

School flags indicate air quality

4-color system to aid students with asthma

By Ken Carlson, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2005

As a light rain cleansed the air Monday morning, two students raised a green flag on the pole at Everett Elementary School in Modesto.

The flag, positioned below the American and California flags, signified that the air was healthy.

Demetrious Dailey, a sixth-grader with asthma, said he will check the flag pole each day for signs the air might harm his lungs.

The San Joaquin Valley has some of the worst air in the nation; dirty air can bring on asthma attacks.

This week, Modesto City Schools started using a flag system at its 33 campuses to tell students and parents what the air quality is each day.

The reporting system uses four colors: green for healthy air, yellow for moderate, orange for air that is unhealthy for sensitive people, and red to signify that the air is unhealthy for everyone.

On orange days, Modesto schools will instruct students with asthma or other breathing problems to limit physical activity, said Shari Lowe, head of school nurses for the district.

When a red flag is unfurled, students will be kept indoors. Lowe said red days happen about twice a year.

The district coordinated with the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition to institute the program. MedicAlert Foundation of Turlock donated a set of flags for each school.

Modesto resident Tiffany Rodrigues said she is glad the district is using the flags. She said she often has used the Internet to monitor the air quality because her 9-year-old daughter, Olivia, has asthma. The Bee uses the same color system on its weather page.

"As a person with asthma myself, it helps to know what kind of air we are breathing," she said.

Energy summit touches on CSU's power

By Sean Mulhair

The Collegian, Mon, Nov. 7, 2005

As one of the largest educational systems in the world, the California State University has considerable influence when it comes to energy policy, said organizer Brent Hagen at the California Student Energy Summit held at UC Berkeley on Saturday.

"If they make changes toward efficiency it will influence other campuses as well as companies across to use clean energy," he said. "Interests in wind and solar power are growing rapidly; especially at large campuses with steep utility expenses."

The CSU system's plans to use alternative sources of energy within five years, to reduce costs and emissions, was addressed at the summit.

"If it saves money, people will listen. Not paying another electric bill is nice too," Hagen said.

He said the energy summit is also trying to promote long-term cost effectiveness of clean energy to large companies and outdated factories.

"The problem with modern industry is that it is only concerned with short-term cost and profit; 'right here, right now' thinking.

"They are wasting large percentages of income on tired, dirty-energy methods. If they see the long term benefits of clean energy they can drastically increase productivity," Hagen said.

Greenpeace campus organizer Josh Lynch said the California Student Energy Summit focuses on how environmentalism can stimulate the economy and save money.

More than 500 university and high school campuses plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States 17 percent by 2010 in the Campus Climate Challenge. The campaign was created to train and educate the next generation of environmental leaders, he said.

"The main problem is that \$30 billion is spent per year on continuing dirty energy sources like coal, natural gas, and oil power plants. Sadly, only a small fraction of that is spent on clean energy like wind and solar," Lynch said.

"We are not trying to attack industry. We need to work with it to innovate clean energy without hurting the economy," Lynch said.

Hybrid and electric cars have disappointed American consumers due to their limited power, but they may consider alternative motors if they outperform gasoline engines, he said.

According to reports from Toyota, the Lexus RX400h hybrid SUV is actually faster than the standard RX with a 0-60 acceleration of 7.2 seconds. For 2007, Lexus plans to release the LS600h sedan with a reported 400 horsepower.

Several other automakers such as General Motors, Mercedes-Benz, Ford and Honda have created more than \$100 million in research projects to improve hybrid technology.

Campus Climate Challenge reports said Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and several mayors in California are addressing concerns of global warming and are passing initiatives to reduce greenhouse gasses in California and promote clean industry.

Energy summit keynote speaker Randy Hayes, the founder of Rainforest Action Network and sustainability director for the city of Oakland, said industrial society has altered the chemistry of the biosphere.

"At some level, who doesn't value a livable planet?" Hayes said. "We may differ on how to get there, but we can sit down and talk about it.

"We're talking about life and death on Earth. Can city governments rise up and do the work?"

Grower has one solution

Cookson Beecher, Washington State Staff Writer
Capital Press Agriculture Weekly, Fri., Nov. 4, 2005

SEATTLE - When Karl Kupers, an Eastern Washington wheat and alternative- crops grower, considers how farmers can adapt to the challenges of global warming while also being part of the solution, he sees a simple answer - renewable fuels.

He believes that it's time to use the rich renewable resources in Washington state to create the "next oil patch."

"We can do this on economics," he said, during an agricultural breakout session that was part of the recent climate-control conference in Seattle. "We have crops in the ground now that could keep money flowing in the state."

He also believes that an important part of the economic driver behind renewable fuels is the fact that the Pacific Northwest does not have a fossil-fuel base.

"Every dollar that we use when we buy a gallon of gas leaves the state," he said.

When looking at the benefits of growing crops for fuel, he said that using those fuels would lower the amount of greenhouse gas emissions going into the atmosphere.

His plan "begs" for two things: a flexible agricultural strategy for the state and legislative support for a renewable fuel standard.

Such a standard would determine how much biofuel should be part of the mix in conventional fuels, based on the amount of biofuel that processors in the state are producing.

"The private sector is already there wanting biofuel," he said.

When someone in the audience asked him about research showing that producing biofuel requires more energy than the biofuel will produce, Kupers quickly told him that that's old science.

"That was true about 10 years ago," he said. "But three years ago, we got to a more equal point. Things are changing so rapidly in this."

Bill Brookreson, deputy of the state's Agriculture Department, told the group that the department, Washington State University, and the Community Trade and Economic Development Department are working together on figuring out how to finance processing projects that would turn crops into biofuels.

He also pointed out that byproducts from the processing of biofuel crops can be used as meal, fertilizer and fumigants.

Kupers agreed, saying that Washington state is a "meal-deficient" state.

"We can take just about every acre and use the meal from it," he said.

When another person in the audience asked how converting to biodiesel and ethanol will make a difference, Chad Kruger, spokesman for Climate Friendly Farms, said that for every gallon of biofuel a person uses, there's an offset of 78 to 100 percent in greenhouse gas emissions from the biofuel portion of the mix.

Deal May Be Near on Power Plant

Edison is negotiating for a continued supply of coal from a mine on Indian land.

By Marc Lifsher, Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Nov. 8, 2005

Southern California Edison Co. is close to reaching a deal with two Indian tribes and the world's largest coal company that would bolster the utility's effort to keep open a Nevada power plant that provides cheap electricity to Southern California - but is a major source of air pollution.

Closed-door talks among Edison, the Hopi and Navajo tribes of northern Arizona and mining giant Peabody Energy Corp. are aimed at resolving water-use issues that threaten the future of Peabody's coal-mining operations on Indian land, tribal leaders said. The Black Mesa mine is the only source of coal for the giant Mohave power plant near Laughlin, Nev., and is a vital pillar of the Hopi economy.

"Essentially, the parties are very near to some agreements" on how best to share the region's scarce water supply and other issues related to the mine, Hopi Chairman Wayne Taylor said.

Ensuring a steady supply of coal and water is crucial to Edison's attempt to keep the 1,580-megawatt plant open despite a court-ordered Jan. 1 deadline requiring the utility to either install costly pollution-control equipment or shutter the 34-year-old generating facility.

Edison declined to discuss details of the negotiations. "We are working hard on all reasonable options that could make possible the continued operation of the plant," the company said in a statement.

Environmentalists, who can veto any deal to keep the plant open, were noncommittal Monday about Edison's efforts. They said the utility must fulfill its obligations to cut pollution but said they were "open to a viable proposal" that both cleans the air and boosts tribal economies.

To date, Edison has done little to significantly reduce emissions from the plant since settling a lawsuit brought by environmental groups under the U.S. Clean Air Act in 1999.

Until recently, Edison had told the California Public Utilities Commission that it expected to close the Mohave plant at the end of 2005. That also signaled the end of the Black Mesa mine because its only customer is the generating facility.

But on Sept. 26, Edison, a unit of Rosemead-based Edison International, reversed itself, telling the commission that it wanted to keep the plant open or shut it only temporarily.

One reason cited by the utility: Skyrocketing natural gas prices have sharply increased the cost of operating more modern, gas-fired power plants, making power produced by Mohave's coal-burning generators cheaper by comparison.

Edison, which owns 56% of the plant, also noted that regulators were concerned about the reliability of Southern California's supply of electricity. The Mohave plant provides about 7% of the electricity used by the utility's 13 million customers, many of them in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The remaining plant ownership is split among several utilities, including the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

Edison has repeatedly told California regulators that it wouldn't spend the \$1 billion needed for pollution controls and other equipment at the plant until it secured agreements from the Hopis, Navajos and Peabody that would guarantee a long-term supply of coal and water that is required.

Those commitments could be close at hand, Hopi leaders said. They are backing a proposal that would allow Peabody to continue mining at Black Mesa and would ensure a new source of water to carry the coal to the power plant via a 270-mile slurry pipeline.

Edison and the tribal leaders then hope to persuade the environmental groups to give them a waiver to operate the plant for at least three years until the pollution equipment and pipeline improvements can be completed, Hopi leaders said.

According to data gathered in 2002 and 2003 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Mohave plant spewed an average of 19,000 tons of nitrogen oxides, 40,000 tons of sulfur dioxides and 2,000 tons of fine soot a year into the air above Laughlin, a Colorado River resort and gambling town. Emissions from the plant also have contributed to reduced visibility around the Grand Canyon to the east of the plant, environmentalists said.

Environmentalists accuse Edison of sending mixed signals to the Indians, California regulators and the plaintiffs who won the consent decree. "They're playing a game of chicken up to the end of this pending deadline," said Rob Smith of the Sierra Club in Phoenix.

Environmentalists remain frustrated at what they describe as Edison's six years of foot-dragging, said Roger Clark of the Grand Canyon Trust in Flagstaff, Ariz. Nevertheless, he said his group would be "happy to listen" to any proposal from the utility.

"Our hope is that we can find a solution that not only cleans up the pollution but also leaves the tribes in a much stronger economic position in the future," he said.

Rob Hammond, Peabody's Southwest group executive, declined to comment on the talks. Navajo leaders didn't return calls seeking comment.

Hopi leaders said they wanted to protect the environment but needed an extension of the pollution-control deadline to make sure that tribal economies weren't harmed by even the temporary loss of coal royalties and, in the Navajo's case, hundreds of high-paying jobs at the Peabody mine.

What's more, the development of a new source of water for the mine from an underground aquifer about 100 miles south of the Peabody open pit could be crucial to economic development of the 7,000-member Hopi tribe and the 250,000-member Navajo Nation.³

The Hopi, a tribe of farmers and artisans that has lived on the same desert mesas for the last 1,000 years, has a 50% unemployment rate. A shutdown at the mine would suck as much as 40% out of the \$20-million Hopi operating budget for 2006.

"This could be disastrous for the tribe," said Taylor, the chairman. "We can be considered today as an endangered species."

The environmentalists are sympathetic but remain distrustful of Edison.

"We are unwilling to excuse further violations of the law," they told the tribes in a May 25 letter signed by representatives of the Grand Canyon Trust, the Sierra Club and the National Parks Conservation Assn.

Consumer advocates said that closing down the Mohave plant shouldn't leave Edison short of power because the utility would open its new gas-fired, 1,054-megawatt Mountainview power plant in Redlands early next year.

And even if it's retrofitted, the plant at most can operate only 20 more years, said Bill Marcus, a consultant for the Utility Reform Network, a San Francisco-based ratepayers' advocate. Edison's permit to take water from the Colorado River to operate the generators expires in 2026, he said.

The best scenario would be for Edison to give up trying to keep Mohave open and, instead, invest in alternative energy projects and transmission lines that would help the Hopi and Navajo exploit their potentially abundant wind and solar power resources, said Clark of the Grand Canyon Trust.

"With California wanting to invest in cleaner forms of energy," he said, "why buy another 20 years of inefficient, old coal-fired generation?"

IN BRIEF LOS ANGELES COUNTY / LOS ANGELES

New Pollution Rules Limit Refinery Flaring

From Times Staff and Wire Reports

L.A. Times, Nov. 8, 2005

Area oil refineries must reduce their use of flaring to burn excess gases under restrictions approved by the board of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Residents have complained for years of potential health risks when refineries vent and ignite gases. Refineries call flaring a safety measure, but a district study found that in 2003, the practice produced 2 tons of sulfur oxides daily, or as much as all the region's large diesel trucks.

.Vermont adopts new rules to cut car CO2 emissions

Nov. 2, 2005

The Associated Press

Published in L.A. Daily News

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) - Vermont on Wednesday approved stricter standards for vehicle emissions to reduce greenhouse gases, leading five other Northeastern states working on the same rules.

The changes by the Legislature's Administrative Rules Committee means that all 2009 and later model cars sold in Vermont will be required to meet higher fuel efficiency standards to reduce emissions such as carbon dioxide.

New York, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut and Rhode Island also have been moving to adopt the new carbon-reduction rules to keep pace with California.

California is the only state that can create emissions standards stricter than the federal government's, but other states can follow California's example.

When California beefed up its rules to take aim at carbon dioxide, the Northeastern states that had followed its previous rules had to either make the same changes or fall back to the federal standard.

Car makers have sued in California to overturn the new rules. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers has argued that changes will add about \$3,000 to the cost of a car.

Environmentalists counter that the increased costs are more like \$1,000 per car, an amount easily offset by lower fuel costs. They also note that a number of car models on the road today meet the new standards.

"It's smart environmental policy that's good for consumers. This is a perfect example of where we should be," James Moore, clean energy advocate with the independent Vermont Public Interest Research Group.

Gov. James Douglas said the state's efforts to improve air quality - along with its natural beauty and quality of life - will help recruit new businesses.

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2005](#)

Buses haven't kept pace with tech

The Oct. 25 community column "School buses are supposed to protect kids, not make them sick from their pollution" raises many important issues, not the least of which is that California has one of the oldest school bus fleets in the nation. Technology has changed dramatically, yet the bus fleet turnover has not been able to keep pace, owing to budget and other realities.

Action is being taken by manufacturers and school bus-fleet operators to upgrade existing buses with more advanced engine-emission controls and cleaner fuel, both of which reduce emissions up to 90 percent.

In August, Gov. Schwarzenegger allocated \$25 million of the state budget for replacing and retrofitting older diesel school buses.

Much more certainly needs to be done than to retrofit older diesel buses or simply replace them, but it's a start. The new generation of clean diesel engines produces 80percent less particulate matter and nitrogen oxide emissions - a key ingredient in the formation of smog - than those built 10 years ago.

School buses remain the safest means of transporting children. Applying some of today's smarts and technology to the existing fleet makes economic and environmental sense for all Californians.

Allen Schaeffer, executive director, Diesel Technology Forum

Frederick, MD