

Pollution from the Bay Area

Fresno Bee Smog Blog, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

A reader e-mailed Monday with a familiar comment:

"It has been shown that if all vehicles were to be pulled off the road here in the Valley, we still would not meet the air quality guidelines as so much of the pollution blows into the Valley from the Bay Area.

Yet, what is being done to control this problem at the source?"

Bay Area pollution does come into the Valley, but its contribution to the air problem here is often overstated. Even if nothing came from the Bay Area, the Valley would have big problems.

Does anyone speak up about pollution that blows into the Valley? Yes.

I have heard officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District argue that the Bay Area should have the same stringent smog controls as Valley residents have. The argument has been successful many times.

There have been federal health violations seven of the last eight days here. Yesterday, the only monitor to show a violation was in Sequoia National Park. I wonder if Bay Area pollution had anything to do with that?

Energy firm drops plan for power plant near Red Bluff

'Plasma technology' would have used medical waste.

By Chris Bowman, The Sacramento Bee

In the Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

Energy developers who promised job-hungry Tehama County a lucrative business turning hazardous medical waste into clean fuel have abandoned construction on its power plant.

Inentec LLC of Richland, Wash., aborted the \$13 million project outside Red Bluff on Friday because of "changing business strategies and market conditions," the company said in a letter e-mailed to county officials last week.

Project opponents, however, said they drove Inentec out of town by undercutting its claims of a pollution-free technology.

"Had it not been for local opposition that plant would be built right now," said Luke Cole, executive director of the Center for Race, Poverty & the Environment in San Francisco.

Inentec is one of several start-up firms promoting so-called "plasma technology" as an environmentally and economically superior alternative to landfills.

Superheated electrified gas, or plasma, vaporizes organic wastes, producing a synthetic fuel for power plants. Molten glass and metals form a glassy slag, which can be sold for construction materials.

The technology is decades old, but its application to waste disposal is relatively new and, critics say, not ripe for commercialization.

Inentec got out of the medical waste business more than a year ago, figuring more money would be made building plasma technology to a larger scale that accepts both hazardous and everyday household rubbish, company President Jeff Surma said in an interview.

"We have a number of very exciting opportunities that we are pursuing," Surma said.

Another energy developer looking to tap that broader municipal waste stream is negotiating with Sacramento.

U.S. Science and Technology wants to make California's capital the first American city to zap its garbage, using plasma technology. Sacramento currently trucks its garbage daily across the Sierra to a dump in the desert east of Reno.

Opposition to the Inentec project formed in 2005 after Tehama County granted the company a land-use permit and a declaration of "no significant environmental impact." Local air pollution regulators deemed the proposed plant safe, based on company-supplied emissions data from test runs of its prototypes.

Many Red Bluff area residents were outraged to learn that something as potentially hazardous as hospital waste - 10 to 20 tons of diseased organs, tissues and limbs and other infectious throwaways trucked in daily - had escaped their attention.

A grass-roots group, assisted by the San Francisco environmental group Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, researched Inentec's patented "plasma enhanced melter" system. They said the technology has a spotty performance record in plants overseas and spews highly toxic pollutants, including dioxin.

In December 2005, an appeals board of the county air pollution control district revoked the construction permits for Inentec, which had just poured a foundation. The permits were ultimately upheld in court, but Inentec never resumed construction.

Council signs off on port's clean truck program

Daily News Wire Services

In the Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

The Los Angeles City Council approved an initiative today that requires trucking firms to employ drivers who call on the Port of Los Angeles, rather than hiring them as independent contractors.

The 12-0 vote was the final one needed for approval of the Clean Trucks Program.

"For ever, I have been talking about two things -- dirty trucks, dirty air and the plight of the independent truck driver," said City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents the harbor area.

"I'll never forget the very first hearing I went to probably six or seven years ago ... these people that we depend on to move America's goods were not making the kind of wages they could even live on, let alone keep up with the fuel costs, insurance and the maintenance of their trucks."

The phased Clean Trucks Program requires companies to hire drivers as employees by 2012.

The council also a Harbor Commission decision to provide grants to cover 80 percent of the cost of replacing older trucks with cleaner-burning diesel models. Under the Scrap Truck Buyback Program, the city will pay \$5,000 each for pre-1989 18-wheelers.

The Clean Air Action Plan is a joint effort between the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Last year, the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbor commissions approved a \$35 fee on cargo containers, which will be implemented on Oct. 1.

The fee is expected to generate \$1.6 billion to replace 16,800 trucks in the short-haul fleet.

Port officials believe the clean-fuel fleet will decrease emissions by 80 percent over the next five years.

"For 30 years, I've hiked in Griffith Park every morning and I see the sunrise and out straight down Normandie (Avenue) and to the east of that is the Port of Los Angeles, and you can often see, unfortunately, a layer (of pollution) that sits there over the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach," said Councilman Tom LaBonge.

Port fee to help raise \$3 billion

INFRASTRUCTURE: Container charge will be matched by proposition funds for overhaul of roads, bridges.

By Art Marroquin, Staff Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

INFRASTRUCTURE: Container charge will be matched by proposition funds for overhaul of roads, bridges.

The Los Angeles City Council on Tuesday approved a fee that's expected to raise \$1.4 billion for bridge, railway and road improvements at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The proposal calls for placing a \$15 charge on all loaded 20-foot cargo containers entering or leaving the port by truck or train beginning Jan. 1, 2009. The fee will be lifted in about seven years, when the infrastructure projects are scheduled for completion.

The fee, along with matching Proposition 1B infrastructure funds, will help pay for \$3 billion worth of air quality and transportation projects, including the long-awaited replacement of the Gerald Desmond and Commodore Shuyler F. Heim bridges, which connect the twin ports.

"The infrastructure is kind of on its last legs and will not be able to accommodate growth unless we invest in new infrastructure," said Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, whose 15th District includes the port.

Plans also call for using the funds to pay for improving the twin ports' rail network as a way to reduce truck trips.

Highway projects include improvements to the Harbor (110) Freeway and the Port of Los Angeles, a new interchange at Navy Way and Seaside Avenue, and an elevated expressway along Pacific Coast Highway from Ocean Boulevard to Alameda Street. A grade separation between railways and the highway would also be built at the southern end of Wilmington.

The Los Angeles and Long Beach harbor commissions already approved the infrastructure fee in January.

The port's plan comes as state Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, continues to push a bill aimed at raising funds to improve road and railway access in Southern California. Specifically, the bill seeks out funds for more grade separations throughout the region, according to Lowenthal aide John Casey.

"What the ports have proposed don't do anything outside of their boundaries, especially on the infrastructure side, so you'll be creating a 21st century port funneling into a 19th century transportation system," Casey said. "There are many grade separations that need to be done throughout the region, and unless you get those done, opposition to terminal expansions will only become greater."

BART starts EIR planning for Livermore rail extension

By Denis Cuff, Contra Costa Times

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

LIVERMORE - BART will host a public meeting in Livermore on Wednesday to kick off an environmental review of alternatives for extending rail service to Livermore.

The meeting at the Robert Livermore Community Center, 444 East Avenue, begins at 6 p.m. with an informal open house to ask questions and examine written materials about the project. From 7 to 9 p.m., the public can comment on the rail extension alternatives and what should be studied about them in an environmental impact report.

BART is considering at least three possible rail alignments, each following the Interstate 580 median out of the current Dublin-Pleasanton station. One alignment would end at a station at Greenville Road. Another would follow Isabel Avenue to its intersection with Greenville Road. Another alignment would follow El Charro Road to a station at the intersection of Greenville Road and Isabel Avenue.

East Bay transportation officials send 1,900 people free bus passes

By Erik N. Nelson, The Oakland Tribune

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

BERKELEY - In an effort to monitor the travel habits engendered by development clustered near public transportation, area transportation agencies announced Tuesday they will give out free data chip bus passes to 1,900 East Bay residents.

The pilot program is aimed at people who live in 20 properties, mostly apartment buildings, with regular bus service nearby. The complexes are around western Alameda and Contra Costa counties, and in Oakland, Berkeley San Leandro, El Cerrito and Emeryville.

Such "transit-oriented developments" are seen as a key to encouraging the use of buses, ferries and trains in order to cut traffic congestion and combat air pollution. Studies have shown that when people live and work within a half-mile of convenient transit, four times as many residents will use it.

"It is wonderful; I love AC Transit," said Lucy Sells, a 76-year-old resident of Sacramento Senior Homes, a 39-unit, low-income apartment building at Berkeley's southern end.

She said the pursuit of green vegetables puts her on the No. 9 Bus two or three times a week, and the transit passes would make her trips more convenient.

"Just having the right change is a drag," she said.

That's just the sort of thing officials at the Metropolitan Transportation Commission are hoping users of their TransLink cards will appreciate.

The system, meant to provide a universal way of paying fares on more than two dozen Bay Area transit systems, has been in development since the early 1990s.

Just last year, TransLink began full-fledged service on AC Transit and Golden Gate Transit.

But various complications and disagreements between agencies - BART in particular - have long delayed making the system capable of taking riders on the area's other major systems.

While MTC officials had expected to add BART to the system this spring, they're now predicting a launch sometime before the end of the year. Caltrain and Muni, which already accepts TransLink for its Metro trains, are expected to begin this summer.

Residents of the transit-oriented developments, who will receive their TransLink cards in the mail in the next several weeks, will only get free rides on AC Transit buses, for both local and transbay service.

The passes "make it possible for people to live without ever using a car," said Chris Peebles in the announcement at the senior housing complex.

One of the biggest sources of delay on AC Transit buses are people fishing for money to pay fares with, Peebles said, and the cards eliminate that for everyone who uses them.

'Spare the Air' one last time

The Bay Area will get one last day of free transit Thursday on what is expected to be the last "Spare the Air" free transit day ever. The program, while it delighted many commuters, day-trippers and joyriders, was criticized as an expensive and inefficient way to cut back on smog. Thursday's free transit is aimed at educating the public about the importance of taking transit on a regular basis, especially on days when smog is forecast. Fares will be waived Thursday for passengers boarding BART, trains and ferries before noon. Bus rides will be free all day.

Bush begins effort to track state of environment

By Dina Cappiello, Associated Press Writer

In the Tracy Press, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

WASHINGTON - The White House on Tuesday directed four agencies to develop yardsticks for charting changes in the amount and quality of the nation's water.

Clay Johnson, a deputy director of the White House budget office, said various indicators would be used to evaluate whether environmental policies and programs are working. "We currently lack consistent information on the environment and natural resources to analyze national trends," he said in a statement.

The water benchmarks will not be released until 2009, according to administration officials, too late to be used for evaluating the effectiveness of the Bush administration's environmental policies. The Interior Department, Environmental Protection Agency, Forest Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were directed to develop the indicators.

Environmentalists said the White House effort is misdirected.

"It would be nice if they put as much effort into protecting the environment as they are collecting the data to show how polluted it is," said Richard Wiles, executive director of the Environmental Working Group, which specializes in environmental databases. "There are plenty of data out there we can go to right now that will tell us everything we need to know to protect rivers and streams."

While local, state and federal agencies collect reams of data on air and water quality as well as emissions from smokestacks and discharge pipes, it is inconsistent, incomplete and often inadequate for responding to environmental problems, according to independent reviews.

Interior, EPA, NOAA and other agencies have contributed \$400,000 to \$500,000 a year since 1997 to the private Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment to compile data for assessing ecosystems. The White House said the new effort would not require additional federal spending.

"This is such an infinitesimally small follow to such an ambitious 10-year endeavor," said Marty Spitzer, a senior fellow with the Heinz Center. On Tuesday, the center issued a report concluding that virtually all streams in the U.S. contain one or more contaminants.