

Supervisors approve refinery expansion

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2008

Expansion of the Big West of California refinery could get under way as soon as January after county supervisors approved the long-fought project Tuesday evening.

The board's unanimous decision came after the company agreed to a series of new conditions proposed by Supervisor Mike Maggard to ensure safe operations at the facility.

Safety became a big issue in recent months following leaks and the last-minute disclosure of a controversial chemical being used there.

"It's now more transparent and (Big West) is more accountable," Maggard said. The \$700 million expansion is expected to nearly double the facility's gasoline and diesel output, create 100 new jobs and generate 700 temporary construction jobs.

The company says the project will create an additional \$1.4 billion in economic output each year, could create more than 1,000 indirect jobs and generate new tax revenue.

Construction is pending permits from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The project approved by supervisors is different than the one Big West originally proposed nearly two years ago. It has fewer environmental impacts and does not involve the use of a dangerous chemical called hydrofluoric acid.

Some new conditions were hammered out Tuesday. They require Big West to:

- Undergo an independent, comprehensive safety audit of its equipment and operations.
- Install monitors along its fenceline that would report any detections directly to county environmental officials.
- Provide semi-annual reports of any leaks, spills or other safety concerns to county officials.
- Give advance notice to the county and submit logs whenever diluted HF will be used at the facility.

The proposed use of hydrofluoric acid generated community opposition to the expansion because of the dangers a release posed to surrounding areas. The project's environmental review underwent major revisions, a delay that Big West says cost it \$75 million to \$125 million.

A new round of concern popped up last week when it became public that a contractor occasionally uses a solution containing up to 5 percent HF for well maintenance there.

Maggard held a press conference lashing out at Big West for not informing the community sooner and the head of a group that opposed the use of HF in the refinery expansion said she felt betrayed.

Betsy Ramsey of Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid reiterated her concern to the board.

"I feel a sense of betrayal that they weren't forthright with me and the rest of the community about the chemical being used in the heart of Bakersfield," she said.

Ramsey was one of three people to speak against the refinery expansion.

County officials concluded the use of diluted HF was safe and common but Maggard still proposed new requirements on the refinery before the vote.

The board's approval drew cheers from the crowded meeting room, filled mainly with refinery employees. People even filled a section of overflow seating in the building's rotunda where the meeting was being shown on closed-circuit television.

"It's been a long road for us but I think we came up with the best solution and everyone came out a winner," said Big West's vice president of refining, Gene Cotten.

CSUB announces huge solar project

By Christine Bedell, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2008

A project to generate 30 percent of Cal State Bakersfield's electrical energy via solar panels mounted over parking spaces on campus was announced Tuesday.

It's part of a partnership between the CSU system and SunEdison designed to offset energy consumption and reduce emissions. Fifteen campuses and the CSU executive offices are involved.

"We're looking at setting an example for the community, the state, the nation," said CSUB spokeswoman Kathy Miller.

Solar panels mounted on the rooftops of parking canopies will be installed over roughly 500 existing parking spaces at CSUB next summer, generating more than 2.1 million kilowatt hours per year, according to campus officials. They said the energy generated will equal the annual consumption of some 150 homes and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by more than 2.2 million pounds per year, which is equivalent to removing about 5,900 automobiles from the road.

SunEdison will fund, build and operate the project, which at CSUB will cost about \$9.5 million. CSUB will buy solar energy at 5 to 10 percent less than current retail rates.

The university said CSUB President Horace Mitchell has promised to pursue climate neutrality including by purchasing energy efficient appliances, ensuring construction is built to a green standard, produce or buy at least 15 percent of electricity from renewable sources and take on at least three waste-reduction initiatives.

The energy produced at all the campuses is expected to deliver 12 million kilowatt hours of clean renewable energy the first year, equivalent to 5 percent of the entire CSU system's yearly energy consumption, according to the governor's office.

Over the life of the deal, the effort is anticipated to offset some 9,485 metric tons of carbon dioxide, the office said, the same as removing 48,937 cars from the road.

The solar project supports our vision of sustainability and is a great example of education and business sectors working together to improve the environment," said Ashok Bhatt, CSUB project manager.

Smog levels in San Juan County cited

The Associated Press
Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, October 22, 2008

FARMINGTON, N.M.—Smog levels in San Juan County violated planned federal health standards for ozone air pollution, raising concerns about a third coal-fired power plant in the region.

Monitors showed an average of 77 parts per billion, exceeding a federally allowed limit of 75 parts per billion that will take effect in three years. The current standard is 80 parts per billion.

"While this violation is a wakeup call, it's also an opportunity to develop a strong, lasting cleanup plan," said Jeremy Nichols of the conservation group WildEarth Guardians.

Ozone is a key component of smog, which forms when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds released from cars, industry and plants mix in sunlight. It can irritate the respiratory system, reduce lung capacity and aggravate asthma.

Nichols said to safeguard public health, the region will have to trim emissions and that means looking at the two existing coal-fired power plants, oil and gas wells and the planned Desert Rock Energy Project.

The Environmental Protection Agency issued an air permit for Desert Rock on July 31, a decision criticized by Navajo groups, state officials and environmental groups who said the decision was not well researched.

The Navajo Nation's Dine Power Authority and Houston-based Sithe Global Power are partners in the 1,500-megawatt plant southwest of Farmington. They argue the plant's pollution control mechanisms, along with reductions in emissions from the other two plants in the county, will improve air quality.

"When you talk about overall ozone, you're talking about regional haze," said Sithe spokesman Frank Maisano. "Our modeling and our controls on Desert Rock will make Desert Rock part of the solution."

Arizona Public Service operates the Four Corners Power Plant and Public Service Company of New Mexico runs the San Juan Generating Station, both located west of Farmington.

PNM spokeswoman Susan Sponar said in-progress upgrades will reduce the San Juan plant's nitrogen oxide emissions by 35 percent. She said the work should be completed next spring.

Mary Uhl, state Environment Department Air Quality Bureau director, said she had expected San Juan County to exceed the new smog standard. The state has been working on a plan to bring the county into compliance.

"We are just in the beginning of constructing a plan," Uhl said. "We had an early action compact to talk about a plan. We had known the San Juan County area is on the cusp of non-attainment."

The EPA estimates that more than 300 counties nationwide will not be able to meet the standard, although it is not expected to make official non-attainment designations until 2010.

Nichols said the air quality problem and possible solutions will be the focus of a meeting of the state Environmental Improvement Board next month. He said the state should enact additional air quality safeguards now rather than wait for the standard to take effect.

"Let's start doing something now," he said. "Let's talk about what more we can do to keep oil and gas air pollution in check and to figure out whether we need to be doing more to keep coal-fired power plant pollution in check."

UC Berkeley study: Green efforts boost economy

David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer
SF Chronicle Tuesday, October 21, 2008

Rather than cost money, California's plans to fight global warming and improve energy efficiency will boost household incomes by \$48 billion and create as many as 403,000 jobs in the next 12 years, according to a UC Berkeley economic study released Monday.

The state has already proved that efficiency pays, said author David Roland-Holst. Starting in the 1970s, the state adopted building codes and home appliance standards that have cut electricity use. Those efforts saved Californians \$56 billion between 1972 and 2006 and created about 1.5 million jobs, according to the study.

"We find, I think demonstrably, that energy efficiency is good for the economy and good for jobs," said Roland-Holst, an adjunct professor in the school's Center for Energy, Resources and Economic Sustainability. "We find that even with very modest targets for energy efficiency improvements, California can continue its legacy of sustained job growth."

California officials are drafting detailed plans for cutting greenhouse gas emissions back to 1990 levels by 2020, and those plans rely heavily on using energy more wisely. They also include

creating a cap and trade system, which places a limit on greenhouse gas emissions and lets companies buy and sell credits to emit specific amounts.

The potential costs and benefits of a cap and trade system have been hotly debated, especially because both the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates support creating one that would cover the nation.

Critics complain that a cap and trade system would raise consumer prices, as the companies buying emission credits passed those costs on to customers. Jerry Taylor, senior fellow with the Cato Institute think tank, said researchers trying to estimate the economic impact of cap and trade systems have reached wildly different results.

"My point is we're rather uncertain about the economic costs" said Taylor, who opposes cap and trade.

Last month, California released its own estimate of how its global warming plans would affect the state's economy. Like the Berkeley study, the state predicted that its efforts would generate jobs and boost personal income. The state's estimates, however, were more modest than Berkeley's, predicting 100,000 new jobs and \$14 billion in added personal income.

Although the Berkeley study examines complicated policies, its central observation is simple. When people use less energy, they spend less on utility bills and have more to spend on other things, from groceries to clothes to lattes. That spurs job creation.

As a result, California should prosper even if a cap and trade system raises electricity costs, Roland-Host said. Although the price of electricity would probably go up, the state and its residents could avoid paying more by using less energy.

"It's well within California's capacity to outpace that price increase," he said.

In addition, the cap and trade system would boost the fortunes of California companies that specialize in renewable power and alternative fuels, generating jobs.

Health Tip: Breathing Polluted Air

Washington Post, Tuesday, October 21, 2008

(HealthDay News) -- When the air you breathe is polluted, it can cause symptoms such as labored breathing; irritated eyes, nose and throat; burning of the eyes; cough; and tightness in the chest.

To minimize these side effects of air pollution -- especially if you have heart or lung disease -- the American Academy of Family Physicians offers these suggestions:

When pollution levels are high, stay inside as much as possible. If you must engage in outdoor activities, try to schedule them first thing in the morning or in the evening, after sunset. When air quality is poor, don't exercise outdoors. Avoid any outdoor activities that require you to exert yourself. Taking in more air also means breathing in additional pollutants.

Wal-Mart to Toughen Standards

By Stephanie Rosenbloom

NY Times, Wednesday, October 22, 2008

Wal-Mart plans to announce Wednesday in Beijing that it will require manufacturers supplying goods for its stores to adhere to stricter ethical and environmental standards, the latest effort by the big retailer to answer criticism of its business practices.

At a gathering of more than 1,000 suppliers, Chinese officials and advocacy groups, Wal-Mart executives plan to reveal a new supplier agreement that will require manufacturers to allow outside audits and to adhere to specific social and environmental criteria. The agreement will be phased in beginning in January.

The changes signal a move on the part of Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, away from intermittent transactions with many suppliers toward longer-term arrangements with a smaller group of manufacturers. Wal-Mart is betting that using its buying power this way can help keep prices low even as it keeps a closer eye on its suppliers.

Wal-Mart, long criticized for its treatment of workers in the United States and its ostensible willingness to overlook violations abroad, has in recent years offered a series of environmental and labor initiatives. A Beijing meeting now under way is the company's first "sustainability summit."

By next year, Wal-Mart will start keeping close track of the factories from which its products originate, even if they pass through many hands. By 2012, Wal-Mart will require suppliers to source 95 percent of their production from factories that receive the highest ratings in audits of environmental and social practices.

The agreement includes a ban on child and forced labor and pay below the local minimum wage.

"Meeting social and environmental standards is not optional," Lee Scott, Wal-Mart's chief executive, plans to say at the Beijing summit, according to his prepared remarks. "I firmly believe that a company that cheats on overtime and on the age of its labor, that dumps its scraps and its chemicals in our rivers, that does not pay its taxes or honor its contracts, will ultimately cheat on the quality of its products. And cheating on the quality of products is the same as cheating on customers."

To ensure suppliers are making changes, Wal-Mart said it would require three levels of audits: from the vendors themselves, from an outside party and from Wal-Mart, which will initiate more of its own random, unannounced audits.

Wal-Mart said the audits would assess factory working conditions as well as compliance by manufacturers with standards regarding air pollution, wastewater discharge, management of toxic substances and disposal of hazardous waste.

Environmental and labor groups that follow Wal-Mart said the retailer had a mixed history when it came to the environment and labor practices — and that sometimes the company's goals were lofty, while the measurable outcomes were less so. Through the years, Wal-Mart has been accused of various abuses.

In the 1990s it came to light that workers at factories producing Kathie Lee Gifford clothing for Wal-Mart were subjected to inhumane conditions. Last year two nongovernmental organizations said abuse and labor violations (including child labor) occurred at 15 factories that produce or supply goods for Wal-Mart and other retailers. In June the United States government and the state of Oklahoma filed a complaint in federal court claiming that Wal-Mart and other companies dumped hazardous waste in Oklahoma City. In Bangladesh, it was charged that factory workers were made to work 19-hour shifts, with some bringing home just \$20 a month.

Michael Green, executive director of the Center for Environmental Health, a watchdog group in Oakland, Calif., said he believed Wal-Mart's effort to improve suppliers' practices began as a program to counter public-relations damage. "I think what happened along the way is some people there actually got convinced," he said. "It became more than a sophisticated P.R. stunt, but something they believed in."

However, without knowing the specifics of Wal-Mart's new plan, Mr. Green said it would not be easy sledding. Suppliers under pressure to offer the company the lowest prices are likely to have an incentive to cheat, he noted, and outside auditors may not want to report violations for fear of losing a lucrative Wal-Mart contract. Additionally, tracing the origins of all the working parts that go into a single toy, for instance, is difficult because it involves multiple factories.

Still, groups that have criticized Wal-Mart are attending the Beijing summit to hear the company's plans.

In a telephone interview from Beijing Tuesday night, Mr. Scott said Wal-Mart may offer longer-term agreements to suppliers willing to make the big investments needed to live up to its environmental demands.

The company said that within China, a nation with major environmental problems, Wal-Mart would aim by 2010 to cut water use in half in all stores, design and open a prototype store that used 40 percent less energy, and reduce energy use in existing stores by 30 percent. "People will judge us," Mr. Scott said, "based on the results."

[Sacramento Bee Commentary, Wednesday, October 22, 2008:](#)

Daniel Weintraub: Former pol finds new business just like the old

By Daniel Weintraub

STOCKTON – Bill Jones has left government. But as a businessman pushing the most popular – and perhaps the most controversial – alternative to petroleum, he seems more enmeshed in politics than ever.

Jones, a former California secretary of state and a candidate for governor just six years ago, is chairman of Pacific Ethanol, a fast-rising company that opened the state's largest ethanol plant here earlier this month.

It is a gleaming facility that stands out in the otherwise grimy Port of Stockton, sitting at the end of a long, curving ribbon of jet-black asphalt paralleled by a shiny new railroad spur. Both are getting plenty of use as 100-car freight trains deliver Midwestern corn and trucks rumble from nearby fields or head out filled with fuel.

The plant itself is state of the art, controlled by two employees at a time sitting at computer terminals. A few dozen other employees putter around in shifts doing maintenance and other minor tasks that can't be automated.

Whether the corn arrives by road or rail, the kernels are quickly dumped through metal grates onto an underground conveyor belt, then combined with enzymes and yeast, heated to 90 degrees and fermented.

The fermented product is piped to a massive still and boiled so that the ethanol steam can be separated from the liquid, then cooled and trucked to Northern California oil refineries, which blend it with their gasoline to create a cleaner-burning fuel. Most of the water that remains behind is recaptured and reused. The corn mush, once it gives up its sugars to make the ethanol, is dropped from another belt into two huge piles inside a cavernous building.

That mush – known as wet distiller's grain – will be one of the secrets to the plant's success if all goes according to plan. The grain is packed with protein and some fat, a power meal for the cows at nearby dairies. Because of that proximity, Pacific Ethanol can sell the stuff as feed and deliver it fresh, instead of having to dry it for long-distance shipping. That means the plant can forgo a drying process that, in a typical Midwestern ethanol refinery, accounts for 30 percent of the energy use.

Jones and his business partners are hoping that their design and strategy will allow them to sell all the fuel they can produce into a California market that currently imports 80 percent of its ethanol from the Midwest. But questions remain about just how large that market will become.

Corn-based ethanol burns cleaner than gasoline, but it has always been dogged by questions, never more than now. The industry emerged thanks to massive federal subsidies, and even today, the government gives the oil companies 45 cents for every gallon of ethanol they blend with gasoline.

At the same time, the government mandates that every gallon of gasoline include at least 6 percent ethanol, a standard that, in California, will soon rise to 10 percent.

Critics point out that ethanol, because it is not as dense a fuel, does not produce the same fuel efficiency as gasoline unless cars are modified to run on either product. And because corn must

be heated to ferment and distill it, some say ethanol actually provides no advantage over the fossil fuel it replaces.

But the real debate that will shape the industry's future is just beginning, as California and the nation grapple with global warming by looking for ways to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide. Reliable studies, including one by the Argonne National Laboratory, have concluded that ethanol produces 30 percent to 40 percent fewer emissions than gasoline, even when the entire process, from the farm to the tailpipe, is included.

The one factor that comparison does not include, however, is the indirect effect of moving land from pasture, forest or other types of farming into growing corn for ethanol. If corn yields remain constant and demand for other corn-based products doesn't decline, this theory goes, then every acre of corn used for ethanol will have to be replaced with an acre of corn to take its place in the food supply. If the land used for ethanol is taken out of other crops, then that food will have to be replaced as well, increasing carbon emissions as forests or grasslands are turned into farmland.

The California Air Resources Board is currently studying whether to count the effects of those indirect land shifts against ethanol as it tallies up the carbon content of alternative fuels. Depending on which numbers the regulators use, ethanol's value as a greenhouse-gas fighter might be considered nil, bringing the growth of the industry to a screeching halt just as it is gaining a foothold as viable alternative to petroleum.

"That doesn't make any sense from a public policy standpoint," Jones said. "This idea of indirect land-use impacts is not based on science. It's based on economic modeling that is hypothetical and unproven." Jones, his company and his entire industry will soon be mounting a full-court press to persuade regulators not to count those hypotheticals.

For this former state official, it seems, his new business is every bit as political as his old one.

[Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor Wed., Oct. 22, 2008:](#)

Controlled burns ruining beauty of Yosemite

I went to Yosemite recently and it was a most unpleasant experience. Road construction delays were everywhere, and when I finally got to Yosemite Valley, it was hazy with smoke and more roads under construction.

But the most disturbing thing was the ugliness of the controlled burns. I have been convinced this is necessary, but maybe enough is enough. The beautiful pines at the tunnel view were cut down, making it a standing-on-the-edge-looking-into-a-hole experience. I have many photos using these trees to frame pictures, and I miss them.

On the way out I saw the "controlled" burn firsthand. It was burning to the top of a mountain through what appeared to be healthy timber. The smoke was thick and the pall extended to the Valley, which doesn't need any more pollution. In Oakhurst, we are into our second day of bad air. I awoke Oct. 18 to smoke so thick my chest hurt.

I saw many dead and dying young trees, which looked to be as much a fire hazard as before. I know fire hazard reduction is important, but maybe it has gone too far. One of my favorite drives has lost much of its beauty.

Helen Button, Oakhurst

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses concerns with environmental Proposition 10 continue to grow. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Crece polémica sobre la Proposición ambientalista 10 de California

Manuel Ocaño, Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, October 23, 2008

Una de las propuestas a referendo en la elección general en California, la Proposición 10 registra una creciente polémica conforme se acerca la fecha de los comicios.

Por un lado, la proposición podría retribuir hasta un 40 por ciento en créditos de impuestos a compradores de vehículos que consumen combustibles alternativos y son residentes del estado, como forma de combatir la contaminación.

Por el otro lado, según grupos de consumidores, la campaña por la iniciativa la financia un multimillonario texano con inversiones en energía alternativa en California, que sería el principal abastecedor de los vehículos de combustible alternativo.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses air pollution in Southern California has gotten worst in recent years.](#)

Supera contaminación del aire del sur de California deterioro alcanzado en años recientes

Manuel Ocaño, Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, October 21, 2008

La contaminación del aire en el sur de California es mayor que la de los dos años anteriores, según un análisis actualizado.

En lo que va de este año, el sur de California ha tenido 118 días con aire insalubre, cinco días más que en todo el 2007, y por lo menos 12 días más que en el 2006; pero aún faltan dos meses enteros para terminar el 2008.

La Administración Distrital de Calidad del Aire del Sur de California informó que con retrocesos como este es difícil poder asegurar que en los próximos años se pueda alcanzar mejor calidad para millones de residentes.

La zona sigue siendo la más contaminada en Estados Unidos.