Consumers line up for electric mower discounts

By Sabra Stafford
Turlock Journal, Saturday, Nov. 13, 2010

A clean air program offering large discounts on electric mowers has already seen its initial round sell-out, but those who didn't get the deal need not worry because more are on the way, according to the local air district. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is sponsoring the Clean Green Yard Machines program, which offers electric lawn mowers at a deeply discounted rate.

The initial allotment of $400,000 for 1,600 mowers sold out in three days said air district spokesperson Janelle Schneider. In response to the high consumer demand, the air district is committing an additional $125,000 for 500 more mowers. "Because of the overwhelming response to this popular program, we are releasing an additional $125,000," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director and air pollution control officer.

"We hope to release even more funding after the first of the year once the lawn mower manufacturer has fully caught up with this current overwhelming wave of orders. "The lawn mower trade-in replaces old, polluting, gas-powered mowers with clean, electric Neuton mowers. The 14-inch Neuton cordless, electric mower will cost consumers $25 and the larger, 19-inch model costs $50. These mowers retail for $349 and $399 on the company's website. The second round of funding started Friday.

The district anticipates exhausting the additional funding before the end of next week. Cordless electric mowers operate off a battery pack and can mow for about one hour off a single charge. The life of the battery is about five years, depending on use, then typically is in need of replacement. The cost of a new battery ranges from about $80 to $110.

Recharging a battery uses about 10 cents worth of electricity and is fully recharged in about 12 hours, according to Neuton's website. The switch from a gas mower to an electric mower can have a significant impact on the environment, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. EPA statistics show gas mowers contributing about 5 percent of the air pollution in the United States.

Additionally, the EPA estimates that 17 million gallons of fuel, usually gasoline, are spilled each year while refueling lawn equipment, which is more than the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimate that one gas mower running for an hour emits about the same amount of pollutants as eight new cars driving 55 mph for the same amount of time.

The additional funding for the mowers was authorized by the district's Governing Board from the 2010-11 budget for community incentive grants. "We're not surprised but we are gratified that this program meets a pressing need for Valley residents and our goal of clean air," Sadredin said.

To participate in the program residents should call (559) 230-6000 and request a voucher for Clean Green Yard Machines. After receiving the voucher residents have to take their old, gas-powered mower to an authorized recycler. After turning in the old mower, residents can order the new cordless electric mower by phone and it will be delivered to their home with no shipping costs.

Air district has no-gas mowers for $50

Bee Staff Reports
Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Saturday, Nov. 13, 2010

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has reduced the price of its popular nonpolluting, cordless, electric lawn mowers.

The Neuton electric mowers, which comes in two blade sizes, will cost consumers less than $100, according to a news release this week.

Funding from the state Air Resources Board puts the price of the 14-inch mower at $25. The 19-inch model costs $50. Vouchers and trade-in of an older, gas-powered mower are required.

"This has been our most popular consumer incentive for many years, and with this new funding, we're excited that many more valley residents will be able to participate," Samir Sheikh, director of the district's strategies and incentives program, said in the release.

The district hopes to replace about 1,600 older, gas-powered mowers with clean, nonpolluting Neutons. A single gas-powered mower running for an hour produces about as much pollution as 40 late-model cars.

To participate, residents must call the air district and obtain a voucher (one voucher per household, three per business), and turn in a gas-powered mower at a participating recycler. Vouchers are valid for 30 days from the issue date. The program will be open until funds are exhausted. For complete details about the program, visit www.valleyair.org or call the Modesto office at 557-6400.

Valley Air District orders 500 more electric lawn mowers

By Sun-Star Staff
Merced Sun-Star and Sacramento Bee, Friday, Nov. 12, 2010

After selling out its initial round of clean, electric lawn mowers in just three days, the Valley Air District said it is committing an additional $125,000 for 500 more mowers.

The Clean Green Yard Machines program, which opened on Nov. 8, sold out of its $400,000 allotment, 1,600 mowers, in just three days. The second round of funding opens Friday, Nov. 12 at 8 a.m.

“Because of the overwhelming response to this popular program, we are releasing an additional $125,000,” said Seyed Sadredin, the District’s executive director and air pollution control officer, in a news release. Sadredin added that due to the popularity of the program, “we hope to release even more funding after the first of the year once the lawn mower manufacturer has fully caught up with this current overwhelming wave of orders.”

The additional funding was authorized by the district’s Governing Board from the 2010-11 budget for community incentive grants.

The lawn mower trade-in replaces old, polluting, gas-powered mowers with clean, electric Neuton mowers for just $25 or $50, depending on the model. These mowers retail for $349 and $399 on the company’s website www.neutonpower.com.

Clean Green Yard Machines is just one of the many programs included in the District’s $100 million available this year for air-quality incentive programs, which grant money to every sector in the Valley. Examples of other grant projects are wood stoves, school buses, trucks, bike paths, vanpools and many other projects that reduce emissions, the news release said.

Funding for these grants come from a variety of federal, state and local sources, including DMV fees paid by Valley residents that go back into Valley projects.

To participate.

· Residents should call 559-230-5800 and request a voucher for Clean Green Yard Machines.

· After receiving, the voucher, residents take their old, gas-powered mower to an authorized recycler near them.

· Then, after turning in their old mower, residents can order their new, clean, cordless electric mower by phone. It’s delivered to their door with no shipping cost.

For complete details about the program, visit www.valleyair.org or call the local regional District office in your area Fresno, 559-230-6000; Bakersfield, 661-392-550; or Modesto, 209-557-6400.

For more information about the Valley Air District, call a regional office: in Fresno, 559-230-6000; in Bakersfield, 661-392-5500; and in Modesto, 209-557-6400.

Driving toward an electric future

Thousands appear ready to ditch their tailpipes, but just how close are we to a plug-filled paradise?

By Alex Breitler
Stockton Record, Monday, Nov. 15, 2010

STOCKTON - Paul and Cindi Marsh could be any 30-something couple.

Not long ago, they bought a foreclosure in midtown Stockton. Cindi works in town; Paul commutes to Sacramento.

They have a baby boy, Bacchus ("Bax"), who is teething and - once in a while - chomps down on mama's finger.

They could be any couple, except for one thing: Soon they'll be driving a car with no tailpipe.

Electric cars are no longer the playthings of the rich and curious, the Marshes say. Paul and Cindi are among more than 20,000 other plug-in pioneers, ready to receive the first wave of the relatively affordable, all-electric Nissan Leaf sedan. Deliveries begin next month, and other zero-emission models are expected to follow.

"Twenty years from now, I believe it will be difficult to buy a car that isn't capable of plugging in," blogged Paul Scott, of the advocacy group Plug In America. "Looking back at 2010, it will all seem so obvious in hindsight - nonpolluting transportation that runs on domestic renewable electricity made from sunlight and wind."

Behind the wheel

The Marshes want to help the environment by eliminating tailpipe emissions. But like anyone else, they had to be certain that a fully electric vehicle would meet their basic needs.

Would the 100-mile battery range be adequate for Paul's 100-mile commute? Will there, someday, be a reliable network of roadside charging stations? And how would the car itself perform?

They got an answer to that last question during a 11/2-mile test drive on Halloween in San Jose.

"It's got great pickup - it's just hit the gas and go," Paul Marsh said.

"Excuse me," he corrected himself with a smile. "You can't use that term - 'gas' - anymore."

Paul will drive the car to his restaurant job in Old Sacramento twice a week. By plugging in while he works, the battery should soak up enough juice for the return trip to Stockton.

They'll charge the car at night, when energy prices are low. Nissan estimates a rough average cost of $2.75 per charge - a steal compared to the price of gas. And it could be even cheaper with discounted Pacific Gas and Electric Co. rates for electric vehicle owners.

The Marshes, however, have solar panels, so their car will be powered by the sun. This also guarantees that the pollution that would have come out of their tailpipe isn't simply spewing from a power plant smokestack somewhere else.

High-powered public charging stations that could "fill 'er up" in 20 minutes remain scarce, especially in the Valley. But Cindi Marsh, an urban planner, expects that private businesses and local governments will install medium- or high-powered chargers as the number of electric vehicles increases.

"Imagine stopping in Stockton to catch a movie and dinner downtown while your (car) charges, then jumping back on the freeway," she said. "Or, stopping at a hotel to sleep," while the car charges overnight.

Slow going

To date, the price of electric cars has been the biggest hurdle in making them available for ordinary families. The sporty Tesla Roadster, the only highway-certified electric vehicle available in the United States, runs about $109,000.

The Leaf will cost $32,780, but a trio of federal, state and Valley air district rebates can cut that amount nearly in half. Plug In America says the comparatively low price of the Leaf "crystallized the reality of affordable EVs (electric vehicles) for the masses."

Despite the hype, J.D. Power and Associates last month reported that in 2020, hybrid and battery electric cars will still account for just 7.3 percent of passenger car sales, in part because of anxiety over range.

"We don't anticipate a mass migration to green vehicles in the coming decade," said J.D. Power and Associates spokesman John Humphrey.

Nissan itself acknowledges that the range of its Leaf could be lower or higher than 100 miles, depending on conditions. A hot day in the Valley, with the air conditioner roaring, could reduce the range to 70 miles. And there are very few fast-charging stations along major routes such as Interstate 5.

"Tow truck operators are ready," blogged Mike Nemeth, project manager for the nonprofit San Joaquin Valley Clean Energy Organization.

People like the Marshes may have to demonstrate that it works for them before others will migrate in their direction.

"It's like the (Toyota) Prius," Cindi Marsh said. "Everyone was scared of the Prius at first."

The Marshes believe that even those who don't share their concerns about natural resources will move toward electric cars to save money.

They're sold on both counts.

Of course, it also helps that Bax's stroller fits in the back of the Leaf. They tried it out just to make sure.

A range of worries

The Nissan Leaf will average 100 miles per battery charge, but everyday mileage could easily vary — contributing to what some are calling "range anxiety." Some of the many scenarios, according to Nissan:

• 100 miles: City driving, averaging just under 20 mph and topping out at 56 mph, with no climate control and with outside temperatures of 68 degrees to 86 degrees.

• 138 miles: Traveling on a flat road just under 40 miles per hour without using the car's climate control.

• 70 miles: Highway driving in the summer, traveling at 55 mph on a 95-degree day, using the air conditioner. Higher speeds mean more wind resistance and a bigger drain on the battery. Air conditioning also taxes the battery.

• 68 miles: Driving from a rural area into the city on a 110-degree day, averaging 49 mph, using the air conditioner.

The battery will gradually diminish over time. After five years, it should have about 80 percent of its original capacity.

Grant propels Fresno's electric bus plan

By Tim Sheehan, staff writer
The Fresno Bee, Saturday, Nov. 13, 2010

Fresno has won a federal stimulus grant that will allow it to put a pair of all-electric transit buses on city streets, probably sometime in 2012.

The grant, almost $1.9 million, comes from the Federal Transit Administration and will be used to buy two buses, spare batteries and a rapid-charging system for the Fresno Area Express, or FAX, fleet.

"It's a very exciting project," said Ken Hamm, Fresno's transit director. "We figured that with the Valley's air-quality issues, moving toward zero-emission buses is one way of contributing to improving that."

Of the FAX fleet of more than 100 buses, about 75% run on compressed natural gas, an alternative fuel. They are cleaner than the older diesel buses that remain on duty in the city. Hamm said FAX also operates a number of hybrid-electric buses that have both fuel-burning engines and electric motors.

Once the buses are put into service, they will be the only all-electric, battery-powered vehicles in the FAX fleet.

Hamm said the electric buses will be put into service on a downtown shuttle loop.

But first, the city has to draw up specifications and solicit bids for the new buses, a process Hamm said will likely take a couple of months. Once a contract is finalized, the winning bidder would then have to build the buses for delivery.

"We're probably looking at 11/2 years to hit the ground, but it might happen sooner," Hamm said.

Fresno Area Express is one of eight clean-energy transit projects in California, and among 63 nationwide, approved for funding by the Federal Transit Administration.

The only other Valley city to receive funds was Visalia, which won $3.1 million to purchase hybrid-electric buses and compressed natural gas-powered trolleys for its transit system, according to information provided by the federal government.

Hamm said Fresno officials have been studying the use of new battery-electric buses by Foothill Transit, which serves the Pasadena and Pomona areas of Los Angeles County. There, three buses manufactured by Colorado-based Proterra Inc. are entering service.

Fresno Bee Editorial, Sunday, Nov. 14, 2010:

Air board should do right by proactive truckers

They cleaned up their fleets, relying on the rules that ARB now seeks to postpone.

David Chidester, owner of a small, Fresno-based trucking firm, did the right thing to cut air pollution and help us all breathe a little easier.

In late 2009 Chidester leased $5.5 million worth of the cleanest diesel trucks available, replacing his aging and dirty fleet, to comply with California's stringent new air pollution standards.

Sadly, he's about to be punished for it. The California Air Resources Board is preparing to revise the standards that prompted Chidester's investment. The air board's action would push back compliance dates by several years and leave Chidester at a disadvantage to all his competitors, many of them out-of-state truckers, who have not invested in cleaner equipment.

The ARB has no choice. The recession has forced the state's air regulators to acknowledge what trucking industry officials have been telling them for several years. In this battered economy, financially struggling trucking firms don't have the cash or the capacity to borrow money to buy cleaner trucks or retrofit existing ones to comply with stringent new state clean-air rules.

In addition, by taking trucks off the roads, the recession itself has significantly reduced emissions. According to state regulators, overall, 2010 truck and bus emissions are more than 20% lower than the air board estimated in 2008.

Acting under direction from its board, the ARB staff has proposed modifications to the new clean-truck standards that will push back compliance deadlines by several years. The board is expected to approve the changes at its meeting next month.

That is the minimum necessary. Because of the recession, ARB regulators are confident the weakened rules will not jeopardize public health nor significantly delay the state's ability to meet federal clean-air standards and avoid sanctions, including the loss of billions of dollars in federal transportation funds.

But the board also needs to do more to make whole people like David Chidester. He and others acted in good faith by investing millions in cleaning up their fleets, relying on the rules that ARB now seeks to postpone. Because he is leasing equipment, not buying it, Chidester is not eligible for state bond funds.

Nor is he eligible for Carl Moyer funds, the state program that provides financial incentives to truckers and other diesel-engine operators who voluntarily go beyond existing clean-air rules. When he invested his money last year, Chidester was complying with existing rules, not going beyond them.

Where simple fairness is at issue, rules like those need to be modified. As the ARB staff finalizes its proposed new diesel truck rules, it needs to craft something for proactive truckers such as Chidester or work with the Legislature on a way to provide them with some relief.

Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Sunday, Nov. 14, 2010:

Air pollution "deaths" all over the map

By Lois Henry

So, according to the attorney representing a local environmental group, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) has been twiddling its thumbs on regulations "when people are dying."

This was in conjunction with a threat by the federal Environmental Protection Agency last week to withhold the state's highway funding if CARB doesn't get off the stick and come up with a plan to rid our air of "deadly" soot, otherwise known as particulate matter, or specifically PM2.5.

If I didn't know better, all this would almost seem like a propaganda run up to CARB's Dec. 16 meeting at which board members will consider amendments to regulations adopted in 2007 and 2008 that strictly curtailed emissions from trucks, buses and heavy construction equipment.

The proposed amendments are intended to ease that regulatory noose somewhat, but CARB staff are adamant some version of the rules are needed to meet federal air standards – hence the EPA saber rattling.

The rules were so stringent initially that many operators feared they would not be able to afford the required retrofits (from $15,000 up to $80,000 per vehicle depending on model) or equipment replacement mandates.

In the past, CARB's approach was to allow industry to retire older, more polluting equipment, reducing pollution through attrition.

But there was a new urgency behind these rules based on the idea that PM2.5, in particular diesel PM2.5, was killing Californians by the thousands.

Anyone who's read my column for any length of time knows I believe the EPA and CARB have systematically ignored studies that show zero effect of so-called premature deaths from PM2.5 in California and other western states, so there's no real need for these rules at all.

But lets set that aside for a moment and just look at the body count.

Err, make that body counts. 'Cause for a bunch of dead people, these alleged PM2.5 victims bounce around more than a roomful of toddlers on a sugar high.

I was told by CARB staffers that the science is "subtle" and "nuanced." And that the scientists who study this stuff "speak in a complex language" to discern air pollution's impact on the general public.

If there's confusion, I was told, that's a failure of the public information arm of CARB, not the science.

Yeah.

The only subtleties I'm seeing are in how CARB words these reports to elicit the maximum fear factor.

As a primer, you need to know that there is diesel PM2.5 and just all around, or "ambient" PM2.5.

Sometimes CARB researchers separated out the effects of diesel PM2.5 from heavy construction equipment and trucks and buses. And sometimes they lumped the effects of both categories together, explained Linda Smith, chief of CARB's health branch in its research division.

And despite the fact that the reports I reviewed were very specifically supposed to assess the health effects of diesel PM2.5, they occasionally mixed in ambient PM2.5 or even premature deaths from ozone.

So much for scientific exactitude.

OK, so in 2006, CARB estimated 2,400 Californians bought the farm early from exposure to diesel PM2.5 (well, ozone was included too, Smith said. And this report looked at all goods transport, which could include heavy equipment or trucks.)

That was the report used to justify the heavy equipment rules in 2007, by the way.

The 2008 report that spawned the rule for trucks and buses went through a few iterations.

In a May draft version, it said there were 3,900 annual premature deaths due to diesel PM2.5. In the final version, that diesel number was reduced to 3,500.

The change was because they looked at air data from 2000 for the draft and 2005 for the final, according to another CARB staffer.

That explanation seems pretty thin to me. I mean, if the report was done in 2008, surely 2005 air data was available for the May draft version. If not, perhaps 2004? Or even 2003? No?

OK, moving on.

CARB put out a new report on the PM2.5 scourge this past August and said it causes 9,200 premature deaths in California every year. That's overall PM2.5, no break down of diesel PM2.5.

Smith told me CARB would be updating its figures to show that of those 9,200 deaths, about 2,000 a year are due to diesel PM2.5.

She said the changing numbers reflect "new methodology and the latest information."

Given revelations about how CARB has done business in the recent past – attempting to cover up that the author of those key 2006 and 2008 reports lied about his credentials and then overestimating how much trucks and heavy equipment contribute to air pollution by more than 80 percent – I'm thinking there's a different reason these premature death numbers vary so widely.

Selective interpretation of the data in order to extract a desired outcome comes to mind.

According to CARB's latest calculations, they believe that from 2010 to 2025 the on-road rule will help keep 3,500 people on this side of the dirt.

That's 233 deaths avoided per year.

And they believe that between 2010 and 2029, their off-road rule will save the lives of 470 people, or 25 per year.

Sooooo, we're saddling California businesses with expensive regulations at a time when they can ill afford it in the name of perhaps, maybe, saving 258 lives a year (if CARB's numbers can be believed). For perspective's sake, about 250,000 Californians die every year of all causes.

That's a pretty expensive maybe.

Getting in touch with CARB

CARB's meeting to consider amendments to the truck and heavy equipment emissions rules will be held December 16 in Sacramento.

The meeting will be webcast at: http://www.calepa.ca.gov/broadcast/?BDO=1

And you can submit comments by mail or electronically. The deadline for submitted comments is Dec. 15 by noon.

Send comments to:

Clerk of the Board, Air Resources Board

1001 I Street, Sacramento, California 95814

Or go to this site:

http://www.arb.ca.gov/lispub/comm/bclist.php

And scroll down to the topic listed as "Two Notices of Public Hearing for Proposed Amendments" and click on the link there.

You can find more information about CARB at their website:

http://www.arb.ca.gov/homepage.htm