

## A Bumper Crop of Bad Air in San Joaquin Valley

Growth brings more smog and health woes. Cleanup seems a low priority for officials.

By Mark Arax and Gary Polakovic, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers, published Dec. 8, 2002

The sun is setting on California's great valley, but the brilliant light no longer shines as it used to. The mountains to the east and west are gone too, blotted from the horizon by a sky the color of mud.

When the first settlers arrived here in the early 1800s, it was the wildflowers of the San Joaquin Valley and the divine view of the Sierra that set them to poetry. Today, this 300-mile-long stretch of factory farms and sprawling suburbs is the worst place in America for smog and one of the worst for haze.

The state's big middle -- by the measure of smog throughout the day -- has now overtaken Los Angeles as the nation's capital of bad air.

During the last 22 months, the San Joaquin Valley, boasting 3.4 million people and 2.4 million cars and pickups, has violated the federal eight-hour ozone standard 226 days. The Los Angeles region, with four times as many people and cars, has violated the same ozone standard 201 days.

This year the valley failed to achieve a single day of clean air in June, July, August and October. During the last 12 months, the "good air" standard has been reached only 53 days -- an average of once a week.

But a sky full of colorless ozone, the main ingredient in smog that can sear and scar the lungs, is only half of what plagues this region.

Dust and soot, the same hazy particles that erase the Sierra and alter the light, contribute to the deaths of an estimated 1,300 valley residents each year -- especially children, the elderly, the poor and people already suffering from respiratory disease. That's more deaths than from car accidents, murder and AIDS combined, according to a 2002 study of state health figures by the Environmental Working Group, an independent watchdog based in Washington, D.C.

Even as people continue to move into the valley, some local residents, fearing the health effects on their children, are packing their bags.

"I spent a year in the valley and decided it wasn't for me," said Paul Kim, a radiologist who quit his job at a Fresno hospital this summer and moved his wife and baby to Orange County.

"It didn't take long to figure out that the valley is run by farmers and developers," he said. "The whole place is consumed with building cheap tracts farther and farther out of town. When it comes to the air, there's a collective complacency."

The valley's lingering bad air stands in sharp contrast to what has happened in other parts of the country. While Los Angeles, San Diego and Denver have posted substantial gains in the campaign for less polluted air, the flatland between Bakersfield and Stockton has amassed the worst cleanup record in the West.

The local air district and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have missed every federal deadline to improve the valley sky since the district's formation in 1991. During that time, the smog-forming emissions from cars, trucks, farms and oil refineries have been cut by one-fourth. This modest improvement is far below the requirements of the U.S. Clean Air Act and far short of what Los Angeles and other regions have accomplished.

The fight against haze has fared even worse. Over the last three years, the amount of tiny particles in the sky has risen 17%, adding more haze to a region that already ranks near the top on the EPA's list of particulate pollution. The haze is a piercing mix of dust, smoke and other airborne matter from farms, vehicles, home construction and wood-burning stoves and fireplaces. The particles are small enough to lodge deep in the lungs and can cause cancer, asthma and heart disease.

The year-round assault from smog and haze also includes a considerable punch from pollen and pesticides.

As a matter of topography, it would be hard for nature to design a more perfect smog factory than this place, the nation's longest valley, pinched by the Sierra and the Coast Range. An inversion layer traps emissions beneath a broiling sun in summer and a stagnant fog in winter.

So adverse are the climate and terrain that it takes half as many emissions in the valley to produce about the same levels of smog found in the Los Angeles Basin.

Poet Philip Levine, the only Fresnoan other than William Saroyan to win a Pulitzer Prize, now spends part of his year in Brooklyn to get a dose of fresher air. "This past summer was the worst I've experienced. I really had trouble breathing. As crazy as it sounds, New York is a whole lot better for my lungs."

At a graduation ceremony in June, the sixth-graders at Malloch Elementary School in affluent northwest Fresno were asked who among them used asthma inhalers. Parents and grandparents, who had gathered in the cafeteria to celebrate, gasped when 30 of the 59 students raised their hands. "I had no idea it was that high," Principal Ellen Hedman said.

More than 16% of the children in Fresno County have been diagnosed with asthma. That is the highest rate in California and twice the rate in Los Angeles County, according to a survey by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. Indeed, every place in this region -- San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties -- has a rate higher than Los Angeles.

Krissy Riley, 13, who attends a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school, no longer hides her asthma inhaler from classmates. "Embarrassed? Heaven's no," said her mother, Kathy Riley. "The inhaler is a fact of life here. It's almost cool to have one. It's right up there with a cell phone."

No one needs to tell Tony Souza that his dairy in Kingsburg is harsh on the lungs and bad public relations. Each late summer evening as the sun sets, a curtain of dust drifts from the dairy to nearby Highway 99. Passing drivers try turning off the flow of their air conditioners, but there's no escape. What's floating in the air isn't only dirt but dung. The manure cloud, kicked up by the hooves of 2,000 Holsteins, bakes in the hot sun.

"We want to be good neighbors, but it's not that easy," said Souza, manager of Jensen Dairy. "We'd have to redesign our entire dairy to cut down on the dust and gases. You're talking about \$3 [million] or \$4 million to fix it."

If the rest of California has emerged as a world leader in the fight for clean air, a laboratory for innovative solutions and tough regulations, then smack in its middle lie eight counties and 24,000 square miles where the clean-air campaign is sadly broken.

Not only does the valley lack a plan to achieve healthful air, it has failed to cast the cleanup net as far and wide as Los Angeles has. In Southern California, for instance, there are regulations on idling big rigs and vehicle fleets, whereas the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has none.

Cars, pickups, sport utility vehicles and big rigs remain this region's biggest polluters. Over the last decade, new freeways and suburbs to accommodate a growing population have increased the daily miles traveled from 63 million to 83 million. On-road vehicles now account for 40% of the smog here, state figures show.

Agriculture, meanwhile, stands as the valley's biggest industrial polluter and the biggest source of haze. Farming operations, which include tilling and harvesting of cotton, grapes, tree fruit, almonds and pistachios, account for 62% of particles in the air and 20% of the smog.

Emissions from dairies and feedlots -- the gases and dust that help form smog and haze -- are growing 5% a year, state figures show.

The fight to clean up the air has now fallen so far behind schedule that the rest of the decade promises no real change.

"I can't tell you of a single political leader here who has taken on air quality as an issue," said Cliff Garoupa, a Fresno City College professor who serves on a committee to reduce vehicle trips to and from campus. "They don't want to upset the building industry and agriculture or mess with the sanctity of the automobile.

"Here we are, the worst place in the nation, and the only solution our politicians and air district can come up with is a pathetic list of voluntary programs. 'Spare the Air' days, they call them. Talk about fiddling while Rome burns."

In October, for example, the county Board of Supervisors in Madera voted to push forward a "new town" that will plant 6,500 houses on farm fields 15 miles outside the city. At no time during the debate did the supervisors delve into the project's impact on air quality.

Supervisor Ronn Dominici, who cast the swing vote, regrets not bringing up the issue. "I probably should have raised more questions," said Dominici, who is also vice chairman of the valley air district. "Enough attention isn't being directed at our bad air by boards of supervisors and city councils."

Elected officials point to the valley's deep poverty and 15% unemployment as rationale for not imposing regulations that might drive away industry. Farming throughout California, for instance, has been largely exempt from state air pollution laws since 1947 and has never had to answer to the U.S. Clean Air Act.

The local air district has never challenged this exemption or asked the EPA to regulate agriculture's biggest polluters. Nor has the EPA stepped in to do it on its own.

"You can't go to the San Joaquin Valley and not be impacted by the conditions there," said Wayne Nastri, administrator for the EPA's Pacific Southwest office. "We have a long way to go, and there hasn't been much progress."

By law, the valley should be cutting its daily emissions by a third, or 300 tons. But even as the air district has reduced some smog-forming emissions, new suburbs and freeways emit almost as many new pollutants into the air.

In the face of such growth, the daily discharge of noxious substances is being reduced by a mere 23 tons.

David Crow, the local air district's top administrator, said the region has made progress, but not fast enough.

"Our [air quality] has been improving over the past decade despite a population increase of 500,000 people," he said. "The improvements just aren't enough to meet the federal standards."

Doctors on the front line of the asthma and allergy wars are surprised to find patients who don't make the connection between what ails them and the bad air. It got so frustrating that Fresno doctor Malik Baz decided to do something bold when he built his 9,000-square-foot medical complex along Freeway 41 north of town:

He equipped it with a tall tower that flashes each day's air quality to commuters.

All summer long, as the big electronic red letters shouted "UNHEALTHY," the Baz Allergy and Asthma Center filled with people wheezing and coughing and clutching steroid inhalers that had run dry.

"I had patients this summer who took their vacations on the coast and told the same story," he said. "As soon as they got out of town, their sinuses and lungs cleared up and they stopped taking their medications. Then, as soon as they headed back and hit the valley floor, they had to pull out their inhalers again."

This summer, the San Joaquin Valley -- touted as the area that will have more to say about the state's future than any other because of wide open land and affordable housing -- became the first region in the nation to seek the designation of "extreme noncompliance" with federal law.

By moving to the worst category, the valley would accept a stigma in return for a reprieve: Federal officials will grant seven more years for the valley to reach air-quality standards without forfeiting \$2.2 billion in highway funds and exposing the region to \$30 million in industry cleanup costs.

The delay, some fear, will only play into the valley's impulse to put off yet again making tough decisions.

Dan McCorquodale, the retired state senator from San Jose who wrote the law that established the valley air district in 1991, said he feels like "a disappointed parent who's watched his child grow up to accomplish nothing."

"My worst fears have been realized," he said. "The air district has sat on its hands, and the people haven't gotten their money's worth."

McCorquodale recalled that the counties had to be dragged "kicking and screaming" to form one big air district back in 1991. Oilmen in Bakersfield, farmers in Tulare, builders in Stockton, chamber of commerce heads in Fresno -- no one wanted a regional agency that took away local control.

Lawmakers ended up passing the measure but on one condition: The air district's board would be made up of only county supervisors and city council members. Unlike in other regions of the state, the valley's air board would have no voice from the fields of health, education or science.

"Our bill got pretty watered down at the end," McCorquodale said. "By filling up the board with only elected officials, the cause of clean air was lost right there. It guaranteed that the only voices heard were those of industry and business."

In 1991-92, shortly after the formation of the regional air district, local neighborhood groups concerned about sprawling suburban development urged the agency to impose a fee on new construction.

The idea behind the so-called "indirect source rule" was to make sprawl offset its own impacts. By assessing a fee of \$5,000 per house, the air district could raise tens of millions of dollars to clean the air. The money could fund everything from mass transit to farmers converting their diesel irrigation pumps to cleaner-burning fuel.

But as soon as the idea was floated, records show, the letters of protest poured in from state and local building groups. The head of the Fresno-area Building Industry Assn. told residents they were wasting their time supporting the measure. The fee would be killed, he said, and it was.

With few brakes on growth, the state's midsection has sprouted new suburbs in every direction.

In Fresno, Mike and Lisa Biskup have watched the city march north all the way to the San Joaquin River, filling an area once reserved as a greenbelt with 2,500 houses. The small farm where they raise lambs, chickens, llamas and vegetables can now feel the breath of suburbia.

Their two sons, ages 4 and 2, have grown up hearing the sound of heavy equipment tearing out nearby orchards and vineyards. Eli, their oldest, knows the different functions of a backhoe, grader, roller and trencher.

But the Sierra outside his front door is a mystery veiled in brown.

"We've got a perfect view of the mountains, but we haven't seen them all summer," Mike Biskup said. "For the past five years, my wife and I have been looking at the sky and saying, 'My gosh, we breathe this stuff. This is so sick!'"

Biskup, who works for an irrigation district, began wheezing at night, and his cough lingered for months. His doctor diagnosed asthma. His wife, Lisa, a schoolteacher, loves their little rural patch, but the bad air has them looking elsewhere to raise their boys.

"It's a geographic fact that the valley can't sustain the development they're talking about without destroying the air," she said. "But they just want to keep doing what they're doing."

Builders say that they aren't indifferent to the problem of air pollution but that slowing growth is the wrong approach. The mantra here should be "smart growth," said Jeff Harris, head of the Building Industry Assn. of the San Joaquin Valley.

"As long as people continue to be born, we have a moral and ethical obligation to put a roof over their heads," he said. "Now, how you do that is the key. It doesn't mean drawing a line around our cities with permanent greenbelts. It means higher densities and building out in increments."

It's not just people and their cars moving over the mountains and settling into new tracts and befouling the air that are the problem. More than 500,000 cows -- many of them refugees from Southern California, where the dairy farm has given way to gated communities -- have joined

them in the past decade. That's one cow for every new resident. The valley now boasts 2.8 million dairy and feedlot cows -- more than all the vehicles on its roads.

Most dairymen have needed only to fill out a simple application with the county to start up. The regulatory process was so lax that in 1999 the state attorney general sued Tulare County, the nation's No. 1 milk producer, and imposed a basic environmental review requirement.

The industrial dairies of the San Joaquin Valley bear little resemblance to the bucolic California farms in TV ads, extolling "Great Cheese Comes From Happy Cows." Thousands of cows squeeze in and out of tight concrete stalls, kicking up dust on manure-laden running paths.

Emissions from dairies and feedlots will become the largest source of smog-forming gases in the next three years, according to air district projections. The California Air Resources Board estimates that dairies also account for 44% of valley air's ammonia, which contributes to particle pollution.

"There is ammonia coming off these dairies, and it's probably a significant amount," said J.P. Cativiela, a spokesman for dairy industry groups. "[But] the 44% figure comes from a study of just one dairy over a few days.

"We're willing to do our part, but we need more research before they start imposing new regulations."

This same argument can be heard from fruit, nut and vegetable farmers, as well as cotton and grain growers, who form the backbone of California's \$27-billion-a-year agriculture industry.

They don't dispute that pesticides and fertilizers release more hydrocarbons than the valley's petroleum industry. Or that thousands of acres of almond trees, the valley's new boom crop, create great dust clouds during harvest. They even concede a link between the fall spraying of cotton fields and what people here refer to as "defoliant colds."

But many of the farmers say that they are barely hanging on in the face of global competition and that any clean air measures adding to their costs could drive them out of business. Like dairymen, cotton and grape growers believe that more studies are needed to identify agriculture's exact role in air pollution and what solutions should be undertaken. A \$30-million particulate study backed by farm groups has been gathering data since 1993.



"We've had some problems with some of the more recent samples, and we're still working to complete the study," said Manual Cunha of the Nisei Farmers League. "We know farming is part of the problem, but without that science we can only do so much."

A state program that pays farmers to convert their diesel irrigation pumps to cleaner fuel has slashed emissions from farm equipment by nearly a third. But farmers have resisted proposals to do more.

Last March, the California air board announced a statewide cleanup plan that outlined new restrictions on livestock waste and irrigation pumps and raised the possibility of "no spray" pesticide days. Farm groups reacted so negatively that Gov. Gray Davis' staff moved quickly to scuttle the plan. Winston Hickox, head of the state EPA, said the no-spray idea was "dead on arrival." The rest of the plan was also shelved.

Kevin Hall, a local Sierra Club member, is no stranger to the farmer's viewpoint or power. Before becoming a clean air activist, Hall spent 13 years editing California farm journals and organizing farm equipment shows.

"It's been the same song for 12 years. 'We need better science. We need more money to fund more studies.' It's one delay tactic after another," Hall said. "Their end game is pretty simple. Avoid federal regulations at all costs."

Hall brought in EarthJustice, the San Francisco-based environmental defense fund, to file a series of lawsuits. Citing a pattern of neglect and inaction, EarthJustice challenged, among other things, the state's exemption on agriculture and the failure of the federal EPA and air district to oppose this free pass. In May, the EPA settled one of the lawsuits by agreeing to seek an end to the farm exemption, though it's likely to be years before farms will be required to change their practices.

Chuck Sant'Agata, executive director of the American Lung Assn. in Fresno, senses a shift in public awareness. The air district, for instance, may soon ban winter fireplace use on bad air days, and it has pledged to reconsider the idea of a fee on builders.

"Public sentiment is changing," Sant'Agata said. "People are starting to open their eyes. Now we have to get the politicians aboard."

That may not be such an easy thing.

In April, a poll by the Public Policy Institute of California ranked air pollution as the No. 1 concern of valley residents, with sprawl not far behind. Yet two prominent state legislators -- Sen. Dean Florez (D-Shafter) and Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes (D-Fresno) -- have never made cleaning up the air an issue.

"We have not touched on that issue yet," said Reyes' press secretary, Karen Clifton.

Last year, state Sen. Roy Ashburn (R-Bakersfield), then an assemblyman, did take a stand when the Bakersfield Californian interviewed him for an in-depth report on air quality. He told the newspaper he was too busy dealing with other state issues to concern himself with improving the air.

This September, even as local schools canceled Friday football games for the first time because of bad air, local officials took the following actions:

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors approved a new dairy with 14,000 Holsteins.

The Council of Fresno County Governments urged voters to pass a tax to fund \$1.3 billion in new highways.

The air district allowed farmers to conduct open-field burning of more than 6 million tons of paper and plastic trays used to make raisins.

The city councils in Fresno, Clovis, Visalia and Tulare pushed ahead plans for more housing tracts and more strip malls -- without studying impacts on traffic and air.

"There's such a pressure to expedite these projects that no one in the planning departments is asking hard questions about traffic congestion and how it impacts air quality," said Moses Stites, an assistant planner for the California Department of Transportation in Fresno. "It's business as usual."

At the Biskup farm on the northern edge of the city, a "For Sale" sign now marks the frontyard. As soon as their third child is born in January, Mike and Lisa Biskup, lifelong Fresnans, are moving -- to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington.

"I love my job, and I love this farm," he said. "But I can't put my kids in harm's way anymore. We're 10 years away from breathing even marginally better air."

Arax is a state enterprise reporter based in Fresno; Polakovic is an environment reporter based in Los Angeles.

## Hybrid vehicles pay off for owners

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer, December 08, 2002

Whenever Stephanie Lynch fuels up her Toyota Prius hybrid car, she whips out a mileage record from the center console and makes note of the miles traveled and fuel consumed on the last tank.

Incredibly, she got paid \$2,000 to do this, and it's not any bother, since the car gets 44 mpg in town and 53 on the highway.

"About once a month I have to put gas in the car," said Lynch, a Bakersfield resident who uses the car for her commute and her work as a field representative for Kern County Supervisor Barbara Patrick. "When I pull up to one of the big SUVs at a light I'm sort of dwarfed, but I feel very virtuous. We're canceling each other out, basically, 'cause I'm sitting at the signal on the battery."

Lynch purchased her car with help from a San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District program. Buyers can get up to \$3,000 back on the purchase of cleaner cars like the Prius, which runs on both gasoline and electric engines. Lynch got a \$2,000 check from the air district two weeks after buying her car, and all she had to do was fill out some forms and agree to submit annual mileage reports.

Her Prius more than cancels out that SUV. In fact, according to the air district, it may cancel out 10 to 15 of them. Trouble is, few people have taken advantage of the program in Kern County, which has arguably the worst air in the eight-county air district and the biggest need for clean cars. According to air district records, 55 vehicles have been sold in Kern County since the program began in April 2001. That puts the county sixth out of the eight counties in per capita car sales under the program, even though Kern ranks second in population.

"I would hope that would be just the contrary," said Bakersfield City Councilman Mike Maggard, also a member of the air district board of directors. "If there's any place in the valley that should be using these cars on a wider basis, it should be Kern County."

By comparison, drivers in Tulare County have purchased 51 cars under the program, though the population there is just over half of Kern's.

Explaining Kern County's low interest in the program isn't easy. Some speculate the area's long history in the oil and farm industries has created consumers more inclined to buy pickups. Others say the region's patriotic roots push buyers away from the imported brands that currently sell all the hybrid and electric cars.

But both comments could be applied to other counties in the air district. Besides, certain pickups and vans are eligible under the program, though they run on natural gas, a refueling inconvenience.

"So many people have moved here from outside the area that there's plenty of demand if the public is sufficiently aware of the program," Maggard said.

Indeed, not many people seem to know about the program, even some who might be the perfect target market.

Arthur Unger of Bakersfield sits on the executive committee of the Sierra Club's Kern-Kaweah Chapter. He even owns a Toyota Prius, purchased before the air district launched its program.

Asked if he knew of the program, he said, "Holy crow, no!"

But he was aware of a separate program that allows a \$2,000 tax deduction for the purchase of a clean car, and he's already applied to the IRS.

Caroline Farrell, directing attorney at the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment in Delano, said she only recently became aware of the program.

"Now that I've learned about it fairly recently I'd like to take advantage of it," she said. "It could be that the program is not very well-known."

The program has minimal marketing and a tongue-tying title: "Light-Duty and Medium-Duty Vehicle Incentive Program."

At first some car dealers weren't telling customers about the program, said Chris Acree, who manages the program for the air district. Rules require consumers to obtain air district approval before buying their clean car, and some dealers apparently kept mum to win impulse sales. But Acree said this haunted the dealers because customers found out later and came back to

complain. In any case, he said, this was never a problem in Kern County, where car dealers supported the program from the start.

"The dealers down there, they know it's going to be kind of the future of the vehicle market," Acree said. "I think we've captured at least 90 percent of the (relevant) vehicle purchases in the valley."

Others say the comparatively high cost of the cars and their untested technology may be factors keeping consumers away. Bakersfield resident Tom Wimberly commutes in a 1991 Chevrolet pickup with a V-8 engine and four-wheel drive. He recently shopped for a new truck and was shocked that the fuel economy of a new Chevy truck has increased only one mile per gallon in 11 years. He said he would consider a hybrid-type vehicle, but worries about reliability.

"I don't think anybody really wants to be the guinea pig, because what happens if it breaks, you know?" Wimberly said. "What if I'm on a trip in the middle of nowhere? Is there anybody that can really take care of it?"

Others hold to the myth that the new clean cars are all tiny and underpowered.

Stephanie Lynch, meanwhile, enjoys knowing that she got \$2,000 in her pocket just for choosing a Prius. The car is as quiet and comfortable as the 1989 Cadillac El Dorado she owned previously, and it's big enough to carry five people or her two dogs. The car cruises easily at 80 mph on long trips, and it's been completely trouble-free.

"I can go up to Fresno, I can go to the San Fernando Valley, and keep up with the best of 'em. It's got the power for freeway driving," Lynch said. "I was going to be looking for a new vehicle anyway, so I said it's time to bite the bullet and at least try to do my part."

The air district program is about to run out of money for this year, but Acree hopes his board approves new funding for next year. Maggard said it might be time to consider a greater marketing effort, perhaps even offering bigger rebates in areas with the worst air quality.

## New gas additive to increase prices

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, December 5, 2002

SACRAMENTO -- Drivers can expect gas prices to rise by up to 5 cents per gallon because of a state law requiring a more expensive gasoline additive, state energy officials say.

The higher prices will accompany California's move away from methyl tertiary butyl ether, or MTBE, an additive that is blamed for polluting drinking water after it leaked from storage tanks.

Instead, refineries will start using ethanol, a corn-based fuel additive that is more expensive but better for the environment.

Federal law requires gasoline to contain a 2 percent oxygen additive -- such as MTBE or ethanol -- to cut down on air pollution.

California's ban on MTBE is set to take effect by the end of next year. The ban, originally scheduled to start Jan. 1, was pushed back a year because of worries a shortage of the new fuel would lead to spiking gasoline prices.

"We wanted to ensure that the infrastructure, such as storage tanks and marine facilities, was in place so that the transition would go smoothly," said Claudia Chandler, spokeswoman from the California Energy Commission.

The jump in prices should be moderate, Chandler says, because many refineries took advantage of rock-bottom ethanol prices when the law

## Bus service doesn't fit with job

By MELANIE TURNER, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, December 9, 2002

People in low-wage jobs who can't afford cars sometimes turn to public transportation to get to and from work.

But those same low-wage jobs -- serving food, washing dishes, cleaning motel rooms -- often have early morning and late-night hours that don't fit into Modesto bus schedules, said one regular rider, Mike Thompson.

"It's not working for the average minimum wage worker who can't afford a car," Thompson said. "It's almost an impossible system."

A study this year backs up Thompson's opinion. It concludes that people trying to move from welfare to work often find it difficult to take public transportation in Stanislaus County because the service hours aren't compatible with their work hours.

Thompson is an advocate of buses. He said if more people rode the bus, the air would be cleaner and the streets less congested.

On the other hand, the 40-year-old Modesto native gets frustrated when he has to walk to or from work or catch rides from friends.

Thompson said he gave up his truck last year after it failed a smog test and needed about \$400 in repairs.

"Four hundred dollars is a mint to me," he said, adding that he takes home about \$420 a month from his part-time job after he pays \$100 in child support.

Thompson, who walks with a limp and a cane, said it's difficult for him to work long hours because he has several health problems, such as chronic fatigue and depression.

He said he's walked 2 1/2 hours to work just to be sure to get there on time. He sometimes stays overnight a couple of miles away from his job as a dishwasher at Perko's Cafe on Kansas Avenue.

The first Modesto buses leave downtown at 6:15 a.m., and while it could get him from his west Modesto home to his 7 a.m. job on time, Thompson said he worries about the bus being late or about missing it.

"If I show up two minutes, three minutes late, it's over. I will be canned," he said, adding that other people in food service need to be at work as early as 5 or 6 a.m.

### **Tried dial-a-ride**

The night shift isn't easy either, he said. The last buses leave at 7:15 p.m., so Thompson's tried booking the after-hours city dial-a-ride. The problem is, he's not always done working when dial-a-ride shows up at 11 p.m. If someone comes in just before closing to have a meal, he needs to stay.

"Getting to Work," a study this year by the Center for Public Policy Studies at California State University, Stanislaus, found that Thompson is not alone.

Researchers interviewed 150 people in the welfare-to-work program and found that they have a tough time taking buses to work because of the limited hours of operation and the need for at least one or more transfers.

"An impressive percentage of low-wage jobs are during off hours, at night or beginning very early in the morning when regular fixed route service is not available," said retired Professor Ken Entin, who directed the study.

The challenge is particularly great for people who live in west or east Modesto, he said.

Modesto Area Express, the bus system Thompson uses, does a good job given funding constraints and legal requirements, Entin said.

He said passenger fares must make up 20 percent of operating costs for MAX. That makes it difficult for officials to serve people at off-peak hours, because fewer riders mean a lower percentage of fares, he added.

Entin's study recommended that the county hire someone to blend the area's transit systems and schedules to make them work better for people.

The region's transportation planning agency, Stanislaus Council of Governments, has applied for a couple of state grants to help pay for the position.

### **More evening rides eyed**

Early next month, the StanCOG policy board will consider a staff suggestion that Modesto look at ways to provide additional evening rides beyond dial-a-ride, said Chip Sellers, an associate planner with the council.

It does not look like it would be cost-effective for MAX to add later service, but the agency could look at alternatives, he added.

Fred Cavanah, the city's transit manager, said it's not unusual for any transit agency to hear from riders who want buses to run earlier or later. But transit managers have to consider cost.

"Right now our ridership (on the last buses) is really, really low per trip," he said. "It's hard to justify it when you get that few passengers."



The last buses that leave at 7:15 p.m. averaged 12 passengers a day in May 2000, compared to 37 at 5:45 p.m. and 23 at 6:15 p.m., he said.

On average, 30 percent of operating costs are covered by passenger fares, but on that last trip fares only cover 10 or 15 percent, he said.

As for Thompson, despite flaws in the system, he keeps riding.

He carries his old monthly bus passes with him and pulls out about a year's worth every once in a while, proudly displaying the colorful souvenirs.

He might complain a lot about the bus service, but he added, "It beats walking."

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[Community Brief, Modesto Bee, December 6, 2002](#)

## STOCKING STUFFER: What a wonderful 2003

Imagine a world without pollution, where the sky is always blue, the air clean and everybody car-pools and recycles.

We're not quoting John Lennon. These visions of a cleaner world came from 13 Central Valley youngsters whose illustrations are included in a free 2003 calendar from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

In addition to the colorful artwork, the calendar also includes environment-friendly tips, lists "enemies of the air" and resources to learn more about improving air quality.

To reserve copies, call the district's northern office at 557-6400.

## Opposition is heated to fireplace-use ban

By MELANIE TURNER, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, December 6, 2002

Air officials should teach people how to properly use their fireplaces before taking the drastic step of banning burning on some nights, participants at a public hearing said Thursday.

"I think you could get rid of a lot of the smoke," said farmer Albert

Autrand, who lives just west of Modesto.

He said people could be using wood that's not seasoned, or letting fires smolder, producing more smoke.

Others echoed Autrand's comments.

"You guys are not educating people. You're scaring them," said Beverly Zwart, a local wood dealer.

About 60 people turned out for the hearing at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Modesto office. It was the final meeting of three this week on the air district's plan to reduce air pollution next winter.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has ordered the eight-county air district to come up with a rule that includes mandatory no-burn nights when pollutant levels are high.

So although air quality officials say they will make small changes to the proposal based on public comments, they will adopt some type of no-burn rules.

Of all pollutants the district regulates, particles such as smoke, soot and dust are most closely associated with health problems, senior air quality planner Tom Jordan said.

Air officials propose the following:

A system that bans burning for people with older, dirtier stoves and fireplaces on unhealthy air days, and bans burning in all stoves and fireplaces on very unhealthy air days. Gas- and propane-fueled fireplaces and other devices would be exempt.

Allowing a single wood-burning device in new developments with less than two houses per acre.

Requiring people who sell their property to remove, replace or render inoperable noncertified wood stoves and wood-burning inserts.

## Details still coming

Officials said they are still working out how to enforce such a program and how much people who ignore the rules might be fined.

Michaele Dempsey, a chimney sweep from Visalia, asked about cars and farming, which also contribute to the soot problem.

"I want you to know it's not fireplaces that are causing this. I feel that we're sacrificed," she said.

But air district officials say wood smoke causes as much as 30 percent of the air problem in the winter.

Kevin Hamilton, a Fresno respiratory therapist and asthma educator, said that every time the air district suggests new regulations, the people being regulated ask why the district is picking on them.

"How long do we keep pointing at each other? I'm sick of it," he said, adding that one in six or seven people in Fresno has asthma.

Some want to see changes in the proposal, including Wayne Lehr, owner of Patterson-based Professional Chimney and Venting Services, and officials at

Duraflame, a Stockton company.

Lehr said fireplaces also should have to be removed or replaced if an owner sells a property. Air officials said fireplaces can stay because people use them less often than they use wood stoves.

Duraflame wants its manufactured fire logs, which burn cleaner than wood, to be exempt just like EPA-certified stoves and inserts would be on some days.

More public hearings will be scheduled in February, and the final proposal is expected to go before the air district board in April.

Bee staff writer Melanie Turner can be reached at 578-2366 or mturner@modbee.com.

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee](#)

[December 9, 2002:](#)

## **Put out the fires**

By Josette Merced Bello

Public Information Office, San Joaquin Valley Air District, Fresno

I am addressing assertions in a recent opinion piece from a manufacturer of fireplace logs.

The San Joaquin Valley Air District doesn't attribute 30% of the annual emissions of particulate matter of 10 microns (PM-10) to residential wood burning. Since people don't use fireplaces all year, using an annual average isn't a realistic assessment.

To determine the amount of wintertime pollution from wood fires, the Valley Air District analyzes filters from Valley air monitoring stations and the California Regional Particulate Matter Air Quality Study. These filters indicate that approximately 30% of PM-10 and smaller particles (PM-2.5) on some of our worst winter days comes from residential wood burning.

We agree that manufactured logs create 16 grams of particulates per hour and they are cleaner than burning wood in a fireplace. Environmental Protection Agency-certified inserts or stoves are better, emitting less than 7 grams per hour of use. Gas and pellet stoves emit less than one.

The author questioned whether emissions from residential wood burning warrant limits. Studies show that even moderate amounts of particulates can cause or aggravate asthma attacks.

One out of six children in our Valley has asthma. It is the No. 1 chronic condition for youths, the leading cause of school absenteeism and the third-ranking cause of hospital admissions for youths under 15. That is why the Valley Air District proposes limiting wood burning on stagnant, polluted nights as many other areas do.

Isn't the health of our children worth forgoing a few fires each winter?

[Opinion Piece, Fresno Bee, December 8, 2002:](#)

# Watershed or sewer?

**Farmers must be required to follow the same rules as other businesses.**

Agriculture is the main industry in the San Joaquin Valley and has enjoyed many governmental exemptions from traditional methods of doing business because of its importance to our economy and the need for a reliable food supply.

But some of these exemptions just don't make sense anymore. In one of the nation's worst air basins, why should farmers continue to be allowed to burn agricultural waste? Or why should farmers be allowed to release pesticide-laden runoff into Valley waterways?

It's time for agriculture to begin abiding by the same rules as other businesses when it comes to protecting our air and water.

But not everyone thinks so. On Thursday, the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board continued an exemption for agriculture from clean-water laws for another two years. This is an exemption that has already lasted for 20 years, which was more than enough time for agriculture to find an alternative to its dumping practices.

But with a Dec. 31 deadline looming, powerful farm interests lobbied for more time. The water board did shorten the exemption from the three-year waiver that farmers wanted to two years. But details on phasing out the exemption over the next two years were left unresolved, and the board is scheduled to meet again in March on the issue.

Runoff from agriculture is the No. 1 source of pollution in Central Valley streams and rivers. Despite that, the industry has been exempt from clean-water regulations routinely imposed on other businesses, from giant corporations to mom-and-pop operations.

During the past 20 years, waste water spilled from farms, dairies and ranches has polluted more than 500 miles of rivers and creeks and 480,000 acres of the Delta. California's waterways are too precious to be used as a sewer by any interest group, no matter how powerful or important the commodity that it produces.

The water board needs to put more pressure on farmers to solve this problem or they'll be back in two years asking for another waiver. While farmers cannot be expected or required to stop all discharges immediately, they must be forced to do more.

They must be required to identify what and how much they discharge. They also should be required to develop plans for reducing and eventually eliminating those discharges or rendering them harmless. To ensure that progress is made, regulators should set performance standards that farmers will have to meet over time.

Farmers told the water board that a three-year waiver would allow them to band with other growers in "watershed groups" to identify the pollutants that wash from their fields and find ways to reduce them. While critics said voluntary regulation wouldn't work, the farmers said peer pressure would be intense in the agriculture community to find solutions.

In addition to peer pressure, there also needs to be teeth in the water rules for farmers. The water board must do more to protect the public's waterways, and farmers must understand that they have an obligation to end their polluting ways.

## **Is Detroit listening?**

**New anti-SUV arguments are based on patriotism and faith.**

Modesto Bee, December 8, 2002

The American car-buying public loves sports utility vehicles. Even though they guzzle more gasoline, pollute more and are more likely to roll on a sharp turn, SUVs regularly outsell sedans and minivans.

Seduced by the money of the auto industry and the votes of its unions, representatives on both sides of the aisles in Congress have adamantly refused to require manufacturers to make these lumbering behemoths cleaner, safer or more fuel efficient. Nor has there been any comfort on that front from the Bush administration, which is engaged in an aggressive rollback of all sorts of environmental standards.

SUV popularity continues to soar despite years of criticism from environmentalists and safety experts. Recently, however, detractors have opened up two new grounds of attack -- patriotism and faith.

Both are powerful forces, but can they break the strong bonds between Americans and their cherished vehicles?

On the patriotism front, columnist Arianna Huffington, a reformed former SUV owner herself, has teamed up with environmentalists to form Americans for Fuel Efficient Cars. They produce ads modeled along the government-sponsored drugs-equal-terror campaign.

Huffington's ads equate driving SUVs to aiding and abetting the enemy by increasing American dependence on Middle East oil. Other critics of gas guzzlers have pointed this out in the past, but Sept. 11 might give the Huffington pitch more traction.

The second appeal comes from the Evangelical Environmental Network. They are a group of religious leaders -- Jews, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Catholics and others -- who visited Detroit automakers last month to encourage them to produce cars that are more fuel efficient and less polluting.

Their not-exactly-ecumenical mantra -- "What Would Jesus Drive?" -- has spawned endless jokes. Their Web site -- found at [whatwouldjesusdrive.org](http://whatwouldjesusdrive.org) -- encourages people to pledge to walk, bike, take public transportation and, if they do purchase a car, to buy "the least polluting, most fuel efficient available."

Americans should not have to consult a moral compass every time they buy a car. The science is there to produce vehicles that are big, fuel efficient, safe and clean. In fact, some auto manufacturers already build big cars, even SUVs and trucks, that Huffington and the WWJD crowd could buy with a clear conscience. Maybe patriotism and faith will prompt others to do the right thing, too.

## [Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian](#)

[December 8, 2002:](#)

### **Worth the sacrifice**

This is in response to assertions in last Sunday's opinion article from a manufacturer of fireplace logs.

The Valley Air District doesn't attribute 30 percent of the annual emissions of particulate matter of 10 microns (PM10) to residential wood burning. Since people don't use fireplaces all year, using an annual average isn't a realistic assessment.

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One out of six children in our valley has asthma. It is the number one chronic condition for youths, the leading cause of school absenteeism and the third ranking cause of hospital admissions for youths under 15. That is why the Valley Air District proposes limiting wood burning on stagnant, polluted nights as many other areas do.

Isn't the health of our children worth foregoing a few fires each winter?

**JOSETTE MERCED BELLO, Public Education Administrator, San Joaquin Valley Unified, Air Pollution Control District**

## **Air pollution kills**

California environment pollution is a case of fraud, waste and abuse, perpetrated on the people of California by the California Air Resources Board and its air quality management districts.

They are wasting millions of dollars and they know they do not have any chance of meeting the federal or state air quality standards. They also know that the Department of Energy, following the seriously flawed energy policy prepared by the automotive and petroleum industries, has pandered to those industries by allowing them to continue to manufacture high fuel consumption, high-pollutant emission engines for cars, light trucks and SUVs.

They know full well that technology exists to produce low- and ultra-low emissions engines for these vehicles.



The automobile industry has been given free rein to produce high-fuel consumption vehicles using the subterfuge of the average of all vehicles even though over half of all vehicles sold last year were low mileage SUVs. Why?

The people of California are stuck with no mass transportation and they have a love affair with their big, low-mileage, high- polluting vehicles that they drive too fast, lose control and cost thousands in death and injuries.

Stop complaining about the high cost of gas, high taxes on vehicles. Tell Sacramento to stop the fraud and waste of the air quality management districts and the Air Resource Board. Tell your congressman to get after the DOE, the DOT and the EPA. The big fast cars kill thousands. Air pollution will kill you if you do nothing.

**WALTER J. MUNDY, Tehachapi**

## **Sprawl will drain city**

A couple of weeks ago there was an article recounting the plans of two developers and the "surprise" of the real estate people interviewed. These plans don't give much hope to stopping the loss of ag land and open space to urban sprawl. It seems any open land draws developers like a magnet draws iron fillings.

One man's plans were for large homes on 60 acres north of Rosedale. The other man talked about his plans for 300 homes out where Highway 178 and Alfred Harrell Highway meet. He was quoted as saying that he looks over the area and dreams of premium lots. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to say what was really on his mind, like lots of money for premium lots.

Nothing was mentioned in the article about all the more pollution and traffic congestion to be caused by these endeavors.

I think the time has come -- though I doubt if it ever will for our "leaders" -- to get enough backbone to tell developers, no more urban sprawl. Draw a line and tell the development crowd: This is as far as you go! This would never happen though because money talks, especially big money.

I'm afraid too many city "leaders" see merit in sprawl. It is more tax money from development. Yet a number of studies throughout the nation show these leapfrogging development never pays its way and are a net drain on a city.

**GRIFFITH SUTTON-JONES, Bakersfield**

[December 9, 2002:](#)

## **Valley air polluted**

A recent letter writer's opinion on the San Joaquin Valley pollution proves that there are still some people who can't be fooled by political and environmental baloney. They know that the problem won't be solved by carpooling, preventing people from using a wood-burning fireplace and raising taxes.

They know the main problem is Highway 99 and I-5 and the millions and millions of leaf blowers that are fired up every day from Redding all the way to Arvin. All these things do is spread dirt, dried animal feces, lawn fertilizers or chemicals, etc. into the air.

It all ends up, along with traffic exhaust, in Kern County.

We swallow tiny particles of these poisons and breathe this stuff into our lungs and some people wonder why asthma and valley fever and heart attacks are becoming so prevalent in our area.

The San Joaquin Valley is overwhelmed with traffic, overpopulated with people and cows and overtaxed. I know the response to this letter will be "Why don't you leave?" I probably will.

**STEVE MONROE, Bakersfield**

[Letters to the Editor, Modesto Bee:](#)

[December 5, 2002:](#)

**Air fouled by growth**

This is in reference to your editorial, "Put out the fires so we all can breathe easier" (Nov. 16). The objectives of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are commendable, but the changes in the draft proposal are too extreme.

The restriction on fireplace use is probably unenforceable. It apparently will depend heavily on neighbors reporting alleged violators, which encourages acts of retaliation and neighborhood disputes.

The rule is proposed without justification, since there is no indication that the attempt to persuade limited fireplace use with the "Do Not Light Tonight" program has failed. We see reference to the dangers from fireplace smoke, but no evidence or research methodology on which these conclusions are based.

I recommend that you visit [www.valleyair.org](http://www.valleyair.org) and read the draft proposal for rule 4901. This proposal coincides with PG&E's notification of a 27 percent increase in natural gas prices, as you promote the increased use of natural gas fireplaces. Section 5 is intended to force use of natural gas for fireplaces by requiring fireplaces to be rendered inoperative or converted to gas when a house is sold.

Your editorial position suggests that we should treat the symptom, not the cause. This problem, as well as many others, is caused by too many people moving into the valley and the creation of denser housing areas in the valley.

You have proposed attracting industry to provide more jobs in order to attract more people to the valley. More people in the valley will increase housing density, which will exacerbate the problems. Do we really want to emulate the Santa Clara Valley?

M.R. RILEY

Modesto

## Don't burn up rights

The Bee's "A Book of Dreams 2002" (Page 9, wish 12E) tells the sad story of Mrs. Boman, a single mother of four, and her wish for firewood needed to heat their home or cook food for this winter.

I am sure that this story could be repeated in our community. My neighbor lost his job and is supplementing his income by selling firewood out of his yard. These are everyday people doing their best with what little they have. They are not asking the government for a handout and they are not standing on a corner with a sign begging.

Then along comes the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control air police with its tip/snitch line. The air police will grant burn permits with ease, which I have personally proven, and now they are going to fine me for having a fire at home in my fireplace?

My family enjoys spending an evening at home with a cozy fire. It is family fun that does not involve alcohol or drugs; clean family fun that Modesto is not able to provide us with.

As residents of this valley, my family has done its part in cooperating with the new smog checks, conserving energy, purchasing energy efficient products and conserving water. But now telling me that I will soon no longer be able to have a controlled fire in my fireplace is going way too far!

There has to be a better solution other than taking away a right that has been enjoyed by Americans in their homes, on their own property, for hundreds of years.

STEVE ROMKEE

Modesto