Calif. settlement will fund car charging network

By ANDREW DALTON - The Associated Press
In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, March 23, 2012

LOS ANGELES -- An energy company accused of artificially inflating the cost of electricity, leading to California's power crisis a decade ago, agreed to pay a $120 million settlement that will fund 10,000 electric car charging stations across the state, Gov. Jerry Brown announced Friday.

The money from NRG Energy Inc. will help California try to turn a black mark on its past power management into an attempt at future energy efficiency.

"This is a truly creative deal that offers tremendous value for California utility customers," said Mike Florio, a commissioner with the California Public Utilities Commission, which negotiated the settlement. "In one stroke, it closes out an unfortunate chapter in our history and propels us down the road to a clean transportation future."

Brown also signed an executive order setting goals to have 1.5 million vehicles with no tailpipe emissions on California's roads by 2025, and aiming for virtually every vehicle on the road to be emission-free by 2050.

The $120 million settlement, to be paid over four years, stems from decade-old claims against NRG and Dynegy Inc., which co-owned plants that generated California power at the time. NRG assumed full responsibility in 2006 when it bought Dynegy's half of the assets, and the settlement resolves the litigation, NRG said in a statement.

California officials claimed that during 2000 and 2001, the state overpaid nearly $9 billion to companies that artificially raised prices by withholding energy supplies, driving up rates and causing the notorious rolling blackouts that left power customers sporadically in the dark.

Other companies involved in the crisis included Enron Corp., Williams Companies Inc., Duke Energy Corp. and Mirant Corp. Most reached settlements with the state several years ago.

Simon Mui, a scientist who works on electric vehicle issues for the National Resources Defense Council, called the plan "great news, particularly given where the funds came from."

"What better way to spend it?" Mui said in a phone interview. "This came from the electricity price shocks, and now we're using it to help the gasoline price shocks."

Some $100 million of the money from NRG will fund at least 200 public fast-charging stations, and another 10,000 plug-in units at 1,000 locations in the San Francisco Bay Area, the San Joaquin Valley, the Los Angeles basin and San Diego County, the governor said.

"With this agreement, the people of California will gain a charging infrastructure ready to support their current and future fleet of electric vehicles," David Crane, CEO of Princeton, N.J.-based NRG, said in a written statement, "and we will be helping the state meet its clean car goals."

The other $20 million will go toward reducing rates for utility customers, Brown said.

Jerry Brown pushes zero-emission cars, defends oil policy

Sacramento Bee, Capital Alert, Friday, March 23, 2012

GOLETA - Gov. Jerry Brown said today that he will push the state to put 1.5 million zero-emission vehicles on the road by 2025, reducing transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent over 1990s levels.

In an executive order, the Democratic governor directed state agencies to help facilitate that effort.

Meanwhile, Brown announced a $120 million settlement between the California Public Utilities Commission and NRG Energy Inc. - resolving a years-old claim related to power costs during California's energy crisis - to fund construction of 200 fast-charging stations for zero-emission vehicles and 10,000 plug-in units around the state.

"This executive order strengthens California's position as a national leader in zero-emission vehicles," Brown said in a prepared statement, "and the settlement will dramatically expand California's electric vehicle infrastructure, helping to clean our air and reduce our dependence on foreign oil."

Brown's announcement came as he defended his record on oil production at a conference on the economy and the environment just outside Santa Barbara. Four months after firing the top two overseers of drilling operations in California, Brown said, "I fired the people in charge, and now our permits are dramatically up."

When asked about his position on nuclear energy and hydraulic fracturing, Brown said he is still studying them.

The administration said the zero-emission vehicle settlement would fund charging stations in the Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley, Los Angeles Basin and San Diego County.

Controversial strawberry pesticide taken off the market

By Sara Jane Pohlman
Lodi News Sentinel, Friday, March 23, 2012

A pesticide used mostly on strawberries is being pulled from U.S. markets by its Japanese manufacturer after harsh criticism that the product is toxic and causes cancer.

Tokyo-based Arysta LifeScience Inc. said late Tuesday that it was immediately suspending the sale, marketing and production of all formulations of the fumigant Midas, or methyl iodide, in the U.S.

The company said the decision was based on the product's economic viability in the United States.

Methyl iodide was used to control soil pathogens and weed seeds before strawberries, peppers, tomatoes or similar plants went in the ground. It is not sprayed on the plant. California regulators approved its use in December 2010 despite opposition from a wide range of scientists and environmental and farmworker groups.

Those scientists concluded that use of the fumigant would result in acute public health risks because tests on rats and rabbits have shown that exposure to the chemical causes thyroid cancer, miscarriages and damage to the nervous system. Scientists also found it can pollute air and water.

Environmentalists who clamored to get the chemical off the market hailed the unexpected decision to end sales and said it came just in time for spring strawberry season.

"This is a pleasant surprise and a huge victory, especially for rural residents and farmworkers across the country," said Paul Towers of Pesticide Action Network. "Arysta saw the writing on the wall and chose to pull their cancer-causing methyl iodide product."

The strawberry industry was also surprised by the decision, said Carolyn O'Donnell, communications director for the California Strawberry Commission. Growers are concerned, O'Donnell said, about the implications of methyl iodide being pulled from shelves while methyl bromide is being phased out.

Local growers were glad to have an alternative to use after its predecessor, methyl bromide, was found to be depleting the ozone layer, said Scott Hudson San Joaquin County Agriculture Commissioner.

But methyl iodide was only used twice in the county and it had been highly restricted by the Department of Pesticide Regulation.

Bruce Blodgett, San Joaquin Farm Bureau executive director, is not pleased at seeing the product removed from the market.

"This was our only helpful replacement for methyl bromide," said Blodgett in an email.

With methyl iodide off the table, the ag industry is back to square one. Now growers have to find something else to prep their soil for the upcoming season. Other fumigants don't seem to be as effective in controlling soil pathogens and weed seeds as both methyl bromide and methyl iodide, according to Hudson.

"We want to make sure neighbors and workers are safe, and we need to have a tangible product our guys can use. The question is, 'OK, now what? Now where do we go? What do our guys need?'" said Patterson.

That research is in progress.

In recent years, the commission has poured more than $12 million into university research to look at alternatives to fumigation, such as crop rotation, eliminating soil pathogens by using natural sources of carbon and sterilizing soil with steam.

And earlier this month, the commission and the California Department of Pesticide Regulation announced a research partnership looking for alternatives to fumigants. The $500,000, three-year project is will focus on growing strawberries in peat, tree bark or other non-soil substances that are disease-free.

Associated Press writer Gosia Wozniacka contributed to this report.

CalRecycle unveils Commercial Climate Calculator for businesses' energy costs

Sun-Star staff
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, March 23, 2012

SACRAMENTO – The Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) has unveiled its Commercial Climate Calculator to help businesses evaluate the benefits of reducing waste, including cost savings. CalRecycle's online calculator complements Air Resources Board and Department of Toxic Substances Control tools developed for use by businesses, industry, and the general public to gauge their carbon footprint and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, according to a news release.

"With California's new commercial recycling requirement soon to take effect, we're working hard to provide tools like this so California businesses, schools, and others can develop their own blueprint to achieve success," CalRecycle Director Caroll Mortensen said in the news release. "The calculator will help Californians see that recycling and waste reduction make sense for our environment and their bottom line."

Two-thirds of California's waste is generated by the commercial sector. AB 341, recently signed into law by Governor Brown, requires expanded recycling by businesses, multi-family residential buildings of 5 units or more, schools, and other public entities if they produce 4 or more cubic yards of waste per week. CalRecycle's Commercial Climate Calculator is available at http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/Climate/Calculator/default.htm in a downloadable spreadsheet format. It is designed for virtually any California business, multi-family residential building, or public entity such as a government agency, to evaluate the financial and environmental benefits of reducing waste and recycling discarded materials.

Businesses can use the calculator to model waste reduction or recycling scenarios, estimate the associated diversion from landfills and resulting cost savings, as well as learn the climate change benefits of reduced greenhouse gas emissions. CalRecycle has also collaborated with the Air Resources Board on its Small Business Carbon Footprint Calculator available at http://www.coolcalifornia.org/business-calculator. It uses California-specific data to estimate the carbon footprint for a range of business operations, from transportation to facility management to procurement. This web-based calculator also highlights the types of recycling activities businesses can take to reduce their carbon footprint.

Businesses can also use this benchmarking and tracking tool to support an application to participate in local Green Business programs. Businesses may also be interested in pursuing Green Business Certification through the California Green Business Program at http://www.greenbusinessca.org. The program, managed by the Department of Toxic Substances Control, measures progress toward reducing environmental impacts in solid waste and recycling, energy consumption, water consumption, and pollution prevention. The California Green Business Program online toolkit integrates applying for certification, tracking status, and monitoring progress.

The toolkit also offers an easy to use searchable database of California Green Businesses at http://www.greenbusinessca.org/directory/search/ to promote participating businesses and generates a report card of environmental benefits over time (e.g., per year, since enrollment).

Stockton Record, Letter to the Editor, Friday, March 23, 2012

Stockton is Valley's clean tech city of the future

Thank you for highlighting Stockton's new plug-in station for electric vehicles ("Static electricity," March 12).

Amidst all the city's gloomy economic news, we forget that Stockton now out-competes other cities attracting clean tech businesses. Stockton is 30th among large metro areas in clean economy jobs. By population, we rank 77th.

With the arrival of an EV plug-in station, Stockton is at the forefront of clean tech in the San Joaquin Valley. As Stockton drivers begin to purchase more and more electric vehicles, they will save money, create cleaner air and therefore healthier children, and help Stockton rebound, making it the Central Valley's clean tech city of the future.

Betsy Reifsnider, Stockton

Fresno Bee Blog, March 23, 2011:

Readers outraged over $500,000 for electric tool giveaway

By Mark Grossi

My posting about electric leaf blowers and other lawn tools triggered outrage among a few readers.

I wrote that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is using $500,000 to basically buy electric lawn equipment for commercial gardeners. Half the money comes from state sources and the other half from Valley air district sources. It's public money.

People were upset at what they saw as a government giveaway. A few callers challenged the idea that leaf blowers and other landscape maintenance equipment are even a big source of pollution.

They are right about the amount of pollution, compared to other sources. The ozone-making gases from lawn equipment do not rank with diesel trucks, cars and farm sources, such as dairies.

Even so, one gasoline-powered leaf blower runs dirtier than a newer vehicle, the air district says. And the leaf blowers are often used very close to homes.

The electric versions are zero emission, but they have not been proven in commercial use, according the district. The freebies are a one-year test to see if they can stand up to daily use. It's part of the district's effort to work on sources of pollution in neighborhoods.

Aside from the pollution reduction, the electric versions are quieter. I have not seen a survey that says a majority of Fresno residents oppose noisy leaf blowers. Some readers even told me they don't have a problem with the noise from a leaf blower.

But the noise is an issue with many who have called and written me. The air district has had the same experience. And this is not the only place where the leaf blower is an issue.

Many California cities have blower regulations and bans, including Berkeley, Del Mar, Los Angeles, Menlo Park, Mill Valley, Carmel and others.