

Merced Sun-Star Tip List: Solutions to noisy, gas-guzzling leaf blowers seem as fleeting as these peaceful autumn days

By Leslie Albrecht

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, October 25, 2007

Autumn mornings mean crisp air, golden light and, unfortunately for sleeping residents, buzzing leaf blowers.

These modern miracles of gardening efficiency help landscapers do their jobs faster. But they also kick up dust clouds and spew exhaust (if they're gas-powered).

As an editorial in a Nashua, N.H., newspaper put it, "Falling leaves, once the inspiration of poets and songwriters, now mark the death of peace and quiet. As soon as they drop, homeowners and landscapers attack them maniacally with leaf blowers."

(Fall is a more serious business on the East Coast, where they actually have seasons.)

Several people have called Tip List to complain about leaf blowers. Unfortunately, the existence of leaf blowers is not a simple fix-it problem that can be solved with a phone call like other Tip List subjects. But we decided to do some research on this hot (air) issue.

One Tipster complained that too many people, including city employees, use leaf blowers and other gas-powered equipment on Spare the Air days, when the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declares air quality unhealthy.

She wondered why the city's public works department uses gas-powered equipment when a Spare The Air day is in effect -- are city workers "exempt" from the Air District's recommendation to avoid gas-powered equipment then?

Public Works Manager Gordon Gray told us that skipping work on Spare the Air days isn't good business practice. "We try to minimize the pollutants that we use but if we took a Spare the Air day to just go to a job site and mill around, (taxpayers) really wouldn't get (their) money's worth."

Spare the Air is a voluntary program, which means there's no penalty for not following the Air District's pollution-control tips, said spokesman Anthony Presto. Nonetheless, the Air District wants everyone -- city employee or not -- to avoid using gas-powered blowers on Spare The Air days.

"We encourage people to use things other than polluting machines for their yards," said Presto. "There are other things that work just as well."

For example, rakes, brooms or -- if you absolutely must blow -- an electric leaf blower.

Gas-powered lawn mowers produce about 40 times more pollution than a car, but leaf blower exhaust is far worse, pumping out about 80 times more air pollution than a car, said Presto.

At least 20 California cities have banned leaf blowers because of the noise and pollution they create, but no one has ever suggested such a ban in Merced, said city spokesman Mike Conway.

However, there is a law on the city's books about proper leaf blowing. It's against city code to blow leaves and lawn clippings into the gutter or street, because debris can clog storm drains, said City Attorney Greg Diaz. Next time you see that happening, feel free to call the police or city code enforcement, he said.

The Merced-Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, which advocates for better air quality, has no official position on leaf blowers and no plans to pursue a ban, said program director Mary-Michal Rawling.

But the group urges people to buy electric lawn equipment as an example of the "personal choices we make in our daily lives to help clean up the air in the Valley," she said.

But Randy Fagundes, owner of Fagundes Custom Yard Care, says electric blowers aren't very practical. They require long extension cords and are just as noisy as the gas-guzzling version.

As for a possible blower ban, Fagundes said he has no problem with that idea, but consumers should be prepared to pay a premium for blower-less maintenance.

WHAT'S WRONG:

Tipsters say leaf blowers are noisy, smelly and dirty.

WHAT'S BEING DONE: Some cities have banned leaf blowers, but Merced has no such laws.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE: If you see someone blowing leaves into the gutter or road and leaving them there, call city code enforcement at 209 385-6855. If you want the City Council to consider a leaf-blower ban, speak up at the next City Council meeting at 7 p.m. on Nov. 5, at 678 W. 18th Street.

Fire-area residents still waiting to inhale

Even as blazes are doused and winds die, unhealthy air is expected to hang around.

Experts advise people to stay indoors.

By Marla Cone, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Thursday, October 25, 2007

The state's smog czar warned Wednesday that unhealthy conditions caused by smoke from wildfires are likely to persist throughout much of Southern California until next week.

Even when the fires are extinguished and the Santa Ana winds that carried their smoke die down, the tiny particles suspended in the air could remain in hazardous concentrations "into next week," said Mary Nichols, chair of the California Air Resources Board.

"Our advice for everybody's health, even for people who are healthy, is they should be taking it easy and staying indoors," Nichols said.

Pollution measurements throughout much of the Los Angeles Basin and San Diego County have peaked at levels up to 10 times higher than levels deemed safe by national health standards. Such extreme concentrations of particulates, even if they last a few hours or less, are considered hazardous, capable of causing immediate breathing problems even for healthy people.

In Escondido just after midnight Tuesday, fine particulates reached 325 micrograms per cubic meter of air, according to a California Air Resources Board website. The federal government's health standard for acceptable exposure over 24 hours is 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air. The state air board put mobile monitors in five fire areas in San Diego County shortly after the fires erupted this weekend to detect the highest concentrations.

On Monday in Norco/Corona and Lake Elsinore, levels reached concentrations exceeding 200 micrograms per cubic meter, according to data from the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Particulates are microscopic pieces of soot, smoke, dust or other materials capable of lodging deep in lungs.

Because of strong Santa Ana winds moving toward the coast, some of the worst smoke is accumulating many miles from fires, including in Long Beach, Simi Valley and the Riverside area.

Pollution concentrations were decreasing region-wide Wednesday, but many areas still exceeded health standards.

"The air quality is officially designated as unhealthful," Nichols said. "There is widespread exposure. . . . This is something that everybody should be paying attention to."

Particulates in the smoke aggravate asthma, emphysema, heart disease and other respiratory and cardiovascular conditions. They also can irritate healthy lungs and airways, causing coughing and shortness of breath, stinging eyes, headaches and stuffy noses.

State and local health officials are urging people throughout the fire region to stay indoors with windows shut, use air conditioning if possible and avoid strenuous outdoor activity.

Some hospital officials reported a moderate increase in patients with respiratory problems. Travis Henson, an emergency room physician at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the northeast San Fernando Valley community of Mission Hills, said larger-than-normal numbers of patients with asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema had shown up this week.

Henson said he noticed a relatively high number of children with cold symptoms and respiratory problems. Some of these young patients, he said, "maybe have never had asthma before."

Cheryl Evans-Cobb, director of emergency services at West Hills Hospital and Medical Center in the west San Fernando Valley, said she had noticed a slight upturn as well. And among the staff, "lots and lots of people have their fire cough," she said.

Studies show that deaths and hospitalizations from lung and heart diseases, particularly bronchitis, asthma and pneumonia, increase in the days after wildfires.

"Our first concern is individuals with pre-existing chronic conditions like heart disease, chronic lung disease like emphysema, and intermittent diseases and conditions like asthma," said Dr. Mark Horton, the state's Public Health director. "Smoke can certainly exacerbate those conditions."

In addition to particulates, smoke from wildfires carries a mix of toxic substances, including carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, nitrogen oxides and traces of heavy metals from the Earth's crust. The fires also are emitting large volumes of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, which have been linked to global warming.

Tom Bonnicksen, a forestry and wildfire expert who is a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University, estimates that 19 million tons of greenhouse gases have been emitted by this week's fires. That is equivalent to 3.5% of annual emissions generated statewide from all sources.

Nichols said the state's greenhouse gas inventory already builds in estimates for wildfires. This year's total, however, could exceed that estimate, given the size of the Zaca fire in the Los Padres National Forest this summer and this week's blazes.

Hope and heartbreak

As fires continue to burn, residents see signs of progress

By John Marelius, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER
San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007

Yesterday was a time filled with mixed emotions.

Although steadily diminishing winds helped firefighters gain the upper hand against certain blazes, other infernos continued to rage unchecked.

Although some evacuees had to flee the path of growing wildfires and many remained at shelters, thousands were allowed to return home.

And while many residents remained without power last night, San Diego Gas & Electric was able to restore a major transmission line and prevent blackouts that would have affected 100,000 people.

"What we were facing was something that could have gone on for hours," said Michael Niggli, chief operating officer for SDG&E.

Since Sunday, the wildfires in San Diego County have forced about 560,000 people to flee their homes. The fires also have caused more than \$1 billion in property damage, disaster-relief experts said yesterday.

As of early last night, fire officials reported that five blazes had burned more than 327,000 acres and destroyed at least 1,100 homes.

The conflagrations also have strained the region's health care facilities.

Hundreds of people have received medical treatment at hospitals, clinics, doctors' offices and evacuation centers. [Hospitals reported that a surge of evacuees began streaming in yesterday with respiratory problems](#), bruises, splinters, fractures and injuries caused by items that fell on them.

Some had not realized they were wounded because they were racing to flee a fire, said Dr. Shawn Evans, an emergency room physician at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla.

In Oceanside, Tri-City Medical Center was handling nearly double its typical number of maternity patients. Some of the deliveries were premature, perhaps because of stress from fire evacuations and the loss of homes, said Tri-City spokesman Jeff Segall.

Usually, the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit treats 11 newborn babies at a time. Yesterday, it had 21.

The dichotomy of heartbreak and hope was experienced by people such as Jeff and Ann Owens, who found out late Monday that flames destroyed the five-bedroom home near Lake Poway they had been remodeling for four years.

As they stood in front of the rubble yesterday, Ann found a way to lighten their spirits. She presented her husband with a caramel cinnamon cake and a mini "Happy Birthday" balloon for his 66th birthday.

"I was really surprised," Jeff Owens said. "I needed a smile. . . . I have gone through a few days of serious grief."

From Palomar Mountain to Jamul, residents braced for the worst as the Witch Creek, Poomacha and Harris fires expanded toward them. But as of late last night, firefighters were optimistic about blunting the blazes' advance.

They also were more confident about controlling the Rice Canyon fire, which has charred roughly 9,500 acres in the DeLuz and Fallbrook region.

Yesterday afternoon, fire officials said they were preparing to lift Fallbrook's mandatory evacuation order "in the near future." They didn't offer more specifics.

The evacuation order remained in place there to enable power to be fully restored and to make sure the town's water supply is adequately treated, said state fire spokesman David Shew.

At Camp Pendleton, unpopulated swaths of the base were charred and roads were closed by three blazes.

Early yesterday, the fires forced the evacuation of about 800 people on the base. They also prompted officials to temporarily close Interstate 5 from state Route 76 to the Orange County border.

"We just have a lot of fire and limited resources," said Bill Gick, Camp Pendleton's fire inspector. "The fires on Pendleton have grown tremendously in the last day. It is going to get bigger."

By contrast, evacuation orders were lifted in some neighborhoods of Escondido, Rancho Bernardo and Rancho Peñasquitos.

In the Trails section of Ranch Bernardo, the randomness of flames from Monday could be seen in the large, estate-style homes that were destroyed.

One home on Bernardo Trails Drive had basically disintegrated, while a red Jeep with its top down in the driveway looked like it could be driven away.

Over at the neighboring subdivision of Montelena, jack-o'-lanterns made of paper and ghosts made of white sheets hung in the front yard of a home on Locksley Street.

Mark Huettinger was relieved when he called the fax machine at his Abra Place home in Rancho Bernardo on Tuesday and it answered. Then his brother brought him down to earth.

"You might come back to a chimney and a fax machine," his brother said.

Yesterday, Huettinger and his wife, Frances, found their two-story, cream-colored stucco home intact. Their only complaints were an accumulation of ash and a slight smell of smoke in the laundry room.

"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful. It looks like nothing ever happened," Mark Huettinger said.

In places still threatened by flames, firefighting crews used at least 57 airplanes and helicopters to dump water and fire retardant, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The availability and use of aircraft continued to stir controversy yesterday.

As federal and state officials patted each other's back for quick action on the aerial front, critics - mainly online bloggers and talk-radio commentators - argued that firefighters lacked air power to battle the infernos.

An irritated Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger bluntly said the skeptics didn't know what they were talking about. He insisted that many of the aircraft were unable to fly until yesterday because of high winds in Southern California.

"Anyone complaining about the planes just wants to complain because that's a bunch of nonsense," Schwarzenegger told ABC News during a morning interview.

He also talked with President Bush, who is scheduled to tour some of the fire-ravaged areas of San Diego County this morning.

Determined to demonstrate that his disaster agencies have gotten their acts together since the chaotic response to Hurricane Katrina two years ago, Bush said he is pleased with the federal government's response to the fires.

"I had a conversation with Governor Schwarzenegger," he said after a morning Cabinet meeting. "My question to him was, 'Are you getting what you need?' . . . His answer was yes. "

Today, Bush will take a helicopter tour over the burned areas and visit a fire-damaged neighborhood. He will have lunch with firefighters and receive briefings from federal and state officials before returning to Washington, D.C.

One success story that local authorities have highlighted is the Reverse 911 calling systems. They said the network has paved the way for a fairly orderly evacuation of more than a half-million people - 10 times as many as were driven from their homes by the Paradise fire and the Cedar blaze, which began exactly four years ago today.

Weather forecasters said the Santa Ana winds that have propelled the blazes and hampered firefighting efforts since Sunday will likely be gone today. In addition, humidity levels are expected to keep rising while temperatures are expected to drop 6 to 8 degrees.

Yesterday, the winds decreased by as much as 36 miles per hour in some areas. That gave firefighters relief from the gusts of almost 70 miles per hour that had whipped up flames earlier in the week.

Instead of blowing in from the east, as they have since Sunday, the winds are expected to come from the west. Those cooler and weaker westerly winds would be a further blessing for firefighters.

[But the calmer conditions would do little to help the air quality, health experts said.](#)

The fires in San Diego County have produced so much soot, ash and other airborne particles that skies will remain polluted for awhile, said Mary Nichols, chairwoman of the California Air Resources Board in Sacramento.

“We can certainly expect that people living in San Diego County will be experiencing several days, if not a week or more, of unhealthful air,” Nichols said.

Also in Sacramento, state Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner declared an “insurance emergency” aimed at speeding up the handling of homeowners' claims. The designation authorizes out-of-state adjusters to process those claims.

San Diego County authorities warned evacuees to be on guard for fire-related scams. In the rush to repair fire-damaged dwellings, homeowners can end up hiring disreputable contractors or falling prey to scams involving bogus insurance adjusters or fake charities.

AIR QUALITY

San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007

Information on air quality is available from the county Air Pollution Control District at (858) 586-2800, press 2, and sdapcd.org/air/forecasts/otoday.html. The telephone recording is updated daily at 4:30 p.m.

To minimize problems:

- Stay indoors.
- Keep physical activity to a minimum.
- Drink plenty of fluids to moisten the respiratory tract.
- If you have one, wear a filter mask that covers your nose and mouth.
- Keep windows and doors closed.
- Keep particle levels lower indoors by not using anything that burns, such as wood stoves, gas stoves and candles.

All CUSD schools will be closed Thursday

The Orange County Register, Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007

The Capistrano Unified School District announced that all its schools would be closed on Thursday.

School officials were concerned about [air quality](#), about the risk to schools in fire-prone areas and about the potential need to facilitate any needed evacuations.

Going green without the sting

Loan options, incentives put solar power in reach

By Alex Breitler - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Thursday, October 25, 2007

The dream of a solar-powered home energized Rick Mielbrecht.

"Until I saw the price tag," he said.

The retired San Joaquin Delta College instructor figured he would be dead by the time he saved enough on his utility bill to offset the \$30,000 cost.

How it works

- Prospective clients sign a waiting list, locking them in to current utility rates for anywhere from one to 25 years, depending on the length of the contract.
- Citizenre says it eventually will send inspectors to each home to see if they are suitable for solar and to determine their energy needs.
- Customers put down a \$500 security deposit, and the equipment is installed.
- Monthly payments based on how much electricity is generated are made to Citizenre, which also collects rebates from the government.
- If you move, Citizenre officials say they will move your panels once for free. Contracts can also be passed on to new homeowners.

For more information, or to estimate the cost of solar for your home and benefits for the environment, visit renu.citizenre.com.

But there may be another way.

Mielbrecht signed on with a startup company that says it will manufacture solar panels and loan them to customers, who will buy their energy from the company at a fixed rate for up to 25 years.

Some see this as a way to dodge future hikes in utility rates. The Delaware-based company, Citizenre, says it is a way to make solar power mainstream as California strives to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

Existing solar providers, such as Stockton-based BTA Solar, say plenty of people are willing to buy solar units outright, adding that companies are coming from out of the area to court prospective buyers.

Those who do invest in the purchase of solar panels can make the cost less colossal. Cash incentives can cover about 25 percent of purchased solar panels, and federal tax credits also are available.

Still, the idea of relatively little money down - Citizenre requires a \$500 security deposit - has prompted about 24,000 people across the nation to sign up for renting solar panels, including nearly a dozen Stocktonians who attended a meeting organized by Mielbrecht on Monday night.

Citizenre has its critics, who point out that the company has not actually built any of the solar equipment that it promises to one day install on residential rooftops. It has not even decided where its manufacturing facility will be located.

This leaves other solar providers skeptical whether Citizenre can deliver.

Jeffrey Wolfe, chief executive officer of national solar firm GroSolar, earlier this year said Citizenre is "not going to be able to stand up to their promises."

Solar power harvests energy from the sun and converts it for use in the home. This can reduce global warming, since much of the state's conventional energy comes from the burning of fossil fuels.

Power plants emit gases that scientists say are contributing to climate change, future consequences of which include rising sea levels, more intense floods and droughts, and the demise of some animal species.

Homes with permanent solar systems are more desirable to potential buyers than homes without, said Terri Steele of the California Center for Sustainable Energy. Citizenre officials Monday said those who can afford to buy solar panels should go ahead and do so. "Our goal is just to have the solar out there," company representative Mike Hackley said. "This is a new option that we offer."

UN, IOC Say Beijing's Bad Air a Problem

By CHARLES HUTZLER, Associated Press Writer

In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Thursday, October 25, 2007

BEIJING, China (AP) -- Beijing's polluted air is raising the likelihood that some Olympic events may be postponed for a day or two, although special restrictions should keep the skies clean much of the time, the International Olympic Committee said Thursday.

With under 10 months to go before the Aug. 8-24 games, air pollution has emerged as one of Beijing's biggest headaches in generally smooth preparations. A report by the U.N. Environment Program criticized Beijing's cleanup as slow and said some pollution exceeded World Health Organization standards.

In an overall positive assessment of Beijing's preparations, an IOC inspection team said air quality was a leading concern and it was monitoring the situation day-to-day. The inspection team leader, Hein Verbruggen, said the impact of pollution on athletes' performance was a particular concern.

Verbruggen and other IOC officials said they were confident that special measures such as traffic controls should reduce pollution. But if that fails, some events would be delayed, Verbruggen said, similar to what happens in sailing regattas when there is no wind.

"The air quality is a big problem. You might wait a day or two, but it is something that we're used to," Verbruggen told reporters. "It is a normal standard procedure that we have."

The acknowledgment underscored the dwindling options organizers face. Some countries are delaying their teams' arrivals in Beijing until the last possible moment to protect their athletes. But competition times have limited leeway.

IOC President Jacques Rogge underscored the IOC's concerns in a speech saying that athletes "need clean and healthy conditions in which to train and compete." But he did not read out a stern warning to Beijing contained in the prepared text that said "time may be running out."

Rogge has warned in the past that the severe air pollution might force some outdoor endurance events to be delayed.

China has one of the world's fastest-growing economies, but its cities pay for it with choking pollution. Beijing is often blanketed by a gray haze, some from coal-fired industries, others from the soaring numbers of cars.

"Extensive use of coal, the city's geographical location and a growing number of motor vehicles means the pace of improvement in Beijing's air quality is slow," said Eric Falt, who heads the U.N. Environment Program's sports and environment project, told reporters at a separate event to release the agency's report card on Beijing's air.

Falt said small particulate matter - fine particles of pollution that can easily pass into the lungs and harm health - were "particularly worrying."

The U.N. report found that the average level of small particulate matter in Beijing's air in 2006 was eight times higher than the level recommended by the WHO.

Other forms of air pollution - sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide - rose or failed to drop in 2006 following three years of decline, according to the report, which was based on Chinese government statistics.

"(China) never committed to reaching those specific WHO standards within the timeframe of the games," Falt said.

Beijing organizers have said contingency measures, such as the selective banning of cars or temporary closure of factories, will have to be used to clear the skies - pledges that were reiterated by officials Thursday.

Verbruggen and other IOC officials defended Beijing's efforts, saying organizers have spent more than the \$12 billion they promised for pollution control, but growth has outpaced all predictions when the city won the bid in 2001.

"As far as we're concerned, there is no blame to be addressed," Verbruggen told a news conference. "We all know that the development of this country and the development of this city has accelerated or enhanced the air quality problems."

The U.N. report was generally positive about other environmental aspects of the preparations, praising the Beijing organizing committee's efforts in waste management, transportation and water treatment.

Solar power will be used at venues and the Olympic village, and organizers have made an "extraordinary achievement" in avoiding chemicals that damage the ozone layer, the report said.

[Fresno Bee columnist, Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007:](#)

Dairies as economic development? That's a bunch of manure

By Bill McKuen

This vision I have can't be a dream, because dreams sometimes come true.

So I'm confessing a caffeine-induced delusional fantasy and admitting up front it won't happen in my lifetime.

But just once, I'd like the Fresno County Board of Supervisors to face an environmental decision and not take its marching orders from the Farm Bureau.

Or a developer. Or whoever else dresses up an attack on public health as economic development.

The latest example of the board majority's old-ways-are-the-best-ways mentality is its dairy permit plan.

Supervisor Henry Perea, who along with Susan Anderson opposed the ordinance, called it "Swiss cheese." The label fits because the county's new dairy controls are riddled with holes.

In fact, the Janice and Diane Sisterhood (of Happy Cows fame) got exactly what it wanted -- the opportunity to expand in Fresno County without investing in clean-air technology or worrying about buffer zones.

There are dairy owners who run first-class operations. But tough controls are a must -- because others believe cheaper is better and money in their pocket is more important than someone else's health.

Because of the state water crisis and the San Joaquin Valley's soup-bowl geography and chronic air pollution, the supervisors should firmly regulate dairy expansion.

They've chosen, instead, to encourage more Southern California dairies to sell out to developers, buy cheap land here and build megadairies that add to the \$3 billion in annual health costs caused by Valley air pollution.

Here's a reality flash for the board majority: Dairies are not economic development. They don't create many jobs -- not enough, anyway, to compensate for wear and tear on the landscape and people's health.

Megadairies are like prisoners, sludge, chemical waste and everything else the rest of California loves to export to the Valley. Enough, already.

One more thing. Megadairies operate on the big-box principle. Bigger is better because it's more profitable.

The small family dairies the supervisors wax poetic about? They'll have to go corporate and buy more cows, or sell out to the big boys next door.

Now, it's time to share the denouement of my fantasy.

Bob Waterston, the swing vote on the dairy ordinance, says to a full house in county chambers: "Megadairies aren't sacred. If we're going to tolerate them, let's have the best in the country with all the latest stuff to protect our air and water.

"Our population is exploding, and a lot of that growth is kids. We need to be talking more about where these dairies go and their health effects. I really don't see how another 35,000 cows and all that manure without iron-clad rules make this a better place."

Back to reality.

The best we can hope for is that environmental advocates sue, bury the board in a paper blizzard and force it to take another crack at doing the ordinance right.

That's one dream, at least, that could come true.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Thursday, October 25, 2007](#)

Board's support of almond huller right for ag zone

Three Stanislaus County supervisors took the right action Tuesday in approving the Salida Hulling Association's proposed plant along Dakota Avenue -- on land zoned for agriculture and for direct ag-related uses such as this.

We agree with the vote by Supervisors Jeff Grover, Jim DeMartini and Bill O'Brien. Tom Mayfield abstained because he owns an almond huller. Dick Monteith voted against the project, and a couple of the reasons he cited didn't make sense. There are not 2,000 people living in close proximity to this rural site, and Modesto has nothing in its long-term plan to suggest it wants to grow that far west and allow more homes to be built there. If anyone were to OK homes in the area, it would have to be the Board of Supervisors.

But the bigger issue was traffic, and the supervisors moved to assuage opponents' concerns by restricting the almond plant to 25 percent fewer trucks than originally proposed. No more than 56 trucks per day will be allowed, adding up to 112 trips in and out. Dakota Avenue will be the entry and exit point. Some of the trucks will go south to Highway 132 (also known as Maze Boulevard),

but 56 trucks will represent only a tiny fraction of the thousands of vehicles that use the highway daily.

Primarily, this was a case of NIMBY (not in my back yard). Opponents went to unusually extensive and expensive lengths to argue against something they just don't want in their area. In response to their years of objections, Salida Huling went to the expense of having an environmental impact report prepared, something that was not required given that this is an acceptable use in an ag zone. Almonds are one of this region's most important commodities, and dozens of hullers operate around the valley. None has needed an EIR. In most cases, people don't even notice the hullers except during the busy harvest season.

Having a home or ranchette in a rural area is very appealing to some people. And some of the ranchettes along Dakota have been there for years. But agriculture uses should have priority in an ag zone. So long as the farmers-operators are abiding by the many state and local regulations -- regarding water and [air pollution](#) and all sorts of things -- they should be allowed to pursue their livelihoods.

This was a case where the county's right-to-farm ordinance, dating to 1981, provided a useful guide to an appropriate land-use decision by the board majority.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Thursday, Oct. 25, 2007:](#)

The real clouds in the skies

Talk about odd timing. While Southern California fights wildfires, state air regulators will be approving a checklist of rules aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

At first blush, it might seem to be a political disconnect, though there *is* a long-term link between global warming and catastrophic wildfire, which is both a contributor to and a consequence of climate change.

The fires will eventually die out, and California industry, roads and ports will return as primary sources of heat-trapping gases blamed for rising worldwide temperatures.

The state Air Resources Board is moving forward with a historic effort, embodied in a bill passed last year, to cut trim such emissions back to 1990 levels by 2020. That goal means a 25 percent reduction over present levels spewed out by tailpipes and smokestacks.

At meetings over the next two days, the board is due to adopt a string of rules that begin to whittle down emissions.

One change requires garage mechanics to check tire pressure when a vehicle is dropped off for an oil change or tune-up. Properly inflated tires, the theory goes, lead to better mileage and less exhaust. A second change tags onto the same notion of fuel conservation: big-rig trucks will be retrofitted with aerodynamic features on bumpers and cab roofs to cut air resistance and squeeze out more miles per gallon.

Several major trucking lines have already done the work to save on fuel bills.

After highways, a second pollution target is California's ports. These facilities will be required to provide electric hook-ups for ships, which now run on-board engines for freezer units and shipboard needs. Also, harbor craft such as tugs and tour boats will face marine engine controls.

The changes could take California 20 percent of the way toward meeting its 2020 deadline. Already adopted are changes covering manufacturing processes, low-carbon fuel, and controls on garbage dumps that give off methane, a greenhouse gas.

One of the biggest rule changes will have to wait. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signaled he was too wrapped up in overseeing the Southland fires to officially file a lawsuit against the Bush administration over vehicle emission laws. The state wants to draw up tougher tailpipe limits, and the White House has foot-dragged on the request.

Washington's assent - plus the air board's work - would add up to major steps in getting to California's ambitious greenhouse goals.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, October 25, 2007](#)

Smells as bad as the tallow plant

Gilton's Waste Management off Finch Road -- the stench is just as bad as the Modesto Tallow Co. plant. With the change in weather, the stench gets worse each day. It is so bad, if you try and sleep with the windows open you wake up with the stench and bad taste in the back of your mouth. Why is it that Gilton can operate like this without any air quality control? We are restricted on when we can have a fire in our fireplace. Yet Gilton can assault our air quality with total immunity.

JACK WILLIAMS, Modesto