

10 Florez bills target pollution

'Ambitious' plan tackles farms, dairies, fireplaces.

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO -- State Sen. Dean Florez has unveiled a sweeping and controversial package of air quality legislation that would take the dirtiest cars off the road, restrict wood-burning fireplaces and impose strict pollution regulations on the state's farms and dairies.

Introduced Friday, the measures are drawing criticism from representatives of the \$27 billion agriculture industry who judge much of the proposal as heavy-handed and unfairly focused on farms. Clean-air activists in the San Joaquin Valley praised the bills, calling them the boldest plan to curb air pollution they have seen.

Says Florez, a Shafter Democrat whose Senate district is home to some of the nation's most productive farms: "It's tough for me to take this on, but we need to be aggressive, and this is our starting point. We have to approach the problem from a health perspective first; that is paramount."

The stakes are high for everyone.

The eight-county San Joaquin Valley is home to some of the dirtiest and unhealthiest air in the nation, and federal and state regulators are under legal and public pressure to clean it up. Air officials are up against a 2005 federal deadline to reduce smog in the Valley or face sanctions that would penalize businesses with millions of dollars in fines and fees and halt up to \$2 billion in road-building funds for California.

Fresno County has the highest child asthma rate in the state, and more than 300,000 Valley residents suffer from chronic respiratory conditions.

Florez says the dire economic consequences of dirty air and its negative effects on health drove him to craft a 10-bill package that he concedes is "ambitious."

The centerpiece of Florez's proposal -- and likely to be the most contentious -- is SB 700, a measure that would repeal the decades-old state law that has blocked state and local regulators from enforcing parts of the federal Clean Air Act on farms.

For the first time, state law would explicitly list diesel-operated irrigation pumps and animal feeding operations such as dairies as stationary sources of air pollution.

Specifically, the bill would require pollution permits for diesel-operated irrigation pumps, dairies, poultry and other confined animal farms -- a provision not unlike a measure that lobbyists for the agriculture industry have been drafting.

But Florez's measure goes further, requiring that local air officials regulate other, non-stationary sources of air pollution from farms -- much of it activity that is fundamental to growing crops, such as harvesting, discing and tilling.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told California officials last week that they must scrap the farm exemption on stationary sources like pumps, as well as on new sources of air pollution.

Growers know the exemption from permits must go, but suggested that Florez's measure may go too far in its attempt to regulate other parts of the farm.

"What in the wide world of sports does all that mean?" asks Paul Betancourt, a Fresno County almond and grape grower. "When it comes to doing things like turning the ground and tilling, I have to do that. Every farmer does."

Cynthia Cory, a lobbyist for the California Farm Bureau, says she is concerned that the measure was drafted with little or no input from farmers or their representatives.

Environmentalists are wowed by the measure.

"What I see here is unprecedented," says Kevin Hall, a clean-air activist and member of the Tehipite chapter of the Sierra Club. "Every legislator should support this. It's a gutsy move."

Hall, who along with other environmentalists sued EPA over the farm exemption, said the bill brings state law into compliance with federal law and "frees the hands of regulators to do their job."

Florez has enlisted one of the Legislature's leading environmentalists -- Sen. Byron Sher, D-Stanford -- to be a joint author of the bill. Sher chairs the Senate Environmental Quality Committee, the panel that will shape and vote on all air-related bills.

"This exemption issue has to be dealt with for many reasons," Sher says. "The agriculture interests are well-organized and are an important constituency for many legislators. Their involvement on an issue always carries a lot of weight. They will be heard in this debate."

Nine other bills make up Florez's air package, including a measure that would ban open-field burning of agricultural waste by June 1, 2005. That proposal also causes consternation for some farmers, who say they have limited affordable options for disposing of tons of orchard and vineyard prunings every year.

But Florez says a ban on burning would be eased by another of his bills that would require biomass facilities to recycle more farm waste to produce their electricity. Biomass operators also burn construction and other sources of waste that generally are cheaper than using agricultural waste.

"What we're saying is that biomass facilities won't get permits unless they take 30% of what they burn from ag sources," Florez said. "That gives a lot more farmers a guarantee that there's an environmentally sound market for their waste."

One measure -- SB 703 -- was immediately embraced by agriculture. The bill aims to revoke expensive "standby" charges that growers pay to keep their irrigation pumps connected to the electrical grid. Farmers say the charges can add up to as much as 40% of their electricity bills, even when the pumps are rarely used -- a factor that has driven many growers to operate their pumps with cheaper, but dirtier, diesel fuel.

"Electricity has always been the fuel of choice, but it's been too expensive," says Jim Crettol, a Kern County grower and president of the Agricultural Energy Consumers Association.

Florez says converting all or most of the San Joaquin Valley's 4,500 diesel-run irrigation pumps would dramatically reduce emissions that are a main ingredient of smog.

Two other measures in the package aim to help farmers pay for the high costs of cleaning up the air that could be imposed on them.

One would set up a low-interest loan program to pay for installing pollution control equipment or measures, while the other would expand a grant program that has helped farmers replace thousands of dirty diesel engines on pumps to other farm equipment such as tractors.

"A lot of this will come down to dollars for us," Betancourt says. "I want to do my part, but I know I can't afford a whole lot of capital investment."

One final farm-related measure -- SB 707 -- would restrict dairy operators from building within 3 miles of an urban area or school. Likewise, developers could not build homes within 3 miles of an existing dairy. Environmentalists have pushed for such buffer zones, but the bill is likely to draw criticism from local planning officials, developers and dairy operators.

The remaining bills aren't directed at farms.

Two measures target some of the biggest components of the Valley's air problem: cars and fireplaces.

In SB 708, only vehicles 45 years and older would remain exempt from the state's emissions standards. Current law shields any car or truck manufactured before 1974 from the Smog Check program, a policy that environmentalists say allows some of the worst polluting cars to stay on the road. Florez's proposal would require most cars to comply with emissions standards, exempting mostly rarely driven antique and classic cars.

Wood-burning fireplaces would be banned from all new homes under SB 706, unless they meet standards set by the federal EPA.

Florez's final air bill --SB 709 -- would add three public members to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Board. With one each appointed by the governor, the Senate Rules Committee and the Assembly speaker, the members would have to have expertise either in health care, the economy or the environment. The current board is comprised of elected county supervisors and city council members from around the eight-county region.

All of the measures will be debated in a series of hearings put on by the Senate Select Committee on Central Valley Air Quality, a panel chaired by Florez.

"We've got to draw the line somewhere, and this is where we are starting," Florez says. "We all have the same goal. We all want clean air."

Summaries of the 10 bills on air quality

SB 700: Repeals a decades-old rule in state law that has shielded farms from needing air pollution permits for diesel-powered irrigation pumps and for confined-animal feeding operations such as dairies. Requires farmers to obtain permits for those sources by Jan. 1, 2005. Mandates that local air districts adopt rules to reduce or eliminate air pollution caused by everyday farming activities, such as harvesting, tilling or discing, by Jan. 1, 2005.

SB 701: Creates a low-interest loan program to help farmers pay for new equipment or for installing measures to limit air pollution.

SB 702: Expands an existing state grant program that has helped farmers pay to replace or retrofit dirty, diesel-powered irrigation pumps. Allows grant money to be used for upgrading other farm equipment such as tractors.

SB 703: Revokes "standby" charges that agricultural customers must pay utilities to keep irrigation pumps connected to the electricity grid. Could encourage farmers to use electricity rather than cheaper, but dirtier, diesel fuel.

SB 704: Requires biomass facilities to regularly burn agricultural waste -- at least 30% of their total fuel -- to produce electricity.

SB 705: Bans open-field burning by June 1, 2005, and requires local air districts to help farmers find alternatives for disposing of farm waste.

SB 706: Prohibits most wood-burning fireplaces in all new homes starting Jan. 1, 2004, except those that meet certain U.S. EPA standards.

SB 707: Sets up buffer zones between dairies and cities by blocking new dairy construction within 3 miles of an urbanized area or school. Prevents schools or homes from being built within 3 miles of an existing dairy.

SB 708: Requires older cars and trucks to comply with state air emission standards through the Smog Check program, but continues an exemption for vehicles older than 45 years -- a concession to seldom-driven antique or classic cars.

SB 709: Adds three public members with expertise in health, economics and the environment to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Board. Members would be appointed by the governor, the Senate Rules Committee and the Assembly speaker.

Backers pumped about biodiesel

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

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A new diesel fuel may be available at Bakersfield gas pumps by the end of the year that could make the valley's smoggy skies clearer, help farmers meet strict new pollution rules, and even make dirty diesel trucks and buses smell yummy.

It may sound too good to be true, but for Joe LaStella, these are just the beginning of the benefits that will soon flow into Kern County thanks to biodiesel.

LaStella's company, Green Star Products Inc., plans to open the nation's largest biodiesel production plant in Bakersfield within two months, turning American farm and waste products into a renewable fuel. Biodiesel is a fuel made from agricultural products.

Biodiesel can be made from a variety of domestically produced vegetable products, from restaurant waste grease to the most common source, soybeans. This gives biodiesel exhaust its trademark aroma, which resembles french fries or doughnuts. It also indicates another benefit: Soybeans cleanse soil and absorb carbon dioxide from the air as they grow. Since carbon dioxide is a leading greenhouse gas, proponents say burning biodiesel can actually reduce global warming.

"It cleans our air. It cleans our soil. If you spill biodiesel, it's as biodegradable as sugar," said LaStella, president of Green Star. "We put our farmers to work and not the Arabs pumping oil for us. We should be getting off that damn foreign oil as soon as we can and we can do it right here."

A Green Star affiliate company, American Bio-Fuels, will produce biodiesel in partnership with Hondo Chemical Inc., a longtime local distributor of agricultural fertilizers and soil amendments. The plant will be located at Hondo's 36-acre facility on Stockdale Highway.

The San Joaquin Valley represents a major market for biodiesel, LaStella said, because of the area's bad air quality and large diesel-dependent farming industry.

So optimistic is LaStella about the appetite for biodiesel here that the partnership is doubling its expected production capacity. Original plans called for producing 15 million gallons per year starting this month. The startup has now been delayed two months so production can be expanded to 35 million gallons. The nation's total biodiesel output last year, he said, was 15 million gallons.

California consumes about 15 million gallons of diesel per day, LaStella said.

So the local biodiesel plant's output of approximately 100,000 gallons per day would provide less than 1 percent of the state's needs.

But with a market that large, it only makes sense to build as big a plant as possible now, LaStella said.

"Why would we want to go smaller when California needs a lot of biofuel very soon?" said LaStella, also a director of American Bio-Fuels. "No one else is thinking about a plant this size."

"The underlying philosophy is that carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere was absorbed by plants as they grew. So you've closed the loop -- you have a renewable fuel source," said Kevin Hall of Fresno, a member of the Sierra Club's Tehipite Chapter, who burns biodiesel in his 1983 Mercedes Benz 300D sedan. "It also gives you the advantage of being able to say, 'My fuel was grown in the U.S.A.,' so it's a very patriotic message, too."

Biodiesel is made by chemically breaking apart the molecules in vegetable matter. The finished product has properties similar to petroleum diesel, but without many of the harmful components that cause smog. Biodiesel, for example, has no sulfur yet it holds its own oxygen, so it burns cleaner but still produces similar power.

Compared to petroleum diesel, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, pure biodiesel emits 43 percent less carbon monoxide, 56 percent less hydrocarbons and 55 percent less particulates. Biodiesel blends easily with petroleum diesel, and a 20 percent biodiesel blend, known as B20, is becoming standard on the market. This blend emits 13 percent less carbon monoxide, 11 percent less hydrocarbons and 18 percent less particulates.

Even the B20 fuel, LaStella said, eliminates the sooty black exhaust so common to diesel engines.

The company is still working on distribution arrangements, but hopes to have biodiesel available at local gas pumps by year's end. It also is planning direct distribution to farmers, which may be the biggest market initially.

The diesel burned today by farm equipment is unregulated and contributes to a significant portion of the valley's air pollution. The state faces a federal order to eliminate the regulatory exemption for agriculture by Nov. 23. That could require farmers to replace current engines at a cost of thousands of dollars each. Instead, farmers might achieve similar air quality improvements simply by burning biodiesel, which requires no engine modifications.

"If it's available and it's price competitive -- even if it's slightly higher -- growers will switch over," said Loron Hodge, executive director of the Kern County Farm Bureau. "They've looked for

alternative fuels for a long time. If we can get them to start using biodiesel, that would eliminate a big part of the air pollution. I'm encouraged by it."

Biodiesel isn't perfect. It reduces fuel economy by about 2 percent, and increases nitrogen oxide emissions by 1 percent to 6 percent. This is no small concern, as the San Joaquin Valley already fails federal standards for this pollutant. LaStella is working to obtain regulatory approval for an additive that reduces nitrogen oxides and also improves fuel economy.

The fuel also costs at least 20 cents more per gallon than traditional diesel. But the price difference has dropped over the years as the market grows and as petroleum prices rise.

Biodiesel has proven itself in a variety of test programs around the country. For example, the city of San Jose now runs its entire fleet of garbage trucks on 100 percent biodiesel, and the Deer Valley Unified School District in Arizona has logged 4 million miles on biodiesel-powered buses. Chris Acree, an air quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said there are no rules in place now to encourage the use of biodiesel. But that could change as the fuel becomes more available and its smog-reducing properties are studied further.

"There hasn't been that much discussion about biodiesel because we don't know enough about it yet," he said.

Debris concerns piled up in Fresno

It took years for city officials to close some waste sites.

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee

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For more than a month, an immense pile of burning lumber and other debris at Archie Crippen Excavation in southwest Fresno filled the city's sky with hazardous soot and the pungent odor of scorched wood.

City officials have said they didn't realize how big Crippen's pile of construction debris had grown -- 150 yards on a side and 40 feet tall, according to initial fire reports -- until spontaneous combustion caused by heat from decomposition set it ablaze in mid-January.

But Crippen's is not the first big debris pile to have come to the city's attention. And even as city officials have plodded through the legal procedures required to shut them down, some of the others have caught fire.

Last November, Fresno firefighters spent three days extinguishing a blaze in another 40-foot-tall woodpile at Yahweh's Best Green & Wood Waste Recycling Inc. on Whites Bridge Avenue in southwest Fresno.

That pile covered an area more than 1,000 feet long and 160 feet wide and extended almost to the property lines, complicating efforts to bring the fire under control.

When the fire began, the city had known about the Yahweh's site for almost two years.

Three weeks after the November fire, crews were called back to the same site when a new fire developed in another part of the pile. That one smoldered until mid-January, giving neighboring businesses a harsh preview of what the Crippen's fire would do to the entire metropolitan area.

"It was pretty bad here, depending on which way the wind was blowing," said Royce Blackwell, branch manager of Rain for Rent, an irrigation equipment dealer just east of Yahweh's.

"You can't keep it out of the building, so people were walking around here smelling like smoke. Their eyes were burning."

Alerted by another neighbor, city inspectors visited Yahweh's in December 2000. For the next six months, they levied a series of ever-larger fines for zoning violations. Then, in July 2001, they turned over their file to the city attorney.

What happened next, according to City Attorney Hilda Cantu Montoy, is this: First, the City Council agreed -- on three occasions -- to a request from Yahweh's for time to find a new location.

The last extension was terminated by the city in January 2002. After that, the matter remained in the city attorney's office for months as officials there, believing the case was a mere zoning dispute, focused their attention on other matters.

"It was sitting here," Cantu Montoy said. "There were some vacancies in our office, and there were some other priorities that the city had given our office."

Nothing further happened until early August 2002, when the city filed a lawsuit seeking a court order to shut down the site.

Three months later, when the first fire broke out, that request was pending. City lawyers then went back to court to get an emergency order forcing Yahweh's to stop accepting waste and start removing the existing debris pile. In recent weeks, it has begun doing so.

"As soon as the sparks started, we went in immediately," Cantu Montoy said. "It's getting cleaned up."

Yahweh's owner John Flores, through his attorney, declined to comment.

Other sites have similar histories.

It took three years to reach an agreement to shut down another big waste site -- ALW Enterprises, a wood waste recycler on Golden State Boulevard south of Bullard Avenue in north Fresno. And it wasn't the city's action that resulted in the agreement; it was a lawsuit filed by a neighboring business.

Fire department records show that the ALW site had a "large compost fire" last September. But fire might have been the least of the problems at the site, which at times has received not just wood waste but scrap drywall, machinery, pipe and bulky wastes from the city's Operation Cleanup program, according to notes from city inspectors.

When the city first inspected ALW -- then called Weaver Industries Inc. -- in August 1999, it lacked required permits and site plans to reduce impacts on neighboring properties, and its zoning allowed only wood waste recycling, not the site's accumulation of drywall, machinery and other wastes.

Inspectors referred their case to the city attorney just two months later, in October 1999. Meanwhile, they prodded owner Tim Weaver to remove everything from his site but wood waste. That was accomplished in December 2000, city records note, leaving only the paperwork issues unresolved.

Records indicate that Weaver promised to submit his proposed site plan and other required documents that same month. But after that, the file contains almost weekly notes saying Weaver had not yet followed through on that pledge.

The documents were finally submitted in early May 2001. They were still under review in August, when neighbor John R. Lawson, of John R. Lawson Rock & Oil Inc., filed a lawsuit complaining that ALW's operations were producing dust that coated his fleet of trucks, and windblown trash that was landing on his property.

Last summer, after a year of litigation, Lawson and ALW reached a settlement requiring ALW to remove the remaining waste from its site.

By that time, city officials had rejected Weaver's permit application. But they had not moved to shut him down.

Timothy Jones, Lawson's attorney, said: "We felt that absent our taking legal action, the problem would not be resolved."

Officials in the city Development Department, which oversees zoning and related issues, said they pursued the Weaver case as quickly as they could by law.

"Unfortunately, the administrative process can be cumbersome," said Planning Manager Rayburn Beach.

Weaver and his attorney did not respond to requests for comment.

Officials moved somewhat faster on a third site, Recycling Unlimited, near Golden State Boulevard and North Avenue north of Malaga, but not quickly enough to satisfy all of the site's neighbors.

Fresno County health inspectors received complaints of bad odors from the site in June 1999. Their inspection found large amounts of household trash, among other debris. But odors weren't the only complaints: Neighbors said the site also harbored rats and created clouds of dust that settled over nearby buildings and vehicles.

One neighbor, John Stanfield, said the site's operators were shredding metal in a device that sent pieces flying like shrapnel. One big chunk pierced the roof of one of Stanfield's buildings.

In August 1999, after a second inspection, the county issued a cease-and-desist order. City inspectors then issued citations for creating a public nuisance and the site's lack of a city permit.

The following February, city lawyers sought a court order to shut down the site.

That order was granted in April 2000. But it wasn't until early 2001, when a new operator took over the site, that the problems finally stopped, said another neighbor, Randy Tosi, who runs a nearby scrap metal yard.

"We had a cease-and-desist order, and they let him go for another year and a half," Tosi said.

Stanfield and Tosi both said the new operator, Dennis Balakian of West Coast Waste, is an improvement over his predecessor.

"These people are doing their utmost to run a clean operation," Stanfield said. "They're always calling us to see if there is any problem."

But Tosi said he remains concerned that Balakian, who holds a contract to process material from the city's green-waste recycling effort, will be unable to control odors and other problems as his operation grows. Tosi is suing the city over its approval of a permit for Balakian's operation.

Balakian asks for patience. He said he spent "a lot more than we expected" to clean up the site after the previous operator left and he took over. He said he intends to prevent a recurrence of the earlier problems.

"You can't satisfy everybody 100% of the time, but that is our goal," Balakian said.

Of all of the city's waste sites, there is one that officials have pursued very aggressively -- Dan Green's Wood Recycling at Whites Bridge and Hughes avenues in southwest Fresno.

After complaints from neighbors about odors and visual clutter, the city sued Green in September 2000, alleging that 5 acres of his 15-acre site had the wrong zoning for his operation.

Green fumes over the city's attention to his business, which he says has not created the kind of problems that have occurred at other southwest Fresno sites such as Yahweh and Crippen.

"All this mess has been made by everybody in town except me, and yet I'm the one they're stepping on," Green said. "They sued me for no reason. But why didn't they sue Archie Crippen?"

City Development Director Nick Yovino said that 10 of Green's 15 acres have the proper industrial zoning, but five have an agricultural zoning that does not permit operations like wood waste recycling.

"I had a real problem" with Green using that portion of the site because of nearby homes, Yovino said.

Other sites might have dealt with their permit problems by pledging compliance and then failing to follow through, but Green was flatly defiant. He refused to stop using the disputed portion of his site. In addition, Yovino said, "there was a lot of public controversy" surrounding Green's operations.

But one thing Green's business has not had is a fire, according to a review of Fresno Fire Department records for the past two years.

Green says he avoids fires by limiting the height of his waste piles and the amount of time that waste is stored on his site before being ground up and sold as mulch or fuel for waste-to-energy power plants. He said other operators should do the same.

"I'm worried about my industry," Green said. "If these guys keep having fires, people are going to think we're all part of the problem."

City officials say they have recently moved to head off problems by preventing similar recycling sites from setting up in light manufacturing zones like the ones that presently house businesses like Yahweh's and most of Green's.

Under the new general plan approved last year, "industrial waste recycling operations and waste transfer stations" can locate only in the city's heaviest industrial zones. Even then, they require special permits that allow the city to prescribe safeguards against problems like those afflicting the existing sites.

Yovino said the new general plan also mandates that city enforcement workers keep an eye on potentially troublesome sites, instead of responding only to complaints, as in the past.

The new policy, Yovino said, has the potential to prevent future Crippens and Yahwehs and nip violators in the bud. But it will require a major shift in the city's handling of its zoning and code enforcement efforts.

"Now the challenge is to figure out how to do it."

Second opinion on SUVs

Study suggests the heavyweight road warriors may not be so safe after all.

Fresno Bee editorial, (Published Saturday, February 22, 2003, 4:51 AM)

Already under assault for damaging the environment and increasing American dependence on foreign oil, sport utility vehicles now face a new challenge. A recent study concludes that SUV drivers are as vulnerable and in some cases more vulnerable to traffic fatalities than drivers of mini-vans, large, midsize, compact and even some subcompact cars. When risk to drivers of other types of cars involved in collisions with SUVs are evaluated, most cars are much safer than the average SUV.

It's long been recognized that with their high center of gravity, SUVs are less stable than other kinds of cars. When a sedan takes a curve too fast it tends to slide, while high-riding SUVs tend to topple.

That makes SUVs more vulnerable to rollovers, the kind of accident most likely to result in fatalities. Rollovers account for 3% of accidents but 30% of fatalities.

In the new study, "An Analysis of Traffic Deaths by Vehicle Type and Model," researchers from the University of Michigan and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory tracked traffic death rates for different models of cars between 1995 and 1999. They counted the deaths of SUV drivers and drivers of other passenger vehicles involved in crashes, as well as the deaths of drivers of other cars with which SUVs and all other vehicles collided, to arrive at what they call the Combined Fatality Risk.

Using that model, researchers rated vehicle fatality risk, from lowest risk or least dangerous to the highest or most dangerous. None of the 15 safest models were SUVs. The safest was a Toyota Avalon, a large sedan. In all, two different large cars, three different models of minivans, six midsize cars, two compacts and one subcompact were rated safer than the first SUV on the list - a Chevrolet Suburban.

Many drivers assume, wrongly, that heft equals safety. The research shows that's not necessarily true. A poor design can make even the heaviest cars unsafe. The safest midsize and large cars,

researchers found, are as safe as the safest SUV and the average large and midsize cars are as safe as the average SUV.

Significantly, when danger to drivers of other cars involved in collisions with SUVs is factored into the analysis, SUVs are more dangerous than any other vehicles on the road.

The important news in the study for policy-makers is this: Researchers conclude that "by paying careful attention to vehicle design, smaller (and more fuel-efficient) cars can be, and indeed have been, made as safe as larger ones." Sounds like a pretty clear agenda.

Cost of smog checks to go up in Bay Area starting July 1

The Associated Press

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Bakersfield Californian

OAKLAND, Calif.(AP) - With gas prices already soaring, Bay Area drivers can expect to pay more for smog tests starting July 1, the kickoff date for tough new anti-pollution standards for the region's 4.8 million vehicles.

Bay Area consumers can expect to pay about \$4 more for the stringent Smog Check II test, officials from the California Bureau of Automotive Repair said Friday.

Since the failure rate is about twice as high for the new test as for the old one, drivers can also expect to pay an average of \$20 more for repairs needed to pass, officials said. The tougher standards have long been in effect in many other parts of the state, but last year the Legislature extended Smog Check II to include the Bay Area. Central Valley residents had complained that they were subjected to tough anti-pollution rules because smog from the Bay Area blew east. Only about one-quarter of Bay Area smog test stations have the equipment to perform the new test, so prices may initially be higher, then come down as more places offer the service, state officials said.

National Park Goes Electric

By Elizabeth F. van Mantgem

Valley Voice Newspaper Online, Week of Feb. 24, 2003

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks - For years, the National Park Service (NPS) has been cooperating with both private and public sector organizations to develop cleaner energy tactics within our parks. As a result, the NPS has become a showcase for several alternative energy technologies and minimized combustion emissions through the use of cleaner energy sources all over the country. California's National Parks offer good examples of this long-term, national endeavor to clean the air, lower noise pollution, reduce our reliance on gasoline, and educate the public, all at the same time.

The clean air effort includes our very own, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, where electric vehicles donated via Ford's TH!NK program are being put to use by bear technicians, campground rangers, and building & maintenance staff. The 2002 TH!NK program donated 500 electric vehicles to the 23 National Parks in California: 250 two-seat neighbors and 250 four-seat neighbors.

One dozen of these arrived at Ash Mountain headquarters and are used among Lodgepole, Cedar Grove, and Ash Mountain visitor sites. The electric "neighborhood" vehicles are actually replacing gasoline-powered vehicles and represent a donation of about \$96,000 dollars per dozen.

"This donation from Ford Motor Company and the National Park Foundation will help protect the environment while enhancing the visitor experience at National Parks throughout California," Gale Norton, Interior Secretary and NPF chairman, said of the program. "This type of innovative partnership is the future of National Park stewardship, and I am grateful to Ford for this gift" (American Woman Road & Traveler 2002).

The TH!NK vehicles are quiet, zero emissions, electric vehicles that can go up to 30 miles per hour. They can be fully recharged in any standard outlet in eight hours. The neighborhood model

was developed for use in niche markets, like small towns and college campuses, to spare air quality and reduce noise pollution. Their initial development began during the 1970's oil crisis, and improvements have been significant since then.

More recently, Sequoia National Park received four GEM vehicles (Global Electric Motorcars) issued through the National Park Foundation. The GEM vehicles came from the DaimlerChrysler Company in December 2002, and like the TH!NK cars, the GEMcars are zero emissions electric vehicles that will reduce air emissions and decrease noise levels in the Parks. DaimlerChrysler donated 500 GEMcars to National Parks and park partners, with 150 of the vehicles going directly to California National Parks and their in-park partners. Both Ford and DaimlerChrysler were motivated to donate zero emissions vehicles to obtain air emission credits.

As one of California's 23 National Parks, Yosemite likewise received 12 electric neighborhood vehicles from the TH!NK program. Other alternative energies used within both Sequoia and Yosemite include solar panels. Sequoia National Park uses solar power in conjunction with wind power to completely electrify an air quality monitoring station on the Mineral King Road.

Yosemite's solar roofing panels can power 10% of the park's El Portal administrative site. That's approximately 47 kilowatts during peak usage hours.

In 1999, Yosemite National Park was one of the recipients of the Green Energy Parks program, sponsored by the Department of Energy partnered with the Department of the Interior. Through the Green Energy Parks program, 12 of Yosemite's red shuttle buses were refurbished to run on propane (biodiesel) rather than on gasoline. Another California park to get biodiesel vehicles is Channel Islands National Park. A list of the many other projects completed through the Green Energy Parks program can be found on the Federal Energy Management Program (FEMP) web site, under Green Energy Parks case studies

(www.eren.doe.gov/femp/techass/green_casestudies.html).

Other NPS showcased, clean energy technologies includes the use of fuel cells for electricity, like the one in California's Golden Gate National Recreation Area, in their Kirby Cove campground.

After reviewing recommendations from a National Renewable Energy Lab (NREL) advisory team, Golden Gate Park Service personnel chose to install a hybrid fuel cell system made up of a, "960-watt photovoltaic (solar) system connected to a 25-watt fuel cell supported by 9 kilowatt-hours of battery storage." The cost of the hybrid system, "was only \$47,000, about \$113,000 less than the cost of a new, standard power line" (FEMP Focus Newsletter July/August 1999).

None of these sorts of NPS projects will singularly achieve the broader goal of significantly saving energy, but the cumulative, actual effects, as well as the influence they have on their neighbors, should make a huge difference. As Kent Bullard, maintenance supervisor of Channel Islands National Park said for Alternative Fuels News (vol.6 no.2, October 2002), "National Parks are not islands. If we minimize our environmental impact, the beneficial effects spill over into the community."

Helping change farming

Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, Monday, February 24, 2003

Freerk Boersma is visiting Merced from the University of Wageningen in The Netherlands as part of a two-year program to obtain his master's degree in animal sciences.

"I want to become a farmer. I have a dairy back home," he said last week.

Boersma, 22, is actually working with the University of California, Davis for the next couple of months.

During that time, he's spending the next few weeks in Merced County with the UC Cooperative Extension working with Dairy Farm Adviser Alejandro Castillo.

As part of his master's degree program, he's helping the university undertake a study of nitrogen emissions, mainly ammonia, on local dairies.

Essentially, using computer modeling, the study is intended to find out where nitrogen is coming from and where it's going - and whether it's causing significant air pollution.

The goal is to determine how much nitrogen goes into the dairy as feed and how much comes out in the form of ammonia in cows' urine and feces.

"We don't know if there is an ammonia emission, so we're trying to find out," said Boersma.

The concern is over how much ammonia might be getting into the air and how much might be getting into the ground.

Boersma said that once the study is completed, in about three years or so, a report will be published.

That report, he said, will likely include some advice on how dairymen can lessen environmental impacts from the nitrogen waste.

Maxwell Norton, a farm adviser with the UC Cooperative Extension, said the goal of the study is not to burden farmers with new rules.

"Our objective is to help farmers achieve the environmental goals society is setting for them," he said.

As part of the study, data will be collected from Merced County farmers who volunteer to participate in the program.

So far this week Boersma had spoken with representatives of more than a dozen dairies to explain the program.

He said most of those approached were very eager to participate.

"It's amazing," he said. "We didn't expect it."

During the next visit with farmers, Boersma and other UC representatives will begin filling out some of the paperwork for the study.

Participation for the farmers will simply be a matter of providing samples of their cows' feed and manure.

Boersma will help collect information about the cows' diets and information about the manure.

After he's done here in Merced he'll head back to Davis for a few more weeks, then back to Holland to finish his studies there.

He wants to take over his family's dairy, about 120 cows, in Friesland province.

So how does agriculture in the Valley compare to Holland?

For one thing, Boersma said that California is about 10 to 15 years behind Holland when it comes to environmental regulations.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing, according to Boersma.

"In Holland, it's a lot of paperwork," he said. "In my opinion, it's too many rules."

He also said that dairies in Holland are much smaller, with fewer workers.

A typical dairyman might take care of 60 or so cows by himself, he said.

Bill's foes protecting turf, not valley's air

'Living environment'

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

By Jessica Garry

Fresno

(Published Saturday, February 22, 2003, 4:52 AM)

I entirely agree with Sen. John Kerry's accusations against the Bush administration on environmental issues. President Bush has been so occupied with the issues of Iraq that he has lost sight of the environmental issues that affect the health of the American people.

Many of the laws written during the Clinton administration to protect our environment have been and are currently being rewritten. This is unjustified.

Here in the San Joaquin Valley we are struggling to live in the worst air conditions in the United States. This air is affecting the health of thousands, and many have acquired asthma from living here.

The government needs to focus on ways to protect its citizens and provide a safe living environment. It is the least it could do with all the tax money it receives each year. As Sen. Kerry said, we should obtain energy from such renewable sources as wind, solar, biomass and geothermal. We have sufficient technology to do so. We should use it.

[Modest Bee and Fresno Bee editorials, February, 2003:](#)

There is a measure headed to the state Legislature that would alter the makeup of the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley's air district slightly, by adding three public members to the 11 elected officials who sit on the panel. It seems innocent enough: Why not add voting members with particular expertise, including medicine and economics, to the board, as the bill envisions? But the sponsor of the bill, Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, believes the debate will be anything but innocuous. He thinks the measure will be the most controversial of 10 bills on valley air quality he is submitting.

The reasons for that belief make this debate one worth watching very closely. Opposition to the measure (Senate Bill 709) is already forming. Officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which includes San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties, have signaled their distaste. Lobbyists for various industries have done the same. They are especially opposed to giving such "public" members a vote on the board.

Critics of the district's performance have complained the board is already a creature of special interests, concerned less with cleaning up the valley's filthy air than with protecting existing highway funds and defending against any notion they regard as too radical -- which sometimes really means inimical to their own interests. Current members of the board object that their new cohorts would not be elected by the people -- but neither are the current members, at least not directly. They are appointed to the air board by the county supervisors and city councils with whom they serve.

Other defenders of the status quo argue this change would make the valley district more closely resemble the powerful South Coast air district. But why is that a bad thing? That district has used its powers to make the air better in that region. Isn't that what we want here? Specifically, the Florez bill would add a physician (appointed by the governor), an economist (by the Senate Rules Committee) and a third member (by the Assembly speaker) from the ranks of environmentalists, academics or lay members of the public. Three new votes wouldn't cause any tremors in the balance of power on an 11-person board. So why the early alarms? What is so objectionable? We'll see. And it could be instructive in making it clear who is really committed to cleaning up the air and who is out to protect turf. Watch SB 709. We will.

Letters to the Editor for Feb. 24 **Submitted by readers of The Bakersfield Californian**

'Just say no' to polluters

When they said yes to Tejon Ranch, the Kern County Board of Supervisors resembled no one so much as Ado Annie, the irrepressible character in "Oklahoma," who sang (and sang), "I'm just a gal who can't say no. I'm in a turrible fix."

The "turrible fix" is that the Feds, the state and Kern County citizens are growing ever more angry with a board that says yes to every slick-talking polluter who blows into town proposing the world's biggest dairy, industrial complex, warehouse, whatever.

The supervisors vote again and again for more air pollution (toxins, really, which is another word for poisons) because they want more low-wage jobs -- even at the price of the health of our children, our old people and, in time, the workers.

It should be a no-brainer. The health of the citizens comes first. When you do not enjoy good health, it quickly becomes clear you cannot build prosperity without it -- "healthy, wealthy and wise." Health first.

Factory-sized dairies and feedlots are named the number one air polluter by the EPA.

We possess the No. 2 dirtiest air in the nation.

Now, demand your supervisor "just say no to polluters" and by doing so, just say yes to health for my grandchildren and your children. It is simple common sense that this heavily polluted county cannot afford, dollarwise or healthwise, even one more polluter. Not another cow, warehouse or diesel truck.

SOFIEA CLERICO, Bakersfield

Air pollution politics

As many of us Kern County residents have long suspected, the politics of air pollution have a certain "through-the-looking-glass" quality to them.

For example, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District thinks that the best way to clean our air is to let air quality actually worsen, to make more time to reduce pollution and to degrade our air quality nonattainment classification from "severe" to "extreme."

Now this: When Ann Williams recently resigned from the air pollution control district's citizens' advisory committee out of her frustration that the air district's decision-makers seem deaf to the comments and criticisms of the public, Supervisor Barbara Patrick reminded her that in Kern County, things are the opposite of what they appear.

Patrick defined the role of the advisory committee this way: "The purpose of the group is to disseminate information (from the district) back to the community." Curious.

The advisory committee's actual purpose, according to the air district's own Web site, is to "advise the district governing on air quality matters."

That seems a very different thing than what Patrick has in mind. Perhaps that is because she is confusing a citizens' advisory committee with a public relations office.

But Patrick's position apparently makes sense here in Kern County, where the air pollution authorities think that the best way to clean our air is to allow us to slip into extreme non-attainment of federal air quality standards.

DOUGLAS W. DODD, Bakersfield

Letters to the Editor for Feb. 21

Submitted by readers of The Bakersfield Californian

SUV best for family

I have been reading with great amusement the controversy surrounding the oversized, gas guzzling, enviro-hating, SUV. Being that my husband and I are preparing to purchase a larger vehicle for our growing family, I wanted to weigh in on the situation.

Last time I checked, this was still the United States of America. We are not communist or socialist. We are a democratic society with laws, which if obeyed, enable a citizen of this great nation to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This brings me to my final comment on this obviously absurd argument. If my family can afford the gas, taxes, upkeep and numerous other SUV related expenses, no one has a right to tell me I can't or shouldn't own one! I'm sorry that there are people who cannot afford an SUV and must drive small, death trap cars. I'm sorry that there are wackos out there who would invoke the name of Jesus Christ in an attempt to detour someone from purchasing an SUV. However, that's the breaks.

There are no other alternatives for my growing family that will provide the same safety and comfort features of an SUV for less money. I am purchasing an SUV and I'm going to love doing it. See you on the highway!

JENNIFER ALLEN, Bakersfield

Fireplaces helpful

I wish to take issue with a Jan. 22 article in *The Californian*. The reporter was quoting Brian Todd, executive vice president of the Kern County Building Industry Association.

Todd said "a wood burning stove is so obsolete. They're gross polluters, and it's not an issue of being able to heat the house."

Does anyone remember the big dust storm in 1977, when power was out in many areas? Our electricity was out for three days (others were out five days.)

My family was able to keep warm, heat water for coffee/tea, and warm soup in our fireplace. Todd also said, "It's amazing that any are still being included with homes."

What is amazing to me is the short-sightedness of this statement, since no one knows when an occurrence of this magnitude may happen again. Please let us keep our fireplace even if we only use it in emergencies.

CATHLEEN GRIFFIN, Bakersfield