

Dairy farmers get revved up over blaming cows for smog

Upcoming pollution rules intensify the scientific debate.

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Friday, March 3, 2006

Also published in part in The Fresno Bee

One issue looms above all today in a \$4.6 billion California industry that has survived despite urbanization, complaining neighbors and even dwindling per-capita consumption of milk: the growing reputation of dairy businesses as air polluters.

As hundreds of the state's dairy owners gathered in Sacramento this week to assess their industry, no topic so dominated an agenda that included agricultural terrorism and disease as their cows' share of the responsibility for smog vs. that of cars.

There were no firm answers for them, either.

"We don't know all the answers. We don't even know the questions yet," said Charles Krauter, soil and water science professor at California State University, Fresno.

Krauter and several other scientists are just scratching the surface of how the 1.7 million cows, feeding areas and manure lagoons actually affect smog formation. Yet, government regulators are about to clamp down, prompting farmers to question the science behind the regulations.

In developing its statistics, the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District relied upon research done in Great Britain and a feedlot study from Texas. Krauter and fellow researcher Frank Mitloehner, air quality specialist at the University of California, Davis, are doing regional studies.

However, they've come under fire from environmentalists for tapping industry money for some of their research.

As the largest individual segment of California's \$31.8 billion agricultural economy, the 2,100 farms that produce milk, cheese and yogurt are finding themselves singled out as farming's leading contributor to organic gases that create smog, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

Tulare, Merced, Stanislaus and Kings counties are the state's leading dairy counties, producing almost 60 percent of the state's milk.

The industry would rather the public focus on how it leads the nation in milk production and trails only Wisconsin in making cheese. In 2004, its businesses produced 36.4 billion pounds of milk and almost 2 billion pounds of cheese, according to the California Dairy Research Foundation.

Until 2003, the state's dairy owners were exempt from state and regional air quality rules that govern vehicles, manufacturers and other businesses.

Now San Joaquin Valley air regulators are soon to crack down on a business sector that fled the urbanization of Southern California only to find itself targeted in Central California for producing smog, usually associated with the state's legendary traffic.

Air regulators between Lodi and Bakersfield say 1,500 dairies across their eight-county region generate more of the volatile organic gases that form smog than do passenger cars. (Vehicles, however, still create 60 percent of all ingredients that create Valley smog.)

For dairy owners, that's provoked defensiveness, which was on display Thursday during a panel discussion at the conference sponsored by the Western United Dairywomen.

"They're coming out with rules and regulations, but they're totally not based on science," argued Hanford-area dairy owner Mary Carnero.

Three air-quality scientists told dairy owners that their operations may have been assigned a higher degree of blame for smog than air regulators are claiming.

While the San Joaquin Valley's air district says dairies are releasing up to 19 pounds of volatile organic gases per cow per year, Krauter said early research shows it may be more like 2 pounds to 7 pounds.

Lower figures could significantly lighten regulations to curb dairies' share of smog. The first are due to roll out in July following workshops on the draft versions this month in Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield.

Some environmentalists have defended the Valley air district's figure of 19 pounds, saying the actual number may be even higher.

Brent Newell, attorney for the San Francisco-based Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, questioned Krauter's findings of lower numbers, calling it the equivalent of "reading tea leaves to tell a favorable crowd what they want to hear."

Newell, part of a group that originally sued to force regulation of the Valley's growing dairy industry, said he considers Krauter and Mitloehner to be "too close to the industry to be considered objective."

They are tapping research grants from the federal and state government and the dairy industry to develop more precise estimates for air regulators to cite in making regulations.

A similar study has begun nationally, Mitloehner told dairy owners.

Currently, most Sacramento Valley dairies aren't large enough to be affected by such smog regulations. Most dairies north of Sacramento average 300 milking cows, compared with the state average of 800.

Farm views clash at forum

California farmers seeking federal aid meet with resistance from the Midwest.

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Saturday, March 4, 2006

STOCKTON - The nation's leading farm state seemed to resemble another agricultural planet Friday as Midwest members of the U.S. House Agriculture committee tangled with California farmers over their environmental issues and hopes for a Mexican guest worker program.

Committee members from grain-growing Midwest states appeared unsympathetic to farmers' requests for more environmental funding to meet California's tougher air and water quality rules, and also to their pleas for guest workers to end a labor shortage.

The exchanges, reflecting the vast differences between California's heavily irrigated, labor-intensive produce crops and mechanized eastern grain belts, came during a four-hour hearing on fashioning a new \$19 billion annual U.S. farm bill when it expires late next year.

Friday's forum was the third of a dozen hearings expected across the nation this year on the federal government's most critical and contentious farm spending bill.

"I have some sympathy for groups that aren't getting much from the farm bill," said Democratic Rep. Collin Peterson of Minnesota. "But California, in my opinion, gets a little carried away with some of this (environmental) stuff. It seems you want the farm bill to take care of problems that are caused by your urban residents."

Republican Rep. Steve King of Iowa likewise expressed repeated skepticism over farmers' hopes for a guest worker program as part of immigration reform being debated in Congress. In December, a House Republican majority passed an immigration reform measure that is opposed by many Western farmers. It calls for severe crackdowns on illegal immigration and increased security along the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Can you contemplate anywhere in the world where there has been a successful guest worker program?" King asked Stanislaus County fruit and nut grower Vito Chiesa.

Listening as Chiesa and three Central Valley congressmen on the committee lamented a California labor shortage and lack of native-born workers to do farm work, King said: "I see what you're up against here, but we also have to have the rule of law."

Immigration and the environment were among numerous issues Friday as cotton and rice producers asked for continuation of their multimillion-dollar subsidies in a 2007 farm bill.

Fruit, nut and vegetable growers who don't get direct crop support payments sought an increase in the federal \$200 million-a-year program that promotes their products overseas. An array of the state's dairy and grape growers, organic farmers and specialty poultry producers asked for new funds to speed mechanization research, better protect the state from invasive insect pests and diseases and help them meet environmental obligations.

The last farm bill in 2002 greatly increased environmental spending through grants from its Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Farmers especially praised the program Friday. It allocated \$48.3 million to farmers last year and will grant another \$47.7 million in incentives this year to curb water runoff and soil erosion.

The nation's farm bill, a complex web of spending that subsidizes production of major grain crops and cotton and allocates money for loans, rural development and nutrition programs, has already been the subject of hearings in North Carolina and Alabama. Friday's session was a prelude to another being held today in Nebraska.

Committee Chairman and Virginia Republican Bob Goodlatte noted the 2007 farm bill will be written amid a tight federal budget and said all the new millions of dollars that Californians want would have to come from farmers in other states.

"Would you suggest where it should come from?" he asked one panel.

"No," answered panelists, chuckling.

"Now you know how we feel," Goodlatte said.

Panel looks at valley growth that preserves farmland

Solutions include higher densities and new cities

By GARTH STAPLEY - BEE STAFF WRITER

Modesto Bee, Sunday, March 5, 2006

If we forbid cities to sprawl outward, shoehorn twice as many people into urban areas and build a few new communities along Interstate 5, we should be able to protect the San Joaquin Valley's fertile farmland for a few decades.

That's the upshot of a high-level discussion by land-use visionaries gathered in Modesto last week to noodle suggestions on how the valley should grow.

"This is not an easy (thing) to project," said Victor Mow, San Joaquin County supervisor and co-chairman of a committee to Gov. Schwarzenegger's California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. "It's abstract; it's visionary, but we want to see the valley we would want to live in 50 years from now."

The partnership's land use, housing and agriculture committee brought farming, development and environmental experts together with academics and government officials. The blue-ribbon panel is formulating recommendations to the governor by November on improving the well-being of valley people.

"He's a gutsy governor, willing to try things," said Fritz Grupe, a Stockton developer and co-chairman of the partnership.

The problem — where to put twice as many people without sacrificing unique farmland — is fairly clear.

"We've got to do something to protect the ag land," said Glenn Anderson, an organic farmer in Hilmar. "We've got some sort of national treasure here that's not acknowledged for what it is."

Potential answers are cloudy and sure to be debated for years to come. The work group vocalized some, including:

New cities. Though free-standing communities have had limited success in recent years, many of the visionaries agreed that these unattached developments can house a sizeable percentage of the valley's growth.

Examples include Diablo Grande in western Stanislaus County and Mountain House in western San Joaquin County.

"But the costs of creating a whole new town are so much greater," said Julia Lave Johnston, a senior planner in the governor's Office of Planning and Research.

Channeling development along transportation corridors. This decreases commute frustrations and air pollution.

Doubling densities. This means directing as much as twice as many people into cities through redevelopment and infill projects.

About 40 percent of the valley's projected growth in the next two decades could be absorbed through higher densities, said Bill Mayben, president of Standard Pacific Homes' Central Valley division. "I don't think we have effectively addressed this, because until now we haven't had to."

Growth boundaries. Controlled-growth advocates for many years have recommended drawing firm lines beyond which cities could not grow, but the concept has not taken hold in these parts.

Greenbelts. Strategically placed around cities, these buffers help guarantee that urban communities won't grow into each other, threatening to destroy their identities.

Kirk Ford, Stanislaus County's deputy planning director, repeatedly noted that local government agencies have power over growth patterns in their respective areas. That would render useless any solution proposed in Sacramento, barring a paradigm shift in the long-standing rules.

Policies are in local officials' hands

And any individual commitment to visionary policies batted about by the work group, Ford said, would be subject to change every couple of years when representatives face re-election.

"It really comes down to city councils and boards of supervisors having the political will to stay with the policies we're coming up with," Ford said.

Grupe, the Stockton developer, also owns extensive ranchland and is planting 230 acres of olive trees. He opposes forcing builders to pay farmland mitigation fees or money that could be used to benefit agriculture.

"I'm not worried about producing the food, personally," he said. "I think we're going to get better at production."

Grupe noted that some farmland is lost when leaders allow ranchettes in rural areas. Directing all such proposals into nonproductive areas in the Coast Range and Sierra foothills makes good sense, he said.

The partnership is focusing on the next 20 years, while the governor's Valley Blueprint Project spans 50 years and emphasizes regional consensus on tough issues. Both efforts are being guided by the Great Valley Center based in Modesto.

Carol Whiteside, the think tank's founder and president, has warned for years that the valley will always be a backwater if leaders don't quickly come up with an integrated road map.

"Right now," she said, "is our chance to grab this and do something significant."

Wal-Mart warehouse would bring 900 jobs

Massive Merced distribution center selected from 170 sites in California

By DAVID CHIRCOP - MERCED SUN-STAR

Published in the Modesto Bee, Monday, March, 6th, 2006

MERCED — By 2011, a Merced almond orchard could be transformed into a bustling, high-tech warehouse feeding the supply chain of the world's largest retailer.

The 1.1 million-square-foot facility would employ 900 people — most full time — and generate 50 big-rig truck trips per hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

A fuel-efficient, low-emissions truck fleet would ship goods to between 50 and 70 Wal-Mart stores.

Those are a few details executives from the Bentonville, Ark., company shared Thursday at a press conference capping a two-day visit here.

After a four-year search, Wal-Mart chose Merced over 170 sites across the state to build its 10th California distribution center, said Colby Tanner, a real estate manager for Wal-Mart's distribution centers.

The company has 127 distribution centers across the country. The closest to Merced is in Porterville, about 120 miles south of the city.

Tanner said the Merced facility will cost \$60 million. Construction is planned to begin next year with service to stores started in 2008.

Wal-Mart is expected to purchase 275 acres at the University Industrial Park between Highway 140 and Mission Avenue in the next two weeks, Tanner said.

City officials have worked closely with a land consultant for the last four years, in hopes of landing the distribution center.

Merced's planning department has said an environmental consultant for the EIR should be selected in the next few months.

After draft of the extensive environmental study is completed, it will be forwarded to the city's planning department for further review. If necessary, the document will go back to the consultant for more studies. It will later be available for public review and comments. The report and comments will then go before the Planning Commission and the City Council, where members of the public can also comment on it. The windfall of jobs it would bring could help ease the county's unemployment rate, which consistently ranks twice the state average.

The massive facility has drawn critics for a number of reasons, including concerns about air pollution and traffic. Others have come forward criticizing Wal-Mart's business practices and aggressive drive to squeeze profits out of a low-margin sector of the economy.

Nancy Goodban, a founding member of Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, which opposes the project, said the area would be better-suited for a research park.

With close proximity to the University of California at Merced campus, she said it would be ideal for a biotechnology firm to locate a facility that could partner with the university.

"There's all kinds of manufactured products in the biotechnology field and its high-quality work," she said.

Goodban holds a doctorate in social psychology from Harvard University and is married to Kenji Hakuta, UC Merced's dean of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts.

Others say the jobs Wal-Mart offers are needed now.

"Even if you were to speak to those who oppose the project and ask, 'Can this county use more jobs?' they would be hard-pressed to say no," said Frank Quintero, Merced's development manager. "We need these jobs, we need this investment to the community."

Besides location, Keith Morris, a spokesman for the company, said a large pool of available workers in Merced is a big plus.

"The work force here was one of the key things that attracted us to stay at this location," he said. "There are sites that we cross off the list; they have the infrastructure and accessibility to our stores, but you go and look at the work force and they don't have enough people to do the job."

Properties near the planned center were designated for industrial use in the 1960s. The specific site was zoned for industrial use in 1999.

It is located in an enterprise zone that could give the company start-tax incentives, including a hiring and sales tax credit.

Because the project is so large, a full environmental impact report will have to be completed. The process is expected to take up to 18 months.

To connect with Highway 99, Wal-Mart's truck fleet would use the Mission Avenue Interchange, now under construction.

Wal-Mart announced plans to move here last summer, less than a month after the state agreed to fund the \$68 million portion of the future Campus Parkway.

Because the site is zoned properly, Morris said, he doesn't anticipate the project will run into any major stumbling blocks.

"I think it's a no-brainer to say we have little to no risk at all," he said.

[Fresno Bee, Letter to the Editor, Monday, March 6, 2006:](#)

Hang 'em up

I would like to add my voice to those who have written recently about the need to hang up our leaf blowers.

Although recent research showed that leaf blowers do not harm our air as much as previously thought, why are many concluding that now it is OK to continue using them? Certainly other things pollute more, but that doesn't make leaf blowers good for our air.

Instead of focusing in on the fact that leaf blowers do not harm our air so much, why not opt for something that doesn't pollute at all? We know that brooms do not, so join me this weekend in picking up a broom and taking the small, needed steps in cleaning our air.

Julia Baker, Fresno