

Farmers gather to discuss ways to comply with law, keep down dust

JULIANA BARBASSA, Associated Press Writer

Published in S.F. Chronicle and Tri-Valley Herald

Wednesday, May 26, 2004
(05-26) 00:11 PDT (AP) --

STOCKTON, Calif. (AP) -- Farmers have been given one month and 100 ways to beat down the dust that comes from their farms, but even as dozens of them gathered in the first of a series of workshops to discuss their options, environmental advocates say the proposed methods will do little to clean the air.

The farmers have a lot of work to do -- and fast. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's new rule, approved May 20, gave 8,000 farmers until July 1 to take steps to reduce the microscopic particles of dust, chemicals or other substances that come from their land and hover in the air, contributing to the particulate pollution that helps make the San Joaquin Valley's air the second worst in the nation.

"It's a little overwhelming," said Ron Harden, of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts, one of the organizations that helped put together the workshops. "All these regulations are coming down on them, and a lot of them are wondering, how do I bring this to my farm?"

Tuesday, about 80 farmers who grow everything from grapes to wheat to walnuts sat down to figure out just that -- what could they do, with their resources and their crops, to reduce the dust that can drift from their land. They went through some of the 100 options offered, like grinding prunings instead of burning them, farming at night when possible, or using organic methods.

The clean-up plan was required by a state law that also ended the decades-long exemption farmers enjoyed from federal air permit programs. The rules apply to farms with more than 100 acres and dairies with more than 500 mature cows, and aims to cut down particulate pollution by 23 percent, or 34 tons a day, by 2010.

The thousands of participating farmers were asked to choose at least one way to reduce particulate emissions in five different areas -- land preparation, harvest, unpaved roads, unpaved vehicle areas, and a last, catch-all section which included pesticide application.

To some, the talk sounded familiar. Walnut grower Christopher Locke, whose family has been cultivating a farm near Lockford since 1850, said he already avoids burning, and allows weeds to grow between rows, instead of keeping the ground bare, to avoid dust.

"We're like everyone else, we'd also like to see the Sierra Nevada every day of the year, and not just when the air is clean," he said.

But environmental advocates argue that precisely because many of the measures were already being used, the plan would not go far enough for the air district to meet its goal.

Brent Newell, an attorney with Center on Race Poverty and the Environment, asked why farmers were being asked to take just one measure in each area, instead of doing all they can to reduce pollution.

"They're not controlling all significant sources, which is what they're required to do," said Newell. "This is a matter that will have to be litigated in the future."

But some of the farmers who attended the workshop were concerned about the consequences of the new regulations, which came soon after another set of requirements they had to meet concerning water pollution. Earlier this year, farmers were asked to submit, for the first time, crop and pesticide reports, and a plan to measure pollution on water running off their land.

San Joaquin County Farm Bureau president Joe Peterson wondered whether the contributions of the \$27.5 billion industry to the state did not outweigh the cost of any particles that might drift off their fields.

"We have a safe, reliable, domestic food supply," said Peterson, after pointing out that Americans are consuming more imported produce every year. "It's not tomorrow that ag will go out of business, but there is a slow tightening of the noose. Is this an industry that we want to regulate out of business?"

Also, he said, just by keeping the land green, covered with trees instead of houses, agriculture is already helping clean the air of pollutants, ozone and particulate matter.

There may be some disagreement on who should shoulder the burden of cleaning the air, but everyone agrees that something must be done to reduce pollution in the Central Valley.

Medical research has shown links between dust-born pollution and premature deaths, heart attacks, strokes and asthma. The American Lung Association has said that inhaling these tiny particles over an extended period of time can shorten lives by one to three years.

According to the Lung Association's data, valley counties top the list of worst areas for exposure to tiny particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter, that get embedded deep into lung tissue. The top three areas for short-term exposure were Riverside County, followed by Fresno County, then Kern. When long-term exposure was measured over a one-year period, Tulare County was fourth, with Kern right behind at fifth, then Fresno County in sixth.

The workshops are hosted by Agriculture Improving Resources, a coalition of ag interests, to help educate farmers and ranchers about air quality issues and about the new rule.

[Fresno Bee editorial, May 26, 2004:](#)

Slowing for a curve

Pushing back high-speed rail bond does not change need for project.

(Updated Wednesday, May 26, 2004, 5:47 AM)

Californians apparently won't be voting in November on a bond measure to begin construction of a high-speed rail system. That's too bad. The proposal could be the best medicine for a state still facing an uneven and slow economic recovery.

The good news is that we likely won't have to wait until 2008, as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wanted. A bill to push the vote back four years has died in the Legislature, and it seems likely now that the measure will be on the ballot in 2006 instead.

Postponing the vote was probably inevitable with the state's budget in shreds and the governor and Legislature still reluctant to take serious steps to clean up the mess. That's galling for those who see the value of the high-speed rail vision for California. But voter anxieties over the budget likely would have sent the \$9.95 billion bond proposal down to defeat, and that would be too great a setback to risk.

Pushing the vote back to 2008, however, as the governor wished, would have made an expensive project even more so. Numerous environmental and engineering studies would have lapsed out of usefulness, making it necessary to repeat the work at additional cost. A vote in 2006 will finesse that problem, saving taxpayers' money.

We've noted the enormous value this project will have for the state, and in particular for the Valley, but the message bears repeating. High-speed rail means tens of thousands of good-paying construction, engineering and research jobs.

The initial link to be built would connect Fresno and the Valley with Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, and later with Sacramento and San Diego. With top speeds in the neighborhood of 200 mph, the trains would move people up and down the state more swiftly than cars and airlines can, and without the aggravations of each.

Air quality will be improved in direct proportion to the number of vehicles that are taken off the highways because passengers are riding trains instead.

Inland California will be linked, not just physically, but psychologically, with the wealthier coastal California in ways that do not exist today.

This project is precisely the sort of large vision of revitalization that Schwarzenegger likes to promote. Despite his desire to postpone the vote until 2008, we hope he will throw his considerable popularity behind the 2006 measure.

Schwarzenegger may be running for re-election that year. Building the high-speed rail system is precisely the sort of bold new step he likes to advocate for California. Why not make it a centerpiece of that campaign?