

Center of opportunity

Development of air pollution technology could drive economy.

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Turning agricultural waste, including manure from dairies -- a major source of air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley -- into clean electricity sounds visionary. It is, perhaps, but it may be closer at hand than we think. And the vision is most certainly worth pursuing.

The Great Valley Center in Modesto has issued a report that suggests those very things may be in our future, along with a number of other advances that could turn the Valley into a center for developing technologies for alternative and renewable energy, including biomass, solar, wind, hydrogen and geothermal.

And why not? We know the problems we have with our air -- we live in one of the most polluted air basins in the country. Why shouldn't the Valley be a leader in developing ways to cure that problem?

Some of the technologies are ready to use right now. Biomass energy plants that burn agricultural waste as fuel to produce power are already in place around the Valley, an alternative to the open-field burning that contributes to air pollution. The technology is not competitive with more traditional power sources such as oil, coal, hydropower and natural gas -- not yet, anyway. Thus the plants require subsidies, which are currently threatened by the state's budget crisis.

There are solar-powered irrigation pumps available -- but they cost thousands more than the diesel counterparts now in use. More research would drive that cost down, but that also requires money that just isn't there right now.

It's estimated that the Valley's dairies could produce 1,500 kilowatts from the manure all those cows generate. But the technology, called anaerobic digesters, is too expensive for most dairies, even with state matching funds, because dairy prices are so low just now.

There are institutional resources in place, such as the Center for Irrigation Technology at California State University, Fresno, and the Great Valley Center itself. More are needed. Environmental studies -- particularly cleanup and conservation techniques -- should be a centerpiece of the curriculum at the University of California, Merced, when it opens.

There are private sector opportunities as well. We have said this before: There is a generation's worth of jobs to be had in the effort to clean up our air, and considerable economic reward awaiting those who solve the problems. Why shouldn't that happen here? Why should we let that development -- both technological and economic -- take place at distant research universities and in

faraway factories?

The answer, of course, is that we should not. But we had better start hustling now if we want these things to occur in our own back yard. We are losing a great deal of time to the state's budget crisis. We should be planning for this vision of the future right now -- real, concrete plans, not wish lists. We will find the money to make these ideas blossom and bear fruit. We will find it because we must; our very lives, and the lives of our children, depend on it.

Bakersfield Californian, Community Voices / Jan R. VanderPool:

Blaming classic cars for smog unacceptable

Tuesday April 08, 2003, 09:30:12 PM

In response to the recent uproar caused by Sen. Dean Florez's air pollution bills, I must add fuel to the fire. Florez's SB708 has outraged classic vehicle enthusiasts throughout California. SB708 would require all vehicles 45 years old or newer to be subjected the the Smog Check Program. Current law exempts vehicles 1973 and older, and starting this year, will exempt vehicles as they become 30 model years old.

These exemptions for classic vehicles are the result of SB42, a grass roots bill passed with overwhelming support in 1997. SB42 came about due to a lack of availability of stock factory replacement and used parts, as well as erroneous smog manuals and unreasonable passing standards.

Florez plans to clean up the air by taking older vehicles off the road. The idea of blaming cars from the 1960s and 1970 for our pollution problems is about 10 years out of date.

The fact is, most of these vehicles simply are not driven enough to contribute to pollution. Many owners drive classics less than 1,000 miles per year. These vehicles are used for recreational purposes like car shows, cruise nights and charity events. We fix these vehicles up and many times add our own personal touches to make them an extension of ourselves. We do not build them to recklessly pollute the environment.

After a deluge of e-mails and phone calls in opposition to SB708, Florez's office claims that the senator plans to modify this bill with a so-called "collections exemption."

No one can explain exactly what this means. Who is to say what type of car is "collectable" or not?

It is the hobbyist's choice and should only be limited by his imagination and budget, not by government regulation. Anything less than leaving SB42 in its current state is unacceptable. If the senator is truly concerned about smog, why does SB708 have a provision for extending the new car exemption from four to six years? This means that new cars (the bulk of California's vehicle fleet) will be able to go 120, 000 miles to more than 150,000 miles without ever being checked. To let the majority of vehicles out there go unchecked while proposing that seldom-driven classic cars be tested makes absolutely no sense.

I have learned over the years not to give any validity to environmental groups, especially after the MTBE fiasco. We classic vehicle enthusiasts worked very hard to see SB 42 pass and Florez's attempt to overturn it by way of SB 708 shows he does not care about the opinions of California citizens.

With a \$35 billion budget shortfall, his time would be better spend on issues that truly concern Californians.

SB708 will do nothing to help the environment and should be defeated.

Jan R. VanderPool is a digital reprographics engineer for Blueprint Services Company. 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.

Letters on point, the Bakersfield Californian

Tuesday April 08, 2003, 09:35:06 PM

Air quality concerns expressed

Asthma on the rise

As a school nurse in the Central Valley for 30 years, I have been shocked at the recent rise in cases of childhood asthma. It is probably the most increasing chronic disease in recent memory. At my school, out of a population of 400 students, birth to 5 years of age, we have a list of at least 38 students already diagnosed with chronic asthma, a debilitating disease which accounts for many lost school days and educational opportunities for children with needs for special education. If SB 700 can address cleaning the air through reduction of agricultural business pollution, then we will have made a significant impact on children's lives, their educational success and the future of California's 6 million future citizens.

Sen. Dean Florez, you have my support on this bill.

CHARLOTTE M. BRANDT, Bakersfield

Florez right, Watson wrong

Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson recently wrote saying he is for "local control," but he is against "bureaucracy," against "more layers of government" and "arbitrary dairy-free zones." In short, he invoked every meaningless political buzz word/phrase he knows to criticize Sen. Dean Florez's recent legislative acts aimed at cleaning up our air.

Worse, Watson pointed to the local process for dealing with air quality matters -- including the now-infamous Kern County Planning Commission and the lopsided pro-dairy Dairy Technical Advisory Committee -- as if these discredited, utterly ineffective groups have given us anything but more toxic air.

Thoughtfully weigh Sen. Florez's decisive legislative moves against Supervisor Watson's overripe political verbiage. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see which one is doing something good for children's health.

As long as the thick brown haze of toxic polluted air hangs over us, families want legislative action, whether it come from the feds or the state. If our "local" supervisors were concerned about air quality, we wouldn't be able to see the air.

The voting record of the Kern County Board of Supervisors makes it clear it is in bed with the powerful animal factory interests and other gross polluters invading Kern County. Watson and the other "locals" can talk and talk, it doesn't take the place of decisive legislative action and old-fashioned, outspoken leadership.

Look out the window at the dirty air. Florez is right. Watson is wrong.

SOFIEA CLERICO , Bakersfield

Letters to the Editor for April 10

Submitted by readers of The Bakersfield Californian

Farmers at it again

There go the agriculture people again denying that they have any culpability for pollution in the valley. The piece by the representative of the Farm Bureau brings nothing new to the table. Until they stop their incessant denials and attempts to exempt their industry from all and any environmental standards, they will continue to have no creditability nor can they command respect by all those who suffer on a daily basis from the industry's inaction.

We all understand that farmers want to make a living. But the question is why at the expense of the rest of the valley? Loron Hodge is an excellent PR man, but valley residents recognize he is paid to carry the farmers' message of a benevolent industry that would rather obfuscate the problem it causes than provide a transparent plan to help solve pollution problems.

Until those agencies and bureaus that control pollution in the valley are free of undue influence by local politicians and dominant industries such as agriculture, nothing will be solved or even improved. Agriculture should do something on its own -- something not subsidized by the rest of us in the valley -- to gain respect.

We pay for your products, we pay for your water through subsidies and we pay for federal subsidies to keep you in business, even when you grow nothing. So why do you need a subsidy for equipment, such as pumps, which you should do on your own. Use that advertising and PR money to help your expenses. Leave us our health.
PANFILO FUENTES, Bakersfield