

EPA sued for Valley air ruling

Earthjustice files motion, saying the region doesn't deserve clean status.

Bee staff and wire services

The Fresno Bee, Friday, December 29, 2006

Environmental and community groups are suing the federal government, claiming it ignored data showing high levels of airborne dust, smoke and soot in the San Joaquin Valley when it ruled in October that the region met clean air standards.

The environmental law group Earthjustice filed the lawsuit on Wednesday in the San Francisco-based 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on behalf of the Latino Issues Forum, Medical Advocates for Healthy Air and three chapters of the Sierra Club.

Plaintiffs are asking the court to review the Environmental Protection Agency's finding that the Valley's air was no longer polluted by PM-10 — tiny pollution particles just 10 microns wide — because it hadn't violated the PM-10 standard in three years.

The plaintiffs said they also planned to file a separate petition today with the EPA asking the federal agency to reconsider its own finding.

"It's very important that the EPA withdraw this finding because the lungs of the people living in the Valley are at stake," said Paul Cort, an Earthjustice attorney. "As long as that finding is out there, the EPA and the air district get to wash their hands and say the work is done."

EPA spokesman Mark Merchant said Thursday that the agency could not comment on pending litigation.

In October, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District cited the EPA finding as a major cleanup milestone for its eight-county territory, which is considered one of the country's most polluted air basins. Local cleanup efforts for PM-10, which is linked to asthma and heart problems, have included spraying water and slowing traffic on unpaved country roads, as well as implementing fireplace restrictions.

Environmentalists said those efforts weren't sufficient.

Environmental groups previously had accused the EPA of ignoring data from certain air pollution monitors in making its decision because the monitors were not officially part of the federally sanctioned network.

The new accusation involves three other monitors, which the EPA does recognize.

The three monitors are in Corcoran, Oildale and Bakersfield.

The Earthjustice petition to the EPA said high levels of small particles were detected at the three monitors on Sept. 22, about a month before the agency ruled that the Valley had met the standard for the prior three years.

But the agency and local regulators dismiss the Sept. 22 readings as resulting from high winds and nearby wildfires.

"They're ignoring at least one monitoring station that they should be utilizing, and now even the ones that they insist on limiting their observations to are showing violations," said Kevin Hall, air quality chairman for the Sierra Club Tehipite chapter, one of the groups represented in the Earthjustice action.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Planning Director Scott Nester defended the EPA's action and said that the district is providing documentation to justify it.

"We believe that the Sept. 22 numbers are solely due to some natural events," Nester said.

"Weather sometimes just completely overwhelms the [air pollution] controls that we put in place."

Hall complained that even if the environmental groups prevail in court, the EPA's October finding will put an indefinite hold on further controls.

"Our fate is in the hands of the Bush EPA," he said. "Their strategy is to create delay through tactics such as false findings of attainment" of the standard.

The agency's action, he said, "stops the rulemaking and pushes us into the courts for one, two or three years to hash this thing out."

But Nester said the groups should have waited to file their newest objection until the district submits its documentation on whether nature caused the high September readings. That submittal, due by March, will be subject to public review and comment, he said.

Groups contend EPA ignored air data

By Garance Burker

The Associated Press

Published in the Contra Costa Times, Modesto Bee and other papers

Friday, December 29, 2006

SAN FRANCISCO — Environmental and community groups are suing the federal government, claiming that it ignored data showing high levels of dust, smoke and soot in the San Joaquin Valley when it ruled in October that the region met clean-air standards.

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"It's very important that the EPA withdraw this finding because the lungs of the people living in the valley are at stake," said Paul Cort, an Earthjustice attorney. "As long as that finding is out there, the EPA and the air district get to wash their hands and say the work is done."

EPA spokesman Mark Merchant said Thursday that the agency could not comment.

In October, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District cited the ruling as a major cleanup milestone for its eight-county territory, one of the country's most polluted air basins.

Local cleanup efforts for PM-10, which is linked to asthma and heart problems, have included spraying water and slowing traffic on unpaved roads, as well as implementing fireplace restrictions.

Environmentalists said those efforts haven't been sufficient and said air monitors in Bakersfield and Corcoran showed dust and soot violations in September.

The district is working to document that those measurements were caused by soot from Southern California wildfires and high winds that kicked up dust in the valley, said Scott Nester, the air district's director of planning.

The air district declined to comment on the specifics of the lawsuit until agency lawyers have had the chance to review it, Nester said.

The plaintiffs said they also planned to file a separate petition today with the EPA, asking the federal agency to reconsider its own finding.

EPA pollution decision challenged

Stockton Record, Friday, December 29, 2006

SAN FRANCISCO - Conservation groups are challenging the Environmental Protection Agency's declaration earlier this year that the San Joaquin Valley has met standards for particulate matter pollution.

The EPA said in October that the Valley had not violated the standard since 2003, allowing it to comply with federal rules that require three years of clean air. The government called it a "significant achievement" for the Valley's notoriously foul air.

But environmental groups led by Earthjustice say the EPA used data gleaned from areas in the Valley where the air is cleanest. They also say the government ignored a violation that took place in September, just before the EPA issued its finding.

The groups filed a lawsuit at the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco and also petitioned the EPA to reconsider its decision.

Particulate matter is made up of tiny particles less than the width of a human hair. The particles, which come from soot, dust and ash, can cause respiratory problems, heart attacks and lung cancer.

Sludge plans shift

Company to ask Kern planners to extend period of time that it can stockpile compost

BY JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Dec. 29, 2006

Even before the giant new sludge plant outside Taft is up and running, its owners want to change the rules.

Industry leader Synagro's composting facility will start taking treated human and industrial sewage in the next few weeks.

By March, it's expected to be running at full steam, taking chipped green waste from the city of Bakersfield and other sources, mixing it with treated sewage sludge and turning out compost, said Synagro facility manager John Goodwin.

But the facility may open to a chorus of opposition.

Synagro is asking to modify the permit that allows it to operate, a regulatory hurdle that Goodwin said could cramp production ability.

The facility can currently only stockpile finished compost for seven days, according to Bill O'Rullian of the Kern County Environmental Health Services division.

O'Rullian said the company has asked to increase that stockpile hold period to three months.

Goodwin said the issue will go before the Kern County Planning Commission for a hearing in January.

The request for a change to the company's operations has gotten Taft City Councilman Cliff Thompson steaming mad.

"They've promised us that this composting would not be there for more than seven days," he said.

He feels like the company has gone back on its word to him.

"They've lied to the community and they've tried to buy their way in," he said. "I've never supported it. I'll never support it. I feel they made a deal and they need to stick to it."

Goodwin said Synagro never promised never to ask for an expansion of its stockpile hold period. The company needs the time, he said, because it must move most of the compost it creates out of Kern County in order to comply with Measure E, the county's sludge ban.

Thompson was one of a group of people who opposed a 2005 Synagro request for a \$35 million low-interest loan to build the composting facility.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors rejected the request.

But it didn't stop construction of the facility, which had been given an operation permit by the county more than two years before.

Goodwin said he understands Kern County's sensitivity to sludge.

"Biosolids are a touchy issue up here," he said. "For the people who are against land application of biosolids, this type of facility is the answer."

Kern County voters overwhelmingly passed Measure E, a ban on the application of sludge on farmland, in June.

Measure E, Goodwin said, will prevent his company from marketing their compost for spreading on Kern County farmland.

A U.S. District Court judge has issued an injunction that prevents Measure E from stopping land application of sludge by the city of Los Angeles and Orange County.

But that injunction does not suspend Measure E for any other company or agency -- including Synagro, Goodwin said.

That ban makes the additional time to stockpile compost critical for Synagro, Goodwin said, because the company needs time to transport their product to markets outside Kern County.

The plan is to sell the product in Southern California and, locally, to companies that will bag the compost for resale, Goodwin said.

For now the facility will only be accepting about 45 percent of the 400,000 tons a year of treated waste it is allowed to take under permits, Goodwin said.

Goodwin said compost will be mixed in an enclosed building with a paved floor and air quality control systems. Compost will be cured on fully lined asphalt and concrete pads.

"This is not a flatten-out-a-field-and-do-windrow-composting-out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere deal," Goodwin said.

Cleaner diesel engine rules take effect

By Chris Woodyard

USA TODAY, Friday, December 29, 2006

Federal regulations that take effect Monday mandate cleaner diesel engines in new trucks and school buses, dramatically cutting pollution but raising costs.

The new engines, in combination with low-sulfur diesel fuel that began selling nationwide in October, will reduce particulate emissions by up to 98% over the previous generation, the Diesel Technology Forum says. Nitrogen-oxide emissions will fall by half.

But the new engines could add up to \$12,000 to the cost of a new big-rig truck, which can run upward of \$100,000. In addition, operators fear higher maintenance costs and worse fuel mileage.

"Clean air is not free," says Rich Moskowitz, who handles regulatory affairs for the American Trucking Associations, which supports the transition.

Truckers seeking to beat the price increases made 2006 a record year for truck makers. More than 373,000 big-rig trucks were built in North America, says Ken Vieth of A.C.T. Research, which follows truck sales trends. The tally easily topped the previous record of 330,000 trucks in 1999.

But next year, Vieth predicts "a production drought," with sales falling by more than 40% to 220,000 as trucking firms hold off buying to see how the new clean-diesel trucks perform.

One big maker, International Truck and Engine, built up to 200 vehicles a day during 2006, double the normal rate of production. Only about four years ago, production was as low as 37 vehicles a day because of sagging demand, spokesman Roy Wiley says.

The Navistar unit dealt with the extra orders this year "in an orderly fashion," mostly by having employees work overtime, Wiley says. He says International expects to weather any industry downturn next year with a sales boost from a new fuel-saving model.

One trucking firm delaying purchases is Schneider National, which operates a fleet of 15,000 trucks from Green Bay, Wis. Schneider increased its truck buying in the past three years to make its fleet younger, but will only take delivery of about 1,000 new tractor trucks in 2007, about half its normal replacement rate. Most of the new big rigs will arrive in the latter half of the year, which will "buy us time to understand the technology (to) make sure it's reliable," Vice President Steve Duley says. The company didn't have enough time to conduct long-term tests of sample clean-diesel models to check durability and costs.

The cost to truckers goes beyond new big-rig purchases, according to Moskowitz. The new fuel costs 5 cents to 10 cents more per gallon to refine and may produce lower fuel mileage. The new engines weigh more, further cutting mileage. "Over the long run, their increased costs will be passed on to the shippers and ultimately, the consumers," Moskowitz says.

Growth dominates Merced's year

By Leslie Albrecht

Merced Sun-Star

Last Updated: December 29, 2006, 01:30:48 AM PST

While the city's building boom and white-hot real estate market cooled considerably during 2006, growth still defined Merced's agenda.

The city embarked on its most expensive infrastructure project ever, a \$198 million wastewater treatment plant upgrade and expansion.

Two factors drove the costly project: New development strained the plant's capacity and new state and federal laws required Merced's wastewater to be cleaner than ever.

The upgrade hit residents in the wallet. In early December, the City Council approved raising homeowners' sewer bills to help cover the cost of meeting the new state and federal wastewater regulations.

Monthly bills will increase from \$21.12 to \$26.95 starting in January, followed by an increase to \$34.77 in January 2008.

To pay for expanding the plant's capacity, developers saw fees to connect to the sewer system jump from about \$3,000 per house to \$12,000 per house.

City Manager Jim Marshall said residents were being forced to bear costs forced on the city by state and federal agencies.

"(The sewer bill increases) are resultant from unfunded mandates from the state and federal government," Marshall said. "They require us to meet standards but they put no money where their mouth is. The rate payers get punished financially."

Residents also saw their wallets pinched at the cash register, but in this case the financial burden was something citizens took on willingly.

The sales tax increase that Merced voters approved in November 2005 went into effect April 1, hiking the sales tax from 7.25 percent to 7.75 percent for the next 20 years.

The new tax went toward funding public safety improvements, including new police and fire personnel and road projects. By Nov. 30, Measure C had raised \$2,347,812.

Citizens saw the measure's results when Police Chief Russ Thomas introduced 25 new recruits at a City Council meeting in December. At the fire department, 13 new staff members were authorized under Measure C.

"The citizens of Merced spoke at the voting booth about their desire to make Merced a safer place," Thomas told the City Council. "They committed their hard-earned dollars in order that improvements in public safety could occur.

"Both the police department and the fire department have responded to the mandate."

That wasn't the only change that Chief Thomas made at his department.

Thomas started in April, replacing Chief Tony Dossetti. He brought with him 30 years of law enforcement experience, most recently in Fort Bragg, and a plan to transform the Merced police department from top to bottom.

Aside from working to fill the department's vacancies and put more officers on the street, Thomas also centralized command and added four lieutenants to his ranks.

A change in shift schedules meant officers worked longer hours but fewer days, a switch that helped recruiting efforts.

"To me, the department has a high degree of trust (in Thomas) and there's a sense of opportunity now in the department for people to develop careers and move up," said City Manager Jim Marshall.

City officials saw a sense of opportunity in Wal-Mart's plan to build a distribution center in southeast Merced.

Wal-Mart announced the plan in 2005, but as more details emerged in 2006, the project drew controversy.

Some praised the 1.1-million square foot warehouse center as a job generator that will one day put 900 people to work at wages starting at \$13 an hour.

Others said the hundreds of trucks that will drive in and out of the center 24 hours a day would clog Merced roads and pollute its already dirty air.

At year's end both sides had retreated to await the project's environmental impact report. Wal-Mart will foot the bill for the \$380,000 report, now expected in March 2007.

A new development that everyone could agree on was the renovation of the Merced Theatre's landmark tower, which got a facelift over the summer.

In the fall, the tower's new orange pyramid roof and blue neon sign debuted at a gala event, restoring the theater's former glory.

"That's a tremendous asset for this community that was basically sitting there, until the (Redevelopment) Agency took it over, rotting," Marshall said.

Reporter Leslie Albrecht can be reached at 385-2484 or lalbrecht@mercedsun-star.com.

Top 5 Merced stories this year

1. Measure C sales tax raises \$2.3 million for public safety and roads.
2. New police chief sets course for department's future.
3. Wastewater treatment plant upgrade means sewer bills go up.
4. Proposal to build a Wal-Mart distribution center in southeast Merced.
5. Merced Theatre restored to former glory.

UC sees permit progress

Report on expansion plan should be out in February

By Victor A. Patton

December 29, 2006, 01:30:49 AM PST

A long-awaited report crucial to UC Merced's 900-acre expansion plans may be available by late February, UC Merced and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials said this week.

UC Merced Acting Chancellor Roderic Park said Thursday he was told about the release of the corps' draft environmental impact report related to the project during a recent meeting with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials.

Park said he was previously dissatisfied with the slow progress of the report -- but that has changed during the past two weeks.

"We have suddenly seen the process pick up speed and things are starting to happen," Park said.

The report is important because UC Merced officials will need a permit from the corps to build on federally protected wetlands to expand the campus beyond its initial 100 acres.

As proposed, UC Merced's expansion just east of Lake Yosemite would destroy 93 acres of wetlands, 72 of which contain vernal pools with endangered species.

Under the federal Clean Water Act, the corps can only permit UC Merced to destroy vernal pools if the university agrees to take measures to mitigate -- or lessen -- any resulting environmental impacts.

UC Merced has purchased more than 25,000 acres of land for mitigation purposes.

Bruce Henderson, a senior project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, also said he expects the report to be released by late February, saying it will probably be available on the Internet or CD-ROM.

"That is the target date and we're going to try to achieve that in some fashion," Henderson said.

Henderson said the specific date for the release of the document largely depends upon when a consultant hired by the corps of engineers completes his work.

Once the document is released, the public will have 60 days to comment, Henderson said.

"After we receive these comments, we determine which comments on the various environmental effects of this project should be addressed more fully," Henderson said. "Sometimes these things require additional data to be collected. Sometimes they require a modification of the project in some fashion."

After reviewing public comments, the corps will then release a final draft environmental report statement, followed by a 30-day public comment period.

Col. Ronald Light, district engineer with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will ultimately decide whether or not UC Merced will be granted the permit, Henderson said.

"There will be some negotiations and I imagine by the beginning of next fall we will have a much better idea of just how things are going to work out," Park said. "There certainly will be determinations made by the end of the year."

Focused on promoting farms

State's oldest farm bureau finds new leadership

By Melinda Morales

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, Dec. 29, 2006

Born and raised in Porterville and a graduate of Porterville High School, Dan Weldon is - almost - back home again after nearly 40 years.

Weldon, who in September was named executive director of the Tulare County Farm Bureau, lives in Visalia now, not Porterville. But his professional responsibilities for the 3,000-plus member organization extend as far south as his roots, and beyond.

His 30 years of experience working for various agriculture groups and managing nonprofit associations made him the logical choice to head up the oldest farm bureau in the state.

ROI talked to him in November as he prepared for his first trip to Washington, D.C., where he would seek disaster relief for ranchers and growers hit hard by the July 2006 heat wave.

ROI: How is this association and this job different from that of other associations you've managed?

Weldon: This is not the biggest, but one of the biggest associations I have worked for. I worked for the Agricultural Council of California, which represents all the farmer cooperatives in the state. That was a big organization in terms of the number of members, like Sunkist, Sunsweet and Lindsay Olives. But that was different because those were companies, and here we have individual farmers, about 3,000 members here.

At the Forest Landowners of California, I was the only employee, and I represented all the small timberland owners throughout the state. But everyone else there was a volunteer, and I have a small staff here. And it's fabulous to have that kind of support.

ROI: What do you see as your primary objective in this new position?

Weldon: To protect the viability of Tulare County farmers and ranchers.

ROI: With such a diverse group of growers and ranchers, and in such a productive county, how do you prioritize the commodities, and how do you focus your attention?

Weldon: We represent them all, and that great diversity and scope of work is probably the biggest change for me from managing other organizations that I've been involved in.

For the first time, I'm doing a lot of public speaking and talking to members of the Kiwanis club and the Rotary clubs about agriculture and about the Farm Bureau. I've talked to the League of Women Voters on their candidate nights, which is something that I've never done before.

Prior to this, my main duty was lobbying and issue management of whatever hot-button issues were important to that industry.

Here, I've got a highly skilled board of directors and a committee system that functions very well, so I'm not going to come in and make wholesale changes in the way the Farm Bureau operates. I'll make observations in the beginning and eventually suggest ways we might tweak things.

ROI: Is there anything in this new job that's really new to you?

Weldon: No, not really, but maybe being so involved in the community is somewhat new, with all the public speaking and appearing before the Tulare County Board of Supervisors. But to increase the visibility of the Farm Bureau is very important.

ROI: Is there a big issue in Tulare County agriculture now that you need to deal with immediately?

Weldon: As you know in July we had a severe heat wave in which 10,000 dairy cows died.

That was a tremendous loss of livestock, crops and production. It was pretty devastating to the county. That's why I'm going to ask Congress for disaster relief funding.

We've been working very closely with Congressman Devin Nunes' office to seek funding and that's the focus also of our next board meeting.

ROI: Can you recap the losses incurred by the county during the heat wave?

Weldon: By far the biggest hit was in terms of losses to the dairy industry. The county ag commissioner reported a total loss of about \$188 million during the 14 days of the heat wave.

We lost 4,992 dairy cows and 5,924 dairy calves, for a total of over 10,000 animals. In addition, we lost 20,259 turkeys, 26,000 chickens and 65 sow hogs. We're still trying to assess the total damage.

ROI: What had to be done right away?

Weldon: Whenever a crisis situation hits, we need to respond. The dairy farmers needed to get permits to dispose of all the carcasses and everyone had to work through the system. It was a very big job.

ROI: Do you have a long-term vision for the Farm Bureau or a particular issue you'd like to tackle?

Weldon: I think the biggest issue for the Farm Bureau is to keep agricultural land production in farming. We have a buffer zone committee that's working with the county supervisors now on the county's general plan. We want to develop these buffer zones between agricultural land and developed residential land. Farmers do have a right to farm in this county and we are concerned about the urban-rural conflict. We're also concerned with the small ranchettes of from two to 20 acres that are taking away from our valuable farmland. They've often too small to make them viable farms and in the long run it hurts our ag production.

ROI: Any other issues?

Weldon: Water and [air quality](#). As regulators reduce the polluting effects on our air and water, they put in place regulations that affect both developers and farmers. Sometimes it just feels like farmers are almost being regulated out of business. We are constantly fighting the battle over the impact of these regulations.

ROI: How you found anything new or surprising about Tulare County or the Farm Bureau since taking on your new job?

Weldon: One of the things I learned about Tulare County is our educational programs, especially the scholarship program for college-bound students.

Since 1996 we have awarded over \$106,000 in scholarships. And we've had a youth leadership program in place for over 20 years. That was a big surprise to me to see how deeply involved we are in youth and educational programs. It's something I wish we'd had when I was in high school.

Coalition Seeks Clean-Car Measure To Clear the Air Report Says Pollution Cancer Risk Far Exceeds the Federal Standard

By Ann E. Marimow, Staff Writer

The Washington Post

Thursday, December 28, 2006; B02

The cancer risk from breathing polluted air in Maryland's largest jurisdictions far exceeds the federal government standard, environmental advocates said yesterday, urging lawmakers to join 11 other states in restricting tailpipe emissions when the General Assembly convenes next month.

A report released by Environment Maryland found the highest level of cancer-causing air toxins in the city of Baltimore, followed by Baltimore, Montgomery and Prince George's counties. The group based its study on data released this year by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Brad Heavner, state director of the research center, an offshoot of the Maryland Public Interest Research Group, called the level of air pollutants "just staggering."

"We know that this pollution comes predominantly from motor vehicles," he said at a news conference at Suburban Hospital's cancer outpatient center in Bethesda. "We also know that there is proven technology to reduce those emissions."

The study is the opening push by a coalition of environmentalists, health professionals and religious leaders who intend to make clean-car legislation its signature issue in the coming legislative session. Last year, the coalition was a driving force behind restrictions intended to curb pollution from coal-fired power plants.

Under the proposal, Maryland would follow California in setting stricter emission standards than those required by the federal government. By 2011, all new cars and trucks registered in the state would have to comply with the standards, and car dealers would have to sell a certain percentage of low-emission vehicles.

Jack Fitzgerald, chairman of the Washington Area New Car Dealers Association, said such requirements would mean higher prices and fewer choices for shoppers with little environmental

benefit. He called the findings "scare tactics" and said the real differences are in the cleaner mix of fuel used in California and the possibility of regulating carbon dioxide.

"When you have bumper-to-bumper traffic, you're going to have more air pollution," said Fitzgerald, who owns Fitzgerald Auto Mall in White Flint. "This is really more about politics than anything else."

Fitzgerald said his group will urge the General Assembly to convene a commission of lawmakers and experts to recommend a comprehensive energy policy before moving ahead with a clean-car bill.

Del. William A. Bronrott (D-Montgomery), who will introduce legislation in the House of Delegates, said if automakers "balk at this proposal, please keep in mind that they used the same arguments and same delay tactics over auto safety standards."

A similar bill stalled in committee in the Senate two years ago in the face of opposition from car dealers and manufacturers. But proponents said momentum is on their side after neighboring Pennsylvania joined New Jersey, New York and New England states in adopting the tougher standards.

Environmental advocates said changing the rules would cut emissions by 57 to 79 percent within two decades. The average statewide cancer risk in Maryland was 40 times higher than the federal government standard established by the Clean Air Act.

That is less than the national average, which is 41.5 times higher, and the District's, at 53.5, but greater than the level in Virginia, at 32 times higher. Rates in Arlington and Fairfax counties are comparable to those in Washington's Maryland suburbs.

Chinese officials suspected of faking pollution statistics to meet clean air targets

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published in the Washington Post, the San Diego Union-Tribune and the San Fran Chronicle
December 28, 2006

BEIJING – China's environmental watchdog is investigating whether local officials submitted fake pollution data to the central government after failing to meet annual clean air targets, state media said Thursday.

The State Environmental Protection Administration, or SEPA, calculated that in 2006, emissions of carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide rose 2 percent nationwide. However, according to figures submitted by 26 regional governments, emissions of the same two pollutants fell by 2 percent, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Chinese cities are among the world's smoggiest following two decades of breakneck economic growth.

The figures submitted by regional governments matched clean air targets set by the central government for the year.

The government plans to cut the emissions of major pollutants by 10 percent between 2006 and 2010 – an average reduction of 2 percent per year.

"Under the great pressure of assessment, some local governments have fabricated the environmental index," SEPA director Zhou Shengxian was quoted as saying.

Chinese leaders said in March that they would start taking energy efficiency and environmental achievements into account when evaluating local leaders' performance.

The administration will send working groups to the provinces to check the local environmental statistics, Xinhua said.

The report quoted a local official from western Gansu province as saying his colleagues had not exaggerated the province's achievements in cutting emissions this year. Rather, officials had downplayed them so they would be under less pressure to cut emissions further in the future.

The official, whose name was not given, said sulfur dioxide emissions were down 6 percent and carbon dioxide emissions were cut 4 percent, but that the province reported a 2 percent reduction for both.

The report did not say which provinces or regions SEPA suspected of submitting fake data or explain how the administration had independent data for all of the regions.

[Letter to the Editor in the Fresno Bee, December 29, 2006:](#)

Rude neighbors add to our noxious Valley air

I have several rude neighbors who believe it's fine to burn fire wood continuously from September through March, no matter how bad the air quality is.

They assure themselves that they're saving money somehow, after all the ridiculous work it takes to keep the fire burning, using excuses such as I'm saving money, to heck with the tree huggers, it's romantic, and of course, "fire good," the main two words these people can string together.

Some of my neighbors actually brag about burning more while the air quality indicator is in the red, which is unhealthy for all of us, not just the health sensitive.

I can only hope that one day these people can look through their irritated red eyes at their dirty, sap-stained, splinter-infested, pyro-instinctive hands and say maybe it's time just to click the heater on. Now I call that evolution.

I enjoy a fire myself, but not on the days and nights when my children, friends and family are struggling with our over-particulated air.

Sean Walker
Fresno

[Guest Commentary, Tracy Press, Friday, December 29, 2006](#)

We're gonna be just fine

by Leroy Ornellas, San Joaquin County supervisor

Politically, a lot has changed in the last month. With that said, I wish to say "job well done" to Congressman Richard Pombo for his years of dedication to our community and welcome to Rep.-elect Jerry McNerney.

McNerney has landed a seat on the House Transportation Committee, which could prove to be key for our region. Rep. Dennis Cardoza of Merced will continue to deliver on our area's issues. One issue the county will continue to seek congressional support for is the Regional Veterans Affairs Clinic/Nursing Home project. Our congressional delegation will continue to pressure the White House and Congress to fully fund the Department of Veterans Affairs' CARES recommendations.

Earlier this year, infrastructure work commenced on the county Agriculture Center at Airport East. This project has been a long time coming and will be a huge benefit to our county's leading industry.

Recently, the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors approved an agricultural mitigation plan to offset the loss of farmland to development. This plan will require developers to preserve one acre of farmland for every acre of county land developed. This plan is a good first step, and there will be opportunities to refine it, as necessary.

The Stockton Metropolitan Airport continues to struggle for both its identity and financial independence, surviving on continued contributions from the county's general fund. In 2002, the

Stockton airport launched a \$10 million improvement program for air cargo. Today, this facility sits unused, as earlier this year we lost our only air cargo tenant, which reduced revenues by \$250,000 and caused an estimated loss of \$1 million to the local economy. Now, we are considering investing \$6 million in a federal inspection station in hopes of starting international passenger flights. This is a huge commitment on behalf of the taxpayers, so I have asked the airline (Aeromexico) to put \$500,000 toward the improvement of the airport to show that it is equally committed to the taxpayers of this county.

Gratefully, Allegiant Airlines began passenger service this past summer from Stockton to Las Vegas. Once again, we have passengers flowing in and out of the airport terminal, which will hopefully lead to more airlines seeking a piece of this region's market. As our area continues to grow, so will our transportation needs.

Since my first year on the county board, I have raised the issue of a business and marketing plan for the airport. Lack of resources was blamed for the inability to create a plan. Recently, grant funds were received for an airport master plan update, which is to include a business plan. Although this news is encouraging, the airport needs more reform than a business plan alone. With millions of dollars spent on facilities and hundreds of thousands being spent on airline, air cargo and marketing consultants, I am disappointed with the progress of the airport. Therefore, I will ask the board to create an exploratory committee to review options of how the airport may be restructured to further its opportunities for success.

Committee assignments continue to change. Last year, I was assigned to the San Joaquin Council of Governments, and this coming year I will be sitting as the vice president of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. I believe these assignments are very important to our region. While the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District strives to achieve cleaner air and meet federal guidelines, we must strike a fair balance with industries that employ our citizens.

In addition to my duties on Council of Governments, I have become a member of the Port to Port Coalition and forged relationships with my counterparts in both Alameda and Contra Costa counties, focusing on the improvement of our transportation corridors.

Illegal dumping continues to be a huge problem in our county. During this past year, I called together a group of county staff members that play roles in the prevention and enforcement of this issue. We had several meetings and are putting together recommendations to present to the county board. This is a lengthy process, and we hope our efforts will result in less trash on our roadsides and agricultural lands.

As I look forward to a busy 2007, I again want to thank the citizens of the 5th District for their continued support.

[Commentary in the Contra Costa Times, Friday, December 29, 2006:](#)

Value of HOV and HOT lanes in dispute

BARBARA ZIVICA

THE LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S Office released a report in January 2000 titled "High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes in California: Are They Achieving Their Goals?" At the time the report was released, California had 925 HOV lane miles, 70 percent of which were in Southern California where HOV lanes are operational 24-7.

The report concluded that, in terms of vehicles carried, California's HOV lanes were operating at only two-thirds of their capacity and that lawmakers and transportation agencies ought to take a closer look at the degree to which HOV lanes were the achieving the goal of congestion relief and improved air quality.

In addition, Caltrans and UC-Berkeley recently announced that they are conducting an extensive safety study of carpool use, which should be done mid-2007. The only other study, done more than a decade ago, didn't provide significant crash data as there were few HOV lanes at that

time; a study done in Texas a few years ago indicated that crashes were 50 percent higher on roads with carpool lanes than those without them because of the difference in speed.

UC-Berkeley professor Pravin Varalya also made it clear in his fall 2005 study that HOV lanes restrict traffic flow to the point that some freeways move fewer cars than they would if all lanes of traffic in a particular direction were open to ALL vehicles; a prime example of congestion caused by special lane designations are the bottlenecks caused by the merge of such lanes into regular traffic at the Bay Bridge.

Caltrans and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, our region's transportation planning and financing agency, however, have already stubbornly declared their intent to build more than 100 miles of car pool lanes on Bay Area roads within the next few years, with another 100 planned by 2020.

In fact, nine of MTC's 21 spending recommendations for funds coming from Proposition 18, the recent voter-approved transportation bond measure, are for car pool lanes. Perhaps Caltrans, whose director in 1989 assumed the authority to approve any change to vehicle occupancy requirements on existing or proposed HOV lanes, and MTC have an ulterior motive in building these lanes. Their goal may be the future conversion of these lanes into HOT lanes where solo drivers are permitted to use the lane for a fee, the ultimate insult to motorists who pay a high price for highways via the 18-cent state and 18-cent federal excise tax on a gallon of gas, the state excise tax on tires, the vehicle license fee, the state income tax, ballot initiatives and bond measures.

In fact, MTC is already working with Caltrans to determine whether a regional HOT lane system is possible and is planning the first Bay Area HOT lane, a 14-mile stretch of southbound Interstate 680 from Pleasanton to Milpitas and two additional lanes on Highways 101 and 85.

Don't worry, though, MTC may allow low- and very low-income drivers a few HOT lane trips per year. Will drivers need to provide a copy of their W-2 to receive such freebies?

Guess we'll find out. If you do qualify, just remember not to use them on smoggy days when you can hitch a free ride on BART. The MTC funded six "Spare the Air" days so far this year at a cost of more than \$12 million. Ain't life grand?

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