In 1998 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency imposed new rules on locomotive engines. Since Jan. 1, 2002, new or rebuilt locomotive engines must emit about 23 percent less nitrogen oxides than their predecessors. On Jan. 1, 2005, an additional reduction of 25 percent is required.

But locomotives have a very long service life -- more than 35 years in many cases -- and their engines may get rebuilt only every eight years. As a result, many older, dirtier trains will continue to ride the rails long after 2005.

Yet the federal Clean Air Act prohibits state and local governments from regulating locomotive emissions. So in 1998 the California Air Resources Board reached an agreement with the two railroads in which the companies committed to accelerate the introduction of clean locomotives in the south coast air basin.

That agreement states that, by 2010, the railroads will attain a fleet average in the south coast region that meets the 2005 federal engine standards. This would have been unlikely without the agreement due to the long service life of train engines.

Florez and Boxer now want the railroads to agree to the same terms in the San Joaquin Valley.

"What they did is agree to send the newest, lowest-emission engines to the L.A. air basin. We want to get the same action," said Larkin Tackett, an air quality specialist who works for Florez.

"The railroads have actually been very responsive and very interested in talking about it. We feel confident we're going to be able to move forward."

Expanding the introduction of the cleaner locomotives may not be a big leap for the railroads.

Railroading is a large-scale, regional business, so it makes sense to use the same locomotives throughout the state or region rather than confining them to Los Angeles. The new engines also get better fuel economy, saving operating costs.

"Of course, our locomotives travel all over the country," said John Bromley, a spokesman for Burlington. "It's not a practical thing to have specific locomotives for California. But we think that with the advances being made now, we'll not only be operating them in the L.A. area but in the rest of California and the West."

Bromley said Burlington is already testing five new locomotives in Northern California and the Pacific Northwest that meet the 2005 federal standards, and those tests are going well. The South Coast and San Luis Obispo air districts have taken other steps to reduce pollution from trains. Both enforce idling restrictions on locomotives to protect residents who live near train tracks.

In San Luis Obispo, for example, trains are forbidden to idle for more than 30 minutes in a zone that covers 1,000 feet of tracks in a residential area. These rules are based on the state Health and Safety Code, which allows local governments to regulate nuisances.

Dave Jones, planning director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said idling restrictions for both trains and trucks will be considered as part of a larger plan in the works to reduce ozone pollution in the valley.

"Basically, we need everything we can get. That's why we want to pursue it," said Jones.

Bill to enlarge valley board OK'd by panel

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A bill that aims to expand the size of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Governing Board cleared a key hurdle in Sacramento Wednesday.

The bill, SB 999 by Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden, would add four appointed members to the governing board. That board currently consists of 11 city council members and county supervisors from throughout the eight-county air district who have final authority to approve regional pollution controls.

On June 18, the bill failed a vote in the Assembly Local Government Committee, under heavy opposition from local politicians and industry groups. But it was granted a second chance, and on Wednesday it passed out of that committee by a vote of 5-3, said Colin Grinnell, a spokesman for Machado.

The bill requires the four new board members to be valley residents appointed by the governor, the Senate and the Assembly. Many local politicians and industry groups fear the appointees will deprive the board of local control. But clean-air advocates say the bill is critical to pollution control in the valley because it will add board members who have a broader perspective on the problem. Already approved by the state Senate, the bill's next step is a hearing in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee on Monday.

S.J. businesses spew fewer toxins

EPA: Amount drops by nearly half in 2000-01

By Audrey Cooper, Record Staff Writer

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The amount of toxic chemicals that San Joaquin County businesses released into the land, air and water dropped by almost half between 2000 and 2001, according to new statistics released by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Representatives of some of the county's top toxic-emitting companies say the drop is mostly due to efforts to generate fewer toxic chemicals.

San Joaquin County companies emitted about 881,000 pounds of toxic chemicals in 2001, compared with nearly 1.6 million pounds in 2000. Most of the chemicals were emitted into the air.

While San Joaquin County saw a 43 percent drop in toxic releases, toxic emissions dropped statewide by just 22 percent.

Not all of those chemicals pose a danger to residents. Some toxics dissipate easily into the air and break down into the atmosphere. Others may not be emitted near any homes, but could pose problems for workers. Some chemicals may also contribute to the region's smog and dust-pollution problems.

Lisa Fasano, an EPA spokeswoman, said the new emission statistics shouldn't alarm the public.

"Typically, these companies are operating within their legal thresholds. But if an industry down the road from your home is emitting ammonia, that might be something you want to know," Fasano said.

The EPA list included only industrial releases, but cars and trucks pose a bigger problem to air quality, Fasano said.

Lathrop-based Carpenter Co. released the most toxic chemicals of any San Joaquin County business in 2001. The polyurethane maker emitted more than 376,000 pounds of toxics in 2001, down from about 711,000 pounds in 2000. The company primarily emits dichloromethane, a probable carcinogen.

Carpenter spokesman Denny Bryant said the company stopped using the chemical in 2002.

Two Stockton power plants -- The POSDEF Power Co. and Stockton Cogen Co. -- were ranked the No. 2 and No. 3 biggest emitters, respectively. The plants emit high levels of ammonia and hydrochloric acid.

Stockton Cogen officials did not return several calls seeking comment.

Steve Stengel, a spokesman for Florida-based FPL Energy, said his company is always looking for ways to cut pollutants from the POSDEF site.

"In the last couple of years we've upgraded various pieces of equipment, instituted design changes to certain pieces of equipment, all with the goal of reducing the amount of toxic releases," he said.

Other top polluters include large wineries, the Tracy site of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and an animal-rendering plant in Stockton.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District identifies its own "hot spots" where toxic chemicals are likely to affect human health. The air district considers different chemicals and whether they pose an unacceptable cancer risk, said air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

Carpenter Co. is being taken off the hot-spot list because of its efforts to change its manufacturing process. The only other companies considered hot spots are Stockton-based Diamond Walnut and a Kern County oil refinery. Diamond Walnut is listed because it sprays chemicals on its nuts.

* To reach reporter Audrey Cooper phone (209) 546-8298 or e-mail acooper@recordnet.com <<mailto:acooper@recordnet.com>>

Panel passes air bill

Plan to expand board 'slap in face'

By Will Shuck, Record Capitol Bureau Chief, July 3, 2003

SACRAMENTO -- A hotly contested plan to expand the Valley's air-quality board made it through an important Assembly committee Wednesday, a surprising development that leaves two Stockton-area Democrats at odds over the bill.

Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden, said he was "pleasantly surprised" that his Senate Bill 999 made it out of committee with the minimum number of votes. For most of the day, word had been the bill was dead.

Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, was disappointed by the outcome. She had contacted committee members and asked them to kill Machado's bill.

SB999 would add four appointed members to the 11-member panel that makes air regulations for most of the Central Valley, a region that has some of the worst air pollution in the nation.

Machado's backers say the board has done a poor job of addressing air pollution and needs outside help to stand up to businesses with a vested interest in avoiding strict new regulations.

Board members and their supporters called Machado's bill "a slap in the face." They say the board should continue to be made up of local officials and doesn't need political appointees chosen in Sacramento.

Local representatives see it as the iron hand of state government moving in to enact the will of big-city politicians from the north and south.

Matthews agrees with them.

"My locals like to represent their district without appointees of the governor, the (Assembly) speaker and the (leader) of the Senate," Matthews said. "We understand the gravity of air quality, and we're working on it. And frankly, we think this is uncalled for."

The committee approved Machado's bill with the understanding that he continue working with Matthews and other opponents.

Machado said he would do that but added: "It's important to understand that the merits of the bill can't be compromised.

"There's a very compelling need to try to improve air quality. This would help diversify the board so it can not only take into consideration local concerns, but also regional issues ... so we should be able to clean up the air and not jeopardize the economy."

* To reach Capitol Bureau Chief Will Shuck, phone (916) 441-4078 or e-mail sacto@recordnet.com <<mailto:sacto@recordnet.com>>

[Fresno Bee editorial:](#)

Pollution and planning

Fresno promises to incorporate air quality measures in future growth.

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It seems obvious: With the Valley's poor air quality and the enormous pollution we know urban development creates, planning decisions should always be made with a strong emphasis on cleaning up the air. Reduce the number of trips by automobile. Make it possible for people to walk or ride bicycles on shopping errands or to work. Offer clean, efficient and reliable mass transit.

The good news is that all those things may be a little closer to reality in Fresno, now that the city and a group of medical advocates have come to a friendly settlement of a lawsuit the group brought against the city last year.

Henceforth, the city's new general plan will be implemented with a strong emphasis on air quality considerations.

This is what's meant by "smart growth," the phrase heard so often these days -- and so rarely put into effect, especially here in the Valley. We hope Fresno's example -- it's not the first, but it may be the most important, because of the city's place in the region -- will spread to cities and counties up and down the Valley.

That won't be easy. The sheer inertia of doing things the way we've always done them is a major obstacle to improvement. We've gone so long and sprawled so far in our urban development that we'll be a long time about the task of fixing it. And there are powerful forces with vested interests in the status quo.

But those forces may soon be overmatched by two things: the simple, awful facts about the Valley's air pollution and the growing awareness of the people living here that we cannot continue with business as usual.

Three of the five worst places in the country for air pollution are right here in the Valley: Fresno, Bakersfield and the Visalia-Tulare area. More than half of the smog-forming pollution comes from so-called "mobile sources," which means vehicles, mostly.

The doctors and other health professionals who challenged the city's general plan clearly get it. So do elected officials at Fresno's City Hall. So do most of the rest of us. That understanding is the first essential step toward overcoming years of inertia, denial and ignorance. It will take discipline and no small measure of sacrifice to get the air cleaned up. But we're headed in the right direction. We just need to keep it up.