Study: Antenna farm 98 percent safe

Attorney for opponents say the land still is not best site for sports center

by Mike Martinez, Staff Writer
Lodi News Sentinel, Wednesday, June 14, 2006

TRACY - A San Francisco-based environmental consulting firm has released a report finding the proposed area for Tracy's youth sports facility well below the state standard for cancer risk.

The proposed facility would sit on a 200-acre piece of property currently owned by the federal government and affectionately known as the antenna farm because of the dozens of antennas that dot the landscape. The complex would feature dozens of soccer fields, and baseball/softball diamonds with ample parking and seating.

The report, released Monday by the city, found the southeast corner of the property, located on Schulte Road west of Tracy, exceeded a hazard index threshold for ammonia emissions.

The ammonia was found to come from the Owens Brockway glass plant located about 1,500 feet away.

The remaining 98 percent of the Antenna farm site is below the acute (hazard index) ... and is, therefore, without risk of significant air quality health effects, the report said.

Alan Bell, senior city planner, said the red flags only go up under worst-case meteorological conditions.

Still or slow moving air during the hot summer, Bell said. Normal weather patterns has the wind blowing from the northwest to the southeast, from the (youth sports facility) to Owens-Brockway.

That part of the site, since it has the chance to exceed state guidelines, would be precluded from use from the facility, (meaning) no parking, ball fields, anything, Bell said.

The same report also examined an alternative site, the corner of Chrisman Road and 11th Street, and found no health hazards.

Mark Connelly, attorney for Tracy Region Alliance for a Quality Community, said just because the site meets state standards doesn't mean its the best site for the sports facility.

It was rejected by (San Joaquin Delta College), developers don't want to use it for housing, and they want our children to play ball there, Connelly said. I don't know why were putting the sports complex there.

He said the Chrisman site offers more acreage, better air quality and no pipeline running through it, and the facility could be built now with money the city has already.

In April, the Tracy City Council directed city staff to negotiate agreements

calling for contributions totaling $75 million from Surland Development and the Tracy Hills developers to build the Tracy Aquatics Center and the Tracy Sports Complex.

In exchange, the developers would be granted rights to build a combined 500 homes a year -- after Measure A average restrictions eased -- and require a total between 6,400 and 9,400 allotments possibly through 2032, according to city documents.

Tracy Hills LLC -- a partnership involving Souza Realty and Development, and AKT Development -- would pay $20 million in cash, plus give the city 15 acres of land in the largest planned housing unit in city history. Half of their cash could be used at the citys discretion in relation to the sports complex or aquatics center.

In documents filed in San Joaquin County Superior Court, TRAQC wants to overturn the city's amendment of its growth management ordinance allowing for 500 home building permits to be given out in developer agreements.

Measure A, passed by voters in 2000, limits the average number of new homes built in Tracy to 600 a year, plus another 150 that are affordable housing. With the large number of homes built over the past few years, only 100 homes a year, prioritized as in-fill and affordable, can currently be construction until about 2012.

The measure also limits the number of permits that can be given in a developer agreement to 250 residential growth allocations -- which are needed before each residential building permit is issued -- a

point the city altered prior to entering into the agreements, but the local slow-growth group claims it can only be changed by the voters.

Seeking Student Artists Through Sept. 30

Modesto Bee, Friday, June 9, 2006

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is looking for student artwork for its 2007 Clean Air Kids Calendar. 557-6400.

Valley air pushes some away, makes others sick

Pollution increasing allergies and asthma

By Jillian Daley, Staff writer
Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, June 13, 2006

Wendy Rudy gave up a lot to prevent her youngest child from developing asthma.

A member of the Visalia City Council with an active real estate business, she chucked it all and moved to Oregon.

Rudy's family is susceptible to asthma and allergies. Her 15-year-old daughter, Jordan, suffers chronic nosebleeds and her 17-year-old stepson, Jon, endures daily headaches. Rudy herself was diagnosed with asthma 11 years ago, leaving her to deal with a gurgling in the lungs and the feeling of weight on her chest and a hand at her throat.

But it was protecting her baby, Emily, that led her, in November 2003, to move to Toledo, Ore., seven miles from the Central Oregon coast. Three months ago, Rudy says, her doctor told her she no longer has asthma.

"I can breathe up here," said Rudy, 37.

Meanwhile, her children's headaches and nose bleeds all but disappeared.

Cleaner pastures

Rudy represents what Lyle Stillwater, an ear, nose and throat physician in Visalia, considers a trend. Central Valley residents — no matter how good their jobs might be — are moving to places with cleaner air, Stillwater says.

In the past two years, two of Stillwater's patients have moved to Idaho.

Several others are planning to leave as well, he said.

"The interesting thing is the main factor was getting their kids out of this air," Stillwater said. "These people left because of the air quality. They didn't have to leave for economic reasons."

Visalia and area cities sometimes rank in the Top 10 on American Lung Association lists of cities with poor air quality — higher than New York and Chicago. Polluted air can cause severe asthma and allergies, experts say, particularly among those younger than 13, older than 55 or genetically predisposed to lung conditions.

Moving away from the San Joaquin Valley can help the seriously asthmatic, Stillwater said. But that's not always an option.

"Most people can't leave their businesses and families here," he said.

That doesn't mean there's nothing that can be done, however. Summer trips to warm, coastal areas can ease the stress on residents' lungs, Stillwater said.

Though pollen and other natural allergens contribute to the Valley's problem, pollution is the major culprit, said Stephanie Moen, founder and director of the Tulare County Asthma Coalition.

Stillwater said much of the region’s air pollution can be attributed to vehicles trundling down Highway 99, as well as growing traffic in Visalia. About 20 percent is thought to drift in from the Bay Area.

Continued population growth will exacerbate the problem, he said. Tulare County was the state's 10th fastest-growing county in 2005, according to a state Department of Finance report.

Tulare, with 51,477 residents, grew by 3.6 percent between 2000 and 2005. Visalia, with 111,168 residents, grew by 2.9 percent over the same period.

Tulare County and asthma

Nationally, 8 percent of the population has asthma. According to a Tulare County breakdown in a 2003 California Health Interview Survey, asthma afflicts:

- 13.7 percent of those 18 to 80
- 23 percent of those 5 to 17.

Many sufferers are not being properly treated, said Moen, director of respiratory services at Tulare District Hospital.

"We see a lot of people, children especially, coming into the emergency room and their asthma's not controlled," she said.

Moen said the Tulare hospital offers the only asthma-education program in the area.

Patients, who may attend by physician referral only, learn about lung disease and receive hypoallergenic mattresses and pillow covers.

Patients also receive a peak-flow meter, which measures how much air they can blow in one second.

Another problem: allergies

While less severe in their effects than asthma, allergies affect far more people in the U.S. More than half of all Americans test positive to at least one allergen, said Kim Scott, a family nurse practitioner at the Baz Allergy & Asthma Centers in Visalia and Hanford.

Allergies are the sixth-leading cause of chronic disease in the U.S. and cost more than $18 billion annually.

Several California cities — including Fresno, at No. 90 — appear on the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America's 2006 list of "worst" cities for allergies. At the top and bottom of the list are, respectively, Hartford, Conn., and Spokane, Wash.

The other California cities:

- Sacramento, No. 8
- San Diego, No. 31
- Stockton, No. 45
- San Francisco, No. 76
- Los Angeles, No. 81.

Scott and others said there has been little or no tracking of allergy rates in Tulare County. Also, sufferers don't always go to a doctor for care, said Cathy Pollak, a health educator at the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America's Southern California Chapter.

"It's not like a disease," Pollak said. "It can be more serious with [some] people, but it's not like we have hard data."

How to protect yourself inside the home and out

By Jillian Daley, Staff writer
Visalia Times-Delta, Saturday, June 10, 2006

Spring, still in full bloom, is when finding the right time to exercise outdoors becomes tricky for asthmatics and the allergy-prone.

For those with asthma, air pollution inflames the lining of the respiratory tract, causing coughing and a runny nose, said Dr. A.M. Aminian, medical director of the Allergy Institute in Fresno and Visalia.

Air pollution is at its peak from noon to 6 p.m., Aminian said. Accumulated vehicle exhaust combined with the heat of the day are responsible, he said.

That doesn't mean it's safe to jog when the sun is rising in the east, however. In the spring, the hours between 4-10 a.m. are allergen-intense, Aminian said.

"The ironic part of this thing is the pollens are released early in the morning," he said.

As summer eases in, though, the morning will be the best time to jog, bicycle or walk, he said.

Controlling asthma and allergies can be easiest at home, said Carolyn Wong, registered respiratory therapist at Tulare District Hospital. Her advice: Start in the bedroom.

"We spend a third of our life sleeping, so keep that room as allergy-free as possible," Wong said.

Other suggestions from Wong:

- An allergic or asthmatic person can cut back on dust mites, an allergen, by vacuuming and removing clutter.
- If the sufferer has a cat, walls should be cleaned with soap and water to remove dander.
- Cats should be kept out of the bedroom.
- Carpeting should be removed, if possible.
- Mattresses and pillows can be replaced with hypoallergenic materials.
- To keep from tracking more pollen and other irritants in, keep shoes out of the bedroom.
- Washing hair and face in the shower or with a wet cloth before bedtime can remove the pollen that collects there during the day,
- HEPA filters — heavy-duty air-conditioning filters — and air purifiers also can help.

Wong's 13-year-old son, Brandon, has asthma, and controlling the family's home environment allows them to stay in town.

Pollution warnings

Which days are most dangerous, pollution-wise?

Check out daily air ratings at:

- The Times-Delta/Advance-Register — Page 2A
- KSEE Channel 24 (Comcast channel 4) — Allergy forecasts are available from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. and also at noon, 5, 6 and 11 p.m.
- Allergyinstitute.com
- www.valleyair.org

Ethanol plant could be in Kern's future

By Ryan Schuster, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, June 14 2006

Kern County would become home to an ethanol plant if a global energy company wins approval to build a facility that would more than double California's current production of the corn-based fuel additive.

The proposed facility outside Delano would create 30 full-time jobs upon completion in 2008 at a cost as high as $127 million, says Arlington, Va.-based AES. The company's Delano subsidiary operates a wood waste-fueled biomass plant that would provide energy and steam to the proposed facility.

Demand for ethanol has spiked lately, driven by surging gas prices and a dwindling domestic supply of crude oil. Domestic production of ethanol has more than doubled in the last five years as state and local governments have called for more environmentally friendly fuels.

But the fuel's future is still uncertain. Some in the oil industry point to heavy ethanol subsidies and question whether more ethanol will significantly reduce gasoline prices.

"We're making a pretty big bet on ethanol," said Don Vawter, the general manager of AES Delano Energy, which runs the existing biomass plant. "We like the long-term prospects even if the short-term

prices do not hold. We think there's momentum and there's certainly government support and mandates that will move the nation toward it."

California consumed about a quarter of the roughly 4 billion gallons of fuel-grade ethanol produced in the United States last year. But the state produces less than five percent of the ethanol it consumes and has just three of the country's 101 ethanol plants.

As proposed, the AES plant would produce about 55 million gallons of ethanol a year -- more than one and a half times the state's current production. The facility could be expanded to make as much as 85 million gallons annually.

California refineries now import most of the ethanol they use by rail from the Midwest, where the majority of the corn used to produce ethanol is grown.

"There's definitely a market," said Gene Cotten, the facility manager of Flying J's refinery on Rosedale Highway. "(AES) is going to be competing with a guy in the Midwest for cost."

The AES plant would convert corn kernels into ethanol, which would then be blended into gasoline by refiners. The plant's owners hope to switch eventually from corn to organic materials such as agricultural waste to produce what's known as cellulosic ethanol, as soon as technological advances make that process more financially viable.

"With the cellulosic technology, people all over the country, not just in the Midwest are looking to their backyards, (asking) 'What do we have in abundance that we can use?'" said Kristin Brekke, a spokeswoman for the Sioux Falls, S.D.-based American Coalition for Ethanol.

"Ethanol is spreading into a national issue, not just a Midwest issue."

Cotten said the 5.7 percent of ethanol blended by his refinery is a "small percentage" and hasn't significantly changed his bottom line.

But ethanol proponents say the fuel will help reduce the prices consumers pay at the pump.

"We simply don't have enough gasoline-refining capacity in this country," Brekke said. "Any time we can add to the supply is good. The demand is extremely high right now. Every drop getting made is being used."

AES, one of the world's largest power companies with 124 generation plants and 30,000 workers worldwide -- 50 of them working full time at the biomass plant outside Delano, announced in April that it intends to spend $1 billion over the next three years on projects and technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Vawter of AES Delano Energy said construction on the local ethanol plant could begin as soon as next spring. But first the company must go through what he termed a "rigorous" permitting process that includes modifying an existing air permit for the biomass plant. He said it will have fewer emissions than the existing biomass plant, which converts wood waste into electricity, powering 50,000 homes a day.

Vawter said he is optimistic the plant will be approved.

"It's an environmentally friendly facility that is wanted and needed in California," he said. "It should meet a relatively small amount of resistance."

What is ethanol?

Ethanol is a clear, colorless, flammable liquid made up of chemical compounds. It can be made from plants, most commonly agricultural crops like corn.

Also known as ethyl alcohol, ethanol is a 200-proof grain alcohol that is found in some alcoholic beverages.

How is ethanol made?

Ethanol is made by grinding up the raw materials and drawing out the sugar. The sugar is fed to microbes, which use it as food and produce ethanol and carbon dioxide as a byproduct. The ethanol can then be purified to the desired concentration.

Sources: U.S. Department of Energy, Renewable Fuels Association, American Coalition for Ethanol, Webster's Dictionary.

Commentary in the Think Tank Town section of the Washington Post, Wednesday, June 14, 2006:

Getting Real on Air Pollution and Health

By Joel Schwartz

There is no question that air pollution can kill. About 4,000 Londoners died during the infamous five-day "London Fog" of December 1952, when pollution soared tens of times higher than current peak levels, and visibility dropped as low as 20 feet. Today's fears, however, center on the extent to which current, far lower air pollution levels can be harmful.

Regulators and environmental activists claim air pollution is still a major health threat. In its State of the Air 2006 report, the American Lung Association claimed "over half of the U.S. population lives in counties that have unhealthful levels of either ozone or particle [soot] pollution." According to an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) fact sheet, "ozone can irritate lung airways and cause inflammation much like a sunburn. . . People with respiratory problems are most vulnerable, but even healthy people that are active outdoors can be affected when ozone levels are high."

Air pollution reductions are expensive, costing Americans at least tens of billions of dollars each year. Recently, the EPA implemented tough new standards for ozone and soot that will cost at least an additional $100 billion per year -- or about $1,000 per household -- and the agency plans to clamp down still further in the future.

The EPA attributes well over 90 percent of the benefits of its clean air programs to improvements in human health. Thus, a key policy question is whether EPA's health-benefit claims are credible. Even as public health authorities and environmental activists become more strident in raising health alarms, evidence continues to mount that air pollution at contemporary low levels is causing little or no harm, even in the most polluted areas of the country.

More sober estimates in the EPA's own technical analyses belie the scary claims it puts out for public consumption. Writing in the journal Environmental Health Perspectives, EPA scientists estimated that going from 2002 ozone levels, which were by far the highest of the past several years, to nationwide compliance with the stringent new federal eight-hour ozone standard would reduce respiratory-related hospital admissions and emergency room visits by no more than a few tenths of a percent.

Claims of an air pollution-asthma link by health experts have also been undermined by recent research. While the prevalence of asthma has nearly doubled in America during the past 25 years, air pollution of all kinds has sharply declined around the nation at the same time, making air pollution an implausible culprit.

Government-funded research by scientists from the University of Southern California supports this finding. The authors of the Children's Health Study reported that children who grew up in areas with higher air pollution, including areas with the worst air pollution in the nation by far, had a lower risk of developing asthma. The researchers also found that ozone had no effect on lung development, even though the study included areas that exceeded the federal ozone standard more than 100 days per year. And even in a community with uniquely high soot levels -- more than twice the current federal health standard -- soot was associated with only a 1 percent to 2 percent decline in lung capacity.

The most serious claim about air pollution is that it prematurely kills tens of thousands of Americans each year. This claim is based on small statistical correlations between pollution levels and risk of death. But correlation doesn't necessarily mean causation, as demonstrated recently by a number of embarrassing reversals of conventional medical wisdom.

The air pollution--mortality claim deserves even greater skepticism. First, it is based on the same unreliable correlation methods that have led medical authorities astray in other areas. Second, even though pollution is weakly correlated with higher premature mortality on average, it seems to protect against death in about one-third of cities. How could pollution kill people in some cities and save them in others? More likely, both results are chance correlations rather than real effects. Third, in laboratory

experiments, researchers have been unable to kill animals by exposing them to air pollution at levels many times greater than ever occur in the United States.

It would be nice if we didn't have to give up anything in order to achieve additional reductions in air pollution. But in the real world, the costs of air pollution control mean higher prices, lower wages and lower returns on investments, reducing the resources we have available for everything else that affects our health, safety and quality of life. If our air is already safe to breathe, then the EPA's never ending war on air pollution is costing us much and providing little in return.

Why would regulators want to impose requirements that will cause net harm to the people they intend to protect? As a powerful, highly specialized agency with a staff that is passionate about air quality, the EPA unavoidably suffers from tunnel vision: the pursuit of a single-minded goal to the point where it does more harm than good. Environmental regulators will pursue the next increment of air pollution reduction, and the next, regardless of whether the increasingly marginal benefits are worth having or the costs worth bearing. By pursuing tiny or nonexistent health benefits at great cost, the EPA is making us worse off overall.

Joel Schwartz (jschwartz@aei.org) is a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI). He has worked for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the California Legislative Analyst's Office, and the Coalition for Clean Air. He was formerly in charge of the California state agency charged with evaluating the state's vehicle emissions inspection program and making policy recommendations to the governor and the state legislature

Editorial in the Washington Post, Wednesday, June 14, 2006:

Warming at the Court

The EPA claims it can't regulate greenhouse gases and wouldn't if it could.

AS EARLY AS this week, the Supreme Court will decide whether to hear a case that is now something of a dud but could become one of the most significant pieces of environmental litigation in a generation. The case is a challenge by states and environmental organizations to the Environmental Protection Agency's decision not to regulate the gases that cause global climate change. The justices should hear it, both because a lower court -- the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit -- could not produce a coherent opinion and because the issues it presents are of enormous importance. The agency is claiming that the Clean Air Act gives it no legal authority over what is probably the preeminent environmental issue of our time; and that even if it had authority, it wouldn't use it; and that nobody can force it to in court. If any part of that argument is correct, the justices -- not a splintered lower court -- should be the ones to say so.

Back in 1999 environmentalists petitioned the EPA to regulate greenhouse gas emissions in new motor vehicles. A few years later the EPA declined. The agency contended that it lacked statutory authority over greenhouse gases, though the law grants it power over "any air pollutant from any class or classes of new motor vehicle . . . [which] may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare." The law defines "air pollutant" as any "substance or matter which is emitted into or otherwise enters the ambient air" and defines "effects on welfare" as including effects on "climate." The agency further declared that even if it's wrong on the law, it prefers not to regulate greenhouse emissions at this time, because of scientific "uncertainty" as to global climate change's mechanisms and a desire to take on the problem by other means.

In response, a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit split three ways: One judge ruled that the agency was, in effect, free to ignore the law's command because of the extraneous policy judgments it identified. A second contended that the states and environmental groups lacked standing to bring the litigation in the first place. A third judge contended that they did have standing and that the EPA had defied the law. The result is that the court affirmed the EPA's position, but for no coherent reason.

The justices now face three distinct questions: Can anyone challenge the EPA's decision? Do greenhouse gases count as pollution? And, if so, can the EPA decline to regulate because, well, it doesn't feel like it?

The second two questions are easy: The law does not give the EPA discretion to ignore its legal duties, and the legal definition of pollution clearly seems to encompass greenhouse gases. The first question is far harder; to establish standing to litigate the case, the challengers have to show that global warming is causing them injuries and that regulating one small corner of the problem -- emissions by new vehicles -- would redress those injuries. Clearly, however, it makes no sense for the justices to leave in place a muddled decision that establishes nothing while letting the agency bind its own hands.