

Fog-free forecast for holiday

Valley driving conditions expected to be clear; frost may hit rural areas.

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, November 22, 2007

Drivers will be sailing through the San Joaquin Valley without a wisp of fog in sight on their way to Thanksgiving family feasts.

And clear, dry conditions should greet them on their return trips home this weekend.

The only travel advisory in California will be for gusty winds in the Southern California mountains near the coast, hitting late Friday and Saturday, meteorologists said.

Otherwise, the weekend looks calm and cold, with patchy frost forecast for areas outside Fresno, said Chris Stachelski at the National Weather Service office in Hanford.

"Probably the coldest morning is looking to be Friday," Stachelski said. "We're expecting lows in the outside areas to get down briefly to 32 degrees."

The high temperature today should be about 63 degrees in Fresno. Night-time lows will drop to the mid- to upper-30s.

Despite an expected chilly day and evening, air pollution control officials urge residents to bundle up rather than light fireplaces and wood stoves today and Friday.

"Over the holidays, people like to have a fire in the fireplace, so we generally see an elevation in pollution levels around those times," said Janelle Schneider, a spokeswoman at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Air quality should be good to moderate, which allows residents to burn wood without fear of a wood-burning ban and fines. But fireplaces and wood stoves emit tiny toxic particles that can be dangerous to people's health.

Besides, a fireplace isn't an efficient way to warm a home, Schneider says. "Fireplaces suck out 10% of the heat in a home."

Stachelski said Valley residents may complain about a chill in the air, but they got spoiled by balmy temperatures this November. "It's just been so persistently warm this month that it seems colder than it actually is," he said.

A cold forecast is good news for holiday skiers.

Ski resorts need freezing temperatures to create man-made snow -- an endeavor that's necessary this holiday since Mother Nature hasn't provided snow.

The Heavenly Valley ski resort at Lake Tahoe fired up snow-making machines at 6 p.m. Monday and they have been running nonstop since.

But there's no guarantee the resort will open this weekend. Heavenly officials won't decide until this afternoon whether to open Saturday, said Russ Pecoraro, director of communications.

People should check at www.skiheavenly.com before making travel plans, he said.

To clean Valley air, fireplace restrictions in place for winter months

By Dhyana Levey

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, November 23, 2007

There's one more step to lighting a fire in your fireplace, and it comes before striking that match.

First make sure that it's all right to light it at all. The consequences might land you in fireplace school.

And, yes, like traffic school, there is a place for people who break the smoke and fire rules.

If Merced County is having a bad air day, that lovely glowing fire or warm wood stove can make the situation worse. Such fires send particulate matter into the air, said Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The small particles can get past our bodies' natural defenses, bypassing our nose and normal filters our bodies have, and into our bloodstream," she warned.

This adds to the Valley's pollution problems, which can aggravate asthma and contribute to heart disease.

To cut down on wintertime pollution, for five years the district has set in place the Check Before You Burn residential wood-burning season. It runs from now through February.

This means citizens must check their county's air quality before burning any solid fuel such as wood, manufactured fire logs or pellets.

They can do this by logging on to the district's Web site at www.valleyair.org and checking the daily air forecast. Or call (800)SMOG INFO (800-766-4463). The district also offers e-mail notifications for days when burning is prohibited.

Each county gets its own forecast, which should be updated for the following day by 3:30 p.m., Turner said. Each forecast takes effect at midnight.

If the Air Quality Index rates the air to be "unhealthy for everyone" -- meaning everyone, not just people with health problems, should try to stay inside -- then douse that dream of a romantic fire. It's prohibited.

Burning wood in an open fireplace is discouraged on a voluntary basis when the air quality is projected to be "unhealthy for sensitive groups," which refers to asthmatics and people with heart problems.

There are no burning restrictions today in Merced County. But wood burning is discouraged in Fresno, Kern, Kings and Tulare counties. There are no Valley areas today where wood burning is prohibited.

But if you burn, burn carefully, the district warns.

The Madera-Mariposa-Merced unit of CalFire just released tips for safe home heating. It suggests having your chimney cleaned professionally or renting a flue brush to do it yourself. Use only clean, seasoned firewood, and do not burn trash, plastic, paper or cardboard in the fireplace.

Last season Merced County was prohibited from wood burning for two days -- Feb. 5 and 6, Turner said, adding that counties with larger populations tend to have more of these days. Stanislaus County last season had nine days and Fresno County had 12.

"It's basically the winter equivalent of a 'Spare the Air' day," said Mary-Michal Rawling, program manager of the Merced/Mariposa Asthma Coalition. "The really strong immersion layers we have in the winter trap particulate matter close to the ground."

That's why people should try to avoid using their fireplaces at all times, she continued. "Don't burn unless you have to. It's a really big asthma trigger for people inside the home. Not everything goes up the chimney -- it circulates."

While residents might not be willing to permanently put out their fires, they will be fined for not complying with "burn prohibited" days. The district has inspectors in each county who follow up reports of violators and check for smoke coming out of chimneys, Turner said.

They take a picture of the smoke and send it along with a letter to the resident stating the date the inspector observed them burning. "You are allowed to respond if you feel there was an error," she

said. "If you agree you did it, you have an option as a first-time (violator) to attend fireplace school."

There, people learn about why the Check Before You Burn rule is in place and hear tips about safe wood burning in general. The class is free.

Or -- and a surprising number of people chose to do this -- violators can pay a \$50 fine, Turner said. The more violations a resident collects, the higher that fine rises.

So in Merced, that old saw about chopping firewood warming you twice can be changed -- here, it can burn you three times.

School board opposes West Park's proposal

Written by Maddy Houk

Patterson Irrigator, Wednesday, November 21, 2007

The Patterson Unified School Board voted 7-0 on Monday to oppose the development of the Crows Landing Air Facility beyond the base's established boundaries.

The proposed PCCP West Park development, spearheaded by Gerry Kamilos, would cover a proposed 4,800 acres that stands on and around the former 1,527-acre naval airfield, now owned by Stanislaus County.

The project would include an inland rail hub for the Port of Oakland. It would also include a business park and commercial development, as well as possibilities for a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection airfield and for a hospital.

In supporting a resolution against the proposed project Monday, the school board joins Patterson's and Newman's city councils and the West Stanislaus Fire Protection District, which also have publicly opposed the project.

Attorney and project spokeswoman Cathy Hallinan of Modesto presented an overview of the project, which would be built out by 2030.

Hallinan said about 23 percent of Stanislaus County residents now work outside the county, and the 37,000 jobs promised by the development would give people the opportunity to work closer to home.

"It offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create new jobs in the area," Hallinan said. "By 2030, there's going to be a tremendous shortage of jobs."

A few supporters spoke in favor of the project.

Local resident Sherry King said it is important for families to spend time together, something supporters say would be a result of the project.

"They deserve to have parents home at a reasonable hour," King said.

Donna Worley, who lives in Patterson's Walker Ranch development and hopes to teach at local schools next year, also spoke in favor of the project.

"The county reps are convinced the project is good for the county," Worley said. "For the life of me I cannot understand why Patterson City Council is opposed to this project. We need the jobs for our graduates. I wonder what they are afraid of. Please do what is right and provide careers for students."

West Park representative Mike Lynch described the resolution against the project as "a job-killer."

"The (Stanislaus County) Board of Supervisors has very detailed guidelines and reports on traffic and [air quality](#)," Lynch said. "The city of Patterson is asking you to do this - stop the process before all the reports are done. In April, we are obliged by the board of supervisors to show the plan works."

By contrast, Patterson City Manager Cleve Morris urged the school board to adopt the resolution. He noted that a recent traffic study done on behalf of West Park found there would be more than 140,000 vehicle trips daily if the project was built out to its full scale. The city is concerned with the size of West Park's proposal, which is three times bigger than the airfield, and with the use of short-haul rail, he said.

"We are not opposed to the new development of the 1,500 acres given to Stanislaus County," Morris said.

School board members indicated the project could create lots of challenges for the school district.

Board President Bruce Kelly was concerned because the project is close to Patterson, but would be in the Newman-Crows Landing School District. That means Patterson Unified schools would not get state and developer funds from the project, though the district might be home to children whose families work at West Park.

"If you're going to create jobs, it's going to impact our school district, and we get no funds," Kelly said. "We're going to be housing a lot of students of people at the job site."

School board member Barbara Hartsell said she attended informational meetings hosted by Kamilos and asked if West Park workers would be paid wages comparable to Bay Area wages. She said West Park had not given her an answer.

Hartsell was also concerned with the proposed upgraded roadways.

"All the corrections to the roadway system are going to cost money," Hartsell said. "Where will it come from?"

Dave Santos, a former school board member and member of the West Park opposition group West Side-Patterson Alliance for Community and Environment, said a lot of things have changed since he served on the board, but some things remain the same.

"The decisions you have to make are for the kids," Santos said. "I don't see the project being positive in any way."

In the end, Trustee Michele Bays made the motion to pass the resolution against West Park.

"We kind of voice our opinion of what we think, and we're never really listened to," Bays said. "... I've been around to see promises come and go. I think (this project is) way too big for what the infrastructure can handle."

Spare the Air advisory issued for tonight

Contra Costa Times, Monday, November 26, 2007

For the second time this season, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District is calling on Bay Area residents to Spare the Air tonight and refrain from lighting a fire or using any other wood burning appliances.

Air quality levels tonight with respect to particulate matter are very high and in some pockets of the Bay Area will exceed 100 on the air quality index, something highly unusual, according to BAAQMD chairman Mark Ross.

"We do get high levels above 85 and 90 about 30 days a year in the winter but to exceed 100 is an unusual event," said Ross.

A good score on the air quality index would fall somewhere between zero and 50 and moderate levels of particulate matter would fall between 50 and 100, a typical Bay Area index level. Exceeding 100 is considered unhealthy for sensitive groups, such as active children or people with respiratory diseases, according to the BAAQMD.

A weather pattern of very still air has produced a situation where the particulate matter has stood still without a weather system to blow it out, according to Ross.

"We are saturated with soot at this point and will reach the point that is unhealthy for those with impaired lung capacity and asthma," he said. "Cardiac issues can also arise from part of the matter passing into the blood stream."

According to the air district, particulate matter is defined as very small liquid and solid particles suspended in the air, and includes particles smaller than 10 microns in size, as well as finer particles smaller than 2.5 microns in size. It is of concern because it can enter nasal passages and the lungs and cause serious health effects such as aggravated asthma, nose and throat irritation, bronchitis, lung damage, and premature death, according to BAAQMD. People with respiratory illnesses, children and the elderly are more sensitive to the effects of particulate matter, but it can affect everyone.

Tonight's Spare the Air advisory is voluntary, according to Ross, and coincidentally it falls on the same night the district is holding its last in a series of public workshops on the district's proposal for a ban on wood burning on evenings like tonight, where the air quality is poor.

The wood-burning ban would reduce emissions of harmful particulate matter from wood-burning devices, including indoor and outdoor fireplaces and wood-burning stoves. The ban would be similar to those in Sacramento and in the San Joaquin Valley, Ross said.

Like most pollution control measures, Ross said the ban would rely on public input. Levels of enforcement would range from warnings to outright fines.

Ross said that just like cigarette smoking bans, there are people that believe the district is impinging on their rights to burn in their fireplaces, but to that Ross says, "Even then, smokers were sharing in the risk. Now a home can be burning wood and it's the homes down the block getting the effects without the cozy little fire in their living rooms."

The district hopes to adopt some sort of an ordinance by the spring. Following that, the district will spend a year or two of educating the public on the ordinance before enforcing fines.

Tonight's workshop will be held at 6 p.m. at the Robert Livermore Community Center, Cresta Blanca Room, 4444 East Ave., Livermore. A live webcast is available at www.baaqmd.gov.

Air district may restrict wood burning

By Arya Hebbar, CORRESPONDENT

Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, November 23, 2007

San Mateo County residents and clean-air activists voiced support for restrictions on wood burning in residential neighborhoods at a recent public hearing in Redwood City.

Clean air standards were exceeded 20 times in the winter of 2006-07, mostly due to smoke from residential chimneys, according to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Wood-burning restrictions on bad-air nights and mandatory use of wood-burning devices with cleaner burning technology are some of the measures being considered.

The Bay Area agency identifies wood smoke as the largest contributor of particulate matter, containing microscopic particles that can bypass nasal and throat filters and penetrate the lungs.

Studies have linked long-term exposure to particle pollution to loss of lung function, bronchitis, heart attacks and premature death. It also causes eye and throat irritation and headaches.

"There is nothing as cheerful as the warm crackling fire until you can't breathe," said Carol Grace of Menlo Park.

Grace, who has wood-burning neighbors, said she has headaches after inhaling the smoke from their fireplaces. "Unless I leave town, I can't get away from that smoke," she said.

Mary Rozenberg, president of Clean Air Revival Inc., empathized. "This is a neighborhood problem that can kill people."

Groups like hers and the American Lung Association of California have been working for years to get restrictions on Bay Area wood smoke passed.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District hopes to follow the lead of the San Joaquin Valley Air District, the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District and the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency in Washington, which have all enacted similar restrictions.

State transportation panel embroiled in air quality dispute

By Samantha Young , Associated Press Writer

In Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle, Modesto Bee and other papers, Thursday, November 22, 2007

SACRAMENTO — When voters approved nearly \$2 billion in bonds last year to upgrade how the state moves goods in and out of its ports, they left it up to lawmakers to decide how to spend the money.

But the Legislature has so far failed to set guidelines on how to spend the money, creating a feud over what kind of highway, port and rail projects should qualify for the bond funding.

Environmental groups, local air quality districts and port communities are upset that the California Transportation Commission is proposing rules they say would allow state, city and county governments to build without considering the added pollution from truck traffic and idling trains.

They say the rules, if adopted at the commission's Nov. 27 meeting, could increase pollution near California's ports, rail yards and highways - undermining the intent of the transportation bond and a campaign pledge by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to improve the state's air quality.

"Air quality needs to be a top priority. We have the worst air quality in the nation," said Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District. "We can't afford any backward steps in terms of projects that would increase emissions."

At issue is whether regulators should consider the effect on air quality when screening construction projects for funding from the transportation corridor improvement fund, a new pot of money created by Proposition 1B to improve the roads, rails and ports used to ship goods around the state.

The \$20 billion bond initiative, the largest single bond ever placed before California voters, pledged to fix the state's most dangerous highways, clear freeway bottlenecks and help reduce air pollution. It said projects that improve mobility while also cutting pollution should get priority.

In California, port and freight traffic accounts for nearly a third of the nitrogen oxides that cause smog and three-quarters of the emissions of diesel particulate matter, according to the state Air Resources Board.

The concern is that new construction at ports would make air quality even worse in areas already plagued by bad air, such as Long Beach and Oakland, and that highway expansions would drive more diesel-polluting trucks through the already smoggy Central Valley.

Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, said the commission's balanced approach strives to improve air quality regionally.

"I think you've got to look at it holistically," said Nava, a nonvoting member of the commission. "I don't think each and every project has to bring about a reduction, but the cumulative effect needs to bring reduction."

Nava and Democratic Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach introduced bills this year that would have set guidelines for how to spend the bond money, but both stalled in committees. To begin spending the bond money, commissioners decided to write their own guidelines for how to pick projects.

Initially, the commission listed air quality as one of four so-called screening criteria to be considered. It also required that projects be built within five years, stimulate the economy, provide jobs and be part of a regional strategy to move goods.

Against the advice of its own staff, the nine-member commission - all four-year appointees of Schwarzenegger - removed the air quality requirement after lobbying from industry officials and Business, Transportation and Housing Secretary Dale Bonner.

Bonner and industry officials say the state has no real way to gauge the effect of projects on air quality in the very early stages.

Instead, commissioners said air quality will be evaluated later on, when more thorough examinations can be done. They also required the Air Resources Board to look at the projects.

"If you evaluate a project on the front end, a lot of assumptions are attached to it," Bonner said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It's very difficult, given air pollution knows no boundaries. You can't look at any of these projects in isolation."

There also could be technological hurdles if the new rules demand less polluting construction equipment at job sites, said Tom Holsman, chief executive officer of the Associated General Contractors of California, which represents more than 1,200 construction businesses.

"The emission cleaners aren't available that would be needed to meet project demands," Holsman said.

Schwarzenegger spokesman Aaron McLearn said no project that doesn't meet California's strict air quality standards would get funding.

Adding to the complexity is the question of whether some projects that might be good for the state as a whole might not necessarily be good for a nearby community. For example, a proposed rail yard center in the Long Beach area is being promoted as a way to cut statewide truck traffic by ferrying goods on trains - however, idling trains and trucks at the yard would add to the local air pollution.

It's the kind of project that might qualify for bond funding if it isn't screened for air quality, Atwood said. Tougher air quality standards might require a new rail yard to use electric-powered trains or limit how long trucks can idle while waiting to unload.

Meanwhile, Schwarzenegger, who in 2003 said he would cut the state's air pollution by 50 percent, faces criticism over the proposed rules. He also signed the state's landmark global warming law last year that sets greenhouse gas emission caps, targeting the transportation sector, which accounts for 40 percent of the state's emissions.

"You've got an administration committed to reducing global warming, but the word hasn't seemed to have filtered through to the all the agencies," said Bill Magavern, policy analyst at the Sierra Club.

Indian tribe get air pollution voice

In the Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, November 24, 2007

The Environmental Protection Agency has given St. Regis Mohawks a voice in enforcing federal air quality rules on the tribe's reservation in northern New York, following a five-year review.

The tribe's recognition under the federal Clean Air Act means New York state is now obligated to consider tribal comments on any project that might affect reservation residents.

Officials had done so earlier as a courtesy, said Ken Jock, St. Regis Mohawks' environmental division director.

Jock said the pollution from industrial neighbors drifts onto vegetation consumed by livestock on the St. Regis Indian Reservation along the Canadian border, causing health problems for both animals and humans.

"This may make someone a little bit less inclined to want to put polluting businesses in the area," said Gavin Lau, an environmental scientist with EPA's air program branch.

The Mohegan tribe in Connecticut has also applied for recognition under the Clean Air Act, as has an Arizona-based tribe, said EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez.

High oil prices sparking wood sales

Stoves and boilers also become hot items. Air quality is less of a concern for many hit by soaring heating costs.

From Bloomberg News

In the L.A. Times, Friday, November 23, 2007

More American households, faced with an 83% increase in heating-oil prices over the last year, are turning to an alternative as old as the Stone Age: wood.

Although the typical wood stove emits as much as 350 times more pollution than an oil furnace, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, some homeowners find the economics compelling. Firewood costs less than half as much as heating oil in terms of energy produced, according to the Energy Department and FirewoodCenter.com.

"I got nearly a \$2,500-a-year saving by putting in a wood boiler," says Wendy Wells, 39, a New Hampshire bookkeeper who replaced her oil furnace two years ago with a \$3,700 wood-oil combination.

Sales of wood-pellet stoves, the least environmentally harmful wood-heating devices, more than tripled since 1999 to 133,105 last year, according to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Assn. in Arlington, Va. At Thayer Nursery in Milton, Mass., owner Josh Oldfield says firewood sales are 15% to 18% higher than a year earlier.

"As oil creeps up toward \$100 a barrel, firewood sales have increased dramatically," Oldfield says.

Business also has picked up for sellers of wood stoves, boilers and ovens used to dry wood, or kilns, says Sherri Latulip, co-owner of Mountain Firewood Kilns in Littleton, N.H. Sales have tripled, says her husband, Bill. Mountain Firewood's kilns retail for \$21,800, and combination wood-oil boilers go for as much as \$6,490.

"When people hear oil is going to get expensive, they start buying," he says.

Ray Colton, owner of Colton Enterprises Inc. in Pittsfield, Vt., says he sells kiln-dried firewood for \$220 a cord, the same as last year. A cord, 128 cubic feet of stacked firewood, is about equal to the amount that can be loaded onto two full-sized pick-up trucks. The national average is about \$160 a cord, according to FirewoodCenter.com.

Wood was the primary heating source for about 1.3% of U.S. households in 2005, according to the most recent Energy Department data. That was down from 7.1% 20 years earlier. Seven percent of homes use heating oil, 58% natural gas and 30% electricity. Propane and other fuels account for the remainder.

Pollution is the big drawback. Even stoves that burn dog-food-sized pellets of compressed sawdust emit about 40 times more particulate matter, similar to soot, than an oil furnace, according to the EPA.

The emissions can contribute to respiratory illnesses such as asthma, says David Wright, a supervisor with Maine's Department of Environmental Protection. Wood burning for residential heating accounted for 57% of toxic air emissions in the state, he says.

The EPA issued regulations for wood stoves in 1989, mandating that they emit no more than 4.1

grams of smoke an hour for catalytic stoves, which convert particulates and harmful gases into less-polluting exhaust, and 7.5 grams an hour for ordinary stoves. Manufacturers that fail to meet those standards may be fined as much as \$100 a stove, says John Dupree, supervisor of the EPA's wood heater program.

New Jersey has a law that forbids use of outdoor wood boilers that emit smoke, says Lisa Rector, senior policy analyst for the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, a nonprofit group of state air-quality agencies. States including Connecticut and Vermont have rules that require wood boilers to be placed a given distance from a neighbor's property.

Wells says air quality isn't a major concern for people in her part of New Hampshire, where the temperature falls to minus 20 degrees for weeks at a time. Almost everyone burns wood, she says.

"It is very expensive to heat our houses up here because we are so far north and the climate is so cold," Wells says. "We live among the trees, where the deer and antelope play."

So What's So Bad About Corn?

As Iowa Enjoys a Bumper Crop, Farmers Hear It From Environmentalists, Ethanol Skeptics and Other Critics

By Joel Achenbach, Staff Writer

Washington Post, Friday, November 23, 2007

NEVADA, Iowa -- To say that corn is king around here is to come close to demoting it. In the last couple of weeks, the farmers of this state finished harvesting an astonishing 14 million acres of corn, which is more than a third of Iowa's surface. The yield: nearly 2 1/2 billion bushels. That's about 420 billion ears of corn, or about 225 trillion kernels.

A phone call to Tim Recker, president of the Iowa Corn Growers Association, found him in his combine, harvesting the last of a bumper crop.

"I got 225-bushel corn that I'm doing right now, which is phenomenal," Recker said by cellphone from a field near the town of Arlington. That's 225 bushels per acre. For a corn farmer, that's living in the tall cotton.

And yet, despite the fabulous harvest and the boom in ethanol made from corn, corn farmers often sound beleaguered and aggrieved. Corn, they say, has been getting a bad rap.

"You have to wear a flak jacket," said Bill Couser, who farms 5,000 acres here in the central Iowa town of Nevada (pronounced ne-VAY-da). "When we planted this crop, people said we were the villains of the world."

This mundane plant, once arguably dull as dirt, its name useful as an adjective ("corny") to describe something kind of lame and hillbillyish, has become improbably controversial. The gist of the criticism: So much corn, doing so many things, serving as both food and fuel, and backed by billions of dollars in government subsidies, has been bad for America and the rest of the world.

Start with food prices. Corn and its derivatives are in thousands of items sold at a typical grocery store, and corn is trading on the market at about twice the price it was just a couple of years ago. There are ripple effects everywhere. More acres in corn mean fewer in soybeans, and so soybean prices are also up. Soybean extracts are all over the grocery store, too.

Meanwhile, there are ethanol skeptics. They say production of ethanol has outpaced the infrastructure -- flex-fuel cars, for example -- for using it. A 51-cent-a-gallon federal subsidy to ethanol blenders helps keep the ethanol market commercially viable.

Environmentalists decry the impact on soil, waterways and wildlife of so much acreage planted in vast tracts of a thirsty, fertilizer-hungry plant. Tens of thousands of acres in Iowa once set aside for conservation were plowed this year for corn. The Iowa landscape is a patchwork of corn and soybean monocultures, with about as much biodiversity as a bachelor's refrigerator.

Corn, in the form of high-fructose corn syrup, is even accused of causing the national obesity epidemic.

A new documentary that skewers corn, "King Corn," has won rave reviews. And corn plays a starring, and nefarious, role in a recent book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," in which author Michael Pollan reveals that, at the molecular level, Americans have ingested so many corn-derived substances that we are essentially walking corn chips.

Recently Jean Ziegler, the United Nations expert on the "right to food," called the diversion of food crops to biofuels a "crime against humanity." The United Nations later distanced itself from those remarks. But they were already in the wind in corn country, where farmers, up to their eyeballs in corn, are wondering what exactly they have done wrong.

The Demand for Ethanol

Here in the town of Nevada, dead center in Iowa, you'll find Couser, a farmer, feedlot owner and ethanol entrepreneur. From many miles away, you can see rising from the fields of corn stubble the silo-like fermenting tanks of the new ethanol plant, Lincolnway Energy, where Couser serves as chairman of the board. At the plant, corn mash makes glucose and ferments into alcohol.

"It's just an old still back in the woods. It's no different. It's just bigger," he says of the plant. "It's basically 200-proof corn whiskey."

A byproduct is a sawdust-like substance called dry distiller's grain with solubles -- huge piles of which are in a warehouse at the distillery, ready to be hauled off and fed to livestock somewhere in the Midwest. It's good feed, Couser said.

"And it smells good. Does this place stink?"

No: Much of the ethanol plant smells like a bakery. Yeasty.

Last year, the federal government banned a gasoline additive, methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE), because it was polluting groundwater. Gasoline blenders needed another "oxygenate" -- designed to reduce air pollution -- and quickly turned to ethanol. Corn prices surged. American farmers planted 93 million acres of corn, up from 78 million a year ago -- the largest crop by acreage since World War II.

As if corn needed yet another boost, the political calendar ensures that the road to the White House starts in Iowa. One candidate after another has put on a hard hat and safety glasses and admired the ethanol plant in Nevada.

Republican Fred D. Thompson, a former opponent of ethanol subsidies, came through a few weeks ago and said he'd changed his mind. Democrat Bill Richardson gave a speech recently in Des Moines about major threats to the environment, but said of ethanol, "It's so far superior to our addiction to foreign oil, you have to go full speed ahead."

Bucking the trend is Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who said recently in a speech in Ames, just down the road, that he opposes all government subsidies that distort the free market: "I've never known an American entrepreneur worthy of the name who wouldn't rather compete for sales than subsidies."

McCain, however, has never counted on getting many votes in Iowa. Because of his position on subsidies, he didn't even campaign here when he ran for president eight years ago.

'We Don't Have the Land'

Once, much of Iowa was a "pothole prairie," an open terrain pocked with wetlands. Now it is a completely managed landscape. It has few forests. You can search a long time in Iowa before finding anything that you could call the Wild.

If the nation's leaders have their way, there will be yet more corn here. The Energy Act of 2005 mandated the use of 7.5 billion gallons of ethanol a year by 2012, and that's just for starters.

"The president's goal is to have 35 billion gallons of biofuels by 2017, and we're currently at 6 billion gallons. That would mean a huge increase in land for corn," says Jerry Schnoor, a University of Iowa professor of civil and environmental engineering. "The environmental constraints are just too great. It's too much nutrients, too much soil loss, too much pesticides. We don't have the land."

Ethanol advocates vow that the next generation of technology will make ethanol more attractive environmentally. Cellulosic ethanol could be made from cornstalks or, better yet, from perennial crops such as switchgrass. But that's the future. Today, corn, and specifically corn kernels -- little nuggets of starch -- are the sole source of commercial ethanol.

"The thing about ethanol: It's not a perfect solution for our energy, but it's a pretty good one. You don't throw out the good in search of the perfect," said Julius Schaaf, who farms 4,000 acres in Randolph, Iowa, and is chairman of the Iowa Corn Promotion Board.

Both Food and Fuel

Driving around Nevada in the truck he calls Bob -- for "big ol' beast" -- Couser grew increasingly combative. He groused about "tree huggers." His way of farming is sustainable, he says. On his feedlot, he uses an innovative system of waste disposal that state officials have praised. He owns lake property and says, "I want to make sure that when I go out in my water scooter, that that water's clean."

As for the professors who criticize industrial agriculture, Couser said, "Have they come out and taken a handful of dirt and seen how black it is?"

It is, indeed, as dark as spent coffee grounds -- espresso roast.

Couser grabbed an ear of corn (planted from Monsanto No. 6163 seed, which he said gave the corn good "standability" even in a stiff autumn wind), shucked it, broke off some kernels and popped them into his mouth like candy.

He made a mental calculation.

"It's about 16 percent moisture," he said. Dry enough to harvest. "It's hard to believe you can put that in your tank, isn't it?"

It's food; it's fuel; it's in every product imaginable. It's the plant that ate Iowa.

Couser said he knows the precise geographical center of the state. He drove up a road, past his house, past his feedlot, took a left through more corn and soybean stubble, and pulled his truck onto the soggy edge of a humble and nondescript patch of open field, the pinpoint center of the heart of the Corn Belt:

A hayfield.

So there's still one of those left.

After success of the Prius, Toyota looks to the future

By Yuri Kageyama, Associated Press
Modesto Bee, Friday, November 23, 2007

TOYOTA, Japan -- Since he was a teenager, Takeshi Uchiyamada's dream was to make a car. But as he entered his 50s as a Toyota engineer, he had all but given up hope he would ever head a project to develop a model.

In 1994, he finally got his dream. Little did he know that the car he was about to design -- the Prius -- would revolutionize the global auto industry.

Uchiyamada, 61, now executive vice president, was tackling the first mass-production gas/electric hybrid, which celebrates its 10th anniversary next month.

With other engineers, he trudged away at 16-hour workdays, patiently testing hundreds of engines. Fistfights broke out over what option to take to overcome engineering obstacles.

The Prius was a big step forward for the future of green cars.

Up next for Toyota and its rivals: far more powerful batteries for next-generation hybrids, plug-in electric cars and eventually zero-emission fuel-cell vehicles powered by hydrogen, which combines with oxygen in the air to form water.

In an interview, Uchiyamada recalled the exhaustion, the loneliness and the gambles as his team debunked Toyota's image as a safe and boring imitator of rivals' successes.

Introduced in Japan in December 1997, and the following year in the U.S., the Prius, now in its second generation, gets about 46 miles per gallon switching between a gas engine and electric motor.

It has been by far the most successful hybrid, selling a cumulative 829,000 vehicles -- making up most of Toyota's nearly 1.2 million hybrid sales.

Toyota has gotten a kick from the Prius, an enhanced global image for technological innovation, social responsibility and fashionable glamour, analysts say.

The Prius is also one solid bright spot for Toyota, whose reputation for quality is starting to tarnish as it targets a record of selling 10.4 million vehicles globally in 2009.

Meanwhile, its recalls are also ballooning. But when it all began, Uchiyamada wasn't even thinking hybrids.

Orders from management -- then president Hiroshi Okuda and Shoichiro Toyoda, the company founder's son and chairman -- were ambiguous: Come up with the 21st-century car, the vehicle that would hands-down beat the competition in mileage and environmental friendliness.

Uchiyamada initially proposed an advanced gasoline engine that was quickly rejected as lacking imagination. But advanced technologies like fuel cells and the electric vehicle were too expensive for a commercial product.

Creating a hybrid would demand excruciating labor, and management had moved up the deadline to 1997. The engineering obstacles were tremendous, especially the development of the hybrid battery, which must deliver power and recharge in spurts as the car is being driven.

Uchiyamada ditched the usual backup plans and multiple scenarios, focusing his team on one plan at a time and moving on when each failed.

As Uchiyamada tells it, the Prius wasn't the kind of car Toyota ever would have approved as a project if standard decision-making had been followed. It was sure to be a money loser for years.

Conventional wisdom was wrong; Toyota's once-skeptical rivals are now all busy making hybrids.

Hybrids are everywhere. The Frankfurt auto show in August had hybrids galore.

Porsche AG showed off a version of its Cayenne sport utility vehicle that is powered by hybrid technology developed with Volkswagen, and BMW pulled back the curtain on its X6, an SUV coupe crossover hybrid.

General Motors Corp., which makes the Saturn Vue, Saturn Aura and Chevrolet Malibu hybrids, is working on a more advanced lithium-ion battery to beat Toyota in the race to bring to market plug-in hybrids, which recharge from a regular home socket. GM has begun production of a two-mode gas/electric hybrid transmission system for the 2008 Chevrolet Tahoe Hybrid and GMC Yukon Hybrid SUVs that uses a computer to choose from thousands of combinations of two electric motors and the gasoline engine.

Ford Motor Co. already has its Escape Hybrid, introduced in 2004, but is working on improved versions. Earlier this year, Ford and Southern California Edison agreed to test rechargeable hybrid vehicles in an effort to speed up their mass production.

Chrysler LLC is debuting a new hybrid system next year on the Chrysler Aspen and Dodge Durango sport utility vehicles.

Hybrids were among the experimental, or "concept," models from Toyota's rivals on display at the recent Tokyo Motor Show.

Toyota showed a "concept" plug-in Prius made of carbon fiber reinforced plastic that's about a third of the weight of the current Prius and doubles mileage.

Nissan Motor Co. has fallen behind Toyota in hybrids and is instead focusing on electric cars, with plans to mass market them by 2012.

Toyota officials acknowledge Honda Motor Co. is their biggest threat in developing new hybrids. Honda, which already markets the Civic hybrid, is hot on Toyota's heels with a hybrid sports car, a fuel-cell vehicle and other ecological cars.

Automakers worldwide seem to be taking hybrids as a serious option and demand should grow, said Koji Endo, auto analyst with Credit Suisse Japan. He noted that interest in hybrids is growing in other parts of the world, such as China, a burgeoning auto market.

Yasuaki Iwamoto, auto analyst with Okasan Securities Co. in Tokyo, says Toyota faces a tough challenge with the next Prius, expected in a few years, with other automakers all hot on its heels.

"The popularity of Toyota's hybrids has been limited so far to the Prius. That means Toyota still has a lot of work to do," he said. "If a car doesn't meet consumer expectations, it won't sell. That's the fate Prius must now shoulder: It can't disappoint fans."

Uchiyamada and Satoshi Ogiso, executive chief engineer working on the next Prius, confidently promise greater things.

The third-generation Prius could include a new lithium-ion battery more advanced than the current nickel/metal-hydride battery, allowing more power to be packed into a smaller battery.

But engineers acknowledge that will require a breakthrough in battery technology.

Endo said Toyota must be careful in introducing the lithium-ion battery, which has been found recently to be prone to fires in laptops. Even a single hybrid battery fire could destroy an automaker's reputation, he said.

Uchiyamada denied media reports that problems in developing the lithium-ion battery would delay the new Prius.

Toyota has other options in the works to dramatically boost mileage and performance, so a battery upgrade isn't the only way to revamp the Prius, he said. Toyota recently has begun public road tests on a plug-in hybrid.

Uchiyamada -- who has spent 38 years as an engineer at Toyota -- admits that much of Prius' success was sheer luck. He still remembers the thrill he felt when he saw a Prius on the streets driven not by an engineer, but by a real customer.

Ogiso, 46, agrees. Toyota workers -- who haven't faced massive layoffs like their American counterparts -- are invested in the company's future.

"Our bosses are going to be around five more years. But we're going to be leading this company for 10 years, maybe 20 years," he said. "I feel the Prius is like my own child."

Interest in outdoor wood boilers grows

By Stephanie Reitz, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee, Contra Costa Times, and other papers, Thursday, November 22, 2007

HAMPDEN, Mass. — Rob and Lynne Wallace jumped at the chance to install an outdoor wood boiler two years ago to heat their home and water supply.

For a year, they were immune to fluctuating fuel oil prices. Their family-owned tree service provided more than enough wood, stacked under a canopy near the furnace about 50 paces from their back patio.

But earlier this year, their small western Massachusetts town set limits on the outdoor boilers that forced the Wallaces to shut theirs down.

Concerned about air quality and neighborhood disputes, Hampden joined a growing number of communities nationwide setting their own rules on the increasingly popular wood boilers, which are not federally regulated. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends emissions and air quality standards, but does not regulate where and when the wood-fired burners can be installed or used.

Rules are patchy on the state level, too.

Some states, including Connecticut and Maine, have regulations and let their municipalities adopt even stricter limits or ban the boilers altogether. Massachusetts has considered statewide rules but has not enacted them, while Michigan offers a model ordinance that local governments can adopt in the absence of statewide standards.

The Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, a government coalition, estimates more than 155,000 wood boilers have been sold since 1990 in the Northeast, upper Midwest states and other areas prone to cold winters.

For those with easy access to wood, the boilers could make their homes among the few that are not vulnerable to swings in fuel oil and natural gas prices.

A recent Energy Department report says the cost of natural gas, used by 58 percent of American households, could rise 10 percent this winter. Heating oil, used by 7 percent of the country's homes, could jump 22 percent. Those who use electricity and propane will also see increases, with the prices of those sources estimated to rise 4 percent and 16 percent, respectively, this winter.

The Wallaces and others say wood boilers are an economical heat source that uses a renewable resource rather than dwindling foreign fuels.

"We're not hillbillies or trashy people. We're educated people who did our homework before we made our purchase, and we made it a point to operate it very conscientiously," said Lynne Wallace, whose unit would comply with the new town rules only if they spend thousands to move it elsewhere on their land.

The boilers resemble small sheds and burn wood to heat water, which is piped underground to the nearby home or other structure to provide heat and hot water. Some owners also use them for hot tubs, greenhouses and businesses such as dairy barns.

Depending on their size, their purchase price can range from about \$5,000 to \$15,000. That does not include pouring the foundation on which they sit, installing underground piping, extending the unit's smoke stack to exceed the height of any nearby roof, and other costs.

Their proliferation has prompted disputes over where they can be operated, the amount and smell of smoke emitted and other neighborhood issues. Many of those conflicts are being played out in town meetings and the offices of selectmen, mayors and health boards.

"You don't realize what you're dealing with until you get this haze all around your house and your back yard," said Chris Anderson, who bought his home in East Longmeadow, Mass., last year before learning that his neighbor had one of the boilers.

That 13-square-mile town, surrounded on all sides by communities with limits on the units, is considering its own rules. Emotions have been running high, however, about whether the limits should include existing units - as in neighboring Hampden - or apply only to newly installed boilers.

"My wife and I saved up for our dream house and this is the biggest investment of my life, and we can't enjoy it," Anderson said. "I'm not saying they should be banned everywhere, if they're put up in a good place away from other houses, but why should we be smoked out?"

Advocates of the boilers say irresponsible users - those who burn trash, chemically treated wood and other unacceptable substances - are ruining it for others who stick to the clean, seasoned wood recommended by manufacturers.

"We beg our customers to extend their chimneys higher up so the smoke disperses where their neighbors aren't affected, and we beg our customers to burn only the right wood," said Scott Bradley, owner of Mainline Heating & Supply of Ashford, Conn.

"We tell them you have the right to use a wood burner and stop using foreign oil, but you never have the right to smoke out your neighbor," he said.

In an attempt to avert such problems, Connecticut requires the boilers to be at least 200 feet from the nearest home not served by the unit, and also mandates chimney heights and the quality of the wood to be burned.

But those rules apply only to burners installed after July 2005, and towns can set stricter regulations or refuse to "grandfather in" older units if they wish. Some communities have banned the outdoor boilers altogether, including several in western Massachusetts and the eastern Connecticut towns of Hebron and Tolland.

Robert Girard, assistant director of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection's air enforcement division, said the department urges potential buyers to research whether their site is suitable before they make the purchase.

"Sometimes they're just not put in the right place because of the topography, the closeness of neighbors, things like that," he said. "There have been a number of cases where people have had to remove the units after they've spent a lot of money to put them in."

The Wallace family, which has returned to oil heat for their Hampden home, is still pondering what to do about the wood-fired boiler that sits cold and empty outside their house.

"It would have paid for itself in a few years," Lynne Wallace said, peering into the unit's firebox on a chilly recent morning. "And here it sits, off."

[Modesto Bee commentary, Thursday, November 22, 2007:](#)

Automakers challenge California's emissions law

By Dale Kasler

FRESNO, Calif. — California's epic battle with the world's automakers over global warming neared a climax in a courtroom here Monday.

Lawyers for the state and auto industry clashed over the fine points of a California law that would force manufacturers to significantly reduce vehicles' greenhouse gas emissions starting with next year's models. The auto industry, arguing that the technological obstacles would explode the prices of new vehicles - harming sales and erasing tens of thousands of jobs at America's auto plants - is suing to have the law tossed out.

State lawyers pressed for a ruling Monday that would dismiss the suit outright. The automakers' lawyers sought a ruling that would award them victory without a trial. U.S. District Judge Anthony Ishii said he will rule at a later date.

The law, AB 1493, takes aim at tailpipe emissions, which account for about 40 percent of California's greenhouse gases. It requires a 30 percent reduction in those emissions by 2016.

Even if the law survives the challenge in Fresno, the state still needs a ruling from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before it can take effect. Two weeks ago California sued the Bush administration, saying the EPA is dragging its feet over the state's request for the ruling.

The flood of litigation shows how California has struggled to turn its lofty ideas on global warming into something with teeth. It has been fighting the automakers for three years over AB 1493, which passed in 2002. The fight with the EPA could mean considerable delays in implementation of the law.

The law's fate has impact well beyond the California's borders. Eleven other states have adopted copycat laws, and five others are considering doing so, but they can only take effect if California is allowed to implement its law.

Monday's tussle turned on a key argument by the automakers: that the California law would require a huge leap in fuel-economy standards, an issue they say is exclusively under the authority of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The automakers contend mileage standards would have to improve to 43 mpg from the current 27.5 mpg for passenger cars by 2016.

"They call it a greenhouse gas regulation. ... At its core this is a fuel-economy standard,' attorney Andrew Clubok, representing the world's automakers, told the judge. He said California regulators' internal documents refer to "the dreaded two words: 'fuel economy.'"

Clubok said California is doing something that is fundamentally unfair. It is seeking a "free license" to impose its will on Michigan, Ohio and other states where car manufacturing is a big part of the economy.

"This regulation will lead to job losses - the only question is the magnitude," he said.

Automakers have calculated that AB 1493, which was signed into law by then-Gov. Gray Davis, could raise industry prices by as much as \$6,000 per vehicle. "There's no free lunch," Clubok said in an interview during a break, adding that job losses in auto plants would total at least 65,000 as vehicle sales plunge.

California officials dismiss those projections, saying automakers already have developed, or are working on, most of the technological improvements needed to meet the law. They believe the additional cost per vehicle is no more than \$1,800.

They also said that it's up to the EPA to decide if the California standards are too burdensome or costly for the automakers to meet.

"The forum for that is the EPA waiver proceeding," attorney David Doniger, representing the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in an interview. The environmental organization is working with the state to defend against the automakers' lawsuit.

During Monday's two-hour hearing, Doniger and Marc Melnick, a deputy state attorney general, told the judge that three big legal decisions this year give added weight to California's arguments.

First, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the EPA has a duty to clamp down on greenhouse gas emissions just as it regulates other forms of air pollution.

Second, a federal judge in Vermont - one of the 11 states to adopt a law identical to California's - recently ruled against a similar suit by the automakers. A lawsuit by the automakers against Rhode Island, which also has passed an identical law, is pending.

Finally, last week a federal appeals court in San Francisco ordered the Bush administration to toughen the fuel economy standards for sport utility vehicles, minivans and pickup trucks. The court said the administration had overlooked, among other things, the impact those vehicles have on global warming.

State officials believe the three cases will create a domino effect that will tip the Fresno case their way. But they also acknowledge that a huge battle still looms at the EPA.

Federal law says only the U.S. government can regulate air pollution. There's one exception: California can impose its own standards if it gets a waiver from the EPA. Other states can then copy California's standards.

California has received more than 40 such waivers on issues ranging from catalytic converters to smog restrictions. But state officials anticipate problems with AB 1493 and have already threatened another suit against the Bush administration if the waiver request is denied.

"We can't do anything until we get an EPA waiver," Melnick said.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Thursday, November 22, 2007:](#)

Open Forum

Should fireplace fires be banned?

By Jeffrey Earl Warren

Under the auspices of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, "public hearings" are being held to determine the fate of the family hearth.

Those of us who live in rural areas have a pretty good idea what the outcome is going to be.

Still, in the interest of basic fairness, we'd at least like the decision-makers to employ the rudiments of the scientific method, rather than riding the winds of energy dependence and global warming hysteria, before coming to a final decision.

The scientific method follows a rigid methodology. Ask a question. Do background research. Construct a hypothesis. Test the hypothesis. And then, communicate the results.

So what is the question? Are the fires in our homes bad because they add to global warming? Release carbon dioxide into the air? Pollute the atmosphere with soot and particulate matter? All of the above?

Where is the research? The Chronicle reported that "government studies" indicate that 33 percent of all "particulate matter" comes from your fireplace and mine. With all the industry and all the cars in the Bay Area, does anyone actually believe that?

Shouldn't we be given more quantitative information such as, "How many fireplaces are there in the nine counties? How many are used each night? How many hours is each fireplace used? How much "particulate matter" is expelled from each fire? How many parts per million are in the air? How much dissipates into the atmosphere?"

Is this decision truly about air quality or global warming?

Interestingly, one loses on the issues of global warming because the odd paradox is, the more there is cloud cover or "smoke" in the air, the cooler the Earth will be. It is well documented how the Earth's temperature cooled after the explosion of the volcano Krakatoa. From that standpoint, one ought to encourage fires which produce the maximum amount of smoke.

Of course, that position is politically absurd.

Those of us in rural communities feel bullied by this sort of nanny state legislation. We'd like to believe that a man's home is indeed his castle. Most of us live in small towns or the country for a reason. We don't like cities. We don't like traffic. We don't like noise. We don't like the dirty air.

Our air is clean, and we take umbrage when someone says our fires are polluting their air.

If the ban goes into effect, what is the cost to society? What is the benefit? We need to weigh these carefully.

Then there is this question: Why do we burn?

We stoke our hearths for two reasons.

First, many rural people burn wood because they can't afford to heat their old houses with electricity. Many more feel that burning wood does less damage to the planet than increasing their carbon footprint by using so much electricity.

Banning fires would hurt the elderly who live on fixed incomes and the poor in general. It would be an added tax on the rest of us and increase dependence on petroleum.

Second, for many of us, a fire crackling in the fireplace is about a different kind of energy - psychic energy. After a day's work, is there anything nicer than coming home and having a glass of Napa Valley Cabernet in front of a roaring fire?

Rainy Sundays find us stretched out on the couch, newspapers scattered, 49ers on the TV, and a fire roaring in the fireplace.

On wintry school nights, our children used to come down into the living room to do their homework in front of the fire as my wife and I read.

During the energy crisis in California, our family closed the parlor doors and gathered in one tiny room around the fire. It was a scene out of a Jane Austin novel. Five of us read, played chess, did homework and paid bills, in a chilly room heated only by our tiny hearth.

Never was our family closer. The fire was more than a source of heat. It was a mystical, magical magnet of love, warmth and togetherness.

We worry that the real issue here isn't about health, global warming or energy savings, but about control.

Were it not about control, the dialogue would be about baffles and filters to eliminate soot, not about outright bans.

Home fires are not about "particulate matter." They are about warmth, love, quality of life - and for many an economic necessity. How cold are those who would take that from us, their neighbors?

Jeffrey Earl Warren lives in St. Helena.

[Contra Costa Times, Guest Commentary, Sunday, November 25, 2007:](#)

Polluting fireplaces unneeded

By Barbara Yencho

THE RESPONSES to your forum question regarding a Spare the Air ban on burning wood in fireplaces during days in which the Bay Area Air Quality Management District determines air to be unhealthy were interesting.

I am somewhat surprised that no one questioned why fireplaces have become basic additions to all new houses considering that not everyone uses them. Why aren't developers giving the first buyer the prerogative to opt-out of this architectural perk? This would allow the second buyer more flexibility to include or exclude a fireplace from the demand list presented to their real estate agent.

My neighborhood in Rockville, Md., back in the 1950s didn't have fireplaces. We found alternative means of comfort during blizzards or when the temperature dipped into single digits, such as sitting practically on top of functional heaters, wearing ski pants under skirts as we trekked off to school (not the highlight of fashion, but who cared?), and immobilizing ourselves in our fathers' army blankets.

Having to contend with winter power outages in Central California as opposed to Maryland would differ. Besides, in my more than 30 years here, one has yet to occur. I don't view the fireplace as a "safety feature" from the temperature standpoint. The likelihood that a nonuser like me is going to rush out during a rare Bay Area freeze to purchase wood, try to figure out whether the damper is already opened or somehow get a consistent flame triggered while I freeze myself to death is remote. And I'd probably end up torching the house. Then my insurer would hate me. I'll resort to coats on top of jackets and other things.

My cactuses and succulents are now indoors to protect them from "harsh" California winters of rain and frigid 40-degree temperatures. A gardening table currently blocks the front of my fireplace because it's the nearest location to the window facing the western sun. During the summer, that area is an eyesore, and it's wasted space. Worse, it's a perpetual reminder of heat.

The automotive industry is one up on real estate developers in that we have the choice of purchasing hybrids to minimize gas consumption. When it comes to purchasing homes, it appears that the buyer is stuck with a developer's misconception that everyone needs a fireplace.

Instead of Spare the Air, start with Spare the Buyer. Fireplaces simply aren't on every wish list.

Yencho is a Martinez resident.

[The Modesto Bee commentary, Monday, November 26, 2007:](#)

Schrag: The price of cheap imports: Pollution

By Peter Schrag - The Sacramento Bee

Had the container ship Cosco Busan run into a bridge pier and spilled 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel in Savannah, Tacoma or even Long Beach, it would have been just as deplorable. That it happened in San Francisco, the mother church of environmentalism, made it blasphemy.

So it wasn't surprising that state politicians, from the governor down, outdid themselves demanding or launching investigations to determine who deserved the rap. Some quickly castigated the Coast Guard and other emergency agencies, many long underfunded, for their slow response. What if a terrorist ... ?

Next to the day-in, day-out air pollution generated by ships, trucks and diesel railroad engines engaged in containerized transport at California's major ports, the damage from the accident at the Bay Bridge, however toxic, was small potatoes.

Still, the incident -- admiralty lawyers call it an allision, meaning the ship hit a fixed object, not another ship -- ought to be a loud reminder of the larger price in illness, environmental degradation and congestion that we pay for the ports.

It should also be a reminder that it's long past time for California to start recapturing some of those costs from the shippers and the people east of us whose consumption of cheap Chinese goods we effectively subsidize, and use the revenue to mitigate the pollution and its effects.

The biggest impact of that dirty air is on poor people, children especially, living near the ports and nearby rail yards, where the incidence of asthma and other respiratory diseases is through the roof.

If you go by old sea lore, the Cosco Busan (originally the Hanjin Cairo) was cursed from the moment she was renamed. Change the name and you have a hard-luck ship. In the six years since she was built in Korea, she had sailed under two flags, had two owners and was now nominally owned by one company, registered to another, operated by a third and chartered by a fourth.

She's listed as being managed by a German firm; her home port is Hamburg, her crew is Chinese, the owner was identified as Regal Stone Ltd. of Hong Kong, but Hanjin Shipping, the South Korean company that had chartered the ship, said it had leased her from Synergy Maritime in Cyprus.

All that's pretty normal nowadays for an industry that works hard to keep accountability as murky as the fog the ship was in when she sideswiped the fender that protects one of the towers of the Bay Bridge.

When she hit the fender she became merely another example of a system that allows shipping companies to routinely spew great volumes of toxins with minimal accountability or compensation to anyone.

After the allision, Hanjin issued a statement that since Synergy operates the ship and manages the crew, "Hanjin Shipping has no legal responsibility in this accident."

In a similar not-me disclaimer, Cosco, the China Ocean Shipping Co., said the ship "is not owned, managed, operated or chartered by COSCO Group or any of its companies." So where does the name come from?

Given the volume of shipping in the Bay, the conditions in which it must operate -- currents, channels, rocks, fog and the near-certainty that sooner or later there will be either human or mechanical error -- some such accident was almost predictable.

The ship's pilot that morning, a man with 25 years of experience in the Bay, had a number of "incidents" on his record, among them one in which his ship ran aground.

We may not know for months -- if ever -- exactly what happened on the ship's bridge that morning. Given the poor visibility and the pilot's doubts about the ship's radar, why was the 68,000-ton Cosco Busan running at 11 knots (about 13 mph)? Why, indeed, wasn't the sailing delayed? But important as those questions are, there are still larger considerations. In Oakland, Los Angeles and Long Beach, California has three of the largest container ports in the nation. Even if there never was another accident, we'd be paying the price.

Last summer, the Senate passed Senate Bill 974, state Sen. Alan Lowenthal's bill that would have imposed a fee of \$60 for each loaded 40-foot container handled by a California port. The money -- an estimated \$350 million to \$400 million a year -- would go to finance major projects to reduce pollution and traffic congestion around the ports.

Lowenthal, facing a likely veto from the governor, agreed to withhold the bill until next year to allow time to deal with opposition from retailers and shippers and with demands from various entities for a share of the money. As those demands are negotiated, maybe improved capacity to respond to the Cosco Busans of the future should go on the list as well.

[Tri-Valley Herald, Guest Commentary, Monday, November 26, 2007:](#)

We need Volkswagens

CALIFORNIANS are being taken for a ride by state clean-air regulators, who are bringing the rest of the country along. Decisions made by the California Air Resources Board early next year will determine whether we get the option of driving zero-emission, non-polluting cars soon, or whether we'll see smoggy business as usual from the car companies for another decade.

Many consumers would love to drive cars that reduce greenhouse gases and our addiction to oil, but the automakers resist. Fortunately, the Air Resources Board has the power to compel them to make the clean cars society needs. Progress through regulation is nothing new: It took laws to get seat belts, air bags and catalytic converters. It took laws to get average mileage standards up from 12 mpg to 27 mpg. It will take regulations to get clean cars.

The air board's first attempt to compel clean cars — the zero-emission-vehicle mandate of 1990 — put thousands of gas-free electric cars in the hands of consumers, who loved them. In 2001, however, the board started giving car companies partial credit toward meeting the mandate if they

sold hybrids and other gasoline-dependent cars. Bad move. Automakers sued, asserting that because the 2001 standards included gas-burning cars, they were, in essence, fuel-efficiency standards. And only the federal government can set those.

At the same time, automakers were making inflated promises to build zero-emission hydrogen fuel cell vehicles — if they could just have a few years more. So the board gutted the zero-emission-vehicle mandate in 2003 and essentially turned it into a hydrogen research program.

General Motors dangled claims that hydrogen fuel cell cars would be competitive in showrooms by 2004. Daimler-Chrysler predicted that it would sell 100,000 fuel cell cars by 2006.

But since 2003, automakers have produced fewer than 200 hydrogen fuel cell cars, each costing about \$1 million, with a fuel cell life span of two to four years and many technological challenges left to overcome.

A few major automakers trot out their hydrogen hardware this week at the Los Angeles Auto Show, claiming they'll lease small numbers of them to handpicked drivers in the next few years. In a déjà vu to 2003, automakers are hyping the promise of hydrogen just as the air board is again revising the zero-emission-vehicle mandate. Behind the scenes, car companies have convinced the board's staff that they can't meet the goal of producing 25,000 hydrogen fuel cell vehicles after 2012, so the staff suggests that the board ease that requirement.

There are signs, however, that the bloom may be fading from the hydrogen rose. This month, one of the biggest fuel cell companies, Ballard Power Systems, bailed out after pouring millions of dollars into fuel cell vehicles. A Toyota official predicted that fuel cell cars won't be mass commercialized until after 2030.

That's not soon enough to avoid global warming, thousands of deaths from air pollution and wars over oil.

Meanwhile, the battery electric cars produced until 2003 have shown that they can do the job. Some have passed 100,000 miles on the odometer, and the batteries are still going strong. A few hybrid owners have added batteries and converted their cars to plug-in hybrids that drive mostly on electricity but retain a gas engine for long-distance trips. Building a network of fast-charging stations would cost a fraction of the tab for building hydrogen fueling stations.

The persistent bias in favor of hydrogen among state regulators defies logic — and yet it could once again distract from fair treatment of more-realistic electric cars. Examples:

-Last week, the air board adopted a state alternative fuels plan that suggests using plug-in hybrids and biofuels would be cleaner than scenarios that rely on hydrogen fuel cell cars. But the plan largely ignores battery electric vehicles. That's foolish, especially in light of a study done for the state Energy Commission that found that electric cars — which use the existing power grid — reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions by 68 percent compared with conventional cars.

Hydrogen fuel cell cars — for which there is no infrastructure — would achieve only a 54 percent reduction.

-State-funded studies starting soon at the University of California, Berkeley and UC Irvine will compare plug-in hybrids with conventional hybrids and with hydrogen fuel cell cars — but not with battery electric cars. That makes no sense, especially because right now several major automakers express interest in resuming production of electric cars. The air board should provide state-owned electric cars for the studies, if necessary, for complete comparisons.

-The board's current zero-emission-vehicle regulations favor hydrogen by granting one fuel cell vehicle the same amount of credits as 10 electric vehicles in meeting state goals; the proposed

regulations for 2008 give three fuel cell cars the same credits as four electric vehicles. Narrowing that credit gap isn't enough. The board should insist on one-to-one technological neutrality and not push back the deadlines just because hydrogen cars aren't ready. Treat hydrogen and electric vehicles equally, and let the market decide.

There's no time to waste. Only California can pass clean-air laws stricter than federal standards.

But many other states adopt California's requirements, so what the board does has national implications for our health, for the environment and for national security. A slower drive away from gasoline is a ride we don't want to take.

Sherry Boschert is the author of "Plug-in Hybrids: The Cars That Will Recharge America."

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Sunday, Nov. 25, 2007:](#)

Henry column: Planning by lawsuit, the Kern County way

By Lois Henry, Californian columnist

For a town that professes no great love for the Sierra Club, they sure do a lot of our heavy lifting.

First it was lawsuits against developers over air pollution.

Now, it's ag land preservation.

For the uninitiated, a couple of years ago, the Sierra Club sued over several developments that had been blithely rubber stamped by our elected officials with zero air pollution requirements.

The Sierra Club argued that because the developments would create more air pollution, developers should pay a fee used to reduce pollution elsewhere (that's known as "mitigation").

Developers settled, and, in some cases, voluntarily entered into contracts with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to avoid lawsuits.

You'd think the people elected to represent us would have our best interests (such as the ability to *breathe*) in mind and require air pollution mitigation right off the get. But no, the Sierra Club had to push the issue.

The same with farmland preservation.

Over the last three years, the Sierra Club has sued several projects, saying they need to replace the prime farmland lost to housing, said Gordon Nipp, with the local Sierra Club.

Again, developers settled. The Sierra Club now has 15 ag land preservation agreements in place. Farmland preservation, however, is more complicated than air pollution mitigation.

With air pollution, the Sierra Club simply gives the money to the Rose Foundation, a Bay Area-based environmental group, which has used it to replace diesel school buses with natural gas ones for the Kern County Superintendent of Schools, among other things.

Ag land involves finding farmers willing to sell conservation easements on their land, meaning it can never be developed. Then an entity is needed to hold those easements.

Enter the Sequoia Riverlands Trust, based in Tulare County, which just secured grant money to start its planning phase in Kern County.

If you think these folks are a bunch of posey pluckin' tree-huggers, think again.

"We are not the Sierra Club," Executive Director Soapy Mullholland stressed. "We are a not-for-profit that holds easements."

Mullholland, who used to be in real estate development, has seen both sides. She knows developers want a level playing field, a set of standards they can rely on and plan for when figuring costs.

To that end, the trust will hire an outside expert to assess the land here, soil quality, water availability, etc. So, when a developer needs to replace land, the trust can make an equitable trade and the developer will know the costs ahead of time.

Right now, Mullholland is looking at an upfront cost to developers of \$2,500 per acre, plus a 1/4 percent transfer fee on each home's sale price after the initial sale.

"That may not be enough," she said. "But we're sensitive to developers' needs and that there's a limit to how high those fees can be."

Even with a structure in place to handle farmland preservation it still comes down to local planners and politicians saying this is a priority. Otherwise, we're right back to the lawsuits.

The city and county are now looking at farmland preservation using a "menu" of options. I have a few issues with the options, such as allowing developers to preserve land outside of

Kern County, or even the San Joaquin Valley. Still, it is a step in the right direction. It's frustrating, though, that it had to come at the muzzle end of litigation.

The Sierra Club and others have complained about air pollution and loss of farmland for years. Nothing changed until developers got thrown for a loop and *they* put pressure on the city and county to come up with guidelines.

Talk about the tail wagging the dog.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Nov. 25, 2007:](#)

Air must remain a key in Prop. 1B funds

Nearly every part of California feels the brunt of the state's congested ports. The state's roads and rail systems can't quickly move the massive volumes of cargo being shipped through these international trade zones, adding to traffic congestion and pollution.

In 2006, voters agreed to combat these problems by approving Proposition 1B, a \$20 billion transportation bond that included \$2 billion for the "Trade Corridor Improvement Fund." Proposition 1B made clear that projects receiving money would both improve mobility and reduce air pollution. Indeed, the name of the law was "The Highway Safety, Traffic Reduction, Air Quality and Port Security Bond Act of 2006."

Yet now that the California Transportation Commission is preparing to distribute this \$2 billion, there's a move afoot to limit air pollution as a factor in awarding these funds.

The railroad industry, shipping interests and regional agencies are pressing the Schwarzenegger administration to disperse the money as soon as possible. At the same time, Dale Bonner, secretary of the Department of Business, Transportation and Housing, has been urging the CTC to limit air quality as criteria in awarding funds.

Bad idea. While increased movement of goods on trains could reduce truck traffic -- and possibly improving regionwide air quality -- it could increase localized pollution from locomotives and other

rail yard equipment. If the state is going to use tax dollars to help expand rail operations for goods movement, then the railroad industry should be expected to mitigate any local impacts.

Bonner's proposal, if implemented, would have recipients of bond-funding figure out these mitigations after the money was already in their pockets, or heading toward it. That is unacceptable.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger needs to pay personal attention to this issue. While improved goods movement is a priority of his administration, it shouldn't come at the expense of certain communities that are already bearing the brunt of the state's cargo juggernaut.

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Saturday, November 24, 2007:](#)

Our View: Prioritize health and safety

Transportation money should also help California improve its air quality. Nearly every part of California feels the brunt of the state's congested ports.

The state's roads and rail systems can't quickly move the massive volumes of cargo that are being shipped from these international trade zones, adding to traffic congestion and air pollution.

People living near the ports -- and associated freeways and railyards -- bear a special burden. In Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland and other communities, diesel soot wafts from trucks, locomotives and forklifts, and it blows into nearby neighborhoods.

In 2006, voters agreed to combat those intertwined problems by approving Proposition 1B, a \$20 billion transportation bond that included \$2 billion for the "Trade Corridor Improvement Fund." Proposition 1B made clear that projects receiving bond money would both improve mobility and reduce air pollution. Indeed, the name of the law was the "The Highway Safety, Traffic Reduction, Air Quality and Port Security Bond Act of 2006."

Yet now that the California Transportation Commission (CTC) is preparing to distribute this \$2 billion, there's a move afoot to limit air pollution as a factor in awarding these trade corridor funds.

The railroad industry, shipping interests and regional agencies are pressing the Schwarzenegger administration to distribute the money as quickly as possible. At the same time, Dale Bonner, secretary of the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, has been urging the CTC to limit air quality a screening criterion in the awarding of funds.

In a Nov. 6 letter, Bonner told CTC Executive Director John Barna he was "concerned" about air pollution being used as a screening factor. In this letter, Bonner argued that, if a rail expansion project were to reduce truck traffic in an area, "that should be sufficient to satisfy the air pollution criterion."

Nice try, Mr. Secretary, but forget it. Such an approach could compound the health risks that residents face when they are downwind of railyards and rail corridors. While increased movement of goods on trains could well reduce truck traffic -- and possibly improve regionwide air quality -- it could increase localized pollution from locomotives and other railyard equipment, harming nearby residents.

If the state is to use taxpayer money to help expand rail operations for goods movement -- and arguably it should -- then the railroad industry should be expected to mitigate any local impacts, and do it on the front end, not the back end.

Bonner's proposal, if implemented, would have recipients of bond funding figure out these mitigations after the money is already in their pockets, or heading toward it. That is unacceptable.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger needs to pay personal attention to this issue. While improved goods movement is a priority of his administration, it shouldn't come at the expense of certain communities that are already bearing the brunt of the state's cargo juggernaut.

The California Transportation Commission meets Tuesday to decide on criteria for the trade corridor funds. Schwarzenegger and his appointees, in no uncertain terms, should urge the commission to restore air quality as a factor in awarding these funds.

[Letters to the S.F. Chronicle Monday, Nov. 26, 2007:](#)

Give up gathering 'round the hearth?

Editor - Re "Should fireplace fires be banned?" (Nov. 22): Jeffrey Earl Warren may be correct when he says "our air (in St. Helena) is clean, and we take umbrage when someone says our fires are polluting their air," but the situation is not so clear in the urban parts of the Bay Area.

I invite Mr. Warren to drive south from San Francisco some cold, still winter evening.

His nose will provide the only proof he needs of the correctness of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's assertions.

Mike Reitsma, Burlingame

Editor - Under the currently proposed regulations from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, fireplace use on Christmas would be banned, even if one had a fully certified EPA II fireplace insert. This is because the BAAQMD's own research shows, not so surprisingly, that the greatest fireplace use in winter months is on Dec. 25.

When that same research reports that total vehicular use, not wood particulate emissions, is the greatest source of air pollution each winter, it seems this whole effort is misguided, if not misdirected.

Will the smoke police have to be put on overtime to seek out and fine the errant fireplace users each Christmas?

Bah, Humbug!

Gary Kozel, Kenwood

State should boycott

Editor - Some automakers have sued the state of California to combat our laws on global warming ("Auto industry fights state's tough emissions standards," Nov. 20).

I wouldn't do business with an organization suing me. The state shouldn't either. Until these suits are dropped, no new contracts should be initiated with these organizations. State employees should not be renting vehicles manufactured by these litigants. Local governments should follow suit. What are your elected officials driving?

Mike Davis, Sacramento

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, November 25, 2007:](#)

Ban leaf blowers

Here I go again.

After letters, repeated calls to Fresno's ineffective City Council and my representative Henry T. Perea, I still haven't seen any action on banning the use of gas-powered leaf blowers in Fresno.

My wife and I moved here from Long Beach in 1996.

Long Beach and many other cities outlawed these foul machines years ago.

The "leaders" on the City Council are more worried about useless human rights commissions in town and they care nothing about the everyday mundane concerns about the citizens.

The Fresno City Council needs to outlaw these evil machines now. The citizens will be thrilled that it actually did something useful.

Dave Buchan, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Saturday, November 24, 2007:](#)

Speed up rail project

The state of California is at a crossroads with high-speed rail. There are three ways to go: The Pacheco route, which would go through the Pacheco Pass and lead north to San Jose; the Altamont alternative, going between Stockton and Modesto and split into branches; and a third choice, which may make most everybody happy, is a hybrid including both routes. The fact that so many opinions weigh in on route options shows how significant high-speed rail is.

To environmentalists like me, rail outweighs the toll on our land and air taken by vehicles. Sprawl would be less invited than with our super pricey freeway system.

The costs are great for this monumental project, but the alternative costs for transporting people and goods are more.

Let's map out the hybrid choice, and move the project ahead with all due speed.

Joan Lipton, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, November 22, 2007:](#)

Global warming church

Here is a suggestion for the true believers in the Church of Global Warming. The sky is falling (United Nations) so stop paying your taxes and stop working. Stop buying everything, including food. Your carbon emissions will drop to near zero as you reach global temperature. The ripple effect may be no economy (Opinion page) thus no carbon footprint. The world is saved. The survivors will thank you.

Bob Novak, Coarsegold