

Dangerously high smog levels trigger Kern health advisory

The Bakersfield Californian (online)

Wednesday September 24, 2003, 05:25:00 PM

Air pollution officials have issued a health advisory for southeast Kern County due to dangerously high smog levels. The advisory runs until 7 p.m. today and applies to Arvin, Edison and surrounding areas.

The notice was triggered by continuing high smog levels in the area, aggravated by ongoing hot weather. Schools are urged to cancel all outdoor activities to protect the health of students and faculty.

In addition, all residents of the area are urged to limit strenuous outdoor physical activities, try to remain indoors, keep doors and windows closed, recirculate indoor air, and drink plenty of fluids to keep lung tissue hydrated.

For information, call 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit [valleyair.org](http://www.valleyair.org). <<http://www.valleyair.org>>

Spare the Air today and Friday

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday September 24, 2003, 11:05:14 PM

Air quality officials have declared today and Friday Spare the Air days in the valley portions of Kern County.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared the voluntary advisory in response to anticipated hot temperatures and smog levels forecast to be unhealthy for everyone.

Residents -- especially children, the elderly and people with breathing problems -- are urged to avoid exerting themselves outdoors. In addition, everyone is asked to avoid activities that cause air pollution, such as excessive vehicle idling and short driving trips, barbecuing, and the use of lawn mowers and off-road vehicles.

For more information and additional smog-fighting tips, call 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org.

Smog hunkers down, will stay awhile

By Barbara Anderson

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, September 25, 2003, 5:12 AM)

Higher-than-normal temperatures will continue through the end of the week, giving San Joaquin Valley residents little relief from the heat and the unhealthy air that accompanies it.

Forecasters say Fresno's high will be 93 degrees today -- a degree higher than Wednesday's top temperature. But Fresno will heat up to 97 on Friday.

Visalia will see a high of 93 today and 95 Friday, and Madera will hit 91 today and 96 Friday.

On Tuesday the high in Fresno was 101 degrees, more than the normal of 87 degrees for this time of year.

"We've got a summer-type pattern that's hanging on. We've got a big ridge of high pressure that's centered almost right over us," said Jim Bagnall, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Hanford.

Today and Friday are Spare the Air days -- the fourth and fifth, respectively, to be called this week by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. On Spare the Air days, residents are asked to reduce air emissions by carpooling, running fewer errands and postponing lawn maintenance and painting.

The air quality index, or AQI, is expected to reach 150 today in Madera, Fresno and Kings counties. An AQI of 161 is forecast for Tulare and Kern counties.

An AQI level of 100 to 150 indicates the air is unhealthy for people with lung conditions, such as asthma. An AQI of 151 to 200 signifies that the air is unhealthy for everyone.

Arvin and Edison, in Kern County, reached very unhealthy ozone levels Wednesday afternoon, forcing district officials to issue a health advisory from 4:15 to 7 p.m. Schools must cancel sports practices and events, and everyone is encouraged to limit exertion and time outdoors during a health advisory.

Pollution forecasters expect elevated ozone levels in the Valley through Sunday.

"It doesn't look like the real cooling is going to occur like we thought, and we're going to see conditions pretty conducive to ozone formation," said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist at the district.

Smog forms over the Valley when emissions from vehicles and other combustion sources mix in sunlight. Ozone, the main ingredient of smog, is a corrosive gas that can burn eyes and lungs and trigger asthma attacks.

The high pressure should keep temperatures up through the weekend, said Bagnall of the U.S. Weather Service. "We're showing a possibility Monday of maybe a couple degrees of cooling, but nothing really significant -- still staying above normal."

Calendar contest

September 25, Modesto Bee, Region

The entry deadline is Tuesday for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's seventh annual art contest. Selected entries will illustrate the district's 2004 calendar. The contest theme is Spare the Air; artwork can depict any air-friendly activity, message or concept.

The district will select two drawings each from grades K-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10 and 11-12. Each winner will receive 25 calendars and a certificate, plus air-friendly prizes and games.

Each entry should have the artist's name, address, telephone number and school printed clearly on the back. Mail entries to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno 93726.

More information is available by telephone, 557-6400, and online, www.valleyair.org. A Region item Tuesday listed an incorrect phone number.

Animal waste may help keep electricity flowing in Lodi

By Jennifer Pearson Bonnett, Lodi News-Sentinel Staff Writer, September 25, 2003

The next time Lodi's lights stay on during a rolling blackout, you might have cow manure to thank.

Although it is only in the exploratory stages, Lodi electric officials are eyeing a unique plan to develop an electric generation plant on the grounds of the White Slough Wastewater Treatment Facility and fuel it with area dairy waste.

At an estimated cost of \$8 million to \$12 million, it would not only develop a new energy source, but help farmers meet increasingly stringent waste regulations, according to Alan Vallow, director of the city-owned Electric Utility.

"The fuel source -- cow manure -- is provided by the numerous dairy farms located throughout the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley, and is in plentiful supply," he said.

"This power plant will utilize a waste product that has become increasingly challenging to dispose

of around the nation."

Basically, the plant would digest cow manure, creating methane gas, which in turn fuels and spins a large turbine. The spinning turbine is what generates the electricity.

The plant would produce between 5 megawatts and 10 megawatts of electricity per day, taking care of about one third of Lodi's residents, according to Vallow.

Trucks would pick up waste from dairies of all sizes and bring it to the plant. It would be located adjacent to the city's sewer treatment plant near Interstate 5 and Eight Mile Road.

The advanced technique is popular in Denmark.

Vallow sees it as a "win-win-win" in Lodi.

The citizens and the Electric Utility Department win, because another reliable energy source is developed; the dairy farmers win, because a substantial amount of waste product is removed from their farms every day; and the Woodbridge Irrigation District wins because certain water quality issues are addressed, he said.

These include how to safely dispose of farming waste without contaminating waterways.

"It's the first time cow manure has looked sexy to me," Vallow added.

Dairy farmer Jack Hamm was looking for a way to get rid of dairy waste from his 1,500 head and help with rolling blackouts.

"California has decided methane digesters for dairymen are a good thing," he added.

"This would be a community digester, instead of having each dairy build their own. That's why we're excited.

"Hopefully we can make a good thing out of it."

Right now, he said, the manure is spread on his fields as fertilizer.

Last week, Vallow and his staff met with several dairy owners, and representatives from Woodbridge Irrigation District, elected state and federal officials and Environmental Power Corporation, a New Hampshire-based firm that has the United States right to the animal waste power technology used in Denmark.

Owners of an estimated 7,500 head of cattle have expressed an interest to participate, according to Vallow.

"We obviously have the waste stream to convert into power, so to me it sounds like we have a great asset in cleaning up the environment," said San Joaquin County Supervisor Jack Sieglock, who represents the Lodi area.

"It seems pretty interesting, and I think it would be pretty exciting. It's a pretty creative solution."

Andy Christensen, manager of the Woodbridge Irrigation District, said he is interested in the proposal because of concerns with water issues. Plus, he wants to see agricultural businesses flourish.

"Agriculture is the mainstay of the district. We are trying to help facilitate a mutually beneficial solution."

He became part of the discussion last month, he said.

"Woodbridge doesn't have a direct role in this. It's just to help facilitate an answer to a problem; to help our customers deal with the problem (of waste)."

If the plant is given the green light to proceed, it could be operational within 12 months, according to Vallow.

By November, he and his staff hope to have a cost-analysis/feasibility report completed and will take it before the City Council.

"We don't want to have any out-of-pocket expense for the farmers," he said.

The Electric Utility is currently seeking state and federal grant dollars to help fund the construction of the proposed plant. Without those, it could cost \$8 million to \$12 million, according to Vallow.

"But if you look at all the savings to the farmers ... it's probably pretty economical."

Technology to harness the power of manure is not new and is working elsewhere in the state.

A Southern California plant is recycling waste from approximately 3,750 dairy cows to generate electricity.

Chino officials reported during the first week of May, the city's digester produced 1.03 million standard cubic feet of methane gas which helps run two generators serving over 700,000 people in San Bernardino County.

And in Tulare, hog manure is collected to fuel a 70-kilowatt engine-generator and a 100-kilowatt engine-generator. The electricity generated on that farm is able to meet monthly electric and heat energy demand.

Amnesty for Clean Air Act condemned

Opponents fear large dairies could circumvent a new air law.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, September 25, 2003, 5:08 AM)

Environmentalists, accusing the Bush administration of back-room dealing, Wednesday made public a draft of a program that outlines Clean Air Act amnesty for large livestock farms.

The proposal could jeopardize a recent push to regulate animal operations in the San Joaquin Valley, the nation's leading dairy region, said lawyer Brent Newell of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

Gov. Davis on Monday signed Senate Bill 700, written by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, lifting a longtime agriculture exemption for federal air operating permits.

Environmentalists fear that owners of large dairies could sign up for amnesty and circumvent the law.

The amnesty program is billed as temporary, lasting two or three years, until researchers can determine how much pollution comes from animal operations. Air emissions from animal operations have not been regulated in the past.

But environmentalists say the amnesty program is too open-ended and could continue for a long time.

"It's a real giveaway," Newell said. "And it's shameful, especially in the San Joaquin Valley."

Newell's group was one of four national environmental organizations that filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C., seeking further access to the proposal and the process surrounding it.

But their fears are overstated, said one dairy advocate, J.P. Cativiela, representing Community Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship. California dairies are already in the forefront of emissions research, he said, and it makes no sense for them to roll back their efforts.

"The environmental groups sound like they're using scare tactics," he said. "They're putting a worst-case spin on it, and it's pretty distorted."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials said the document being circulated is an internal draft that has not even been released to the industries involved.

The public will have a chance to comment when it is released, probably this fall, said EPA spokeswoman Lisa Fasano.

"This program is an enforcement tool," she said. "There's no way it would be used to pre-empt state law or regulation."

The issue of livestock has moved to EPA's front burner because of environmental lawsuits over possible pollution as expansion occurs in modern dairies, hog farms and other animal operations.

A study from the National Academy of Sciences last year advised officials to pursue more research on the emissions. The livestock-farming industry approached the EPA with suggestions.

But environmentalists said they were not invited to the table when the EPA received industry ideas in May. The EPA has refined the suggestions since then and developed the amnesty program, federal officials said.

The program would allow farmers to open their property for researchers without being prosecuted for previous air pollution offenses.

According to the document released Wednesday by environmentalists, farm owners would be allowed to pay a \$500 fine upfront in return for amnesty from Clean Air Act violations. In addition, the farmers would chip in \$2,500 to finance the research. Scientists would then be able to enter farm property.

"The truth is, the EPA has the authority to monitor these emissions to begin with," Newell said. "There's no way they could get this through Congress or rule-making, so they came up with this behind closed doors."

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EPA Plans Farm Pollution Amnesty

Large feedlots would be spared lawsuits if they took part in a program to monitor emissions. Environmental groups say it's too lenient.

By Elizabeth Shogren, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer, September 25, 2003

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency is planning to offer large livestock farms amnesty from lawsuits if they take part in a program to monitor air emissions.

If industry groups and the EPA reach an agreement, the plan would generate data that regulators could use to determine how much air pollution is emitted by pork, poultry, egg, dairy and cattle operations of various sizes, and it could eventually result in requirements that the farms control air pollutants created by animal waste.

Those wastes emit nitrogen, methane and other gases that combine with substances in the air to create ozone or smog. Ammonia, another gas emitted by animal waste, can form small particulate matter, a respiratory irritant linked to asthma attacks, heart and lung problems and early deaths.

Because feeding operations have become much larger in recent years, emissions have become a significant problem, EPA officials say.

Environmental groups criticized the proposal, saying it would allow such facilities to continue to flout the Clean Air Act for an indeterminate length of time.

"It lets polluters off the hook, sets no firm deadlines and contains no firm requirements for the livestock industry to clean up its pollution," said Joe Rudek, senior scientist with Environmental Defense, a national environmental group.

But EPA officials described the plan as an attempt to start regulating an industry that may be polluting a great deal but has not been subject to regulations.

"It's bringing them into the system; it's exactly the opposite of letting them off the hook," said Bob Kaplan, director of the EPA's division of special litigation and projects.

The Bush administration has been seeking compliance with environmental laws through voluntary agreements with industry instead of through litigation.

A deal between the EPA and the livestock industry could have a significant effect in California, home to thousands of large animal feeding operations — and acute smog problems in the Central Valley, where many such farms are located.

On Monday, Gov. Gray Davis signed a law that ended agriculture's exemption from the Clean Air Act. Among other things, the law requires the state to define what constitutes a "large confined feeding operation" and monitor emissions to determine their effect on the environment.

The nation's largest milk-producing state, California has about 2,000 dairies with about 1.5 million cows. About 1,400 of the operations have at least 700 mature animals.

Michael Marsh, chief executive of Western United Dairymen, which represents the industry in California, said he supported the proposal because it would take a scientific approach to studying the emissions before establishing and enforcing regulations. Marsh said he believed the studies would show that dairies do not pollute the air as much as environmentalists assert.

Bill Mattos, president of the California Poultry Federation, which represents poultry farmers, said that his members were working with the California Environmental Protection Agency to come up with ways to monitor and test emissions and that he did not expect that they would be required to do much to control their air emissions.

Mattos said California has about 80 large chicken ranches with more than 125,000 birds, and 35 large turkey ranches with more than 55,000 birds. "We don't look at this as a major problem for the poultry industry," he said.

Industry groups approached the EPA with the suggestion of amnesty from Clean Air Act penalties in return for participation in monitoring efforts. The EPA's Kaplan discussed the plan Wednesday after environmental groups released a draft of the proposal that had been leaked to them.

Although nothing has been finalized, the industry groups are eager to reach an agreement with the EPA that would give an independent organization — chosen by the industry and approved by the EPA — the ability to conduct emissions studies that would become the basis for future

regulation, said Richard Schwartz, a Washington lawyer who represents the egg, dairy and pork industries in their talks with EPA.

The agricultural industry wants to have a "level playing field," where all the facilities are held to a single standard, Schwartz added.

The Clinton administration was the first to apply the Clean Air Act to the livestock business when it began enforcement actions against some large feedlot operations.

Michele Merkel, who worked on those efforts as an EPA lawyer until she left the agency a year and a half ago, criticized the Bush administration for allowing the cases to languish.

She argued that the administration's new plan for addressing the problem would allow the large livestock facilities to stall even longer before they had to control pollution.

"This is another potential delay of years before the industry has to clean up its act," said Merkel, senior counsel for the Washington-based Environmental Integrity Project, an environmental research group.

Crippen cleanup completed

Fire was fought this year at Fresno excavation site.

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, September 25, 2003, 5:08 AM)

After a firefighting effort that took a full month -- and amid legal battles that could easily last for years -- city officials were ready for some good news about the Archie Crippen Excavation site in southwest Fresno.

Now, they have it.

On Wednesday, they announced completion of a multimillion-dollar cleanup of a vast pile of burned wood waste and other debris at the Crippen site -- the same pile that burst into flames in January and filled Fresno's skies with smoke for days on end.

The good news lay in how quickly the job was done:

"We thought it was going to take three months and they got it done in seven weeks," city spokesman Matt Otstot said.

The mountain of debris, most of which had been trucked to the site from demolition jobs, stood three stories high and covered almost 5 acres. But now it is gone, 4,111 truckloads hauled away and buried in a landfill in southwestern Kings County.

Michelle Rogow, on-scene coordinator for the federal Environmental Protection Agency, said about 102,650 tons of debris, mostly burned in the fire, were removed.

"Archie," Rogow said, turning toward owner Archie Crippen, "we're glad to have your site back to you. You won't be looking at us anymore every day."

The publicly funded cleanup was designed to prevent a repetition of last winter's smoky blaze, which was attributed to spontaneous combustion triggered by decay heat within the debris pile. But it doesn't put an end to the resulting controversy, which now includes at least eight lawsuits, claims and other actions.

EPA, the state Integrated Waste Management Board, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the city have filed claims totaling several million dollars against Crippen.

Crippen has filed two claims of his own against the city -- one for damages resulting from what he calls the city's slow response to the fire, and one alleging defamation for comments made at a previous news conference at which the Crippen site was termed an "illegal dump."

In addition, the city has revoked Crippen's land-use permit. Crippen has sued to overturn that decision, saying that he should be able to run his public truck scale and his asphalt and concrete recycling business, which he says were not involved in the fire.

"What I would like to see them do next is get some sense and give us back our permit for the crusher," Crippen said.

City officials have given no indication that they are likely to do that unless under an order.

Meanwhile, Crippen's lawyer, Charles Doerksen, said that with or without a permit, Crippen is still operating his scale and still believes he has the right to conduct his other business activities as well.

"Our position is, and always has been, that the revocation of the [permit] does not affect it," Doerksen said. "We're entitled to do whatever the heck we want as far as the asphalt and concrete recycling" is concerned.

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Automakers showcase latest eco-friendly car technology

TERENCE CHEA, Associated Press Writer, published in the Los Angeles Times, September 25, 2003

General Motors Corp. calls it the Hy-wire: a car that puts fuel-cell technology in a futuristic body. It lacks foot pedals and a traditional steering wheel.

It scoots along on a skateboard-like chassis containing everything that runs the car, including hydrogen fuel cells that power an electric motor. The driver controls the Hy-wire by twisting handgrips to accelerate, squeezing them to brake and tilting them to steer. In a test drive, the ride was smooth and quiet.

"This is a reinvention of the automobile," said Scott Fosgard, GM's communications director for advanced technology vehicles.

The Hy-wire was one of the stars of the show this week when automakers displayed more than 100 vehicles powered by electric motors, hybrid engines, fuel cells and other eco-friendly technologies aimed at reducing pollution and boosting fuel economy.

Automakers say fuel cells could reach the market within a decade and eliminate today's internal-combustion engine as a source of air pollution.

"The industry is moving toward cleaner, lower-emission vehicles. Many alternatives for the consumer will be available as the industry continues its progress," said Ron Musgnug, project leader for the event, known as Challenge Bibendum -- named after the puffy mascot of sponsor Michelin.

But environmentalists say the auto show, complete with test-drive opportunities at Sonoma's Infineon Raceway just north of San Francisco, clouds the pollution debate.

Although encouraged by the long-term potential of these next-generation technologies, they complain that auto makers keep opposing higher fuel-efficiency standards -- and keep selling gas-guzzling SUVs.

"The auto companies are using these long-term solutions like hydrogen fuel cells to distract us from these near-term options," said Roland Hwang, a vehicle technology expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"If the auto industry was serious about reducing our petroleum dependency, it would support raising fuel-efficiency standards at the national level," Hwang added.

Carmakers are investing billions to develop more eco-friendly vehicles to meet stricter standards on auto emissions and fuel efficiency. But so far only hybrid cars, which combine battery power and the internal-combustion engine, have reached the market.

Environmentalists are impatient for more consumer choices.

"There will be a market for this technology, but it's still in its infancy stages," said Mike Wall, an automobile analyst at CSM Worldwide in Farmington Hills, Mich.

Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. introduced the first hybrid cars three years ago, but the market is still small because hybrids are relatively expensive and don't perform as well as conventional cars. The hybrid's cost outweighs savings from better mileage, Wall said.

"Fuel economy is not a driving factor for most consumers right now," Wall said. "What's selling is higher horsepower."

This week's event demonstrates the wide spectrum of alternative-fuel technology under development.

Several carmakers exhibited diesel-powered cars that are popular in Europe but have yet to break into the U.S. market outside commercial vehicles.

"People have this long-lasting impression of dirty, stinky diesel -- black smoke and a lot of noise," said Reg Modlin, director of environmental and energy planning at DaimlerChrysler AG. "We've made great strides with diesel in the last few years. We think the market will grow over time."

Modlin said diesel engines consume 30 percent less fuel than internal-combustion engines, release fewer emissions and "feel great to drive."

DaimlerChrysler featured several prototypes of diesel-powered vehicles, including cars that run on biodiesel, which combines diesel fuel with renewable resources such as corn. Next year, the company plans to introduce diesel-powered versions of its Jeep Cherokee and Mercedes Benz.

Almost all carmakers believe hydrogen fuel cells will power the cars of tomorrow. Fuel cells generate electricity from a chemical reaction between hydrogen and oxygen and release only water as waste.

General Motors is perhaps most bullish on fuel cells. The company has invested \$1 billion and spends more than a quarter of its research budget on fuel-cell development, Fosgard said.

"Our long-term vision is that the country will move toward a hydrogen economy, and fuel cells will steadily become the fuel of choice," Fosgard said.

While most car makers believe fuel cells won't hit the mainstream market for 15 to 20 years, GM targets 2010 as the year it wants to start selling fuel-cell vehicles, possibly including a version of the Hy-wire, Fosgard said. He said fuel cells are "taking the automobile out of the environmental debate."

Asked why GM opposes raising fuel-efficiency standards, Fosgard said the company doesn't have the money to develop fuel cells and more efficient gas-powered cars at the same time.

"As big as car companies are," he said, "there's a finite amount of resources."

Fresno Bee editorial:

The next step

Time to turn our attention to non-farm sources of Valley air pollution.

(Published Thursday, September 25, 2003, 5:15 AM)

In the wake of all the fanfare over the signing of a package of clean-air bills by the governor, it was useful to have a vivid reminder of what's at stake in this struggle: the health of Valley residents -- especially the children.

Across the Valley the past couple of days schoolchildren found themselves restricted in the activities they normally love at recess. Bad air quality mandated more sedate recess pursuits than suit most kids. And in the blunt words from Jackeline Zavala, a fourth-grader at Mayfair Elementary School in Fresno, "It's boring."

No doubt, but it's also necessary. Too much exercise outdoors on bad air days can have profoundly ill effects on our health. Children, of course, are even more vulnerable than adults.

The summer ozone problem is insidious. Even when the air quality doesn't reach the "unhealthful for all" level, it is doing damage. That damage accumulates over the years, and can lead to birth defects and all manner of respiratory illnesses. In short, our bad air can kill.

That's why all the energy that's been spent to get these clean-air bills passed and signed has been well-spent. It's only a beginning, and perhaps a small one at that.

But it taught us some important lessons about the difficulty of this struggle, how hard it is -- and will be -- for all of us to overcome ancient habits. The agriculture industry, target of many of these first legislative efforts, fought them nearly to a standstill -- and they aren't through fighting them, either. That's understandable. Ag is being asked to make sacrifices, real ones, and they're being asked to go first.

The rest of us aren't going to like it much when it's our turn -- which is now. It may be easier if we can just remember those kids who cannot play at recess.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Another in a series of Thursday editorials on the Valley's poor air quality. Today: small reminders of why this fight is important.

[Guest editorial, Merced Sun-Star, September 23, 2003:](#)

High speed rail system needed in Merced

Editor: Merced County supervisors should not even have to think about the decision to incorporate the high speed rail system into our community. They should do everything in their power to bring the high speed rail system to our county and create a station in the city of Merced.

Perhaps they do not truly understand the impact that high speed rail will have on the California community, despite the presentation by the High Speed Rail Authority. High speed rail is not just going to be a faster Amtrak system, but a revolutionary system of transportation for Californians, and it is important that our supervisors understand the gravity of their decision.

The future high speed rail system was compared to the Japanese Shinkansen and the Spanish Alaris. But it would be even better if they looked to the trains based on French TGV technology and the rail network built by the French National Railway, SNCF, over the last 22 years. (Yes, people around here are going to have to get over their hatred of the French.) The French TGV network is the most successful example of high speed rail implementation ever.

Environmental concerns over the proposed network are valid, but given our current environmental conditions in California, there is no reason anyone should complain about the prospects of a high speed rail system, because such a system would only improve our environment. High speed trains are electric, which means the train sets do not have any emissions, and they are much more efficient with energy per person than a car could ever be. Therefore, real environmentalists who truly understand the issues at stake should be proponents of high speed rail because it will decrease levels of pollution in our state.

Farmers who are worried about "valuable farm land" being paved over with concrete need to realize that this rail system first and foremost is not going to cover every acre of farmland in the county with tracks. The rail construction will be similar to the construction of a freeway, which only

cuts across a few acres of land in any given direction. And besides, given the fact that farmers today can't even make a profit in the US, given the increasing and irreversible trend in globalization, and given the burgeoning California population, I'm afraid that their land isn't going to be very valuable as farmland much longer (look at all the housing developments being built on old farmland as proof).

Ultimately, the high speed rail system WILL be constructed. This is given. What we must now decide is whether to be a part of it or to trail behind the rest of the state of California (and the rest of the developed world) as we always have. We have an economic interest in having the train come to Merced. We have the land at Castle for the train yard. We have a new research university being built. We have a growing population. We have every reason to have a high speed train here.

Our answer is obvious: The train should stop in the city of Merced (not Los Banos) and the land at Castle should be offered as a location for a train yard. The decision lies in the hands of the Merced County supervisors. Let us hope they can see past the end of their terms and realize that the future of California is high speed rail, and that the future is now.

Nicholas Stark
Merced

[Los Angeles Times editorial, September 25, 2003:](#)

Pin Him Down on Pollution

California's clean-air efforts, after years of hard-won progress, are faltering. It had been six years since ozone — an invisible gas and the main ingredient in smog — blanketed the Greater Los Angeles area as insidiously as it did this summer.

As you read this, however, President Bush's Environmental Protection Agency is aggressively trying to undermine California standards that might restore progress against those clouds of damaging smog. The EPA has called, for example, for eliminating California's unique ability under the federal Clean Air Act to set emissions standards higher than those of other states. Late last month, Justice Department officials sided with oil companies and engine manufacturers in a Supreme Court case challenging Southern California smog rules that require cleaner-running school buses, trash trucks, airport shuttles and taxis, street sweepers and utility trucks.

That's why the seemingly dry and political struggle going on in the Senate over whether to confirm former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt as the EPA's next administrator should matter to all Californians. Like former EPA Administrator Christie Whitman, who resigned four months ago, Leavitt is considered a moderate. So far, senators have unfortunately let Leavitt dodge questions about the administration's decisions to relax air pollution standards for aging coal-fired power plants, its orders to slow down Superfund toxic site cleanups and reversal of the president's campaign pledge to regulate carbon dioxide emissions.

The Senate should withhold its support until Leavitt addresses these questions more candidly than he did at Tuesday's confirmation hearing.

The Senate's task is more challenging than simply saying yea or nay to this nomination — whether to "love it or Leavitt," as pundits have quipped. Senators should recognize this as one of the few moments when they wield significant leverage over Bush's environmental policies.

Lawmakers should use that clout to pressure the Bush administration to level with the public about dangers related to pollution at New York City's ground zero, as Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-New York) has asked, and to support a proposal by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) to add carbon dioxide to the list of conventional pollutants — sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury — that the president's Clear Skies initiative proposes to regulate.

Compelling Leavitt and the Bush administration to go on record in responding to difficult questions is the least senators can do, given the rarity of this chance to demand some curbs on the sacking of environmental protections.