County approves contract to repair landfill gas system

By JOEL HOOD
Modesto Bee, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2005

A grass fire Sunday that burned 40 acres around the old Geer Road landfill near Waterford damaged equipment that keeps methane gas from seeping out of the dump.
The Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors approved an emergency contract Tuesday night with Long Beach-based SCS Field Services to evaluate and repair the damage, estimated at $160,000.
The methane gas collection system is required by the state under terms of the landfill's closure agreement to prevent the build-up and release of the toxic gas.
The landfill was sealed in 1990.
Stanislaus County director of Public Works George Stillman said between 10 and 12 wells are believed to have been damaged in the fire, along with much of the system's plastic piping. Officials say about 25 percent of the system still is operating.
With much of the system down and low levels of methane gas being released into the air, the landfill is in violation of the agreement with the Central Valley Air Pollution Control District. The state has given county officials 30 days to repair the damage, but the county is seeking an extension.
Meanwhile, firefighters still are trying to determine what sparked the blaze. Of the 40 acres that were consumed, 13 were in the landfill. One structure, an abandoned, 500-square-foot building, also was destroyed.
Three firefighters suffered minor heat-related injuries, including one from the Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District who was briefly hospitalized.

Compromise On Dairy Emissions?

Valley Voice Newspaper, August 18, 2005

San Joaquin Valley - There may be a compromise brewing over the dairy emission issue depending on your point of view.

A new group of dairymen, represented by the California Dairy Campaign and California Milk Producers, have been talking to local Air Board officials this week hoping to come up with some new plan valley dairymen can live with.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board will have their monthly board meeting this week - Thursday August 18 - but the agenda reflects no discussion of what has become a very hot potato in the valley - the executive officer's estimate of dairy emissions. Critics of the estimate at 19.3 lbs. of VOCs per cow per year want the matter taken up by the board. Many dairymen believe the estimate is too high - an estimate that will be used by the agency to mandate controls on larger dairies to cut air pollution and help clean valley skies.

But if the staff of the APCD has not put the issue on the agenda for action - the board can't take any action either way.

Board member Steve Worthley - a Tulare County Supervisor - told the Voice that he feels conflicted over the issue coming from the state's largest dairy county. "I know they believe the number is too high but I feel the real test comes when we talk about what control measures we put on" and all the give and take that comes in that process. In these negotiations with the ag industry there has been a history of compromise on both sides as to the extent and timing for required technology - often with federal incentives thrown in.

Further, Worthley worries that if the board sides too quickly with the dairy industry on this issue it gives those who favor widening the board membership adding fuel to a fire as proposed by Senator Machado. Worthley and others want to keep local elected officials in charge.

Worthley says using the 19.6 emission factor doesn't add too many dairies that would otherwise be covered in Tulare County anyway since all dairies over 1000 cows are automatically required

to control emissions. Only 17 other Tulare dairies are added to the list because of the higher emission factor, he says.

Western United Dairymen are upset with high emission factor they say is not consistent with good science.

They cite new emails from the authors of the Hobbs dairy study used by the district to justify a high emission factor on their work done in England.

Email letters obtained by the Voice show that two of the authors of the study appear to agree with local dairy interests that their findings were in no way final and shouldn't be used to make air pollution policy. One mentioned that the husbandry practices in England where the study was carried out is completely different to California dairy operations. Tests done in California by UC scientists and other show lower emission factors than are being proposed by the air district.

Moreover, dairy industry critic says the district's emission factors include cow belching in their figures - something dairymen can hardly be held accountable for.

On the other hand, Executive Director of California Dairy Campaign Kevin Abernathy and others met with Air Board director David Crow this week before the meeting and Abernathy says it's likely the group will speak at this week's meeting. "We're working with the district in a collaborative effort," he says noting that "where we started may not be where we end up" sounding a note of optimism in the discussion. "There is a lot that has happened in the past 72 hours."

The two dairy groups represent about half the milk produced in the state, says Abernathy.

The other major industry group, Western United Dairymen, sued the district over the emission issue and may yet and hinted in their newsletter recently that some "mystery" dairy group was quietly negotiating with Mr. Crow over the dairy emission issue.

State's First Ethanol Plant Opens in Goshen

Pacific Ethanol announces purchase and possible expansion

Valley Voice Newspaper, August 18, 2005

Goshen - Another first for California - and for Tulare County - was ushered in with federal and state dignitaries as Phoenix Bio Industries and Western Milling officially opened the state's first ethanol plant in Goshen Aug. 12. The plant, which was constructed on Western Milling's property just east of Highway 99 in Goshen, will produce 25 to 30 million gallons of ethanol a year and has expansion capabilities in place to produce between 45 and 50 million gallons by next year.

"With this plant, we are showing that we are doing our best to take care of the environment and to clean our Valley's air," said Rick Eastman, president of Phoenix Bio Industries.

Ethanol provides a clean-burning renewable fuel oxygenate and a renewable fuel that can reduce reliance on imported oil, while increasing the domestic fuel supply. According to the Pew Center for Global Climate Change, ethanol and other renewable fuels are the single most cost effective solution to global warming in the near future. Ethanol reduces carbon dioxide, or CO2 emissions by 30 percent compared to gasoline.

Rhys Roth, co-director of Climate Solutions, a Washington state-based environmental group offering practical solutions to global warming, called the Tulare County ethanol plant a model for the rest of the nation.

"This plant is a model for a pro-jobs, pro-agriculture, pro-environment solution," Rhys said. "I feel for too long we have shouted at each other…and no doubt we will continue to have disagreements. But this proves that we have a golden opportunity to set aside our differences to develop something good for our farmers, the environment and the community. The plant is a renewable model we can carry into the future."

Kevin Kruse, whose family started Western Milling and produces the Kruse Perfection brand of feeds, described taking on the ethanol project.

“Two years ago we decided to join Phoenix Bio Industries in building an ethanol plant to help meet California’s energy needs,” Kruse said. “It will also reduce our reliance on imported grains from the Midwest.”

Ethanol’s by-product, wet distiller’s grain, provides a high protein feed for local dairy and cattle farmers. Since distillers grain, which is the spent corn that gone through the distilling process, can be fed wet to animals, this ethanol plant will be more energy efficient using one-third less natural gas in the process. Other plants built in California also will use less gas and be more energy efficient.

California’s Secretary of Agriculture, A.G. Kawamura, addressed the crowd, equating food security with homeland security and calling the convergence “energy security.”

“This plant is proof that we can redevelop what agriculture can be in California today and for this nation,” Kawamura said.

A featured speaker at the opening was federal Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns. Johanns had visited Fresno earlier in the day for part six of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s scheduled listening sessions concerning the 2007 Farm Bill. Johanns attended the ethanol plant opening event at the invitation of Congressman Devin Nunes.

“This is a remarkable week when you think of it,” Johanns said. “On Monday [Aug. 8, 2005] President Bush signed the energy bill into law, which had been in the works for more than four years. This factory is a great example of what the new law will do to help meet our energy needs.”

The National Energy Bill increases ethanol use by mandating an estimated five to eight billion gallons of ethanol and other renewable fuels be purchased by gasoline refiners by 2012.

Johanns also discussed additional benefits of the plant, including the creation of additional jobs, and an increased property tax base that can generate at least $600,000 in new tax revenue for state and local governments annually.

“Energy security is related to our economic security,” Johanns said. “I’d much rather see our energy come from the farm fields of America than from the oil fields of the Middle East.”

Former Secretary of State Bill Jones also spoke at the event. Jones is the founder and chairman of Pacific Ethanol, Inc., which announced the morning of the ribbon-cutting ceremony that it plans to acquire Phoenix Bio Industries. The Goshen plant has been valued at $40 million in an SCE filing by Pacific Ethanol.

Pacific Ethanol, Inc. became a publicly traded company in March. Its corporate mission is to become the West Coast’s leading marketer and producer of renewable fuels.

Jones acknowledged that while Goshen plant’s production represents less than five percent of the state’s ethanol demand, the Governor has the opportunity to make ethanol a viable part of life for Californians.

“This plant is the largest refinery for fuel built in California in a generation,” Jones said. “The governor has an opportunity to build the same kind of interest and enthusiasm we’ve seen here today and with members of his cabinet here in attendance, I hope that message is carried to him.”

California’s Resources Secretary, Mike Chrisman, also attended the event.

While 19 states have banned the use of MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether) as a fuel additive to increase octane levels in gasoline, California still allows it. Higher octane levels provide cleaner burning fuels that are more energy efficient.

California, likewise, requires a lesser percentage of ethanol in its fuel, under six percent, compared to most other states, which require 10 percent.

Should California increase its ethanol requirement to 10 percent, the estimated ethanol market in California alone would be 1.6 billion gallons, compared to about 900 million gallons today.

Pacific Ethanol's SCE filing notes the following about ethanol:

"The market price of ethanol is volatile and subject to significant fluctuations, which may cause our results of operations to fluctuate significantly. The market price of ethanol is somewhat dependent on the price of gasoline, which is in turn dependent on the price of petroleum. We cannot predict the future price of gasoline or oil and we may realize unprofitable prices for the sale of ethanol due to significant fluctuations in market prices. For example, the price of ethanol declined by approximately 25% from its 2004 average price per gallon in only three months from January 2005 through March 2005 and has reversed this decline and increased to approximately 25% above its 2004 average price per gallon in only four months from April 2005 through July 2005.

Member of the Board of Supervisors Steve Worthley hailed the project's economic impact locally - virtually the first fuel refinery built in the state in a long time where we appear to be running short on motor fuel every day. Asked if he was concerned about the pollution from trainloads of corn coming into the state to make the fuel here, Worthley said it was a push since "trains are coming now with corn to feed the cows" and now the corn will be used to make fuel and animal feed with healthier nutrient content delivered nearby to the cows.

If Pacific Ethanol decides to expand their Goshen ethanol plant significantly it could change it's planned purchase of 100 acres across the freeway from the airport for a new ethanol plant - the company has said would use cellulose waste material rather than feed corn as a feedstock to make ethanol. The company has an option on the land, says the firm's SCE filing. They continue to work on submittal of planned EIR on the Visalia project although with the new acquisition there is more uncertainty over the future of the Visalia Pacific Ethanol plant.

Ag News

Valley Voice Newspaper, August 18, 2005

Dairymen were reminded to get construction permits form the Valley Air District after the district issued violations to six valley dairies for building activity without a permit. Dairymen are in for more paper work as of October when all central valley dairies have to file waste discharge reports to ensure groundwater is protected from waste. The filings are sent to Central Valley Regional Water Control Board.

An ag industry fueled study on the socio-economic impacts of a proposed Valley Air District rule on **irrigation pumps** has paid off for farmers with the rule now allowing more time to comply with plans to switch from existing diesel and natural gas fired engines to electric. Farmers can now apply for funding from now until 2010 to comply helping to clean the air.

Dairy operations are using the same strategy increasingly adopting their own quality assurance programs demonstrating environmental stewardship. The California Dairy Quality Assurance Program has now certified more than 200 dairies statewide including some here featuring Environmentally Certified signs out front.

Consumers may have to gamble on complex new hybrid tax credit

BY Kathleen Pender
San Francisco Chronicle, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2005

The energy bill that President Bush signed Aug. 8 provides generous tax credits to people who buy new hybrids and other fuel-efficient vehicles starting next year.

For most people, the credit will be more valuable than the $2,000 tax deduction available on most new hybrids purchased this year. But the credits will start to decline after an automaker has sold 60,000 hybrids under the new program -- which could happen in the first half of next year for some manufacturers -- so buyers might have to act quickly next year to get the biggest benefit.
Of course, buyers who wait to buy a hybrid until early next year run the risk that demand at that time will be so high dealers raise their prices, which would offset the value of the tax credit.
Even with their better mileage and the new, more generous tax incentives, hybrids will still be more expensive to own over five years than their closest nonhybrid kin, according to a new report from Edmunds.com.
Like everything Congress cooks up these days, the credit is complicated, so complicated you have to wonder how effective the incentive will be and whether car salespeople will be able to explain it accurately to buyers.
The new tax credit will become available on most new hybrids purchased and registered on or after Jan. 1. (Used cars don't qualify.)
The credits will vary by model and will be based on two things: how much more fuel efficient the car is compared with an average 2002 model-year car of the same weight class and how much gasoline the car will save over its lifetime compared with a baseline car in the same weight class.
The latter provision will let some hybrid SUVs qualify for a tax credit, even though they guzzle more gas than smaller conventional cars that get no tax credit.
That provision "is something that was aggressively supported by the domestic automakers," says Jim Kliesch, a research associate with the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy.
Actual credits to come
The Internal Revenue Service will announce the actual credits later this year. The credits expire after 2010 for most vehicles.
Using specifications for this and next year's models and other data, Kleisch's organization has estimated credits for various cars.
Its estimates generally range from $600 for a Honda Accord Hybrid to $3, 150 for a Toyota Prius. The maximum available credit is $3,400.
For most people, the credit, which reduces taxes dollar for dollar, will be more valuable than the existing $2,000 deduction, which reduces income before taxes.
A $2,000 deduction reduces most people's tax bill by about $500 to $700.
A $2,000 tax credit will cut most people's tax bill by $2,000, with a big exception.
The credit will be of no value to people who owe alternative minimum tax, an alternative tax scheme that is trapping more Americans every year, says Glenn Greenberg, an enrolled agent in San Francisco.
If you expect to owe AMT next year and want a hybrid, you would be better off buying it this year and taking the $2,000 tax deduction, which expires at year's end.
Unlike the deduction, the new tax credit will also apply to cars that are leased, although you will probably have to sign a five-year lease to get the full credit, says George Jones, managing editor in the Washington of CCH, which publishes tax information.
The credits will apply to hybrids, which typically run on gasoline and electricity, and to vehicles powered by fuel cells, advanced "lean burn" diesel and other alternative power sources.
Both diesels and hybrids must meet certain emissions standards to qualify for the credit. While many hybrid vehicles already meet them, diesels do not, although some might meet them in model year 2007.
Shortly after an automaker has sold 60,000 vehicles (of all models) eligible for the new credit, the credit will start to shrink -- eventually to zero -- for future sales of cars from that automaker.
For example, Toyota expects its hybrid sales for 2006 will reach 60,000 in the second quarter. As a result, all Toyota hybrids sold in the first, second and third quarters of next year will qualify for 100 percent of their respective tax credits, says Toyota spokeswoman Nancy Hubbell.
After that, the credit falls to 50 percent in the next two quarters, 25 percent in the next two quarters, and then to zero.
Early hybrid start
Companies like Toyota and Honda, which got an early start in hybrids, will run out of tax credits before companies that were late to the game, says Kleisch.
Hubbell says the new credits will pose communication problems for Toyota and its dealers.

"We need to make sure that once these values are established, they have to communicate it properly to customers," she says. "It will be fine for the first three quarters. We will say everyone who buys a hybrid will qualify. After that, it gets a little dicey. If you ordered a car on Sept. 29, but it wasn't delivered until Oct. 3, do you qualify?"

Toyota has not seen a falloff in hybrid sales as people await the new tax incentives.

"People bought hybrids for a lot of reasons prior to the tax credit," Hubbell says.

"With the California decision last week to let hybrids into the (carpool lanes), our Prius sales were up 35 percent in California over the weekend."

In San Jose, hybrids park free at downtown meters and in city lots.

Mike Chung, a market analyst with Edmunds.com, says the new tax credit will shrink but won't wipe out the premium people pay for hybrids, which is typically $4,000 to $6,000.

Edmunds recently calculated the cost to own four hybrid models versus their closest nonhybrid kin over five years. It included the purchase price (less the estimated tax credit for hybrids), taxes, fees, insurance, maintenance and fuel costs, but not depreciation.

It concluded that over five years, it would cost about $2,700 more to own a Ford Escape Hybrid than an Escape nonhybrid.

For Hondas, it would cost $4,249 more to own an Accord Hybrid and $2,417 more to own a four-door Civic Hybrid versus their respective nonhybrids.

For Toyotas, owning a Prius would cost $3,436 more than a Corolla, but $2, 100 less than a Camry.

Chung says that when hybrids were new, they depreciated faster than comparable nonhybrids, but now that they have become more popular, they are depreciating more slowly. If that trend continues, hybrids would become cheaper to own over the long haul.

He says that depending on make, model and options, some hybrid prices could escalate when the new credits become available.

"When the new redesigned Prius came out, we saw (some) dealers charging (up to) $4,000 over sticker price" in California. Those premiums have mostly disappeared, but they could resurface.

Sound and fury in the garden

Tired of those noisy leaf blowers? Let's try quieter plants.

By Emily Green, Times Staff Writer
LA Times, August 18, 2005

IN a Hollywood film, the garden surrounding an ideal American home would typically have a thick, cool lawn, sculpted hedge, a flowering tree with a circle of marigolds planted around the base. On the soundtrack, there might be bird song, squeals of children playing, maybe the squeak of a porch door.

The impact is so appealing that it could make an Eskimo set up a lemonade stall. It's even half true. For the most part, our streets are every bit as presentable as the ones in the movies. Reality only departs the ideal with the audio. In real life, the prevailing sound is more likely to be a 400-decibel quartet of lawn mower, leaf blower, weed whacker and pruning saw.

Anyone who has bought into the look and only later discovered the sound will recognize the irony. You've attained your dream home, and it's unlivable.

First comes defiance - phoning the police to find that, as is the case in the city of Los Angeles, noise regulations allow lawn crews to work from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. Then comes anger, when your neighbor won't stop weed-whacking during your daughter's wedding. Then comes acceptance.

You call the double-glazing company and decide that outdoor living was a fiction sold by sections like this.

The search for a solution can be an exercise in frustration. National legislation is unlikely. Not everyone is as continually assaulted by garden noise as Southern Californians. People in Michigan don't wake up to the roar of lawn mowers on Christmas morning.

Locally, it takes the kind of neighborhood generally referred to as an "enclave" to produce meaningful noise restrictions. Across most of the Southland, one person's high holy day is his neighbor's day to do yard work.

The likelihood that garden noise will breed enemies is not only predictable, but high. On a street with 11 homes per block, and garden noise immediate from across and behind, or from 33 properties, a resident on a street with lawns and sculpted hedges could expect as much as 33 hours of garden noise every week.

There is recourse for noise from only one of the tools: leaf blowers. Los Angeles banned gas-powered leaf blowers, largely to reduce air pollution. However, the ban seems to have escaped notice of almost every mow-and-blow crew in the city. Try calling the LAPD's Leaf Blower Hotline, (800) 996-CITY, and you get recorded options to report cracked sidewalks, dead animals, potholes, blocked storm drains, traffic problems, burnt-out street lights, illegal dumping and any number of urban complaints - except, that is, leaf blowers.

Some argue that garden noise is our fault. We can't expect yard workers to rake for what we pay them. Others contend that cheap lawn care is part of the black economy of undocumented workers and outside legislative influence.

But is it really so far gone? Do we really have to close the earning gap and solve immigration for a day's peace in our gardens? At the risk of sounding like Tony Blair circa 1997, there is a third way. We could grow quieter plants.

As odd as it seems, there are such things as noisy plants. A simple solution is to look at plants not just for their appearance, but for what it will take to maintain them.

How helpful it would be if garden centers that sold plants put tags on them specifying not only the amount of sun and water needed, but also the amount of noise generated by the maintenance. The tag for a flat of typical lawn sod could read: "Full sun, regular water and more decibels than a Ted Nugent concert."

But they don't. Noise calculations are up to us. As a rule of thumb, if it has to be cut often, it's noisy. For example, grass is easily the noisiest plant. If you love lawn between your toes, and you can't teach your toddler to walk in a cactus garden, then you must have it. But maybe you don't need so much that baby will never have an uninterrupted afternoon nap.

Consider only keeping grass where you use it. Imagine if in our frontyards and parkways, where lawn is mainly ornamental, grass were replaced by shrubs, mulch or gravel and trees. The 33 hours of noise every week could be cut to 16 1/2 right there.

Edges. By replacing the lawn bordering on sidewalks and streets with different groundcovers, say a mixture of gravel and dymondia, it could be watered less and grow less. Edging with a weed whacker, a tool that manages to combine the worst aspects of a swarm of irate hornets and a dentist's drill, could be done once a month instead of once a week. Or even every four months.

The best way to put leaf blowers out of business is to learn to love leaves. Forget the marigolds under the flowering tree. Forget grass under the tree. Instead, try keeping the shaded area under the leaf canopy mulched, and the tree will do what nature intended: become self-mulching. Soon you will have birds feeding on the worms and grubs in the mulch, and bird song instead of an 85-decibel roar.

Sometimes it's not our plants that need changing, but our aesthetic. Hedges are only noisy if we sculpt them with buzz saws every week. Our standard plants - box, ficus, Carolina cherry, holly, oleander, Texas privet - all seem to need constant pruning because we fertilize so heavily and then water until our gutters runneth over.

Left to their own devices, these are actually hardy plants. They need cosseting when they are first put in, but once established, they should need only occasional water. Pruning could be done quarterly.

Once the plant is easier to shape, it's worth devoting time to hand-cutting the hedge to put enough variation in the surface that it doesn't become a plate for dust and spider webs. The slight unevenness allows for a pleasing play of light and shadow.

There is no better way to spend a drowsy afternoon. As leaves rustle in the afternoon breeze, it may hit you that this is, indeed, the American dream.

Los Angeles Times, Guest Commentary, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2005

Tainted 'justice' at the EPA

A proposed policy ignores pollution's effects on low-income and minority communities in deciding which areas need help.

By Manuel Pastor, Bill Gallegos and Michele Prichard

THE ENVIRONMENTAL Protection Agency quietly released a draft plan in July on "environmental justice" - how to deal equitably with the effects of environmental problems on communities of people. But, in fact, the proposed policy ignores race and income - two main factors - in identifying areas that need help. The EPA instead takes a sort of "colorblind" approach. That might not be an issue if all communities were equally affected. But they are not.

The disproportionate exposure of minority and low-income communities to environmental hazards has been amply documented, particularly in Southern California.

In Los Angeles County, for instance, a research team from Occidental College and UC Santa Cruz found that African Americans are about 1½ times more likely and Latinos twice as likely as whites to be living in neighborhoods near hazardous waste treatment, storage, transfer and disposal facilities. The pattern isn't simply a result of minorities and low-income residents choosing to move to cheaper, but higher-risk, neighborhoods. These researchers also found that such facilities were usually placed in neighborhoods already predominantly minority and working class.

THE PATTERN of inequity holds for air pollution. In the five-county Southern California region, African Americans are a third more likely and Latinos are nearly twice as likely than whites to be living in a neighborhood containing a facility that emits what the EPA terms "high-priority pollutants."

And in a recent California-wide analysis that used EPA data, researchers from Occidental, UC Santa Cruz and Brown University found that California census tracts with the highest estimated cancer risk were about two-thirds racial or ethnic minorities.

The reasons for the disparity are complex, but one important factor is the lack of political power in many low-income and minority communities. Projects more environmentally damaging are often placed where they will meet the least resistance. Low-income communities are less likely to vote and less likely to know how to influence decision-makers.

A 1994 presidential executive order mandated action to address the inequities. Although progress was sometimes halting under the Clinton administration, environmental justice advocates generally felt they were at least given access to the policy-making process.

Environmental justice, however, seems to have stalled under the Bush administration. The EPA's inspector general issued a report last year criticizing the agency for failing to follow the intent of the 1994 executive order. The agency's advisory committee on environmental justice has not met in more than 18 months.

The draft plan seems to continue the EPA's recent move away from environmental justice. Meanwhile, the public review of the proposal appears to have been designed to minimize objections. A woefully inadequate 15-day public comment period - extended 12 days after protests by 70 congressional Democrats, among others - was provided, but no public hearings were held.

California, a state where "minorities" constitute a majority and where the data on environmental inequality by race and income is clear, has a special interest in persuading the EPA to rethink its approach. State officials have launched comprehensive efforts to further document disparities, calculate risks and find solutions. The South Coast Air Quality Management District has likewise adopted guidelines so that populations of color and low-income neighborhoods will not continue to be the dumping ground for a disproportionate amount of pollution.

The EPA's "colorblind," one-size-fits-all proposal would turn back the clock and threaten the substantial progress by state and local officials and community groups in California. The EPA's environmental justice responsibilities must include a proactive effort to address cumulative or multiple adverse effects on minority and low-income communities. The future of millions of our residents is at stake.

MANUEL PASTOR is co-director of the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community at UC Santa Cruz. BILL GALLEGOS is executive director of the statewide Communities for a Better Environment. MICHELE PRICHARD is special projects director with the Liberty Hill Foundation, the coordinating agency for the Southern California Collaborative for Environmental Justice.

Marin Independent Journal, Editorial, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2005

Break for hybrids makes little sense

Owners of some hybrid cars have another reason to feel smug. They'll soon be able to drive - with a special permit - in California's carpool lanes, even if they are driving alone. A provision in the new $286 billion federal transportation bill signed by President Bush makes it legal.

The policy applies only to hybrids that get 45 miles or more per gallon, which means that Toyota's Prius and Honda's Civic and Insight are the only hybrids that qualify. Hybrids are cars that better mileage by supplementing gas with electricity generated by the engine during braking and coasting.

Hybrid owners must send in an application for a special decal. They also must get a FasTrak pass if they don't already have one. The FasTrak pass allows drivers to pay bridge tolls electronically, meaning they don't have to stop at a toll booths.

The new policy is intended to encourage purchase of high-mileage, low-emission vehicles. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called the change "a common-sense policy" to reduce air pollution.

But is it?

Carpooling reduces air pollution by reducing the number of cars on the road. This also reduces traffic congestion. Traffic congestion increases air pollution by keeping cars on the road longer, spewing fumes while they idle.

Allowing hybrids to travel in carpool lanes does nothing to reduce the number of cars on the road. It merely grants the owners of the most fuel-efficient cars an extra benefit, and it may actually encourage more trips on crowded freeways.

In addition, the policy is essentially pay-to-play: You need to buy a new car to drive solo in the carpool lane. True, the Toyota and Honda hybrids are not super-expensive luxury cars, but they will set you back $20,000-plus.

A better policy would tax those who drive gas-guzzling cars while providing all drivers an equal chance to use a bypass lane. The gas tax could be just that - an increase in the per-gallon gas tax. Or it could be an annual vehicle license fee based on each car's mileage rating, with low-mileage vehicles paying a higher fee than high-mileage vehicles.

Some areas already have fee-based bypass lanes. Drivers can choose to pay to take the bypass lane. With a FasTrak-like device, they can be charged automatically without having to stop at a toll booth. The pricing on some of these fee-based bypass lanes varies with the traffic congestion. When there's no traffic, the bypass lane may be free. When there's lots of traffic, you have to pay to take the bypass. The more traffic, the more you pay. Electronic signs tell you how much you'll have to pay. Each driver has a choice; the benefit doesn't go only to those who have purchased a new $20,000 car.

Driving a hybrid is its own reward. They are good cars and they get terrific gas mileage. With gas heading toward $3 per gallon, do we really need to give hybrid drivers another reason to smile?

PASADENA STAR NEWS, Guest Commentary, Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2005

Hybrid vehicle efficiency may give way to lust for power

By Michelle Robinson

IMAGINE the public outrage if it were discovered that Philip Morris developed a cure for cancer but used it to merely make cigarettes taste better. While that is fictional, something very similar, and very real, may be happening to hybrid vehicles.

Right now there are more than 100,000 fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles on the road in America, most notably the Toyota Prius, Honda Civic Hybrid and the Ford Escape Hybrid. Hybrid sales shot up a remarkable 81 percent in 2004, and, based on early projections for 2005, there appears no end in sight to hybrids' popularity.

Unfortunately, some automakers are offering models that fall far short of their potential.

The best hybrid vehicles use advanced technologies that blend gas and electric power to create fuel-efficient, consumer- friendly cars and SUVs. While Ford, Honda and Toyota's hybrids set new standards for fuel economy, General Motors has short-changed the technology by introducing "hollow hybrids' that barely increase fuel economy 1-2 miles per gallon.

For example, the "hybrid' versions of GM's Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra pickups use only conventional technology improvements rather than the full combination of gas-electric engines (these pickup trucks could easily reach 30-35 miles per gallon if GM had done a better job).

But GM is not stopping there. Its "Green Line' Saturn VUE and Chevy Malibu "hybrid' will be only marginally more fuel-efficient.

While mislabeling conventional cars as hybrids is disturbing, GM's plans to hybridize its massive Yukon and Tahoe SUVs in 2007 is a potential poison to the market. GM officials call these vehicles "strong' hybrids, which may well be a euphemism for "muscle hybrids' vehicles that use hybrid technology primarily for performance rather than significantly boosting fuel economy.

This obsession with performance is what led to our nation's dependence on foreign oil in the first place. As a new report from the Environmental Protection Agency shows, leaps in engine technology over the past 20 years have been used almost exclusively to make cars faster and heavier, not more efficient.

True hybrids can play an important part in reducing both our dependence on foreign oil and the emissions that cause global-warming pollution. Our government should foster such hybrids.

New federal tax credits for hybrids are starting in 2006, which is a positive step. But it could be better. For instance, the four-wheel drive Toyota Highlander Hybrid will actually get a larger tax credit than the more fuel-efficient two-wheel version. "Gas guzzler' incentives like this could encourage hybrid buyers (and hybrid producers) to upsize their power and downsize their fuel economy benefits.

Everyone from auto executives and engineers to city council members and consumers has a part to play. For two decades we have been in the fast lane of foreign-oil dependence. Now is the time to use hybrid technology to take the road less traveled. Too much is at stake to let the benefits of hybrids go up in smoke.

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