

State's largest biodiesel plant unveiled in Kern

By Sarah Reinecke, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, July 30, 3009

Four years ago, Harry Simpson started thinking about what he could do to improve the environment for his his kids and future grandkids.

"I wanted to be an old man some day and say, 'I did something to help the greater good,'" Simpson said. "I wanted to be able to tell them that what I'm doing is to make the planet -- their world -- a better place."

Simpson, president and co-founder of Crimson Renewable Energy, had a vision to produce low- and ultra-low carbon fuels to better the environment and improve air quality.

It was fully realized Wednesday when Crimson announced the completion of its first biodiesel and glycerin production facility -- the largest in California.

The plant, near Interstate 5 and Old River Road, will use a wide variety of feed stocks such as used cooking oil, animal fats and virgin vegetable oils to produce low- and ultra-low carbon fuels.

It's designed to produce 30 million gallons of biodiesel per year, nearly doubling California's current biodiesel production capacity of 34 million gallons per year.

"There's a lot of people starting to feel we're leaving a mess for the next generation -- financially, environmentally, in so many ways. I prefer to be doing something that does the opposite," Simpson said.

Simpson said biodiesel improves air quality significantly by reducing particulate emissions that come from diesel fuel. Particulates are tiny specks of soot, dust, chemicals and smoke that can lodge deep in the lungs when inhaled and increase incidences of respiratory disease.

The California Air Resources Board has said biodiesel produced from used cooking oils can reduce carbon and greenhouse gas emissions by up to 86 percent compared to petroleum-based diesel fuel.

Simpson said the fuel's use addresses California's landmark AB 32 law, which requires cutbacks in greenhouse gas emissions. The fuel will help people meet those requirements as, Simpson said, biodiesel works in all diesel engines -- there is no need to retrofit the vehicle or engine to use to fuel.

The low-carbon fuel will be priced competitively with diesel, he said. Another benefit is reducing reliance on foreign imports of gasoline, diesel and crude oil.

The Crimson project currently employs 14 people; it's expected to employ up to 22.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, said he envisions all school buses in California will one day be fueled with biodiesel. He said at the ribbon-cutting ceremony that the goal is to make biodiesel a fuel of choice.

His daughter, Faith, 9, cut the ribbon. Florez said since she is a future biodiesel user, he wanted her to be present for the opening of California's largest biodiesel and glycerin production facility.

Florez said he was "ecstatic" about the plant's opening in Kern County, especially in a tough economy. He sees the plant as an achievement for the entire state.

"I just think it rounds out Kern County as a true energy provider," Florez said. "This is one of the true clean air projects -- we can utilize this product, this type of fuel, to make breathing easier here in the valley."

Concern about air pollution declines in California, poll finds

The percentage who think smog is a 'big problem' in their region drops sharply. Support for the state's greenhouse gas law also falls.

By Margot Roosevelt, staff writer
L.A. Times, Thursday, July 30, 2009

The percentage of Californians who believe air pollution is a "big problem" has dropped precipitously in recent years, especially in Los Angeles County and the Central Valley, among the nation's dirtiest regions, according to a new survey.

At the same time, the poll by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found that support for the state's landmark 2006 law to slash greenhouse gases has declined, and fewer people think that global warming is a serious threat to the economy and quality of life of the state.

Californians continue to care about environmental issues," said Mark Baldassare, president and chief executive of the polling group, which found strong majorities in favor of pollution and global warming laws. "But less so than two years ago, perhaps because of the economy and the partisan discussion in Washington around environmental policy."

Air quality in Southern California, the Central Valley and the state overall has improved dramatically in the last two decades, despite a growing population, according to the Air Resources Board.

But three-fourths of residents still live in areas that violate health standards for ozone, which causes respiratory disease. And large swaths of the Inland Empire have 40 to 80 days a year that exceed the federally designated safe level for ozone, a colorless gas.

About half the state, including major portions of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, exceeds the health standard for fine particulates, which are linked to cancer, heart disease and other ailments.

And more than a third of Californians report that they or an immediate family member suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems.

Nonetheless, the survey found that only 23% of Californians saw air pollution as "a big problem" in their region, an 11-point drop since last year. In Los Angeles County, that segment dropped 17 points, to 30%, and in the Central Valley, it sank 15 points, to 36%.

Baldassare suggested that the sharp drop this year could be attributed partly to the fact that wildfire-related air pollution is down, with fewer fires so far this year than last.

"The poll results would likely have been different if the public was more aware that 5,000 Southern Californians are estimated to die each year due to air pollution," said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a regional agency. "Much more needs to be done to increase public awareness."

Nonetheless, the survey found strong support for tougher pollution standards on cars, diesel trucks and buses, on commerce and industry, and on agriculture. More than three-fourths of Californians say the state should focus transportation dollars on public transit, while just 18% want more freeways.

In the case of global warming, the softening of support for regulation may be linked to the poor economy, but it also comes at a time of fever-pitch rhetoric over whether a national climate law, passed by the House and awaiting Senate action, will damage U.S. industry and cost consumers money.

Two-thirds of Californians still support the state's comprehensive global warming law, the first in the nation, but that's significantly less than the 78% who endorsed it in 2007. The partisan divide has widened, with only 43% of Republicans supporting it, compared with 57% two years ago.

The California survey echoes results of a March Gallup poll that suggested that skepticism about global warming was rising nationally, with only 60% viewing it as a problem they worried about "a great deal" or "a fair amount."

"We see declining interest in environmental initiatives -- or anything else that implies new investment -- whenever the economy is in trouble," said Air Resources Board Chairman Mary D. Nichols, who oversees the state climate plan. "But people understand that economic recovery depends on reducing our dependence on petroleum and developing new technologies."

On the petroleum issue, 51% of Californians favored expanding oil drilling off the coast, compared with 43% that opposed it. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger sought to insert a drilling provision into the budget, but environmental groups objected strenuously and the measure failed to pass the Legislature.

Californians feel less urgency on warming, poll finds

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, July 30, 2009

Californians are somewhat less enthusiastic about the state's war on climate change than they were a year ago, but two-thirds of residents still support it, according to survey results released Wednesday by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California.

Backing for Assembly Bill 32, which requires the state to cut climate-warming emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, fell from 73 percent of residents last July to 66 percent today, the survey found.

The perceived urgency of cutting emissions also fell. Today, 47 percent of residents consider global warming to be a "very serious" threat to the economy and quality of life in the state, down from 52 percent last year and 54 percent in 2007. Currently, an additional 28 percent of residents consider climate change to be a "somewhat serious" threat.

This year, more residents were comfortable with waiting until the state recovers economically to start cutting emissions. Last July, 57 percent said state government should take action right away, while 36 percent said government should wait until the economy and the state's budget situation improve. Today, 48 percent say the state should act now, while 46 percent say government should wait.

Under AB 32, the state Air Resources Board plans to enact a handful of relatively modest emissions-cutting policies in January. More serious controls are to be phased in over the next decade.

The survey showed stronger support for individual emissions-cutting policies than for AB 32 as a whole. Fully 85 percent of residents back mandates on increased use of renewable energy, while 76 percent support energy-efficiency requirements for buildings.

The PPIC survey showed a partisan divide, with Republicans much less likely than Democrats to back government action to cut emissions.

The results are based on a survey of 2,501 adults.

Schwarzenegger's approval numbers hit an all-time low

By Steven Harmon

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, July 30, 2009

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has sunk to an all-time low among Californians in a new survey that also finds that residents, while strongly in favor of environmental regulations, want to slow down on environmental reforms while the economy is still taking a beating.

Schwarzenegger's job approval rating is now at 28 percent, according to a poll by the Public Policy Institute of California, comparable to the ratings faced by former Gov. Gray Davis before he was recalled in 2003.

The poll of 2,501 adults was taken July 7-21, at the height of budget negotiations but before the \$26 billion deficit had been resolved. Ironically, Schwarzenegger had attempted to appeal to populist sentiment by refusing to consider taxes as a way to climb out of the budget hole, using a combination of cuts, fund shifts and borrowing instead.

"A lot of the cuts being made were not popular, and he really took the lead and was out front on what he said was needed — staying firm on not raising taxes — so the entire deal has his fingerprints," said Melissa Michelson, a political science professor at Cal State East Bay. "I hear from a lot of people who would have understood if some taxes were raised. Raising taxes on the wealthy sure would have been more palatable than cuts on students, elderly and children."

Schwarzenegger may be suffering from the high expectations he raised at the outset of his term, said Jack Pitney, government professor at Claremont McKenna College.

"He was going to be an action governor, he was going to blow up the boxes," Pitney said. "Several years later, people are used to him and he has become part of the Sacramento system he came to office to end."

"People are deeply concerned about the direction of the economy and where California is in terms of its fiscal conditions," said Mark Baldassarre, president and CEO of PPIC. "There's a sense that things are not

going well in California, and the public holds the governor and the Legislature at least partly accountable, rightly or wrongly."

Still, Californians have positive views about leadership in Washington. President Barack Obama's job approval numbers, though taking a dip from 72 percent in May, are still strong at 65 percent.

"It speaks to the fact that Californians' primary hopes and dreams are in what's happening in Washington, D.C.," Baldassare said. "Those who were supporting Schwarzenegger two years ago are now looking to Obama to help get them out of this deep recession."

The economy has taken a slight toll on Californians' typically strong environmentalist leanings. Nearly half of respondents — 46 percent — say government should wait until the economy and budget improve before taking action on reducing greenhouse gases. Forty-eight percent say government should take action right away.

"For the last 18 months, people have been waking up in the morning and going to bed at night with the economy as the biggest thing on their mind," said Derek Walker, director of the California Climate Initiative for the Environmental Defense Fund. "So, I don't think we're seeing much of an erosion in their support for reducing greenhouse emissions at all."

Indeed, their views remain strong on specific environmental reforms. More than three-fourths of Californians think the government should regulate greenhouse gas emissions, and two-thirds favor AB32, the state law that requires California to reduce greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by the year 2020.

By far, most adults — 78 percent — support requiring all automakers to further reduce emissions from new cars; 71 percent would be willing to see tougher air pollution standards on new passenger vehicles; and 76 percent would be willing to see tougher air pollution standards on commercial and industrial activities.

More than half — 56 percent — of Californians support a carbon tax on companies for their greenhouse emissions, though only 49 percent support "cap and trade" system, in which companies would be given the choice of reducing emissions or buying expensive permits to continue polluting.

Californians remain divided on whether to allow oil drilling (51 percent favor, 43 percent oppose) and on whether more nuclear plants should be built (46 percent favor, 48 percent oppose).

The poll, which interviewed 2,251 people on land lines and 250 on cell phones, had a margin of error of 2 percentage points.

Company sues Texas town for "green" cement policy

By John McFarland, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, July 30, 2009

DALLAS—The largest U.S.-owned cement company filed a federal lawsuit Wednesday accusing a Dallas suburb of unconstitutional discrimination for favoring the purchase of cement made in a more environmentally friendly process.

Plano is the latest of several local governments, including Dallas and Fort Worth, to be sued by Overland Park, Kan.-based Ash Grove Cement Co. over "green cement" laws. Ash Grove claims purchasing policies that give preference to cement from "dry kilns" that typically pollute less than older "wet kilns" violate state competitive bidding laws and don't clean up the air.

"With little to no consideration of state and federal public contracting rules, Plano adopted a cement purchasing resolution that is not only unconstitutional, but also highly prejudicial to Ash Grove," the company said in a statement.

Ash Grove has only wet kilns at its operation just south of Dallas that is part of the largest single concentration of cement plants in the nation.

Plano's city attorney did not return a message seeking comment Wednesday, but environmentalists said the suit and others like it are simply ploys designed to stop other cities from taking action.

"Ash Grove has no hope of winning this lawsuit," said Jim Schermbeck, a member of the environmental group Downwinders at Risk that closely monitors the cement plants. "What they do have hope of is putting this in the freezer so long that nobody passes any more green cement rules."

It's hard to convince a city council or any governmental body to run headlong into a federal lawsuit."

Schermbeck said Ash Grove filed its first suit in November out of desperation, only after local governments repeatedly and overwhelmingly adapted the green laws.

Ash Grove said in its suit that Plano is acting illegally by giving preferential treatment based on something outside the competitive bidding process. The lawsuit said "only the competence of the bidder and quality of the price" can be considered. The company seeks an injunction stopping Plano from enforcing its resolution, which it says passed after just 10 minutes of discussion in April 2008.

Ash Grove said in the lawsuit that Plano's objective to clean up the notoriously dirty air in the Dallas-Fort Worth area was "laudable," but that the resolution "has done little, if anything to actually improve the air quality. Instead, what the resolution has accomplished is to unfairly stifle competition in the cement industry and jeopardize jobs and economic growth."

Ash Grove said in its suit that it has reduced smog-causing nitrogen oxide emissions drastically since 1996.

Beijing closing coal plants in environmental move

The Associated Press

In the Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, July 30, 2009

BEIJING -- China has taken advantage of a drop in electricity demand due to the global financial crisis to speed up a campaign to close small coal-fired power plants and improve its battered environment, an official said Thursday.

Authorities have closed power plants with a total of 7,467 generating units, meeting a previously announced goal 18 months ahead of schedule, said Sun Qin, deputy administrator of the Cabinet's National Energy Administration.

"This couldn't be done when power demand was very intense," Sun said at a news conference. "Due to this financial crisis, the power generation has slowed down, so we took this opportunity to accelerate the shutdown."

Beijing is trying to improve its energy efficiency and reduce surging demand for imported oil and gas by closing smaller, less efficient power plants and encouraging use of wind, solar and other clean sources.

The latest closures will reduce sulfur dioxide emissions that cause acid rain by an estimated 1.1 million tons and carbon dioxide output by 124 million tons per year, Sun said. He said the closures involved moving 400,000 workers to new jobs.

China and the United States are the world's biggest emitters of carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse gases" that scientists say trap the sun's heat and are altering the climate.

China produced 6.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide in 2006, according to a study by the Netherlands' Environmental Assessment Agency.

Beijing says it is committed to reducing pollution but has resisted pressure to adopt binding goals to reduce its greenhouse gas output, saying the onus is on developed countries to reduce their emissions.

The Chinese government's top priority in closing coal-fired power plants is controlling sulfur dioxide emissions. Acid rain from heavy coal use has poisoned most of its rivers and lakes and badly damaged its forests.

Sun said environmental officials will meet in August to make plans to close more small coal-fired power plants.

In a reflection of the tensions between Chinese environmental regulators and local authorities over the loss of jobs and economic activity, an official of Sun's agency, Xu Yongsheng, said seven local officials and company managers were punished for restarting power plants after the agency closed them.

China relies on coal for about 60 percent of its power.

The Finance Ministry announced an initiative last week to promote development of China's solar power industry, promising to pay up to 70 percent of the cost of new solar systems.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., July 29, 2009:](#)

Older trees decline in Yosemite

By Mark Grossi

Echoing previous studies in the West, scientists today said the number of large-diameter -- older -- trees had declined 24% in Yosemite National Park between the 1930s and the 1990s.

A long-time federal scientist, Jan van Wagtendonk, said the cause of the decline has not been investigated, but he speculated climate change is a likely contributor. Read the study [here](#).

To me, it's an interesting study because Yosemite was largely untouched by the commercial timber industry, grazing, mining or other similar activities during those decades. It makes an appropriate laboratory to study change over time.

Aside from the obvious findings -- loss of habitat for spotted owls, fishers and mosses -- the scientists said they found a shift from fire-tolerant trees, such as the ponderosa pine (that's the type of bark in the photo), to far less fire-tolerant trees, such as the white fir and incense cedar.