

Farmers offered engine option

EPA lets growers buy pump engines, avoid smog permit rule.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, April 11, 2003

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday announced California farmers can buy new diesel pump engines to replace their polluting older ones and avoid a controversial requirement for an air pollution permit.

Farms with the new diesel engines would be regulated like cars and trucks, according to a new EPA rule issued this week.

Federal officials like the potential for quick air-pollution reduction in the vast farmland of the San Joaquin Valley, which is one of dirtiest air basins in the country. Clean engines would reduce pollution faster than an air permit program, they said.

But environmentalists said federal officials cannot legally make such a rule, saying the Clean Air Act forbids it. They said the pumps belong in the air permit program, which provides much more future monitoring.

"We think they're trying to help farmers skirt the Clean Air Act," said lawyer Anne Harper of Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund, which last year sued the federal government to force large farms into the permit program. "We do plan to challenge this rule-making."

Farmers see the new rule as a ray of hope.

"Everybody wins when air pollution is reduced," said Kerman grower Paul Betancourt, former president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. "These are the kinds of things you want to see."

Throughout the Valley, which is home to several million acres of agriculture, large farms have scrambled to meet a May 14 deadline for the air permits.

The EPA, compelled by the Earthjustice lawsuit and settlement last year, is requiring large farms to apply for a permit under a program that tracks pollution from big sources of air pollution. For decades, state law has exempted farms from such permits.

The permits are required of sources that don't move, such as factories and power plants. Industries must account for pollution from large sources and pay fees for each ton of pollution. Authorities design pollution-reducing rules from the information provided by the industries.

But, after several weeks of consideration, the EPA decided that the new rule could help farmers and the air.

Kerry Drake, associate director of the EPA air division in San Francisco, said the rule, which will be published soon in the Federal Register, is designed to build on pollution reductions that farmers already have made in replacing diesel engines. Farmers have replaced about 2,200 of the more than 4,000 Valley farm diesel engines in the past three years.

"We want to kick-start more pollution reduction right now," Drake said.

The Sierra Club, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit that forced EPA to bring farms into the permit program, asked how the engines will be monitored.

"Sure, you get some pollution reductions right now, but for how long?" asked club member Kevin Hall of Fresno. "Will someone come back and check these pumps years from now?"

Under the new rule, such engines would not be subject to later tests or checks, federal officials said. But Drake said the state could enforce further controls on the engines in the future.

Indeed, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, said he knew the EPA rule was inevitable, prompting him to rewrite one of his air pollution bills to give the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District authority to monitor and enforce emission standards on the converted pumps.

"Farmers who do this aren't going to be able to escape the scrutiny of the air board," Florez said. "This is not going to be the Wild West."

He also said the EPA rule is narrowly focused on one source of farm pollution.

"This doesn't say anything about the dairies and confined animal farms that we are talking about in our package. This is only on-farm pumps."

Tracy sports site draws fire

Proponents insist health-risk concerns can be dealt with

By Kate Fowlie, Record Staff Writer, Thursday, April 10, 2003

TRACY -- A proposed site for a badly needed youth sports complex in Tracy continues to draw criticism from residents who worry the location poses health risks for children.

The site is a 200-acre former Federal Aviation Administration radio transmission field a mile outside town known as the Antenna Farm. Residents are anxious about the safety of an underground gas pipeline that runs through the property and the site's proximity to a natural-gas-fired power plant, a glass factory and a wood-chip-burning plant.

But city officials and youth-sports advocates say sports facilities are needed desperately in Tracy because of the area's booming growth and contend that the environmental concerns can be overcome.

The Tracy City Council and the Parks and Community Services Department plan to conduct a joint meeting May 1 to approve a design for the sports complex, parks Director Karen McNamara said.

The next step will be to submit the design plan to the federal government, which will sell the city all 200 acres for the price of 50 acres.

The property has yet to be appraised. To acquire the land, the city will need to do environmental studies, McNamara said.

"So far, the site planning we are doing shows us it is a very feasible site," McNamara said.

Carole Dominguez was among several frustrated residents who spoke out at a recent City Council meeting. She has been a vocal opponent of the site from the beginning.

"I keep attending meetings and voicing my concerns," she said Thursday. "But the city is just focusing on doing a design plan. They should be focusing on whether the site is suitable. ... I want the city to prove to me that this is a safe site for my child."

The Antenna Farm is next door to the Owens-Brockway Glass and Tracy Biomass plants, along with the 169-megawatt GWF Peaker power plant.

The **cumulative air-quality effects of the three plants need to be studied**, along with big-rig truck and commuter traffic in the area, she said.

It's just not a good location for playing fields, Dominguez said, adding that a better place would be on city-owned property on Chrisman Road.

Tracy Planning Commissioner Irene Sundberg agreed.

"I don't think we should be putting our children next to industrial plants to play," Sundberg said.

However, according to a city report, the Antenna Farm is the better location.

Though the Chrisman property doesn't have the Antenna Farm's contamination issues and already is owned by the city, its shape is awkward, and its location near 11th Street makes it a good candidate for commercial development, the report says.

The Antenna Farm also was considered for the proposed Tracy Learning Center but was rejected after an environmental-impact report in 2000.

The FAA used the land for an antenna and radio-transmission facility until 1981, and the report showed there are several environmental issues that could pose risks, including underground gas pipelines, power transformers, an underground storage tank and possible polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in the soil.

School district officials said the environmental concerns as well as the cost of building water and sewer lines in the undeveloped area made the site unsuitable.

McNamara said new environmental-impact reports will be done on the Antenna Farm site to determine what cleanup is required.

The city has set aside about \$1.8 million from developer fees to buy the land and pay for any needed road or sewer work.

The city hired a consulting firm for \$65,000 to design the park with the help of members of the Sports Alliance of Tracy, a collaboration of youth sports leagues that will run the park and lease the land from the city. The Sports Alliance will be responsible for converting the site into playing fields for soccer and baseball.

The Sports Alliance supports the location, which would help fill Tracy's need for playing fields.

Even with the new, 27-acre Tracy Sports Complex on 11th Street, the area's growth demands more sites, McNamara said.

A study projecting Tracy's recreation needs estimates that as much as 188 additional acres of parks will be necessary over the next 10 years, she said.

* To reach reporter Kate Fowlie, phone **833-1143** or e-mail [**kfowlie@recordnet.com**](mailto:kfowlie@recordnet.com)

Tracy defense depot drives into future

64-cart electric fleet saves money and environment

By Kate Fowlie, Record Staff Writer, Saturday, April 5, 2003

TRACY -- The city's defense depot is on the cutting edge of commuter technology with its new fleet of 64 electric carts. Employees use the carts instead of cars to drive around the 448-acre site on Chrisman Road.

Not only are the carts more convenient, environmentally friendly and less expensive to buy, they also are expected to save the depot about \$150,000 over the next five years, spokesman Doug Imberi said.

The San Joaquin Defense Depot, Tracy, provides the military with nonmunition supplies, such as clothing and food, and employs about 1,475 people.

It's the only depot among the Defense Logistics Agency's 22 defense distribution centers in the nation to use DaimlerChrysler's Global Electric Motorcar scooters, spokeswoman Jacqueline Noble said. Other locations use some older types of electric carts, but not to the extent that Tracy relies on the newer vehicles.

"The GEM carts are still kind of a prototype, and we are watching to see how they progress inside the (Tracy depot) to determine whether it (will) be feasible to deploy to other locations," Noble said.

Tracy depot computer specialist Terry Winter came up with the idea last year to replace many of the vans and other cars employees use to travel among the 23 warehouses at the facility. She started with a few, and the idea "just kind of mushroomed," she said. Every van or car replaced by a GEM saves the depot money, she said.

The carts are smaller than cars and thus can be driven inside the warehouses and down the narrow supply aisles. Gasoline-fueled vehicles aren't allowed inside the warehouses. In addition to saving money and being good for the environment, the zero-emission carts are silent. The GEM model is much improved over earlier versions of electric carts, which are more like golf carts, she said.

"They're great," she said. "One of the best things about these is the suspension."

Employee Richard Burton, a material examiner and identifier, agreed.

"These are a lot better, a smoother ride," he said.

The GEM carts come in two- and four-seat models, run on 72-volt batteries and can operate five to six hours on a charge. They can reach 25 mph and are legal on public streets with speed limits of 35 mph or less. They need to be recharged overnight but can be plugged into standard electrical outlets, Winter said.

The vehicles come with roofs, seat belts, windshields and wipers, removable doors, drink holders, turn signals, horns and headlights. Although the GEM Web site lists prices from \$6,995 to \$8,695, Winter said the depot paid \$4,000 to \$5,500 for each and also received some two-for-one bargains.

Visalia's example

South Valley city decides to clean up its own air quality act.

Editorial, Fresno Bee (Published Friday, April 11, 2003, 7:24 AM)

Visalia stepped up to the air quality plate this week and belted a clean base hit. The city council there voted to make every effort to replace the cars and trucks in its fleet with alternative-fuel vehicles as the need arises.

That's exactly the kind of public policy decision all of us should be encouraging from all our elected officials, wherever we live in the Valley.

Russ Webber, Visalia's public works director, put it succinctly: "We do have poor air quality, and we need to do our part." Couldn't have said it better ourselves.

In fact, that's a line that every single resident of the Valley should adopt. All of us contribute to our poor air quality, all of us suffer from it, and all of us have means within our grasp to do something to help.

For Visalia, as for all operators of vehicle fleets, public or private, the conversion will be neither quick nor easy. Alternative-fuel vehicles are, for now, more expensive than their diesel- or gas-powered counterparts -- in many cases, much more expensive. There are also logistical questions. For example, natural gas fueling stations are far less ubiquitous than gasoline and diesel stations.

But fleet operators -- and the rest of us as well, for that matter -- must remember that the cost of such measures is not just a simple comparison of sticker prices. There are other costs that must be accounted for in decisions about which fuel to use: health costs, lost wages, crop damage and

the like. Those social costs are every bit as real as the price paid for new vehicles by a public treasury or a private business -- they just get assessed and paid at different times and in different ways.

As for logistical concerns, Visalia is already on its way to solving them. The city already operates a few natural-gas powered vehicles; they are fueled at a Southern California Gas Company facility for now, and the city plans to use a station being built by the Visalia Unified School District in the future. Once a sufficient number of such vehicles are in use, the market will drive the creation of more widespread and convenient stations.

Visalia's on the right track. So are many other government agencies and private businesses. Some are slower off the mark. Residents of those areas ought to take the Visalia story to their own city councils and county boards of supervisors, and ask the pointed question: "What are we doing to follow this example?"

[Letter to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian, April 11, 2003](#)

Widen Highway 178

As a former Rio Bravo Valley resident and Highway 178 traveler for years, I urge the Bakersfield City Council to protect the future of northeast Bakersfield. There is no doubt that, unless Highway 178 is widened, we will have another fiasco like the one that we currently endure while driving through the Westchester area.

I wholeheartedly agree that before any additional projects are authorized east of Fairfax Road, prospective builders should be required to pay for the complete widening of 178 between Fairfax and the mouth of the canyon.

I am pro-growth. However, for too long city and county taxpayers have footed the bill, suffered unbearable road and traffic conditions and poor air quality because our elected officials have voted with developers for quantity versus quality, to provide more jobs. Yet, Kern County's low wages and high unemployment continue to plague us.

We can no longer afford to assume the burden of expanding and maintaining infrastructure because developers insist they can't afford it. They have made millions upon millions of dollars in profits and can well afford to pay their fair share. All builders must be required to provide funding for roads and services that will serve their developments.

I also applaud the city Planning Commission for its recent rejection of a proposed 400-plus Rio Bravo housing development until adequate infrastructure is in place. A basic element to the future quality of life and safety of families in the Rio Bravo area is the widening of Highway 178.

MARY HELEN BARRO, Bakersfield