

Appeals court approves SoCal air district's clean fuel rules

The Associated Press
in the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, August 21, 2007

A federal appeals panel largely upheld a lower court decision allowing Southern California air regulators to make government agencies buy clean-fuel trucks, buses and other vehicles for their fleets.

The decision Monday by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals backed major portions of rules adopted in 2000 and 2001 by the South Coast Air Quality Management District and rejected industry arguments that the rules improperly attempted to impose emissions standards.

The South Coast district regulates Orange County and large portions of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

The decision applies to public agencies that are replacing or expanding fleets of 15 or more buses, street sweepers and garbage trucks.

David Pettit, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the decision could affect thousands of vehicles in the heavily populated South Coast district, which has some of the worst air quality levels in the nation.

"It's very significant," he said.

The environmental group had intervened on behalf of the air district.

The panel also directed U.S. District Judge Florence-Marie Cooper to review parts of the rules that primarily focus on private entities, such as taxi cab fleets.

A message left early Tuesday seeking comment from the Engine Manufacturers Association, the trade group that challenged the rules, was not immediately returned.

1 out of 20 Manteca homes going EasyGreen

Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor
Manteca Bulletin, Monday, August 20, 2007

Nine hundred Manteca homeowners are already counting on the South San Joaquin Irrigation District to save them money on electricity.

One in every 20 owners of a traditional detached Manteca single-family homes have signed up for the SSJID's EasyGreen program that manages air conditioner energy loads based on a preset temperature.

Three hundred homes are up and running while another 600 are waiting for technicians to make the simple installation that involves a remote control placed on air conditioning units that is tripped when energy loads are reaching critical levels in California.

Unlike other energy load management systems such as the ones employed by Modesto Irrigation District and PG&E, the EasyGreen program doesn't simply cut power to air conditioning during a power shortage. Instead, it caps it as a preset level that doesn't let the temperature go above that mark.

"I believe that is the big reason why it has been so successful," SSJID General Manager Steve Stroud said of the EasyGreen program. "This (EasyGreen) allows you to maintain a temperature inside the house instead of cutting off the air conditioner. It doesn't take too long when its 100 degrees for your inside temperatures to heat up when the air conditioning is off."

The SSJID is in the middle of a long process to establish itself as the retail power supplier in Manteca, Ripon, and Escalon to reduce power costs at least 15 percent across the board compared to what PG&E charges.

EasyGreen' approach controls the thermostat and the temperature doesn't go above either 78 degrees or 84 degrees depending upon the plan a homeowner opts to sign up under.

The EasyGreen system rolled out this summer via a SSJID partnership with BPL Global is a precursor of the "Smart Grid" management that will be put in place if and when the Manteca-based public agency takes over the PG&E retail system.

The wireless mesh technology allows for peak load control.

PG&E is under regulatory agency directives to reduce peak demand by 3 percent of the system's peak in 2005 and increasing that reduction by 1 percent through 2007. PG&E has not met those targets according to regulators.

The reason for the reduction is simple. It is peak demand - primarily air conditioner use - that strains the state's power grid. It is extremely expensive to build power plants that need to operate for only a few hours for a handful of days a year to meet the peak demand. The generators that utilities fire up to help avoid brownouts or blackouts are carbon-based and increase greenhouse gases.

By reducing peak demand, it avoids the need for costly power plants, lessens the likelihood of black outs, and avoids injecting more carbon-based gases into California's air.

The savings on the PG&E bills are passed directly to those signed up with EasyGreen. The SSJID intends to retrieve the cost of putting in place the wireless mesh system by selling the aggregate power saved to a third party.

BPL Global, based on PG&E rates and current consumption patterns, has determined that a Manteca home with air conditioning setting the thermostat under the program at 78 degrees could save up to \$300 a year while homes with thermostats set at 84 degrees could save up to \$600 annually.

All of the money being spent on gearing up to enter the retail power business is not coming from tax dollars as the PG&E-backed Stop the Power Grab group contends on their website. It is from the proceeds of the SSJID's net annual profits from selling electricity from the Tri-Dam Project. Last year, it exceeded \$10 million. Tri-Dam is why SSJID's reserves are now in excess of \$30 million against an operating budget of \$12 million a year. Based on current trends and interest, SSJID could have a reserve in excess of \$80 million by 2010. It is all made possible, ironically, by PG&E which is buying the power from Tri-Dam. It is that money, and not tax dollars, that are funding studies and the effort to obtain the SSJID's bottom line of reducing power costs universally in Manteca, Ripon, and Escalon by 15 percent across the board.

Priority changes on green policies

Democrats in Congress turn to lower-profile projects to combat global warming and aim to boost funding 33%.

By Richard Simon, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, August 21, 2007

WASHINGTON - Reflecting a shift in priorities under the Democratic majority, Congress is moving to spend as much as \$6.7 billion next fiscal year to combat global warming, an increase of nearly one-third from the current year.

House appropriations bills call for about \$2 billion in new spending on initiatives aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and oil dependency, significantly expanding the budgets for numerous federal research initiatives and launching some new ones.

While legislation to raise vehicle miles-per-gallon standards and cap emissions from power plants has been slower moving -- because of resistance from some lawmakers -- Democrats have turned to the budget to advance their environmental priorities by increasing spending on a variety of lower-profile programs.

That is likely to set up a showdown this fall between Congress and President Bush, who wants to spend less on climate-change initiatives. The White House budget office, which has criticized excessive spending in the overall appropriations bills, noted that the president's proposed budget provides for a 3% increase in spending for climate-change activities.

"Congress is putting its money where its mouth is," said Lowell Ungar, senior policy analyst at the Alliance to Save Energy, a Washington coalition of business, consumer, environmental and government leaders. "They are devoting real resources to trying to address the problem of climate change."

Lawmakers from both parties also see the public's heightened interest in climate change and energy security as an opportunity to steer federal money to their states through earmarks billed as environmentally friendly.

Money has been set aside for scores of home-state research initiatives and construction projects, including \$1 million for a plug-in hybrid vehicle demonstration project at Southern California's South Coast Air Quality Management District.

"Green is becoming very fashionable," said Rep. David L. Hobson (R-Ohio), a senior appropriator who secured \$500,000 for a geothermal demonstration project. "I think members are going to be challenged in their district" about how they are responding to concerns about climate change and U.S. dependence on foreign oil, he said.

Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Burbank), for example, got \$500,000 for a fuel-cell project by Superprotonic, a Pasadena company started by Caltech scientists. "America needs to wean itself off of foreign oil," Schiff said in a statement. "This is as much a national security imperative as it is an environmental one. And federal support for innovative new technologies is part of the answer."

Early this year, Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee asked scientists how government efforts could be cranked up to combat global warming and reduce oil use. "The question then became: How do we get the biggest bang for our buck?" said Kirstin Brost, spokeswoman for committee Chairman David R. Obey (D-Wis.) "We've only accomplished a small first step, but it is a step in the right direction."

Environmental initiatives are scattered throughout the 12 House appropriations bills for the federal fiscal year that starts Oct. 1. Kei Koizumi, research and development policy program director of the American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, said money for addressing climate change had been added "even in areas where you might not expect to find it."

The bill funding foreign-aid programs calls on the U.S. Export-Import Bank to increase investment in renewable energy projects -- a provision that its sponsors, Schiff and Steve Israel (D-N.Y.), say could lead to about \$1 billion in additional green exports in 2008.

The bill funding the Department of Housing and Urban Development requires it to incorporate "robust green building" standards.

And the bill funding Congress provides \$3.9 million to the Green the Capitol initiative that Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) is pushing to make the House carbon neutral by the end of next year.

Some of the largest increases are in the bill that funds the Department of Energy.

The House provided about \$1.9 billion for energy efficiency and renewable energy programs, about 52% more than the administration requested. Just two years ago under the Republican-controlled Congress, the programs received about \$1.2 billion.

The Senate has yet to complete its spending bills, but its appropriations committee has recommended about \$1.7 billion for energy efficiency and renewable energy programs.

The House energy appropriations bill also provides \$44 million to promote geothermal energy, a ninefold increase compared with current spending. The Bush administration, on the other hand, has proposed doing away with spending on the geothermal energy program, contending that it is a mature industry.

Environmentalists welcome the increased spending but say more pollution regulation is crucial. "Those spending measures are no substitute for better fuel-economy standards and tough caps on greenhouse gas emissions," said Frank O'Donnell of Clean Air Watch.

The Senate has approved a bill calling for the first significant increase in vehicle fuel-economy standards in years, and the House has approved a bill establishing the first nationwide requirement for utilities to generate more electricity from cleaner energy sources, such as the sun and wind. When Congress

returns from its August recession. This fall, Congress is also expected to consider legislation that would cap emissions from power plants and other sources.

In addition to the appropriations bills, the House and Senate energy bills would authorize billions of dollars in additional spending. Among the measures: establishing a program to train workers for "green-collar jobs," such as solar-panel installers, and creating a \$1-billion foreign aid program to help developing countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The House energy bill also includes tax credits that would help state and local governments finance \$6 billion in bonds for green projects. Of that, California could get \$720 million.

Republicans have derided the bond program as "green pork." Some of the other initiatives, including a new Office on Global Climate Change within the State Department, also have drawn scorn.

Rep. Donald Manzullo of Illinois, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that deals with the global environment, said that the House energy bill "grows the size and scope of the federal government" and "ignores all that our government is doing in the area of climate change."

Some of the new projects are the result of unusual alliances between lawmakers looking out for home-state interests and those seeking to reduce pollution. Coal-country lawmakers have been among the strongest supporters of increased funding for projects to capture carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, seeing it as a way to preserve the coal industry.

Increased concern about global warming also has given rise to a fresh approach to landing federal funds for home-state projects -- green earmarks.

Businesses have also reacted. "Lobbyists are crawling out of the woodwork to say their idea is good for global warming," said Clean Air Watch's O'Donnell.

Critics of earmarks say some of these projects may be worthy, including new energy research initiatives, but others are merely classic pork-barrel spending, particularly construction projects that have been touted to Congress as green.

"For many lawmakers, global warming is more than just an issue. It's an opportunity to send more tax dollars to their pet parochial projects," said Steve Ellis of Taxpayers for Common Sense, a watchdog group.

Citizens Against Government Waste singled out for particular criticism the \$150,000 secured by Rep. Joe Knollenberg (R-Mich.) to buy a solar-powered house for the Troy Chamber of Commerce. Knollenberg spokesman Trent Wisecup said the house, being built by students from Lawrence Technological University, would be put on display to show ways to reduce carbon emissions.

"I don't think it's pork," Wisecup said.

"I think it's actually a great example of how a local university is working with engineering kids to do something that shows how they can protect the environment."

Spending bills

Here is a look at some of the environmental and energy spending contained in fiscal 2008 House appropriations bills:

Interior and environment: Boosts spending for climate-change research by more than half, to \$264 million. Includes \$50 million to create a climate change commission to study and recommend initiatives and \$2 million for the Environmental Protection Agency to develop regulations to reduce greenhouse gases.

Energy and water: Provides \$1.9 billion for the Energy Department's energy efficiency and renewable energy programs. Includes \$200 million for solar energy and \$235 million for vehicle technologies. Also provides \$150 million -- about \$20 million more than the president's request -- for climate-change research.

Commerce, justice and science: Allocates nearly \$1.9 billion -- \$164 million more than the president's request -- to address climate change. Includes \$10 million for a "global-warming reduction incentive program" and \$10 million for climate-change education.

Transportation, housing and urban development: Directs Housing and Urban Development to incorporate "robust green building" standards in housing programs.

State and foreign operations: Encourages the U.S. Export-Import Bank to increase investment in renewable energy projects.

Legislative branch: Contains \$3.9 million for the Green the Capitol initiative, including \$2.7 million to shift from coal to natural gas for heat, and \$100,000 to install more energy-efficient lightbulbs.

Source: House Appropriations Committee ss, House-Senate negotiators will try to work out differences between the two energy bills.

Contra Costa's refinery plans flawed, Brown says

State attorney general worries Richmond's upgrades don't take into account the effect on global warming

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen, Staff Writer

Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, August 21, 2007

California Attorney General Jerry Brown, who sued San Bernardino County for failing to factor greenhouse gas emissions in its general plan, is turning his attention to Contra Costa County and its two refinery- expansion proposals.

Brown has submitted critical comments to Richmond planners as part of the city's environmental analysis of a Chevron project and appealed the county Planning Commission's approval of a ConocoPhillips Rodeo refinery upgrade on the grounds that it has failed to mitigate the impacts on global warming.

The attorney general personally called all five members of the Board of Supervisors, who will vote on the appeal, and met in San Francisco last week with Supervisors Gayle Uilkema and John Gioia, who sit on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Brown, who could not be reached for comment, has also scheduled a meeting this week in Contra Costa County with local union leaders whose members work in the refineries.

"We want clean air, but we also want jobs," said Contra Costa Building and Construction Trades Council Director Greg Feere.

In the series of phone calls, supervisors say the attorney general explained his concerns about adding more pollutants into the air at the same time the state has signed a new law, AB32, that calls for a reduction by 2020 to 1990 levels of carbon dioxide emissions that scientists say contribute to global climate change.

But Brown's personal interest is making county officials nervous that it will lead to a costly legal showdown over greenhouse gas rules that regulators haven't written yet. The law requires the state to adopt the regulations by Jan. 1, 2011.

Brown not only sued San Bernardino County, but he is also flexing his legal muscle from San Diego to Orange County to Sacramento on planning efforts for everything from housing and new roads. The attorney general's interventions even factored in the state budget stalemate as Republicans sought to squash Brown's global warming campaign.

Contra Costa officials, who oversee one of the state's largest concentrations of oil refineries, say they want to comply with AB32. Oil refineries are responsible for roughly 5.6 percent of Bay Area greenhouse gas emissions.

"We are caught in a quandary," said Supervisor Uilkema, past chairwoman of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "The standards have not yet been established. What I don't want to have happen is grandstanding because our county would become the target of some negative impressions. We are very serious about air quality."

In the meeting with Brown last week, Uilkema said she suggested levying an interim fee that would fund an emissions reduction program administered by the air district.

Board Chairwoman Mary Piepho of Discovery Bay said she is urging ConocoPhillips to negotiate a deal with the attorney general before the matter comes to the board for a vote on the appeal.

"I have asked for a way that the refinery could commit today to coming into AB32 compliance when those standards are known," Piepho said. "No one wants a lawsuit. They are costly and time-consuming, and they very often end up in a compromise anyway."

ConocoPhillips proposes to expand and modify its Rodeo refinery to produce cleaner-burning gasoline and ultra-low sulfur diesel fuels, and increase production by 30 percent to 1 million gallons a day.

The environmental report said the expansion would generate 1.25 million metric tons of greenhouse gases per year from its fuel production facilities, hydrogen and electrical generation plants.

Brown's appeal states that the county, as required under the California Environment Quality Act, failed to evaluate specific mitigation measures that would ameliorate the impacts of the added emissions.

A ConocoPhillips spokesperson could not be reached, but Contra Costa County's environmental document notes that the company has signed up with the voluntary California Climate Action Registry. The six-year-old registry tracks greenhouse gas emissions and allows firms to establish baseline levels for purposes of future compliance with AB32.

The Chevron refinery expansion includes replacement of its hydrogen and power plants, a new catalytic regeneration unit plus a plethora of upgrades that increase its production capacity by 6 percent.

In Brown's comments to Richmond officials, the attorney general argued that the lack of specific AB32 thresholds for greenhouse gases is erroneous because public agencies are required under state environmental law to evaluate and mitigate for significant impacts.

Chevron spokesman Dean O'Hair called it premature to judge the outcome of the environmental review process.

"We're right in the middle of the process, and it's completely appropriate to have people making comments during the response period," O'Hair said. "By the time it is completed, we expect it will be adequate in terms of the law, and we expect to fully address the issues."

Beijing Car Ban Improves Air Quality

By Anita Chang, Associated Press

In the New York Times, Washington Post, SF Chronicle, Fresno Bee and Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, August 21, 2007

BEIJING (AP) -- A test run of traffic controls to clear Beijing's smoggy skies for next year's Olympic Games successfully improved air quality, state media reported Tuesday, saying conditions were "fairly good" despite a constant gray haze.

Air pollution has emerged as a key problem for Beijing as it gears up for the Olympics. International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge warned during a visit earlier this month that some Olympic competitions might be postponed if the city did not clean up the pollution.

Air quality was "fairly good" during the four-day trial that ended Monday, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The traffic ban removed 1.3 million private vehicles from Beijing's perpetually gridlocked streets each day. Additional buses and subways were added as residents turned to public transportation, car pools and taxis for their commutes.

Cars with even-numbered license plates were ordered off roads on Friday and Sunday, and vehicles with odd-numbered plates were banned Saturday and Monday. Emergency vehicles, taxis, buses and other public-service vehicles were exempt.

Environmental officials said air quality improved even though Beijing seemed to be polluted as normal, with an unmoving gray haze shrouding the Chinese capital. The pollution rose thousands of feet above the city Sunday, the third day of the test -- a distinct gray layer could be seen from flights descending in Beijing, hovering over fluffy white clouds.

Beijing had an air pollution index of between 93 and 95 during the test days, the city's environmental protection bureau said on its Web site. By Tuesday morning, the index had climbed to between 90 and 120. Any reading over 100 is considered polluted.

The air quality did not seem to be visibly better because high humidity trapped the pollution and there were no strong winds to blow it away, the environmental bureau said.

However, "It should be affirmed that the ban of vehicles has improved the city's air quality," Zhao Yue, a senior engineer with the Beijing Environment Protection Monitoring Center, was quoted as saying by Xinhua.

The Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau referred questions to its Web site and did not immediately respond to a faxed request for comment. Telephones at the Beijing Olympics organizing committee rang unanswered.

Traffic controls are just one way Beijing Olympic organizers have tried to clear the skies. Officials have spent billions of dollars closing factories and moving others out of town. Frenzied, around-the-clock construction to modernize the capital will be curtailed ahead of the games next summer.

Beijing is particularly focused on combatting particle pollution, which can cause breathing problems and reduced visibility. That pollution is caused by emissions from power plants, diesel engines and wind-blown dust. High ozone levels, which occur on sunny days when nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons emitted by car tailpipes, power plants and factories react in the air, are also a problem.

Beijing's Pollution Rises in 4-Day Test Of Restricted Driving

By Maureen Fan, Washington Post Foreign Service
Washington Post, Tuesday, August 21, 2007

BEIJING, Aug. 20 -- Despite a move by authorities to slash the number of motorists in Beijing by more than a million during a pre-Olympics pollution test, the city's skies remained a hazy white Monday evening and pollution levels showed a slight increase over the four-day trial period, Beijing's Environmental Protection Bureau said.

A top Chinese environmental official attributed the increase to humid weather and said pollution levels had been higher just before the test began.

Pollution remains a challenge for organizers of next summer's Olympic Games. Authorities fear Beijing's smoggy skies could threaten athletes' health and have said events might be postponed as a result. The problem reflects the difficulties China faces as it struggles to meet environmental goals without curbing economic growth.

Traffic flowed easily Friday through Monday as a result of the restrictions, which limited car use to alternate days based on whether license plates ended in odd or even numbers.

But humid weather and lack of wind trapped particles in the city, even as vehicle emissions such as nitrogen dioxide were reduced, Zhao Yue, vice director of the Environmental Protection Bureau, said on the agency's Web site.

Zhao insisted that the driving ban had improved air quality. "If there had been no car restrictions to reduce emissions, the air quality would not be able to meet the current standard after one or two days," he said.

According to data published by the bureau, the index of particulate matter -- a measure of fine particles that can be easily inhaled deep into the lungs -- rose from 91 on Friday to 93 on Saturday and 95 on Sunday. On Monday afternoon, the bureau said, the index was 100.

A report on the Web site of the state-run New China News Agency said, however, that Monday's index was 95. The report said that all four days were an improvement over the 116 index on Thursday, before the restrictions took effect. [On Tuesday, the environmental bureau's Web site reported Monday's index as 95.] China's Communist Party has ordered local journalists to emphasize the positive side of the driving ban.

It was unclear how the index was calculated or which kinds of particles it measured.

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Tuesday, August 21, 2007:](#)

Smog inaction gagging Kern

It's time to rattle cages in Washington. Pressure the federal government to meet its moral, ethical and legal responsibility to clean up our air.

In passing the nation's first emission rules for off-road diesel engines, the California Air Resources Board has done about all the state can to reduce diesel emissions to help clear our air.

It is long past the time for the federal government to meet its responsibility for mobile sources of diesel pollution -- primarily cars, buses, trucks and locomotives. These mobile sources are exclusively in federal jurisdiction. The state can't touch them.

So far, the feds have been dissuaded from targeting these sources by politically powerful lobbyists who represent affected industries.

The upcoming presidential election presents an opportunity for voters to press the need for the federal government to get serious about air cleanup. Candidates should commit to having the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rein in mobile sources of diesel emissions.

The same pressure should be placed on candidates for the House of Representatives, all of whom will be up for election next year.

CARB's actions for static sources of pollution are especially crucial in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California port areas. Diesel soot and nitrogen oxides are significant smog-producing components. CARB set standards for engines that power generators, air compressors, construction equipment and the like. Cost to comply with the new rules will be \$13 billion, according to construction industry sources.

By 2020, according to CARB, the state regulations should reduce particle emissions (soot) by 5.2 tons per day and nitrogen oxides by 48 tons per day. The agency estimates that reductions would prevent 4,000 premature deaths in California and reduce health costs between \$18 billion and \$26 billion annually.

Cracking down on mobile sources of pollution will be an even greater benefit.

Almost all other industries have been forced to clean up their emissions acts:

- Individuals pay thousands of dollars more for cars today than they did in the past because of smog and safety rules.
- The oil industry has invested untold billions of dollars in pollution controls.
- Agriculture has belatedly gotten on the bandwagon, largely due to legislation by Sen. Dean Florez of Shafter.

And the list of clean-air contributors goes on -- except for the transportation industry.

They must pay their dues to public health just like nearly everyone else.

[Editorial in LA Times, Tuesday, August 21, 2007:](#)

Drunk on ethanol

Basing energy policy on corn could fuel a potential disaster.

'Gasoline is going -- alcohol is coming. And it's coming to stay, too, for it's in unlimited supply. And we might as well get ready for it now.'

Those words might have come from President George W. Bush, or just about any member of the U.S. Congress, or every major presidential candidate from both parties. All are euphorically drunk on ethanol (a fancy name for grain alcohol), seen as the miracle fuel that will simultaneously solve our global warming problem and end our reliance on foreign oil. Actually, though, they were uttered by automotive pioneer Henry Ford nearly a century ago.

Ford might have been a visionary, but he was badly mistaken about ethanol. Unfortunately, so are Bush et al.

Alcohol is best taken in moderation, and that applies to cars as much as people. Ethanol isn't all hype -- it's a promising alternative fuel that could stretch gasoline supplies and cut emissions. But as politicians try to outdo one another by approving ever-bigger ethanol subsidies, production mandates and research grants, few are considering the environmental and economic effects of a massive, rapid rise in ethanol production. These are so severe that unless the mania ends soon, they could far outweigh any gains.

Food for fuel

The United States is the world's top producer of ethanol, most of which is made from corn. The bulk of our home brew is used as a fuel additive to make gasoline burn more efficiently; such use took off a few years ago after it was found that the more commonly used additive, methyl tertiary butyl ether, was contaminating groundwater. California is among more than two dozen states that have banned or restricted MTBE, with most replacing it with ethanol. It's also blended into a fuel called E85, a mix of 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline.

Corn-based ethanol is cleaner and more energy efficient than gasoline, though not by much. Studies agree that it reduces greenhouse gases, even if they differ on the magnitude. Yet it also can increase emissions of dangerous pollutants, especially at high concentrations. A recent Stanford University study showed that E85 produces so much ozone, a key ingredient in smog, that if it were used in Los Angeles instead of gasoline, it would raise ozone-related deaths 9%.

Nonetheless, Congress sees the kernel of something much bigger in ethanol. The 2005 energy bill mandated that production nearly double, to 7.5 billion gallons a year, by 2012; we're on track to easily pass that goal. In his State of the Union address in January, Bush upped the ante by calling for 35 billion gallons of alternative fuels (meaning mostly ethanol) by 2017. The Senate responded by passing an energy bill in June mandating 36 billion gallons of renewable fuels by 2022.

One problem here is that there's no such thing as a free lunch. In fact, when you produce such enormous quantities of corn-based ethanol, lunch gets more expensive for everybody. As demand for corn to make ethanol has soared, corn prices have shot up, nearly doubling their year-earlier level in early 2007. Other crop prices have risen too, because farmers are planting corn in fields that otherwise would have been used for crops such as soybeans or wheat. Prices for meat, eggs and dairy products are rising because animal feed is more expensive, as are prices for processed foods using corn and soft drinks made with corn-based sweeteners.

According to the consumer price index, grocery-store food prices rose 8% in the first half of this year. It's unknown how much of that hike is attributable to corn, but it was undoubtedly a factor. A recent study by Iowa State University estimated the per capita cost of higher corn prices at \$47 over the last year, meaning that the nation has paid \$14 billion in higher consumer prices for its ethanol obsession, not counting the \$2.7 billion in tax credits given to the industry last year.

Higher food prices are hard on low-income Americans, but they're even harder on the developing world. If more corn goes to ethanol, far less will be exported, spurring ever-higher world prices because the United States is the world's top corn grower. This is already causing an outcry in Mexico, which relies on U.S. corn for tortillas and other staples. In countries where the typical citizen makes less than \$5 a day, an increase of even a few pennies can be devastating.

Then there are the environmental effects. Corn is a very water- and chemical-intensive crop. Ordinarily, farmers rotate crops annually to avoid soil exhaustion, but high corn prices encourage them to plant corn in the same fields year after year. The only way to make this work is to pour on more fertilizers, which seep into waterways and create algae blooms that suck up all the oxygen and kill everything else. Two "dead zones" caused by chemical fertilizers in the Gulf of Mexico are already the size of Connecticut, Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Meanwhile, herbicides used in cornfields seep into groundwater supplies and raise risks of cancer and birth defects.

Further, there's only so much farmland to go around. To meet the Senate's 2022 renewable-fuels mandate of 36 billion gallons using corn would take 96 million acres. Last year, the entire corn crop, most of which went to food, was grown on 80 million acres. The only source of unused farmland is 37 million

acres in the federal Conservation Reserve Program, under which the government rents cropland from farmers for wetlands and wildlife conservation. Farming this land would destroy critically endangered Midwest wetlands and savannas and contribute to soil erosion, contaminated water and deadly algae blooms.

Bait and switchgrass

Of course, not even the most enthusiastic ethanol boosters expect to make 36 billion gallons of the stuff out of corn. The great hope for the future is "cellulosic" ethanol, which can be made from a wide variety of biological matter. Cellulosic ethanol is an exciting development because it's much more energy efficient than corn ethanol and emits less pollutants. It can also be made out of waste materials such as wood chips or cornstalks, though the fuel source considered to have the most potential is switchgrass -- a native plant that once blanketed the American prairie.

Yet even cellulosic ethanol has production limits. Making it out of plant materials gathered from forest floors, as some have proposed, would reduce the health of forests. Farmers intentionally leave cornstalks and other crop waste in their fields in order to till them into the soil; removing it would reduce soil quality and thus require more fertilizers. And widespread switchgrass cultivation once again raises worries that conservation lands would be dedicated to farming.

The other thing about cellulosic ethanol is that it doesn't actually exist -- no one has yet figured out how to make it economically in commercial quantities. The result is that farmers will plant more corn to meet federal mandates, even as the number of corn-based ethanol refineries skyrockets. There are 124 in the United States, with 76 more being built, according to the Renewable Fuels Assn. Their investors are operating on the assumption that use of corn-based ethanol will expand for years to come. If the economic and environmental effects of this practice are bad now, they'll soon get far worse.

The ethanol craze, like so much of U.S. energy policy, is designed more to please small but politically powerful constituencies such as corn growers and Detroit automakers than to solve the nation's energy problems. There is no other way to explain the flip-flops by presidential candidates Hillary Rodham Clinton and John McCain, who as senators were critical of ethanol but, desperate to win the primary in corn-growing Iowa, have more recently become ethanol boosters.

Likewise, there's no other way to explain the country's 54-cent-a-gallon tariff on Brazilian ethanol, which, because it's made of sugar, is dramatically more energy efficient (as well as being much cheaper to produce) than U.S. corn ethanol. The tariff protects corn growers while guaranteeing higher prices for consumers.

Meanwhile, our fuel-economy rules allow automakers to build lower-mileage cars than they could otherwise if they also make flex-fuel vehicles capable of running on E85. Yet E85 requires an expensive, separate fueling infrastructure, which is why it's available at just 1% of gas stations nationwide and at only four in California. Thus, Detroit gets to build bigger gas-guzzlers in order to boost an inefficient, highly polluting fuel that almost no one uses.

There are much better ways to cut greenhouse gas emissions and decrease our reliance on foreign oil. They start with improving fuel economy standards, as the Senate proposes to do in its energy bill. There's no compelling reason to make E85, let alone for the government to promote it. Instead, Congress could mandate a national fuel blend containing a minimal percentage of ethanol, with the quantity rising over time as cellulosic comes on line. The tariff on Brazilian ethanol has to go, though some sort of import cap may still be needed to avoid encouraging Brazilian farmers to clear the Amazon rain forest to grow more sugar cane.

Henry Ford, whose Model T ran on ethanol, made the mistake of thinking alcohol for motor fuel could be made in limitless supply. He didn't count on how widespread his invention would become, nor the fact that the world's population would grow so large that there wouldn't be enough agricultural land or fresh water on Earth to feed us all. We may have already passed that point, and the human population is expected to rise an additional 50% or so by 2050. This means that turning vast quantities of food into fuel is a recipe for global starvation. Ethanol will definitely play a role in our future energy mix, but not the starring role its advocates predict.

[Fresno Bee, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, August 21, 2007:](#)

Not against dairies

A commentary Aug. 14 by Steve Nash and Michael Marsh, representing dairy interests and the Farm Bureau, lauded the efforts made by dairies to be free of air pollution causation.

It accused members of the Healthy Dairy Commission of being a tool of a Bay Area union rather than Fresno teachers, physicians, ministers, attorneys, members of the League of Women Voters and other community groups aghast at new air pollution threatening our already polluted Valley. It accused us of employing false data and disproved studies in our argument. The data offered are findings of university scientists' years of scientific study.

We are not against dairies. We are against 1 of every 5 children having severe asthma in our Valley, more than twice the incidence in other areas of our country. We are against the \$3.2 billion spent in our Valley yearly for treatment of victims of air pollution. We are against the particulate matter causing heart, lung and brain damage.

It is our hope that we can sit down with dairy interests to discuss the issues, share data and learn from each other how to meet the problems of living in our complex society.

Leopold J. Snyder, MD, Fresno

[Fresno Bee, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, August 21, 2007:](#)

Forward thinking

Recent interest in the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley is long overdue and will hopefully result in improving the Valley's economy, security and quality of life. The hurdles this effort faces will require "outside-of-the-box" thinking.

The recent infrastructure bonds will obviously be divided up proportional to population densities. This fact should nudge members to recommend actions that appeal to the major metropolitan centers. Obviously, a high-speed rail system would be more appealing to Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco than to congested Valley rail cities denied stops due to costs.

These costs might be significantly reduced if a new rail right-of-way is established along the Interstate 5 corridor to be utilized by the present freight train service in conjunction with present cross-Valley rail systems. The new high-speed rail could utilize the present Amtrak right-of-way. Removing the 60 or 70 daily trips these diesel-powered trains make through our Valley's cities would only benefit our air quality.

We all remember the improvement Interstate 5 made to Highway 99 congestion when it was first built. Let's bring back the forward thinking and spirit of cooperation when working on the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley.

Leonard Baker, Hanford