

Sprawl heads for the hills

Study warns of climbing population in foothills.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

The Sierra Nevada foothills, home to California's sensitive oak woodlands, are the next frontier for damaging urban sprawl, a new study warns today.

By 2040, foothills population could more than triple from 665,000 to 2.4 million, says the Sierra Nevada Alliance, an advocacy group based in South Lake Tahoe. That's almost the population of San Diego.

Madera, Mariposa and Fresno counties already are among the fastest-growing foothill areas, all expanding by 20% or more between 1990 and 2000. They are among the 20 counties along the 400-mile range where thoughtful planning must precede the projected growth, said alliance officials.

"The foothills are a very attractive place," said alliance board President Terry Manning, who lives in the Tulare County foothill community of Springville. "I fully understand why people like it. But we're in danger of loving it too much."

The alliance today will release the study "Planning for the Future: A Sierra Land Use Index," outlining the threat of population growth to everything from the state's water supply to rare animal and plant species. Recommendations include keeping small town centers separated by rural countryside as well as providing and restoring natural areas. The report also supports continued farming, ranching and forest activities.

"We don't want to lock people out," said alliance executive director Joan Clayburgh. "But the more pavement you get, the more oil you get, and the more pollution you get. About 65% of California drinking water comes from the Sierra, and it needs to be protected."

The oak woodlands of the Sierra help filter water from the annual snowpacks. The woodlands also provide corridors for animals migrating to and from the high Sierra as seasons change.

The Sierra foothill belt, roughly from 500 feet to 4,000 or sometimes even 5,000 feet in elevation, contains the most diverse collection of creatures and plants in the range. The blunt-nosed leopard lizard, riparian brush rabbit and the winter-run chinook salmon are among the protected species.

Of all the foothill counties, the alliance study said, Fresno County has the highest number of endangered and threatened species — 15.

Alliance officials said only a tiny fraction of foothill land is protected from development. And many area towns are within commuting distance of rapidly growing cities in the Central Valley, such as Fresno or Sacramento.

In Madera County, officials are planning for growth, said Supervisor Gary Gilbert, whose district includes large parts of the fastest foothill expansion in the Sierra between 1990 and 2000.

During that decade, eastern Madera County's foothills population grew by almost one-third, from 19,551 to 25,734, the alliance study said.

"We should have been talking about this in the 1980s before all this growth started," Gilbert said. "This is some of the best animal habitat in the world, and you're above the fog and below the snow. It's popular, but how much growth can we put in these areas?"

Study projects Sierra growth will skyrocket

Environmentalists worry sprawl will go up the hill

By Don Thompson, Associated Press

in the Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, June 21, 2005

SACRAMENTO - The population of the Sierra Nevada could more than triple in the next 35 years, threatening many of the mountain range's Gold Rush-era towns with sprawl, gridlock and pollution, according to a report released today.

Much of the 400-mile-long range is designated as national forest, parkland or wilderness. But it also holds plenty of private land where development could change the face and feel of the mountains, warns the Sierra Nevada Alliance, a 12-year-old coalition of more than 60 environmental organizations.

About 600,000 people live in the 20 California and three Nevada counties that divide the Sierra. But that population is projected to grow to 1.5 million to 2.4 million by 2040.

Poor planning for that growth invites the problems that have plagued more populous areas, warns the alliance in the first of a planned series of reports on the health of the range's natural resources.

Seven of the 20 California counties have general plans more than 10 years old, although five of them are expecting updates. But fewer than a third have plotted areas that deserve protection from development, and most have no conservation plans.

"Population in and of itself really isn't a problem. It's how well we plan for it," said Joan Clayburgh, the alliance's executive director. "Ten years ago, they weren't expecting all these population increases."

State Assemblyman Tim Leslie, R-Tahoe City, fears overburdening private property owners with restrictions on developing or altering their land. That's one reason he backed this year's creation of a Sierra Nevada Conservancy charged with protecting resources, promoting tourism and enhancing recreation in the area.

"I think the idea isn't to close it down, but to rather be smart and make it work for everybody," Leslie said. "The Sierra needs to have a vital economy just like the rest of California. ... I think there's a balance that needs to be struck."

Overall, a third of the Sierra is privately owned, but that percentage varies among counties. Private landowners own half the land in 10 of the 20 California counties, and two-thirds or more of the acreage in five of those counties.

Pollution, traffic are concerns

The amount of developed land could double over the next half-century, even using conservative projections. Traffic congestion already has followed an increase in home building, and the environmental coalition fears a cascading effect on air and water quality in a region that provides much of California's water storage and hydroelectricity.

The counties most affected are Placer, El Dorado and Nevada, all within commuting distance of Sacramento. Placer County's population is expected to grow by 84 percent, El Dorado's by 42 percent and Nevada County's by 38 percent by 2020.

Retirees are moving up the hill

More isolated counties are affected, too, as they develop what Clayburgh called "a mailbox economy" - retirees who get their income from retirement accounts instead of working in the region.

Much of the environmental focus has been on the region's old growth timber, particularly as the U.S. Forest Service fights to implement a sweeping management plan for the 11 national forests that dot the range.

But the oak woodlands that grow at lower elevations are most in danger from sprawl, particularly in the western foothills, where 70 percent of the population resides. That pressure is likely to continue because the region is within commuting distance of Central Valley cities.

Weather is a breath of fresh air for Valley

Pollution reduced thanks to cooler days, lots of rain

By Scott Peszcnicker

Merced Sun-Star
June 21, 2005

Merced County residents can breathe easy, at least for now.

Since the official start of the summer smog season two weeks ago, Merced County's air quality has been rated "good" every day but one -- June 14, when it got a "moderate" designation.

But the San Joaquin Air Quality Management District has yet to declare a Spare the Air day, which happens when the air becomes a health risk.

Janelle Schneider, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Air Quality Management District office in Fresno, said the air this year is better than usual because of Mother Nature.

The pollutant ozone -- which most often spawns from a chemical reaction between vehicle or business emissions, sunlight and heat -- has been suppressed by the year's unseasonably cool, wet weather, Schneider said.

However, she said, it's too early to tell whether the air quality this season will keep pace with last summer, when there were just five Spare the Air days.

"There's always a chance, I guess, but there's no way we can forecast that kind of thing," Schneider said.

The air district rates air quality on a scale of 1-151, with 1 being the best. A rating of 1-50 means the air is good, 51-100 means moderate, 101-150 means the air is unhealthy to sensitive groups - such as children, the elderly or people with asthma -- and air rated 151 -- or in some cases even higher -- is hazardous to everyone.

June 14 was rated a 69.

David Spector, a meteorologist with the Warning and Forecast Office of the San Joaquin Valley branch of the National Weather Service, said weather this year and last year has contributed to air quality in different ways.

Last year there was more wind, Spector said, from a series of storms that passed to the north of Merced County.

The wind helped mix the air and dissipate pollution, he said.

There has been wind this year, too, but the real difference comes from the winter rains and the cooler temperatures of late.

April temperatures ranged from 70.3 degrees to 42.9 degrees, lower than the month's average of 75.3 degrees to 44.6 degrees.

High temperatures in May were low also, from average highs of 83.7 degrees to 80.5 degrees. Rain was a bigger factor, though, with 1.11 inches during the month, up from the average of 0.45 inches.

"We have a trend that seems to come every two or three years," Spector said. "We have a cooler-than- usual or wetter-than-usual spring."

Spector also said it's too early to predict whether this year will shape up like last year.

"It looks like we're not going to be in any stagnant pattern -- at least for the next week," he said.

Cutler and Orosi bus riders win big

TCAG approves five transit projects to cover unmet needs

By Lynn Doan, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, June 21, 2005

Cutler and Orosi bus riders can expect more buses, stops and benches in their area as early as August, after the approval of this year's transit projects Monday.

The Tulare County Association of Governments, a group of city and county officials that oversees transportation funding, approved a list of five transit projects Monday - four of which call for improvements in Cutler and Orosi. The county also plans to add bus trips between Woodlake and Visalia.

County officials said this year's list of projects was not only shorter than previous years, but also more focused around unincorporated areas. The association approves the list each year based on written requests from bus riders and a public hearing in March.

"In the past, a large majority of the requests came from Visalia for longer hours and Sunday services," said Dan Fox, who is transit coordinator for Tulare County. "Since they [granted those requests] last year, we've gotten far fewer requests of any type from anybody."

The association's public hearings on unmet transit needs has attracted dozens of bus riders in previous years. This year, only one woman, Ann Harabedoff, came before the group to request a bus stop closer to her home in Visalia.

The drop in requests gave the association a chance to focus on more requests from unincorporated communities, Fox said. And Cutler and Orosi came out the big winners.

"Cutler and Orosi have a good basis for community action, putting together petitions and getting them signed by lots of people," he said. "In other communities, it was just one person filling out a request."

Fox said his department plans to purchase about 15 benches and shelters for bus stops in Cutler and Orosi. The county will also add two more bus trips to the 12 trips that already run through the communities, he said.

Orosi resident Celia Quesada said benches and shelters at her bus stops will make her frequent bus rides a bit easier.

"I take the bus to the store because I don't have a ride, so it's very good," she said.

Jose Reynosa, who sells cell phones and accessories in front of a bus stop in Orosi, said the improvements would also keep waiting bus riders from coming into nearby stores for shade.

"They stand at the bus stop for awhile shading their face with their hands," he said. "And then they'll go into a store until the bus comes."

Fox said about 20,000 Cutler and Orosi residents use county transit services each year.

Ted Smalley, a county transportation engineer, said this year's drop in requests was also the reason for a shorter list of projects. Last year, the association granted nine requests, mostly in incorporated cities such as Visalia and Farmersville.

"We're not seeing a lot of comments because they have been doing a good job in the past five years," he said. "Agencies are trying to stay on top of it all."

Fox said the projects will cost about \$66,000 altogether, with about \$46,000 going to more service. The county is aiming to complete most of the projects by August to prepare for the beginning of the school year, he said.

State law requires the county to address any "reasonable" unmet transit needs each year before spending transportation development funds on streets and roads. The money is generated through a federal tax on gas.

The association received 35 unmet needs this year, but it only found five requests reasonable, Smalley said. In some cases, additional bus stops and trips wouldn't generate enough revenue, he said.

"It's just that for most agencies it's not feasible to meet these requests," he said. "That's the tradeoff of being in a large city versus a small city."

Transit projects

The following are requests that the Tulare County Association of Governments granted Monday:

- Nine people in Cutler and Orosi requested an additional bus stop at Cutler Park.
- Four people in Cutler and Orosi requested more buses and stops.
- Twenty-eight people in Cutler and Orosi requested additional bus stops at: Ledbetter Park and Road 128, the Family Education Center and Avenue 408, First Drive and Road 128, the post office and Road 128, and Road 124 and Avenue 416.
- Twenty-nine people in Cutler and Orosi requested benches and shelters at bus stops.
- One person requested more frequent trips from Woodlake to Visalia in the afternoon.

How to comment

Comments on county or city public transportation can be e-mailed to mgarza@co.tulare.ca.us, phoned in to Maria Garza at 733-6291 or mailed by March 24 to TCAG, 5961 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia CA 93277.

GET gets closer to finalizing routes tonight

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, June 21, 2005

Golden Empire Transit has been tinkering with its lines for months, modifying them to increase efficiency and beef up service where it can. This latest map reflects suggestions from more than 150 riders.

Golden Empire Transit's board of directors will hear suggestions at a public hearing tonight at 5:30 p.m. at 1830 Golden State Ave. The meeting is the last chance to give in-person feedback before the board votes on the changes in July.

You can also get involved by phone or e-mail. Go to www.getbus.org or call GET directly at 869-2GET.

-- *Californian staff writer Sarah Ruby*

IN BRIEF THE STATE / TULARE

L.A. Times

From Times Staff and Wire Reports

June 21, 2005

A dairyman who built his 9,100-cow facility in Tulare County without applying for an air permit is facing a federal lawsuit seeking a \$15-million fine.

Fred Schakel moved his Chino dairy to Tulare County last year. He started building the facility on Jan. 6, 2004 - five days after a law took effect requiring large dairies to apply for air permits.

A group of local activists sued last month, saying it is time that farmers did their part to help the Central Valley deal with air pollution.

Schakel's lawyer said his client and the industry were disgusted by the suit.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Tuesday, June 21, 2005:](#)

On the emissions front

City of Fresno, Valley farmers get creative for the sake of cleaner air.

The Valley's chronically polluted air should see some improvement, thanks to a couple of recent events that will help reduce the use of diesel engines and their toxic emissions.

The city of Fresno has replaced more than half of its garbage collection fleet with natural gas-powered trucks, and cleaned up the remaining diesel-powered vehicles with new filters. The move brings the city into compliance with state standards that won't kick in for another five years, an aggressive approach that brought praise from state and federal air regulators.

And farmers got some welcome news with an agreement that will reduce their electricity bills if they switch from diesel to electric motors to power their irrigation pumps. Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Southern California Edison will offer lower rates — 12.5% to 20% lower — to those farmers who replace their diesel pump motors with the cleaner electric models.

Such news is most welcome. Diesel exhaust is a huge component of the Valley's smog and particulate pollution problems. Heavy-duty trucks spew almost 22% of the total nitrogen oxide emissions in the Valley. That gas is a building block for smog. Diesel-powered pumps in the fields are another major contributor.

Diesel engines also put out large amounts of the tiny specks of dust and soot called particulate matter. Such pollution lodges deep in human lungs, and is responsible for all manner of respiratory and cardiovascular problems, especially among the very young, the old and those suffering from problems such as asthma or lung disease. About 4,500 diesel irrigation pumps around the Valley pump out nearly 17 tons of nitrogen oxides per day, accounting for 3.4% of all such emissions.

Farmers generally prefer the electric motors because they are cleaner and easier to maintain. But in recent years, electricity rates have soared, making the diesel engines the more cost-effective choice, however unpleasant. The new agreement with the power companies should allow many farmers to make the switch, and we hope they are able to do so in large numbers.

Another incentive for farmers to make the change is that electric motors don't require a permit from the Valley's air district to operate; diesels now do.

On the urban front in the battle for cleaner air, Fresno has taken a mighty step forward. The city has 130 garbage trucks, and 69 of them now run on the cleaner natural gas fuel. The remaining diesels — better now after their retrofit with the new filters — will gradually be replaced with natural gas vehicles as they are taken out of service.

The change didn't come cheap. The natural gas trucks run about \$23,000 more than their diesel counterparts, according to city officials. But that added cost was offset by a \$1.6 million grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which awarded another grant that paid about half the costs of a \$600,000 refueling station.

In both cases, innovative thinking led to useful solutions for at least a part of the Valley's air cleanup effort. There are models in these experiences that can be used again and again as we struggle to make our air cleaner.