

Tuesday, April 13, Bakersfield Californian

Parra presents bill to help naval air base keep flying

VIC POLLARD, Californian Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO -- If a new fleet of fighter jets is stationed in the San Joaquin Valley, they would, in a sense, have to pay for the smog their engines produce, under a bill being sponsored by Assemblywoman Nicole Parra. The measure would divert some of the sales and income taxes from new jobs associated with the new fleet to offset the air pollution they would create.

The innovative bill is aimed at removing a potential roadblock to future location of a fleet of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter planes at Lemoore Naval Air Station in Kings County.

The new-generation fighter, designed to save costs by meeting the needs of all the U.S. armed forces and its allies with one standardized aircraft, is still under development.

Lemoore supporters are hoping to protect the base against the next round of closures by selling it as the best site to locate a fleet of about 1,000 of the fighters.

But with the valley's severe air pollution problems, any major increase in activity at Lemoore would have to be offset, or mitigated, by reductions in pollution from other sources in the valley, officials say.

Parra's bill would create a "Joint Strike Fighter Impact Zone," similar to an urban redevelopment area, in Kings County. An as-yet-unspecified percentage of sales and income taxes collected as a result of new jobs created by the new fleet would be turned over to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District for clean-air programs.

Parra said she believes her bill "is the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that further strengthens Lemoore's chances for the JSF selection, and bolsters the economy of Kings County."

Tuesday, April 13, San Francisco Chronicle

More hybrid cars in carpool lanes?

Christian Berthelsen, Chronicle Staff Writer

Owners of hybrid vehicles would be allowed to use carpool lanes -- even when cruising the California freeways alone -- under a bill that passed a key Assembly committee on Monday.

The bill, AB2628 by Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills (Los Angeles County), has wide support, including backing from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state Treasurer Phil Angelides. It passed the Assembly transportation committee with 11 votes.

It would allow drivers of a new generation of hybrid vehicles, such as the Toyota Prius and some versions of the Honda Civic -- which get 45 miles per gallon or better -- access to so-called high-occupancy vehicle lanes even if they are not carrying the requisite number of passengers, usually two or three. Hybrid car drivers would have to obtain a decal from the state Department of Motor Vehicles to use the lanes.

The program would cap the number of eligible vehicles at 75,000, to ensure that carpool lanes do not become congested and would require a review at the 50,000 mark to make sure the program is effective. It would expire in 2008 under a sunset law provision.

Hybrid vehicles get better mileage than conventional ones by running on a combination of gasoline and battery-stored energy. They use less gasoline and emit less pollution.

According to a Caltrans analysis, allowing hybrids to use the lanes could add two minutes to the commute in congested areas, but would not delay traffic in areas of no congestion. There are currently about 20,000 such vehicles on California's roads, about one-tenth of 1 percent of the total. Pavley and other supporters said the bill is intended to promote the fuel-efficient cars and encourage more people to buy them.

"I think it's important to incentivize consumers to look at these vehicles," Angelides said in a hearing Monday afternoon.

The lanes were originally created to reduce traffic congestion and ease auto pollution.

Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza, D-Long Beach, expressed some reservations that the bill could undermine efforts to relieve congestion, though she ultimately voted for it.

"My concern about this approach is that it's not pure from a transportation-management point of view," she said. "It meets the core value concern of cleaning the air, but works at cross purpose with traffic congestion management. I think this is a less-than-perfect solution."

[Monday, April 12, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

Bill would repeal 30-year "rolling exemption" from smog checks

Cars would no longer be exempted from the state's biennial smog inspection programs when they turned 30 years old under legislation approved Monday by the Assembly Transportation Committee.

Bill supporters said older vehicles tend to generate more smog than newer models and should continue to have their air pollution control equipment tested to make sure it's working properly.

Critics of the legislation said there are fewer and fewer of the older cars on the road as the years go by, and that many are driven relatively few miles.

The committee's chairwoman, Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza, D-Long Beach, said the bill was a "mixed bag" but that reducing air pollution was more important than the concerns of the cars' owners. "In the interest of the big picture it's good legislation," she added.

The bill by Assemblywoman Sally Lieber, D-Santa Clara, was sent to the Appropriations Committee, the last stop before the full Assembly.

Lieber's proposal would exempt cars made before 1976 from the smog checks, but newer models would no longer be dropped from the program when they turned 30.

[Monday, April 12, New York Times](#)

Having Their S.U.V.'s and Converting Them, Too

By FARA WARNER

EVIN RICHARDSON, who at 32 is the oldest member of the Backstreet Boys, took delivery last week of his 2004 GMC Yukon sport utility vehicle. He raves about its "F.B.I. look" - all black and chromeless, with lacquered wheel rims - and the 5.3-liter V-8 engine that puts close to 300 horsepower under the hood.

And he dreams of ordering a customized license plate for this, his perfect Hollywood ride. It would read "CLEAN."

That may sound as contradictory as Mr. Richardson himself - an avowed environmentalist with an ungreen hankering for big, powerful cars - but, in fact, he is spending more than \$10,000 to convert the Yukon to run on compressed natural gas, a domestically produced fuel that is less polluting than gasoline. The conversion will include the installation in his garage of a refueling system, which will let him fill up the Yukon by using the same gas line that supplies his house.

To do the conversion, he has hired Evo Transportation, a company started by two former entertainment industry executives, David Young and Seth Seaberg.

The two men, who had virtually no automotive experience but a lot of Hollywood connections, have built a bustling business in Los Angeles by offering environmentally friendly but cool rides. Their Evo boutique limo service features three black S.U.V.'s much like Mr. Richardson's. The vehicles also have Game Boy consoles and minibars stocked with organic goodies like soy-based vodkas and soft drinks made from green tea. Celebrities like Cameron Diaz and Woody Harrelson are regular customers.

"We figured, 'Why should people compromise?' " said Mr. Seaberg, who before founding Evo with Mr. Young was chief executive of Ray Gun Publishing, which publishes the magazine Bikini. (Mr. Young ran Bliss Artist Management, which managed rock bands.)

Unlike cars powered by electricity, a vehicle fueled by natural gas has the same power and performance - and can carry the same weight - as an identical vehicle fueled by gasoline. "You actually can get all the luxury of a big S.U.V. with none of the guilt," Mr. Seaberg said.

Now Evo is ramping up its next and potentially far bigger business: converting S.U.V.'s for Hollywood's elite - and anyone else with \$10,000 or more to spend - as well as converting smaller vehicles like General Motors' new Chevrolet Colorado pickup for corporate and municipal fleets. Their municipal customers already include the City of Santa Monica and Los Angeles County.

As traditional automakers continue bickering over the future of hybrids and hydrogen, Evo is offering consumers alternate-fuel versions of the vehicles they want to drive right now.

The limo service will expand, but its founders say it was just a start toward creating a company based on the idea of alternative fuels. "The limo business was a scaleable business and got us good cash flows pretty quickly," Mr. Young said. The service started in April 2003 and became profitable in the first quarter of 2004, and the two men say they expect to have \$2 million in revenue this year.

A ride in an Evo limos costs \$75 an hour, with a two-hour minimum. The company said it logged 2,000 hours of service last year, 60 percent of them for hauling celebrities to events like the Academy Awards or Emmy Awards ceremonies. More important, Mr. Young said, the limo service brought the vehicles to the attention of the very customers who were likely to buy an S.U.V. conversion.

Evo has received \$500,000 in venture capital to expand its limo fleet into other California cities. And more celebrities are expressing interest in conversions. Brad Pitt requested a proposal for a conversion after he rode in an Evo limo to a pre-Oscars party.

As for Mr. Richardson, he said he saw his first Evo S.U.V. in May 2003, when he showed up at a forum for the Natural Resources Defense Council featuring Arianna Huffington, the syndicated columnist, who has been pressing Detroit automakers to make more fuel-efficient cars. The topic that day was "Breaking the Chain of Oil Dependency." Mr. Richardson showed up in a gas-guzzling Mercedes CL500 sports car that gets about 16 miles to the gallon.

"I was looking for some place to hide my ride when I saw this S.U.V.," Mr. Richardson said. The converted Evo S.U.V.'s have labels saying, "powered by clean natural gas."

"I didn't want to be a hypocrite anymore," said Mr. Richardson, who operates an environmental foundation called Just Within Reach. "I want to walk the walk if I'm going to talk the talk." He sought out the S.U.V.'s owners, and Mr. Seaberg let him take the vehicle for a drive after the meeting.

In addition to spreading the word at environmental events, the Evo founders have hired several drivers with M.B.A.'s who serve as business development employees when they are not on the road.

In effect, the drivers are missionaries for the Evo brand. Jacob Ryan, who drives for Evo and holds an M.B.A. from Schiller International University in Madrid, can reel off a host of facts and figures about Evo-mobiles. They have a range of about 175 miles on a fill-up. The gas is stored in several high-pressure tanks under the rear of the vehicle. It takes about the same time to refill the high-pressure tanks with compressed natural gas as it does to fill up a conventional tank at a gas station.

And natural gas is cheaper than gasoline. "It's \$1.39 per equivalent gallon at a lot of stations, but if you go the airport it's 30 cents cheaper and there's no line," in contrast to the usual queue at regular gas stations, Mr. Ryan said. That compares with more than \$2 a gallon for regular gasoline throughout much of California. "And it has 90 percent less emissions than regular gasoline engines," he added.

Despite its recent successes, Evo, like other alternative-fuel companies, faces formidable challenges. Most notable is the continued emphasis of the auto industry and the federal government on hydrogen as the fuel of the future. Compressed natural gas, which has been used most extensively in corporate and municipal fleets, including thousands of buses around the country, has become a stepsister to what experts envision as a far more exciting transportation economy based on hydrogen fuel cells.

NATURAL gas has been pumped from underground reservoirs for decades to heat homes and businesses. In the 1980's, the gas was commercialized as a transportation fuel by compressing it so it could be stored in portable tanks. Hydrogen fuel, by contrast, is made by the complex process of breaking apart molecules that contain hydrogen atoms. That is one reason experts say that compressed natural gas still has a future.

"We're driving down this hydrogen highway and that's hurting compressed natural gas," said Rebecca J. Royer, president of the Baytech Corporation, a manufacturer based in Los Altos, Calif., that provides Evo with conversion parts and does

conversions for big corporate clients like United Parcel Service. "Everybody is saying it's better to just wait for the hydrogen economy."

Evo also has to contend with the rapidly expanding popularity of the hybrid gas-electric vehicles, like the Prius. Evo said it planned to add a few Priuses to its limo fleet. Even S.U.V.'s will soon be available as hybrids, as Ford Motor and Toyota add them to their lineups this year.

It is also true that many gasoline-powered vehicles produce far lower emissions than they did in the 1980's, reducing one of the benefits of natural gas. "The inherent advantages of natural gas have diminished in the past three or four years as superclean gasoline and diesels have come on the market because of tighter emissions regulations," said Tom Cackette, chief deputy executive director of the California Air Resources Board, which regulates emissions in the state. "It's hard for natural gas to compete."

Still, Evo's founders appear undaunted. To the idea of a future fueled by hydrogen, they argue that compressed natural gas can be a helpful steppingstone. "Right now, you have consumers who think hydrogen in a tank in their car is like riding with a bomb," Mr. Seaberg said. "But storage of hydrogen and natural gas aren't that different. So if you get comfortable with one, you'll feel comfortable with the other one."

Mr. Richardson of the Backstreet Boys does not seem especially worried about fueling up next to his home. In fact, he says he is happy to have such a convenient refueling station, allowing him to get natural gas at a price equivalent to 80 cents a gallon of gasoline. The fuel system in his garage is "the size of a small water cooler," he said, and the cost of the fuel he uses is added to his home gas bill.

Hybrids, meanwhile, still use gasoline, albeit in smaller quantities than a regular S.U.V. does. If gasoline becomes more and more expensive, even hybrid S.U.V.'s might be regarded as guzzlers.

Mr. Ryan, the Evo driver, said such issues could change the minds of even Hollywood's most vocal environmentalists. "Now Arianna can finally ride in an S.U.V.," he joked as he waited to hear the name of his first celebrity passenger of the day. Alas, it was not Ms. Huffington.

[Sunday, April 11, Contra Costa Times](#)

Yosemite expected to be listed as smog violator By Dogen Hannah

Famous for its granite cliffs, thundering waterfalls, peaceful meadows and other natural wonders, Yosemite National Park also is home to a man-made scourge: smog.

Federal officials are expected to announce next week that the popular Sierra Nevada destination violates a tougher new air quality standard.

Joining it on that list will be at least seven other national parks, including California's Sequoia, Kings Canyon and Joshua Tree, according to the National Park Service.

The designation would probably surprise many park visitors seeking relief from obviously smog-plagued regions, said Jill Stephens of the National Parks Conservation Association, an independent organization that aims to protect park resources.

"When you think of national parks you think of a refuge or haven, a way to escape it all," Stephens said. "And now we find out there really is no escape."

The problem is ozone, a gas and component of smog formed when emissions from motor vehicles and other sources combine in sunlight. It is a health risk, particularly to the elderly and people with respiratory problems, and to some wildlife.

Blown into the parks from smoggier areas, ozone has damaged as much as 90 percent of the seedlings of some pine species in Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, said Courtney Cuff, the conservation association's Pacific regional director.

Smog also hurts parks in other ways, she said. In Joshua Tree National Park, for instance, it has obscured the view from a popular vista.

"It's not something where we're going to see destruction of these national parks ... overnight," Cuff said. "But if we don't address the problem we will face serious repercussions in future."

Pursuant to the Clean Air Act, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has set a new standard for allowable ozone levels. On Thursday, it plans to announce which parts of the nation meet the new test.

"By far the most serious problem in the country is in California," said Matt Haber, deputy director of EPA's Pacific southwest region, air division. Trouble spots include the Bay Area, Los Angeles area, San Joaquin Valley and Sacramento Valley.

Because the National Park System monitors ozone levels in 28 parks, it already knows which of those parks violate the new standard, said Brian Mitchell, a park system environmental protection specialist.

In addition to those in California, the known violators are: Maine's Acadia, Tennessee and North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains and Virginia's Shenandoah national parks and Massachusetts' Cape Cod National Seashore.

The U.S. Department of the Interior has notified the EPA that 100 or so other, unmonitored parks and other sites are likely to fall within areas violating the new standard, Cuff said.

While park visitors experience the ill effects of high ozone levels, they are not the problem's largest cause.

The sources of Yosemite National Park's air pollution, for instance, lie mostly to the west in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond. "Very little of the pollution that affects parks comes from within park boundaries," Stephens said.

The EPA's new ozone standard alone won't ensure that air quality improves. Yet it should help spur regional, state and federal authorities to bring their powers to bear on the problem, she said.

"It's long overdue," Stephens said. "The challenge is going to be to come up with plans that clean up those areas, to make sure we do that in a timely manner."

[Tuesday, April 13, Fresno Bee, Opinion](#)

Patriotic pollution

Michael P. Bird
Fresno

Something to think about: If our air quality is so bad, then why are the Fresno Grizzlies, the Visalia Oaks and the massive number of Fourth of July events allowed to set off fireworks?

Perhaps as long as somebody wants to make money, they can get away with anything. Just think about the amount of smoke that goes into the air with fireworks -- about as much as burning wood in a fireplace or burning waste in an agricultural area. Wake up and smell the air.

[Tuesday, April 13, The Record, Editorial](#)

Going to 'extreme' lengths

We've entered the Los Angeles zone.

It's official. The air we breathe is as dirty as the air in the Los Angeles Basin. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says so.

Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley -- stretching from the Stockton area to Bakersfield -- are designated as "extreme" pollution zones, the only two such regions in the nation.

Even more remarkable: It's supposed to be good news for the Valley.

Being designated "extreme" by federal air regulators gives the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District breathing room for five more years.

The Valley -- and its businesses -- have until 2010 before noncompliance means fines and penalties. The problem, however, is out of Valley officials' control: The No. 1 source of pollution is the tens of thousands of cars and trucks traveling through

on their way to somewhere else.

Thumbs down to the Feds who slap these standards on regions such as ours without enforcing their own laws, thereby causing the problem.

[Monday April 12th, The Bakersfield Californian, Editorial](#)

Trend-setting valley

Census figures show Kern and other Central Valley counties are experiencing big population growth.

The San Joaquin Valley a trend-setter for California? That's the way Associated Press described the valley in a story about population growth in California.

And the story provided statistics to back up the claim. Counties throughout the valley are experiencing population surges, just as planning experts have been predicting for the past few years.

Eight counties in the valley or Sierra foothills are in the top 10 fastest-growing counties. That includes Kern, San Joaquin, Sutter, Merced, Mariposa, Placer, Madera and Calaveras counties.

Since the 2000 census, Kern County has grown by 51,442 people. The county grew an estimated 20,613 residents from July 2002 to July 2003, according to census estimates.

California census statistics reflect what demographers call the funnel effect -- residents leaving costly coastal venues for the lower-cost Central Valley.

South High School teacher Caron Byrd is reflective of that fact of life. After graduating from San Francisco State University, Byrd wanted to stay in the Bay area, but returned to Bakersfield, where she was raised.

"It all comes down to money," Byrd explained. "I had gone on like 30 different interviews to get a room and for whatever reason I couldn't get a place. I was couch surfing for two weeks and finally said 'That's it. I'm going to go home.' I couldn't get a good-enough-paying job to live in the city."

In all, the state added 480,000 residents from 2002 to 2003, a 1.4 percent growth rate that pushed the population toward 35.5 million people. By comparison, the entire nation's population grew 1 percent to about 291 million people as of July 2003.

Yet gains represent a slower-than-expected statewide growth rate, which academics view as a positive trend. Dowell Myers, a University of Southern California professor of urban planning and demography, notes:

"Slower growth is a lot better for citizens and governments both, because it means there's less congestion and more opportunity to catch up with our unmet needs from the last decade."

In contrast to Kern's growth, for example, the San Francisco Bay area since 2001 has lost 22,000 residents, according to census data. In contrast, Kern County and other valley counties and cities face the challenges of population growth that is higher than the statewide average.

While people move to Kern and other valley cities to get away from traffic jams and take advantage of lower housing costs, Bakersfield residents face some perplexing driving time problems due to the growth. (Consider the patience needed as rush-hour drivers travel on Rosedale Highway.)

The growth pattern in the valley emphasizes the need for strong planning decisions to avoid pervasive urban sprawl problems.

[Monday, April 12, Fresno Bee, Editorial](#)

No more wiggle room

The Valley reaches the bottom of the nation's air quality failure list.

Move over, Los Angeles, and make way for the San Joaquin Valley at the bottom of the air quality heap. It isn't entirely official just yet, but the Valley is now regarded as being in "extreme noncompliance" with federal air standards.

That's jargon for "our air is as bad as it is anywhere in the country, and much worse than in most places."

The action by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last week wasn't a surprise, of course. The Valley asked for it. The alternative, remaining in the "serious" category, meant harsh new penalties, fines and fees for Valley businesses, as well as

the loss of billions in transportation funds.

The new lower category means we now have until 2010 -- instead of next year, under the "severe" designation -- to meet EPA standards for cleaner air.

Many environmentalists acknowledged the high costs, but argued for staying at "severe." They pointed out that we've already had many years to meet the 2005 deadline and haven't done much with that time. That suggests we'll do little constructive with the extra time we've bought with this action, they say. We hope they're wrong. It is no longer possible to ignore the Valley's air quality problems, as we did for so many years. Nor is it likely we'll get another stay of execution in 2010.

It's not all bleak. Air officials and others point out that new standards for vehicle engines and fuel will go into effect in 2006 and 2007. That should reduce vehicle emissions, which are by far the biggest source of air pollution in the Valley.

But by itself that's not enough. There are dozens of ways we can, as individuals and collectively, help clean the Valley's polluted air. And we'd better get after it with a little more alacrity. The clock has been pushed back, but it's still ticking loudly. And the alarm rang a long time ago.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Pushing back a deadline for sanctions because of our dirty air doesn't make them go away. We've just borrowed a little time.