Ag loses air quality exemption in San Joaquin Valley

350 San Joaquin Valley facilities face tighter restrictions

By Wes Sander, staff writer
The Capital Press, Sat., April 24, 2010

In an attempt to improve some of the country's worst air, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has approved a tougher emissions standard for the San Joaquin Valley.

The rule sets the limit for emitting ozone-producing materials at 10 tons annually. The current threshold is 25 tons. The change will require 350 additional facilities to comply with permitting controls and emission-offset requirements, the agency said.

Instituting the new rule partially involved getting the state to rescind its long-standing exemptions for agriculture under emission-control rules, said Kerry Drake, associate director of EPA's air division for the region.

The EPA rates the ozone-producing emissions of only two regions in the country, Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley, as "extreme," Drake said.

"Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is consistently among the worst in the nation," said Deborah Jordan, director of the Air Division for the EPA's Pacific Southwest region, in a statement. "New and modified facilities will now be subject to the most stringent requirements, which will contribute to the health of our communities."

American Lung Association's 2010 State of the Air Report to be Released

By American Lung Association in California
In the Sacramento Bee, Monday, April 26, 2010

LOS ANGELES, April 26 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The American Lung Association in California will be joined by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, air quality specialists, medical professionals, and local students to release the American Lung Association's 2010 State of the Air Report that grades the air quality in counties throughout the state of California, the other 49 other states and the District of Columbia.

WHO: Jane Warner, President and CEO, American Lung Association in California

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa

Ara Najarian, Chair of the MTA Board of Directors, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Sonal Patel, M.D., Allergy and Immunology, White Memorial Medical Center & ALAC Board Member

WHERE: Wilshire/Western MTA Station/Street Level

Metro Purple Line

3775 Wilshire Boulevard

Los Angeles, CA 90005

WHAT: The report grades the quality of air people are breathing by looking at how many days the levels of ozone and particle air pollution measured by air monitors violate federal air quality standards. The American Lung Association graded 50 California counties based on data collected in 2006-2008 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Air Quality System (AQS). The report also ranks the top 25 worst polluted cities and counties based on their scores.

WHEN: Wednesday, April 28, 2010

9:00 a.m.

Since the American Lung Association began reporting on air quality eleven years ago, California has made tremendous progress in improving the state's air quality. Yet, the health of over 90

percent of Californians continues to be at risk from exposure to the dangerous air pollution they breathe every day.

Californians can help make real change to improve the quality of air in their communities. There are many things individuals, communities and state agencies and elected officials can do to help reduce air pollution and make California a healthier place to live in.

The full report, regional analysis, fact sheets, tips, and other media materials will be made available at www.lungusa.org/california-sota2010 on April 28 at 9:30 a.m. Interested media can also schedule interviews with local experts.

SOURCE American Lung Association in California

Use of low-dust farm practices rise

By John Holland
Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, April 25, 2010

Central Valley farmers have greatly increased their use of practices to reduce soil disturbance and dust, according to a survey released this week.

The practices grew sixfold from 2004 to 2008 in the nine survey counties, an alliance of farmers, researchers and other experts reported.

The result was cleaner air for valley residents and reduced tractor use by farmers, the alliance said.

"There is definitely a reduction across the board when it comes to fuel, labor and maintenance," said Alex Karolyi, associate director of communications for Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco-based group that is part of the effort.

Among the practices is conservation tillage, which involves leaving much of the stubble from the previous harvest when planting corn, tomatoes, cotton or other row crops.

Farmers use various other means to lessen the amount of soil disturbed during planting and other tasks. The goal for the surveyed acreage was a cut of at least 40 percent in the number of tractor passes needed to produce a crop.

The survey found that this goal was met on 416,035 acres in 2008 compared with 64,613 acres in 2004.

The 2008 figure was 19 percent of the total row crop acreage in the nine counties -- Merced, San Joaquin, Sacramento, Yolo, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern. The survey relied on records from county agricultural commissioners.

It was done by the Conservation Tillage and Cropping Systems Workgroup, which includes representatives from farming, academia, government and nonprofit groups in California.

Helpful for dairies

The findings could be especially valuable to dairy farmers, who grow much of their own feed. They have faced low milk prices on one hand and high costs for fuel and pollution controls on the other.

"My philosophy is that good environmental stewardship must be profitable to be sustainable," Hanford-area dairy farmer Dino Giacomazzi said in a news release. "Our conservation tillage program has been helpful to our family business during these hard economic times."

Advocates say the practices can improve the fertility and water-holding capacity of the soil, resulting in larger yields.

Controlling dust could reduce asthma, heart attacks, strokes and other ailments that result from breathing the fine particles, said Janice Nolen, an assistant vice president at the American Lung Association.

The survey did not include efforts in valley orchards.

Increasingly, walnut and almond growers, for example, are using harvest machines that do not produce the big dust clouds of old.

Study: Cow feed may be causing Valley air problem

By Tracie Cone - The Associated Press
In the L.A. Times, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, April 23, 2010

FRESNO, Calif. -- Air officials for years have blamed dairy cow emissions for the unusually high ozone levels in California's San Joaquin Valley, but a new study points more to what goes into the animals than what comes out.

The study - funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, California Air Resources Board and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District - initially was intended to measure the impact of animal manure, urine and flatulence on ozone levels.

University of California, Davis researchers, however, found that the bigger ozone culprit appears to be millions of tons of fermenting cattle feed. This previously unrecognized source is likely the reason why ozone levels have not dropped even as the region has implemented control programs, scientists said.

"The take-home is that feed sources might be more important than all of the things we've been caring about in the past," said Michael J. Kleeman, a professor in UC Davis' department of civil and environmental engineering who was the study's lead investigator.

When tests on animal waste failed to find as much ozone as expected, researchers turned their attention to the silage - giant mixes of corn, alfalfa, almond shells and corn stalks that's piled to ferment under black plastic. The alcohol-drenched concoction is scooped with tractors and dumped into dairy cow feed troughs.

Researchers found that the gases emitted during the fermentation react in the atmosphere to turn oxygen into ozone.

"What was surprising was the scale of the issue," Kleeman said. "We looked at the census of agriculture and realized how much is being used."

The valley, which is under federal mandate to reduce its ozone levels, is the No. 1 dairy production region in the country with nearly 1.5 million dairy animals. Repeated exposure to ozone can scar lung tissue and worsen asthma, emphysema and bronchitis.

With air officials focusing for years on animal waste as the reason why smog is highest here despite having less vehicle traffic than large cities, many dairies invested in expensive methane digesters to deal with the problem.

Dairy operators long suspected that something other than the manure lagoons could be to blame and requested more studies.

"We felt more likely it was coming from the fermentation process and likely the feed," said Michael Marsh, executive director of Western United Dairymen.

The focus on controlling emissions at dairies and other confined animal operations to improve air quality has grown in recent years - along with the size of the operations. In 1992, only 10 percent of all dairy cows lived on farms with more than 1,000 others. By 2007, that increased to 36 percent, most in the San Joaquin Valley.

Researchers working on the four-year study developed a portable smog chamber to test onsite the waste from dairies and feedlots.

The study was published this month in the American Chemical Society's journal of Environmental Science & Technology. More studies are required to ensure that the team's findings are correct, Kleeman said.

"There are still other reasons to care about those waste emissions, but for the urban regional ozone problem, it looks like the waste isn't as important as feed," Kleeman said.

Already the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is working to amend emissions regulations to focus on new requirements for handling silage, said Executive Director Sayed Sadredin. In June, he plans ask the board to require that dairies bag their silage, a move that could cut ozone emissions by 90 percent.

While bagging silage adds expense, dairy operators say the cost is far less than a $2 million methane digester.

Study: US dairy cows generate less gas

By Seth Nidever
Hanford Sentinel, Friday, April 23, 2010

U.S. dairies crank out milk with the lowest carbon footprint in the world, according to a United Nations study released this week.

The 98-page study, titled "Greenhouse Gas Emissions from the Dairy Sector," aims to inform the public debate on emissions and indicate where the greatest efficiencies in dairy production are.

The highest emissions came from dairies in developing regions of the world. The lowest came from Europe and North America, with North America's highly efficient dairies proving to have the lowest carbon footprint per kilogram of milk.

Kings County's huge dairy sector produced $670 million worth of milk in 2008.

Perhaps surprisingly, the study found that dairy cows that graze on grasslands generate more greenhouse gases per unit of milk than cows on confined dairies.

U.S. dairies have combined advanced genetics with carefully planned feed mixtures to dramatically increase the amount of milk per cow. Dairies in developing countries lack sophisticated feeding mixtures. Another factor contributing to bigger greenhouse gas contributions in the developing world involve forest clearing to create farmland.

A California dairy environmental group called Dairy Cares hailed the report as good news for consumers of the state's huge dairy product output.

"This is further evidence that California's dairy families are leading the way on sustainability issues," said Bill Van Dam, Dairy Cares chairman and CEO of the Alliance of Western Milk Producers.

"The key thing this says to me is the types of dairies we have in the U.S., and especially in California, have made a lot of progress toward reducing their carbon footprint, and that progress has put them in a leadership position in the world," said J.P. Cativiela, a Dairy Cares spokesman.

The study found that the worldwide dairy sector is responsible for 4 percent of total man-made greenhouse gas emissions in the world. The total includes all aspects of dairy production, including transportation and cows sent to slaughter for beef.

The study follows up on a controversial 2006 U.N. report that said worldwide livestock production - including dairy - is responsible for 18 percent of all greenhouse gases. It also comes at a time when California regulators are looking carefully at where they can achieve greenhouse gas reductions to comply with a landmark 2006 law that requires the state to return to 1990 emissions levels by 2020.

The U.N. report also buttresses University of California, Davis, research that indicates that most greenhouse gas pollution from dairies comes from the cows themselves, not the manure and not the transporting of milk. Fifty-two percent of the greenhouse dairy emissions came in the form of the potent greenhouse gas methane, much of it belched out by cows while feeding.

Calif. considers delaying diesel-emission rules

By Samantha Young - Associated Press Writer
In the Fresno Bee, Capital Press, and other papers, Friday, April 23, 2010

SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- California air regulators took steps Thursday to delay the nation's toughest rules to slash emissions from diesel-powered construction equipment, saying the poor economy has left many of the vehicles sitting idle.

Members of the California Air Resources Board said they want to give companies more time to comply because construction activity in the state is down about 50 percent since the regulations were adopted three years ago, and that has significantly reduced harmful emissions.

"Unfavorable economic times make it more difficult for industry to comply with our regulations and function," board chairwoman Mary Nichols said.

The regulations, referred to as off-highway diesel rules, were scheduled to take effect this year, and some companies have already spent millions of dollars on new equipment to comply.

No formal vote was taken Thursday, but the board directed its staff to determine ways the construction industry can more easily reach the state's goal of cutting diesel emissions by 2014, the date required to meet federal clean air standards.

Thursday's debate comes four months after the board decided to explore loosening similar diesel rules for trucks and buses.

Any new guidelines for trucks and construction equipment were expected to be put to a vote in September.

While the economy was the driving reason for reviewing both rules, board staff reported Thursday they had overestimated how much pollution construction equipment, buses and trucks emit into the air.

For example, there are about 200,000 fewer construction vehicles in California than the board had initially thought, and the industry didn't use as much diesel as expected. So, the regulation assumed there were 50 to 80 percent more emissions that needed to be cut, according to board staff.

The revelation drew criticism from a few of the board members and industry groups who called for better numbers before imposing costly regulations.

"Until they are right, you're asking us to spend billions of dollars to reduce phantom emissions, and we're not going to do that," said Michael Lewis of the Construction Industry Air Quality Coalition, which is based in Southern California.

Industry representatives urged the board to delay the regulations by five years, citing the much lower emissions footprint of construction.

The off-highway diesel rules passed in 2007 require tractors, forklifts, bulldozers and other types of diesel-powered equipment to be replaced or retrofitted over the next 15 years. Large fleets have until 2020, while fleets with fewer than 20 vehicles have until 2025.

Firms with large fleets were supposed to start replacing and retrofitting vehicles beginning March 1, but California is waiting for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to grant the state a waiver from federal regulations under the federal Clean Air Act. The California rules can't be enforced without the waiver.

Meanwhile, the truck and bus rule is scheduled to begin taking effect in January 2011. Nearly a million vehicles must be replaced or retrofitted over the next 10 years with smog traps, filters or cleaner-burning technology.

The construction and truck regulations were adopted to help clean the state's skies by targeting particulate matter and nitrogen oxide - pollutants blamed for contributing to respiratory ailments, cardiovascular problems and premature deaths.

Southern California air district officials warned that any delay in the regulations would leave toxic chemicals lingering in their region.

"We must reduce residential exposure to emissions as quickly as possible," said Henry Hog of the South Coast Air Quality Management District. "We must also be cognizant, at some point, the economy will pick up and economic activities will be the same or greater in the future."

Stockton Record, Letter to the Editor, Saturday, April 24, 2010

Earth Day activities

Kim Huit of Stockton and her family were among those who attended the Earth Day Festival at Victory Park in Stockton. She sent in this description of the event.

My family and I went to the festival to learn more about keeping our planet alive and to be a part of the community supporting those efforts. It was a great family atmosphere with a shared common goal: learning how we can help save our planet. There were musical acts with environmental messages in their lyrics and good food, all meatless, to further support the green message.

My two sons and I enjoyed visiting all the booths and learning the different ways we can help our environment. I went online before going to the festivities and downloaded a passport for each of my boys. The purpose of the passport was to encourage us to visit specially marked booths and either participate in an activity or listen to information about an environmental topic such as recycling/waste reduction, alternative energy, air pollution prevention and climate change. The boys had a great time and learned a lot along the way. I also learned a few new things thanks to the volunteers who were operating the booths.

There was an organized bike ride at the festival to promote bike peddling as opposed to using the gas pedals on our cars. I was amazed at all the homemade bikes people brought.

I also was very impressed with the booths set up by different schools in the area. There were environmental projects done by students in grade school through college. I could tell a lot of effort and research went into the projects. It was great to see our youths actively involved in saving the planet not only for us but for future generations.

For those of you who have never attended the Earth Day festivities, I highly recommend them. The admission and entertainment were all free and it is a great way to teach the community and our children about caring for the Earth.