Smog: Valley bypassed in school monitoring

By Mark Grossi, Fresnobee.com, Friday, April 3, 2009

The federal government this week released a list of 62 schools in 22 states that would be monitored for toxic air pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley was left off the list. There were only four in California. The cities included Lennox, El Monte, Los Angeles and Cupertino.

Lennox and El Monte are basically Los Angeles. Cupertino is west of San Jose.

The Valley, which had more ozone violations than Los Angeles last year, is a place where thousands of tons of pesticides are used each year. Childhood cancer clusters were investigated in Earlimart and
McFarland in the past two decades.

Yet, the Valley was bypassed in this national effort.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says the choices were made based on information that included the best data available to EPA scientists about air pollution in the vicinity of schools, results of a computer modeling analysis, results from a recent newspaper analysis and information from state and local air agencies.

Some examples of toxic air pollutants:

Benzene, which is found in gasoline; perchlorethlyene, which is emitted from some dry cleaning facilities; and methylene chloride, which is used as a solvent and paint stripper by a number of industries.

Environmentalists delay S.F. biodiesel plans

By Robert Selna, staff writer
Friday, April 3, 2009

Plans to build San Francisco's first biodiesel plant have been tripped up by environmentalists who argue that the city failed to consider hazards associated with converting fat into fuel.

Darling International Inc. has operated since the 1960s at Pier 92, south of Islais Creek. Darling creates tallow by processing bones and other animal parts from meatpacking facilities and restaurants. The company now sells the rendered tallow for the production of soap and fertilizer, but wants to start using the tallow to produce biodiesel - a cleaner fuel that can be blended with petroleum-based diesel or used on its own to run vehicles with minor modifications.

The city of San Francisco uses a blend of biodiesel in all of its 1,500 diesel vehicles, but the fuel is delivered by truck or rail from as far away as the Midwest. The city would like to get all of its fuel from local sources.

Biodiesel is created from recycled products, but producing it can pose environmental threats. Biofuel spills can foul waterways and harm birds and fish. And some of the chemicals used to process the fuel, such as methanol, are highly flammable.

A group of environmentalists and neighbors became concerned when the city's Planning Department concluded that Darling's new biodiesel operations required no environmental review. That decision was appealed to the Board of Supervisors.

"Once constructed, Darling's proposed biodiesel facility will cause air pollution, wastewater discharges, hazardous waste and increased truck, rail and boat traffic in a neighborhood already over-burdened with a high level of industrial activities," stated the appeal by a group called the Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates. The advocates are represented by an environmental law clinic at Golden Gate University School of Law.

"There was no opportunity for the public to be able to understand whether the project was safe and clean and operated in a manner compatible with the area," said Karen Pierce, a group member who lives in the Bayview. "We don't have a full picture of what is going to happen to decide if we should be concerned or not."

Pierce said that on the whole, she supported the biodiesel plant, but simply needed to know more about it. The Planning Department has since agreed to do the report, which could take four to six months.

Industrial toxins have long been blamed for high incidences of asthma and other illnesses in southeast San Francisco. It is home to the former Hunters Point Shipyard and other polluted industrial sites.

The new biodiesel facility would add 12 aboveground storage tanks and would be capable of producing 10 million gallons of biodiesel annually.

City planners concluded that the new facility fit in with the area's current heavy industrial zoning and did not create significant new environmental impacts. In addition, air and water quality issues are already regulated by regional, state and federal agencies, officials said.

"Things like methanol tanks and wastewater discharges have to be approved by federal and state authorities and so we were very comfortable with that," said Bill Wycko, the Planning Department's environmental review officer.

Long Beach Port's environmental impacts to be released

Daily News Wire Services
L.A. Daily News, Friday, April 3, 2009

LONG BEACH - The Port of Long Beach is expected to release the final environmental impact report today on a 10-year, $750 million harbor expansion that would accommodate the world's largest ships and create 14,000 permanent local jobs.

If all goes according to plan, work on the massive Middle Harbor project could begin as early as December.

Environmentalists and health advocates are demanding a number of revisions and at least $5 million worth of mitigation measures to counter the project's side effects -- heavy truck traffic, excessive noise and light, air pollution and higher rates of respiratory disease and cancer.

But with the unemployment rate hitting nearly 11 percent in Los Angeles County, supporters of the project believe that in upcoming debates the prospects of large-scale industrial growth will carry more weight than the potential environmental impacts.

"It's our very own economic stimulus package," James Hankla, head of the Long Beach Harbor Commission, which will vote April 13 on whether to go forward with the project, said. "We believe it will be approved."

Critics, many of whom complained about having only 10 days to review the voluminous impact report, were preparing to challenge the project.

State air quality and health experts say 2,400 premature deaths a year are linked to emissions from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Texas gasoline prices jump nickel

The Associated Press
Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, April 3, 2009

HOUSTON—The average retail price for a gallon of gasoline jumped a nickel this week across Texas and drew closer to the $2 mark.

AAA Texas on Thursday reported the statewide average was $1.97 a gallon.

Nationally, gasoline averaged $2.04 a gallon, an increase of 4 cents from last week.

The association survey found Dallas had the most expensive gasoline in Texas, at $2 per gallon.

Corpus Christi had the least expensive retail gasoline, at $1.92 a gallon.

AAA Texas says the price at the pump has risen because of the recession, as oil refiners cut capacity to keep the markets from being glutted with gasoline.

The association also says this time of year is when refiners must change their gasoline from winter blend to cleaner-burning spring and summer products to reduce air pollution. Those additives push up the cost.

Correction: Air quality tests near schools

The Associated Press
Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, April 3, 2009

WASHINGTON—In a March 31 story about plans to monitor air quality near 62 schools, The Associated Press reported erroneously how long the tests would run. Air samples will be collected on 10 days over a two-month period, not one month.

TVA agrees to pursue renewable energy purchases

By Duncan Mansfield, Associated Press Writer
Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, April 3, 2009

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.—In the face of looming legislative pressures for cleaner energy, the nation's largest public utility agreed Thursday to buy more than a nuclear reactor's worth of electricity from renewable energy sources.

The Tennessee Valley Authority board gave President and CEO Tom Kilgore authority to sign contracts totaling up to 2,000 megawatts of renewable and clean energy by 2011, with some of the power entering TVA's seven-state system as early as 2010.

TVA began the search in December and received more than 60 offers, some of which have been withdrawn because the providers have since committed to other utilities. TVA executives refused to say how much the federal utility is prepared to spend or to identify potential generators.

The quantity of renewable energy being sought is substantially more than TVA will get from the $2.5 billion completion of a second 1,200-megawatt reactor at the Watts Bar nuclear station by 2013.

"We applaud and welcome the fact that TVA is preparing for the 21st century by making this kind of commitment. Two-thousand megawatts is a major step in the right direction," said Steve Smith, director of the
Southern Alliance for Clean Energy.

TVA executives said internal studies suggest the Tennessee Valley lacks the potential capacity to meet TVA's renewable energy needs, so they are looking outside the region. Smith conceded the region's renewable infrastructure is lacking, but urged TVA to help grow it through the agency's economic development activities.

Kilgore said TVA has little interest in building its own renewable energy generators, though TVA in the 1990s developed the first commercial wind farm in the Southeast near Knoxville.

The most likely near-term source of renewable generation are Western wind farms in the Dakotas and landfill gas recovery operations, said Van Wardlaw, TVA's power supply and fuels executive vice president.

While purchases outside the region will do little to improve air quality within TVA's 80,000-square-mile service territory, Kilgore said TVA's goal is to "reduce TVA's environmental footprint by increasing the renewable and clean energy resources in our generation mix."

The agency now generates a small amount of renewable energy at its own solar sites, wind turbines and a methane recovery project at a Memphis wastewater treatment plant. It also buys wind power from 15 privately owned turbines located on TVA's Buffalo Mountain wind farm.

TVA, which supplies some 8.7 million consumers, hopes to get more than half of its total electricity from zero or low carbon-emitting sources by 2020.

The utility currently gets about 60 percent of its power from coal-fired power plants increasingly under the gun to reduce emissions—most recently from a federal court ruling brought by North Carolina against four TVA plants closest to the North Carolina border.

Various energy bills before Congress would require a 20-25 percent clean energy mix by 2020. Kilgore said those proposals would not count nuclear power, which represents another third of TVA's power, or existing hydroelectric generation, which accounts for another 10 percent of TVA's power.

"Renewable energy and energy efficiency will be part of our clean energy portfolio," Kilgore vowed.

Meanwhile, TVA is in the early stages of an incentive-driven program to reduce energy consumption during high demand periods by up to 1,400 megawatts by 2012. Pilot tests with 13 commercial customers last summer produced a 70-megawatt reduction in peak power use by offering cheaper rates at night and more expensive prices during the daytime.

Modesto Bee editorial, Friday, April 3, 2009:

Nozzle delay provides a fair break

The California Air Resources Board has wisely agreed to delay enforcement of rules that require gas stations to install new pollution-control nozzles on their pumps. The deadline was Wednesday, and many of the state's 11,000 gas stations had not met the requirement.

The main reason is the cost of the enhanced vapor-recovery nozzles. The high-tech system costs about $11,000 per pump, or about $80,000 for the average station, according to state officials. That's a hefty investment for small businesses, especially in this economy.

Under the regulations, station owners who had not complied faced fines of hundreds of dollars per day or even closures.

The enforcement delay makes sense. Gov. Schwarzenegger, who urged postponement, said the most cost-effective nozzle system was not certified by the air board until last year.

The governor asked the Air Resources Board to delay imposing penalties for six months to a year. In addition, he has asked the Legislature to pass an urgency measure that would provide financial assistance to station owners who cannot secure financing.

Even before the governor's request, the air board anticipated that some owners would miss the deadline and urged them to work with their local air districts to avoid fines.

No one should doubt the benefits of the new nozzles. They will eliminate 25 tons of smog-forming, cancer-causing and lung-searing pollution statewide every day. In the San Joaquin Valley, with its bad air quality, that would be very helpful.

But because of the demand for the nozzles, the cost has been driven up and there's been a delay in getting them installed, even for stations that have their permits. And the permit process to get the nozzles has been excruciatingly slow.

The goal of the ARB must be to encourage compliance, not to close businesses and throw people out of work. The delay announced Wednesday is a good step in that direction.

Modesto Bee editorial, Friday, April 3, 2009:

Density compromise is good -- if used

There are several ways to look at the compromise approach adopted this week by elected leaders selecting a long- term growth vision for the San Joaquin Valley.

One is that the valley too often settles for average rather than aspiring to do things differently, such as reducing sprawl across farmland by insisting that 10 homes be built per acre.

Another is that the adopted goal of 6.8 homes per acre is far more realistic and therefore achievable.

And another is that this is just an exercise anyway, so why think about moving past the status quo, which is an average of 4.3 homes per acre?

There's some truth in all three views, which is why we're OK with the compromise — so long as elected leaders do not lose sight of the bigger picture, which is having a vision that protects farmland, discourages sprawl and provides people with multiple housing choices.

Cities and counties aren't mandated to meet the density goal set by the San Joaquin Valley Policy Council, although that could change as a new state law is implemented. Furthermore, the state is providing incentives toward higher densities, such as earmarking certain transportation funds for jurisdictions that promote apartments, condominiums and other high-density housing close to public transit facilities.

The vision adopted Wednesday now goes back to county boards of supervisors and city councils to incorporate into their thinking.

We're doubtful it will have much impact in Stanislaus County, where the elected leaders were unenthusiastic participants in this whole blueprint process.

Last fall, they refused to set a common goal for density, opting to let each of the nine cities and the county use their current general plan goals as their density targets. The driving sentiment appeared to be, "We don't want anyone, but especially the state, telling us what to do."

The fact is, the density goal of 6.3 homes per acre falls at the low end of the general plan ranges of most cities.

Modesto, like many large cities, has a higher density rate and is likely to be increasingly dense, compared with smaller cities, such as Newman.

In the "Eager to Grow" package in Sunday's Bee, reporter Garth Stapley provided some useful comparisons of how cities in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties have grown since 1990.

Patterson not only has grown quickly, but its leaders appear to favor much more growth, in spite of its high foreclosure rate and water supply problems. We urge Patterson residents to start asking hard questions about whether they really want to continue down this path.

Around the valley, residents aren't paying much attention to long-term growth planning, in large part because building has slowed so much because of the economy.

Arguably, this is the best time to establish a long-term vision. Housing density is only one piece of the plan, but an important one. Housing sprawling out across the valley not only destroys valuable farmland but also contributes to air pollution, traffic and other problems.

The Blueprint Plan is only as useful as the actions that follow. The regional council adopted a realistic goal. We hope that council members, supervisors and the public will recognize the value in incorporating it into their decisions

Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, April 2, 2009:

'The Earth is round'

Cal Thomas laments that the issue of climate change is denied full-fledged "debate" by censorship imposed by "fundamentalist politicians and scientists who have declared global warming as fact" [column March 27].

This is probably the same cabal of conspirators who prevent full debate about the truth of, for example, American slavery, evolution and the Holocaust. This, even though numerous Web sites exist showing these other subjects have their own deniers, just as do those who run Web sites and hold meetings claiming climate change as a hoax.

Next thing these people with dictatorial intent who want even more control over our lives will tell us is that the Earth is round and goes around the sun, even though every day my eyes tell me otherwise.

Richard Haas, Fresno

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses higher winds have increased the levels of PM10. In March the levels were registered above 100 points on the Imeca index. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Eleva viento niveles de contaminación

Pedro Sánchez Briones
EL DIARIO, Thursday, April 02, 2009

Además de causar diversos destrozos, como la caída de anuncios espectaculares, los vientos han provocado que se eleven los índices de contaminación por polvo, al exceder de los límites permisibles por las autoridades de Salud, de acuerdo con el Departamento de Calidad del Aire.

Se informó que en marzo se registraron más de 100 puntos del índice Metropolitano de la Calidad del Aire (Imeca) en cuatro ocasiones, de las cuales tres fueron por las ráfagas de viento.

En lo que va del año, el área dependiente de la Dirección General de Ecología y Protección Civil, tiene reportadas 22 excedencias de PM 10 (partículas menores a 10 microgramos).

De esas, cinco han sido a causa de la velocidad del viento, dos en febrero y tres en marzo, puesto que se alcanzaron más de 50 kilómetros por hora.

Los parámetros señalan que si se excede de los 100 puntos Imeca, la calidad del aire es considerada no satisfactoria.

Para contrarrestar el daño por la contaminación, las autoridades realizan una forestación en escuelas donde se carece de áreas verdes.

Bernardo Escudero Ortega, titular de la dependencia, indicó que se programaron plantar 15 mil árboles en los primeros tres meses de este año en escuelas del suroriente de la ciudad y en sus entornos.

Sin embargo, el primero de enero las PM 10 superaron los 174 puntos, el día cuatro fueron 104, mientras que para el 10 alcanzaron los 103 y el 13 las mediciones fueron de 149.

En ese mismo mes el día 16 se reportaron 169 puntos, para el 19 la cantidad llegó a los 168, luego el 22 los 175 y el 31 de enero fueron 145.

Para febrero, una ocurrió el día tres con 166 puntos, otra el seis con 137, el nueve cuando se alcanzaron 102, el 12 fueron 129, le siguieron 103 el 15.

El día 18 fueron 101 puntos Imeca, para el 21 creció a 123, el 24 con 125 y 127 el día 27.

En lo que respecta a marzo, la primera fue el día dos con 147 puntos, luego 105 el día cinco, el 17 fueron 148, el día 20 se reportaron 110 y 139 el día 23.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses nano-catalyzer convert that could possibly help drastically reduce the amount of pollutants that are generated by vehicles.

NANOCATALIZADORES

Podrían ayudar a reducir drásticamente la cantidad de contaminantes generados por los vehículos

El Universal, Thursday, April 02, 2009

Del total de gases contaminantes que emite un vehículo en un día, 60% a 80% se genera durante los tres a seis minutos que tarda en calentarse el motor.

Esto se debe a que el convertidor catalítico que usa no funciona a temperatura ambiente, sino hasta que los metales que lo conforman (platino, paladio y rodio) alcanzan una temperatura de más de 300 grados centígrados por efecto del gas caliente que viene del motor, precisamente. Ante esa problemática ambiental, investigadores del Centro de Ciencias Aplicadas y Desarrollo Tecnológico (CCADET), coordinados por
Rodolfo Zanella Specia, han formulado y probado nanocatalizadores que podrían mejorar la eficiencia de los convertidores catalíticos comerciales, con lo cual se reduciría la cantidad de humo blanco que sale del escape de los vehículos.

“Al funcionar a temperatura ambiente, nuestros catalizadores, conformados por nanopartículas metálicas, han mostrado ser útiles para hacer más completa y eficiente la combustión”, sostiene Zanella Specia.

Estos nanocatalizadores permiten la oxidación del monóxido de carbono y los hidrocarburos no quemados durante el proceso de combustión hasta dióxido de carbono y agua, así como la reducción de óxidos de nitrógeno a nitrógeno y agua.

Bimetálicos

Los investigadores han formulado varios catalizadores de oro combinado con otros metales, como plata, cobre, níquel, hierro e iridio. Las nanopartículas de oro (de 2 nanómetros) depositadas en óxidos han mostrado ser más eficientes que otros metales. Sin tomar en cuenta que son más caros que el oro y poco abundantes en la corteza terrestre, el platino, el paladio y el rodio (normalmente usados en catálisis) transforman el monóxido de carbono en dióxido de carbono a temperaturas de entre 200 y 300 grados centígrados, mientras que aquél lo hace a temperatura ambiente o subambiente.

“De las formulaciones de los nanocatalizadores que hemos desarrollado, dice Zanella Specia, la mejor es la de oro-iridio, pero escalarla comercialmente resulta muy complicado, ya que este último metal es muy caro (más que el platino, el paladio y el rodio) y escaso en la corteza terrestre.”

Los investigadores están sustituyendo átomos de oro por átomos de plata para generar un catalizador muy activo y, sobre todo, más estable a temperatura ambiente.

También, para hacerlo más durable y activo, han comenzado a combinar oro con cobre y metales transicionales como iridio, níquel, hierro y cobre. Además, al combinar el óxido de titanio con óxidos de aluminio, cerio, hierro, silicio, estaño, etcétera, están modificando el soporte para generar óxidos mixtos.

Muy activos

Zanella Specia y sus colaboradores ya han hecho catalizadores muy activos, con una eficiencia igual o superior, en algunos casos, a la de los que se venden en el mercado.

“Ahora bien, para que puedan competir con los comerciales, aclara el investigador, hay que mantener su estabilidad e impedir que las nanopartículas de oro se hagan grandes o que sobre ellas se formen carbonatos u otros compuestos que bloquean los sitios activos, porque entonces quedan desactivados.”

Cuando aquéllos logren que funcionen durante un periodo largo, estos nanocatalizadores podrán utilizarse comercialmente para abatir la contaminación atmosférica.

“Su aplicación tecnológica podría mejorar el funcionamiento del convertidor catalítico de los vehículos, que dura años: las fases activas (oro combinado con otro metal soportado en óxido de titanio o de cerio) podrían depositarse en un monolito formado por poros hexagonales, que es por donde fluyen los gases y se llevan a cabo las reacciones”, señala Zanella Specia.

En casas y oficinas

Aplicados en sistemas de aire acondicionado o en otro tipo de dispositivos para hacer que el aire recircule, estos nanocatalizadores podrían abatir también la contaminación en casas, oficinas u otros ambientes cerrados.

“Al estar recirculando, y como la transformación del monóxido de carbono en dióxido de carbono puede realizarse a temperatura ambiente, el aire se purificaría.”

Asimismo, podrían ayudar a que la gran cantidad de ozono generada en las oficinas por las impresoras láser y las fotocopiadoras se transformara en oxígeno.

“Sólo habría que poner uno de nuestros nanocatalizadores en un pequeño dispositivo que hace recircular el aire.”

Otros proyectos

Los investigadores del CCADET trabajan en otros dos proyectos que forman parte del Programa Universitario de Nanotecnología Ambiental y que son financiados por la UNAM y el Conacyt.

El primero se relaciona con catalizadores que permitan tratar aguas contaminadas con productos químicos. Así, estudian diversas reacciones catalíticas y fotocatalíticas, con el fin de lograr la degradación (oxidación) total de tres contaminantes específicos: fenoles, 4 clorofenol y metil terbutil éter. El otro se relaciona con catalizadores que hagan posible generar combustibles limpios, como el hidrógeno. (Fernando Guzmán Aguilar).

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Bill Clinton proposes that the end of the international economic crisis is the fight against climate change.

Bill Clinton propone luchar contra cambio climático como salida a la crisis

El Periodico de Mexico, Thursday, April 02, 2009

Bruselas, (EFE).- El ex presidente estadounidense Bill Clinton propuso hoy en Bruselas impulsar las políticas de lucha contra el cambio climático como una fórmula para salir de la crisis económica internacional.

"Cada vez que veo un vertedero veo empleos", dijo Clinton en referencia a las oportunidades que plantean las energías renovables durante su intervención en un "foro progresista" organizado en la sede del Parlamento Europeo por el grupo Socialista.

Según el ex presidente de EU, "la salida de la crisis está en crear millones y millones de empleos" para desarrollar nuevas formas de generar energía que cambien "la manera en la que alimentamos nuestras economías".

Clinton subrayó la necesidad de actuar pronto contra el cambio climático, y aseguró que "es relativamente fácil acordar metas estratégicas como un buen resultado de la Conferencia de Copenhague" que se celebrará este año para buscar un acuerdo global.

"Pero la pregunta que los progresistas nos tenemos que hacer es '¿cómo vamos a lograrlo?", afirmó el ex presidente estadounidense.

Junto al desafío del cambio climático, Bill Clinton profundizó en su intervención en los otros dos grandes problemas que a su juicio tiene "el mundo interdependiente" de hoy: la desigualdad y la inestabilidad.
La solución a los tres desafíos está interconectada y debe buscarse ya a pesar la coyuntura económica, agregó.

"No podemos ignorar estos problemas por la crisis financiera actual", insistió, y recomendó a los gobiernos que acuerden planes de recuperación "agresivos" y, al mismo tiempo, impulsar la cooperación internacional.

"Yo apoyo el plan del presidente Barack Obama, pero también apoyo a mi secretaria de Estado (Hillary Clinton) cuando dice que no podemos alejarnos del resto del mundo", indicó.

El discurso de Clinton fue recibido con una gran ovación por la audiencia, en la que se encontraban destacadas figuras socialistas encabezadas por el presidente del Partido Socialista Europeo, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen.