Peak production

By Eric Firpo
Tracy Press, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Owners of the Tracy Peaker Plant southwest of town hope to nearly double the amount of electricity it can generate by using heat from the plant to power a steam turbine.

GWF Energy LLC says it's probably five years away from adding 145 megawatts to the 170-megawatt plant southwest of Tracy. One megawatt can power 750 to 1,000 homes, said Gregg Fishman of the California Independent System Operator, which runs the state's electrical grid.

The company expects to submit an application to the California Energy Commission in April or May, said GWF Vice President Doug Wheeler.

It would likely take 18 months to two years before the application is OK'd by the commission, if it decides to say yes to a bigger plant. The plant could be running by 2013, the company estimates.

GWF officials have already talked to a few people in town about its plans, Wheeler said, and they plan to set up meetings with city department heads, elected officials and some of the residents it battled to win energy commission approval for the plant in 2003.

Andrew Malik, the head of the city's engineering and development department, said the city received a letter recently from GWF asking to discuss its plans to modify the plant, but the letter gave no specifics. They're still trying to schedule a meeting, Malik said.

To sway some opponents in 2003 and ease concerns about air pollution spewed by the plant, the company agreed to do things to cut down on air pollution in the city. It bought electric lawn mowers to replace gas mowers, helped Tracy Unified School District buy a bus that runs on natural gas and put catalytic converters on school buses to cut emissions, among other things.

The company also set up two high school scholarships and gives out $50,000 in year in charitable grants, Wheeler said.

Whether it will have to jump through similar hoops this time remains to be seen.

Bob Sarvey, a critic of the plant when it was proposed, could not be reached for comment today.

At the moment, the Peaker Plant runs only when the state needs to increase power to the grid during peak use. Its permit from the state limits its use to 8,000 hours a year, and the company says that limit will remain even if it gets to add megawatts.

Wheeler says the plant will actually cut some greenhouse gas emissions by about 30 percent, reduce other pollutants and be much more energy efficient.

The company runs two other peaker plants in the Central Valley, one in Lemoore and another in Hanford, and plans to ask regulatory permission to add steam turbines to those plants, too, Wheeler said.

Local company starts cow power project

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

A Bakersfield company has kicked off the state's first "cow power" project.

BioEnergy Solutions Tuesday started its first system to create natural gas from cow manure at the 5,000-cow Vintage Dairy in western Fresno County.

The technology collects methane from a five-acre wide, 40 foot-deep manure pit and converts it to natural gas to be sold to Pacific Gas and Electric.

The system works similar to digesters already in use to self-generate electricity at some farms. But BioEnergy Solutions is the first to pipe natural gas from manure to a publicly owned utility.

The Public Utilities Commission approved a 10-year contract between Pacific Gas and Electric and BioEnergy Solutions.

BioEnergy Solutions and the dairy are owned by Bakersfield attorney David Albers.

Vintage Dairy is expected to produce enough fuel to power 1,200 homes a year while cutting greenhouse gas emissions at the dairy by 70 percent.

The company plans to install the gas collection system at other dairies and will eventually supply enough gas to power 50,000 homes a year, Pacific Gas and Electric officials said.

SoCal air regulators may pass new restrictions on home fireplaces

The Associated Press
Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

LOS ANGELES -- In Southern California, where fireplaces often serve a more decorative than practical purpose, air pollution regulators are expected to pass restrictions this week that would limit their use.

The proposed regulations would include no-burn days, limit new homes to natural gas fireplaces and require stores to only sell clean-burning grades of wood during winter and fall. Burning trash in fireplaces would be banned.

Similar rules are already in place in the San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento area, and San Francisco Bay area air regulators have proposed wood burning rules.

"No stone can be left unturned in our quest for clean air," said Barry Wallerstein, executive director of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Developers oppose new fireplace rules. They say new home fireplaces emit less pollution than those in older homes.

"We believe consumers should have the choice," said Julie Senter, spokeswoman for the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

The regulations also propose penalties. If air quality doesn't meet the federal health standard, homeowners could not light up a fire starting in 2013. Violators could face fines from $50 to $500.

Regulators are expected to vote on Friday. The rules would help the air district meet a 2017 deadline to bring particle pollution levels down to healthy levels.

The district has jurisdiction over Orange County, most of Los Angeles County and the western portions of Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

China premier promises to cut pollution

By TINI TRAN , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, USA Today and Washington Post, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

BEIJING — China's premier promised in a major speech Wednesday to cut pollution emissions, conserve energy and shut down outmoded and inefficient factories in heavily polluting industries such as electricity, coal and steel.

"We must increase our sense of urgency and intensify efforts to make greater progress," Premier Wen Jiabao said at the opening of the national legislature's annual session.

"First, we will implement the plan to close down backward production facilities in the electricity, steel, cement, coal and papermaking industries," Wen said.

China's double-digit economic growth has come with a surge in heavily polluting industries such as manufacturing and energy. The country is home to 16 of the world's 20 most heavily polluted cities.

Intense pollution in developing countries has complicated international discussions on curbing emissions, with the United States rejecting the 1997 Kyoto protocol in part because it did not require firm enough commitments from developing nations such as China and India on reducing greenhouse gases.

In his speech, Wen also promised a renewed push to rein in "haphazard" investment and "unneeded development projects" in highly polluting industries.

China's communist leadership has recently become more sensitive to the environmental cost of the country's economic boom after a series of high-profile accidents polluted rivers, disrupting water supplies to major cities. Farmers have protested over tainted water supplies and ruined land.

Wen said China will work toward breakthroughs in technologies for producing vehicles powered by new energy sources and to develop high-speed rail transport.

China's growing demand for cars has worsened the smog blanketing many larger cities. In Beijing, the site of this summer's Olympics, organizers have been debating strategies to take half of the capital's more than 3 million-plus vehicles off the roads during the Games.

The premier said Beijing also wants to strengthen efforts to protect and conserve its natural resources, including land, water, grasslands, and minerals.

Free public transit trips curbed to two days

Spare the Air campaign cut back this year as federal money dries up

By Denis Cuff, Staff Writer
Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, March 5, 2008

Free public transit rides in the Bay Area likely will be limited to two smoggy days this summer because of diminishing federal funds.

Air pollution officials, however, say they intend to broaden their Spare the Air campaign — urging people to cut air pollution year-round to combat global warming.

Up until now, Spare the Air messages have focused primarily on getting people to drive less and pollute less on the smoggiest days when a pungent gas called ozone can irritate eyes and lungs.

"It's not just Spare the Air. It's Spare the Earth," said Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District Board.

On Monday, the air pollution board's public outreach committee approved a scaled-back plan for free rides during the smog season from June through mid-October.

Officials would spend $5.2 million to offer free fares on two Spare the Air days, plus another $1.5 million on other incentives, messages and measures to reduce global warming gases permanently.

The other measures might include providing equipment for people to work at home and communicate via teleconferencing; offering discounted rental bicycles, or helping schools promote safe walking and biking routes to schools.

Free passes for targeted groups of commuters to ride public transit on certain days also may be offered under the plan.

Also Monday, the board committee called on the pollution agency to try to find money for free rides on a third day this year — a tall order.

The proposal is being sent to the full air pollution board and to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a partner in the free transit days.

Last year, the air and transit agencies approved funding for up to four free transit days, but called only two of them because of a mild smog season.

During a very hot 2006, air and transit officials called six free-fare days.

A key federal funding source for the Bay Area free fare days is drying up.

After the upcoming smog season, the Bay Area will have used all the money for free-fare days that it got from federal Congestion Management Air Quality funds, officials said.

"We agree free fares are a good way to attract riders to public transit during smoggy episodes, but we want to branch out to look at promoting other ways to reduce pollution year round," said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the nine-county air district.

Motor vehicles contribute to both smog, a problem on hot, windless days, as well as to global warming gases, which build up over years.

"Pollution on cold rainy days contributes to global warming," Schkolnick said.

The air pollution district also is exploring the idea of creating a separate nonprofit foundation to accept private contributions to fund measures to reduce global warming gases.

EPA: No timeline for high court request

By ERICA WERNER , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

WASHINGTON — Nearly a year after being told to do so, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday he couldn't say when he would comply with a Supreme Court directive and determine whether greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles should be regulated.

In a tense exchange with a senator, EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson suggested that few if any people at the agency were directly working on the issue now. The high court in April 2007 had said the EPA was required to determine whether carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping greenhouse gases posed a danger to public health.

Johnson originally had promised a reply to the court's ruling by last fall.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., pressed the EPA official at a hearing, repeatedly asking him how many EPA employees he had working on the greenhouse gas issue.

"Is anyone working on this at the present time, Mr. Johnson?" she asked. "How many members of your staff are currently working on this?"

"I don't know the answer to that," Johnson replied at a hearing of the Senate Appropriations environment subcommittee.

Feinstein accused Johnson of "stonewalling" and said she found it strange that the EPA chief "can't give me a number (of people engaged) on something that is a Supreme Court finding."

"Madam Chairman, I am not stonewalling," Johnson said.

He said a law that Congress passed in December requiring automakers to achieve a fleetwide average of 35 miles per gallon by 2020 has complicated the EPA's response on greenhouse gas regulation as required by the high court.

Johnson also used the new auto fuel economy requirements as a key reason that he decided to reject a request by California for permission from the EPA to pursue its own controls on greenhouse gas emissions - mainly carbon dioxide - from automobiles.

The Supreme Court ruling last April found that the EPA had authority under the Clean Air Act to regulate tailpipe emissions of greenhouse gases, so named because their accumulation in the atmosphere can help trap heat from the sun, causing potentially dangerous warming of the Earth. The court directed the EPA to decide whether the emissions endanger the public's health or welfare. If so, the court said, the EPA must regulate such emissions.

The Bush administration had long argued against regulating carbon dioxide, maintaining that it is not a pollutant under the Clean Air Act, and has opposed mandatory limits even in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling.

EPA scientists determined last year that greenhouse gas emissions are a threat to the public welfare, government officials familiar with the decision have told The Associated Press. However, EPA officials said that once the new fuel-efficiency law was signed the process was restarted.

Johnson emphasized Tuesday that the decision on greenhouse gas regulation has to be examined broadly.

"I know we have staff working on a myriad of issues," Johnson told Feinstein as the senator pressed him on to what extent the agency was viewing the court's edict as a top priority.

"We have a lot of activities, important activities that we're working on as well," he added.

Johnson again defended his decision to deny California permission to implement its own law regulating greenhouse gas emissions from new cars and trucks. He said the decision was his alone and the right one, even though more than a dozen states have sued him over it and internal documents have emerged showing his career staff advised that the waiver should have been granted.

Johnson, a career EPA employee before he was selected as administrator by President Bush, has been under intense criticism from environmentalists for a number of pollution decisions, from dealing with how he would reduce mercury emissions, to the California waiver to what critics argue is a refusal to meet the global warming issue head on.

EPA head unaware of pressures on states

By ERICA WERNER , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee and New York Times, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

WASHINGTON — The head of the Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday he didn't know of behind-the-scenes efforts by EPA officials to blunt state attempts to reduce mercury emissions from power plants.

Those efforts occurred even as the Bush administration argued in court that states are free to enact tougher mercury controls from power plants, The Associated Press reported last month, based on internal EPA documents.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., questioned EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson about the report at a hearing of the Senate Appropriations environment subcommittee.

"Has anyone with EPA ever pressured any state against instituting any more restrictive mercury regulation?" asked Leahy, who chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"I don't recall having any firsthand knowledge of that," said Johnson. "I don't know if they have, no I don't," he added.

Leahy cautioned Johnson that such pressure on states was inappropriate, and if it did occur, "then the EPA gave misleading information to the courts, which is an extremely serious matter."

A federal appeals court last month struck down the Bush administration's industry-friendly approach for mercury reduction that allowed plants with excessive smokestack emissions to buy pollution rights from other plants that foul the air less.

Internal EPA documents obtained by the advocacy group Environmental Defense show attempts over the past two years to bar state efforts to make their plants drastically cut mercury pollution instead of trading for credits that would let them continue it.

Many states did not want their power plants to be able to buy their way out of having to reduce mercury pollution.

The push to rein in uncooperative states continued until the eve of the Feb. 8 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit that struck down the EPA's program. A day before that ruling, the White House Office of Management and Budget approved a draft regulation to impose a "federal implementation plan" for mercury reduction in states whose mercury control measures did not meet EPA approval.

It would have required power plants to comply with the national cap-and-trade provisions, even it that meant ignoring state restrictions.

Yet even as the EPA tangled with the states behind the scenes, government lawyers representing the agency were in U.S. District Court in Washington saying states could require more than the federal program. A state restriction on emission allowances "is not a basis for disapproval" of its program by the EPA, the court was told.

Loans program for coal plants suspended

By MATTHEW BROWN , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Washington Post and Capital Press Ag Weekly, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

BILLINGS, Mont. — The federal government is suspending a major loan program for coal-fired power plants in rural communities, saying the uncertainties of climate change and rising construction costs make the loans too risky.

After issuing $1.3 billion in loans for new plant construction since 2001, none will be issued this year and likely none in 2009, James Newby, assistant administrator for the Rural Utilities Service, a branch of the Department of Agriculture, said Tuesday.

The program's suspension marks a dramatic reversal of a once-reliable source of new coal plant financing. It follows the announcement last month that several major banks will require plant developers to factor in climate change when seeking private funding.

"This is a big decision. It says new coal plants can't go to the federal government for money at least for the next couple years, and these are critical times for companies to get these plants built," said Abigail Dillen with the environmental law group Earthjustice. The group filed a federal lawsuit last year seeking to block the loan program.

At the time of the suspension, at least four utilities had been lined up for loans totaling $1.3 billion - for projects in Kentucky, Illinois, Arkansas and Missouri. A project in Montana was denied funding last month. Two more were recently withdrawn: last October in Wyoming and earlier this week in Missouri.

Newby said material and labor costs for new coal plants have been rising 30 percent a year, even as utilities struggle to pinpoint future costs of controlling greenhouse gas emissions. The 2 billion tons of those gases produced annually by coal-fired plants in the United States exceed the emissions of any other source.

Newby said those uncertainties prompted the White House's Office of Management and Budget to ask that new loans be put on hold until risks can be better quantified.

Rural utilities provide power to about 40 million customers across the nation. More than 60 percent of that electricity comes from coal.

Whether the plants that were awaiting federal loans can find alternative financing remains to be seen.

Associated Electric Cooperative Inc. announced this week it was "delaying indefinitely" its proposed plant in Norborne, Mo., after receiving word of the loan program suspension.

At least one developer, the East Kentucky Power Cooperative, is hoping to wait out the suspension of the loan program rather than seek more expensive loans on the open market, spokesman Nick Comer said.

Two more projects - Southern Montana Electric's Highwood Generating Station and Basin Electric Power Cooperative's Dry Fork plant in Wyoming - already are seeking private funding.

A representative of the East Texas Power Cooperative, which has proposed a plant in Plum Point, Ark., also said his utility would seek private financing if the loans are not resumed.

"We'll have to look elsewhere for funding, which will increase the interest expense, which will increase the electric bill for the consumers at the end of the line," said the cooperative's Ryan Thomas.

Newby, with the Rural Utilities Service, said his agency is considering imposing upfront fees on coal plant developers as a way to mitigate taxpayer exposure through the loan program. Initial discussions have centered on a 0.2 percent fee - equivalent to $2 million on every $1 billion in loans.

Newby added he was confident the government would work through the concerns over risk and resume issuing loans possibly as soon as 2010.

Glenn English, chief executive of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said the program's suspension was a sign of "nervousness" among lenders anxious over the potential ramifications of climate change legislation now before Congress.

Depending on what policies are adopted, retail electricity prices could increase sharply once the costs of reducing greenhouse gases are factored in, he said. Utilities that drop coal-fired power proposals will be forced to shop for more expensive electricity on the open market.

"What you're seeing (with the Rural Utilities Service) is a general reflection of the attitude we find in the financial community, mainly this apprehension about what the future holds and what can be expected out of government," English said.

Report: World must act on climate change now

USA TODAY, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

OSLO (AP) - The world must deal with climate change now - or pay a much higher price later, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said Wednesday.

In two decades, unchecked environmental damage could leave half the world's population without adequate drinking water, the OECD's secretary general, Angel Gurria, said Wednesday.

"Climate change is mankind's most important challenge. We know the enemy: It is named carbon," he said.

An OECD report on the environmental outlook to 2030, part of a series of reports compiled every five years, concentrates on climate change, water shortages, energy needs, biodiversity loss, transportation, agriculture and fisheries.

"Without more ambitious policies, increasing pressures on the environment could cause irreversible damage within the next few decades," the report said. "The cost of inaction is high, while ambitious actions to protect the environment are affordable and can go hand in hand with economic growth."

The report also stressed the need for a global response. Gurria urged the USA and developing countries with booming economies such as China and India to accept a binding international commitment to reduce global-warming gases.

"It involves that everyone participates. This is very important. We can't have anybody do a 'free ride,'" he said.

By 2030, the world's population - currently about 6.5 billion people - is expected to hit 8.2 billion, and the global economy could double in size, largely due to growth in countries such as Brazil, Russia, China and India, the report said.

Unchecked, growth in energy consumption in those countries could be 72% by 2030, compared to 29% for all 30 of the OECD's European nations.

That would lead to a 38% increase in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050. However, if Brazil, Russia, China and India take the same step in 2020, and are followed by the rest of the world in 2030, emissions could be held at 2000 levels, it said.

If no steps are taken, world gross domestic product will grow 99% between 2005 and 2030, with severe environmental consequences, the report said. With measures, growth would be nearly the same, 97%, but with a much healthier environment.

The report said governments must create such policies as "green taxes" to encourage sound technologies and practices, and that the rich world must help poor countries develop without spewing pollution by providing technology and expertise.

It also said ecological advances bring multiple benefits. For example, cutting motor vehicles' greenhouse gas emissions would improve air quality in cities or better insulated homes that cut power bills for consumers while reducing power plant emissions.

"OECD's report identifies critical environmental issues facing our country and countries around the world," Congressman Bart Gordon, a Tennessee Democrat, said in Washington. "The OECD report provides a good roadmap for evaluating environmental challenges and the economic impacts we face if no action is taken."

The OECD, made up of 30 European nations, focuses on economic and social policies.

Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Wednesday, Mar. 05, 2008:

Our View: Bring back severance tax

Renewed tax on oil production would raise $400 million a year for state's general fund.

It has been said that California is operating on borrowed time in responding to the threat of global climate change.

It is also operating on borrowed money.

Over the past two fiscal years, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers have been paying for implementation of Assembly Bill 32 -- the state's law to control greenhouse gases -- by taking loans from various unrelated state special funds.

Schwarzenegger is proposing to do so again in 2008-09 -- borrowing $55 million from the state Air Pollution Control Fund, the Proposition 84 water bond, the Public Transportation Account, the Waste Discharge Permit Fund and others.

Officials for the Air Resources Board, which administers AB 32, say these funds will be paid back once the ARB has finished assessing the sources of greenhouse gas emissions in California, and can reliably set fees on the major emitters.

In the meantime, the administration is raiding money that should be going to control smog, finance public transit, improve water quality, encourage recycling and other dedicated purposes.

This is unacceptable.

If the ARB is quickly to establish a low-carbon fuel standard and explore various market mechanisms and rules for controlling greenhouse gases, it needs a stable source of funding.

Senate Democrats and the Legislative Analyst's Office have rightly criticized the Air Resources Board for not using its statutory authority, under AB 32, to set a fee structure on the largest emitters.

If the air board won't do it, lawmakers should undertake the exercise themselves. Either that, or find another way to pay for the rapid implementation of a law that has helped put the governor's mug on the cover of several national magazines.

Lawmakers should consider resurrecting plans for a severance tax on oil production. Such a tax would raise up to $400 million per year and add California to the long list of oil-producing states that use such severance taxes for public purposes.

Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, Mar. 05, 2008:

Merced's bad air

Editor: The California Environmental Protection Agency deserves applause. The San Joaquin Valley was identified as the most ozone polluted area in the United States in 2003, and Merced was awarded the distinction of being the most ozone polluted small city in the country. Now Merced ranks sixth-highest in the nation. Since 1990, Merced has repeatedly failed to meet the standards of the EPA and has not met any of the deadlines set for clean air.

Air pollution comes primarily from automobiles, trucks, trains, buses, construction, manufacturing, agriculture and livestock. One hundred percent pollution control is not expected. Gradual reduction from 650 to 160 tons per day of Nox emissions in the Valley is required by EPA. Our projected date of attainment is 2023. By that time there may be more excuses for noncompliance.

Air pollution damages lungs, produces premature death and induces or accelerates illnesses such as valley fever, asthma, tuberculosis, cystic fibrosis and COPD. Children, the elderly and people with lung disease are all adversely affected by air pollution. It can be a death sentence for HIV-infected persons. Around 36,000 in Merced and Mariposa counties have asthma; around 13,000 of those are children. One in five children in this Valley have been diagnosed with asthma. It is the number one cause of school absences. It is taking money from schools and overloading hospital emergency rooms.

One of the problems in this area, as I see it is the EPA evaluations for construction. Environmental impact reports are required and the construction companies almost always pay for the reports. This saves the city/county money. As we all have been taught, "you get what you pay for." The report is evaluated by the city/county which, to my knowledge, approves the reports unless citizens stand up and loudly protest.

Now the EPA in Sacramento is taking a look at the report on the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center. It is certainly past time for EPA involvement. May the EPA continue to look at the reports in all areas of California not in compliance with EPA standards for the health and welfare of its citizens, especially children who live there. Thank you, EPA. Maybe now we have a chance at clean air and a healthy lifestyle.

Joan Porter, Merced

Lodi News Sentinel, Letter to the Editor

Octane booster could help

In view of the serious problem this world has, namely global warming, I have a suggestion that just might help in resolving it.

For a few dollars, a customer can purchase a container called octane booster. One container can be added to a full tank of gasoline. The booster not only guarantees more miles per gallon of gasoline, it also lessens the amount of pollution — carbon monoxide — in the air.

Elin Terra, Lodi

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses a train carrying dangerous chemicals derailed in Mecca causing an evacuation due to toxins in the air. For more information on this clip or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Fuga de gases tóxicos tras descarrilamiento

By Claudia Núñez
La Opinion, Wednesday, March 5, 2008

El descarrilamiento de un tren que transportaba químicos peligrosos ocasionó la evacuación de 40 familias en la comunidad de Mecca, a dos horas de Los Ángeles, y el acordonamiento de la zona ante el temor de posibles intoxicaciones. Esta es la segunda vez, en menos de un año que ocurre un incidente de este tipo a menos de una milla de distancia.

De acuerdo al informe oficial, en punto de las 8:33 de la noche una llamada al 911 realizada por uno de los vecinos del lugar alertó al Departamento de Bomberos del Condado de Riverside de un intenso olor a tóxicos y de la presencia de un incendio que provenía de las vías del tren en donde una máquina se había descarrilado.

Tras la llegada de las autoridades al lugar se reportó que de los 65 vagones que transportaba el tren, 29 se descarrilaron y cuatro de ellos transportaban sustancias químicas altamente tóxicas como son el ácido hidroclorídico y fosfato, dos elementos que se utilizan para la limpieza industrial y la agricultura entre otras cosas.

No hubo lesionados y las familias afectadas fueron enviadas a un centro de refugio en la ciudad de Coachella a casi 20 millas del lugar donde sucedieron los hechos.

Se presume que la evacuación de familias podría continuar a lo largo de este miércoles dependiendo del clima ya que de presentarse condiciones de viento la peligrosidad de que residentes aspiren los contaminantes podría extenderse a otras áreas.

"De momento todo es especulación, pero la limpieza de la zona podría tardar hasta una semana", dijo Fernando Herrera, capitán del Departamento de Bomberos del Condado de Riverside.

De momento continúan las investigaciones para determinar cuáles fueron las causas del incidente, aunque de manera extraoficial trascendió que el motivo pudo haberse tratado de falta de mantenimiento a las vías que rodean esta zona, en donde con frecuencia, según vecinos del lugar, suceden situaciones de este tipo. El último descarrilamiento sucedió en mayo del año pasado a menos de una milla de distancia de donde ocurrió el descarrilamiento del lunes.

James Barnes, portavoz de la compañía Union Pacific, informó que el tren salió de la ciudad de Colton, en el condado de San Bernardino y se dirigía a El Centro en el Valle Imperial.

Barnes negó que las vías del tren que rodean la comunidad de Mecca estén en malas condiciones y aclaró que no haría comentarios al respecto pues de momento continúan las investigaciones para determinar las causas del accidente. Otros trenes que cruzaban la zona fueron desviados hacia Salt Lake City.

Sin embargo, informes computarizados del Departamento Federal de Transporte indican que el condado de San Bernardino, de donde partió este tren, es el que registra el mayor número de incidentes con materiales peligrosos de todo el país en más de 10 años.

Los daños materiales aún no han sido determinados, pero Esteban López, manager de la compañía Prime Time, cuyos sembradíos y planta empacadora se ubican en la zona afectada, informó que al menos 600 trabajadores fueron afectados y las pérdidas pudieran ser cuantiosas.

"No nos han informado nada pero esperemos que pronto nos dejen entrar para regar el área. Están en riesgo 14 acres de cultivo de lechuga y chile y pues también peligra el salario de mucha gente" apuntó.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the evacuation of 70 residences in Mecca, all claiming it hurt to breath due to the toxic gases in the air.

Reubicados por peligroso derrame

Sustancias dañinas atentan contra unos 70 residentes del área que fueron llevados a refugios

By Alejandro Cano
La Opinion, Wednesday, March 05, 2008

THERMAL.- Después de una larga jornada de trabajo en los sembradíos del Valle de Coachella, Rubén Cervantes, de 40 años, no deseaba más que reposar al lado de su esposa e hijos.

Sin embargo, los fuertes toques a su puerta en la madrugada del martes, interrumpieron su sueño para despertar con la noticia de que tenía que abandonar su hogar.

Consternado y sin entender la razón exacta de la situación, Cervantes despertó a sus tres hijos, empacó algunas cosas para su bebita de 5 meses y decidió buscar refugio en el albergue establecido por la Cruz Roja Americana en la escuela preparatoria Coachella Valley.

"Los bomberos llegaron casi tumbando mi puerta para avisarme de que había que evacuar. Juntamos unas cuantas cosas y salimos, dolía respirar, los gases nos hacían lagrimar", comentó Cervante, quien junto con otros 70 residentes de la zona arribaron al albergue desplazados por las nubes de gases tóxicos que fueron ocasionados por el descarrilamiento de un tren de carga.

Según el Departamento de Bomberos del condado de Riverside, el ácido fosfórico y el hidroclórico líquido que se derramó alrededor de las 9:00 p.m. del lunes en las proximidades de la ciudad de Mecca, representan una amenaza para la salud humana.

Según estudios elaborados por el Departamento de Control de Sustancias Tóxicas (DTSC) de la Agencia de Protección Ambiental (EPA) de EU, el ácido hidroclórico líquido, empleado