

Plan lists ways to cut farm air pollution

Pollution control district gives options on reducing Valley particulate matter.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

(Published Wednesday, March 26, 2003, 4:43 AM)

Farmers will have the choice of several methods to help control dust as part of a new plan to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's particle pollution by 2010.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District posted its draft "PM-10 Plan" on its Web site, along with meeting announcements for early April to discuss the document with the public.

The plan discusses farm options, such as fewer plowing passes on dusty fields and chipping farm waste to avoid field burning. Farm sources account for more than half of the Valley's PM-10, particulate matter 10 microns in width, which is about one-seventh as wide as a human hair.

"Every crop has its own nuance," said Dave Mitchell, an air district planning manager. "For instance, some orchards could leave grass between rows of trees to hold down particulate matter."

The Valley is among the worst basins in the country for particle pollution and faces federal sanctions by Aug. 28 if a complete plan is not submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Valley has missed key deadlines for particle cleanup plans in the past decade.

The sanctions would begin with extra fees for large new or expanding businesses. By February 2004, billions in federal road-building money would be frozen.

The cleanup plan is considered a blueprint from which air authorities will create and group control measures for many pollution sources, such as farms, residential fireplaces, construction and industrial processes. Particle pollution can be anything from soot and dust to combinations of chemicals and liquids.

Within the plan, 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. The smallest particles can lodge deep in the lungs, some being absorbed into the bloodstream.

The Valley's particle pollution seasons occur in fall and winter. In fall, dust is the dominant pollutant. In winter, the particles are smaller and characterized by chemicals and soot from residential burning.

Farming operations and other farm-related activities, such as field burning and driving on unpaved roads, produce more than 150 tons of particle pollution daily, according to state estimates. Residential burning and construction combine for about 24 tons daily.

Particle pollution varies from area to area in the 25,000-square-mile Valley. Ammonium nitrate -- which forms when oxides of nitrogen and ammonia from livestock operation combine in the air -- is a regional problem, but other types of pollution create federal violations in cities.

"In Fresno, you see particulate matter on a neighborhood level from wood smoke in fireplaces," said Mitchell.

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S.J. Valley air regulators unveil plan

By Audrey Cooper, Record Staff Writer
Published Wednesday, March 26, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley's filthy skies would clear by 2010 under a long-awaited plan that air regulators released Tuesday.

The plan -- a basic road map to cleaner skies -- effects everything from wood-burning home fireplaces to mandatory dust-reduction rules for farmers and construction workers.

The plan is an attempt to bring under control one of the Valley's biggest pollution problems: microscopic flecks of dust, vapor and soot smaller than 10 microns wide. By comparison, a human hair is about 80 to 100 microns wide.

The Valley has some of the country's worst dust pollution, also called particulate pollution. The tiny bits become lodged deep in human lungs and have been linked to a growing number of premature deaths, childhood asthma, lung disease and heart disease.

The plan released Tuesday by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is an attempt to meet federal Clean Air Act requirements and avoid sanctions that could freeze federal road-building dollars starting in February.

That plan also promises more than 5 percent drops in emissions each year. That would be a major accomplishment for the Valley, which failed to meet daily pollution limits in 12 of the past 13 years.

"Absolutely, this will clean the air. We're very hopeful that we can reach all of our goals by 2010," said Dave Mitchell, the air district's planning manager.

The air district's previous efforts to write a dust-control plan all failed to win approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or to sufficiently reduce dust pollution. Environmental groups have sued both the air district and the EPA over the dust-control issue, claiming the agencies haven't done enough to cut the pollution.

"They've never been able to draft a plan that was workable. I think you'll find that the air district is poised to let agriculture escape with doing as little as possible," said Kevin Hall, a Sierra Club air expert.

Hall and other environmentalists were still looking over the draft pollution plan Tuesday and couldn't comment on specifics.

Lisa Fasano, spokeswoman for the EPA, said experts in the agency's Washington and San Francisco offices were examining the plan to see if it would win approval.

"We've been working with the air district on this for a while, and they've run their ideas by us in most cases," Fasano said.

The plan includes general ideas for new anti-pollution policies that would affect businesses and residents. Specifics of those proposed rules would have to be approved separately by the air district's governing board.

Those new proposals include a mandatory program that would give all Valley farmers a choice of several dust-control methods.

For example, some farmers could choose to buy new equipment that would reduce the number of times they would have to drive over dusty fields. Planting cover crops in orchards or vineyards to reduce flyaway dust would be another option, Mitchell said.

Although all farmers would have to make efforts, only larger farms likely would be forced to report their efforts to authorities, Mitchell said.

Other key parts of the plan include a proposed limit on wood-burning residential fireplaces on bad-air days. Another idea is to restrict activity in construction zones on windy days.

Particulate pollution comes from car and truck exhaust, on- and off-road dust, wood burning, and industrial processes.

The newly proposed dust-control plan is the subject of several upcoming workshops to be conducted via teleconference. The nearest site is the air district's Modesto office at 4230 Kiernan Avenue, Suite 130.

The workshops are scheduled for 1 and 6:30 p.m. April 7; 1:30 p.m. April 9; and 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. April 10.

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On the Net

To download a copy of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's dust-control plan or for more information on air pollution, go to [**www.valleyair.org**](http://www.valleyair.org).

Matthews' bill would address restrictions on fireplace burning

By Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, March 26, 2003

Merced County's state assemblywoman wants to ensure fireplace wood burning isn't overly restricted by the local air district next fall.

Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, is proposing legislation that would ensure local agencies and air districts "do not unreasonably restrict" the use of wood-burning heaters, stoves and fireplaces that have been certified as low polluters by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Beginning next fall the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will begin banning residential wood fires on nights when air pollution is particularly bad.

The ban will likely apply on about 20 nights per winter in the Fresno area and fewer nights in Merced County. For the EPA-certified stoves and heaters mentioned by Matthews, the ban is expected to apply on about five nights per winter in the Fresno area, and fewer nights at the north end of the Valley.

A spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley air district said, "We're opposed to the legislation."

Josette Merced Bello said the air district doesn't feel that it's "asking too much" for Valley residents to give up their fires a few nights during the winter.

"This is well within our jurisdiction to do so," she said.

Matthews, who was elected to represent Merced County in November as part of the redrawn 17th Assembly District, could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

However, she did release a press statement on Assembly Bill 720.

"We all remember when natural gas prices went through the roof," she said. "Many people purchased EPA certified wood-burning products in order to heat their homes. It would be unwise if wood burning is banned altogether and Californians are left with no optional heating source."

Officials with the Valley air district have previously said that residents with no other source of heat - like gas - will be allowed to burn wood even on nights when restrictions apply.

Supervisors lobbied to become part of clean-air initiative

By Cynthia Neff , Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, March 26, 2003

Representatives of a clean-air initiative launched about 1 1/2 months ago visited the Merced County Board of Supervisors Tuesday to gain its support.

Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston introduced "Operation Clean Air," an initiative aimed to unite the eight San Joaquin Valley counties aggressively targeting the Valley's poor air quality.

"If the (eight) counties are not in on this, it will fail," he said during Tuesday's board meeting. "We are in the top 10 in the nation for bad air quality - is that what we want?"

Merced County supervisors said they would definitely get involved in the initiative to clean up the valley.

"If Los Angeles can take care of their problems, I don't see why we can't," said Supervisor Gloria Cortez Keene.

Said Supervisor Jerry O'Banion, "The trouble is that our (San Joaquin Valley Air Unified Air Quality Control District) does not have control over much of the air pollution in the valley."

Representatives from San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern counties will meet on April 23 in Fresno to unite on the air quality issues and start discussion on "a five-year action plan that will allow economic prosperity and clean air to co-exist in the San Joaquin Valley."

The valley needs a 30 percent ozone reduction to meet federal standards, which is next to impossible for an area that was named by the American Lung Association as the seventh worst place in the United States to live regarding air quality.

California also has the five most ozone-polluted counties, including Kern, Fresno and Tulare counties, according to the association's "The State of the Air 2002 Report."

Poor air quality poses a serious threat to public health, agricultural crops and forest damage, and is detrimental to valley economy, Waterston said. One in of five children in the San Joaquin Valley have asthma.

In Fresno County last year, medical bills related to poor air quality jumped from \$900,000 to \$3 million, and rates for medical insurance "are astronomical," he said.

Nearly 4,000 children in Merced County have asthma, according to the Merced Mariposa County Asthma Coalition.

Program Manager Alicia Bohlke said that the coalition "wants to give full support to Operation Clean Air," and would also like initiative members to consider air quality not just as an environmental issue but as also a public health threat.

O'Banion said that this initiative marks the first time local government has come forward to support getting clean air, due to Waterston and Fresno Mayor Alan Autry's undertaking.

In other board action

- Supervisors voted unanimously to withdraw about 10 acres in the Hilmar area from the Merced County Agricultural Preserve under the California Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act).

On Jan. 28, the board voted to amend the Merced County General Plan to withdraw the major subdivision "Villa Cordoba" project site from the preserve.

A negative declaration to meet California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements was also approved in January, which included mitigation to address potential loss of farmland.

The mitigation states that "for every acre taken out, the developer has to put another acre in," said Robert King of Planning and Community Development.

The project site will become 41 housing lots, according to the Planning Commission. The concurrent zone change of the project alters the land use from general agriculture to single-family residential.

King said he believed construction would begin during the summer.

- The board unanimously approved a reduction in the Mental Health Department's hours at its Main Street ACCESS drop-in center, which provides socialization services to mental health consumers.

The \$287,346 contract with service provider Community Catalyst of California, from Feb. 1 to June 30, was cut by about \$107,000.

The services, which include a drop-in center and employment assistance at the department's Main Street ACCESS Center, will be reduced but will still allow clients lacking Medi-Cal coverage to reap the center's benefits.

Fox said in January that the socialization services were not being used to their full potential.

Sierra Club calls on council to deny bluffs development

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
Tuesday March 25, 2003, 10:43:03 PM

Gordon Nipp knows the square mile of new development planned just north of his home on View Street will bring traffic congestion and pollution to northeast Bakersfield.

The Sierra Club activist has asked the city of Bakersfield to deny a map for 316 homes that local developers Craig Carver and Tom Carosella plan to put on the property.

Nipp said the application for the tract map, and accompanying city review, didn't adequately assess the impacts of the pollution and traffic congestion those homes will generate.

"The city has been doing some pretty shoddy environmental work out here," he said.

Members of the Bakersfield City Council will take up Nipp's request at 7 tonight at City Hall.

City Planning Director Stan Grady said his department is recommending that the council deny Nipp's appeal and approve the homes.

The pollution and traffic impacts of the project were studied, he said, and determined to be insignificant.

"The impacts from this project can be fully mitigated," Grady said.

But Nipp said the city isn't looking at the big picture, with development plans popping up along the Kern River bluffs like wildflowers.

Nipp, a former college mathematics professor, said he's studied the impact that all those projects will have on the environment and that the cumulative impact is more than significant.

Grady said a recent update to the Bakersfield Metropolitan General Plan showed the new congestion and tailpipe emissions from cars and sport utility vehicles will have a substantial impact on the environment across all of Bakersfield.

But city and county lawmakers approved the update with the understanding they couldn't solve the problem without halting all growth.

And that isn't something they were ready to do.

While Nipp said it's time the city changes its ways, he doesn't expect the council will side with him against Carver and Carosella.

But he said the Sierra Club needs to start somewhere in the fight against pollution generated by new development.

"We haven't been challenging them for years, for decades. Our valley air quality is so bad that the planners need to start focusing in on that," he said. "This is the first time we've taken them to task on these issues."

The Sierra Club's appeal of the Carver/Carosella tract map also focuses on traffic congestion the project would theoretically bring to Highway 178, which has only two lanes in the area.

"What we'd like to see is some firm timelines for improving the highway," he said.

City Assistant Public Works Director Jacques LaRochelle said the city should have Highway 178 widened to four lanes by the time most of the developments in the area are finished.

The city will use money from the developers to pay for the highway expansion.

"We're going to be marching to the east one mile at a time," LaRochelle said. "Four lanes would handle most of the new development out there."

Other issues on the agenda at tonight's council meeting include a three-month extension of the city's pilot curbside recycling program.

The monthly fee for the program, which was previously \$5, will go up to \$6.25.

The extension is needed to keep the program up and running while the council considers expanding the program from a few test neighborhoods to cover the whole city.

A flood of e-mails have been sent to the city supporting the curbside program, which had a 10 percent participation rate in neighborhoods where it has been offered for the past year.