

Valley residents encouraged to upgrade old fireplaces Smoke and fog a dangerous mix during winter months.

By Dhyana Levey

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, Feb. 7, 2008

Take a pinch of dust.

Add a bit of ash.

Mix with mists of fog to keep it all close to the ground.

Result: A perfect recipe for wintertime pollution.

You can't do much about fog in the Valley this time of year. But you can take steps to make that toasty home fire as friendly to the air as possible.

That's what the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District encourages in public messages, fliers and other communications.

Now, the air district is putting its money where its mouth is. It suggests that people replace their old wood-burning stoves and fireplace inserts with natural gas, propane stoves or propane inserts.

And it is offering a voucher program to inspire the change-over. "We're hoping this will motivate people who are considering updating their stoves," said Maricela Velasquez, spokeswoman for the air district.

From now through April 30, Merced County dwellers and other full-time residents of the Valley air basin can apply for \$350 vouchers to buy a new device -- or until funding runs out.

The air district has \$108,000 to spend on this project, which came from an Environmental Protection Agency grant to Operation Clean Air. It can fund about 300 vouchers.

People in the Merced and Modesto areas can call 209 557-6400 or go to www.valleyair.org to apply.

Changing out an older wood stove or fireplace insert with a new, cleaner natural gas or propane stove costs from \$1,000 to \$3,000, Velasquez estimated. So shoppers will still have to cough up a bit more cash -- but the overall purchase price will be cheaper.

It will help those who suffer from asthma and, basically, anyone else who breathes the air, said Mary-Michal Rawling, program manager for the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition: "Not all smoke goes right up the chimney. A lot of that ends up in the room, circulates throughout the house, aggravates asthma."

It's not safe for anyone to breathe in fine dust and ash particles from the smoke. "Then there's smoke that goes up the chimney, goes into the ambient air," she noted. "In the winter, inversion layers trap all that wood smoke close to the ground, where we can breathe it in."

An inversion layer, which can be created by the Valley's tule fog, acts as a lid to prevent air near the ground from moving away. "It doesn't allow particulate matter to escape," Velasquez explained.

Using natural gas or propane to warm a home can help because they don't release particles -- they just burn the gas, Rawling said: "You get the nice ambience of a fireplace, but no particles associated -- so it's the best of both worlds."

This marks the second year the air district has offered the program. And it, along with about 300 other projects, is helping clean up the Valley's air problems, Velasquez said.

Not soon enough, some residents have stated. But it's a start.

Calif. coastal commission nixes toll road near famous surf break

By Gillian Flaccus, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Thursday, Feb. 7, 2008

DEL MAR, Calif. -A state commission rejected a proposal late Wednesday to build a toll road that would cut through a popular beachfront state park that's home to a world-renowned surf break called Trestles.

Fourteen hours after the hearing began, the coastal commission voted 8-2 against the project, which had raised the ire of surfers and environmentalists. They argued it would wipe out about endangered species, destroy an ancient Indian burial ground and block sediment that creates world-class waves at San Onofre State Beach.

The panel's vote, which would have been the first of nearly a dozen reviews by state and federal agencies, means that commissioners found the project doesn't meet with the legal requirements of the federal Coastal Zone Management Act and California's Coastal Act. A vote in favor was critical to toll road supporters, who now must appeal the decision to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce to keep the project alive.

"When I look at this project, I can't believe it. This looks like something from the 1950s, not from now, when we know how endangered our planet is," said Commissioner Sara Wan, in public comments before the vote.

"I guess if you throw enough spaghetti at the wall, you hope that some of it will stick or at least prevent the majority of folks from understanding the issues."

Toll road officials said they would appeal the vote next week.

"It's not over yet. We've spent \$20 million and six years on this ... and we still believe firmly that our project as proposed provides the best traffic relief in the most environmentally sound way," said Lance MacLean, chairman of the Foothill Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency.

An estimated 3,000 people-surfers, environmentalists, commuters, union activists and tribal members-showed up for the marathon hearing, some with surfboards in tow. Speakers hoisted signs that read "Honk for Trestles" and "Highway from Hell" or "241 Toll Road: Drive Less. Live More." Opponents erupted in raucous cheering and dancing as the vote was tallied.

The commission's staff had recommended that the project be rejected, and executive director Peter Douglas called it "precisely the kind of project the Coastal Act was intended to prevent."

The toll agency published a rebuttal report and offered \$100 million to the state parks system as part of any deal.

Supporters, however, said the turnpike was necessary to relieve crushing rush hour traffic where 125,000 cars pass each day between Orange County and San Diego. They also argued the road would increase access to the pristine beach for low-income and minority families and provide an alternate escape route in case of a wildfire.

"The area is in gridlock most of the time," said Tom Margro, the toll road agency's chief executive officer. "The fact that Southern California needs an alternative to the I-5 in this area has been known for decades."

But speakers at the hearing questioned the wisdom of intruding on the state's fifth-most popular state park and its famous surf break for the benefit of commuters.

Surfers worry the road would block the fist-sized rocks that wash down the San Mateo Creek watershed and line the shallows. They believe those "cobbles" create the wave conditions that earn Trestles one of the coveted spots on surfing's annual World Championship Tour.

The break attracted 400,000 surfers last year and contributes up to \$13 million to the local economy, the commission staff said.

"It's about water quality, it's about air quality, it's about habitat-and this road is tearing through that. Last time I was there, I saw a sight I don't think I've ever seen in California. There were two giant bucks with all their antlers standing there, so majestic," said Toni Iseman, a Laguna Beach councilwoman. "What are we going to do with this land, if we say yes?"

The toll road agency cited studies that found that without the turnpike, by 2025 a 16-mile drive on that stretch of Interstate 5 would take an hour. They said the alternative -widening the I-5-would destroy more than 1,200 homes and businesses.

"I understand the surfers feel their beach will be disturbed and they want to keep their little haven to themselves," said Diane Harkey, a councilwoman from Dana Point.

"But many of our cities are built out," she said. "We have nowhere to route this traffic."

Environmental groups threaten to sue Port of Long Beach over air pollution They want the facility to reduce its diesel soot and smog within 90 days.

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Thursday, February 7, 2008

Two environmental groups on Wednesday gave the Port of Long Beach 90 days to reduce diesel soot and smog or face a lawsuit in federal court.

The 13-page ultimatum from the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Coalition for a Safe Environment is a prerequisite for a lawsuit that is likely to ignite a protracted battle over how to manage the potentially cancer-causing pollution spewed into the air from ships, big rigs and locomotives at the busy port.

The letter of intent to sue was hand-delivered to Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster, Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners President Mario Cordero and port Executive Director Richard Steinke.

"We want the court to take over the whole thing at once in order to enforce a new priority of public health over profit," said David Pettit, senior attorney for the defense council. "We think that will require court appointment of a port czar to force the port to use currently available technology to fix the problem.

"If it works here," he added, "it will work at every port in the nation where there's a diesel pollution problem."

Foster defended his city's track record on pollution. "We are very serious here about making sure the air is cleaner, and doing it as quickly as possible," he said. "It's the No. 1 health issue in Long Beach."

The environmental groups' strategy differs radically from previous legal challenges against the port that targeted specific polluters or flaws in environmental impact reports. Instead, it seeks to have the port complex treated as a single entity subject to court-monitored benchmarks and progress reports.

The groups chose not to sue the adjacent Port of Los Angeles, pending resolution of ongoing negotiations.

The lawsuit would be brought under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, which was designed to protect the public from harm by sites contaminated with hazardous waste. In this case, the waste includes thousands of tons of microscopic diesel particulates emitted each year by freight haulers.

"The argument that dangerous materials released into the air would be subject to the RCRA seems to be a plausible and innovative way to try to deal with the issue. I suspect it is untested," said Sean Hecht, executive director of the UCLA Environmental Law Center.

"No one knows, however, whether a court will find this is such an urgent problem that it is willing to fashion the remedy and timetables the petitioners are asking for."

In an interview, Cordero said the legal action didn't make sense, given that the Los Angeles and Long Beach port officials a year ago approved a Clean Air Action Plan to slash port-generated pollution 45% by 2012.

Implementation of that plan, aimed at reducing emissions from its fleet of 16,800 heavy -duty diesel trucks is a year behind schedule.

"We have the most progressive and aggressive environmental plan in the nation when it comes to air quality," Cordero said. "But we're not finished with it yet. We plan to be finished with this plan very soon. So I'm surprised by this action being taken."

Jack Kyser, chief economist with the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., expressed dismay over the legal tactic, which he warned "could choke off a lot of international trade" and result in price hikes of imported goods.

"Sometimes, people don't understand the ultimate consequences of what they do," he said. "Start stocking up on your tennis shoes and other necessities."

Environmental attorneys, however, argued that the port plan, while "well written," lacked enforceable deadlines.

Studies estimate that diesel exhaust from freight transport contributes to 2,400 premature deaths statewide each year -- with 50% occurring in the South Coast Air Basin

Environmental groups threaten SoCal port with pollution lawsuit

By Noaki Schwartz, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Thursday, Feb. 7, 2008

Two environmental groups are threatening to file a federal lawsuit against the Port of Long Beach unless it takes greater steps to clean up diesel pollution from ships, trucks and other vehicles.

The Natural Resources Defense Council and the Coalition for a Safe Environment on Wednesday sent port officials and the mayor of Long Beach a warning letter. The groups have given the port 90 days to come up with enforceable deadlines for its clean air initiative that they say is languishing.

Long Beach and neighboring Los Angeles harbor combined are the nation's largest port complex and account for more than 40 percent of all containerized cargo entering the U.S. annually.

"Both ports passed this thing called the Clean Air Action Plan but I don't think it's any exaggeration to say it's all plan and no action," said David Pettit, an attorney with the council. "We need court ordered deadlines that are enforceable by contempt of court."

Pettit said the Port of Long Beach has taken "a few very small steps but has fallen behind" on its commitment to clean up the air. The council has not threatened the Port of Los Angeles with such a lawsuit, saying talks have been more productive.

Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster said his city has matched every move made at the Port of Los Angeles.

"I quite frankly don't understand what the issue is," Foster said. "I think we're making very good progress. These two ports have been working in tandem on this plan doing everything in lockstep. ... Everybody would like to get it done faster."

Mario Cordero, President of the Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners, said the groups need to give the port more time to complete its initiative.

"We're in the midst of completing the most progressive and aggressive environmental plan of any port in the nation and any port in the world," he said.

Concern over the affects of port pollution on surrounding communities helped lead the Long Beach and Los Angeles harbor commissions to approve a \$2 billion clean air initiative in 2006.

Dust Storms Overseas Carry Contaminants to U.S. Scientists Study Whether Diseases Are Also Transported

By Doug Struck
Washington Post, Wednesday, February 6, 2008

Seventy-five years ago, aviator Charles Lindbergh turned the controls of his pontoon plane over to his co-pilot, wife Anne Morrow Lindbergh, while flying above Iceland. He thrust a makeshift metal arm holding a sticky glass plate from the cockpit. He wanted to see if the winds high aloft the Earth were as clean as they seemed.

They were not.

Now, with NASA satellites and sampling by researchers around the world, scientists know that great billowing clouds of dust waft over the oceans in the upper atmosphere, arriving in North America from deserts in Africa and Asia.

[Researchers have also found that the dust clouds contain not only harmful minerals and industrial pollutants, but also living organisms: bacteria, fungus and viruses that may transmit diseases to humans.](#) Some say an alarming increase in asthma in children in the Caribbean is the consequence of dust blown from Africa, and predict they will find similar connections in the Southeast and Northwest United States.

Scientists are beginning to look at these dust clouds as possible suspects in transcontinental movement of diseases such as influenza and SARS in humans, or foot-and-mouth disease in livestock. Until recently, epidemiologists had looked at people, animals and products as carriers of the diseases.

"We are just beginning to accumulate the evidence of airborne dust implications on human health," said William A. Sprigg, a climate expert at the University of Arizona. "Until now, it's been like the tree falling in the forest. Nobody heard, so nobody knew it was there."

The World Meteorological Organization, a science arm of the United Nations, is alarmed enough to set up a global warning system to track the moving clouds of dust and to alert those in the path. Sprigg is heading the project.

He foresees a system soon in which forecasters can predict "down to the Zip code" the arrival of dust clouds. That forecast could prompt schools and nursing homes to keep their wards inside, and help public health doctors predict a surge of respiratory complaints.

Analysis of soil samples has long shown that minerals picked up from barren deserts reach distant shores, for good or bad. The Amazon rain forest in South America, for example, gets phosphate nutrients from dust blown in from northern Africa's Sahara Desert.

[Industrial development has added heavy metals and toxic chemicals to that airborne mix.](#) Korea and Japan periodically chafe as storms of "Yellow Dust" wash over from China, bringing a caustic mix of sand and industrial pollutants.

Even natural minerals can be harmful to humans, and dust-borne particles have been linked to annual meningitis outbreaks in Africa and silicosis lung disease in Kazakhstan and North Africa. The Dust Bowl storms of the 1930s in the United States brought graphic descriptions of choking sediment getting into the lungs of people and felling livestock.

But the advent of satellite images gave scientists a sobering look at how even faraway storms can reach us.

Traveling for a week over the Pacific from the Gobi and Taklimakan deserts in Asia, clouds carrying hundreds of millions of tons of dust regularly reach the northwestern United States. From the Sahara and Sahel deserts in Africa and the East, they roll across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and reach the southeastern United States in three to five days.

[Authorities in Los Angeles estimate that on some days, one-quarter of the city's smog comes from China.](#)

["There is plenty of evidence from space observations of the Northern Hemisphere that there is a persistent ring of industrial emission dust and other pollutants in the air. You can actually see this](#)

bathtub ring around the Northern Hemisphere," said Stanley A. Morain, who heads the Earth Data Analysis Center at the University of New Mexico and collaborates with Sprigg.

"If something breaks out, it can move very quickly into other areas," he said.

Dust storms may be increasing as global warming and desertification expand arid areas. The dust swirls into the atmosphere containing plant pollens, fungal spores, dried animal feces, minerals, chemicals from fires and industry, and pesticide residues.

Asthma in the Caribbean increased just as an African drought increased the amount of dust washing over the islands. Asthma has increased in Barbados 17 times since 1973, when the African drought began, according to a national study there, and researchers have documented an increase in pediatric hospital admissions when the dust storms are worst.

Scientists previously had thought bacteria and viruses picked up by the dust storms would die on long flights, when they are exposed to ultraviolet radiation and extreme temperatures. But three-inch African locusts have been found alive in the Caribbean after dust storms.

In the late 1990s, Eugene Shinn, who was studying the widespread die-off of Caribbean coral reefs for the U.S. Geological Survey in Florida, began wondering if smaller living organisms came with the dust. He eventually linked live microbes brought from Africa to sea fan disease, which was infecting the coral.

Shinn enlisted USGS microbiologist Dale Griffin. They and other colleagues devised a method of collecting air samples, using a contraption built with a vacuum pump from Home Depot drawing air through a two-inch round sterile filter.

In the first test, collected during a dusty day in 2000 over the Virgin Islands, Griffin said he thought they might find evidence of four or five different microorganisms growing colonies on the filter. Instead, he found 30 colonies, each with billions of cells.

"I did not expect that many," he said. "And we know that whatever grows on the filter represents only about 1 percent of what's really there. People just don't think about microorganisms moving around the atmosphere, at least that far."

Griffin said that "in Florida in the summer, when the dust storms are pulsing across, if you walk outside and breathe, 50 percent of the particles you breathe come from Africa," more than 4,000 miles away. They contain mold spores and bacteria that increase allergies and respiratory diseases.

Shinn, who is now retired, said that there has not been enough response to these findings.

["No one in authority really wants to hear about this problem, even when it is known that African dust sporadically exceeds EPA air standards in places like Miami during the summer months," Shinn said in a letter recently. "No government agency wants to face this problem because no one knows what to do about it."](#)

"In my opinion, nothing will change regarding either African or Asian dust until we have a catastrophe such as a large-scale avian flu, West Nile virus, or some other deadly outbreak that cannot be explained away by the usual suspects," he said. "Meanwhile we will continue to employ agents to check for fruit in baggage and dirt on tourists' shoes while hundreds of millions of tons of soil dust carrying live microbes continue to be transported unchecked overhead."

Unchecked, perhaps, but not unwatched. The early warning system being devised by Sprigg will track those storms, integrating the data with weather forecasts, so that local authorities have notice of one to three days to take precautions. Parts of the system have already been set up in China and Europe.

In addition to medical precautions, police can be warned about deteriorating driving visibility and airports can plan to reroute planes, Sprigg said. He said he hopes the next step will be more aggressive medical research to determine the composition and human health threats of what is in those dust clouds.

"I really see some practical applications here," he said. "We are just getting started."

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the air pollution in ports as the "Perfect Storm" against the health of local residents. For more information on this clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Califican contaminación en puertos como "tormenta perfecta" para la salud

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, February 6, 2008

Una empresa privada que realizó un estudio de diez meses en los diez puertos marítimos más activos del país, calificó esas áreas como "tormenta perfecta" para la salud humana.

El empresario James Cannon dijo que en los puertos crece la actividad comercial continuamente y se combina con el crecimiento demográfico.

Según el estudio, la solución más adecuada, porque se puede aplicar rápidamente, es sustituir el combustible que consumen los barcos y los camiones de carga en dichos puertos.

El estudio integra a los tres mayores puertos marítimos en California.