Local Briefs

Meeting to discuss air rule for businesses

The Fresno Bee, Wed., June 3, 2009

Business owners and managers are encouraged to attend a two-hour meeting, starting at 1:30 p.m. today, to learn strategies that will help when local air officials pass a new air pollution rule aimed at businesses.

The meeting will be at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave. The agenda will cover reductions on employee commutes in vehicles, grants for businesses and ideas for energy efficiency.

For information, go to www.healthyairliving.com or call (559) 230-6000.

Dairy families to continue air quality protection

The Madera Tribune Monday, June 01, 2009

SACRAMENTO-San Joaquin Valley dairy operators have pledged to voluntarily comply with air quality regulations, even though the rules were temporarily suspended by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"For three years, California dairy families have been complying with these new regulations, and according to air quality officials, that's reduced emissions by nearly 30 percent," said Dairy Cares chairman William C. Van Dam.

"Like other residents of the valley, we all want clean air. It only makes sense for dairy families to continue to do their part until the air district re-adopts the rule, and we're hearing from dairies around the valley that this is just what they will do."

In 2005, the air district adopted air quality protection measures known collectively as Rule 4570. But activists sued the air district, claiming the rules weren't restrictive enough. The claims came from a group calling itself the Association of Irritated Residents, represented by the San Francisco-based attorneys of the Center on Race Poverty and the Environment. Two courts have now rejected nearly all the lawsuit claims, but noted a procedural violation and ordered the air district to suspend the rule temporarily to prepare an additional report.
Note: The above article has been shortened from its published form.

Proposed ban on dirty diesel trucks at Port of Oakland fails

By Janis Mara
In the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, June 3, 2009

A proposed ban on pollutant-spewing trucks at the Port of Oakland failed to gain approval at a Port Commission meeting Tuesday.

The board rejected a ban on truck models older than 1994 that would have taken effect starting Jan. 1, as well as a ban on models from 1994 to 2006 not equipped with filters, as part of its comprehensive truck management program. Later-model trucks have much cleaner emissions technology than those of previous years.

The commission agreed to reconsider the bans, and the comprehensive truck management program they are part of, at its June 13 meeting.

"I'm disappointed but hopeful for a better outcome next week," said Doug Bloch, director of the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, which supported the bans.

He and his group of environmental and social justice activists were part of a crowd of about 200 that jammed the port's public meeting room in Jack London Square, spilling into an overflow room. About 30 residents commented on the proposals.

Citing what they say are compelling reasons for the bans, environmentalists point to a 2008 study by the California Air Resources Board that found one in five children in West Oakland has asthma and that West Oakland residents have a life expectancy 10 years shorter than other residents in the city.

The Port of Los Angeles adopted a plan involving a registry and progressive truck ban in October and has seen an air quality improvement of 25 percent to 35 percent, according to representatives of that port.

The comprehensive truck management program would have mandated that the estimated 2,000 trucks that pass through the port daily would conform to a rule passed by the California Air Resources Board barring old diesel trucks from visiting ports after Jan. 1 unless they are retrofitted with filters.

Bay Area air-quality regulators, environmentalists and some neighbors say the Port of Oakland should do more to improve air quality ahead of the regulatory deadlines.

"We want to recognize the courage of the board," said Chuck Mack of the Teamsters union. Like the majority of the 30 or so speakers, Mack supported the comprehensive truck management program. The proposed truck ban was one of a number of options suggested in the program.

Critics say the Oakland port has lagged behind the Los Angeles port and its sister Long Beach port, which have adopted freight container fees to fund clean-air measures, and adopted a ban ahead of the state deadline on old diesel trucks using ports.

"At present, part of the comprehensive truck management program is underway — a truck retrofit program that was approved in April. The port is spending $5 million to help finance retrofitting trucks at the port along with a $5 million from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District," port spokeswoman Marilyn Sandifur said.

"In addition, we may be getting up to $10 million in additional funds from the California Air Resources Board to help with retrofits and truck replacements. This will go toward cleaning up hundreds of trucks at the port. We expect the trucks at the Port of Oakland will be compliant (with CARB standards) on Jan. 1, 2010," she added.

Farmers may benefit from carbon credits

By Seth Nidever
Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, June 3, 2009

It's a process known to every biology student: Plants take carbon dioxide out of the air.

For local farmers facing looming greenhouse gas regulations, that could translate into credits and offsets as researchers work to determine just how much agriculture cuts down on carbon dioxide, the gas considered a major contributor to global warming.

It's estimated that agriculture produces 7 to 9 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Many believe that if growers are credited for their carbon-reducing methods, they will be able to sell the credits to dirtier industries.

A bill to set up a system to do that is being debated in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Under the bill, total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions would be reduced 17 percent by 2020 and 83 percent by 2050. Businesses would be able to buy and sell individual emissions allowances. In the cap-and-trade provision, industries that are able to achieve emissions reductions more easily would sell them as credits to other businesses, such as heavy industry, that might have a harder time cutting emissions.

A similar California law, passed in 2006, requires a roughly 25 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

Many growers believe agriculture would be a natural source of carbon credits because of the nature of the plant-growing process.

Much of the research is focused on how organic matter stores carbon in the soil. Scientists have measured higher levels of carbon in ground that is not disturbed after a crop is harvested. The more time a tractor tills the soil, the more carbon dioxide is released into the air.

So farmers who figure out ways to make fewer tractor passes in the field may eventually get credit, not only for leaving more carbon in the ground, but also for reducing diesel fuel emissions.

But the research has a long way to go, and it's unclear whether farmers will see a lot of benefit.

"I hope that we're able to do that. I don't know if the politics are right for it," said John Deaner, a farmer in Fresno County west of Lemoore Naval Air Station.

Deaner uses minimum tillage methods on some of his crops, and said he thinks he should get credit for the carbon trapped in the ground by the technique.

But he believes the credit should go beyond the soil to include the crops themselves, which lock in carbon from the air in the form of sugar, which is then trapped in the human body when the products are eaten.

In the end, it's likely that farmers will have a smorgasbord of ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

It has long been known that livestock digestion and manure produce methane, a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Manure management strategies and feed formulations that cut down on methane-belching animals may be a key for livestock producers, Hatfield said.

Additionally, fertilizer applications produce nitrous oxide, another greenhouse gas. Various strategies are already available to help farmers cut down on fertilizer emissions, Hatfield said.

But when it comes to carbon, the numbers haven't been pinned down yet, he said.

Gary DeLong, who is involved in an effort to nail down international carbon-in-the-soil standards, agreed.

"We kind of all agree that we're kind of on the beginning edge of understanding this activity," DeLong said.

Agriculture air quality workshops

Turlock Journal, Tuesday, June 2, 2009

A series of workshops will be held during the next few weeks to update farmers and ranchers about a new cost-share program to help reduce air quality emissions from off-road mobile or stationary agricultural sources. The cost-share program is administered by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service as part of a new air quality provision of the 2008 Federal Farm Bill, provided through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Under the program, agricultural producers can apply for cost-share funds to replace, repower, or retrofit existing combustion engines. The deadline to apply is June 26.

Three local workshops will be held on June 16. The first will be held at 8 a.m. at the Merced County Farm Bureau, 646 S. Highway 59, Merced. The next will be held at 1 p.m. at the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau, 1201 L St., Modesto. The last workshop will be held at 5:30 p.m. at the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau, 3290 N. Ad Art Rd., Stockton.

For complete details, visit www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/2009.

Cap-and-trade plan puts a price tag on pollution

By Rick Montgomery - McClatchy Newspapers
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, June 2, 2009

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Look at pollution as pork belly futures.

Or try thinking of "cap and trade" as a game of musical chairs, where the granddaddies of greenhouse gases scramble for dwindling seats.

Another analogy: That AT&T commercial with the mother who doles out tokens of unused cell-phone minutes to her sons? If each token were a permit to pump a ton of carbon dioxide into the air, and the sons were coal-fired power plants ...

Still confused about cap and trade, aren't you?

"I tend not to use analogies, because I'm not sure anything fits," said Eric de Place, at the environmental think tank Sightline Institute in Seattle. "We've never set a national price on carbon emissions."

But Congress appears headed in that direction, touting cap and trade as a market-based approach to warding off global warming.

Here are some questions and answers:

What does "cap and trade" mean?

Let's start with "cap."

It is an overall limit set for greenhouse gas emissions nationwide, based on a previous year's totals. The year 2005 or 2006 would be tempting benchmarks, since carbon dioxide emissions were peaking and have since been dipping, largely because of the recession.

As the years pass, the cap gets lower and lower.

If President Barack Obama gets his way - he likes cap and trade - Congress will pass a plan that will reduce total emissions by at least 14 percent below 2005 levels in 2020 and 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050.

The "trade" side of the package would allow companies to buy and sell pollution permits.

How do you trade pollution permits?

You go shopping in the emissions market or bid at an auction.

Say you want to build a power station. You calculate that you need permits to cover 75,000 metric tons of carbon-dioxide-equivalent gases the plant will cough up in the first year.

It just so happens that Joe's Electric Co. has unused permits to sell, having just retrofitted its operations to lower emissions. If the exchange price for permits stands at $10 to emit 1 ton of carbon emissions, you can pay Joe $750,000 for the papers that allow you to emit.

(Consider yourself lucky. Large older power plants emit millions of metric tons annually, so they would pay a lot more.)

And this is supposed to wean us off fossil fuels?

It could, because of the financial incentive for energy producers to go greener.

Imagine if electricity demand shoots up (it always does in good times) and everyone's desperate to generate power just as you're planning your station.

The demand drives up the market price for permits to, say, $40 per ton of pollutant. Then maybe you start thinking of fuel sources other than coal - like natural gas, wind power or solar energy.

An oil producer might ramp up research on biofuels.

But what about Jane's Cement Plant, which can't easily trim the emissions it produces?

Jane could search the world for a project that foils climate change, such as reforestation or investment in wind farming, for an offset option.

Under most cap-and-trade plans, companies can earn offset credits that let them exceed carbon allowances. But if Jane, for example, writes a check to save the rain forests, she'll need to prove that her contribution will offset the damage of those emissions not covered by her permits.

Will the first batch of permits be sold or given away by federal regulators?

Obama wants companies to pay from the start at auctions. Industry would prefer Round 1 to be free - enabling companies to post hefty returns if they play the market right and adopt cleaner practices.

If the government auctions off pollution permits, proceeds could go into research of alternative fuels, assistance to low-income families needing to weatherize, and the creation of what Obama foresees as millions of green jobs.

Who plays?

Congressional proposals center on large, "upstream" energy producers and deliverers: Electric companies, oil refineries, tanker docks, maybe railroads and steel mills.

Many farmers want to play. Under voluntary programs that already trade carbon emissions, growers can get a nice check from their Farm Bureau if they adopt environmentally friendly practices such as no-till planting.

But a cap-and-trade bill pushed through a committee by Democrat Reps. Henry Waxman and Edward Markey left farm groups wondering if they had any role at all.

"Downstream" users of fossil fuels - including the gas station operator or any family that likes air conditioning - would be left out of the marketplace of permits.

They'll just pay the energy bills, which would almost certainly climb.

"If our production costs go up," said Floyd Gilzow of the Missouri Public Utility Alliance, "it's not like we (municipal utilities) have a big pot to draw from other than the ratepayers."

How did the idea evolve?

The first emissions trading market was established by Congress in 1990 to curb sulfur dioxide releases, a primary cause of acid rain.

The legislation worked - U.S. sulfur dioxide emissions have been cut in half through the use of scrubbers and other pollution controls.

So Democrats and environmental groups that once favored taxing emissions warmed up to potential marketplace solutions.

"We're trying to be compassionate" to business, said Joe Spease, who examines global-warming issues for the Kansas Sierra Club. "George W. Bush would be proud."

But scientists say carbon dioxide is far trickier than sulfur dioxide to clean out of a smokestack. Nobody has yet found an affordable way to do it and then store away the stuff.

What does cap and trade cost taxpayers?

Until Congress agrees on a framework - if it can, given the multiplicity of options - the federal cost is unclear.

More regulators would be needed to keep companies honest about emissions and to monitor exchange markets. Think in terms of a hybrid of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency - neither the most trusted of institutions at the moment.

Wouldn't stopping global warming be worth it?

Whoa! Not so fast.

The big question, economically, isn't what cap and trade costs taxpayers, but what it would cost energy consumers - that's all of us - and whether a fragile economy needs it now.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, a cap-and-trade bill introduced last year in the Senate would add anywhere between $30 and $325 to average annual household energy costs by 2020.

The EPA estimates an extra $98 to $140 per year. A Congressional Budget Office expert recently figured the average cost at $1,600 per year.

"The point is we really don't know how much it would cost," said Jerry Taylor at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, who attacks the proposals for having "optimistic scenarios and dodgy data."

What about the problem of the whole world heating up?

Taylor said if cap and trade hit its goal and U.S. carbon emissions fell 80 percent by 2050, the effect on global warming would be a fraction of one degree Fahrenheit. "Can you even put a price tag on a probability that small to measure?"

Sure you can - and we must, said Spease of the Sierra Club.

"What drives me crazy is that business interests aren't talking about the economic damage if nothing is done," he said.

A 2006 study by British economist Nicholas Stern projected between 1 percent and 2 percent of global gross domestic product would have to be spent to avoid climate change at its worst - but failing to do so could drive down the GDP by 20 percent by century's end.

Is anyone else capping and trading CO2 emissions?

Yes, even here in America.

Ten Northeast states from Maine to Maryland in January launched the first mandatory exchange system for large polluters, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

States set their own caps, affecting 233 plants. Proceeds from the auction of pollution allowances are being invested mainly in efficiency programs and in wind and solar energy.

Many experts point to the European Union Emission Trading System, which took effect at the start of 2005.

Environmentalists are widely critical of the initial caps as too generous and thus leading to little if any overall emissions reductions yet.

Energy producers and traders in Europe have been whipsawed by wildly fluctuating market prices and rule changes during the system's baby steps.

China? India?

Their emissions are not capped, a big concern to cap-and-trade critics who note that most greenhouse gases are a global, not local, threat.

Proponents say the Chinese and Indian governments will adopt their own systems if we do so first.

As for the United States, "one day sooner or later there's going to be a need for this" and companies have begun to prepare, said Rafael Marques of the Chicago Climate Exchange.

It started trading greenhouse gas allowances in 2003 with 13 founding companies on a voluntary but legally binding basis. It now serves more than 400 companies and farm groups worldwide.

"A lot of them were winners in the trading," Marques said. "They knew they had the ability to cut emissions and found a way to make money out of it."

Sacramento Bee Commentary Wednesday, June 3, 2009

My View: State fortunes will grow if forests are thinned

By David A. Bischel

If we work our diligent best to reduce the uncharacteristic fuel loads that drive catastrophic wildfires and restore resilient forests to California's landscape, we may one day have sustainable forests for generations of Californians to enjoy.

If in the process we save taxpayers millions, tap a reliable source of renewable energy and increase the carbon sequestration capacity of our forestlands, we may realize tremendous climate benefits from our forests that today remain out of reach.

But if the fear of short-term risk prevents the pursuit of those goals, Californians should brace for more costly and environmentally devastating wildfires.

The 2007 Angora fire burned 3,100 acres, 52 percent of that in high-intensity burns – the kind that rob soils of their nutrients, destroy owl-nesting sites and fill watercourses with thousands of cubic yards of ash, debris and sediment.

Wildfires have become increasingly common in California as public forests that have gone largely unmanaged become overgrown. Many Sierra forests now have 10 times more trees per acre than Gold Rush-era forests. Tree mortality around Lake Tahoe is up to 39 percent; in the southern Sierra it's 50 percent.

Realizing the benefits of thinning before fires and reforestation after fires carries some risk; not actively managing our forestlands has proved far more dangerous.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, catastrophic wildfires pose the greatest threat to spotted owl habitat. California wildfires in 2008 spewed millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, the rough equivalent of 11 million cars on the road for a year. Residents in Trinity County experienced 87 unhealthful air days during the 2008 wildfire season. Post-fire rains in 2003 buried fish-spawning gravels and caused more than $400 million in damage to water-quality infrastructure in the Santa Ana River watershed.

California wildfires cost taxpayers more than $1.4 billion to fight last year. In the past five years, more than 10,000 structures and two dozen lives have been lost to wildfire. The number of severely burned acres in 2007 and 2008 was up 300 percent and 315 percent, respectively, over the previous five-year average.

More than a dozen lawsuits blocking forest management in the Sierra Nevada today have been tied up in court for more than four years. Some administrative appeals filed to stop harvesting cite concerns of increased sediment delivery to streams. In the cases where forest management has been shown to increase sediment delivery, it has been on the order of 2 percent or less. The magnitude of what's going to hit Angora Creek is on a whole other scale.

Activists recently raised fears that harvesting trees on the Angora burn site may harm creeks and perhaps Lake Tahoe, and deemed the logging of dead trees killed by severe wildfire excessive – even though the trees in question were declared "hazard trees" and represent less than 3 percent of the burn area.

The objectionable harvest was done in full compliance with regulations that set some of the highest environmental standards in the world. It has resulted, according to water board officials, in no water quality degradation and has helped set the stage for reforestation to begin before the land is converted to brush field.

Yet activists raise fears.

As the wildfire season begins, more than 3 million homes stand at significant risk of a catastrophic wildfire. More than 10 million forested acres across watersheds that serve millions of Californians and hundreds of species are overgrown and at risk. Climate models predict higher temperatures, drier forests and more severe wildfires for California.

Enough new growth gets added to California's forests every year to stack a football field with a woodpile five miles high. Something has to be done with that wood. It can be put to good use through forest management that enhances wildlife habitat, reduces severe wildfire threats, provides "green" products such as lumber for homes, yields renewable energy and cleans the air, or be left to accumulate and burn. Active forest management is the difference.

But all too often, forest management is blocked, frequently by appeals ultimately found to be without scientific merit.

There have been 57 administrative appeals and lawsuits filed on the community-backed, activist-supported, congressionally authorized forest management program known as the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Pilot Project. Last year, the Moonlight and Camp fires raced through areas where appeals had blocked fuel reduction efforts and went on to destroy more than 20 owl nesting sites and burn the community of Concow to the ground.

A dry winter has set the stage for a potentially devastating fire season. May it be a safe one, and may we rise above fear to manage our forests so next year is safer still.

O.C. Register blog, Tuesday, June 2, 2009:

Air board fines two companies with O.C. ties

posted by Pat Brennan, green living, environment editor

Two companies with O.C. connections have been fined for air-pollution violations, the state Air Resources Board announced this week.

Silver State Trailways, a tour bus company based in Placentia, agreed to pay a $15,750 fine after the air board said an audit showed the company did not conduct required emissions inspections in 2007 and 2008 on heavy-duty diesel tour buses, the announcement said.

The company must also take other steps, such as sending employees to training classes on diesel inspection procedures. Most of the money, $11,812, will go to the state's Air Pollution Control Fund.

Company president Anthony J. Fiorini said he agreed to the settlement without admitting wrongdoing. An air board inspection showed no problems with buses, he said.

"Every coach tested on our yard that day – every single one of them passed," he said.

Robertson's Ready Mix received a $65,700 fine in May, the statement said, for diesel emission violations in 2007 and 2008 at facilities in Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. Of that total, $49,275 will go to the Air Pollution Control Fund.

The agency accused the company's of failing to properly inspect its heavy-duty fleet.

An air board spokeswoman said the company agreed to the settlement, although such agreements do not necessarily involved admission of wrongdoing.

Officials at the company did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Sacramento Bee, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, June 3, 2009

Wake up and smell the emissions

Re "Climate bill faces long road in Congress" (Page A6, June 1): I found the first line of this article hysterical: "Congress will return today ready to engage in a historic debate on whether the country should shift to cleaner and more efficient use of energy and reduce the heat-trapping gases building up in the atmosphere."

The fact that our leaders need to even debate this subject seems ludicrous to me. As a high school student, my World Politics class recently put on a model United Nations session, in which all the countries discussed the issues surrounding global warming, conservation and governmental policies. Who would have known that South Africa, a very newly industrialized nation, limits the use of plastic bags? Who would have guessed that Pakistan, a developing country, has ratified the Kyoto Protocol, unlike our own great nation?

The fact that we are still debating capping carbon emissions (not to mention disregarding the more efficient carbon taxing) just proves that it will be a long journey to go before the United States will be able to step down as the world's second-greatest CO2 emitter. I hope my gut instinct, which is telling me this bill may not live much longer, is wrong.

Annamarie Arai, Sacramento