

Chemical signs on rail cars: Safety feature or terror target?

By Donald E. Coleman / The Fresno Bee

Monday, March 14, 2005 Fresno Fire Chief Randy Bruegman and others on the front line of emergency response are weighing in strongly against removing diamond-shaped signs from rail cars used to ship dangerous chemicals.

The small placards serve as critical labels to emergency responders, telling them what kind of hazard is posed by a derailment, spill or leak. But federal homeland security officials worry that they could invite acts of terrorism.

Possible removal of placards and other identifying marks from rail shipments of toxic inhalation hazards was one of several security upgrades being considered by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Department of Homeland Security.

Toxic inhalation hazard materials are gases or liquids known to be so toxic to humans that they pose a health hazard if released into the atmosphere. They include chlorine, nitric acid, sulfur dioxide and sulfuric acid.

"When the idea was first floated, the government felt that it was advertising to terrorists," Bruegman said. "Terrorists know the configuration of tank cars. Removing the placards is not going to deter terrorists from blowing things up." Bruegman said the color- and number-coded placards are vital because they help emergency personnel determine the contents of shipping tanks and decide what actions to take in case of a derailment, spill or explosion.

The type of materials involved dictates the size of the evacuation zone, the level of personal protective equipment and the need for additional or specialized personnel, fire officials say.

"We rely on those placards to give us a bird's-eye view of what's in the tankers," Bruegman said. "It gives us the ability to identify the product as quickly as possible."

Despite references to possible changes in an August 2004 Federal Register notice, a Transportation Security Administration spokeswoman said last week that the placarding system isn't being eliminated.

"We are not interested in removing the placards," said TSA spokeswoman Deirdre O'Sullivan. "It's a safety issue that first responders are aware of what is being carried. TSA is looking at whether there are alternatives. We wanted to lay out some of the issues."

O'Sullivan said the agency is still collecting responses and working on a final policy to safeguard shipments of toxic hazards.

The federal government is looking at the costs and benefits of several security enhancements. Those include improved security plans, enhanced requirements for temporary storage, strengthened tank car integrity, and implementation of tracking and communication systems.

Joe Delcambre, a public affairs specialist for the Transportation Department's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, said there is no timetable on when the results of the study will be revealed. "The intent is not to leave first responders without a method of identifying hazardous materials," Delcambre said. "We want to leave the door open for any new technology without diminishing identification by first responders."

Materials posing a toxic inhalation hazard play a vital role in life. They are used to purify water supplies, fertilize crops and build manufacturing components. They pose a special risk because their release in an urban area could endanger many people.

About 10 million tons of the materials are shipped by rail each year in the United States, according to the federal government.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs published the results of a survey last week that showed 98% of responding fire chiefs consider hazardous materials placards essential to their emergency responses.

"The removal of hazardous materials placards from rail cars and other containers continues to be a topic of discussion among homeland security officials," the association's statement said. "The IAFC opposes the termination of the current placarding system until a replacement system has been demonstrated to be effective and the fire service has been fully trained in its use."

The Ventura County Fire Protection District, the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Orange County Fire Authority and the Governor's Office of Emergency Services also have sent letters opposing placard removal.

Scores of freight trains rumble through Fresno each day, hauling chlorine for pools and water-treatment plants, and chemicals for crop fertilization among their cargo.

Between 35 and 40 freight trains a day use the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad tracks through the heart of Fresno, said Lena Kent, a BNSF spokeswoman.

They pass a hospital, schools, a nursing home and residential areas along the way. In 2001, more than 15,000 loads of hazardous materials moved through town. Kent said that information is not available now for security reasons.

"Railroads are the safest method of transporting hazardous materials," Kent said.

"About 99.9998% are without accidents. Rail accidents involving hazardous materials are down 87% since 1980. Rail is 16 times safer than shipping by truck."

About 15 trains a day use the tracks west of town, said John Bromley, a spokesman for the Union Pacific Railroad Co. He said hazardous materials comprise about 5% of everything his company hauls.

Tim Casagrande, manager of environmental health for the Fresno County Department of Community Health, said because of the agricultural nature of the region, a lot of chemicals are transported, most without incident.

He said the current system provides for awareness of potential risks, "I don't know if another system would ensure an accurate method of identification."

Grants aimed at addressing air quality

Nonprofit groups will use funds for advocacy effort and rural monitoring.

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Sunday, March 13, 2005

Two environmental grants awarded to nonprofit agencies in the central San Joaquin Valley will help people become clean-air advocates and allow rural residents to know how dirty the air is in their communities.

Everyone in the Valley should have the chance to express opinions about air quality to the decision makers in the state, says Carolina Simunovic, environmental health director at Fresno Metro Ministry, which advocates cooperation among various religious groups in Fresno and local service organizations to help solve community problems.

People are upset about having to use asthma inhalers to breathe, but don't know how to make their voices heard, Simunovic said.

An \$83,000 New Constituencies for the Environment grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation will train people how to become clean-air advocates, Simunovic said.

The focus is on helping low-income people and ethnic minorities "that need to be active and need to have a voice," she said. Latino Issues Forum will use a \$100,000 grant to increase the number of air-quality monitors in the Valley, said Chione Flegal, senior program manager at the public policy and advocacy institute in San Francisco.

The agency, which operates an office in Fresno, plans to start a monitoring program over the next couple of months in Huron, Flegal said.

"There is currently a gap in where [air-quality] information is being gathered, and these areas tend to be rural, low-income, predominately Latino communities," she said.

Eric Brown, a William and Flora Hewlett Foundation spokesman, said the goal is to help organizations that are working to solve air pollution problems in the Valley.

"Local groups can provide you with a real understanding of what's happening on the ground -- and they are very close to the community," Brown said. "They deserve a voice in the debate over air quality. And our hope is we'll be able to continue to provide them with resources to get these stories out."

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of Menlo Park has been awarding grants since 1966 to help solve environmental problems.

Allergies in full bloom

You won't suffer as much if you treat the symptoms quickly.

By Guy Keeler / The Fresno Bee

Sunday, March 13, 2005

Spring is in the air, but people with allergies aren't happy about it.

"My allergies are seasonal," says Karen Kitchen, 52, a health educator for a Fresno insurance company. "When winter starts turning into spring and the weather is warming up, I feel miserable."

"It's real frustrating," says Julie Tymn, 38, of Fresno, the mother of two young daughters who also have allergies. "It can be difficult in the spring, when you want to be outside and active. If I don't have my medication, I'm in a world of hurt. I'm constantly sneezing and my eyes are watering. It's uncomfortable."

Kitchen and Tymn are two of thousands of central San Joaquin Valley residents who suffer from allergies. They are among the estimated 20% to 25% of Americans whose immune systems overreact to common substances that don't bother most people. Although they have learned to cope with their condition, they say living with allergies isn't easy and the struggle never ends.

Part of the problem rests with the Valley's poor air quality, abundant foliage and warm weather, which make it difficult to escape the allergens that cause all the sniffing, sneezing, itching and coughing. "Except for a couple of months in the winter, there are trees pollinating year-round in the Valley," says Malik Baz, medical director of the Baz Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center in Fresno. "Then when the weather turns warm, people want to spend more time outside, and they inhale more pollen. For those with allergies, it's a Catch-22 situation."

The Valley's spring allergy season typically begins in mid-February to early March and runs through June. Another spike in pollen occurs in the fall and lasts from mid-September through November.

Baz says this year is likely to be worse than normal because of the wet winter. Abundant rainfall means more pollen-producing grass and weeds. Windy days also cause problems by blowing pollen in from outlying areas.

Except in rare instances of severe reactions, allergies to airborne particles such as pollen grains, droppings and body particles from dust mites and cockroaches, mold spores, and microscopic bits of skin and saliva from dogs and cats are not life-threatening.

"The allergies won't kill you, but they can make you feel like you want to die," says Baz.

Allergies occur when the immune system responds aggressively to things that are ordinarily harmless, says A.M. Aminian, medical director of the Allergy Institute in Fresno and the former national public information chairman for the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

Normally, the body's white blood cells vigorously attack bacteria and viruses and recognize that pollen and other airborne bits of junk are not a serious threat. But in people with allergies, the

white cells react strongly to the harmless stuff by producing a powerful antibody called IgE, or immunoglobulin E.

The IgE is concentrated in the nose, eyes and lungs, and binds to pollen grains or other allergens when they enter the body. This signals nearby mast cells to release chemicals to fight the perceived "invasion." These chemicals, which include histamine, are what cause the sneezing, runny nose and itchy eyes common to many allergic reactions.

Although symptoms usually can be controlled with over-the-counter or prescription drugs, Aminian says allergies never should be taken lightly. In some cases, allergies can lead to asthma, he says. Delayed treatment also can lead to poor performance at work or school.

Though their symptoms may appear minor to others, many people with allergies endure a diminished quality of life.

"About one-third don't get a good night's sleep," says Aminian. "They experience what we call a shallow sleep and wake up feeling tired. This affects adults at work and can affect the academic performance of students at school."

Children who have more than six colds a year or have colds that typically last more than 10 days may have allergies, says Aminian. Unexplained coughing or a reluctance to participate in physical activity are other signs of potential allergy problems.

Adults who experience frequent colds, a constant runny nose, lots of sinus drainage, an unexplained cough or heaviness in the chest after physical exertion may have allergies.

"Go see your doctor," says Aminian. "There's no reason to suffer and try to tough it out."

Tymn says she was constantly getting sick as a child.

"I've had allergies all my life," she says. "Cedar and olive trees are the worst, but I'm allergic to everything in bloom. I also had asthma when I was young. When things got bad, my parents would take me to the emergency room."

Today, Tymn says, medical treatment options for people with allergies are more effective than when she was growing up. Prescription drugs allow her to keep symptoms under control.

"But I have to be very diligent," she says. "I have to make sure I've got my medication and nasal spray. You're never safe."

Kitchen says her allergy symptoms are relatively mild compared to those of other people. She uses a prescription nasal spray and over-the-counter drugs to keep symptoms at bay.

"Everyone in our office has allergies," she says. "We have one staff member who lost her voice. Flowering trees bother me, and heavily scented plants like jasmine get to me."

After the spring blooming period, Kitchen's symptoms decline. But she knows they will return during the next blooming period and she must start taking her medication before they kick in.

"If I catch my symptoms early enough, I can control them," she says.

Use over-the-counter allergy medications early because they take about 10 days to work, says Baz.

The first line of defense against allergies is to avoid known allergens. Depending on what triggers your symptoms, this could mean removing offending trees and shrubs from your home landscape, eliminating damp, dark areas where mold can grow, and either getting rid of pets or not letting them in the house.

Avoid outdoor activity between 4 and 10 a.m., when pollen count is the highest. Pay attention to the air quality forecast from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which is published on the back page of The Bee's local and state news section, and try not to be outdoors noon to 6 p.m. on days when the air quality is unhealthy.

Keep windows in your car and home closed. Wash your hands and face and change clothes after coming indoors from outdoor activities.

The second line of defense is to take medicine to control the symptoms. Aminian says over the past 20 years, a number of over-the-counter and prescription drugs have been developed that are practical to take and have no major side effects.

But since the drugs do not eliminate the cause of allergies, they must be taken as long as symptoms are present.

Finally, in cases where it is impossible for a person to avoid a known allergen, an allergist may recommend immunotherapy, commonly called "allergy shots."

In this treatment, regular injections are given over a period of five years to help the body build tolerance to allergens and to stimulate the production of different antibodies that help neutralize allergens before they trigger the production of IgE.

Immunotherapy produces good results in 85% to 90% of patients, says Aminian. Allergists continue to monitor patients after the injections are completed because it is possible for a person to lose immunity to allergens over time.

"The best advice I can give is to develop a good relationship with a doctor who really pays attention to your allergy problems," says Tymn. "It makes no sense to go on being completely miserable."

For printed material on allergies and how to find relief from the symptoms they cause, call the American Lung Association of Central California at (559) 222-4800.

Weekend air pollution warning

Spike in particulate matter is forecast.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Saturday, March 12, 2005

Air authorities are warning residents this weekend about an unusual spike in potentially dangerous tiny bits of pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced Friday that people with sensitive lungs should be cautious about outdoor activities this weekend.

"This is not typical for this time of year," said supervising meteorologist Evan Shipp. "Normally, we have northwest breezes moving the air right now."

Readings indicate Kern, Tulare and Fresno counties are most affected. A monitoring station in Fresno showed a particle pollution reading above the federal health standard. Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties had moderate levels.

The air district is advising people to check the air quality report online at www.valleyair.org or by phone at (800) 766-4463 before planning outdoor activities. The pollution specks can evade the body's defenses, lodging in the lungs and even entering the blood system. Such pollution has been connected with heart problems and higher death rates.

The specks, called PM 2.5, are normally a midwinter problem when tule fog fills the air and holds pollution in place. The Valley, stretching from Stockton to Bakersfield, has been one of the worst places in the country for such pollution.

The particles now are building in the atmosphere during spring-like conditions because the air is caught in a stable weather pattern, Shipp said. The pattern is part of the reason residents are seeing morning fog.

"We have a very large high pressure system over the entire state," Shipp said. "It's a complicated situation, but we have little air movement down on the Valley floor."

Shipp said forecasts hint that the problem might clear up by Tuesday.

Officials have not yet evaluated the microscopic pollutants, but they know the particles include ammonium nitrate.

Such particles form when ammonia and nitrogen combine in the air. There are many sources of ammonia, but the largest in the Valley is dairies. Cars and other combustion sources emit oxides of nitrogen.

"We really don't know the source precisely," Shipp said. "This would be a very good episode to study further."

Air district issues alert over high level of pollution

The Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, March 12, 2005

While the forecast calls for a sunny weekend, not everyone will be enjoying it. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an unhealthy air quality alert Friday.

While many areas in the valley are experiencing unhealthy air, Kern County has seen the highest levels of particulate matter.

On Friday air quality was 153 and today it's expected to be 154, meaning unhealthy for everyone. The unusually high levels have air district officials perplexed.

"We don't really know what's causing it. We usually don't see this type of air pollution until the summer months," said Jaime Holt, public education administrator for the air district.

The district's meteorologist is conducting tests to see where the particulate matter is coming from, Holt said.

But the findings won't be available until Monday at the earliest, she said.

The levels of PM2.5 -- the smallest form of particulate matter -- have been going up over the past few days. Air district officials expect the levels to rise throughout the weekend.

When levels reach the unhealthy range of 151-200, the district advises everyone to cut back or reschedule strenuous activities.

Those with heart and lung conditions should avoid all strenuous activity.

The American Lung Association also recommends avoiding congested streets and rush-hour traffic.

It also suggests avoiding mid-day or afternoon exercise and strenuous outdoor work.

2 Ports Split on How to Clear the Air

L.A. and Long Beach share a bay but fight pollution in different ways. Environmentalists and area residents express their concerns.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Sunday, March 13, 2005

The nation's two largest seaports are pursuing different strategies to reduce air pollution, worrying environmental officials and residents who say that the lack of coordination could harm efforts to clean the air throughout the Los Angeles Basin.

Some fear the division will lead to conflicting regulations and a scenario in which dirtier ships could choose the port with weaker standards.

Taken together, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which are side by side in San Pedro Bay, are the largest source of air pollution in Southern California. And the decades-old rivalry between them is evident as they forge separate plans to clean the air.

The two ports recently conducted expensive surveys of the pollution they produce, using the same consulting firm. But one port chose to study the year 2001, and the other 2002, making comparisons impossible.

The ports are using different methods to measure pollution.

And Los Angeles has asked regional air regulators to help craft its plan, while Long Beach has not.

In the most dramatic sign of bad communication, Long Beach declined a recent invitation from Los Angeles to join in its much-publicized clean-air effort, spurning the opportunity to develop a unified approach.

The gulf between the ports became clear last Tuesday as Long Beach City Council members struggled to decipher the air-pollution plan forged by a Los Angeles task force five days earlier. No one from the port or city of Long Beach attended the task force's sessions, which had been held six miles away.

The lack of coordination is frustrating residents and environmental officials, who point out that the tons of diesel fumes and nitrogen oxides from the two ports do not respect geographic boundaries; together they cause life-threatening respiratory problems across the region.

"It all goes into the same air," said Peter M. Greenwald, senior policy advisor at the South Coast Air Quality Management District. He said he fears that shippers would use whatever port has less-stringent rules, undermining his agency's clean-air efforts.

San Pedro activist Janet Gunther implored Long Beach officials last week to work with Los Angeles. "To continue denying you are one port becomes a little bit ridiculous. Look at a map! It's just one port."

Some observers, however, think the variances between the approaches taken by the two ports are largely cosmetic.

"For the most part, I would argue that the differences are very minor," said T.L. Garrett, vice president of the Pacific Merchant Shipping Assn., which represents owners and operators of U.S. and foreign vessels operating in the Pacific Basin.

"I do think that the programs are in sync with one another," said Garrett, who until January was in charge of the air resources section in the environmental planning division at the Port of Los Angeles.

Neither port has formally compared evolving plans, although Long Beach planners are assembling a point-by-point comparison in response to a City Council request.

But officials are nonetheless sparring over who has the better plan.

Long Beach port officials are dismissive of much of the Los Angeles plan, saying it contains many measures that are likely to become state or federal regulations.

But Los Angeles officials bristle at that comment, contending that they will put these measures in place regardless of whether they become law.

In addition, Long Beach officials say their plan is more realistic.

"It's my opinion that we're less words and more action," said Robert Kanter, Long Beach port planning director. For example, he said, Los Angeles planners are eyeing the potential for electrifying the Alameda Corridor to reduce railroad emissions. Neither port has the power to accomplish such a project, he said.

"There are some radical ideas, pie-in-the-sky ideas, that I don't think are likely to take place in the near term," he said.

That characterization irks Ralph Appy, director of port environmental management in Los Angeles, who notes that his port invited its rival to join its six-month planning effort.

"If they thought this was all pie in the sky, they should have been over here. They could have set us all straight," he said.

Port air pollution is attracting considerable attention, especially in the wake of studies showing a high risk of respiratory ailments in the port area. Rapid growth at both ports, spurred largely by imports from Asia, has increased emissions of particulate matter and nitrogen oxides from ships, trains and trucks. The problem is increasing not only near the port but also along freeways and near warehouses as far east as Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Ports and shippers are adopting cleaner methods of moving cargo, but those advancements are outstripped by growth, and cargo shipments are expected to triple by 2025.

Staff members at both ports say they work together frequently, as in their current effort to bring cleaner-burning locomotives to the ports.

Still, the two remain fierce competitors, and Los Angeles recently edged ahead of Long Beach to seize the title of the nation's largest seaport. Los Angeles wooed the shipping giant Maersk Sealand away from Long Beach in 2002, and its rival scored a coup a year later by bringing Carnival Cruise Lines to Long Beach.

Now that rivalry is surfacing again.

Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn last summer charged a task force with reducing port pollution to 2001 levels. The draft plan approved March 3 would employ 65 measures to reach the 2001 goal sometime between 2009 and 2011. The group is still researching the costs of those measures and what legislation would be needed to implement them.

The Long Beach policy, by contrast, does not list specific anti-smog measures but outlines major goals that the port has set, including "protect the community from harmful side effects of port operations" and "employ best available technology to minimize environmental impacts."

At the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Matt Haber, deputy director of the regional air division, said that although the two ports are pursuing different approaches, their objectives are the same. He commended the new Long Beach policy, noting the emphasis on "best available technology."

But Long Beach council members — clearly wary of trailing Los Angeles — grilled their port representatives last week to explain how their new "green port" policy compared with L.A.'s. Some were puzzled by the absence of concrete pollution reduction goals, a concern echoed by environmentalists and residents in the audience.

"The report I heard tonight has no sense of urgency or immediacy," complained Regina Taylor, a resident of Long Beach's Wrigley area.

Council member Rae Gabelich asked port representatives to explain why they did not accept the invitation from Los Angeles. One official responded that she was unaware an invitation was delivered. Another said he did not know about the meeting last week.

Gabelich was not appeased.

"If we can't even keep track of each other's meetings," she retorted, "how are we going to keep track of goals and objectives?"

A Long Beach port official promised Friday that a representative would attend the next meeting of the Los Angeles task force.

Some Long Beach critics also point out that the Los Angeles port invited the regulatory "heavies" — the Air Quality Management District, the state Air Resources Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — to participate. The agencies, whose support could be crucial in implementing plans, played a major role in reviewing technologies and crafting measures.

"It's pretty clear that the port of L.A. has involved us to a greater degree in their decision-making. We think that's a good thing," the AQMD's Greenwald said.

He added that he is seriously concerned that the absence of coordination will lead to unequal standards. "We do think it can undermine the controls to have differing levels of stringency," he said.

Air district officials cite, by way of example, the Los Angeles proposal that ships arriving at the port slow down 40 miles offshore to reduce air pollution, a measure that could become mandatory. Both ports now ask ships to voluntarily slow down 20 miles away.

The Los Angeles plan would subsidize cleaner vehicles using both ports. The port already has allocated more than \$21 million to a regional program that has replaced 350 trucks.

The Long Beach port has not contributed. Clean-air activists say that places the burden unfairly on Los Angeles, because many of the participating truckers serve both ports.

Long Beach port spokesman Art Wong said the port had planned to contribute to the program to offset emissions from a pier expansion that has been delayed. He did not rule out future support.

"These are things we are exploring," Wong said. "This 'green' policy says we want leadership in environmental protection, and we have to figure out how to do that." LOS ANGELES (AP) — The nation's two largest ports are forging different plans to fight air pollution, raising fears that their lack of coordination could harm efforts to clean up Southern California's smog.

Others worry the divide will lead to conflicting regulations and allow dirtier ships to choose whichever port has weaker standards.

So far, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have used differing methods to measure pollution and conducted expensive surveys of the pollution caused during different years. Los Angeles has asked regional air regulators to help craft its plan, but Long Beach has not.

Additionally, Long Beach spurned an opportunity to develop a unified approach to reducing smog when it declined to join Los Angeles' clean-air effort.

The gulf in strategies has frustrated residents and environmental officials, who note that the tons of diesel fumes and nitrogen oxides from the two ports don't respect geographic boundaries.

"It all goes into the same air," said Peter M. Greenwald, senior policy adviser at the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Long Beach port officials have dismissed parts of Los Angeles' plan.

"It's my opinion that we're less words and more action," said Robert Kanter, Long Beach port planning director. "There are some radical ideas, pie-in-the-sky ideas, that I don't think are likely to take place in the near term."

Ralph Appy, director of port environmental management in Los Angeles, responded that his port invited its rival to join its six-month planning effort.

Vigil an Outlet for EV1 Fans

Enthusiasts hope their 24-hour presence at a GM facility in Burbank will change the firm's decision to scrap the last of its electric cars.

By Patricia Ward Biederman, Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Saturday, March 12, 2005

The vigil in Burbank is now in its fourth week, a period made miserable at times by torrential rains. Twenty-four hours a day, day in and day out, a dedicated group of enthusiasts has been camped out in front of the General Motors' facility here.

The group includes actors, engineers, automotive consultants and just plain car nuts. To a person, they fret about what fossil fuels do to the environment. Now sleep deprived from pulling night shifts on the curb, the protesters are here to save not whales or some other endangered species but 71 of the last of GM's legendary electric car, the EV1.

The threatened vehicles sit in a parking lot behind the building, where a GM employee plugs them in from time to time to keep them road-ready.

General Motors made 1,000 of the revolutionary clean cars in the 1990s, leasing most of them. In August, the last lease was up, and GM took back the vehicles. Since then, the Burbank protesters say, the company has been crushing the cars in Mesa, Ariz.

"We estimate they've already destroyed 800 of them," said Chelsea Sexton, one of the organizers of the protest that began Feb. 16. Dozens of EV1 enthusiasts have offered to buy the remaining vehicles for about \$25,000 each.

Dave Barthmuss, a spokesman for GM in Thousand Oaks, said he understood the affection the protesters have for the EV1 but that there wasn't a big enough market to support the car.

"The loyalists who are gathered in Burbank are very passionate about the vehicle, but there simply weren't enough of them at any given time to make the EV1 a viable business opportunity for GM to pursue long term," he said. "Eight hundred leases in a four-year time frame does not a business make."

He said GM did not plan to sell the remaining cars to the demonstrators. One reason is that the model has 2,000 unique parts, many no longer available, raising safety concerns.

Before Sexton became an automotive consultant, whose specialty is electric vehicles, she helped market the EV1 for GM. Best of all, she got to drive it.

The battery-powered coupe was easy to pitch, said Sexton, even after she told customers that it had to be plugged in and its batteries recharged every 140 miles. All she had to do was get the customer behind the wheel: "It's fast and fun, and it will beat a Viper," she said.

The car was governed so that it couldn't go faster than 80 mph, but one set a land-speed record for an electric car at 183 mph, she recalled.

As the 29-year-old activist sat shaded by a beach umbrella, a teenager pulled to the curb in his 2005 hybrid Toyota Prius. The 17-year-old Burbank resident said he was attracted by the group's signs and his concerns about conventional cars and air quality.

"Why are they crushing the cars?" he asked.

"That's exactly what we're asking," Sexton said.

Sexton said that she and the others trying to save the remaining EV1s (EV stands for electric vehicle) should not be written off as mere enthusiasts, smitten with the car's cool technology and compact good looks.

GM proved that it could build a viable electric car, and now it has turned its back on its own creation, she said.

"This is an issue of an American public that deserves the choice to drive clean cars and to be independent from oil and to have clean air," she said. "The EV1 is a symbol of what's possible. It's a betrayal of the American dream for GM to crush these cars."

With financial incentives from both the state and federal governments, GM was the first major U.S. auto company to develop a truly clean car with the EV1.

In 1990, California's Air Resources Board announced its zero-emission vehicle mandate, requiring 2% of all cars sold in California to be nonpolluting by 1998. Since then, the mandate has been amended to favor the development of low-emission vehicles. That paved the way for hybrid vehicles and doomed the nonpolluting electric car, Sexton and other EV1 supporters say.

Today, hybrids like the Prius have long waiting lists and demand premium prices, but not a single major supplier offers an electric car to American consumers. Thus, the demand for the few vehicles like the EV1 that remain.

Barthmuss said GM was recycling the bulk of each EV1, "not simply crushing them and sending them to landfills." Some are going to museums and universities, where engineering students can dissect them like cadavers.

He said GM was building on what it learned from creating electric cars to produce its new hybrids and the hydrogen-powered fuel-cell models it plans to market within the next few years.

But this is little consolation to EV1 enthusiasts. Actress Alexandra Paul, who starred in TV's long-running "Baywatch," is one of dozens who has offered to buy the remaining battery-powered cars. She said she would also release GM from any warranty or liability in connection with the car.

She leased a hunter-green model on Dec. 5, 1996. Hers was the first EV1 made available to the public — No. 37.

"It was an incredible machine," said Paul, who used it as her only car until GM declined to renew her lease in 2001. "It's the cleanest car in the world, and, not only that, it was incredibly fast and quiet."

Virtually the only maintenance the car required was rotating the tires and checking the fluids.

Paul said she had been driving electric cars since 1990, the year after the tanker Exxon Valdez went aground and spilled oil off Alaska.

"I realized I was part of the problem," the Westside resident said. She began driving cars that had been converted to battery operation.

Paul described herself as an environmentalist, not a car lover: "When I was 7, I wrote to President Nixon and asked him to stop pollution."

Paul Scott, who sells visual effects to the entertainment industry, also helped organize the vigil. The 52-year-old Santa Monica resident said he was outraged that "the auto industry is ignoring what is the single best solution to get us off oil."

All six of the major auto companies that developed electric cars have abandoned the technology, he said.

He doesn't believe GM's contention that it couldn't sell enough of the electric cars to make a profit: "If GM had used the marketing budget that they have for the Hummer for the EV1 and vice versa, which car do you think would have sold?"

The protesters aren't giving up. They have enlisted the help of state Assemblywoman Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills) and state Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica). This week, the legislators sent a letter to GM Chairman and CEO Rick Wagoner expressing concern that "you are now destroying the very cars subsidized by taxpayers." They urged the company to sell the last few EV1s "to people who want to use them to help clean up California's air."

Sexton, who met her husband when he was an EV1 technician, said she was proud that their 6-year-old son, Christopher, doesn't remember a time before electric cars.

"He's broken-hearted that we can't drive a red EV1 home" from Burbank, Sexton said. "And I'm going to stay here until he gets his wish."

[Fresno Bee commentary, Sunday, March 13, 2005:](#)

Let's bring out the best in one another

By Mike Fuller

I'm pagan and proud of it. I'm American but find it increasingly difficult to be proud of that. As a pagan, everything is sacred. As a result, I try to treat the place where I live and work, mother earth, father sky, people, plants and animals with reverence and resolve.

As is true for few, narrowing the gaps between my ethics and actions is paramount to my enjoyment of and purpose in life. I'm human and sometimes don't live up to my own standards or ethics. But the older I get, the more my actions match my values.

When one considers our responses to conditions at home and abroad, the differences between what we say and do are worth examination. The gaps between pride and practice are what I suggest we consider.

When one takes a close look at our country and culture, rather than right-mindedness or reciprocity, the gods worshiped most seem to be money, materialism and war. As a result, the gaps between America's ethics and actions appear as wide as the Valley is long.

America's foreign policies and international aid are not the focus of this opinion piece. The living conditions we're creating in the Valley are. Rather than create and sustain a better quality of life, we're missing the opportunity. If designed differently, cities in the Valley could be healthier, more accessible, attractive, comfortable, cost- and energy-efficient. Why they're not is antithetical.

Practical and proper

Managing our desires for mobility with frequent trips in cars and trucks is manic when one considers the impacts. Air pollution and poor health are the result of antithetical actions, which illustrate the gaps between our behavior, what's practical and proper.

As I consider the conditions we've created, the vast expanse of noisy, oily and dusty roads, highways, parking lots, suburban sprawl, strip malls and industrial agriculture adds much fuel to my concerns. The health of rivers and streams flowing from the Sierra to and through the Valley has been degraded by dams, urban and agricultural encroachment and runoff. In my early years as an outdoorsman, I drank directly out of these waterways. I wouldn't even think of doing so now.

I'm also concerned about the high levels of asthma, obesity, diabetes, cancer, poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality that exist in the Valley. In my opinion as a pagan, the impacts of these conditions on children are unconscionable and unethical.

It's not my intent, but asking Americans to consider the morality of the conditions we're creating might make some people mad. If your defenses are triggered to the point where you want to silence, sequester or shoot me, please don't forget that I, too, am an American.

As an American who values the nature of our Constitution, the separation of church and state and freedom of speech are human rights worth respecting and protecting. The same is true for the pursuit of happiness, liberty and justice for all. Reverence for everyone and everything is the best way I can put it as a self-improving pagan.

My commitment to narrowing gaps between my ethics and actions is driven by my reverence for the quality of life, which is possible here. The San Joaquin Valley is a region rich with resources, including good people, weather, water and soil. Rather than perpetuate hypocrisy, this Valley could be a healthier and more ethical place to live.

Rather than pick a fight, if we focus on the values we share, your world view or religion and my perspective as a pagan may not seem much different. Yet, if you view my earth-based spirituality to be disrespectful of your religion or you feel I'm misrepresenting America or Americans, please respond.

As a means of protecting and respecting freedom, I encourage letters to the editor, direct action and participatory democracy. Think globally if you wish, but please act locally.

Can-do attitudes

Despite the contradictions in American culture, I appreciate caring and can-do attitudes. Though I'm constantly questioning commitments to core beliefs, I'm more than happy when my concerns are proven wrong or my actions proven hypocritical.

My goal is to bring out the good in all of us, including myself and the place where we live. I'm not always right nor are my behaviors beyond reproach. Therefore, I look forward to receiving help from others as we bridge the gaps between our values and acting upon them. The outcomes should be nothing short of realistic, enjoyable, economical and ethical.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Saturday, March 12, 2005:](#)

A recent letter to the editor from the chairman of the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition suggested a warning system using flags at schools to alert people to stay inside on bad-air days. We hope civic groups and others will consider contributing; the cost is \$90 per school for a set of color-coded flags. (Send checks to the coalition in care of Health Services Agency, Attn: Laura Shinn, 1030 Scenic Drive, Modesto 95353.) By one estimate there are more than 13,500 children in the county with asthma and 12,080 others at risk. Scary numbers.

[Letter to the The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, March 14, 2005:](#)

Refinery noise constant

In my earlier letter, I failed to indicate we have lived in the same house, same address, about two miles from the Shell Refinery for 25 years, since 1978.

There was no notable noise at that time -- didn't even know it was there except for the stack fire at that time.

Then in October 2004, this roaring mid-pitch sound (like a shop vac) was heard constantly -- especially disturbing at night inside the house -- and of course outside too.

It was tracked down to the refinery. I had called the refinery a couple of times regarding the noise and time element. They said they would check to see if there had been any change or problem.

They were gracious to call back, but nothing seemed evident to them. They had returned my calls and that was appreciated.

Consequently, moving has been one of the considerations, among others. However, I love my home and the area. (At least Mesa Marin gets a break. The refinery noise is constant.) But I am sure something will work out -- for better or for worse.

-- DARLEEN STRAUSS, Bakersfield

[Letters to The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, March 13, 2005:](#)

Plant a shade tree

Here in California we celebrate Arbor Day on Luther Burbank's birthday. It is my favorite holiday because we can do something good for our communities and the environment. It is also a day that reaffirms our hopes for the future.

Some years ago a friend gave me a shirt that said, "If you want to be happy for a season, plant a garden, if you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a tree." I hope that many people will follow this advice. Our cities, schools and roadways could be much more pleasant by having more trees. We used to call this beautification. However, we have often neglected this term of late.

Trees can provide needed shade that can reduce air conditioning bills.

They can also help lessen air pollution by slowly blowing particulate matter and absorbing carbon dioxide.

People often say that there isn't enough money. However tree planting really doesn't cost that much.

The real expense comes in watering, tree care and maintenance.

These things do need to be considered. Please be careful when you plant a tree to make sure you do so in an appropriate place.

There are many organizations that are willing to provide information and help such as the National Arbor Day Foundation, American Forests, Tree People, local nurseries and Urbantree.org.

-- JOHN R. MILLER, Ducor

Community Effort Needed

Since we have the worst air quality in California, it makes sense that we should be making a conscious, citywide community effort to plant more trees and to nurture and cultivate the ones that we have.

Instead, our trees are falling victim to ugly, guillotine-style "toppings" and an insane effort to strip the "messy" leaves from trees.

Sadly, many property owners are choosing efficient "cleanliness" over the very gentle, seasoned nature of trees that have inspired poets for ages, and provided adults with fond memories of jumping into piles of raked leaves.

I hope we can educate the public on the beauty, strength and serenity of trees and the obvious benefit they provide in terms of controlling and improving noise, air pollution and odor in our area.

-- ANGIE GIA WENTWORTH, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Sunday, March 13, 2005:](#)

Air quality flags a good idea

In response to the letter "Fly air-quality alert flags at schools" (Feb. 28), this situation needs to be addressed and the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition needs all the help it can get. The Central Valley has the worst quality of air in the country and we need to protect children from being exposed to harsh conditions.

Our exposure to the air is bad enough as it is, so let's try to keep the children in better health. Allowing a system of warning flags being flown daily at county schools would not only help the children, but also inform the public how the air quality is. It is a decision that should not hurt the schools financially with only a \$90 price tag per school. If schools want the best for the children, then they must help out in every way.

DEAN FREITAS

Modesto