Valley air board bans some irrigation pumps

Measure to clean air a win for environmentalists, but farmers say costs unfair

By STEPHANIE TAVARES, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, June 17, 2005

The valley air board is banning some high-polluting irrigation pumps used by farmers to feed thirsty valley fields and requiring cleaner-running engines to be monitored.

But not right away.

At a monthly meeting Thursday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board voted to adopt state-mandated monitoring systems and emissions standards for irrigation pump engines.

The new rules are a major win for local environmentalists and some regular community members who for years have complained that farmers' heavy polluting engines were allowed to go unregulated while the cars and even fireplaces of regular residents have restrictions placed on them.

Local farmers, some of whom have been replacing pump engines for four or five years to meet existing air district standards for large farms, feel the new regulations are expensive and a bit unfair.

"We're not like the diesel trucks that run down the highway. We're growing crops that themselves clean the air," local farmer Fred Starrh said. "It's a difficult process to keep getting slammed for creating problems when we're also doing something that actually helps, and that's the frustrating deal."

He said the upgrades, which the district admits will continue as technology progresses, have economic ramifications beyond the cost of the new engines.

"They're much more difficult to operate and much more difficult to service -- obviously we can't just work on them ourselves anymore," he said.

Thursday's decision didn't take farmers by surprise though. They had known the change was coming since 2004, when the state Legislature removed pollution-rule exemptions for the diesel and natural gas engines they use. California air districts were given until July 1 to adopt the standards.

Under the district's new rules farmers running cleaner-burning engines, most of whom run large farms requiring air pollution permits, have until January 2006 to start providing emissions data and maintenance records to the district.

Farmers with older, dirtier-burning pumps aren't off the hook, though, said district rule development supervisor George Heinen. The district plans to implement a maintenance monitoring program for those engines within the next year.

"For the current (dirtier) engines, we're going to require that they run them the best they can until they can replace them," Heinen said.

Owners of the dirtier-running pumps have until 2010 to get their engines up to snuff, although the district expects the new engines to be in place by 2007 or 2008.

To ease the transition, the district is offering grants from its Heavy Duty Incentive Program, which provides matching funds for engine replacements.

Air district staff say the changes are necessary to clean the valley's notoriously nasty air. They're expecting the new rules to reduce the amount of airborne nitrogen oxide in the region by about 24 tons per day.

That's good news for anything in the valley with lungs. The region is known for high levels of lung disease and asthma and has topped nationwide lists of places with dangerous levels of air

pollution for years. The area also regularly fails to meet statewide standards for air pollution reduction.

"I think that this is probably just another thing we have to do to reduce pollution, one of many things," said air district board president Tom Mayfield. "We just take small steps at a time."

Air district unwilling to get tough on farmers, group argues in court

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, June 17, 2005

The goal is cleaner air as soon as possible.

How to get there -- that's when things gets ugly.

Air police are using fancy math to make farmers' lives easier, say environmentalists, who took their gripe to a San Francisco federal appeals court this week.

By banking past clean air progress, air officials let farmers and other dust polluters avoid covering manure lagoons, changing crop layouts and other dust-cutting measures, environmentalists say.

Regulators call this quibbling. The air district has put unprecedented controls on agriculture, they say.

They could wait on some rules, ensuring future quotas, but instead they went ahead and made all but 10 percent of the reductions they set out to make by 2010.

Best known for shutting down fireplaces on thick winter evenings, particulate pollution joins ozone as the valley's major air quality concerns. Particulates are tiny dust and aerosol molecules a fraction of the thickness of a human hair.

Both sides of the suit paint different pictures of air pollution in the valley.

To the district, air quality data from the past year has been vindicating, and regulators say we could meet federal standards as soon as this year.

"Being in compliance" is a short phrase for a web of calculations designed to tell us we've spent three years breathing decent air.

The district, with state and federal blessings, gave itself until 2010 to get its particulates under control.

Environmentalists point to a pattern of false starts and stalling since 1991, when the district started working toward its original deadline of 2001.

The district yielded to powerful pressures from industry -- mainly agriculture, they say -- and doesn't want to push further than it already has, said Brent Newell, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment who argued the case in court Wednesday.

In sheer numbers, agriculture is the valley's biggest source of particulates. Big-time culprits in congested urban areas are cars, which the district doesn't have the power to regulate.

Particulates are so small they bypass respiratory defenses and lodge deep into people's lungs.

They aggravate asthma, bronchitis, lung disease and heart disease, according to the state air board.

Swap engines, reduce rates

Utilities help farmers who switch from diesel.

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger / Bee Capitol Bureau
Friday, June 17, 2005

SACRAMENTO — State power regulators Thursday approved a utility plan that will make electricity more affordable for farmers who want to ditch their dirty diesel engines.

Beginning Aug. 1, Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Southern California Edison will offer lower rates to farmers who replace their diesel irrigation pump motors with cleaner electric models.

PG&E rates will be about 20% lower than what the utility now offers its agricultural customers, and Southern California Edison's rates will be about 12.5% lower.

The program is expected to benefit the Central Valley's air basin, which is among the dirtiest in the nation.

Diesel agriculture engines — used primarily to pump water for crop irrigation — emit tiny specks of soot and chemicals that form air pollution. Electric engines create virtually no pollution. Jon Tremayne, a spokesman for PG&E, said the program will benefit farmers and the air: "We're certainly hopeful that many, if not all [farmers], sign up because of the benefits that the program will bring to California's air quality."

Thursday's approval by the California Public Utilities Commission comes after months of negotiation involving utilities, agriculture associations, air officials and energy watchdog groups.

It also coincides with the start of new clean-air rules that require some farmers to apply for permits and change out their oldest engines. Farmers don't have to get permits for electric motors.

"We're very excited, and it couldn't be more timely either," said Roger Isom, vice president of California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations.

Farmers with older diesel engines larger than 50 horsepower qualify for the utility program. To participate, they must get rid of their diesel engines.

About 4,500 diesel irrigation pumps exist in the San Joaquin Valley. Those pumps emit nearly 17 tons of nitrogen oxides per day, accounting for 3.4% of all such emissions. Nitrogen oxide is an ingredient in ozone, a corrosive gas that forms on still, warm days. Ozone can aggravate asthma and bronchitis.

Diesel agriculture pumps are the 10th-largest source of nitrogen oxide emissions in the San Joaquin Valley. Heavy-duty trucks rank first with 21.8% of total nitrogen oxide emissions.

Tom Jordan, an air quality project adviser with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the degree of air quality benefit will depend on how many farmers retire their diesel engines.

There is no way to predict how many farmers will switch out their engines, but agriculture groups say many growers are interested in the program.

"There are no silver bullets left, but this is a powerful tool to control emissions from that source," Jordan said.

Under the program, the utilities will help farmers pay for lines connecting motors to the power source. In all, PG&E will pay a maximum of $27.5 million and Edison will pay $9.2 million.

The program will last 10 years. The rate will increase by 1.5% each year, providing farmers with a predictable utility bill. Over the years, some farmers switched to diesel from electricity, in part because of volatile utility rates.

Michael Boccadoro, executive director of the Agricultural Energy Consumers Association, said the new rates will even out the costs of diesel and electricity in most cases.

"For just about every farmer, it's going to be a beneficial program," he said.

Everything being equal, farmers prefer electric motors because they require less maintenance and are cleaner.

Utility rates will be structured in a way that will encourage farmers to run their pumps during off-peak hours.

Bill Bryan, vice president of Edison's business customer division, said the utilities will be able to handle the additional load: "It's not anticipated to have an impact."

Woodpile burns near Dinuba

Spontaneous combustion may have caused the fire in the huge mound.

By Tim Bragg / The Fresno Bee
Friday, June 17, 2005

DINUBA — A pile of scrap wood nearly the size of a football field fed a large fire near Dinuba on Thursday, sending a plume of smoke into the air visible for miles.

The blaze started before 9 a.m. at Pruner Enterprises, near Avenue 430 and Road 68, in a complex of buildings once part of the old Sequoia Forest Industries sawmill.

The company collects old pallets and other pieces of scrap wood and lumber and grinds the material into wood chips, said Tulare County Fire Battalion Chief Michael Davidson.

He said some of the material is fed into a co-generation plant nearby and some is sold as wood chips for landscaping.

Davidson said an employee was working with equipment near the pile when the worker noticed a small amount of smoke, which eventually grew into a large blaze.

He said the cause of the fire has not been determined, but it could have been sparked by spontaneous combustion within the pile. The wood lost to the fire had an estimated value of about $75,000, Davidson said.

Witnesses to the blaze said the fire grew very quickly.

"I couldn't believe that it happened so fast," said Luis Cisneros of Ivanhoe, who works for another company in the same complex. "It started out as just a little fire."

Tim Fried, who also works nearby, said he could see the smoke column as he drove to work Thursday. "The flames were just going everywhere," said Fried, of Visalia.

Workers from Pruner used front-end loaders to move away parts of the pile that were not on fire while crews of firefighters poured water onto the blaze using hoses and a nozzle mounted on a ladder truck.

Davidson said firefighters planned to apply foam to the fire later in the day, to contain it so fire crews could leave the scene and turn it over to the owner.

He said the pile would probably continue to smolder for at least four days before the fire burns itself out, as long as the pile isn't disturbed, he said.

Several recent blazes have kept Dinuba-area fire crews busy:

A Wednesday morning fire at a cold-storage facility at Brandt Farms, also located along Avenue 430, caused about $100,000 in damage.

On April 15, a fire swept through a Dinuba cardboard-box plant, burning more than $2 million worth of boxes used to ship crops.

Ashy mounds outside Wasco are ... still a big mystery

By GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, June 17, 2005

They're poking, prodding and testing it.

But what it actually is -- the massive moonscape of gray, ashy material stockpiled outside Wasco -- still isn't clear.

A town hall meeting in Wasco Thursday night gathered Oxnard city officials, environmental regulators and locals to address whether the eerie mountains off Gun Club Road pose any health risk.

Council member Larry Pearson organized the event to get answers about an estimated 72,000 tons of material stockpiled on land owned by the city of Oxnard. The site is used to process that city's sludge, or treated human and industrial sewage.

The trucking firm Oxnard contracts to haul waste to its facility, located eight miles northwest of Wasco city limits, has apparently created the stockpile, county environmental regulators say.

That firm, U.S.A. Transport Inc., didn't send a representative to Thursday's meeting.

This much was confirmed: The ashy material comes from a BP oil refinery in the Los Angeles area.

Exactly what's in it, however, remains a mystery.

Oxnard city officials insisted the material was not "fly ash," as some Kern County regulators believed. Fly ash is a caustic powder left over from burning oil, waste and other materials, according to federal regulators. It becomes hazardous at very high pH levels.

Instead, the heaps are "synthetic gypsum," said Robert Montgomery of Oxnard's wastewater division. He defined the gypsum as calcium sulfate.

But questions came up later when Blake Sanden, a farm adviser with UC Cooperative Extension, questioned how the gypsum was used. Oxnard officials had said it is mixed with sludge to treat the waste to high-quality levels.

"You need a hot alkaline material to stabilize sludge," Sanden said.

Montgomery agreed.

"If that's only calcium sulfate, the stuff is oxidized and dead," Sanden said. "You're not going to be able" to produce the heat needed to kill pathogens, he said.

Later, Shafter resident Tom Frantz asked more questions about the material's origin.

Discussion had already identified the ash as a byproduct of a sulfur-scrubbing process.

"So it came from an oil refinery," Frantz asked to a row of Oxnard representatives. "The sulfur came from oil products?"

"I don't know the answer to that question," said Boris Pastushenko, a consultant for Oxnard, who shortly before claimed "this product has been tested extensively by lots of prominent scientists."

Montgomery jumped in: "It's a product that comes (from) scrubbing to clean the air."

Frantz pushed again: So it's air pollution control residue?

Montgomery ducked. It's been analyzed, he said. The synthetic gypsum we use is a calcium sulfate.

Where's the paperwork? Frantz asked, before pressing on to the next question: It comes from burning something?

Not necessarily burning something, Montgomery and Pastushenko answered. Heat, they said, but not necessarily burning.

If the material were actually fly ash, which is a byproduct of refinery burning, it could be classified as hazardous.

In the end, Oxnard officials agreed to send all information they have regarding the material.

Andres Herrera, Oxnard's mayor pro tem, told Pearson he understood Wasco residents' concerns, and stressed he wanted to maintain good relations and clean up the site.

One Wasco resident who attended the meeting said she found it interesting, but was disappointed she "didn't find out what the stuff is.

"I just really don't think they know," said Laurie Rodriguez, as attendees spilled outside into the warm night air.

Lindsay police await hybrid cruisers

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, June 16, 2005

The Lindsay Police Department is awaiting the arrival of hybrid Toyota Highlanders to replace its fleet with clean-burning cars.

The gas/electric car is in short supply, but once the cars are available the police department will use a clean air grant to purchase the cars and convert them into police cruisers.

It's a case of having the money but not enough of the clean-burning cars available, city officials said this week.

City employees have been calling every Toyota dealership in California and neighboring states to get on a waiting list for the cars.

Refiners will upgrade controls

by Nicholas Yulico, staff writer
TriValley Herald, Friday, June 17, 2005

Valero Energy Corp., Tesoro Corp., Sunoco and Suncor Energy have agreed to install nearly $1 billion in new pollution controls at 18 oil refineries across the country, including those in Benicia and Martinez, as part of a settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA, which announced the settlement Thursday, targeted the refineries for alleged violations of clean air laws.

Valero and Tesoro, both based in San Antonio, will invest about $700 million in projects aimed at reducing emissions at 13 refineries across the country. Sunoco, based in Philadelphia, will pay $285 million to install such technologies at its four refineries. Suncor will spend up to $6 million to upgrade a former Valero refinery in Denver. Valero and Sunoco also will pay civil penalties of $8.5 million.

The refineries' efforts are expected to significantly reduce annual emissions of nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide.

At the Benicia refinery, Valero plans to improve its leak detection and reporting program to more closely monitor benzene emissions from its wastewater treatment plant and improve its monitoring of flaring — a process routinely used in the petroleum industry to dispose of flammable waste gases.

The Golden Eagle refinery in Martinez, which Valero sold to Tesoro in 2002, will make similar changes. Also, Valero will install a $60 million scrubber at its Benicia plant, which aims to wash out sulphur from emissions at the plant.

Marilyn Bardet, a founding member of the Good Neighbor Steering Committee in Benicia — a group that challenged the environmental review of Valero's planned expansion of the Benicia refinery — said the agreement was a step in the right direction.

"We're happy with anything they do to improve the quality of air that we breathe everyday. The question is, how do we verify scientifically that they have actually improved our air?" she said.

Bardet's group has been fighting for the installation of air monitors that will give residents real-time access to the air quality in the city.

Oil Refiner Valero to Pay Penalty, Reduce Pollution

The company agrees to a $711-million EPA settlement. Sunoco reaches a similar deal.
L.A. Times, Friday, June 17, 2005
From Reuters

Leading independent oil refiner Valero Energy Corp. has agreed to spend $700 million to cut pollution at its refineries, the Justice Department and the Environmental Protection Agency said Thursday.

Valero also has agreed to pay a $5.5-million civil penalty and spend an additional $5.5 million to further cut emissions and to support environmental projects in communities where its refineries are located, federal regulators said.
A similar settlement was reached Thursday between refiner Sunoco Inc. and the EPA.

Refineries covered by Valero's agreement are in California, Colorado, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas. Refineries affected by Sunoco's agreement are in Ohio, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania.

Those states were also parties to the settlement.

Valero's agreement is part of the EPA's Petroleum Refinery Initiative, which began in 1998 to bring U.S. refineries into compliance with the Clean Air Act. The settlements are negotiated under a lawsuit brought by the Justice Department.

The EPA said it had negotiated settlements with companies operating 65% of U.S. refining capacity.

Valero Chief Executive Bill Greehey said the vast majority of issues covered by the settlement with the EPA were problems with permits that preceded Valero's purchase of the refineries.

"We're happy to have the agreement completed, and we're looking forward to working with the EPA and the states to implement it," Greehey said. "Our emphasis was on providing proven state-of-the-art hardware and technology to reduce emissions, rather than focusing on operational restrictions to achieve emission reduction targets."

San Antonio-based Valero has expanded rapidly since 1998 by purchasing 13 refineries in the U.S., Canada and Aruba. The company agreed to acquire rival Premcor Inc., which operates four refineries, for $6.9 billion this year. That deal is awaiting approval by the Federal Trade Commission.

Philadelphia-based Sunoco agreed to spend $285 million on pollution-reducing equipment at its refineries and pay a $3-million civil penalty as well as $3.9 million on other environmental projects.

As part of the Valero agreement, Tesoro Corp., which purchased Valero's Golden Eagle refinery in Martinez, Calif., in 2002, will pay for projects to reduce emissions there.

The projects at the Valero refineries will be phased in over the next seven years and have been included in capital budget planning by the company, Greehey said.

Hot for hybrids

Power of chic adds fuel to the drive for gas-electric vehicles

By Gina Kim -- Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Friday, June 17, 2005

Hybris: n. Excessive pride based solely on one's hybrid car.

It isn't technically a word yet, but the folks at a trendy online newsletter thought the hybrid phenomenon was too big to ignore.

There they are, with names like Prius, Insight and RX 400h, parked in the prime spots at the hot Los Angeles restaurants - right next to the Bentleys, Jaguars and Rovers.

"It's superficial, but those are the cars that are parked in front," said Crystal Meers, an editor for DailyCandy.com. "Cars are a status symbol in L.A., and living in L.A., it's obvious to see the cult that's sprung up around hybrids."

Hybrids, vehicles that run on a combination of gasoline and electricity, are morphing from tree-hugger leftymobiles to cool chic, especially in California. The Golden State is at the forefront of the hybrid-as-fashion craze, with 42 percent of hybrid owners living here. Thirteen percent of Toyota's hybrid sales are in Northern California alone.

You'll find Jack Nicholson and Cameron Diaz getting more per miles per gallon in a hybrid, but more and more, hybrids are being found in the garages of the mainstream.

Janelle Alvstad-Mattson, office manager of a West Sacramento computer-repair company, says she feels like a star while cruising around in her Toyota Prius, which she named Harmony.

"To be quite honest, one of the reasons I wanted one was because it looked really cool," she said.

Alvstad-Mattson, 27, of Davis, wanted a hybrid for years. After convincing her husband that they should trade in their two cars for one, they did just that in February 2004.

Problem was, the new car didn't come in for six months - demand at times has exceeded supply.

Alvstad-Mattson put her name on waiting lists at three area dealers for a bright-red Prius and then called every other week for months.

"As month five was creeping in, I said, 'I don't even care if it's white. If one comes in, I'll take it,' " Alvstad-Mattson recalled thinking.

But then it came, the Prius that now boasts a sticker declaring, "Plant seeds and sing songs."

"I think that she - I call her a 'she' - that she's really at one with the Earth in the best way that she can be," said Alvstad-Mattson, who claims she is not a "hippie granola chick."

"I think it's good to be at peace with Mother Nature."

While still a small fraction of total car sales - half a percent in 2004 - hybrids have moved beyond simply being a technological curiosity. By 2010, hybrids will be 3 1/2 percent of the auto market, according to J.D. Power and Associates.

"It's not a passing trend," said Ron Cogan, editor and publisher of the Green Car Journal. "We've passed that point of no return."

Sales of the largest SUVs have dropped by 15 percent this year as gas prices have soared. Some hybrid owners say that has fueled a change in perception: Once considered the car of choice for extreme green types, hybrids are now the subject of envy by SUV drivers tired of forking over $50 to fill up.

Roger Loghry, 45, of Yuba City is a 6-foot-5, 300-pound Repub-lican who wouldn't use the term "environmentalist" to describe himself.

"I bought it purely because I was enamored with the fact that I could save so much money on gas," said Loghry, who works as a product manager for a high school sports Web site. "If my SUV could have gotten 45 to 50 miles a gallon, I would have never gotten rid of it."

Loghry, who drives 125 miles a day, traded in his Ford Explorer in December for a sea-green Toyota Prius when he couldn't rationalize a monthly gas bill that sometimes hit $800.

And although he loves his car, mostly for the smug feeling that comes over him at the gas pump, he hasn't become one of those hybrid owners.

"I don't pay that much attention to other drivers, but the Prius people honk at me or flash their lights at me," he said about his road encounters with other hybrid owners.

"I guess I am in the secret club but I haven't filled out my membership card."

The club isn't very secret anymore.

About 87,000 hybrid cars were sold last year, and industry analysts expect that number to grow to 222,000 this year, even though hybrids still cost thousands of dollars more than the similar gasoline-only versions, said Anthony Pratt, a senior manager at J.D. Power and Associates.

The expansion of hybrids into models such as the Toyota Highlander, Dodge Ram, Chevrolet Malibu, Nissan Altima, Lexus RX 400h and even a Toyota Sienna minivan means that the cross between gasoline-powered and electric vehicles is here to stay.

"Before, you had to sacrifice performance and you got into a car that looked more like a science project than a practical car to drive," Pratt said. "Now you can get it in almost every segment."

Ann Kohl, vice president of transportation and air quality for the Environmental Council of Sacramento, put her money where her mouth was when she signed up for a seven-month wait for her hybrid last year.

"I'm concerned about air quality and the end of cheap oil," said Kohl, 71, of Sacramento. "I felt I ought to practice what I preached."

While Kohl's husband, who was worried about legroom, took some convincing, now there is a discussion each morning about who gets the keys to the green Prius.

"There's a little negotiation sometimes," Kohl said. "If he goes to the grocery store, that's a big incentive for me to let him have the car."

Hybrids still cost more, thousands of dollars more than the gasoline versions - an amount that would take years to make up in lower gas costs.

For instance, a gasoline-powered Honda Civic costs about $15,800 while a hybrid version runs about $20,200, according to J.D. Power and Associates. A Honda Accord with a gasoline engine costs $21,600 while the hybrid is $30,800. And for the Lexus RX 400h, an SUV, the regular version is $39,500 while the hybrid is $51,100.

But that amount was negligible for Ryan Seo, 38, of Elk Grove, who didn't want to wear out his red convertible BMW when he took a job as a pharmacy manager in Fairfield last year.

With an hourlong commute each way, Seo decided it made sense to get a Prius, even though he finds the car rather unattractive.

"I don't really like the way it looks. It's small and kind of dinky-looking," he said. "But it just kind of grows on you."

Seo has since sold his Beemer and has fallen in love with his hybrid, much like people who love their three-legged dogs.

"I'm not a big environmentalist," said Seo. "I'm more of a practicalist."

The owners

* The average age of hybrid buyers is 53.9, about six years older than the average car buyer.

* Close to 40 percent of hybrid owners have an advanced degree or higher, compared with 20 percent of average car buyers.
* Hybrid buyers are generally male.
* Hybrid owners tend to own their cars longer.
* Those who buy hybrids fall into three categories:
1) They want an environmentally friendly car.
2) They like technology.
3) They believe they will see a savings in the long run because of lower gas consumption.
Source: J.D. Power and Associates

Practical views
"Your mileage gets better as you figure out how to drive. We've gone from down in the 30s (miles per gallon). ... Now we're up to 47 and we're aiming toward 55."
- Ann Kohl, 71, Sacramento
"Everybody I know talks about the Prius from the point of view they want to save the Earth. I bought it purely from an economic point of view. I can fit in it and I can save a lot on gas."
- Roger Loghry, 45, Yuba City
"You see a BMW convertible and it's sexy. It's got big wheels and a big engine. But after driving my hybrid for about a year, I really love that car."
- Ryan Seo, 38, Elk Grove

Refiners reach $1 billion pollution settlement

By JOHN HEILPRIN
Published in the Orange County Register and the San Francisco Chronicle
June 17, 2005

WASHINGTON, (AP) -- Four companies — Valero, Sunoco, Tesoro and Suncor Energy — will install nearly $1 billion in new pollution controls at 18 oil refineries in settlements with the government and seven states over alleged violations of clean air laws.

Valero and Sunoco, responsible for most of the improvements, also will pay fines totaling $8.5 million. The refineries covered in consent decrees filed Thursday in federal courts in Texas and Pennsylvania represent about 15 percent of the nation's refining capacity.

Valero, based in San Antonio, estimates it will cost more than $700 million to install smokestack scrubbers and chemical additives at 13 refineries in six states. That includes $5 million to $6 million that Suncor Energy of Calgary, Alberta, will spend on a former Valero refinery in Denver, Valero spokeswoman Mary Rose Brown said. Tesoro, also based in San Antonio, will spend an unspecified amount to clean up a former Valero refinery in Martinez, Calif.

"We really do believe we are in compliance with the Clean Air Act. Most of these infractions occurred before Valero ever owned or operated these facilities," Brown said.

Once all that work is completed within a decade, emissions of smog-forming nitrogen oxides are expected to drop by 4,000 tons a year and acid rain-causing sulfur dioxide by 16,000 tons, the Environmental Protection Agency said.

Sunoco, based in Philadelphia, will install $285 million in new controls at four refineries in three states to cut their annual emissions of nitrogen oxides by 4,500 tons and sulfur dioxide by 19,500 tons. Both pollutants also cause serious respiratory ailments and worsen cases of childhood asthma.

Valero also will pay a $5.5 million civil penalty and spend an added $5.5 million on environmental projects. Sunoco will pay a $3 million civil penalty and spend $3.9 million on projects.

The settlements are the 14th and 15th reached since December 2000, the last full month of Bill Clinton's presidency, that resulted from EPA investigations into refineries' air quality starting in the mid-1990s.

They are intended to enforce the Clean Air Act, including the 1977 amendments known as "new source review." That program was designed to force industrial sources of pollution to install state-of-the-art emission controls when they make significant repairs or modifications.

"Sixty-five percent of our nation's petroleum refining capacity now has committed to make significant improvements that will benefit everyone," Thomas V. Skinner, EPA's acting enforcement chief, said Thursday.

Kelly A. Johnson, an acting assistant attorney general, said the Justice Department "will continue to aggressively pursue actions like these" across the refining industry.

EPA's inspector general, however, said in a report last year that the agency is doing a poor job of managing the documents that companies submit as part of agreements. Environmentalists also have complained that deadlines in prior settlements were repeatedly extended.

Valero's affected refineries are in Benicia and Wilmington, Calif.; Corpus Christi (two refineries), Houston, Sunray, Texas City and Three Rivers, Texas; Krotz Springs and St. Charles Parish, La.; Ardmore, Okla; and Paulsboro, N.J.

Sunoco's affected refineries are in Philadelphia and Marcus Hook, Pa.; Toledo, Ohio; and Tulsa, Okla.

Refiners will upgrade controls

by Nicholas Yulico, staff writer
TriValley Herald, Friday, June 17, 2005

Valero Energy Corp., Tesoro Corp., Sunoco and Suncor Energy have agreed to install nearly $1 billion in new pollution controls at 18 oil refineries across the country, including those in Benicia and Martinez, as part of a settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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Valero and Tesoro, both based in San Antonio, will invest about $700 million in projects aimed at reducing emissions at 13 refineries across the country. Sunoco, based in Philadelphia, will pay $285 million to install such technologies at its four refineries. Suncor will spend up to $6 million to upgrade a former Valero refinery in Denver. Valero and Sunoco also will pay civil penalties of $8.5 million.

The refineries' efforts are expected to significantly reduce annual emissions of nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide.

At the Benicia refinery, Valero plans to improve its leak detection and reporting program to more closely monitor benzene emissions from its wastewater treatment plant and improve its monitoring of flaring — a process routinely used in the petroleum industry to dispose of flammable waste gases.

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Bardet's group has been fighting for the installation of air monitors that will give residents real-time access to the air quality in the city.

AEP Announces Pollution Measures at Plants

S.F. Chronicle, Friday, June 17, 2005

Winfield, W.Va. (AP) -- American Electric Power Co. said Friday it plans to install pollution control equipment at coal-fired plants in five states as part of an ongoing $3.7 billion effort to reduce emissions.

Flue gas desulfurization systems, commonly known as scrubbers, will be installed at the Columbus, Ohio-based utility's John E. Amos plant in Winfield, Muskingum River plant near Beverly, Ohio, Big Sandy plant near Louisa, Ky., and Conesville plant in Conesville, Ohio.

Scrubbers reduce emissions of soot-producing sulfur dioxide, AEP said in a news release.

Scrubbers at the company's H.W. Pirkey Plant near Hallsville, Texas, will be upgraded. The plant has had the scrubbers since it began operating in 1985.

"That system consistently removes nearly 80 percent of (sulfur dioxide). This original equipment will be upgraded to bring its removal rate into the 90-percent range," AEP said.

A selective catalytic reduction system also will be installed at the Conesville plant to reduce smog-forming nitrogen oxide emissions.

When the equipment is installed, the plants will be in compliance with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Air Interstate Rule, AEP said.

The rule covers 28 states, mostly east of the Mississippi River, and the District of Columbia. It requires most to cut emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide that can pollute across state lines. The EPA has said there would be up to $100 billion in yearly health benefits.

The projects are expected to be completed between 2007 and 2010, AEP said. The utility did not immediately say how much the projects will cost.

AEP has more than 5 million customers in 11 states, including West Virginia.

San Mateo library going for the green

New main building will be a model of environmental design

By Julia Scott, staff writer
TriValley Herald, Friday, June 17, 2005

SAN MATEO — Architect Jennifer Devlin remembers it clearly.

At an early design meeting for the new San Mateo Main Library in 2000, community members lined up to give the Planning Commission their feedback about the project.

"Then a woman raised her hand and asked, 'Are we going to build an environmentally sustainable library?' and people got excited," Devlin recalled.

The woman's comment generated such enthusiasm, it launched an effort that will make the new public library the largest "green" library in Northern California.

In their construction and operation, buildings are notorious consumers of energy. They radiate heat, waste gallons of water and pollute the air. A "green" building reconsiders every detail of a structure's design in terms of its impact on the environment, and community members were vocal about their support for such a design.

Using the citizen feedback, planners set out to build a library that was in every way the opposite of the library it will replace at 55 W. Third Ave., often described as a concrete "bunker" with cramped seating and small windows that kept the sunlight out.

For their new library — the most popular public building in San Mateo — residents said they wanted big windows that opened, lots of sunlight and a general feeling of space.

Green expertise

The city hired Devlin's architecture firm, known for its "green" building designs, and asked it to incorporate residents' suggestions into a structure that met the highest environmental standard the city could afford.

The result is a three-story building design with bright reading rooms, tall windows and skylights, several levels of underground parking to cut down on blacktop, and an energy-saving technical design that will cost the city less to operate — even though it will be two and a half times larger than the old library.

When it opens in summer 2006, someone engrossed in a book will be able to read by natural light 95 percent of the time. Motion-sensing overhead lights will turn off when they're not needed. Patrons won't have to breathe stale, recycled air: A special ventilation system will heat the building using outside air and cool it on hot days with windows that open automatically.

Low-flow plumbing fixtures will help library patrons conserve water, and automated features, including a curbside book drop that carries books into the building and computer check-out centers, will save them time.

Certified green

The library will achieve a Silver LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating from the U.S. Green Building Council, which sets the national standard. With the savings they can create, Devlin said it's not surprising that "green" buildings have become increasingly attractive to homeowners and project developers, especially in California.

"Five or six years ago, I don't think a client ever came to us and asked for a 'green' building. Now, almost every project that we have, the client wants [one—," Devlin said. "The state energy crisis put the issue in the public's eye."

That's true of San Mateo County as well. Several sustainable building projects, including the Hewlett Foundation headquarters and the county's forensic lab, were completed in the past five years, and other "green" public buildings are in the design stages in such cities as Portola Valley, Pacifica and Redwood City, according to the county's RecycleWorks program.

The library's construction has been a boon to the community in other, unexpected ways. To minimize the environmental impact of transporting construction materials from abroad, the site will use concrete made in Davenport. Almost all of the old building has been recycled into other projects; the city was even able to spread the dirt collected from digging the new underground parking garage in the nearby Shoreline Parks.

K.G. Ouye, managing director of the new library development, said reducing the new library's operating costs was important, but it wasn't the main reason the City Council decided to "green" the library.

"It was the right thing to do," she said.

Editorial, Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, June 16, 2005

City can't ignore bikes, scooters

The city is doing its best to keep planning up with growth, but there is one area where the city needs to step up efforts: making it easier and safer to leave the car at home and walk, ride a bike or an electric scooter.

Because Visalia is so flat, it would be a good place to bicycle to work or the store for much of the year.

Electric scooters - the kind that go up to about 15 mph - would be another good alternative.

Both would protect air quality, ease congestion and save people money.

But trying to ride a bicycle on most city streets is a dangerous proposition. There are no bike lanes on many of the main streets, particularly in older parts of town.

Bicyclists have to contend with moving traffic and the dangers of parked cars backing out of diagonal spaces or drivers opening doors into the bicyclist's path.

Electric scooters face the same problems - plus they are banned on streets where the speed limit is more than 25 mph. Considering that bicycles go as fast as the scooters, the law makes no sense, but it's there.

So, what's the solution?

First, make separate bike paths as important a part of the transportation system as roads.

In new developments, the city is including many bike paths - but they need to connect to others to allow easy access to downtown and other business and shopping areas.

The old Santa Fe railbed would make a good path on the east side of town. As streets are widened or repaved, add bike lanes.

Second, take a look at laws such as those applying to electric scooters and see what can be done to make it easier for people to use them and be legal.

The result can be a cleaner and quieter town with less of a wait at stoplights.

Stockton Record, Editorial, Friday, June 17, 2005

ACE deal has a clean [sic]

When the air is bad, the prices will be good for Altamont Commuter Express riders.

Good as in free.

ACE is offering free morning rides on the first five weekdays, excluding holidays, this summer when air quality is poor and expected to exceed federal health standards.

It's part of the Spare the Air campaign.

The caveat: Those rides are only free when the air quality is poor in the Bay Area. The program doesn't kick in when air pollution is at a high level in the Central Valley.

"That's something we're very aware of," said Mike Steenburgh, ACE's marketing director. "From the public's view, we know that it's going to seem a bit strange to say the program only is available when the air is bad over in the Bay Area.

"But the funding is available now, and it's a benefit for our riders. We will talk with the air quality district in the Valley to see if a similar program can start. We have a directive from our board to pursue it."

Here's how the free ridership program will work:

Bay Area Air Quality Management District officials will determine by 1:30 p.m. whether the next day will be a Spare the Air Day. They'll notify officials from ACE and 20 other Bay Area transit agencies, including BART.

ACE officials will notify riders that the next morning's ride will be available at no cost. Steenburgh said it's important to inform ACE riders on their way back to San Joaquin County.

The free rides could occur from June to October, which are typically the months when Bay Area smog is the worst.

The ACE plan also includes a $25 voucher for those who hold monthly passes and ride the train on the five Spare the Air Days.

ACE operates three daily commuter trains between Stockton and San Jose, with about 1,300 customers using the service each weekday. There are stops in Lathrop, Tracy, Livermore, Pleasanton, Fremont and Santa Clara.

ACE will be reimbursed for the fares through the $3.9 million program for the 21 transportation agencies.

There has been quantifiable success with the program in the past. BART offered free rides on the first five days of heavy smog last summer and reported an 8 percent increase in ridership.

"We realize we're a bit different in this, because all of the other agencies involved are in the Bay Area, and much of our ridership originates in the Central Valley," Steenburgh said. "We're confident that the program will continue to succeed."

There's some irony, because Bay Area and Central Valley officials often have been at odds on the issue of air pollution, shooting blame in one another's direction.

This ridership program should help keep more automobiles off the road -- in the Valley and the Bay Area -- on key days. That sounds like a win-win for both regions.