Dirty tricks on diesels - State air board should rein in the engines' manufacturers

Editorial - Published in the Fresno Bee Sunday, March 7, 2004, 5:10 AM

The state's air quality board has a chance later this month to take a major step in the direction of cleaner air in the Valley and elsewhere -- not to mention addressing a stunning example of corporate misbehavior.

The problem has to do with diesel engines that were designed to cheat on federal air quality standards. Seven manufacturers equipped the engines they built from 1993 to 1998 with "defeat devices" -- software that allowed the engines to pass emissions tests, but then let them exceed those standards when they were used on the highway.

Those emissions have been linked to asthma and other respiratory diseases in both children and adults.

The feds and the state sued, and won -- but the problem is still with us. As part of settling the suits, the manufacturers agreed to pay for a "reflash" on each of the affected engines. That basically means disarming the cheating software whenever the engines are brought in for the periodic rebuilding diesels require.

But today's diesel engines are more durable than their predecessors, and only 10% of them have been fixed to this point. That's too slow. The California Air Resources Board has a recommendation from its own staff for a new regulation that would speed up the process. The board will be meeting in Sacramento to consider the issue March 25, and could make a final decision then. What it should do is move aggressively to make the industry clean up its act, and do so inside of a year.

The problem is not trivial. The Air Resources Board itself estimates that the cheating allowed an additional 30 to 40 tons per day of nitrous oxides into the air in California. NOx is a major ingredient in ground-level ozone, or smog, as well as damaging particulate matter.

Continuing to let the diesel engine industry off the hook -- essentially a reward for cheating -- is not acceptable. This is a part of the air quality problem in the Valley and the state that we thought had been fixed. It's high time that turned out to be true.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Diesel engine makers cheated on air quality standards and got caught, but they're still getting away with it. The state must step in.

Trains Are Targeted in Smog Fight

(As more cargo leaves ports by rail, the AQMD seeks fines on dirty locomotives. Railroads tout voluntary plans for cleaner engines.)

By Miguel Bustillo - Published in the LA Times Sunday, March 7, 2004

The expanding rail yards east of Los Angeles, brimming with foreign cargo from the area's two ports, are a brawny symbol of Southern California's growing stature as one of the world's great crossroads of international trade.

But the economic bonanza is exacting a rising price. Exhaust and soot from diesel locomotives, ships and planes are dirtying the air in neighborhoods from Wilmington to Commerce, threatening to undermine decades of progress toward healthful air.

Alarmed by the procession of smoke-belching freight trains rumbling out of the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles — their number is expected to double by 2020 — Southern California's

chief smog-fighting agency is seeking approval from the Legislature to impose a fee on locomotives that do not substantially reduce smog-forming emissions.

The fee proposal is part of a broader attempt by the South Coast Air Quality Management District to strengthen its authority over a variety of pollution sources, including the principal engines of global trade — trains, ships and planes.

Last year, the Greater Los Angeles area experienced a smoggy relapse: 68 bad air days, a 28% increase from the previous year and nearly 50% more than in 2001. Last summer, air quality officials declared the first Stage 1 health alert since 1998. The public warning that the air was dangerous for everyone to breathe is one officials had thought they might never need to issue again.

"We're trying to shine a bright light on the railroads, because of the impact they are having on air quality in local communities," said Barry Wallerstein, the AQMD's executive officer, adding that the district was going to bring railroad companies "to the table, one way or another, and have a serious discussion about air pollution."

However, the legislation is strongly opposed by two powerful adversaries: Union Pacific Railroad and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.

The railroads helped scuttle a similar bill sponsored by the AQMD last year that would have allowed the agency to place a pollution fee on ships, airplanes and trains. Such a move would almost certainly be challenged in court as a violation of federal laws that give Washington oversight over railroads because of their importance to interstate commerce.

The railroads, which haul an estimated $100 billion in goods out of the region every year, note that they are responsible for a relatively small share of Southern California's air pollution problems — roughly 3% of smog-forming fumes.

And they argue that they are already doing their part to clean up the air by volunteering to bring a fleet of cleaner locomotives to the region by 2010, replacing engines as much as 40 years old. Under an agreement with the California Air Resources Board, the railroads have volunteered to bring in hundreds of newer, cleaner locomotives, each costing $2 million to $3 million.

"Railroads are dramatically better than the other choices society has to move goods around," said Kirk Markwald, a San Francisco-based consultant to the industry, adding that trains actually pollute far less than their chief competition, big-rig trucks. "It would be wrong to conclude railroads have not been doing anything."

Acknowledging that he faces an uphill battle, the AQMD's Wallerstein argued that he had no choice but to seek the power to impose the fees.

Four-fifths of the emission sources that combine to form Southern California's smog — exhaust from trains, trucks, ships and airplanes and fumes from consumer products such as hairspray — are primarily regulated by the state and federal government.

But the state air board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Wallerstein contends, refuse to set policies strict enough to meet Southern California's extraordinary air pollution challenge. Most of the AQMD's authority lies in regulating emissions from power plants, refineries, gas stations and factories.

The Clean Air Act requires the Los Angeles region to cut ozone, the main ingredient in smog, in half by 2010. Failure to do so could lead to billions of dollars in lost highway funding and other economic sanctions in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Experts

believe that the deadline will be impossible to meet unless government officials take drastic new measures.

EPA administrator Mike Leavitt has announced that the federal agency is considering requiring trains to use cleaner-burning fuel as part of a new rule to be made final this year. The EPA is also contemplating tougher engine standards for future locomotives. However, the agency has not made a final decision on either move, officials said.

Although cars, buses and trucks together emit roughly half of the area's smog-forming fumes, the railroads' contribution is not negligible. Every day, trains in Southern California spew 36.5 tons of nitrogen oxide, one of the building blocks of smog — more than the area's 100 largest factories, power plants and oil refineries combined.

Diesel locomotives also emit nearly 2 tons per day of particulate matter — tiny airborne specks of dust and soot that can become lodged in the lungs and lead to respiratory problems. An AQMD study concluded that 70% of the cancer risk related to air pollution in the four-county area stemmed from diesel engine exhaust, making reductions a major public health priority.

Although railroads may be more environmentally efficient, "they are really losing their edge, because trucks are getting cleaner," said Diane Bailey, a scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

In Commerce, where working-class neighborhoods are only feet from bustling Union Pacific and Burlington Northern rail yards, residents who have complained for years about noise and flashing lights are now blaming smoke and soot from the trains for increased respiratory illnesses.

In response to reports that trains belching diesel exhaust run idle for hours at a time near open residential windows, local air district officials have begun citing the train companies. But community activists say the railroads have made few changes. The trains, they say, often just move down a few blocks and idle beside someone else's house.

"Interstate commerce should not supersede community health, but that's the way it seems to work," said Angelo Logan, who grew up in Commerce on a street beside a rail yard and returned to work as an activist with East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice. "Maybe the cumulative impact of the trains is not as bad as the trucks. But when you live near these trains, it's like having a thousand trucks by your house. The impact is huge."Noting that the railroads volunteered six years ago to replace the oldest, dirtiest engines, Mark Stehly, an assistant vice president on environmental issues for Burlington Northern Santa Fe, said: "We have agreed to things that others have not agreed to do."

"We think our contributions are very positive. I will leave it to others to say, 'Where are the trucks and ships?' "

Officials with the state air board predict that the agreement will reduce the railroads' air pollution by 67%.

Catherine Witherspoon, the board's executive director, said she didn't think it fair to criticize the 1998 replacement agreement "as lacking a substantive commitment by the railroads, because it is a big commitment. It's a two-thirds reduction."

But AQMD officials dispute that claim, asserting that, in reality, the replacement will only cut emissions a little more than half, because overall train traffic will grow substantially by 2010.

The AQMD wants the railroads to begin replacing diesel engines with hybrids and natural gas trains, and contends that the move could easily cut emissions 50% more than would be accomplished under the railroads' plan.

The railroads' proposal, negotiated behind closed doors with the state air board, has also drawn criticism from environmental groups, which cite it as a classic example of railroads' sidestepping tough regulations and setting their own terms.

Because the plan is not a government regulation, environmental groups cannot sue to enforce it if the freight companies fail to carry it out. Moreover, the railroads can walk away from the proposal if the state attempts to impose any new restrictions on the industry between now and 2010.

The EPA had been contemplating tougher regulations on the railroads before the freight companies made the voluntary concessions. The companies later employed a similar strategy in Houston, which has a smog problem nearly as severe as that of Los Angeles, by agreeing to a voluntary reduction pact with Texas officials.

The railroads "are smarter and smoother than others in the environmental arena, and they have been more successful" in shaping regulations to their satisfaction, said David Jesson, an EPA air expert based in San Francisco.

Valley residents help spare the air

By (Hanford) Sentinel Staff - Published Saturday, March 6, 2004

HANFORD - Air quality this winter showed progress Valleywide, but a consistently low pollution level was found here in Kings County, according to Valley air quality officials.

While the season's rainfall helped clean the air, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District gives credit to the "outstanding cooperation of Valley residents this winter in voluntarily curtailing their fireplace and woodstove use."
During the 60-day period of the mandatory wood-burning rule that ended last Sunday, Kings County only had one day when wood burning was discouraged, the SJVAPCD said.

This winter, residents were asked to check air quality conditions before lighting fires and were discouraged from burning when the Air Quality Index was between 101 and 150.

"Valley residents refrained from burning this winter, not only on days when no burning was allowed but also on days when they were discouraged from burning," said Dave Crow, the district's air pollution control officer. "Their actions definitely helped improve the Valley's wintertime air quality. People saw the value of not burning and that has allowed Valley residents to breathe easier."

Eight counties, including Kings County, fall under the jurisdiction of the district. A mandatory ban was called for Nov. 18 in Fresno and Kern counties and on Jan. 23 in Fresno County.

Supervising meteorologist Evan Shipp said the district had expected 20-25 days of mandatory curtailment this year based on previous years.

"That has been our experience over the past three years of measuring," Shipp said. "This year was difficult to forecast because particulate levels were only slightly above health standards. In previous years, the highest winter AQIs were greater than 200."

This year, the highest levels of pollution measured by real-time monitors were 155 in Modesto, followed by 154 in Bakersfield and 153 in Fresno, Shipp said.

Preliminary analysis indicates people stopped burning when a curtailment was announced, Crow said.

"Perhaps the most significant aspect of this measure is the 'burning discouraged' calls made by the district," Crow said. "It is clear from the public's response to this advisory that AQI levels of 151 or higher were averted, thus reducing the number of expected prohibitions. It is the kind of public awareness and action that will bode well for improving wintertime air quality."

The 25,000-square-mile San Joaquin Valley is among eight areas in the country considered seriously out of compliance with federal standards for particulate matter - microscopic soot found in burning smoke and other aerosols.

In an attempt to meet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's emission standards, the district this year placed a ban on wood burning - which significantly burdens Valley air quality - hoping to reduce wintertime air pollution.

It limits the number of wood-burning devices allowed in new residential developments and requires any woodstove or fireplace insert left in a home when sold or transferred to meet 1990 EPA emission standards.

Big engines are back
By RICHARD T. ESTRADA (Modesto Bee - Friday, March 5, 2004) (front page)

There was a time Ron Panelli would fiddle with car engines in hopes of increasing their speed.

"When I was in high school, it was all about who had the fastest car," the 45-year-old Panelli said. "Everyone wanted the big, powerful engines to get that speed."

That was in the early 1970s, before the government crackdown on fuel-wasting, air-polluting vehicles forced manufacturers to limit horsepower.

Technology, however, is paving the way for powerful engines to once again rumble through city streets and climb steep hills.

These engines produce greater horsepower, boosting both speed and pulling power of vehicles.

While fuel efficiency has improved from the gas-guzzling engines of the 1970s, today's engines still consume gas at a high rate.

And despite rising gasoline prices that could top $3 a gallon, demand for these big engines remains high.

Automakers installed large V-8 engines in 29.1 percent of passenger vehicles built in North America for the U.S. market last year. The figure has risen each year since 2000, when V-8s went into 25.3 percent of autos, according to Ward's Automotive Reports. Small, 4-cylinder installations fell from 27 percent to 25.3 percent in the four-year span.

Many V-8s power sport utility vehicles and heavy pickups that tow trailers, boats and other equipment. Others increase acceleration rates -- and pump up the engine volume -- of Mustangs, Corvettes and other muscle cars, providing ear-popping bursts of speed from a dead stop.

"The new V-8s get better gas mileage and pass environmental rules, which is why they're popular," said Panelli, who owns Oakdale Pet Station and recently upgraded the engines in both vehicles he uses for hauling.

New V-8s can boost gas efficiency 15 percent to 50 percent, depending on if they are replacing a V-6 or an older V-8.

Panelli pointed out that "the other big change for me is that I want a larger engine for power, rather than just driving faster."

He's not alone in that desire.

Across the country and in the Northern San Joaquin Valley, more drivers are looking for more power from a car or truck.

"There's always a desire for speed, but we're seeing more people looking at powerful trucks to haul a boat or horse trailer," said Danny Perez, the sales manager at Central Valley Nissan in Modesto. "Improvements in technology make it possible, keeping engines within environmental standards the government sets."

Nissan answered the call with its 2004 Titan, a 5.6-liter, V-8 producing 305 horsepower. Its small trucks typically use 3.3-liter, V-6 engines with 210 horsepower.

"With the Titan, you can haul 9,500 pounds, so it's no problem putting a boat and then some behind it," Perez said. "Our smaller trucks can haul 5,000 pounds."

Speed, power can be costly

The price of power can range from $500 for minor adjustments in a shop to $10,000 for a tricked-out engine and accessories.

Environmental advocates, however, say making vehicles more powerful is the wrong approach. They want U.S.

automakers building smaller engines.

"It's unfortunate Detroit confuses horsepower with quality. It's why more and more Americans are buying imported vehicles," said Daniel Becker, director of the global warming and energy project for the Sierra Club.

One of the popular V-8 designs has the Hemi, so-named because of the hemispherical shape of its combustion chamber. Sought by hot rodders in the 1960s because it could be modified to produce more power, it's a common term today because of ads used by Chrysler to push its truck sales.

Chrysler executives say the Hemi produces more power and achieves greater fuel economy. It introduced the newest version of the Hemi in 2002 on heavy- duty trucks, then began offering it as an option on the Dodge Ram 1500 pickup and Durango SUV.

More than 50 percent of buyers choosing new Ram 1500s and Durangos opt for Hemi versions, a trend that encouraged Chrysler to offer it in two upcoming cars -- the Chrysler 300C sedan and Dodge Magnum sport wagon.

Automakers such as Subaru and Volvo also are installing engines with powerful components, such as superchargers and turbos, to add punch to their cars.

Some alterations are made by the manufacturer, before the engines are built, but others are done by car owners and engine technicians after purchase.

"Putting in larger cams allows more air and fuel into the engine," said Steve Borja, owner of Performance Dyno Tuning in Oakdale. "The cam shaft is the heart of the engine. It provides more power and more sound."

Fast and powerful

Borja is revving up engines on everything from "soccer mom" minivans to classic Mustangs. The most common call is to create a vehicle that can go fast and still haul a heavy load.

"Computers have allowed us to greatly improve fuel injection systems from the 1980s," Borja said. "That triggered a series of improvements that are making it possible to have high-powered engines that are also efficient."

Panelli, for example, had a stock 454 cubic-inch motor producing 200 horsepower in his 1985 Chevy four-door truck. He moved up to a 502 cubic-inch that produces 450 horsepower.

Both have computer-controlled carburetion, but the 454's lower compression allowed it to burn lower-octane gas. His gas mileage has climbed from 8 mph to 14.

While power is often a priority, some valley drivers say it's always nice to get extra speed.

One reason Gary Riley bought his 2003 Ford Lightning pickup was its supercharged factory engine. He liked a standard truck for driving in town, but wanted the option of taking it out to a race track to run quarter-miles.

"We made some changes to the engine so it runs an 11-second quarter-mile, but I can still use it to haul the boat to the lake," said Riley, who lives in Ballico. "Now I've got the best of both worlds."

Study: California's air quality improves, but trouble spots remain

Associated Press- Published in the Turlock Journal and Modesto Bee Saturday, March 6, 2004

DIAMOND BAR - California's air quality has improved since 1990 despite increases in population and vehicle traffic, which is the major cause of air pollution, a new study found.

The study's authors credited tighter anti-pollution standards and improved technology - such as cleaner burning vehicle engines - for the improvements. But they noted that several trouble spots remain.

The study was conducted by the staff of the California Air Resources Board with help from AQMD staff, and was presented in January to the ARB, which regulates air quality statewide.

Air pollution regulators in the San Joaquin Valley took the unusual step in December of asking the EPA to put it in the worst category for air pollution as a last resort to meet federal air standards and avoid expensive sanctions. Officials said that volunteering for the extreme polluter category would prevent the federal government from taking over the cleanup and preserve the Valley's oversight.

The study also found that there were too many particulates remaining in several areas, including San Joaquin Valley, Coachella Valley, Owens Valley and the Los Angeles Basin.

The regions have already missed a 2001 deadline to reduce their particulates, and some are negotiating for more time, Fasano said. San Joaquin Valley was ordered to reduce particulates by 5 percent a year until the region is in federal compliance.

The study measured particulates that are the size of 10 microns or smaller - small enough to slip into the respiratory system. A micron is one-1,000th as long as a millimeter, meaning a thousand particulates can fit on the head of a pin.

The study focused on the amount of ozone and particulates in the air. Ozone is one of the components of smog, and particulates of diesel soot, sulfate, nitrate, ammonium and other substances can enter the bloodstream through the lungs, creating or exacerbating cardiovascular and respiratory problems.

Regions that had too much ozone in the air to meet federal standards for hourly average air quality included the Los Angeles Basin and the desert to the southeast, Imperial County, the San Joaquin Valley, and the Sacramento area.

The Los Angeles Basin and the San Joaquin Valley have until 2010 to meet the federal standard because they have the most serious problems, according to Lisa Fasano, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The southeastern desert has until 2007, and Sacramento until 2005.

Imperial County is required to improve as quickly as possible, Fasano said.

Missing the deadline could result in a loss of billions of dollars in federal highway money, as well

as other measures, such as new regulations on building.

The study said that the Los Angeles Basin, which has the most polluted air in the country, showed signs that steady improvement since the late 1990s may be coming to an end, or even reversing.

In 2003, Los Angeles had its first stage-one smog alert since 1998. By comparison, there were 121 stage-one alerts in 1977.

AQMD senior meteorologist Joseph Cassmassi said unusually hot weather for the last two years contributed to the recent smog problem. The high temperatures cause ozone-forming pollutants to evaporate faster into the air, and contribute to stagnant air that holds pollution in place.

“Weather has the greatest influence on smog levels from day to day,” Cassmassi said, adding that this is expected to be a milder year, which would be good for air quality.

Diesel cleans up its dirty act, but is it enough?

By Greg Schneider -The Washington Post (Published in the Modesto Bee - Friday, March 5, 2004)

The '70s TV shows return as big-budget movies and now the auto industry is pushing a technology that's been around the block a few times: Diesel.

The last time most Americans gave diesel a try, it was smoky and loud and had no acceleration. Diesel was an 18-wheeler clattering up a hill, a 1979 Cadillac with black exhaust stains on the back. U.S. carmakers eventually quit offering diesel engines except in the biggest pickup trucks.

Now several companies are bringing them back, hoping to do for diesel power what the Atkins diet has done for red meat -- turn public perception on its head. They are pitching diesel as not only good for drivers, but good for the planet.

"This is really a conservation technology," said Allen Schaeffer, director of the Diesel Technology Forum, an alliance of automakers, engine companies and fuel suppliers.

Because of advances in electronics, diesel vehicles now do a far better job of controlling how fuel burns in the engine, eliminating much of the smoke and noise of 20 years ago. That allows some of diesel's good qualities to shine: It gets 20 percent to 40 percent better fuel economy than gasoline power. Diesel engines tend to be far more durable than gasoline engines, routinely lasting for many hundreds of thousands of miles. A diesel has tremendous low-end power, which is good for hauling boats or jumping off the line at a stoplight.

What's more, the federal government has mandated that low-sulfur diesel fuel be available in the United States by 2006, which experts say will help diesel engines meet strict air pollution guidelines that go into effect in 2007.

"Historically, agencies concerned about the environment have not been big fans of diesel, but the new technology that's emerged in the last few years has actually made us big supporters," said Jeffrey R. Holmstead, Environmental Protection Agency assistant administrator in charge of programs to control air pollution. EPA projections show that if diesels accounted for a third of all vehicle-miles traveled in the country by 2020, the nation could save a million barrels of fuel a day and consumers could save more than $20 billion per year.

In Europe, where tax breaks make diesel fuel much cheaper than gasoline, more than 40 percent of all new vehicles are

diesel-powered -- more than double the amount of just five years ago. European carmakers would like to expand that market into North America, but they are worried that Japanese rivals Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. are cutting them off with a different type of alternative power technology -- gasoline-electric hybrids.

So the Europeans are making their move. In April, Mercedes-Benz plans to offer its first U.S. diesel product since 1999, the E-320.

This fall, DaimlerChrysler AG plans to begin selling a diesel version of its Jeep Liberty SUV. And Volkswagen AG, which has been offering diesel-powered passenger cars here since 1996, this year plans to introduce diesel versions of its Passat sedan and its Touareg SUV.

If those products do well, more will probably follow.

DaimlerChrysler sells diesel versions of its PT Cruiser, Jeep Grand Cherokee and minivans in Europe, and could bring any or all of those to the United States if the Liberty catches on, said Jim Weidenbach, manager of small diesel applications at the Chrysler Group.

"The big problem is going to be consumer acceptance," said George Peterson, president of AutoPacific, an auto industry consulting firm in California. "The experience most Americans have had with diesel passenger cars is negative."

That experience was shaped during the energy crisis of the late 1970s, he said, when General Motors Corp. slapped diesel engines into some of its cars and did not engineer them well. Today, surveys show that about 2 percent of consumers are interested in diesel products, Peterson said.

"Americans aren't going to go with diesel," said Art Spinella, who tracks auto consumer attitudes for CNW Market Research in Oregon. "Every time we do a survey of alternatives to gas engines, diesels come up at the bottom. It's got a bad reputation and GM is to blame."

GM still puts diesel engines in its Chevrolet Silverado heavy-duty trucks and in nearly half of its vehicles sold in Europe.

It takes years for gas savings to offset the higher up-front cost of buying a diesel vehicle, said Charlie Frees, GM's executive director of diesel engineering. And though diesel engines are far cleaner today than 20 years ago, they have a hard time meeting U.S. emissions standards, which are stricter than in Europe.

Diesel engines put out less carbon dioxide than gasoline engines, but emit more soot. The advent of cleaner diesel fuel in 2006 will help fix that, but engineers are still figuring out how to make diesel engines clean enough for the tough federal air standards that will hit in 2007.

District considering smog-fighting measure

MATT WEISER, The Bakersfield Californian - Published Monday, March 8, 2004

A groundbreaking proposal to regulate air pollution caused by housing and commercial development gets its first airing in a series of workshops starting Thursday. The so-called "indirect source rule" aims to reduce pollution from vehicles and consumer products that is linked to new development. It recognizes that every new home, minimart and office causes a certain number of vehicle trips and, as a result, air pollution.

The rule is proposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which would become the largest air basin to adopt such a rule. The district tried a similar rule about 10 years ago, but it was crushed by opposition from developers.

This time, the district is required to adopt the rule for two reasons: it is already part of the district's federally approved plan to control particulate pollution; and a new state law sponsored by Sen. Dean Florez, SB 709, requires the district to adopt the rule.

Clean-air advocates say the rule is vital to control air pollution caused by urban growth, one of the last unregulated smog sources.

"There's a significant amount of growth occurring throughout the entire air basin, and some of that growth is offsetting some of the reductions we're getting from traditional sources (such as factories)," said Jennifer Barba, an air quality specialist in charge of developing the rule for the district.

The rule could change the way housing subdivisions and commercial projects look and function.

Developers would be required to quantify the pollution their projects will cause, then offset that pollution by paying a fee, changing the project to discourage vehicle trips and other polluting activity, or both.

Physical changes to a project could range from energy-efficiency measures and planting more trees, to building a mixed-use project that allows people to walk to work and shopping, or including more sidewalks and paths.

Any fees paid under the program would be spent on other clean-air projects. For instance, the money could purchase clean-fuel vehicles for city fleets, subsidize public transit or build regional bike paths.

The air district must prove a measurable connection between the fees charged and the pollution reductions purchased. Studies will be done during the rule-development process for this purpose, and it's something critics are watching closely.

Local governments are also concerned about how the rule will fit with their own development codes. And they want assurances that fees paid locally get spent on local clean-air projects.

At the moment, the air district plans to oversee the rule and allocate all the money it generates.

But Barba said the district may grant interested cities and counties power over parts of the rule.

"It's a new animal that's being proposed," said Ted James, Kern County planning director. "I'm a little skeptical just watching to see that there's good, sound science behind this. Show me that it's not redundant. Show me there's going to be measurable benefits for our air quality situation. That's critical to getting local buy-in."

The air district anticipates adopting the rule in October, and it would take effect two months later.

Supervisors expected to OK controversial development

The Bakersfield Californian - Published - Monday, March 8, 2004

County supervisors are slated to approve a controversial northwest housing development at Tuesday's board meeting. Some 412 homes planned for the southeast corner of Hageman and Heath roads have drawn complaints from residents in the area as well as the Sierra Club.

Would-be neighbors are concerned about several issues, including housing density at the 160-acre site.

The developers, Hageman Northwest LP, are seeking a zone change that would allow quarter-acre lots on most of the land.

Opponents say existing homeowners who have horses and other large animals will be the target of complaints from lot-bound newcomers.

They're also concerned about increased traffic problems and funding for new schools.

The Sierra Club objected to the project because of air pollution concerns, although the developer agreed to mitigations to keep air quality impact at zero.

Supervisors are also set to ratify extra back pay for four sheriff's commanders.

Almost $32,000 of extra pay was apparently erroneously given out between 2000 and 2003 for after-hours calls, SWAT team requirements and other duties. The pay was discontinued last September when the Sheriff's Department realized the extra pay hadn't been authorized.

Also on Tuesday's agenda:

* An agreement with the Buttonwillow County Water District to improve its water system for about $294,000. Some pipes in the current system have dead ends where stagnant water pools and allows bacterial contamination.

* A resolution to support a proposed ballot initiative regarding workers' compensation reform.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors will meet at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesday at the county administrative center, 1115 Truxtun Ave.

Cities and county talk transportation

By Midway Driller staff
The Taft Midway Driller - Published Friday, March 5, 2004

A sub regional committee meeting for the Kern Council of Governments, the regional transportation planning agency for Kern County, will be held in Taft on March 11.

The meeting will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. in the Taft Civic Center council chambers.

The KernCOG western sub regional committee includes the mayors of Taft and Maricopa and Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson.

The committee will consider transportation issues involving western Kern County.

The committee will hear staff reports about planned transportation projects for the area.

The public is invited to attend and the committee will take questions and comments at the meeting.

The sub regional committee will be able to make recommendations to the full KernCOG board.

For more information, call 861-2191.

Group plans suit over ag pesticides

The Bakersfield Californian
CHRISTINA VANCE, Californian staff writer (Published - Friday, March 5, 2004)
[entire article available only via paid subscription to archives…]

Local residents are threatening legal action to force the state to discourage the use of harmful pesticides.

State policy encourages voluntary reduction in the use of pesticides and fumigants that contribute to smog.

But Brent Newell, an attorney for the Shafter-based Association of Irritated Residents, said that program just isn't working.

"Under a voluntary program, it's really just a state of non-regulation rather than anything else," Newell said Thursday.

Fuel formulation freedom vital

Editorial - The Bakersfield Californian - Published Sunday, March 7, 2004

In light of near-historic high prices for gasoline, air pollution fighters must take a new look at an old claim made by former Gov. Gray Davis. He had sought a waiver from federal rules on cleaner burning fuels that all but dictate the use of gasoline blended with ethanol -- a grain alcohol that is widely perceived as a subsidy for Midwest corn growers and processors.

The need to rethink fuel formulations is especially acute with a rapid and probably long lasting rises in gas prices in California. In one 24-hour period, per-gallon costs jumped 11 cents.

Numerous causes are cited for the increase, but one certainly is that the state's unique blended fuels make it difficult to seek out-of-state supplies when local markets are in short supply.

Davis and others do not dispute the need for oxygenates to help clear California's air, they merely sought the freedom to formulate such gasoline in other, safer and cheaper ways.