

Valley briefly spared worst air

Today not official 'Spare the Air' day, but efforts to cut pollution still urged.

By Sarah Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

Tuesday, July 26, 2005

Valley residents can breathe a little easier today.

The air quality in Fresno and Tulare counties is expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups, but today is not a "Spare the Air" day, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district declares "Spare the Air" days when air quality is expected to reach unhealthy levels for everyone.

The district asks people to cut back on car trips on those days by car pooling, running several errands at one time, walking or biking.

Fresno and Tulare counties have each had 13 "Spare the Air" days this year, said Brenda Turner, public information representative with the district.

Twelve of those days have been in the past 13 days, and all have been in July.

Usually the counties have between 25 and 35 "Spare the Air" days each year.

Last year, Fresno County had only 11 and Tulare County had 15 "Spare the Air" days. But 2004 was unusual and not as hot as this year, Turner said.

"This year, we've just had this prolonged heat wave," Turner said, including a double-digit streak of 100-plus-degree days. But everyone should cut down on trips, either by car pooling or "trip linking," even when a "Spare the Air" day isn't declared, Turner said.

"Every little bit helps, even just making one less trip," Turner said.

Carpooling or using mass transit helps, also, even though it doesn't always keep people cool.

Dorothy Peeples, 68, walked about a block from her apartment in Visalia at 1p.m. Monday to catch the city's free trolley service, which doesn't have air conditioning.

She was on her way to visit her daughter in north Visalia.

Peeples said the heat bothers her a little but she grown accustomed to it after living in Visalia for 25 years.

"I just go when I feel like going," Peeples said.

College of the Sequoias student Lorena Jimenez is a regular on the trolley. She takes it to the Visalia Transit Center and then takes a bus to her Woodlake home.

Even without an air conditioner, the trolley is better than walking, she said..

"As long as it takes me here," Jimenez said, pointing to the transit center. "I'm not going to walk in this heat."

Visalia was one of the cooler spots in the Valley on Monday, with a high of 99 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

Fresno's high was 104. Coalinga was the hottest spot in the Valley at 107.

Monday was Fresno's 17th triple-digit day this year, said Daniel Harty, a meteorologist in Hanford.

Totals for other cities were not immediately available.

Similar temperatures are expected today. The forecast high for Fresno is 105. Visalia is expected to reach 102.

Firefighters battle foothills blaze

At least 100 homes still at risk in Madera County.

By Diana Marcum / The Fresno Bee

Tuesday, July 26, 2005

COARSEGOLD — As evening fell, firefighters battling a 1,200-acre Madera County blaze said they had saved at least 1,000 homes, but the fight wasn't over.

"It's been horrible all day long. Flames 50 to 150 feet high bumping on roads. The minute we would get a handle on it, it would blow up again, and it's not over yet," said Karen Guillemin, a California Division of Forestry spokeswoman.

Monday night, at least 100 homes were still threatened, at the mercy of which way the wind decided to blow. It took more than 500 firefighters, six air tankers, six helicopters and seven hand crews — with eight more expected — to contain 10% of the blaze by 9 p.m.

At dusk, the aircraft were called off and residents held their breath, waiting to see whether the cool evening breeze they usually look forward to would appear and fan the flames.

"We have a great breeze up here, which is welcome when it's 108 degrees but is not welcome if there is a fire burning," said Guillemin, a Coarsegold resident.

The Madera County Sheriff's Department evacuated 72 homes. Sheriff's spokeswoman Erika Stewart said 50 residents were actually notified; those in the other homes were out. Stewart said no one was being allowed to return for now.

Jennifer and Jonas Garner had their 3-year-old toddler, T.J., 3-year-old golden retriever, Chance, and their wedding and baby's-first-step videos packed in their SUV.

"They told us once we leave, we can't come back," Jonas said.

Jennifer Garner said she might be overly emotional since she is five months pregnant, or maybe the emotion was deserved. "It was bad. I was crying. What do you take? What if you don't come back?"

Tired firefighters also were emotional.

Mike Boren, the incident commander, has worked in the Coarsegold area for 30 years. His exhausted face lit up when asked how many houses were lost.

"Not one. We saved every one ... so far," he said.

Investigators with CDF believe the fire was caused by an off-road vehicle sparking dry weeds.

Paul Lane, 48, whose property overlooks the blaze, spent six hours watching helicopters drop water and planes drop fire retardant.

"I could actually hear the bombardier doors opening. They were so low and so close to my house," he said. "I see those planes and think, 'Thank you.'"

His home was at the midpoint between the flames and the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino. Helicopters were landing in the casino's parking lot to get more water.

Monday night, the casino's hotel was providing shelter for those who had been evacuated.

As the night wore on, more crews continued to arrive from across Central California as firefighters dug in for another fight today.

Guillemin said that residents' efforts at keeping the brush away from their houses were helping the cause.

"We don't have it under control at all, but people are helping us in our fight. The brush is meant to burn, but houses are people's hopes and dreams and memories. So far, we've directed the fire around the houses."

People continued to hold their breath as the air seemed still and only a slight breeze blew through the foothills.

Spare the Air

Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, July 25, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has declared today a Spare the Air Day.

The district alerts residents when air quality is expected to reach unhealthful levels.

When a Spare the Air Day is called, residents are asked to curtail activities that cause air pollution for the next 24 hours.

Information: (800) 766-4463.

Bay Area gets a free ride

Spare the Air Day incentive to get people out of cars to reduce pollution

Suzanne Herel, Joe Garofoli, Staff Writers

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, July 26, 2005

Bay Area commuters who leave their cars at home this morning will get a free ride to work on their pick of public transit, from cable cars to ferries, in an unprecedented atmosphere-saving effort that one organizer called "a giant social experiment."

The cultural challenge of today's Spare the Air Day: to see if the offer of a free bus or train ride is enough to pull people out of their cars in a region where 71 percent of the morning commuters drive to work alone.

Only 11 percent of Bay Area commuters take public transit to work, according to 2000 figures from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. Those Earth-savers don't make up for the 5.1 million cars registered in the Bay Area, each one contributing a little less than a pound of pollution per day.

"We're hoping to get people to change their behavior," said Terry Lee, spokesperson for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, in observing how today's Sparefest will be a "social experiment." It will be the first to include nearly all the region's transit agencies, including some of the largest operators, such as BART and Muni, and is believed to be the largest such free ride offering in the nation. Only a handful, largely in Solano and Sonoma counties, are not participating.

"It's not for a matter of not wanting to do it, we just didn't have the staff to coordinate it," said John Harris, transportation planner for Vallejo Transit, one of six Bay Area agencies not participating. "We'll be there next year."

Last year, a pilot program was confined to two days on BART, which drew 40,000 more riders than usual over that period, and rave reviews. Transit and air quality officials say today's Spare the Air Day will be successful if the 21 participating transit agencies see a 10 percent increase in ridership.

"And it will be successful if we don't exceed federal air standards," said John Goodwin, a spokesman with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which is coordinating the program.

The free ride -- available only from 4 to 9 a.m. on most systems -- is courtesy of a \$3.9 million federal grant and the unhealthy air quality predicted for the East Bay, which is expected to violate federal standards.

Later return trips are at the riders' expense for two reasons: emissions cause worse pollution in the morning because of the sun's heat, and to offer free rides both ways would cut down on the number of Spare the Air Days that could be funded. Transit officials are prepared to offer five such days between now and Oct. 14, the period of the year when smog is at its worst.

Yet while the turnstiles will be wide open at BART this morning, and bags will be placed over the fare boxes on San Francisco's Muni system, few are expecting a stampede of the environmentally conscious and the cheap.

"If everyone who usually drives decides to get religion and take public transit, yes, there is the potential for chaos," said the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's Goodwin. "But I don't expect that to happen."

"No, not in the Bay Area," said Lee. "We don't stampede here. This is the white wine crowd."

Muni spokeswoman Maggie Lynch doesn't expect a whole lot of new riders --

most buses and trains are packed as it is, she said. Buses like those that travel down Geary Boulevard through San Francisco's Richmond District, which carry 15,000 to 20,000 morning commuters, are among the most well traveled in the country, she said.

"I don't know how many people who live around there don't take public transit," she said.

Yet the Bay Area has more than 2.2 million solo morning commuters like Debbie Tan. As she left a \$10-a-day South of Market parking lot Monday afternoon, the Milbrae resident confirmed that she wouldn't be freeloading a train or bus ride today. No matter how free it is.

"I can't," she said. "I have to take my daughter to school."

But why not drive to a train station afterward?

"No," she said.

What incentive would make you take public transit?

"Nothing," she said.

But for others who sample today's freebie, transit employees -- and hopefully their equipment -- will be on their best behavior.

After all, some transit officials can even see the sunshine of a marketing opportunity through the smog.

"We've been licking our chops for the next Spare the Air Day," said BART spokesman Jim Allison, adding that the agency would offer longer trains and increased staff to help public transit virgins. "It's good publicity. One of the main objectives is to provide a positive experience for old and new BART riders."

Transit officials were confident that their systems could handle the increased load despite heightened security measures following recent terrorist bombings in London.

"You have a greater volume of people using the system, but you also have a larger number of people watching out for things," said BART's Allison. "There's not a lot more added measures we can take. We're already on an orange (Department of Homeland Security) alert, bordering on red."

Air quality works on a grading system similar to national security, said air quality district spokesman Darrell Waller. Most of the time, it's in the green or yellow zones.

"We're going to be in the orange, meaning it's going to be really, really bad for people with breathing problems and the young and elderly," he said of air quality anticipated for today.

That means high temperatures, high pressure and little wind, an atmosphere ripe for creating ground-level ozone. The forecast calls for high temperatures ranging from 67 in Pacifica to 99 in Antioch.

"Sometimes people think we call these days just to be calling them, but there's a lot of science that goes into them," Waller said.

The air quality district is also asking people not to do other air-polluting activities such as using gasoline-powered lawnmowers and hair spray.

Said Lee: "Yes, it will be Spare the Air Day and Bad Hair day."

Free rides today

Twenty-one public transit agencies in the Bay Area will give free rides from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m. today for Spare the Air Day. They are:

-- ACE

-- AC Transit

- Alameda Harbor Bay Ferry
- Alameda/Oakland Ferry
- BART
- Benicia Transit
- Caltrain
- County Connection
- Emery Go Round
- Golden Gate Transit
- Muni
- Petaluma Transit
- SamTrans
- Santa Rosa CityBus
- Sonoma County Transit
- Tri Delta Transit
- Union City Transit
- VTA
- VINE
- WestCAT
- Wheels.

Give air a chance

In the Earth's lower atmosphere, near ground level, ozone is formed when pollutants emitted by cars, power plants, industrial boilers, refineries, chemical plants and other sources react chemically in the presence of sunlight. Ozone at ground level is a harmful air pollutant. Here are 10 ways to spare the air:

- 1. Drive less
- 2. Take public transit
- 3. Carpool or vanpool to work a few days, or even one day a week
- 4. Telecommute
- 5. Refuel in the evening and never top off
- 6. Combine errands and make fewer trips
- 7. Avoid consumer spray products
- 8. Use water-based paints
- 9. Don't use lighter fluid when barbecuing
- 10. Do your garden chores without using gasoline-powered devices.

Sources: Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Environmental Protection Agency.

On the Internet

For more information, log on to www.sparetheair.org <<http://www.sparetheair.org>>.

Transit offering free rides today

First Spare the Air Day has agencies waiving fares from 4 to 9 a.m.

From Staff Reports

Tri-Valley Herald, Tues., July 26, 2005

Commuters looking to reduce air pollution will get a free ride on public transit this morning on the Bay Area's first Spare the Air Day of 2005.

The region's seven major transit carriers, plus 14 of the area's 15 local agencies, will forgo fares from 4 to 9 a.m. today. Those agencies carry an estimated 1.2 million commuters.

In terms of numbers, I don't think this has ever been done before, said Bay Area Air Quality Management District spokeswoman Teresa Lee. Certainly never in a metropolitan area that has 7 million people.

The Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority is offering free morning rides on Wheels buses.

Because there are more agencies participating in this year's Spare the Air Day than in years past, LAVTA will not be able to receive enough funding to maintain free rides for the whole day, and will begin charging fares at 9 a.m.

The past two years, the system offered all-day free rides during a Spare the Air Day.

This will be the third year LAVTA has participated in the event, which saw an increased ridership on last year's first Spare the Air Day of 6,631 riders from 5,709 in 2003.

We're hoping for a significantly higher ridership this year because we have been outreaching to people since May, said Rosemary Booth, the agency's manager of marketing and public affairs.

A high pressure system bringing high temperatures, low wind and unhealthy air is responsible for the warning, the first of the summer. The worst pollution should come in the late afternoon and will hit the inland valleys the hardest.

If you've got a child with emphysema or asthma, you don't want them out in the afternoon doing sports or other types of exercise, Lee said.

Residents also are urged to limit automobile trips and curb the use of products such as hair spray and charcoal lighter fluid.

Today's highs should hit the mid-80s by the San Francisco Bay and near 100 inland, according to the National Weather Service. Starting Wednesday temperatures should ease a bit, with highs near the Bay in the mid-70s and inland valleys hitting the 90s.

Those wishing to stay abreast of Spare the Air Days - and the corresponding free morning commute - can sign up for free e-mail notification at <http://www.sparetheair.org>. The district sends electronic alerts the day before. That's all you get, Lee said. We don't sell your name, we don't spam you. You get an e-mail the day before.

Alert on tailpipe smoke

Big pollution source falls under radar, experts say

By Edie Lau -- Bee Science Writer
Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, July 26, 2005

also in the S.F. Chronicle

In the quest to clean up air through limits on motor vehicle exhaust, a top researcher says government regulators are missing a pollution source that's plainly visible: smoking cars.

Largely ignored because of their relatively small numbers, cars that blow smoke from their tailpipes actually are responsible for a significant and highly toxic share of urban traffic emissions, recent scientific studies show.

"Smoking cars appear to be getting a free ride, and they are much more important in terms of the material (they emit) and toxicity than are big diesel trucks," said Tom Cahill, an atmospheric physicist at the University of California, Davis. "These cars should be controlled."

Cahill is the lead scientist on a study being released today by the American Lung Association of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails examining particulate pollution from traffic on major thoroughfares in the region.

The research, which focused on the intersection of Watt Avenue and Arden Way, found that cars contributed two-thirds of the total of very fine particles collected; diesel trucks were responsible for the other one-third.

Cahill, an expert in tracing pollutants to their source by analyzing their chemical composition, said fine particles emitted by gasoline-powered engines are associated with burning engine-lubricating oil.

The pollution largely has escaped attention because the state's program for controlling emissions from passenger cars and light-duty trucks, Smog Check, focuses on the ingredients of the pollutant ozone.

Ozone is a corrosive, invisible gas formed by the reaction of certain gaseous tailpipe emissions with sunlight. Particles are a different species of pollutant and not measured in Smog Check.

"It is possible for a smoking car to pass the smog test," said Russ Heimerich, chief of public affairs for the Department of Consumer Affairs, which runs the Smog Check program.

Heimerich said Smog Check measures oxides of nitrogen, carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons. While burning oil would produce extra hydrocarbons, he said, "They may not reach the threshold at which you'd fail the smog test. Also, the catalytic converter (emissions control device) could be eating the hydrocarbons but still allow the smoke to pass through."

Tom Cackette, deputy director of the California Air Resources Board, said only in recent years has particulate pollution from motor vehicles come to be recognized as a serious health threat on par with ozone.

While ozone is associated with respiratory distress - shortness of breath, asthma and the like - exposure to small particles is linked to heart disease and early death.

Cackette said the air board staff is aware of the smoking car problem and is proposing to add to the smog test a check for smoke. The proposal is part of a draft report on Smog Check that has yet to be approved by the air board.

Adding a test to the program won't be simple. It requires a change in law, Cackette said.

California's motor vehicle code already prohibits excessive smoke - smoke that issues from the vehicle for more than 10 seconds - but enforcement is catch as catch can.

State statistics show the California Highway Patrol issued 1,400 citations for smoking vehicles in 2003. The air board's staff estimates that about 200,000 cars in the state are smokers.

The air board does have a voluntary program to try to fix smoking cars. The program encourages individuals to report such cars by calling a toll-free number, (800) END-SMOG.

Owners of reported cars receive a letter urging them to have their cars checked and repaired. But the air board lacks authority to force car owners to act.

According to air board staff, 2,999 smoking-car letters went out last year, to which the agency received 942 responses.

Blue or white smoke is a sign that engine lubricating oil is burning, typically indicating a problem with rings or valves, parts that - when functioning properly - keep oil inside the engine where it belongs.

Although only about 1 percent of the 25 million passenger cars in California are estimated to be smokers, scientists who study the issue say those cars cause a disproportionate amount of pollution.

"The average person driving a California car is driving an awfully good car, very clean," Cahill said. "They deserve to get the (clean) air. A small number of people on the highway are doing us in. It's sort of a justice question."

Recent research also indicates that the exhaust from cars that burn oil is the most toxic of vehicular emissions - more toxic even than diesel truck particles.

Joe Mauderly, a lung physiologist and air pollution researcher at Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute in Albuquerque, N.M., said that in an analysis published last year, he and his colleagues found that emissions from a smoking car were as harmful as the collective emissions from 75 well-maintained cars.

The researchers measured toxicity by exposing rats to the emissions, then checking the animals' lungs for inflammation.

"People will say, 'Well, there aren't that many smokers on the road.' If you get on the road behind one smoker, that probably bothers your lungs more than all the rest of the vehicles you encounter that day," Mauderly said.

Donald Stedman, a professor of chemistry and biochemistry at the University of Denver and an authority on tailpipe emissions, said that smoking cars tend to be found chugging along in cities - where most people live and breathe - rather than on highways, because they're not reliable for long trips.

He said targeting smoking cars is an efficient way of cracking down on pollution.

"A relatively small investment in identifying them and getting them fixed would give you an awful lot of payoff in air quality," Stedman said.

Curbs on fossil fuel consumption killed Action in Congress on energy measure

Carl Hulse, New York Times

Tuesday, July 26, 2005

Washington -- Working furiously to try to strike a deal on broad energy legislation, congressional negotiators Monday killed two major provisions intended to curb consumption of traditional fossil fuels like oil, natural gas and coal.

House members rejected an effort to incorporate a plan passed by the Senate to require utilities to use more renewable energy such as wind and solar power to generate electricity. They also defeated a bid to direct the president to find ways to cut the nation's appetite for oil by a million barrels a day.

Backers of the initiative to identify the oil savings said it was an alternative to the politically difficult approach of increasing automotive gas mileage standards and would demonstrate that Congress was serious about cutting the nation's dependence on oil imports.

"We are having an energy bill that is doing so much on the supply side that we need to address the demand side," said Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, who said the goal was the "bare minimum of what we ought to be doing."

But Republican opponents of the plan said the fuel savings target could lead to unpopular restrictions such as mandatory carpools and put too much responsibility for achieving the goal in the hands of the president.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, the senior Democrat on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said his plan to require power plant operators who now rely on coal, oil and natural gas to increase their use of renewable fuels was a low-cost, market-driven approach to cutting demand for fossil fuels and easing **air pollution**.

Opponents of the initiative, known as the renewable portfolio standard, asserted it would drive up the cost of electricity, conflict with similar state initiatives and put a burden on utilities in some regions where acceptable alternative fuels are in short supply.

The energy bill has come under criticism from some lawmakers and conservation groups for doing too little to cut into the nation's dependence on foreign oil while increasing oil and gas

production. The two provisions dropped Monday were seen by the environmental community as among the few bright spots in the energy bill.

While House and Senate negotiators on energy policy met into the night in an effort to agree on an energy measure that could clear the House and Senate this week, a separate group of lawmakers was trying to hash out the tax elements of an energy proposal.

Lawmakers and aides said they expected the tax breaks and incentives to cost in the neighborhood of \$11.5 billion, more than sought by the House and White House but less than approved by the Senate. Should lawmakers agree on that figure, the tax package was expected to include a substantial emphasis on tax credits for energy efficiency.

At the White House, Scott McClellan, the spokesman, said the administration was eager to see an energy bill since President Bush has been calling for a new energy policy since taking office. "Four years is long enough to wait for comprehensive energy legislation," McClellan said.

One of the most contentious environmental issues of past energy debates -- whether to drill for oil in an Alaska wildlife refuge -- will not be in the compromise bill.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 26, 2005:](#)

Buffalos, cows and smog

The scientists seem to disagree on the amount of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) produced by a cow in a year. It ranges from 6.4 to 40 pounds.

Let's look at the issue from a different viewpoint to validate today's "science." It is estimated that 30 million to 60 million bison/buffalo roamed North America before the white man came. Because of other data that records how many buffalo were killed in the late 1800s, this seems to be a reasonable number.

The bison belongs to the same family, bovidaeas, as our dairy cows in question. However, bison bulls are 500 pounds heavier than the largest dairy cow. They also have a higher rumen volume to body weight ratio, which means more VOCs produced per animal.

There are approximately 9.2 million dairy cows in the United States (3 million in California.) This means there were six and one-half times as many bison as there are now dairy cows.

Since the "scientists" say dairy cattle (or ruminants) create more pollution than motor vehicles, then with six and one-half times the pollutants from the major polluter, those cud-chewing ruminants, there must have been a terrible smog problem in the plains of North America.

My research shows no reports of such pollution, only testimonials of clear skies.

Could some claims of the severity of pollution from dairy cows be erroneous? Is there another agenda that is being pursued, rather than just clean air? Is the "science" that is being quoted fallacious? I just submit a different perspective to ponder.

Fred Hartwell, Lake Isabella

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Sunday, July 24, 2005:](#)

Building nuclear power plants will clean valley's air

When the U.S. fades as a major power, historians will focus on the period after 1975, when Americans began to believe they could no longer do big things. As a nation, we used to produce monumental works - the transcontinental railroad, the Panama Canal, Boulder Dam, the Manhattan Project, the Apollo Program. As our national status has declined relative to the world, Americans seem to no longer feel their country could complete masterful project in an "Age of Limits."

Americans used to see problems as opportunities. This notion would serve us well today as we address the worst problem facing the Central Valley - air pollution. The solution to our perpetual air problem is simple to conceive and probably impossible to execute, given the aversion to thinking big.

Several fine people, mostly fellow educators with young children, have left Kern County since I moved here nine years ago. People genuinely enjoy the family-friendly Bakersfield. They just can't bear the air. Children get sicker, old people suffer more and life expectancy is lower in the valley due to bad air. The solutions are onerous to our key industries - agriculture, petroleum and construction. Thus we face a great dilemma and react with tentative and hapless measures - ban fireworks, fireplaces and the burning of agricultural waste. The real problem is primarily the exhaust created from motor vehicles and other internal combustion engines traversing the valley, as well as the area's many power plants.

Imagine the Central Valley in 20 years with the cleanest air in the country, increased economic opportunity and holding the enviable spot as the world's leader in the fight against global warming. Imagine quiet, safe and efficient electric vehicles, trains and trams hauling people and goods and plowing fields from Bakersfield to Redding, with clear views of the snow-capped Sierras in the background - never having to check the air quality index.

How could a smog-free valley emerge in this haven of pickup trucks, 18-wheelers and anti-government sentiment? The valley must go nuclear. A series of nuclear power plants should be built to serve the valley. The plants would produce abundant, cheap energy - working as an "energy bridge" as we shift away from fossil fuels towards renewable sources of energy, while lessening our obscene addiction to foreign oil supplies. (Our local petroleum industry could thrive making lubricants, plastics and other materials involved in converting to all-electric vehicles.) While the visceral reaction to nuclear power still involves visions of meltdowns, mutants and Jane Fonda tweaking in "The China Syndrome," there are a growing number of environmentalists-turned-nuclear-power-advocates, including James Lovelock, a founder of the modern environmental movement. Lovelock and others believe the primary environmental threat comes from global warming caused by vehicle and power plant emissions, particularly from the most industrialized nations. They make a strong argument that nuclear power has a fairly strong safety record.

The problems with the valley going nuclear are manifold, but center around cost, environmental issues, safety and regulatory problems. Most importantly is the lack of public will. Nuclear power plants are expensive to build, but a new generation of reactors developed in France and Japan are less expensive and more efficient than first and second generations. Newer prototype plants use substantially less water than previous designs, though clearly water for these new plants would be a sensitive issue for the Central Valley.

Thinking big, these plants would be coupled with a series of new water storage reservoirs and the construction of a Delta peripheral canal. The energy, air and water issues facing the state in the future could be addressed simultaneously.

Safety problems are obviously central to the revival of nuclear power. While Three Mile Island is still a name that evokes somber memories of the 1970s, that accident was relatively minor compared to the recent storms hitting the Gulf Coast. The worst nuclear accident ever, at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986, was the result of poor design and management by the now-extinct Soviet government. Japan and France have embraced nuclear power and produce far more of their energy from nuclear plants than the U.S. Nuclear power obviously involves risk, but so does driving down the freeway every day.

The toughest part of the safety problem is the disposal of radioactive waste. Researchers have produced several proposals - from "seeding" the rain forest with radioactive waste to stop human incursion to launching it into outer space. A more practical approach lies in the development of Nevada's Yucca Mountain site, a reasonable mid-term storage solution. In a state that founded the concept of NIMBY (not in my back yard) the idea of building a batch of new power plants seems absurd. We can't even build an oil refinery or a new hydroelectric dam. The political-bureaucratic environment in California is notoriously hostile to business. We want cheap energy, low taxes and complete safety. We talk a great deal in this country about "the children" and "a better future." Fortunately Americans in the past practiced what they preached. They conquered the mountains with rails and highways, they fought and won two world wars, they sent the first

human to the moon. I find it difficult to fathom that this strain of innovation and this penchant for "thinking big" has completely died in America.

Randal Beeman is a history professor at Bakersfield College.

[Sacramento Bee editorial, Tuesday, July 26, 2005](#)

Editorial: No bailout on MTBE

Don't burden cities and counties

Over the weekend, a House-Senate conference committee abandoned a controversial provision in the still tentative federal energy bill that would have shielded oil companies from MTBE lawsuits. That is very good news for local governments and taxpayers.

The chemical MTBE was added to gasoline in the 1990s because it caused it to burn cleaner, and thus improved air quality. At that time, air regulators did not know that MTBE posed a risk to groundwater. By the time the chemical was banned, which did not happen in California until 2004, it had polluted groundwater supplies across the country.

Cleaning up this mess will cost tens of billions of dollars. Local governments, including the city of Roseville and Sacramento County, have sued oil companies that manufactured the chemical to cover those costs.

Under the now-abandoned deal, Congress planned to create an \$11.4 billion trust fund and require oil companies to pay a mere \$4 billion collectively for a cleanup bill that could run as high as \$30 billion. In exchange, oil companies would have been immunized from lawsuits. That would have unfairly saddled states and local governments with the lion's share of the cleanup costs.

Rep. John Doolittle, R-Roseville, had praised the controversial provision, even though it would have voided lawsuits in communities he represents. Because MTBE was originally supported by environmental groups and approved for use by the EPA, Doolittle said, "It stands to reason that some of the liability for cleanup lies with the government."

There surely is plenty of blame to go around, but Doolittle fails to point out that recent disclosures have shown that some oil companies knew early on that MTBE had serious potential to pollute water. So it also stands to reason that oil company stockholders along with gasoline consumers and taxpayers should share in the cleanup cost.

The public will end up paying for MTBE pollution one way or the other. To ask already overburdened state, county and municipal governments to pay the biggest share while protecting oil companies would be wrong. Thank goodness Congress recognized this before it was too late.