Green Goat hybrid expected to cut train pollution by half

By Malcolm Maclachlan
Thursday, April 7, Tracy Press

Union Pacific unveiled a new train on Wednesday designed to cut emissions by over 80 percent.

The company is planning on using the Green Goat at its switching station in Fresno to move cars from one train to another. Built by RailPower Technologies Corp. of Vancouver, British Columbia, the diesel-electric hybrid engine is designed to emit 16.5 fewer tons of smog-causing nitrogen oxides per year than a standard train engine. It will also reduce diesel fuel use by 50 to 80 percent.

Union Pacific has been testing the engines in several locations around the country, and plans to use more in the coming months. John Bromley, a spokesman for Union Pacific, said the Green Goat is a “light switching” engine that is used in rail yards rather than for cross-country hauling. The goal is to introduce the technology in rail yards near urban areas, where pollution affects the greatest number of people.

“That’s where you get the most bang for your buck,” Bromley said.

That was also the goal of the San Joaquin County Air Pollution Control District, which gave Union Pacific a grant of $700,000 for leasing the engine. RailPower spokesman Nigel Horsely said the hybrid engines sell for $800,000.

District spokesman Anthony Presto said his organization has given over $90 million in grants to various businesses and organizations since 1992, with the goal of spending money in ways that will lead to significant reductions in air pollution.

Trains can be significantly more efficient and less polluting as a way of moving freight than trucks.

However, Presto said trains still contribute 26 tons of nitrogen oxides per day to the air in the San Joaquin Valley. By comparison, the Valley’s motor vehicles - including all passenger cars, buses and freight trucks - produce 204 tons a day.

Green Goat engines are built with the frames of older locomotives, giving them an old-fashioned appearance. They operate on a similar principle as hybrid cars, using battery power for low-speed stopping and starting.

Lassen will rely more on fire in managing forests

By Christine Vovakes -- Bee Correspondent
Friday, April 8, Sacramento Bee

MINERAL - After decades of suppression, wildland fire will resume a more natural role under a management plan adopted this month by Lassen Volcanic National Park.

The plan calls for an aggressive program that will return fire to more than half of the 106,000-acre park east of Redding.

Around 6,000 acres a year will be treated with fire over the next 10 years, most of it in controlled burns in strategic locations.

The goal is to improve forests and wildlife habitat by restoring the role of fire, one of the most significant natural processes operating in the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains ecosystems, said Marilyn H. Parris, park superintendent.

"We have unhealthy forests where species are changing and disease is spreading. This will help create healthier forests," she said.

Local officials who reviewed the draft plan were concerned about the impact of increased smoke on their communities and lobbied for more attention to public health. Recent lightning-caused fires allowed to burn in Lassen sent smoke into Chester and the surrounding area, said Bill Dennison, Plumas County Board of Supervisors chairman.

Without reasonable controls, the particulate matter carried in wood smoke from the park could have "devastating and even life-threatening" effects, he said.

"It's up to the whim of the winds whether we're all choked out here in the Almanor basin," he said.

Parris said park officials modified the final fire management plan to reflect the supervisors' concerns about public health.

Dennison also cited the economic impacts on the tourist-dependent area. However healthy fire may be for the ecosystem, "neither smoke nor the charred remnants of trees" can be marketed to attract tourists, he said.

The Plumas supervisors called for a survey to determine, "If you burn it, will they come?"

Despite the increased burning planned, the park will continue to meet all state and federal air quality regulations, Parris said. Even a 3,000-acre fire that burned for more than two months last year exceeded air regulations for fewer than two hours, she said.

"We have not and will not blow by our responsibility to obey the law," she said.

The new fire management plan fulfills the mission of national parks to protect natural resources.

For the next decade, park officials hope to treat about 4,000 acres annually with controlled burns to reduce the heavy fuels and help restore the natural mix of conifers and understory plants.

Natural fires will be allowed to burn on about 2,000 acres annually if the conditions are appropriate, she said.

Park officials also plan to use chain saws and other mechanical equipment to reduce the brush and forest understory in areas of the park not designated as wilderness.

Pombo seeks changes to top environmental law

By Bob Brownne
Friday, April 8, Lodi News Sentinel

One of the nation's leading environmental laws could be in for an overhaul later this year, depending on the recommendation of a new task force formed by the House Resources Committee chaired by Richard Pombo, R-Tracy.

The National Environmental Protection Act was signed into law in 1970 by President Richard Nixon in response to air and water pollution across the nation. Pombo said that in 35 years the law has never been reviewed by any Congressional body.

"At this point we really don't know what the answers will be and we don't want to prejudge," Pombo said Wednesday. "The idea is to go out and hear from people who work with it every day."

The task force, to be headed by Rep. Cathy Morris, R-Wash., will hold a series of public hearings around the country between now and late summer, when it is expected to release its report and recommendations.

While he wouldn't predict the task force's recommendation, Pombo believes that enforcement of NEPA -- which mandates public review of a variety of projects such as logging fire-prone forests, highway construction and wind-power development -- often leads to unacceptable delays.

Pombo's family owns land leased by a power company which has built windmills.

He criticized one windmill project on federal land that stalled because the environmental review process required an explanation of alternative projects.

"It really doesn't make sense in a case like that to come up with four or five different alternatives," he said. "You either tell them yes or tell them no."

Environmental advocates were critical of the committee's task force from the moment they heard of it and say it appears to be an attempt to weaken the review process.

"Pombo has declared war on environmental protection," said Peter Galvin, conservation director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "This is just one step in his effort to eliminate environmental law."

Galvin said he's also skeptical of the hearing process.

"These field hearings and task forces are dog and pony shows, tightly scripted to agree with Pombo's anti-environment rhetoric," Galvin said.

Eric Parfrey, local representative of the Sierra Club, said environmental groups understand that efforts to reform environmental laws are ongoing.

"But what we often see every time Republicans talk about 'reforming' environmental law, they are trying to weaken it to allow special interests to exploit resources."

The Sierra Club has been involved in several lawsuits with the city of Tracy, typically over growth-related issues.

In the most recent case to come back from the state appeals court involving a water transfer from Banta-Carbona and West Side irrigation districts, the judge wrote that the Sierra Club's use of state and federal environmental review law appeared to be an attempt to stall the project.

"In a lot of cases they use NEPA to reach a different agenda," Pombo said. "They were just trying to stop the water transfer from happening."

Get Used to High Gas Prices, U.S. Says

By Jonathan Peterson
Los Angeles Times
April 8, 2005

WASHINGTON - On a day when California gasoline prices set a new high, the Energy Department forecast Thursday that record pump prices will not only rule the road this summer, they'll stick around through 2006 as motorists' thirst for fuel shows no sign of abating.

California's fuel costs are expected to remain substantially higher than the nation's this summer, with prices 25 cents to 50 cents above the predicted U.S. average of about $2.28 a gallon during the peak driving season, according to the Energy Information Administration, the Energy Department's statistical arm.

Meanwhile, gasoline continued its relentless climb Thursday. California's average retail price for regular gasoline hit a record $2.554 a gallon, an increase of 4.1 cents from Wednesday and 32.3 cents from a month ago, according to AAA, the nationwide auto club. California requires a cleaner-burning recipe produced by few refineries outside the state, contributing to the higher price.

The U.S. average for regular gasoline reached a record $2.251 a gallon, up 2.3 cents from Wednesday and up 31.3 cents in the last month, AAA said. Every state in the nation saw gasoline touch fresh highs Thursday.

"Every day this week there's been a higher price than the day before," said Elaine Beno, a spokeswoman for the Automobile Club of Southern California.

Just last month, the government had projected that gasoline might average $2.10 a gallon in the summer but would dip below $2 in late 2005 and stay there for much of next year. But after that forecast was issued, the agency pumped up its oil price expectations for the period.

The latest outlook renewed questions about the effect of costly fuel on families and the economy. For low-income households in particular, the choice increasingly is becoming: "Do I fill my gasoline tank or do I buy something else?" said Mark M. Zandi, chief economist at consulting firm Economy.com.

Overall, the government report sees no short-term relief for motorists. Crude oil costs are clinging to exceptionally high levels in response to economic growth and other factors, and refiners have little capacity to boost summer supply.

"We're looking at a global crude market that is straining" to meet world demand, Guy Caruso, head of the Energy Information Administration, said in a briefing for reporters.

U.S. crude oil prices shot up after the forecast but then plunged as investors focused on a report issued Wednesday that predicts a sharp increase in U.S. gasoline production. Crude oil for May delivery fell $1.74, or 3.1%, to $54.11 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange, marking a fourth consecutive day of losses.

U.S. gasoline prices are expected to peak at an average of $2.35 a gallon in May, the traditional start of the heavy driving season, and then plateau at around $2.28 through the rest of the summer, 38 cents higher than last summer, the government said. "Similar high motor gasoline prices are expected through 2006," the report says without offering specifics. Summer diesel prices will average $2.24 a gallon, the report says.

The gasoline price increases are driven by oil, which accounts for about half the cost of each gallon of gasoline. The U.S. forecast figures oil prices will remain above $50 a barrel for the rest of this year and 2006; a year ago today, oil was selling for $36.15.

Also, the International Monetary Fund said Thursday that high worldwide demand would keep oil supplies tight and could cause spikes as high as $100 a barrel, echoing a report last week by a Goldman Sachs analyst who predicted an oil price "super spike" as high as $105 a barrel.

Despite the surging pump prices, the government analysts predicted no retrenchment in gasoline consumption. Rather, they said, motorists will slurp up 9.3 million barrels a day this summer, a 1.8% increase from last year.

Reasons include a growing number of drivers, the proliferation of sport utility and other vehicles that guzzle gasoline and the assumption that many motorists will take lengthy road trips, Caruso said.

"Highway travel continues to steadily rise," Caruso said. "It's rising nearly every year."

Businesses cringed at the forecast amid scattered economic warning signs, including some hints of retail weakness and a growing willingness by automakers to offer discounts rather than sacrifice sales.

"It's frightening," said Patty Senecal, vice president of Transport Express Inc., a trucking company based in Rancho Dominguez. "It's very difficult for any business when . all of a sudden, you get hit with these surprises."

Senecal is spending an average of $753 to fill a truck's dual 150-gallon tanks with diesel, and each truck fuels up twice a week. About a year ago, such a fill-up cost $648, and in 1999 it was just $285, Senecal said.

Farmers are worried about shipping costs as transport companies tack fuel surcharges on to their rates.

"I'm becoming very concerned, real concerned," said Ken Adams, a sales manager at Growers Express, a Salinas farm that ships lettuce to the East Coast in the summer. "Obviously freight costs will make an impact on sales."

"It's a drag," Zandi said of the rise in energy costs. "The question is: how big a drag?"

A reason for the question is that energy costs represent a smaller share of consumer spending than they used to, and today's prices when adjusted for inflation are not as extraordinary as they may seem.

In current dollars, for example, gasoline prices peaked in March 1981 at $3.12 a gallon, the government said. At that time, gasoline accounted for about 5% of overall consumer spending; today the figure is less than 3%.

"We just don't see oil prices as being the critical issue in the economy at this point in time," said Christopher Thornberg, senior economist with the UCLA Anderson Forecast.

However, few question that the price surge represents a growing burden.

"California households pay more in gasoline and they use their cars more often than most other Americans," Zandi said. "Higher gasoline prices this summer will be a heavier weight on Californians than most other Americans."

Gas still soaring; consumers fuming
Rising fuel costs could slow state and national economies

By Dale Kasler
Sacramento Bee, as printed in the TriValley Herald Online
April 7, 2005

SACRAMENTO - Outraged every time you fill your tank? Try filling 100 of them.
High fuel prices - gasoline and diesel hit records Friday in California - are steadily eroding trucking executive Joe Antoninis bottom line.

Its definitely cutting our profit margin, said Antonini, whose Stockton-based Antonini Enterprises runs a 100-truck fleet that hauls fruit and other goods around California and Nevada. Its one of the biggest expenses a trucking company has.

True, the pain is manageable. Antonini can pass on some of the costs to customers. But not all. We have to live with it, he said. We have no choice.

With prices one-third higher than they were five years ago, the cost of fuel is turning into a dull, but persistent, backache for the American economy. Its not crippling but is certainly noticeable.

While the bigger expense doesnt impoverish most people, it drains dollars from their wallets - dollars that might get spent on other things.

I dont think its going to send either the California economy or the nation into a recession, said state chief economist Howard Roth. But it certainly could slow the growth of the economy.

Much depends on how high prices get and how long they stay there. AAA said a gallon of self-serve regular gas hit a statewide average of $2.45 Friday, breaking the record set last October. Across the nation, the average price of $2.16 was a record.

Diesel, meanwhile, is a staggering $2.62 a gallon in California - also a record.

Driving all of this is another run-up in crude oil prices, which jumped $1.87 a barrel Friday to close at a record $57.27 on the New York Mercantile Exchange. Although most analysts shrugged off a Goldman Sachs report suggesting crude oil prices could reach $100, the booming worldwide demand for fuel could keep upward pressure on prices for years to come. Every $1 increase in crude translates into another 2.4 cents per gallon at the pump.

David Hackett, a petroleum industry consultant in Irvine, Calif., said Californians can expect $2.50-a-gallon gas before too long, and maybe a bit higher than that.

And thats if things go well. If one of Californias major refineries suffers a significant malfunction this summer, prices would shoot way, way up, Hackett said. Thats because very few refineries outside of California make fuel that meets the states strict clean-air fuel formulas.

All this is happening at a time when the economy continues to give off mixed signals. The U.S. Commerce Department reported this week that economic output rose an encouraging 3.8 percent in the final three months of 2004. But on Friday the Labor Department said employers created a disappointing 110,000 new jobs in March. Perhaps more ominously, Ford Motor Co. reported a 5 percent drop in vehicle sales in March, including a 6.6 percent drop for trucks and sport utility vehicles.

So is this a return to the 1970s, when oil shocks caused two recessions and sent Americans scrambling for small cars? Not quite, or at least not yet.

Start with vehicles. Sales will be affected, but not drastically, said analyst Jim Hossack of the AutoPacific Inc. consulting firm in Tustin.

People are moving out of larger SUVs into smaller SUVs, Hossack said. Theyll go from Suburbans to Tahoes; theyll go from Tahoes to Trailblazers.
Sales of fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles are up. But Hossack predicts gas will have to hit $3 before motorists make the kind of big changes they made in the 70s.

A big reason why 2005 isnt 1973: In the 70s the government capped petroleum prices. That caused shortages and long gas lines - and sank Americans confidence in the economy. Today prices arent regulated. Gas may be expensive but at least theres enough to go around.

In addition, the overall economy is bigger and can handle oil shocks more easily. Energy consumption per dollar of economic output has fallen by nearly half in 30 years, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Adjusted for inflation, gas today is more than a buck cheaper than it was in 1981.

That doesnt mean fuel prices are irrelevant. As recently as 1990, the oil shock from Iraqs invasion of Kuwait helped plunge the nation into recession (although Roth said high interest rates played a big role as well).

Last year Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the worlds largest retailer, was humbled by gas prices, saying it had cut into revenue. And some independent truckers staged wildcat strikes around California to protest diesel prices, snarling freight traffic at Stockton rail yards, the Port of Oakland and elsewhere.

Farmers are vulnerable to high fuel prices. So are plastics manufacturers, which see raw material costs jump. Many airlines are getting clobbered.

And for consumers near the lower end of the economic ladder, high gas prices can be almost catastrophic.

Ive just spent all my money and Im broke, said Robin Rick, who paid $3.76 on Friday to put gas in the tank of her aging Pontiac Sunbird at the Circle K 76 Station in midtown Sacramento. At $2.40 a gallon, her money didnt go very far.

Rick, who makes $8 an hour working at a discount clothing store, said shes had to cut back on food expenditures and will have to borrow money from friends to buy gas until she gets paid on Thursday.

Im one of those paycheck-to-paycheck people, said Rick, 46.

Even if crude oil prices moderate, seasonal factors will keep nudging prices upward in California. Because of pollution constraints, its harder and more expensive to blend fuels for hot weather.

And its hard to see oil prices falling significantly. Because of huge increases in demand in China and India, some experts think crude will continue rising almost without end. Some analysts say Chinas petroleum imports could quadruple by 2020.

Hackett isnt that pessimistic. As prices climb, he said, ethanol use will increase and other alternative fuels will emerge. More people will buy hybrids. New refineries will get built, although that could take as long as five years.

Supply and demand will figure it out ... but its going to be an interesting few years, Hackett said.

Surging gas bills run drivers off the road

By Brent Hopkins
Los Angeles Daily News
Friday, April 08, 2005

Record highs at the gasoline pump -- get used to it, the government warned Thursday.

With a gallon of regular up 30 cents from a month ago, to $2.541 on average in the Los Angeles area, and no relief in sight this year, drivers have started to make painful choices in how they adapt to this economic punch to the wallet.

"I've got a daughter who's about to drive, and with the price of insurance and now gas, I'm gonna think twice about buying her a car," said Larry Hoffman, a 60-year-old from Toluca Lake. "Too bad, let the rich kids' parents pay for gas."

Fifteen-year-old Liana Hoffman won't be cut off from transportation -- after all, her dad owns The Pedal Shop, a bike store on Lankershim Boulevard. Her wheels could come in a set of two, rather than four, however, unless prices head south soon.

With the U.S. Energy Information Administration predicting that prices will continue above $2 nationwide for the rest of the year, even gasoline experts are wondering how consumers can cope with the steep hikes.

"That sank my heart," said Jeff Spring, spokesman for the Automobile Club of Southern California, which tracks gas-price movements locally. "It's a paradigm shift if this comes to be. Typically we'd expect prices to spike in California, but if what the EIA says plays through, we're in a new era."

The Auto Club has been advocating increased telecommuting and car-pooling -- suggestions that are likely to take on new meaning for many commuters as they face the prospect of high gas prices over the long term.

It's a new era with major ramifications for drivers such as Eliceo Mayorga. Just for his short commute from his North Hollywood apartment to work, he pays up to $35 a week. His six-cylinder Nissan Maxima gets decent mileage, but he's looking into getting a hybrid to cut down on his gasoline bills, and has made even more drastic life decisions.

"I was planning on moving to Palmdale for those low house prices," the 38-year-old film technician said. "But with the price of gas to drive every day to the San Fernando Valley, it's just not worth it. That definitely affected my decision."

With increasingly steep fuel bills for its 15 trucks, Woodland Hills-based Fazio Cleaners might start charging delivery fees for the first time. Nearly a quarter of its business is delivery, a percentage that's been growing steadily in recent years.

"It's difficult because you want to keep your customers happy, but sooner or later you have to do something about (the rising costs)," marketing director Susan Chicas said.

Consumers will generally pay a bit more for convenience. Pizza Hut tacked a $1 delivery fee onto its pies in 2002, which spokeswoman Patti Sullivan said hasn't raised any complaints.

Other drivers make do however they can. An aspiring journalist ditches a rib dinner for In-N-Out Burger, while a computer student rides the bus instead of driving his tiny Nissan. A North Hollywood mom, fretting over her sons' expenses and her husband's gas-hog truck that pushes their monthly bill over $500, goes straight home from work to minimize her own expenditures.

And Armen Abramian's slick-looking Mitsubishi is sitting curbside. He bought the black 3000 GT for its flashy look and throaty six-cylinder engine, but they're not getting much action these days.

"Me, personally, I'm not cruising around anymore," the 21-year-old salesman said, looking sadly at the car. "If my friends call me to hang out, I tell them you'd better come pick me up."

Editorial, The Fresno Bee, April 8, 2005

Solar perplexis

Why is the governor taking so much heat on solar plan?

U.S. auto manufacturers snickered when their Japanese rivals started marketing hybrid cars a few years ago. Detroit doubted that U.S. consumers would pay extra for a fuel-efficient automobile. Japan is now laughing all the way to the bank.

Some big homebuilders and utilities are currently making the same miscalculation about solar power. Skeptics doubt Californians will pay more for energy-saving solar panels on their roofs. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is itching to prove them wrong, partly because he wants to jump-start a solar industry here in California.

SB1, which will be debated this month, is the current vehicle for the governor's plan to create 1 million new solar roofs by 2017, and it is a hybrid itself. Last year, the governor wanted to mandate solar on a percentage of new homes.

Homebuilders objected, saying it would drive up the cost of housing. Some also claimed the solar industry wasn't geared up to produce tens of thousands of new photovoltaic units each year, a claim the industry disputes.

Wisely, the governor has come back with an incentive program that seeks to create 3,000 new megawatts of solar energy in California. (Currently, businesses and homeowners here generate about 70 megawatts, a paltry amount in a sun-drenched state.) All this new energy would forestall the need to build dozens of power plants. It also could be a lifesaver for the grid on hot summer days, when solar produces the most juice.

Under the plan, production homebuilders would be required to offer solar as an option to prospective home buyers, just as they offer marble counter tops and hardwood floors. This offer must include information on the cost of solar units (typically about $15,000, minus a $5,000 rebate and a $1,000 tax credit). It also must include information about projected energy savings. (In general, a 2-kilowatt system can provide half of a household's electricity needs.)

In effect, the governor would be dramatically broadening a rebate the Sacramento Municipal Utility District has successfully tested for several years. Supporters estimate that $2 billion to $3 billion would be needed to subsidize these rebates over 10 years. The ultimate amount would be determined by the Public Utilities Commission, which would finance a rebate fund through surcharges on electricity rates.

As now crafted, SB1 poses challenges for homebuilders, who would be mandated to market solar, and utilities, which would have to buy back excess electricity generated by solar homeowners. It would also challenge the solar industry, which would be expected to bring down the per-unit cost of solar panels once they are produced in vast numbers. Under the legislation, the rebates would decrease each year and finally sunset in 2016. At that point, solar would have to stand on its own.

Amazingly, this farsighted legislation — cosponsored by state Sen. Kevin Murray, D-Los Angeles, and Sen. John Campbell, R-Costa Mesa — is encountering flak not just from sluggish corporate interests but also from so-called "public-interest" groups.

Instead of crediting the governor for going farther than any of his predecessors, the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights and other groups have recently dumped on SB1. Foundation spokesman Jerry Flanagan called it a "green veneer on a dirty and costly energy policy."

Although the governor could do more to promote conservation and he may be forced to this summer, if electricity supplies fall short — one can hardly claim he is promoting a dirty energy policy. Perhaps Flanagan got Schwarzenegger mixed up with the fossil-fuel junkies who run the White House. On this issue, the governor is separating himself from his counterparts in Detroit and Washington. That independence deserves plaudits, not partisan sniping.