Wal-Mart concerns to be voiced at Wednesday meeting

by PI Staff
Patterson Irrigator, Monday, Oct. 12, 2009

At a glance

WHAT: Scoping meeting for Wal-Mart environmental review

WHEN: 3 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 14

WHERE: City Hall, council chambers, 1 Plaza

TO COMMENT: Those wishing to comment on the impending environmental review of the proposed Wal-Mart in Patterson can submit entries to the City of Patterson, Community Development Department, 1 Plaza, P.O. Box 667, Patterson, 95363.

Local residents will get a chance to help guide the environmental review of Patterson's proposed Wal-Mart store at a public meeting at City Hall at 3 p.m. Wednesday.

The Wal-Mart project — officially titled the Patterson Plaza project and encompassing 16.75 acres at the corner of Ward and Sperry avenues — will soon undergo a full environmental review as required by the California Environmental Quality Act. Part of that review is a public comment period that will run from Oct. 1 to 30.

During that time, people and groups can submit comments on what should be studied in the review — from traffic and air quality issues to the economic impact on local businesses.

Wednesday's meeting will give people the opportunity to express their concerns vocally, though written comments can also be submitted to the city's Community Development Department.

A similar meeting was held last summer for West Park, the proposed industrial project on and around the Crows Landing Air Facility.

The Patterson Plaza retail center includes the proposed 158,000-square-foot Wal-Mart as well as 20,000 square feet of what will be retail and restaurants and nearly 20,000 more square feet occupied by CVS Pharmacy and Taco Bell.

Wal-Mart proponents say the store would give local residents a more convenient way to buy a wide variety of products while also keeping that sales tax revenue here, instead of sending it to Modesto or Turlock, which already have such stores. Opponents say it will destroy small businesses in town and could have a negative impact on the quality of life in Patterson.

For info: 895-8020.

Schwarzenegger to issue order for renewable energy goals

Susan Ferriss - The Sacramento Bee
Tuesday, October 13, 2009

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will take charge today of how California utilities meet a goal that one-third of their power be generated by renewable energy by 2020.

Schwarzenegger plans to issue an executive order, aides said, that will instruct the California Air Resources Control Board to design regulations for how utilities can meet a 33 percent renewable goal.

Aides said the plan will not include union-supported restrictions on purchasing energy credits from outside California. Two bills the state Legislature passed last weekend, aimed at charting how utilities can meet the goal, contained those restrictions.

Supporters of the bills expressed disappointment with the governor's plan to veto the legislation, which they say has provisions to create jobs.

"We're here today to ask the governor to give a lifeline to California's working families," said Scott Wetch of the Coalition for Green Jobs, who appeared at a Capitol press conference to represent unionized construction workers.

The Union of Concerned Scientists, a big solar-energy company, the California Wind Energy Association, Pacific Gas and Electric, and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power also support the bills.

Supporters say the bills will help create jobs in California by requiring that utilities purchase no more than 25 percent to 30 percent of renewable energy credits from sources outside the state.

Cleansing the Air at the Expense of Waterways

By Charles Duhigg, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Monday, Oct. 12, 2009

MASONTOWN, Pa. — For years, residents here complained about the yellow smoke pouring from the tall chimneys of the nearby coal-fired power plant, which left a film on their cars and pebbles of coal waste in their yards. Five states — including New York and New Jersey — sued the plant's owner, Allegheny Energy, claiming the air pollution was causing respiratory diseases and acid rain.

So three years ago, when Allegheny Energy decided to install scrubbers to clean the plant's air emissions, environmentalists were overjoyed. The technology would spray water and chemicals through the plant's chimneys, trapping more than 150,000 tons of pollutants each year before they escaped into the sky.

But the cleaner air has come at a cost. Each day since the equipment was switched on in June, the company has dumped tens of thousands of gallons of wastewater containing chemicals from the scrubbing process into the Monongahela River, which provides drinking water to 350,000 people and flows into Pittsburgh, 40 miles to the north.

"It's like they decided to spare us having to breathe in these poisons, but now we have to drink them instead," said Philip Coleman, who lives about 15 miles from the plant and has asked a state judge to toughen the facility's pollution regulations. "We can't escape."

Even as a growing number of coal-burning power plants around the nation have moved to reduce their air emissions, many of them are creating another problem: water pollution. Power plants are the nation's biggest producer of toxic waste, surpassing industries like plastic and paint manufacturing and chemical plants, according to a New York Times analysis of Environmental Protection Agency data.

Much power plant waste once went into the sky, but because of toughened air pollution laws, it now often goes into lakes and rivers, or into landfills that have leaked into nearby groundwater, say regulators and environmentalists.

Officials at the plant here in southwest Pennsylvania — named Hatfield's Ferry — say it does not pose any health or environmental risks because they have installed equipment to limit the toxins the facility releases into the Monongahela River and elsewhere.

But as the number of scrubbers around the nation increases, environmentalists — including those in Pennsylvania — have become worried. The Environmental Protection Agency projects that by next year, roughly 50 percent of coal-generated electricity in the United States will come from plants that use scrubbers or similar technologies, creating vast new sources of wastewater.

Yet no federal regulations specifically govern the disposal of power plant discharges into waterways or landfills. Some regulators have used laws like the Clean Water Act to combat such pollution. But those laws can prove inadequate, say regulators, because they do not mandate limits on the most dangerous chemicals in power plant waste, like arsenic and lead.

For instance, only one in 43 power plants and other electric utilities across the nation must limit how much barium they dump into nearby waterways, according to a Times analysis of E.P.A. records. Barium, which is commonly found in power plant waste and scrubber wastewater, has been linked to heart problems and diseases in other organs.

Even when power plant emissions are regulated by the Clean Water Act, plants have often violated that law without paying fines or facing other penalties. Ninety percent of 313 coal-fired power plants that have violated the Clean Water Act since 2004 were not fined or otherwise sanctioned by federal or state

regulators, according to a Times analysis of Environmental Protection Agency records. (An interactive database of power plant violations around the nation is available at www.nytimes.com/coalplants.)

Fines for Plants Modest

Other plants have paid only modest fines. For instance, Hatfield's Ferry has violated the Clean Water Act 33 times since 2006. For those violations, the company paid less than $26,000. During that same period, the plant's parent company earned $1.1 billion.

"We know that coal waste is so dangerous that we don't want it in the air, and that's why we've told power plants they have to install scrubbers," said Senator Barbara Boxer, the California Democrat who is chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. "So why are they dumping the same waste into people's water?"

Though the Environmental Protection Agency promised earlier this decade to consider new regulations on power plant waste — and reiterated that pledge after a Tennessee dam break sent 1.1 billion gallons of coal waste into farms and homes last year — federal regulators have yet to issue any major new rules.

One reason is that some state governments have long fought new federal regulations, often at the behest of energy executives, say environmentalists and regulators.

The counties surrounding Hatfield's Ferry, which are home to multiple universities, are an example of what hangs in the balance as this debate plays out.

Last year, when Hatfield's Ferry asked the state for permission to dump scrubber wastewater into the Monongahela River, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection approved the request with proposed limits on some chemicals.

But state officials placed no limits on water discharges of arsenic, aluminum, boron, chromium, manganese, nickel or other chemicals that have been linked to health risks, all of which have been detected in the plant's wastewater samples, according to state documents.

Records show, and company officials concede, that Hatfield's Ferry is already dumping scrubber wastewater into the Monongahela that violates the state's few proposed pollution rules. Moreover, those rules have been suspended until a judge decides on the plant's appeal of the proposed limits.

"You can get used to the plant, and the noise and soot on your cars," said Father Rodney Torbic, the priest at the St. George Serbian Orthodox Church, across the road from Hatfield's Ferry. "But I see people suffering every day because of this pollution."

Officials at Hatfield's Ferry say there is no reason for residents to be concerned. They say that lawsuits against the plant are without merit, and that they have installed a $25 million water treatment plant that removes many of the toxic particles and solids from scrubber wastewater. The solids are put into a 106-acre landfill that contains a synthetic liner to prevent leaks.

Officials say that the plant's pollution does not pose any risk. Limits on arsenic, aluminum, barium, boron, cadmium, chromium, manganese and nickel are not appropriate, the company wrote in a statement, because the plant's wastewater is not likely to cause the Monongahela River to exceed safety levels for those contaminants.

"Allegheny has installed state-of-the-art scrubbers, state-of-the-art wastewater treatment, and state-of-the-art synthetic liners," the company wrote in a statement. "We operate to be in compliance with all environmental laws and will continue to do so."

The plant's water treatment facility, however, does not remove all dissolved metals and chemicals, many of which go into the river, executives concede. An analysis of records from other plants with scrubbers indicates that such wastewater often contains high concentrations of dissolved arsenic, barium, boron, iron, manganese, cadmium, magnesium and other heavy metals that have been shown to contribute to cancer, organ failures and other diseases. Company officials say the emissions by the plant will not pose health risks, because they will be diluted in the river.

Though synthetic liners are generally considered effective at preventing leaks, environmentalists note that the Hatfield's Ferry landfill is less than a mile uphill from the river, and that over time, other types of liners have proven less reliable than initially hoped.

The Environmental Protection Agency, in a statement last month, said it planned to revise standards for water discharges from coal-fired power plants like Hatfield's Ferry. Agency studies have concluded that "current regulations, which were issued in 1982, have not kept pace with changes that have occurred in the electric power industry," officials wrote.

But some environmentalists and lawmakers say that such rules will not be enough, and that new laws are needed that force plants to use more expensive technologies that essentially eliminate toxic discharges.

Cleaning Up Pollution

"It's really important to set a precedent that tells power plants that they need to genuinely clean up pollution, rather than just shift it from the air to the water," said Abigail Dillen, a lawyer with the law firm Earthjustice, which represents two advocacy organizations, the Environmental Integrity Project and the Citizens Coal Council, in asking a Pennsylvania court to toughen regulations on Hatfield's Ferry.

Ms. Dillen, like other environmentalists, has urged courts and lawmakers to force plants to adopt "zero discharge" treatment facilities, which are more expensive but can eliminate most pollution.

State officials say they have established appropriate water pollution limits for Hatfield's Ferry, and have strict standards for landfill disposal.

"We asked the plant for estimates on how much of various pollutants they are likely to emit, and based on those estimates, we set limits that are protective of the Monongahela," said Ron Schwartz, a state environmental official. "We have asked them to monitor some chemicals, including arsenic, and if levels grow too high, we may intervene."

However, environmental groups have argued in court documents and interviews that Hatfield's Ferry probably will emit dangerous chemicals, and that they fear the state is unlikely to intervene.

Similar problems have emerged elsewhere. Twenty-one power plants in 10 states, including Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina and Ohio, have dumped arsenic into rivers or other waters at concentrations as much as 18 times the federal drinking water standard, according to a Times analysis of E.P.A. data.

In Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Wisconsin and elsewhere, power plants have dumped other chemicals at dangerous concentrations. Few of those plants have ever been sanctioned for those emissions, nor were their discharge permits altered to prevent future pollution.

Records indicate that power plant landfills and other disposal practices have polluted groundwater in more than a dozen states, contaminating the water in some towns with toxic chemicals. A 2007 report published by the E.P.A. suggested that people living near some power plant landfills faced a cancer risk 2,000 times higher than federal health standards.

Lobbyists Block Controls

In 2000, Environmental Protection Agency officials tried to issue stricter controls on power plant waste. But a lobbying campaign by the coal and power industries, as well as public officials in 13 states, blocked the effort. In 2008 alone, according to campaign finance reports, power companies donated $20 million to the political campaigns of federal lawmakers, almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans.

In interviews, E.P.A. officials said that toughening pollution rules for power plants was among their top priorities. Last month, the agency announced it was moving forward on new rules regulating greenhouse gas emissions from hundreds of power plants and other large industrial facilities. Lisa P. Jackson, who was confirmed to head the agency in January, has said she would determine by the end of the year whether certain power plant byproducts should be treated as hazardous waste, which would subject them to tougher regulations.

But for now, there are no new rules on power plant waste. And many states are trying to dissuade Ms. Jackson from creating new regulations, according to state and federal regulators, because they worry that

new rules will burden overworked regulators, and because power plants have pressured local politicians to fight greater regulation.

For instance, Pennsylvania has opposed designating the waste from Hatfield's Ferry and other power plants as hazardous. In a statement, the Department of Environmental Protection said the state had "sufficient state and federal laws and regulations at our disposal to control wastewater discharges at levels protective of the environment and public health."

But residents living near power plants disagree.

"Americans want cheap electricity, but those of us who live around power plants are the ones who have to pay for it," Mr. Coleman said. "It's like being in the third world."

O.C. Register blog, Monday, October 12, 2009:

Green job, energy bills could give a jolt to Southern California

posted by Pat Brennan, green living, environment editor

A legal logjam that has stopped regional regulators from issuing smog credits for a variety of projects could be broken by new legislation signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger – one in a stack of environmental bills signed by the governor Sunday that could help stimulate the Southern California economy.

The bills, among many signed to meet a legislative deadline, include everything from banning lead wheel-weights on cars to cutting greenhouse gas emissions from buildings.

The smog credit bill modifies a court-ordered moratorium on air-pollution emission credits issued by the South Coast Air Quality Management District. It's expected to free up 60,000 jobs and $4 billion worth of economic activity in Southern California, the governor's office said.

Businesses such as power plants must have the credits before they can receive permits for new construction.

The other bills would:

- Cut greenhouse gas emissions and create green construction jobs by requiring the California Energy Commission to create an energy efficiency program for homes and businesses.
- Order the state Air Resources Board to regulate nitrogen trifluoride, a gas used in manufacturing but believed to possess 17,000 times more global-warming potential than carbon dioxide.
- Create the Sonoma County Regional Climate Protection Agency to regulate greenhouse gases.
- Allow construction of clean-burning, natural gas power plant in Riverside County expected to stimulate $900 million in new investment and create 350 jobs.
- Allow electric utility customers who install solar panels or wind-power systems on their property to be paid by utilities for the extra energy they produce.
- Expand requirements for utility companies to purchase solar power, potentially stimulating installation of large solar power systems.
- Prohibit sale and installation of lead wheel weights, used to balance wheels but thought to be a major source of lead contamination in drinking water when they pop off the wheels onto roadways.
- Grant local water agencies more authority to regulate salt content in water supplies in a bid to reduce excess salinity caused by residential water softeners.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses cultivating bio-fuel on land that had previously been used by forests or prairies generate more CO2 emissions than what it reduces. For more information on this or other Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Cultivar biocombustibles genera más CO2 del que evita

La Opinión, Saturday, October 10, 2009

París, 9 de Octubre (EFE).- Cultivar biocarburantes en tierras que antes han estado ocupadas por bosques o praderas genera muchas más emisiones de dióxido de carbono (CO2) que las que permite evitar la sustitución de hidrocarburos, según un estudio la Agencia del Medio Ambiente y del Control de la Energía de Francia (ADEME).

El balance en término de emisiones de CO2 puede ser “catastrófico”, de dos a cuatro veces más que con el recurso a los carburantes de origen fósil, sobre todo cuando se talan bosques tropicales para producir aceite de palma, indican los autores de este informe dedicado a la primera generación de biocombustibles.

La razón es que para obtener ese aceite de palma que se cultiva por ejemplo en Indonesia, no sólo se generan gases de efecto invernadero, sino que previamente se ha producido la deforestación de un arbolado que previamente contribuía a la absorción de CO2 y algo similar ocurre con las praderas.

Los autores de este estudio, que se ha hecho público con meses de retraso, han sometido a examen los principales biocarburantes comercializados en Francia para, al margen del citado impacto de la sustitución de suelos, establecer para cada uno de ellos el saldo de las emisiones si se compara con las generadas con hidrocarburos.

El resultado es que el etanol obtenido con caña de azúcar es el más eficiente en términos medioambientales, ya que genera un 90% menos de gases de efecto invernadero que la gasolina. Su elaboración, además, moviliza en torno al 80% de la energía que proporciona.

El bioetanol de maíz, de trigo y de remolacha, así como el biodiesel de colza y de soja presentan un balance correcto, con una reducción de emisiones en torno al 60-80% respecto a los combustibles fósiles que sustituyen y un ahorro energético en su elaboración entre el 50% y el 80%.

Sin embargo, el ETBE, un etanol obtenido de la remolacha, el trigo o el maíz representa ganancias energéticas de apenas un 20%, por debajo de los requerimientos europeos.

De acuerdo con la directiva europea sobre las energías renovables, para poder ser compatibilizado como útil en términos medioambientales, un biocarburante deberá representar una reducción de CO2 del 35% en 2010 y del 50% en 2013.

El informe salió a la luz pública un día después de que el Gobierno francés anunciara un plan impulsado por la propia ADEME para el desarrollo de biocombustibles de segunda generación en el horizonte de 2015.

Este plan BioTfuel, de un monto de 112 millones de euros, contempla la construcción de dos plantas -una de ellas con el apoyo de la petrolera Total- con el objetivo de producir de 200.000 a 300.000 litros de los nuevos carburantes en la fase industrial.