S.J. wineries fear tougher smog rules (Gases from fermentation targeted)

By Audrey Cooper - The Stockton Record - Friday, March 5, 2004

For about a week each year, two steel tanks behind The Lucas Winery in Lodi hold a mix of grape skins and juice that ferment into a tasty zinfandel.

A 4-foot hole atop the tanks allows carbon dioxide, ethanol and other gases to escape during fermentation. It's a key step before the wine goes into barrels to age at the small, family-owned winery.

But San Joaquin Valley air regulators say the tanks are helping produce more than a few thousand gallons of wine. They're also contributing to late summer smog, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The air district is contemplating new rules that would require winemakers to put emissions controls on the large fermenting tanks. The rules, still under consideration, could be approved later this year. If approved, the rules likely would be the first of their kind in the country.

Winemakers from around the Valley say they doubt the region's wineries play any significant role in air pollution. They question the air district's estimates of the amount of smog-causing emissions caused by wine fermentation, and they say forcing wineries to buy expensive emissions-control systems could put most vineyards out of business.

David Lucas said European researchers studied emissions from wine decades ago. California State University, Fresno, also looked at the fermentation tanks. In both cases, scientists discovered wine wasn't the problem, Lucas said

"The problem is cars and trucks. I think (the air district) will eventually find out the wine problem isn't as big as they think it is," he said.

Capping the steel tanks also could make it difficult or impossible for Lucas to work the juices by hand, which he usually does three times a day during fermentation.

"It could dramatically affect our ability to make wines as we do in our traditional style. Then again, what we still have to find out is whether it is really a problem," he said.

George Heinen, a supervisor for rule development at the air district, said wine fermentation takes place when Valley air quality already is suffering -- August, September and October.

According to the air district, fermentation at the Valley's 109 wineries accounts for about 1,120 tons of emissions each year. That's less than 1 percent of the Valley's smog-related emissions, but the bulk of the emissions occur over just a few weeks after the grape harvest.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told the air district to pursue new rules for wine tanks. The EPA plans soon to give the Valley an "extreme" status for its smog problem, so any possible cuts in emissions have to be examined. The air district isn't allowed to regulate tailpipe emissions, a role reserved for the EPA.

"We're really breaking ground here, because we have to look at all (pollution) sources. We think that if we can find control measures that are reasonable and cost-effective, we could get good reductions from wineries," Heinen said.

Few winemakers have faith they'll be able to find inexpensive ways to cut emissions.

Brad Alderson, general manager of Robert Mondavi's Woodbridge Winery, has several hundred fermenting tanks used to make red wine. Some emissions-control systems would cost about $4 million for every 40 tanks, he said.

"So we're talking millions and millions of dollars per winery for about an eight-week period in the fall. That pretty much puts me out of business if they really go that way," Alderson said.

Heinen said the air district would examine whether regulating wineries would be financially worthwhile.

There may be some ways wineries can find to help clean the air in other parts of their operations, he said.

"We're really doing something new here, so we want all the information we can have so that we can make some informed decisions," Heinen said.

Threat to ozone a bigger threat to workers

Commentary: By Dick Meister - The San Francisco Chronicle - Tuesday, March 9, 2004

Methyl bromide is one of the most damaging of the pesticides that increasingly threaten the Earth's ozone layer -- so damaging that an international treaty, the Montreal Protocol, has ordered it banned worldwide as of next year. Yet the Bush administration is seeking to exempt many of the pesticide's U.S. users from the treaty.

The international community's main concern is that depletion of the Earth's protective ozone layer subjects people everywhere to the possibility of skin cancer, cataracts and other ailments caused by exposure to ultraviolet radiation.

That's true, certainly. But of more immediate concern should be the severe effect the pesticide is having on the hundreds of thousands of farmworkers and other Americans who are regularly exposed to methyl bromide because of its widespread use in agriculture and other industries.

U.S. growers of strawberries, grapes, ornamental plants and more than 100 other crops spray methyl bromide on the soil to kill insects and weeds and use it to fumigate produce shipped to and from foreign markets. It is used in flour mills and grain storage facilities, and to treat golf course sod and rid warehouses and other buildings of pests.

As any user of methyl bromide will tell you, it is a very effective pest killer. But as any public health worker will also tell you, the pesticide is a nerve gas that can do severe damage to the brain and nervous systems of those exposed to it, and to their lungs, kidneys, eyes and skin, according to the Environmental Defense Fund and others. It can cause birth defects. It can kill.

At the least, victims experience trembling, vomiting, blackouts, pounding headaches, fainting, nausea, swollen lips and tongue, unusual muscle pain, inflamed skin, fatigue and numbness in their hands, feet, arms and legs. Those affected have included not just people working directly with the pesticide, but others who have been exposed as it drifted from fields and buildings that were being sprayed. That has included children in nearby schools and residents of nearby homes.

Effective, safe alternatives to methyl bromide are available. But growers complain they would cost more and put them at a competitive disadvantage with foreign growers who use poorly paid laborers rather than pesticides to control weeds and pests. That's right, U.S. growers -- who, as the United Farm Workers union can attest, pay their workers an average of less than $8 an hour, or less than $10,000 a year, and provide few, if any, fringe benefits -- are complaining about competition from cheap foreign labor as an excuse to subject their miserably paid workers to poison.

There is another bit of fine irony here in that growers of the tobacco that poisons many Americans and millions of others throughout the world are among those arguing for the continued use of the pesticide. Administration officials will make their formal request to exempt growers of tobacco seedlings and other users of methyl bromide from the ban at a meeting this month of parties to the treaty that in 1987 set a timetable for outlawing substances that harm the ozone layer.

The administration demands threaten to all but undo the genuine progress that has been made since the Montreal Protocol was signed. In those 17 years, use of the pesticide has dropped by 70 percent worldwide. But the U.S. action, the first by any country to try to upset a decision to phase out a substance and increase its production, undoubtedly would cause a surge in worldwide use of methyl bromide. It would seriously undermine the treaty and reverse what has been a steady and hopeful trend toward a cleaner and safer environment for everyone.