

Wood-burning ban today in Fresno, Kern counties

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Saturday, November 18, 2006

Today was the first time this fall that air-quality authorities have ordered residents of Fresno and Kern counties not to burn wood in fireplaces and wood stoves.

A stagnant weather pattern is allowing microscopic particles to accumulate in the air, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. High concentrations of such particles can trigger asthma and heart problems.

Fresno and Kern residents should not burn wood after midnight Friday until at least midnight today. Last season, 11 burn bans were enforced in Fresno County and 16 in Kern.

Exemptions to the burning ban include residents whose sole source of heat is wood. People who live at or above 3,000 feet and those who don't have access to natural gas also are exempt.

Burning bans are announced on a countywide basis when air quality is expected to be unhealthy for the public — which equates to 150 or above on the Air Quality Index. The AQI is a forecast rating system ranging from healthy air at zero to a lung-searing 300 or above.

"If residents comply with the ban and refrain from burning, we could see an AQI closer to the high 130s or low 140s in these counties, instead of air quality that's unhealthy for the general population," said Shawn Ferreria, a district meteorologist.

District inspectors patrol neighborhoods looking for illegal burning. Citations could cost offenders \$50 to \$1,000.

To report violators in Fresno County, call (800)870-1037. To determine whether burning is allowed Sunday, call (800) 766-4463 or go online to www.valleyair.org after 4:30 p.m. today.

Authorities also are asking residents in Tulare, Madera and Kings counties to voluntarily refrain from burning wood unless they use stoves and fireplace inserts that are pellet-fueled or burn manufactured firelogs.

The district suggests using devices that meet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 1990 standards.

Livestock feedlots breed toxic environment, study says

By Marla Cone, The Los Angeles Times

In the Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, November 18, 2006

Growing so large that they are now called "factory farms," livestock feedlots are poorly regulated, pose health and ecological dangers and are responsible for a deteriorating quality of life in America's and Europe's farm regions, according to a series of studies published this week by scientists.

Animal feedlots are contaminating water supplies with pathogens and chemicals, and polluting the air with foul-smelling compounds that can cause respiratory problems, but the health of their neighbors goes largely unmonitored, the reports concluded.

The international teams of environmental scientists also warned that the livestock operations are contributing to the rise of antibiotic-resistant germs, and the proximity of poultry and hogs could hasten the spread of avian flu to humans.

Feedlots are operations where hundreds, often thousands, of cattle, hogs, dairy cows or poultry are confined often in very close quarters. About 15,500 medium-to-large livestock feedlots operate in the United States, and it is roughly an \$80 billion-a-year industry.

Led by Peter Thorne, director of the University of Iowa's Environmental Health Sciences Research Center, the researchers outlined the need for more stringent regulations and surveillance of water and air near feedlots.

"There was general agreement among all that the industrialization of livestock production over the past three decades has not been accompanied by commensurate modernization of regulations to protect the health of the public or natural, public-trust resources, particularly in the U.S.," wrote Thorne, a professor of toxicology and environmental engineering.

The findings came from a consensus of experts in the United States, Canada and Northern Europe who convened in Iowa two years ago for a workshop funded by the U.S. government to address environmental and health issues related to large livestock operations. Six reports, written by three dozen scientists mostly from the American Midwest and Scandinavia, were published this week in the online version of the scientific journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

Among their recommendations are limits on the density of animals and mandatory extensive environmental reviews for new feedlots. They also recommended a ban on the use of antibiotics to promote animal growth, and that the drugs be available to factory farms only through prescriptions.

\$2.5M air fee a lawsuit hedge

Builder bites pricey bullet in battle over pollution payments

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee Staff Writer

The Modesto Bee, November 20, 2006

A Bakersfield developer is paying almost \$2.5 million to offset air pollution from a future Madera County community and promising to clean up more pollution than the development would create, a step that goes far beyond what local air authorities would ask under a controversial new rule.

The money from Castle & Cooke of California will be spent to replace diesel engines on farm water pumps and possibly buy buses and other public vehicles around Gateway Village, a development planned along Highway 41 north of the San Joaquin River.

Company president Bruce Freeman said he doesn't like the payment but sees it as protection against a potentially costly environmental lawsuit.

He believes it will be cheaper to replace diesel farm engines now than to buy pollution reductions in the future.

"The cost will go up because all the big, easy reductions will be gone," Freeman said. "Then you will pay a lot more money to find other reductions, like replacing city buses, that won't cut out as much pollution."

Castle & Cooke's payment is part of a landmark campaign to control dirty air from sprawl in one of the nation's most unhealthy air basins. No other major air district in the country imposes fees for such a cleanup. And the fees are controversial.

Castle & Cooke just decided to move its Gateway project ahead by making a payment well beyond what the air district wants.

It has signed a contract promising to remove as much pollution as the project's traffic and other activities would create. That's beyond the 30 percent to 50 percent cut the air district requires.

Such contracts were hatched in the southern San Joaquin Valley over the past two years to settle Sierra Club lawsuits against developers.

The Gateway Village development contract is the first under the new rules in the central San Joaquin Valley.

The California Building Industry Association is among four groups that sued the air district this year. It argues that vehicles, not homes and businesses, create air pollution.

"If someone scientifically demonstrates how we are the cause of this kind of air pollution, then yes, it is something we need to mitigate," said Tim Coyle, senior vice president of the association.

"But nobody has done that. This fee is frivolous, contrived and aimed at making money for the air district."

Builders can install air-enhancing features such as outdoor outlets for electric lawn mowers, bike lanes and energy-efficient water heaters to help reduce fees, said Tom Jordan, air district special projects administrator.

"We would rather see the improvements in the developments because those are permanent," he said.

There is a long-established connection in state environmental law between new developments and air quality, he said.

A recognized mathematical model is used to estimate traffic-based pollution. The Sierra Club used it to sue Bakersfield-area developers over such pollution.

When their projects snagged in court, developers in Kern County signed contracts to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars. Ten contracts have been signed.

Freeman said the contracts can't continue indefinitely without raising the cost of homes. The cost might escalate many times as the cheapest pollution fixes disappear, he said.

Sierra Club member Kevin Hall also criticizes the air district's campaign, but for a different reason.

With a projected 5,800 homes and other commercial development, he said, Gateway pushes the urban footprint farther into orchards and farmland, and people will drive more, making it harder for pollution-reduction efforts to keep pace.

Some fear pollution's rise on the import list

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

The (Stockton) Record, Monday, November 20, 2006

STOCKTON - It's not a bad place to live, Michael Carter said. An instant later, his voice was drowned out by a diesel truck roaring down Harbor Street.

"Just hecka noisy," the 22-year-old added, leaning in the doorway of the bungalow he shares with his grandfather. "It's like this around the clock."

Traffic and noise are the norm for Boggs Tract residents, whose neighborhood sits in the shadow of the Port of Stockton's massive tanks and towering cranes.

It's what Carter can't see or hear, however, that increasingly worries conservationists and state officials.

A report released last week by a coalition of clean-air groups says freight transport will cost Californians \$200 billion in health care over the next 15 years. Residents of predominantly low-income neighborhoods adjacent to the busiest transportation hubs are the ones who suffer.

Big rigs and trains emit pollutants that cause respiratory problems.

So do the ships and heavy equipment that allowed the Port of Stockton - said to be the state's fastest growing port - to trade rice, wheat, cement and other goods with more than 55 countries last year.

Port of Stockton officials say they have made a renewed effort to improve the environment, including a road project that will divert trucks from Boggs Tract as well as the purchase of four zero-emission trucks.

But an anticipated fourfold increase in the amount of shipping statewide, including a planned expansion at Stockton's port, suggests more action is needed, environmentalists say.

"Every single community is impacted," said Swati Prakash of the Pacific Institute, one of more than a dozen groups that issued the report. "We need a sense of urgency about this."

Moving freight throughout California causes thousands of premature deaths each year, according to the state Air Resources Board.

It causes hundreds of thousands of missed work days and more than 1million school absences.

Those who live closest to seaports, airports, highways, rail yards and truck distribution centers are most at risk, the report says. They could suffer ailments ranging from asthma to cancer.

"There's a lot of evidence to this effect," said Kathryn Phillips of Sacramento, who is with the conservation group Environmental Defense, which was not involved in the latest report. "Kids especially are at greater risk, because their lungs are developing, but the elderly are also at risk."

The traffic and noise might deter residents from walking in their neighborhoods or visiting parks, making them less likely to get the exercise they need, the report says.

The Port of Stockton is aware of these concerns, said its environmental manager, Jeff Wingfield.

"We understand that ports aren't always viewed in the best light," he said. "We've been working pretty closely to identify areas that need improvement."

A new bridge at Daggett Road will connect the port directly to Interstate 5 and Highway 4, reducing truck traffic in Boggs Tract.

Also, port employees are being trained to read air emissions to make sure vessels are in compliance with clean-air laws. And the port says it's working with tenants to install cleaner-burning engines in heavy equipment.

In all, the port spends about \$4million a year on environmental programs, Wingfield said.

Environmental groups say these kinds of expenditures ultimately will prove far cheaper than the massive costs resulting from health problems and lost productivity.

Still, the companies that move freight through California should shoulder a greater responsibility for those health effects, the groups say.

At the Boggs Tract Community Center, where seniors eat early lunches and children's Halloween drawings are still tacked on the wall, director Arlene Coffee said residents aren't oblivious to the health effects of living near a major seaport.

Neighbors have been kept informed of cleanup efforts at an old creosoting plant that is on the federal government's Superfund list of the nation's most-polluted sites, she said.

"Everyone out here knows what the danger is," Coffee said. "What can they do? This is where they live."

Lodi's Westside, Southwest Gateway projects going green

By Matt Brown, Lodi News-Sentinel Staff Writer
Lodi News-Sentinel, November 20, 2006

As Lodi braces to add more than 2,000 new homes on its west side, a statewide program will ensure the two new developments are environmentally friendly.

FCB Homes, the company that is developing the Westside and Southwest Gateway projects, agreed to become a California Green Builder before breaking ground on the new houses.

The City Council recently voted to annex 257 acres of land and approved the development agreement for the Southwest Gateway project after FCB struck a last-minute deal with the group Citizens for Open Government. COG, which originally opposed the development, agreed to not try to block the project after FCB consented to become a Green Builder and set aside agricultural land for conservation.

"Becoming a Green Builder is the wave of the future to make houses that are more energy efficient," said COG spokeswoman Ann Cerney. "(FCB Homes) are forward looking builders."

The California Green Builder program is the largest in the state and requires builders to use environmentally friendly materials and build energy efficient homes, according to Doug Dryer, director of green market development for California Green Builder.

Started in 1985 by the California Building Industry Association, the program currently has eight members and 16 developments. Green Builders must construct homes that are 15 percent more energy efficient than current state regulations mandate, Dryer said. He said that builders must use engineered wood as opposed to so-called big timbers from old growth forests.

"This saves old growth forests," Dryer said. "It saves one tree per house."

Tom Doucette, President of FCB Homes said his company already practices some of the Green Builder techniques, but is happy to become part of the program because it produces verifiable results. He said the program would make it a little more expensive to build each house, but consumers won't mind paying more if they know they can save money on their energy bill.

"There is value added to each home for the buyer," he said. "If you make the home more energy-efficient, it saves the buyer money each month. Buyers will be willing to pay a little extra to reap the long term-benefits."

Other techniques Green Builders must employ include using innovative plumbing to save 20,000 gallons of water per home per year, making solar power available and recycling 50 percent of the construction site.

The program costs \$400 to join and \$20 per home.

Dryer said having FCB Homes join the program could set an example for other area builders.

California Green Builder program at a glance

The CGB program certifies developers as building environmentally friendly homes. Some of the features of the program include:

- Using improved insulation to exceed state energy efficiency standards by 15 percent.
- Using innovative plumbing and irrigation systems to save 20,000 gallons of water per year.
- Using engineered wood from sustainable forests to save one tree per house.
- Requiring that 50 percent of waste from construction site be recycled or diverted from landfills.

Source: California Green Builders

"It's very exciting," he said. "With FCB going forward, it's going to set the bar for other builders in Lodi."

In Galt, the Warmington Group is in the process of constructing a Green Builder development. The models for the Summer Park Estates are due to open in December, and Purchasing Manager Terri Clark said they will be more marketable with the Green Builder stamp of approval.

"People know they are going to save money (on utility bills)," she said. "They will buy into that."

She added that the hardest part about becoming a Green Builder has been learning which building techniques are acceptable.

Councilwoman JoAnne Mounce said she voted to approve the development agreement for the Southwest Gateway, which includes 1,200 homes, partly because of the Green Builder and agriculture land mitigation addendum. She said in the future, the state may require all developers to follow the techniques laid out in the Green Builder program.

"Any time Lodi can add value to the citizens and create a win-win situation, that's a great thing," she said.

Councilman John Beckman also voted in favor of approving the development agreement. The lobbyist for the San Joaquin County Building Industry Association said California already has some of the toughest environmental standards in the nation, and having developers go above those standards is beneficial to the community.

"It's nice to have an environmentally friendly builder in town," he said. "It shows (FCB is) a good community partner and they want what's best for Lodi."

Lawmakers want \$100M annually from feds for air

By MICHAEL DOYLE, Bee Washington Bureau
Modesto Bee, Monday, November 20, 2006

WASHINGTON — California lawmakers hope to secure \$100 million a year in federal money to help clean up San Joaquin Valley air pollution.

It's ambitious. It's also just the start.

In a Capitol Hill strategy session last week, lawmakers agreed they will seek \$100 million a year annually through 2020. That adds up to \$1.3 billion or more for attacking the region's ozone and soot mess. Equal levels of state funding will be sought.

"The valley has a very serious issue," Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said.

The 25,000-square mile San Joaquin Valley is the nation's largest designated air basin, as well as one of the dirtiest. Last summer, the valley violated the federal ozone standard 85 times. By some estimates, 2,400 Californians die annually because of exposure to dust and air pollution.

"This is turning into an air quality Katrina," Fresno Mayor Alan Autry said after the Capitol Hill meeting and a follow-up meeting at the White House. "It's a tsunami that doesn't recede."

The political challenge is equally serious. A senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Feinstein will take a lead role in the funding search. She convened the meeting in her office with San Joaquin Valley congressmen along with state and federal regulators and Autry.

Feinstein anticipates difficulty

Their goal was to help flesh out federal support for a valley air basin cleanup plan that's due next year. They recognize the odds against Congress signing such a big check in a time of war and red ink. The \$100 million is significantly more than the federal government now spends on San Joaquin Valley air programs.

"It's going to be very difficult, but all I can do is the best I can do," Feinstein said.

The money could be applied many ways, including to help replace heavily polluting engines.

The Californians want the Bush administration to request the funding as part of the White House's 2008 budget, which will be presented in February. In the budget, the money would have momentum and could be cast as a national priority. The problem is that Bush might have little incentive to funnel so much money to California, which favored his 2004 Democratic opponent by 54 percent to 44 percent.

The alternative is for California members of Congress to slide the funding into individual appropriations bills, but that raises questions about so-called earmarks.

A separate but complementary track discussed Wednesday has been presented to Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, who in January will become chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Boxer and others are exploring a proposal for an "air quality empowerment zone."

Federal empowerment zones established for blighted urban and rural areas provide tax incentives to encourage job-creating businesses.

San Joaquin Valley clean-air advocates have discussed for several years expanding the empowerment zone concept to include air pollution. The idea would be to encourage investment in clean-air alternatives through tax breaks and low-interest loans.

"I am open to considering any and all ways to clean up the air in these severe non-attainment areas in our state, which include the Central Valley and Los Angeles areas," Boxer said.

Other lawmakers have seized on the same concept and have offered bills to create health empowerment zones and educational empowerment zones. Those bills did not go far in the current Congress.

At a glance

THE PROPOSAL: California lawmakers are asking for \$100 million a year in federal funds through 2020 to clean up valley air pollution.

THE REASONING: The valley is the nation's largest designated air basin and one of the dirtiest, blamed for an estimated 2,400 deaths each year. A cleanup plan is due next year.

THE OPTIONS

1. Obtain federal funding for the program in the next budget
2. Slide the program into another bill as an earmark
3. Create a designation for "air quality empowerment zone" that would provide tax incentives for private investment

THE FORECAST: Lawmakers agree that odds are against getting the money from an already overstretched federal budget.

THE POLITICS: Heavily Democratic California is asking for special consideration from a Republican administration for an environmental program.

THE POINT PERSON:

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee

Really just dust in the wind?

Boaters ponder site's dangers

By Todd R. Brown , Staff Writer Inside Bay Area

Tri-Valley Herald, November 20, 2006

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO — Terry O'Rourke leases a slip at Oyster Cove Marina for his 33-foot Beneteau sailboat.

Maintaining the \$80,000 vessel is a pretty decent investment for the 53-year-old avionics technician, but it isn't his primary worry at the marina. Instead, it's the air quality.

"How much cadmium dust would you like to breathe?" he said.

O'Rourke and several other boaters who dock at Oyster Cove and Oyster Point marinas are concerned that a nearby construction site may be sending dust containing heavy metals in their direction, as well as into the Bay through sewer runoff.

The work at 333 Oyster Point Blvd. began last year, when a warehouse was demolished to make way for a biotech office building. The boaters didn't give the project much thought until this summer, when they say the Pacific breeze really kicked up some debris.

"Sometimes you find little rust specks on the deck of your boat," said O'Rourke, a South City resident. "I looked at it under the microscope. It looks like little, black, cinder-like things."

The boaters wondered whether the particles might cause rust damage to their vessels, so they sent a sample to a Hayward laboratory that identifies trace metals.

Besides a hefty presence of iron, the lab report showed high levels of cadmium, chromium, lead and other substances that can cause nerve and organ damage and cancer.

"After we got the lab results, we started looking up the health effects," O'Rourke said. "We became a lot more alarmed."

And then there's the uranium.

Forging renewal

The 8.84-acre property being developed is in the Shearwater area, home to steel plants for much of the 20th century.

Amgen, which took over the 189,000-square-foot Tularik office complex next to the site after acquiring the fellow biotech in 2004, plans to triple the size of its South City research-and-development facility within two years.

Two buildings were erected during the first construction phase. In the next phase, workers with contractor Hathaway Dinwiddie must excavate almost 30 feet of fill material containing slag, the waste product from steel smelting, before laying the foundation for a third building at 333 Oyster Point Blvd.

On Wednesday, bright yellow and orange construction cranes were busy digging in the dirt. A crane shovel raked the soil over a slanted steel grate, sifting out chunks of slag and letting the dirt fall through.

Recent rain has tamped down the ground, but the boaters took photos last month showing visible dust rising from the site. More recent images show rain runoff from the area pouring over sandbags that workers placed around sewer grates funneling to the Bay.

Jon Bergschneider, senior vice president of site developer Slough Estates USA, issued a statement Thursday regarding the remediation of the slag-filled ground.

"Our Soil Management Plan for the Britannia Oyster Point II development was approved by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board last April," he said in the statement. "We have not only met the requirements of the plan, we have consistently exceeded them."

Radiation concern

Stephen Hill, environmental program manager for the Oakland-based water board, said Slough came to the state Environmental Protection Agency to get approval for its remediation plan this year.

He said the board has coordinated with the worker-safety agency Cal/OSHA, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control and city and county officials to ensure the developer adheres to strict regulations for handling contaminated land.

The board also reviewed O'Rourke's lab results and decided the dust posed no notable health threat, Hill said, although the level of cadmium was about three times higher than the agency's acceptable level for commercial areas.

Regardless, he said there is no way to determine where the dust came from, adding that slag doesn't fragment easily.

"The boat owners are roughly north of the site. The winds are blowing out of the west-northwest going towards the east-southeast. We don't believe this site is responsible for significant dust leaving this site and impacting the boat owners, and anybody else for that matter," Hill said Thursday.

One substance the water board learned about during the digging is quite a bell-ringer: uranium, an ingredient in iron ore, the feedstock for U.S. Steel. The natural element was found in one part of the construction site.

"Some slag had some low-level radioactive signature to it," Hill said.

Excavation in that area is on hold while officials get a handle on whether the uranium poses a danger. Meanwhile, Hill said the water board plans to e-mail a fact sheet about the discovery to Oyster Point workers and residents.

Doubts remain

O'Rourke has made the rounds of developer reps and government agencies, bringing his concerns before the South San Francisco City Council at a recent meeting.

"All the reports say that everything is hunky-dory, there's no problems here," he said. "We wouldn't even have been interested in this site if we hadn't been inundated by dust in August. And we've seen a consistent low level of dust since."

That's what bothers us."

He said the boaters were reluctant to go to the press until they decided they weren't getting satisfactory responses from the officials in charge.

"We were hoping to solve this by just a rational appeal," he said.

What O'Rourke worries about isn't just what he learned about the slag from planning documents Slough filed with the city for building permits, or even what the boaters have seen with their own eyes.

It's also what he doesn't know.

"What if they dig up more?" he said. "You think they're going to come to us and say, 'Oh, there's higher levels of radiation now'? I'm a complete skeptic."

South San Francisco officials did not return calls for comment.

Spare the Air: Don't burn wood

By Denis Cuff, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Tri-Valley Herald, November 19, 2006

Bay Area residents, who drove less in summer to Spare the Air, will be asked for the first time this winter to give up wood fires in stoves and fireplaces to limit smoke on dirty-air nights.

Stricter new health standards to protect the public from soot has changed the threshold for when pollution regulators will ask for voluntary cooperation in not burning wood fires on dirty nights. The winter pollution season begins Monday and extends through Feb. 16.

Our message is not to burn wood. Its one of the easiest choices people can make to have a healthy community, said Karen Schkolnick, spokeswoman for the nine-county Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

The Bay Areas regional air pollution district has rarely issued the winter no-burn advisories in the past. None were called last year.

But regulators say they expect this winter to go to the media to get out the several advisories to protect people from ultra-fine particle pollution linked to asthma, bronchitis and other lung and heart ailments.

The air isnt dirtier, but pollution levels acceptable in the past are now considered harmful, officials say.

Some may consider the change a crimp in their winter traditions, but a district study shows more area residents are opting not to burn wood in old-fashioned open-hearth fireplaces.

Its a cultural thing that many people have warm feelings about wood fires, Schkolnick said, but there is increasing scientific evidence that the smoke can be harmful.

In its Spare the Air Tonight winter advisories, the air district also will ask people to drive less because auto and truck exhaust is also a major source of particle pollution. No free public transit rides will be offered in winter, however, as was done on six dirty-air days last summer to fight smog, a hot-weather problem.

The closer watch over winter pollution stems from the federal Environmental Protection Agency's decision Sept. 21 to nearly halve its allowable limit for concentrations of tiny particles 1/30th as thick as a human hair.

The limit dropped from 65 to 35 micrograms per cubic meter.

Many studies suggested the tiny particles are more dangerous than previously believed, especially to young children and the elderly, air district officials say.

San Jose and Concord air monitoring stations historically have among the highest particulate readings in the Bay Area, but they are not the only places where past particle readings have topped the new limit.

Car and truck exhaust accounts for many of the fine particles in Bay Area air on a day-to-day basis, but a surge in wood fires on cold nights can push the air quality readings over the limit into the unhealthy range, Schkolnick said.

Cold air can trap pollution close to the ground so one fire in one old-fashioned fire place can smoke up a neighborhood.

The air district says the cleanest way to enjoy fires on cold nights is in popular modern fireplaces that use natural gas to heat ceramic logs.

Some people will continue to burn wood, officials say.

For those who do, the air district recommends EPA-approved stoves, fire boxes and fireplace inserts. These devices emit a fraction of the pollution spewed out by old wood stoves and traditional open hearth fireplaces.

The newer wood-burning technology has secondary combustion chambers or catalytic converters to destroy most pollution before venting exhaust into the atmosphere.

The Bay Area air district has no current plans to ban wood fires on dirty-air nights, as is done in the San Joaquin Valley.

However, if the district persistently fails to meet the stricter new health standard, some mandatory limits on wood burning might be considered, officials said.

For more information, the free Wood burning handbook with tips to reduce pollution from home fireplaces and stoves can be viewed at sparetheair.org. Information on winter pollution levels also is available at that site.

State emission credit may be hot commodity

By Michael Gardner

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

In the San Diego Union-Tribune, Monday, November 20, 2006

SACRAMENTO – Like gold and pork bellies, California's carbon dioxide emissions credits may someday emerge as the big thing on commodity markets.

Brokers who specialize in the art of the deal are closely following developments here as California steers toward a controversial, yet common, market-based course to reduce pollution many scientists link to global warming.

Under the proposal, California would reward low-polluting companies with emissions credits that they can then sell on an open market to industries that cannot readily curb greenhouse gas discharges.

Companies are already forming a line, said Josh Margolis, a manager with Cantor Fitzgerald Brokerage.

"We have folks who would like to buy and folks who are willing to sell," Margolis said.

The potential payouts and payoffs are being measured in the billions – for good reason.

Globally, the World Bank and China worked out a record \$1 billion deal this summer to help two refrigerant manufacturers reduce carbon dioxide emissions. In Europe, nearly \$13 million changes hands daily as businesses buy and sell emissions credits to comply with demands to curb global warming.

In the United States, Northeastern states are preparing to launch a greenhouse gas marketing program expected to produce millions of dollars in deals to offset power plant emissions starting in 2009. The Chicago Climate Exchange, where many pollution-credit trades are conducted, broke records this year and projects nearly \$1.5 million in contracts in 2007.

However, the market for carbon dioxide credits is still in its infancy in the United States. California adopted landmark legislation this year that will require industry to gradually roll back emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, linked to global warming.

In an important concession sought by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, state lawmakers agreed that the Air Resources Board could develop a system called "cap and trade" as part of an overall strategy to reduce emissions by 25 percent by 2020.

Under cap and trade, companies can earn state-issued credits if emissions fall below a minimum allocation that will be determined by regulators in the coming years. Companies can take that reward and sell it to industries needing pollution credits to come into compliance.

The Legislature made it clear that it wants a cautious approach to the cap and trade system.

But not Schwarzenegger. He wrestled with lawmakers to guarantee that the program was in the legislation and later issued an executive order to jump-start the necessary groundwork before the air board takes up regulations.

"Governor Schwarzenegger has committed us to cap and trade," said air board Chairman Robert Sawyer when asked whether the program was a foregone conclusion.

Schwarzenegger has already held talks with major players across the nation and overseas. The administration is putting together a globe-trotting team to exchange ideas on implementation.

Emissions market specialists have come calling in Sacramento.

"The logic of the system is you use the power of international finance markets to ensure that you're making reductions in a way that's most cost-effective," said Martin Nesbit, chief of Britain's national climate change division.

Regulators have yet to determine geographical boundaries for the program, but there appears to be momentum for allowing national, if not global, trading because greenhouse gases, unlike many smog-forming compounds, do not stay in one region.

While not exactly on par with Wall Street's anticipation of Google's initial stock sale, the looming California market for carbon dioxide credits is expected to be huge. The state's proposal seeks a reduction of 174 million metric tons by 2020, although a large share of that may be achieved by installing new equipment.

Cutting 1 million metric tons of carbon dioxide is the pollution-reducing equivalent of taking 216,000 passenger cars off the road for a year, according to the state Air Resources Board.

"We will look closely at California for the opportunity to invest given that it is 10 percent of the nation's economy," said Richard Rosenzweig, chief operating officer of the worldwide asset manager Natsource LLC.

A Cantor Fitzgerald survey of 58 companies found 41 percent said they would buy credits to comply with the law, 26 percent expected to sell credits and another 40 percent said they would reduce emissions on-site.

More telling, 10 percent said they would have to move out of state and another 2 percent said their businesses would close.

There were overlapping answers to some questions, explained Margolis of Cantor Fitzgerald. More important, he said, businesses considering a departure should expect to see "state-offered economic incentives and/or mandated fees that will be designed to discourage companies from moving manufacturing operations out of state. These could include the issuance of bonus allowances, levying fees on goods shipped into California or some other means that emerges."

The cap and trade program is not revolutionary, though some wary lawmakers and environmentalists question whether it is a truly tested concept. Variations have existed nationally to target other forms of pollution, but none have been aimed specifically at greenhouse gases until recently.

The greenhouse gas program is expected to broaden markets already in place in Southern California, where existing law allows similar activities involving emissions of particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, sulfur oxides, carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons.

In the Los Angeles basin, the nation's smoggiest region, businesses have been buying and selling pollution credits for some time. Contracts are closing in on a cumulative \$800 million since 1994.

"Serious money is traded," said Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

In San Diego County, trading in credits for pollution-forming compounds fluctuates. Close to \$250,000 in contracts were signed in 2005; \$2 million in 2004; and \$1 million in 2003. Prices have ranged from \$50,000 to \$210,000 per ton.

Financial opportunities, combined with the county's aggressive regulations, have provided "dramatic improvements" in air quality even as San Diego continues to grow, said Robert Reider, a county air pollution specialist.

Environmentalists recognize the gains, but are still wary of free-market mechanisms, which they say can be abused and can take much longer than regulations to achieve targets.

"Command and control gives you greater security that you're going to get the reductions. . . . But the reality is we don't appear to have the political will to implement an aggressive command and control program," said Tim Carmichael, president of the Coalition for Clean Air.

Environmentalists want to make sure that initial allocations of allowable pollution are not inflated. Other concerns include avoiding heavy concentrations of polluting industries in poor neighborhoods and ensuring that emissions reductions are real and not just shown on paper.

"When you're talking about trading pollution, you have to remember that at its core, you're giving somebody the right to pollute in the future," Carmichael said.

Nevertheless, Carmichael and others accept the market compromises, convinced that it will make a difference.

"With command and control, there's no incentive to do it faster. We want to reward people with early action because we're running out of time," said Jim Marston, who monitors pollution issues nationally for Environmental Defense.

A major turning point in emissions trading may have been the federal government's compromise to slow destruction caused by acid rain in legislation signed by the first President Bush in 1990.

The success of the acid rain program erased a long-standing misperception, helping regulators overcome business jitters over emission trading in other arenas, according to federal overseer Brian McLean.

"An emissions cap was always equated with an economic growth cap," he said. "There was this connection that I believe we broke."

California's aggressive push is expected to increase pressure on Congress and the Bush administration to take action, those involved say.

"National regulation is coming. It's just a matter of when," said Brent Dorsey, director of environmental programs for Entergy, a major power producer in the South and Northeast.

But Congress must include market mechanisms, he said.

"Let the market dictate the winners and losers – not regulators," Dorsey said. Franz Litz, coordinator of climate change policy for the state of New York, said market forces benefit the environment and public health.

"By establishing a price, you are driving innovation and rewarding innovation," Litz said. Said Rosenzweig, Natsource's asset manager, "It's a lot easier to meet your environmental goals if people can make money."

A Sunnier Forecast for Solar Energy

Still Small, Industry Adds Capacity and Jobs to Compete With Utilities

By Steven Mufson, Staff Writer

The Washington Post

Monday, November 20, 2006

The top of a large steel vat gently swings open, and a slab of silicon, cut into pieces the size of large bricks, is lifted onto a conveyor belt. On a mezzanine above the warehouse-style floor of the factory in Frederick, Bill Good is monitoring the six-foot furnaces that melt the silicon that goes into bricks, which are later sliced into wafers and turned into solar panels in a building next door.

Good, 53, used to work in a landscaping business, but like many people around the country he has found work in the alternative-energy industry. After two years, he said, "I could retire here."

That's the sort of job certainty many workers would envy. Growth in the solar, wind power and biofuel sectors has been fast and promises to be enduring. Last Thursday, BP PLC's solar division announced a \$70 million plan to double the capacity of the Frederick factory and hire 70 more people.

"The demand for solar energy is so strong, not only in the United States but around the world, that we have to keep up," Lee Edwards, chief executive of BP Solar, said at a ceremony attended by Maryland politicians, congressional aides, BP employees and a group of local elementary-school pupils.

Many boosters of solar, wind and biofuels have tried to sell them as pieces of a new American economy, but these nascent industries rely on many of the same skills and materials as the old American economy-- and that's good for people looking for jobs.

The wind turbines installed by Madison Gas and Electric Co. in Wisconsin, for example, were placed on towers that weigh 73 1/2 tons, mostly made of steel. They were built in Shreveport, La. Wind turbines also use components common in many endangered U.S. industries, such as gearboxes, rotors, control systems, disc brakes, yaw motors and drives, and bearings.

"What we need are policies that advance the climate for investment in these products," says Marco Trbovich, communications director for the United Steelworkers of America.

The ethanol sector has been adding jobs, too. In August, U.S. refineries produced 27 percent more ethanol than a year earlier, and 48 distilleries are under construction. Meanwhile, the solar industry has about 20,000 jobs nationwide, said Rhone Resch, president of the Solar Energy Industries Association. That's a small number, but Resch said it is growing by 35 percent a year.

Expansions like BP's add another reason -- along with environmental concerns and national security -- for the boosters of solar, wind power and biofuels to use in pleading for more government support in the form of purchases, targets, import limits, subsidies and tax breaks for

alternative energy. The Apollo Alliance -- a group of environmentalists, alternate energy companies and unions -- said in a 2004 report that a \$30 billion federal program could create 3.3 million jobs over 10 years.

That sort of spending isn't likely, so the report's optimistic forecast won't be tested. But many governors and mayors are realizing that fostering renewable energy can be good for their states and cities. Under Gov. Edward G. Rendell (D), Pennsylvania has become a major purchaser of "green energy." The jobs created, while modest in number, have symbolic importance and make a difference in individual communities. In March, after receiving financing from the state and assurances from Rendell, Spanish wind power company Gamesa Energy said it would invest \$34 million to manufacture towers and blades for wind turbines in Fairless Hills, Pa., which was hit hard by the closing of the last U.S. Steel Corp. facilities there in 2001. Gamesa said it expected to create 530 jobs.

Many of the jobs are good ones, in contrast to the low-wage food-service jobs that have bolstered employment statistics without improving quality of life for the people who hold them. "You're producing high-quality manufacturing jobs when others are moving out of the United States," Resch said. "If you look at the next high-tech growth industry in the United States, it can and should be solar energy."

Jigar Shah, 32, started a solar installation and financing company, Sun Edison LLC, in the basement of his District home in 2003. Now he employs 150 people. Shah gets stores, warehouses and factories to let him buy, install and maintain solar panels on their roofs and he gives them 10- to 20-year contracts for energy with set prices. That way companies don't need to make the initial investment for the panels, whose payback periods can be long.

One of Sun Edison's first customers was a [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) in Edgewater, N.J. With backing from [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) & Co., Shah bought solar panels and installed them on the store's roof. Sun Edison retained a small stake in the system while Goldman Sachs owns the rest. Whole Foods got a contract for energy that rises a modest 2 percent or so a year for more than a decade.

By making Goldman Sachs a partner, Shah got not only financing but also credibility. He also made sure that the 30 percent federal tax credit for solar panels weren't wasted on Sun Edison, whose profit wasn't big enough to make use of them all.

When the panels were installed in January 2004, Whole Foods was paying about 1 percent less than utility rates for electricity. But rates have since soared and now the store's power costs about 20 percent less than the electricity sold by the local utility, a bonus for its effort to promote an environmentalist image.

If utilities start charging customers more for electricity during peak-usage periods -- around midday and early afternoon, when solar power is most available, the solar business could get another boost.

While Shah started his company in the District and put its headquarters in Baltimore, most of Sun Edison's business has been in such states as California, New Jersey and Arizona, where government incentives for solar power are best.

Shah said he might move the company because of obstacles that make this area one of the toughest for solar installations. He complained that area utilities demand interconnection studies and require expensive safety equipment that is not required elsewhere.

Pepco executive Stephen Sunderhauf said there are safety issues, such as protecting people who are repairing downed lines, and technical limitations.

Shah also lamented that Maryland's budget for renewable energy is tiny compared with New Jersey's or California's.

"It's a real shame to me that BP Solar is building all this manufacturing capacity in Maryland and virtually none of that product will stay in Maryland to help citizens get over the rate increase," Shah said.

But BP is thinking about more than Maryland. It acquired a half-interest in the Frederick plant when it bought Amoco Corp. in 1999; it bought the rest from Enron Corp. Now it has about 15 percent of the U.S. solar market, BP's Edwards said last week.

As he spoke in the plant's control room, silicon wafers in another part of the plant were being cleaned, polished, stamped with silver wires, backed with aluminum, hooked together and placed under protective glass. To check their durability, some panels were tested in machines that simulate harsh weather -- extreme cold or heat, high humidity and one-inch hailstones traveling at 52 mph.

If they last as long as planned, solar panels might become competitive without government subsidies. Edwards said that every time industry capacity doubles, the cost of panels falls about 20 percent.

Capacity has doubled over the past three years, but costs haven't dropped as much as expected because of a silicon shortage. Eventually, though, Edwards said that "if we can keep driving costs lower, we will reach a point where solar is the same price as grid power."

In Brief

Precautions on Leaf Burning

Washington Post, Sunday, November 19, 2006

As the final fall cleanup of leaves and seasonal yard waste approaches, the St. Mary's County Health Department reminded residents last week of the rules that govern open burning.

According to Ann Rose, environmental health supervisor at the health department, burning leaves and seasonal yard rakings does not require a permit. However, she said there are precautions.

"We would like to have people think a little more this year about the byproducts of their burn," Rose said in a statement. "Noting when people are active in the area, the wind conditions or the dryness of the material being burned, for example, all might affect the decision for a person to light the first match."

The health department said air quality issues also should be considered. High levels of particle pollution can affect anyone, but certain groups are more sensitive, including people with heart or lung disease, children and older adults.

Residents should report their planned yard waste fires to the county's Emergency Operations Center in Leonardtown by calling 301-475-8016. The center often receives residents' calls about leaf fires, and knowing in advance of a leaf burn helps officials determine which calls are real emergencies, Rose said.

22 States Say EPA Too Soft on Mercury

By John Heilprin, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle, Friday, November 17, 2006 05 20 PM

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Air quality regulators in at least 22 states have concluded that the Bush administration's approach to cutting mercury pollution from coal-burning power plants is too weak and are pursuing tougher measures of their own.

Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin that accumulates in fish and poses the greatest risk of nerve and brain damage to pregnant women, women of childbearing age and young children. Emissions of mercury total about 48 tons a year, most of it in the form of air pollution that winds up in waterways.

The trend of states bucking the Bush administration became apparent Friday, the deadline for states to submit their plans for reducing toxic mercury emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency. States' responses were tallied by the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

"At least 22 states have gone beyond EPA's rule in three ways," said Bill Becker, the association's executive director. "They have either adopted more stringent regulations, accelerated compliance deadlines or restricted interstate trading of mercury. Some have done more than one of those."

States most frequently chose to require cuts of up to 90 percent in mercury pollution, speed up federal requirements by about three to five years or reject the administration's decision to let companies turn to the marketplace to buy and sell rights to emit mercury.

Becker estimated that the tougher state rules would generally add about \$1 a month to the average household's utility bills.

The rest of the states are roughly split among those accepting EPA's regulations as sufficient and those that are still trying to figure out what they plan to do, according to Dan Riedinger, a spokesman for Edison Electric Institute, a utility trade association that favors the EPA approach.

"Clearly, some individual utilities will be able to exceed this level of reduction or may be able to reduce emissions more quickly," Riedinger said. But he also said many companies will be hard pressed to meet even the federal requirements because the new technologies are still being tested and manufacturers are reluctant to guarantee they'll work.

The EPA adopted new regulations in March 2005 that the agency said could force mercury reductions of 70 percent by 2018 from coal-fired power plants, the source of 40 percent of the nation's mercury pollution. The agency set a nationwide cap on mercury pollution, and put a ceiling on allowable pollution for each state starting in 2010.

That would allow companies to choose between installing new technologies to trap mercury particles in exhaust vents or paying other companies to instead reduce their pollution.

EPA estimated that with the trading mechanism, mercury pollution from power plants could be cut in half by 2020 at an eventual cost of \$750 million a year to utilities and users of electricity. Deeper cuts would take a few more years, the agency said.

Idaho, Rhode Island and Vermont are excluded from any regulations because they have no coal-burning power plants.

Becker said many states informed his group they viewed the trading system as "extremely problematic" because it would create so-called hot spots of pollution in waterways. "By allowing a utility in Ohio to trade with one in Florida, for example, it may improve mercury levels in one of those states," he said, "but it will continue to exacerbate the levels in the other state."

The states' responses also reflect the fast-changing nature of a carbon injection technology for trapping mercury in power plant exhaust systems. Once considered effective only for coal mined in the East, the technology is now also working better with lower-sulfur coals mined in the West, Becker said.

The 22 states listed as having tougher mercury-cutting plans than the federal government are: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Little progress made at climate change meeting

By Jeffrey Gettleman, Andrew Revkin, New York Times

In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, November 18, 2006

Nairobi, Kenya -- The yearly U.N. conference on climate change ended Friday with only modest results after delegates failed to establish a timetable for future cuts on pollution linked to global warming.

Despite nearly two weeks of meetings, which drew 6,000 participants to Nairobi from around the world, the delegates could not agree on a number of issues, especially how to move beyond the Kyoto Protocol, which requires cuts in emissions by most industrialized countries but expires in 2012.

Two persistent problems were U.S. reluctance to agree to any mandatory emissions limits and increased stubbornness by China and India, two of the world's fastest-growing polluters, which face no penalties under the Kyoto agreement for all the heat-trapping gases they pump into the atmosphere.

Even under conservative projections, scientists predict several degrees of warming this century, and possibly much more, which could shift precipitation patterns, disrupt agriculture and wildlife, and eventually melt ice sheets, raising the level of the oceans and submerging low-lying coasts.

Delegates from outside the United States expressed frustration with the Bush administration's environmental policy, saying that without clear signals from the world's largest source of air pollution, other countries would hesitate to move ahead. The United States is one of the few countries that has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

But Paula Dobriansky, the top U.S. official at the conference, stood firm, saying that the best way to battle global warming was a mix of voluntary partnerships between developing and wealthy countries that foster economic growth while limiting pollution.

"The most effective strategies on climate change are those that are integrated with economic growth, with energy security and reducing air pollution," said Dobriansky, undersecretary of state for global affairs and democracy.

Jennifer Morgan, who directs energy and climate programs for E3G, a London-based environmental group, said that a letter sent to President Bush from three influential senators on Wednesday -- and distributed in the conference halls -- provided at least a hint that a shift might be possible in Washington.

The letter, from Democrats Barbara Boxer of California and Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, and Connecticut independent Joe Lieberman, said Democrats would push to pass binding restrictions on greenhouse gases, starting in January when they take control of Congress. "If we are to leave our children a world that resembles the Earth we inherited, we must act now," they wrote.

"The senators' letter was very influential and welcome here," Morgan said. Another central theme at the conference was the importance of boosting aid to the world's poorest countries to help them adapt to climate changes.

Hanford residents turn sour on plant near yogurt maker

By Eiji Yamashita, Sentinel Reporter
Hanford Sentinel, Sunday Nov. 19, 2006

Just as Hanford city officials rescinded a permit for the tire-crumb recycling plant, a group of residents on Friday filed a formal letter of opposition to the plan with City Hall.

The group that calls itself Hanford Environmental Awareness Team, or H.E.A.T., cites environmental concerns and inadequate scrutiny by Valley air officials over potential emissions. The company, however, insists its operation would be perfectly clean.

Modular Rubber Drains of Goshen wants to move into the Kings Industrial Park at the northwest corner of Industrial Way and Crown Avenue. Crown Natural Foods, a cheese and whey product manufacturer, opposes the project for emission and odor concerns.

H.E.A.T. calls for a full environmental review in light of lack of information regarding the technology being used to recycle tire crumbs.

The approval of this project by a city without an environmental impact report would be an "abuse of discretion," Andrew Mattos, co-chairman of the opposition group, said in a letter to the city.

Among other concerns:

The proposed plant is near a food producer.

It has no plan for possible hazardous waste fires.

No environmental impact studies are available.

Koster Company-Modular Rubber Drains of Goshen called the opposition misinformed.

"We're taking two of the biggest environmental waste products in the state - ag plastics and tires - and turning them into useful products," said Greg Graham, vice president of the company. "I just find it interesting that this group doesn't see the justice behind what we're doing."

Graham touts the fact that the operation has been given a permit exemption from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

H.E.A.T. argues the air district's assessment was inadequate.

The company would produce rubber products using a patented process called "thermokinetic mixing," which melts tire crumbs by spinning them at high speed and uses shredded agricultural plastic films as a key binding ingredient.

The technology has been in use for several years in Utah, Texas and North Carolina, Graham said.

Impressed by the technology, the state Integrated Waste Management Board gave Modular Rubber Drains a \$175,000 grant to start up the business in Hanford.

The Hanford planning commission also liked what it heard. It unanimously approved the conditional use permit on Oct. 24.

On Tuesday, the city planning department rescinded the firm's conditional use permit, saying that nearby businesses and residents were not properly notified about the proposed plant.

Meanwhile, H.E.A.T. and Green Action, a San Francisco-based environmental justice group, asked the city to halt the project until a conditional-use permit hearing is over.

City officials say that's exactly what they are going to do.

Crown Foods officials said they had appealed the Oct. 24 project to the city council.

Company officials were not available for further comment Friday.

Report analyzes meat plant

Impact report says meat plant could be trouble

By Jillian Daley, Staff writer

Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Nov. 18, 2006

The meatpacking plant proposed for the southwest side of Tulare could have a negative affect on air quality, groundwater recharge and agriculture, a study reports.

Friday, the city released the Environmental Impact Report on the Western Pacific Meat Packing Plant planned for 90 acres at Paige Avenue and Enterprise Street, next to the city's wastewater treatment plants.

Possible solutions to the potential effect of Western Pacific are also listed in the report. Project manager Nicholas Basile of Quad Knopf, a planning and design firm, compiled the report, which is a standard procedure for such building projects.

Western Pacific is slated to be built on a cotton field, and the report stated the loss of prime farmland as a "significant and unavoidable" impact.

It did state that the use of farmland does adhere to the city's general plan.

Mayor Richard Ortega said nothing can be done to offset the loss of the farmland, but it is a necessary sacrifice.

The land is "being put to a greater and higher use by creating jobs and industry," he said.

The effect on air quality was also listed in the report as "significant and unavoidable." Basile said the air is affected by the increased traffic in the area, particularly the delivery trucks that will be trundling through the plant.

Possible ways to lessen the air pollution include:

- ? Extending city bus service to within one-quarter mile of the project and offering free bus passes to employees who request them

- ? Providing at least one bicycle parking space per 20 car spaces

- ? Preferential parking spaces for those who carpool.

The plant could also affect water recharge.

The report states the "water demand for the project has been estimated by the applicant to be 1,266 acre-feet per year," (an acre foot is the amount of water it takes to cover on acre with one inch of water). Within three years, the plant will use 1.08 million gallons of water a day.

But an underground basin in Tulare will renew the groundwater supply, Basile said.

"The basin is replenished naturally from all the rivers and runoff from the mountains," he said.
"The good thing about this site is it's right next to the wastewater treatment plant, and the wastewater treatment plant uses water to irrigate surrounding farmland, and that water eventually trickles down and can be recycled over time."

The packing plant will recycle 85 percent of its water. The remainder will be used for plant processes. Processes could vary, as the plant includes not only the meat processing facility but a cold storage building and cogeneration plant. Cogeneration uses excess energy to produce heat or electricity.

The cogeneration plant will require 500 megawatts of power, but it will produce its own power by converting waste (cow remains) into electricity.

Public works director Lew Nelson said the plant will produce more power than it uses, and the city can buy the remaining power, meaning purchasing less energy from Southern California Edison.

Initially the meatpacking plant will hire 200 employees, and within two years it is expected to hire 100 more, the report states. Within three years the facility is expected to generate 475 jobs.

"Our object is to create more jobs in the community," Ortega said.

Fire fizzle: It's that time of year again ...

BY James Burger, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Nov. 18, 2006

Today is a no-burn day in Kern County -- the first of the season here in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

Let that cozy, romantic fire burn out by midnight on Friday and keep it out until at least midnight tonight, advised Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Brenda Turner.

"If people cut out on the burning we may be able to get the AQI down," she said.

That's Air Quality Index, for those who don't know.

Turner said that measurement of poor air quality has been creeping up this week as a dead-air system hovers over the valley.

And now the district needs some human help to clean up the air.

So burning wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs will be illegal today.

Inspectors will be watching, Turner said. The penalty for breaking the rules a first time is a \$50 fine or attendance of a public education class.

But never fear, she added. If people abide by the rule, the ban could be lifted by Sunday morning.

"We'll tell people tomorrow how it will go through Sunday," Turner said Friday afternoon.

Fireplace owners should check the www.valleyair.org Web site or call 800-SMOG-INFO around 4 p.m. Saturday to see if the ban will last.

And they should keep checking for future bans -- which may become more frequent between now and mid-December, Turner said.

[Lodi News-Sentinel commentary, Monday, November 20, 2006:](#)

GRAB THE UMBRELLA!: Latest research says global warming giving way to rain, rain, rain

By Steve Hansen

A new threat is emerging for the future of civilization according to Heinz Dumkoft, professor of environmental studies, at New Age University. "Global warming is nothing compared to this," the professor was quoted saying at a news conference yesterday. "The destruction from global raining is far worse than anything we could have possibly imagined," he said.

According to the professor, the phenomenon began back in the early 1950's, with atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. "We were blowing up islands right and left and no one seemed to be concerned about the consequences," he said. The first sign that something was going wrong was in 1954, when giant ants appeared on the island of Pacardia. The government was able to secretly extinguish these horrible creatures with little fanfare, other than a science-fiction movie, which hit the screens shortly thereafter.

Next came global cooling and the prediction of a new ice age in the 1970's. "We would probably be living on ice right now if it hadn't been for an ironic twist of global cooling," said the professor. "Man has always been able to control climate changes by his actions. Fortunately, he was driving muscle cars at the time, and the extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere switched global cooling into global warming."

But now, we have a new phenomenon greater than any environmental issue from the past. Global raining is caused by less plant life, producing less oxygen, according to Dr. Dumkoft. The destruction of our forests to build cheap tract homes and privacy fences are the primary factors creating global raining. The imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide causes a process called "deoxymethylfibrocarbonization," which produces more rain. "We could have a flood not seen since the days of Noah," declared the professor. "The proof is in the extraordinary number of hurricanes we saw last year, the recording-breaking March rains in California, and now, the highly unusual weather patterns in the Northeast.

"Paradoxically, there is only one practical solution for this, and that is to increase carbon dioxide in the atmosphere," stated professor Dumkoft. "We can do this by driving the biggest cars we can find, getting rid of our natural gas furnaces and returning to wood-burning stoves. If we all cooperate, we may be able to turn this thing around."

Not all scientists agree with Dr. Dumkoft's hypothesis. "I don't buy it, and I'm sticking with global warming," declared Dr. Gaseous Green, professor of physics, at the Cranial Institute. "I got the Nobel Prize for my work in global warming, and I'm not going to give that marker up for a hair-brained theory like this."

Still, Dr. Dumkoft insists his calculations are accurate, and that it is just a matter of time until the great flood appears. "Buy your SUV now," he insisted, "before it's too late."

[L.A. Times commentary, Saturday, November 18, 2006:](#)

An above-ground solution for Wilshire traffic

A dedicated bus lane for the Metro Rapid Line 720 would cost less in time and money than digging a subway to Santa Monica.

By Michael Woo and Christian Peralta, MICHAEL WOO, a former L.A. city councilman, is a member of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission and teaches urban planning at USC and UCLA. CHRISTIAN PERALTA is managing editor of Planetizen.com.

THERE'S NO question that we need alternatives to sitting in L.A. traffic, and the Wilshire Boulevard corridor is as good a place as any to start.

While the continuation of the Red Line subway along Wilshire championed by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and others is a worthy goal, the project's \$5-billion cost is staggering. Even if the money is found, the 10 years it would take to construct is too long to wait for a solution to our worsening congestion there. Why not improve what's already working on Wilshire: Metro Rapid Line 720, which boasts about 50,000 boardings a day between East L.A. and Santa Monica?

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's BRT (or "bus rapid transit") experiment on Wilshire and in other parts of the city is like a bus system on steroids. In order to approximate the speed and capacity of a more expensive urban rail system, the Metro Rapid buses exploit their advantage over conventional MTA buses by scheduling more frequent service, fewer stops, coordination with subway station locations and even a device that extends a green light for an approaching bus.

Now, transit planners want to make the Metro Rapid system even more productive by installing a dedicated bus lane along Wilshire and implementing a prepaid fare system, similar to the Valley's Metro Orange Line. These improvements could cut bus travel time between downtown Los Angeles and Santa Monica by an estimated 20% to less than 50 minutes, making a Wilshire BRT line competitive with a subway.

However, there are complaints about traffic problems and the temporary loss of business during construction. There are also concerns about the permanent loss of street parking if the curb lane is used for buses or, alternatively, the destruction of Wilshire's signature planted median if center lanes are created for the buses. These objections are threatening to derail both the MTA's current one-mile pilot project in West L.A. and the entire Wilshire plan.

Local officials now considering the fate of the bus lane ought to look at how Bogota, Colombia — a metropolis of nearly 7 million residents — tackled its traffic problems. Former Mayor Enrique Peñalosa spearheaded a 300-mile system of bus lanes, bicycle paths and pedestrian streets that is widely credited with dramatically reducing urban traffic. By 2005, there was a 32% reduction in commute times and a 40% drop in air pollution, according to one study.

The success in Bogota has shown that bus rapid transit is a proven solution for moving people efficiently. New York and San Francisco, cities with mature rail systems, have recently announced plans to build bus rapid transit lines using dedicated lanes. All this suggests that before we consider spending \$5 billion — and waiting at least 10 years — for a subway, Los Angeles should be investing a fraction of that sum to create a first-class BRT system on Wilshire by the end of 2008.

The MTA estimates that it would cost \$232 million to complete the dedicated lane on Wilshire. The savings over a subway system would be more than enough to justify spending money on replacement parking, traffic management, transitional assistance for affected businesses and more trees to replace the planted medians.

Dedicating road space to bus riders makes transit work better for everyone, and it ultimately benefits motorists by reducing the number of cars on the road. Instead of caving into parochial interests, county and city officials should push for dedicated lanes along all of Wilshire Boulevard.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, November 19, 2006:](#)

Taking charge

Feinstein, Boxer lead Valley delegation in clean air effort.

A move is under way to get significant new federal funding for efforts to clean the Valley's dirty air, and it's promising in several ways.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein convened a strategy session Wednesday, bringing Valley representatives together in her office with congressional staffers, state and federal regulators and Fresno Mayor Alan Autry.

The goal: Secure \$100 million annually in new funds through 2020 to address the Valley's massive ozone and particulate pollution problems.

This is Feinstein at her best. She has a great knack for getting the players together on one page — as she did recently in the settlement of the long-running San Joaquin River restoration lawsuit — and keeping their attention focused until results are delivered.

Feinstein is not alone in the clean air effort. Her Democratic Senate colleague, Sen. Barbara Boxer, is studying the possibility of an "air-quality empowerment zone" for the Valley. Such zones would function much like existing federal empowerment zones focused on economic development in depressed urban and rural areas by providing tax incentives to businesses that create jobs. Similar incentives for reducing pollution and choosing clean-air alternatives might work in the Valley and other polluted regions of the country.

Thanks to the Democratic takeover in Congress, Boxer will be well positioned in this effort. She will take over as chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in the new Congress.

Feinstein is similarly well-positioned. She is a senior member of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, and commands great respect among her peers.

There remains a question whether the Bush administration, never given to helping California much, can be dragged along in this campaign. Nor will it be easy to get the rest of Congress to approve this kind of money for the Valley while the nation is awash in the red ink of budget deficits.

But the chance is too good to fumble. If ever there was an issue that demands a bipartisan approach, it is the Valley's filthy air.

We all breathe it — Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Greens, liberals, conservatives, young, old, wealthy, struggling, engaged citizens and somnolent couch potatoes. The region's delegation in Congress has a wonderful opportunity to set aside partisan differences and work with Feinstein and Boxer to help erase a serious threat to the health — physical and economic — of their constituents up and down the Valley.

Modesto Bee editorial, Monday, November 20, 2006: Giving our valley a brighter future takes teamwork

The local councils of governments in the eight counties of the San Joaquin Valley have begun an ambitious, yet promising, effort to map a better future for valley residents. The goal is to draw up a San Joaquin Valley Blueprint that would be adopted — and followed — by all of the valley's counties: San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern.

The county COGs are working with the Great Valley Center in Modesto on the project.

The process began earlier this year and won't be completed until early 2008. It involves drawing together a host of interests: from agriculture and business, to environmental, government and civic groups, and individuals. The task at hand is to define the values that valley residents share, and the vision they have for the future they want for themselves and their children.

The most encouraging thing about this effort is that the groups and agencies involved have recognized that only a regional effort will work if we are to build a brighter future and create a better quality of life for ourselves.

The areas in which we face challenges — air quality, water supplies, transportation, land-use planning — are not confined by the artificial boundaries of cities and counties. Yet we usually make crucial decisions about these issues in a local context, ignoring the fact that their implications are much broader than the parochial limits we impose on ourselves.

Local control is something to be cherished, but it can't address all of the problems we face. And "local control" all too often is less a civic virtue than a euphemism for "business as usual," and that's what has created much of the mess we face.

That's why local governments must work together on a regional basis to find the answers we need.

And new answers are crucial. The eight counties that make up this effort have a population of about 3.3 million. That's expected to rise to about 7 million in the next 40 years. We're often unable to handle the problems we have now. If we don't find ways to do better — and soon — we will face catastrophe in the near future: gridlocked roads and highways, foul air, dwindling water supplies, a stagnant economy, increased unemployment, rising crime, growing poverty and a pall of hopelessness draped tightly over the physical and social landscape.

We can do better. We must. The San Joaquin Valley Blueprint is an effort that has the promise of great things. It deserves the support of everyone in the valley.

For more information on this project: www.greatvalley.org/blueprint.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, November 16, 2006](#)

Supervisors miss the point

Editor: It was gratifying to see so many citizens eager to participate in Tuesday's all-day hearing concerning the proposed raceway. There were 99 speakers, plus about 30 others who submitted cards but were unable to stay and be called upon to address the supervisors. Board of Supervisors Chairman Mike Nelson generously noted that legitimate concerns had been raised and that new information was provided to the board. County staff were directed to look further into such issues as traffic, road use and the potential disruption to farmers' livelihoods.

Unfortunately, the substance of most supervisors' comments was aimed at how to fix things here and there in order to make the raceway project fit. The problem is that the raceway doesn't fit. The selected site is the wrong place to build a major auto-racing facility. The narrow, two-lane roads leading to the 1,200-acre property cannot carry the volume of traffic headed there on race days. Farm vehicles and the many farm-related activities that represent our agricultural heritage would be greatly disrupted, as was so eloquently expressed during the day's testimony.

An overriding issue, our polluted air, was barely mentioned by our elected officials, but it was on the minds of many citizens. It is hard to exaggerate the degree to which our community's health is threatened by the dirty air that settles in the San Joaquin Basin, and it is up to us to do something about it. The environmental review of the raceway project clearly identifies contamination of our air as a significant impact.

Why would we bring this upon ourselves? We can do better.

Tom Grave, Merced