

Ethanol plant decision likely on Tuesday

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, Feb. 18, 2008

Great Valley Ethanol, a fledgling Bakersfield firm, has secured a city approval for its first-ever corn ethanol production plant in south Hanford, where there is neighborhood opposition. The company is locked in a fight with a handful of residents who oppose the company's proposal to build a plant capable of producing 63 million gallons of ethanol a year at the southwest corner of 10th and Iona Avenues.

"I understand people want to make money and the city wants an economic benefit, but I think in the Valley, we've got to be realistic about what kind of businesses are a good fit," said opponent Andre Booker, who lives within a quarter mile of the project.

Booker's concerns include emissions, an anticipated explosion of truck traffic in the area as well as more global concerns such as greenhouse gases from the production.

Edward Settle, Great Valley Ethanol's president has maintained that the Hanford project will help meet a 1 billion-gallon demand that is barely filled by a current 70-million gallon supply. Corn ethanol is used as a gasoline additive replacing MTBE, which has caused groundwater pollution in the past.

Anticipating controversy, Great Valley Ethanol went through an environmental impact review process last fall.

In December, the Hanford City Planning Commission voted 6-1 to approve the project over objections from residents who fear pollution and truck traffic. The city council has approved an annexation and rezoning for the project site.

But San Francisco-based group, Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment (CRPE), has appealed the decision to the City Council, which is scheduled to consider the appeal this coming Tuesday. The group claims that the commission violated the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act by approving the project.

In previous testimony submitted to the city, the organization stated that city analysis of the air pollution concerns was inadequate because it required no mitigation despite the anticipated 313,000 tons of greenhouse gas emission a year. CRPE says greenhouse gases contribute to global warming, decreasing snow-pack, affecting the ag economy, and further slowing the progress in the air quality standard in the Valley.

The environmental impact report indicates the plant would cause unavoidable significant amounts of nitrogen oxide, a smog precursor, and greenhouse gases, marked with carbon dioxide.

The plant also uses 1 million gallons of water a day, which is one-11th of the average water pumped by the city at any given day. That's enough to serve 6,651 residents in Hanford.

Company officials say they are mitigating the latter issues.

For example, the company will pay the Kings County Water District for any water usage exceeding the historical use of water by agriculture in the area, that is 3 acre-feet per acre. The money will pay for water banking to replenish groundwater. The company also says it will implement a truck traffic plan to minimize inner-city traffic impact. Odor will be controlled by combustion, the company says.

Great Valley Ethanol's plans call for breaking ground in April and completing the construction by the end of 2009. The company will get various tax incentives by siting itself within Kings County's enterprise zone.

THE MEETING

The Hanford City Council meets for a study session at 4 p.m. and reconvenes for a regular session at 7:30 p.m. every first and third Tuesday in the Council Chambers, Civic Auditorium, 400 N. Douty St.

TO LEARN MORE

Call the Hanford Community Development Department at 585-2581. Staff reports are available at the office, 317 N. Douty St., Hanford.

Expert speaks in town at asthma coalition event

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

Asthma has been prominent in David Nunez's family. But Nunez himself never had an issue -- until he reached his early 30s.

"I didn't develop it until I was an adult, when I developed chronic coughs, which were later diagnosed as asthma," he said.

Being a physician, he thought he knew enough about his condition. But Nunez recalls scaring himself one day at an airport where he ran across the corridors to catch a flight. He was wheezing, and his chest was tight. He nearly had an asthma attack, learning a valuable lesson that he would be sharing with others later in life.

"It was surprising to me because I never knew exercise being a trigger for my asthma," Nunez said. "It just shows that knowing your asthma trigger is important. You have to be aware of all the things that can be responsible for your asthma."

Today, Nunez, 45, is one of the state's most respected asthma expert. As the head of the California Asthma Public Health Initiative, Dr. Nunez preaches the power of asthma management using his own personal experiences as well as his expertise as a public health physician.

His mantra: You don't have to live with symptoms and limit your activities, if you keep your asthma under good control.

"If you're using your quick-relief medicine a lot, that's a sign of poor control," said Nunez.

"You shouldn't have to use that more than twice a week ... What we want to have people learn to expect is that they should have complete control over their asthma."

Nunez was in Hanford Wednesday to speak to an audience inside the county Health Department annex at the invitation of the Kings County Asthma Coalition.

Asthma is a serious public health issue in the San Joaquin Valley, where some of the highest asthma rates in the state are found. Kings County is no exception.

Nunez was here mainly to discuss new federal guidelines for controlling asthma, which were issued last fall by the National Institutes of Health. The guidelines -- which provide the latest information on the best practices for asthma management -- are the first major update of its kind in a decade.

"It's a really good opportunity to remind health care providers about what the gold standard of care for asthma is," Nunez said, "because we know that many people don't receive everything they should receive."

The new guideline raises the expectation about well-controlled asthma.

For both children and adults, asthma is considered well controlled when:

- Daytime symptoms are experienced less than twice a week;
- Nighttime awakenings less than once a month;
- Quick-relief medicines are used less than twice a week;
- There is no interference with daily activities;
- An asthma attack is experienced less than once a year;

- Lung function is kept at 80 percent.

"Asthma is a huge public health problem because it's an epidemic," Nunez said. "There is a lot we should be doing."

According to UCLA's California Health Interview Survey data, asthma prevalence in the Valley was 17.1 percent in 2005, compared with the state average of 13.6.

Poor air quality in the Valley does increase asthma attacks and emergency visits, but it remains unknown whether air pollution causes more people to develop asthma, Nunez said.

"But despite the lack of information about the specific cause, there is a lot we can do in terms of recognizing it, treating it and avoiding triggers."

Nunez also emphasized the negative effect of second-hand smoking on asthma, saying that it is one of the most common symptom triggers.

These triggers, which can vary from one person to another, include allergens such as dust mites, animals, cockroaches, pollens and molds. They could also include viral infections, exercise, or strong fragrances.

Nunez recommends an allergen test for people with asthma. Identifying and avoiding triggers could be as "powerful" as medications, he said.

"What you should be doing is maximizing your control by identifying and reducing triggers and working with providers to see if you can step down (on medication therapy), because you never want to use more medication than you need."

Refinery critics eagerly await new report

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2008

Big West has launched a PR offensive in its bid to expand but community members remain apprehensive.

"We're all waiting to see what the upcoming (environmental) report says," said Fruitvale School District Superintendent Carl Olsen. "We'd like to see what the changes in that report reflect."

Fruitvale has five schools near the refinery, the closest Discovery Elementary about a mile away. Safety of students should be the primary concern in talk of expansion, he said.

Area resident David Wolf, a Kern County deputy district attorney, wants a detailed study of how many schools and neighborhoods would be affected by a spill of hydrofluoric acid at the refinery.

Industry tests have shown the chemical's toxic cloud can migrate up to 5 miles. Contact with even small amounts can cause deep tissue burns that develop over days while exposure to large concentrations can lead to death caused by lung damage.

Big West said last year it would use a modified form of the chemical to suppress creation of such a cloud.

"I'm not against progress," Wolf said. "I like to see lower gas prices and new jobs in Bakersfield but I'd like to see more about the safety of these schools."

Michael Stump, another attorney and nearby resident, is also concerned about increased odors and truck traffic.

"Twenty years ago, when Coffee Road was alfalfa fields, maybe this was a good location for a refinery," Stump said. "But now that the Board of Supervisors has allowed the community to grow, do we want to allow toxic, deadly chemicals around new schools?"

Shafter-based environmental group Association of Irrigated Residents has objected to the project's air quality impacts.

To allay concerns, Big West has mailed glossy flyers and newsletters to surrounding homes explaining safety inspections at the plant, the economic benefits of expansion and the company's commitment to the environment.

It had a Los Angeles production company produce a six-minute video touting refinery plans to spend \$6 million to reduce local greenhouse gases, plant 1,000 trees and install the most effective air pollution controls.

Those featured include Bakersfield Fire Capt. Quincy Sloan, Fruitvale School District Trustee Kevin Burton and Greater Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce President Debbie Moreno.

Bakersfield Fire Chief Ron Frazee said the fire captain's appearance in the video is not a city endorsement of the refinery's plans and he's looking into the appropriateness of Sloan's actions.

In addition, Big West takes great pains not to call its proposed project an expansion, instead describing it as a "modernization," "upgrade" or the "Clean Fuels Project" because the new gasoline and diesel produced meets the state's strict environmental standards.

Company officials said "expansion" implies the facility would take in larger amounts of crude to be processed. Instead, they want the community to understand that crude processing capacity would remain the same while the volume of fuel produced by the facility would increase.

Expansion plans to move forward

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2009

Plans to expand Big West of California's Rosedale Highway refinery are about to move forward after concerns about the risks to surrounding neighborhoods and schools ground them to a halt. A new environmental report on the project is due out in the next few months, prompted by concerns the first one did not adequately address safety issues and the dangers of a hazardous chemical to be used.

Refinery executives and county officials declined to discuss the revised report until it's made public - something that keeps getting pushed back - but said it better addresses those criticisms.

"We listened to the public when they said they wanted something safer," said refinery Health, Safety and Environmental Director Bill Chadick.

Concerned residents say they'll see about that when they get the report.

THE PROJECT

The refinery wants to increase production of gasoline and diesel by 65 percent, to about 3 million gallons per day, by upgrading and adding new equipment. The lack of equipment now requires it to export about one-third of its product to refineries in Southern California and the Bay Area for further processing.

The biggest concern is the refinery's plan to use a hazardous chemical called hydrofluoric acid, or HF. The chemical's been shunned by most other refineries in the state following its role in deadly refinery explosions in the late 1980s and fears a spill would create dangerous vapors capable of migrating up to five miles.

Big West said last year the refinery would instead use a less dangerous form of the acid but experts contend it could choose an even safer alternative.

THE CRITICS

Project critics are eagerly anticipating the new report.

The initial one was "seriously flawed," said Gloria Smith, a Bay Area attorney representing residents near the refinery, facility workers and local environmentalists.

"From start to finish it had not properly addressed all the impacts associated with the project," she said. "There were serious problems, especially with the schools nearby."

Smith assembled a team of consultants with decades of experience in environmental management of industrial facilities, which found the report understated the dangers of HF and failed to explore alternatives to the chemical.

Consultant Phyllis Fox, a licensed chemical engineer, said the lack of detail was alarming but not uncommon. Industrial facilities seeking permits often withhold project details to lower the cost of mitigating possible environmental threats.

"They encourage their consultants not to lay all the cards on the table, hoping the regulators won't catch it," Fox said. "The local permitting agencies get bamboozled. They don't know anything about HF or they would have done more with it" in the first environmental report.

Smith's consultants also found the report lacked any information about major soil contamination at the refinery that could pose health risks to workers or students at the nearby Vista West High School if disturbed during construction.

Consultant Matt Hagemann, who used to work in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's superfund and hazardous waste program, said concentrations of lead and chromium in soil at the refinery is so high in some places, it meets the state's criteria for hazardous waste.

"It's not surprising that there would be these concentrations of contaminants at a refinery," Hagemann said. "What's surprising is that it wasn't mentioned in the (environmental report) and no provisions were made for protecting someone who would come in contact with these contaminants."

Chadick denied Big West purposely cut corners in its environmental report. The company, he said, hired respected consultants to assist in the effort.

"At no point would they ever recommend anything that's not safe or not a prudent design for a safe refinery," Chadick said.

PROBLEMS ALREADY

Existing refinery operations have also become an issue in the expansion.

Following odor complaints, gas releases and related flaring the past two years, Kern County Environmental Health Services Director Matt Constantine considered bringing criminal charges against the company. Constantine instead required it to spend money to prevent future gas releases and provide better information to the community when heavy odors or releases occur.

At least once, a gas release at the refinery made nearby residents sick and led to an informal evacuation of the Lowe's store next door, Constantine said.

"My concern is I don't want to drag this out," Constantine said of his decision not to send the case to the District Attorney's office for possible charges. "We need to get through this and remediate this so it doesn't happen again."

Constantine said he's compiling a list of the facility's violations to get a better picture of the facility's safety record as the expansion project proceeds through permitting. Refinery officials have said releases are normal at refineries and that inspections of more than 120,000 refinery parts are checked every three months to ensure safety. "Flaring is a refinery safety device," Chadick said. "It's needed. It's important at every refinery."

City might seek more input on Wal-Mart Consultants may be enlisted to analyze EIR for divisive project.

By Leslie Albrecht

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Feb. 18, 2008

Intense public interest in how a Wal-Mart distribution center would affect the environment is prompting the city to consider adding another layer of scrutiny to the project.

The City Council will vote Tuesday on whether to conduct what's called a "peer review" of the environmental impact report on Wal-Mart's proposed distribution center in southeast Merced.

If the council approves the plan, the city will hire Irvine-based consultants RBF, Inc., to read and analyze the environmental impact report. Wal-Mart would pay the \$18,800 consulting tab.

Putting an extra set of eyes on the environmental impact report is meant to ensure that "nothing is overlooked," said city Planning Manager Kim Espinosa.

"Because of the amount of attention that the project has gotten from the public and the number of issues that people have raised, we wanted to make sure that the environmental impact report is as complete and thorough as possible," said Espinosa.

The environmental impact report on Wal-Mart's proposed distribution center hasn't been released to the public yet. Consultants EDAW, Inc. started work on the impact report in June 2006. So far the report has cost \$441,800, all paid by Wal-Mart.

Right now city staff are looking at a draft version of the document. When the report is finished, probably in late April, the public will have 45 days to read it and submit comments.

The report is meant to give the public and city leaders an accurate picture of how building the distribution center will affect traffic, air quality, ag land, noise levels, public health and other environmental issues. Consultants who worked on the report visited a Wal-Mart distribution center in Apple Valley to observe traffic and collect data on noise.

Completing the impact report is an important step in Wal-Mart's plan to build the distribution center, first announced in 2005. State law requires the report, and the City Council must certify the report before it makes the final vote on the distribution center.

If hired, consultants RBF, Inc., would read and analyze the entire report, then alert city staff to any shortcomings or weaknesses. RBF's suggestions could range from changing wording to collecting new data, said Espinosa.

The peer review will take about three or four weeks. The city has never requested such a review before, said Espinosa.

The county requested a similar peer review -- at a cost of \$102,000 -- for the environmental impact report on the Riverside Motorsports Park, the racing complex slated to be built near Atwater.

Wal-Mart wants to build the distribution center on 230 acres of land between Childs and Gerard avenues, west of Tower Road. The 1.2-million-square-foot complex would operate 24 hours a day. It's projected to employ 600 full-time workers in its first year of operation. Approximately 450 trucks would drive into the center every day and another 450 would leave the center each day.

Wal-Mart currently operates six distribution centers, 140 stores and 32 supercenters in California.

Diverse group treads The Longest Walk for the environment Through hillsides and busy streets, Americans look to shed light on ecological challenges facing the nation

By Dhyana Levey

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2008

The sounds of passing trains and honking cars blended with cheers and a pounding drum Monday as about 100 brightly clad walkers brought their journey through Merced.

They paused in the morning for a break where Highway 59 meets Olive Avenue. A cloud of sweet-smelling sage wafted from the center of their circle as Los Banos resident Henry Dominguez, a Chiricahua, led a prayer in thanks to the past four miles they had walked.

The beginning point was Alcatraz Island, but participants had spent the weekend at Merced resident and Shawnee Indian Mike Hermann's ranch. There, they gathered spiritual and physical replenishment through food, rest and a sweat lodge before hitting the road once again.

There were many purposes to this walk -- the Longest Walk 2 -- which will span five months as it heads to Washington, D.C. For one, it gives a 30-year nod of remembrance to the original 1978 Longest Walk across the country. Many of Monday's walkers, such as Hermann and Dominguez, had participated in the 1978 trip.

The purpose for that journey was to draw attention to proposed legislation in Congress that threatened American Indian rights. Shortly afterward, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 was passed.

This year, walkers want to raise environmental concerns. "I have 10 sons and eight daughters ... and I want to make sure they have air they can breathe and water they can drink," Dominguez said. "We need to put the message out there."

As walkers reach each community, they plan to gather information from the locals about each environmental challenge they are facing. These details will be included in a paper to be delivered to Congress on July 11, said organizer Pashina Banks Moore -- daughter of Dennis Banks, who co-founded the American Indian Movement, led the 1978 walk and is taking charge of this year's trip.

While the event is to raise awareness across the nation, it also works as a springboard to address local issues, said David Alvarez, a Merced resident and "Yoeme" or Yaqui Indian. He runs the Merced Talking Circle, which provides updates on issues affecting Native Americans.

His specific environmental concerns for Merced include the area's congestion from so many vehicles, and the development of major outlets. "It hurts the quality of the air," he said. "To top it off, there isn't adequate health care."

Some walkers, like Kaelan Holmes of Seattle, were in the walk for the long haul. "I haven't had a driver's license for years, so I'm used to walking," he said. "I love Seattle, but you can't just sit there stagnant. ... A lot of people here are going through a spiritual pilgrimage."

Other walkers, like Atwater pencil portrait artist Johnny Clay, simply joined in for the Merced part of the walk as it headed down Olive Avenue on the way to Le Grand and into Chowchilla.

Clay, a descendant of the Yokayo Band of Pomo Indians, was also one of many local residents who donated food or other supplies.

At least 50 people from this area so far have donated food or money, Hermann said. The Merced County Food Bank even passed some nutrients along.

And the event itself drew participants from all ages and backgrounds.

Buddhist monks joined the journey with Native Americans and other cultures. Shunsho Yamada traveled all the way from Tokyo to make the cross-country trip. "I came here to learn about what this movement is so I can go back to Japan to talk about it," he said.

This year's walk drew more people than the original, Hermann said. It split into two groups to cover two routes. The northern route commemorates the original walk and will wind through Nevada, Utah and Colorado. The southern route -- which came through Merced -- visits significant Native American tribal land.

But the biggest difference between the Longest Walk 2 and its 1978 predecessor is technology, Hermann said: "We can document everything as we go along. People up ahead can get a vision of the walk (from the Web site). In 1978, there wasn't the technology to have forward vision."

Green ranchers buck cattle industry

By Garance Burke, Associated Press Writer
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Feb. 15, 2008

CATHEYS VALLEY, Calif. Seth Nitschke spent his early 20s working at large feed lots before he returned home to start a business raising beef cattle fed on the grasses of the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Nitschke, 31, who herds heifers through pastures near Yosemite National Park, doesn't consider himself an environmental activist, though he's planting saplings to protect nearby streams and runs a light herd to let his pastures breathe.

Unlike some of his counterparts in traditional livestock production, he and a new crop of cattlemen are quietly working to minimize their industry's ecological footprint and are forging unlikely alliances with environmental groups.

"Look at this grass. If I don't take care of it, that's my livelihood," Nitschke said, kneeling as he examined foxtail shoots. "We dress differently than the eco-folks, we probably vote differently, but in the end there's a lot of ways in which our core values are really close."

Across the West, cattlemen and environmentalists have locked horns over grazing practices for decades. But increasingly, ranchers are buying into the idea that they have a role to play in protecting open space, be it through preserving private wildlands or promoting sustainable grazing techniques.

Near Florida's Lake Okeechobee, the World Wildlife Fund has recruited ranchers to build ditches on their lands to improve wetlands habitat for threatened and endangered birds like the wood stork and crested caracara.

In Wyoming, the Audobon Society is trying to persuade oil and gas companies to pay ranchers to maintain sage brush expanses key to the survival of the sage grouse.

And in California, 75 ranching organizations, environmental groups and state and federal agencies have adopted a common strategy to enhance the state's rangelands while protecting its ecosystems.

"This new generation of ranchers knows they have to work on the environmental part of it to survive," said Neil McDougald, a rancher at the University of California Cooperative Extension office in Madera County. "I'll guarantee you the guys driving cows today have a better environmental conscience than the ranchers who were riding around holding up stagecoaches."

Still, a history of bad blood between those who live off the land and those who seek to protect it hasn't made coalition-building easy.

Recent research from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization found that the world's large-scale livestock operations are causing environmental problems ranging from land degradation and air and water pollution to loss of biodiversity.

In last two centuries, foraging has contributed to the erosion of arid Western rangelands and watershed contamination, said Mel George, a range ecologist at the University of California, Davis.

The environmental movement has hit back with lawsuits seeking to ban cattlemen from running their herds on public lands.

Last year, 37.5 million calves were born to U.S. beef producers - the smallest herd since 1951 - a decline the National Cattlemen's Beef Association attributes partially to land loss.

Research and government programs highlighting how grazing can benefit the environment have helped make partners out of livestock producers and their adversaries, George said.

The USDA's Grasslands Reserve Program, which works to preserve rangeland through conservation easements and rental agreements, has kept 712,000 acres nationwide from being developed.

The California Cattlemen's Association, The Nature Conservancy and other groups are lobbying to get more money for the program included in the 2008 Farm Bill, said Matt Byrne, the association's vice president.

Other programs reimburse ranchers when they build fences to keep cows away from sensitive pasturelands or erect water tanks so cows don't foul up creeks, said Sara Schmidt, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's assistant chief for the West.

Such efforts also serve as a marketing tool with eco-friendly customers who seek out Nitschke's grass-fed filet mignons, he said.

Kelly Mulville, a consultant to cattle owners in Colorado and New Mexico, says environmental stewardship can work in tandem with the profit motive: if ranchers protect their grass, they can feed more livestock.

"We may end up using the same tools that are destroying our environment to repair it," Mulville said. "Still, it's going to take a lot more than beef to save the world."

Long Beach airport expansion clears hurdle

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, Feb. 16, 2008

LONG BEACH, Calif.-A judge has potentially cleared the way for the expansion of Long Beach airport.

Superior Court Judge Thierry Patrick Colaw said in a ruling Friday that the city did not violate state law when it approved an environmental report for the expansion. The report says the expansion won't affect noise and air quality.

The Long Beach school district, which filed the lawsuit in 2006, argued that dozens of schools would be affected by noise and demanded the city pay for soundproofing at those sites.

The city plans to expand the terminal and build a new parking garage. The number of passengers using the airport annually is expected to increase by 1.2 million to as much as 4 million in the coming years.

Berkeley steel plant agrees to reduce odors

Action designed to avoid possible nuisance proceeding from the city

By Doug Oakley, Staff Writer

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, Feb. 16, 2008

Pacific Steel Casting in Berkeley has agreed to voluntarily reduce noxious odors coming from its 2nd Street plants in the face of a City Council proposal to declare it a public nuisance.

After receiving a letter on Tuesday from Pacific Steel General Manager Joe Emmerichs agreeing to "cut odor and emissions while producing superior steel castings," Berkeley City Councilwoman Linda Maio pulled her proposal from consideration at the start of the council meeting.

Pacific Steel has said it would have to shut down and lay off 640 workers if the city went through with its formal nuisance proceedings to alter its use permit. Those proceedings could take time and end up in court.

"They are letting us know the use-permit route is harmful to them, but they want to collaborate on an agreement that will still get us there," said Maio, whose West Berkeley district includes the plant. "I don't want a drawn-out process. There could be many public hearings, appeals and lawsuits, and it could be messy."

Maio said it has taken the city 20 years or more to get to the point of nuisance proceedings because the state of California, with its Bay Area Air Quality Management District, was first in line to get the steel foundry to clean up its act. Now that it has concluded a lawsuit that resulted in some environmental changes at the plant, the city gets its turn, Maio said.

Maio said she favors a negotiated plan with Pacific Steel because it will be faster, and the threat of starting nuisance proceedings can be held over its head in case it doesn't live up to the agreement.

Emmerichs, who brought about 250 union members to Tuesday night's City Council meeting to urge the city not to start nuisance proceedings, had no comment when asked whether he had cut a deal with the city to avoid the proceedings.

According to Mayor Tom Bates, Pacific Steel was told before the meeting that the item to start nuisance proceedings would be pulled because the city received the letter agreeing to negotiate. Bates wondered aloud during the meeting why the steel company brought its union members to the Tuesday meeting anyway.

"We met with Pacific Steel on Friday, and we said we are pulling this item and you show up with all these people to harangue us," Bates said.

In its letter, Pacific Steel claimed it already has laid off 30 workers because some of its customers have gotten wind of the proposal to tamper with its use permit and have gone elsewhere.

"To say that there are 30 jobs lost already because of this is so much b.s. I can't believe it," Bates said at the meeting.

During a tour of the plant last week, Emmerichs said business is down because one of the truck manufacturers it makes steel parts for designed a newer model of truck that costs more, causing fewer people to buy it.

He also said any changes to its use permit that would cause it to reduce hours of production would hurt business.

Ignacio De La Fuente, vice president of the West Coast Glass Molders International Union and president of the Oakland City Council, came to the City Council meeting as well.

"The reality is that Pacific Steel Casting has spent millions and millions of dollars improving conditions at the plants," De La Fuente said. "We need to keep good union jobs here."

Maio said her intention was never to shut down the plant or to put people out of work.

"Now we have their attention," Maio said. "(Nuisance proceedings) are our leverage point. I've been saying all along I don't want to jeopardize their contracts and lose jobs."

Maio said Pacific Steel has shared with her plans to change what is called an aromatic compound that is used to hold its sand steel molds together. Called phenol, it is probably what people are smelling when it gets hot as molten metal is poured into the molds, she said.

Calif air regulators want plan for measuring ozone approved

Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Thursday, February 14, 2008

LOS ANGELES - State air regulators are calling on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to approve a more protective strategy for measuring and enforcing ozone levels in Central and Southern California.

The California Air Resources Board said the agency on Thursday scrapped its current plan of measuring ozone levels over one hour in favor of measuring levels over eight hours.

The board submitted the new ozone plan to the EPA in November, but said it had yet to get approval.

Officials say federal approval would allow them to enforce the new plan and offer greater protections to the public against chronic health problems from daylong exposure to ozone.

Ship pollution bill splits senators

By Lisa Friedman, Washington Bureau
In Contra Costa Times, Friday, Feb. 15, 2008

WASHINGTON - A move to cut pollution from ships sailing into U.S. ports is pitting the West Coast against the Gulf Coast in what could become a bitter battle over who pays for cleaner air.

At issue is legislation introduced by California Sen. Barbara Boxer, a Democrat, that would require ships calling on U.S. ports to use cleaner marine fuels and engines.

"There's a problem in Southern California. You're out of compliance. Don't drag us down to fix it," Sen. David Vitter, R-La., said Thursday, referring to the fact that California does not meet the federal Environmental Protection Agency's air-quality standards.

Air-quality management officials say marine vessels spew air pollution throughout the country and cause 2,000 to 5,000 premature deaths annually.

But Louisiana leaders sought to portray the problem as purely a California issue. New restrictions on fuels, they argued before a Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works hearing, would put Gulf Coast ports at an economic disadvantage.

California officials, meanwhile, maintained that the problem is a national one and sought to put a human face on the health crisis.

Jonah Ramirez, an asthmatic 12-year-old boy from San Bernardino, pleaded with the panel to approve the bill. With his family watching and snapping pictures, Ramirez said he was speaking "not as a 12-year-old boy, but as a victim of air pollution."

He said his asthma attacks feel "like a grown man is sitting on my chest," and they often prevent him from playing ball with his friends.

Dr. John G. Miller, who lives in what he describes as the "diesel death zone" in San Pedro, testified that in his 30 years of emergency-room practice in Southern California, he has seen too many serious illnesses and deaths directly related to pollution.

"We're not just talking about numbers," Miller said. "Real people are sick and dying."

Miller said lowering ships' emissions would have an immediate positive health impact. Officials have estimated it could save 700 lives a year in Southern California.

According to local officials, the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles are responsible for 25 percent of the region's air pollution - and the majority of that comes from ships.

In a study of the Port of Los Angeles, ship operations were shown to contribute 55 percent of port-related pollution.

Under Boxer's bill, oceangoing vessels - 90percent of which are foreign-owned and foreign-flagged - would be forced to drop their sulfur content from an average level of 27,000 parts per million to 1,000 ppm.

It would require ships either to use cleaner fuel or new technology to reduce pollutants.

Currently no U.S. standards exist except for small vessels like tugboats.

Marine ships use heavy-duty "bunker" fuel of the heavily polluting type that spilled from a container ship into the San Francisco Bay in November.

Sulfur contributes to toxic air pollution, and EPA officials acknowledge that, without new laws, marine vessels will contribute 95percent of sulfur emissions from mobile sources by 2030.

More than 3,000 huge freighters stream into Southern California ports each year - making them one of the region's and nation's largest sources of air pollution. Researchers also have found high levels of pollution-related premature deaths in Oakland and some port regions in other states, including Florida and New Jersey.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein is a co-sponsor of Boxer's bill, and in the House, Rep. Hilda Solis, D-El Monte, introduced a companion measure. Local supporters include Los Angeles city government and officials at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Bryan Wood-Thomas, associate director of the federal EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality, testified that the Bush administration has no official position on Boxer's bill. But he praised the measure's goal and noted that the U.S. is pushing for similar standards as part of an international plan.

Ports Association of Louisiana Executive Director Joe Accardo, Port of South Louisiana Executive Director Joel Chaisson and Offshore Marine Services Association President Ken Wells urged Congress to wait until global standards to set to create what they called a level playing field.

Air pollution in U.S. ports debated

Senate considers bill to cut emissions from diesel ships

By Rita Beamish, Associated Press

San Diego Union-Tribune, Friday, Feb. 15, 2008

The Bush administration is making headway with other nations in setting new global standards to reduce dangerous emissions from giant diesel-burning ships that pollute U.S. ports, a senior environmental official told a Senate panel yesterday.

However, an emergency room physician testified later that there is "diesel death zone" around major U.S. seaports, creating higher cancer rates and other health risks.

"International standards for pollution from ship engines, written mostly by the shipping industry, are so lax as to be meaningless," Dr. John Miller, a San Pedro emergency room physician, told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

That panel is considering legislation to sharply curb emissions from the largest cargo carriers, most of which are foreign flagged.

Bryan Wood-Thomas, an associate director at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said the Bush administration favors pursuing a new global standard instead of imposing U.S.-specific rules. The agency is making progress on strong U.S. proposals to reduce pollutants, he said.

Committee Chairwoman Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said the EPA should act quickly, regardless of the international action. "I just don't get it," Boxer said. "Our people are suffering because foreign flags are coming in and they're filthy and they're polluting. And we are sitting back saying we can't do anything until we get this international agreement."

She called on a 12-year-old sixth-grader from San Bernardino, who told the hearing of his battles with asthma.

"If these particles that I breathe every day are safe, then why do I depend on daily medication and the fast relief of my inhaler to do something that everyone has the right to do: breathe," Jonah Ramirez asked the panel.

Sen. David Vitter, R-La., questioned whether all states should have to face possible economic consequences from new regulation that is most critical where air quality is worst.

"There's a problem in Southern California," he said. "Don't drag us down to fix it." He suggested that Los Angeles ports limit their ship traffic.

The administration is under pressure from Congress and local environmental regulators to enact its own regulations instead of waiting for the U.N. International Maritime Organization to reach an anti-pollution agreement. The EPA plans to issue its rules in 2009.

"Marine vessels are the largest uncontrolled source of air pollution in many areas of the country, causing at least 2,000 to 5,000 premature deaths every year," said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the air-regulatory board for four Southern California counties.

Wallerstein said Congress should act because there is no assurance the international rules will comply with measures needed to keep ship pollution from eroding gains the United States has already made regulating other diesel sources.

Representatives from Louisiana's ports and offshore oil and gas shipping urged Congress to support U.S. global proposals rather than imposing unilateral rules that could put them at a competitive disadvantage.

Ports in Canada and Mexico could attract more ships if Congress imposes tougher air-quality restrictions than other countries, said Joe Accardo, executive director of the Ports Association of Louisiana.

"We don't want to see one person die because of pollutants coming from any of our ships," Accardo said.

Boxer countered that global talks have been going on since 2003. "How long does Jonah have to wait?" she asked.

L.A., Long Beach port officials split over truck pollution

Program to cut diesel fumes may be affected as officials appear divided over how to treat truckers who haul cargo in old, polluting vehicles.

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Tuesday, February 19, 2008

For months, officials in Los Angeles and Long Beach have touted plans to jointly combat air pollution generated by their adjacent ports, but a much-vaunted program to replace thousands of polluting trucks has hit a significant snag.

The problem reveals that officials at the cities' ports have sharply differing views on how to treat the 16,500 truckers serving the nation's busiest port complex.

In a move that disappointed environmentalists and Los Angeles port officials, the Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners on Friday released a plan to slash truck-related diesel pollution that would allow trucking companies to use employee drivers, independent contractor drivers or a combination -- as they do now. The commissioners are expected to vote on the proposal today.

Environmentalists and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters had hoped Long Beach would take a radically different approach -- that trucking and shipping companies would be compelled to hire the truckers. The burden of owning, operating and maintaining the fleet of cleaner big rigs would fall to the companies.

"Their announcement caught us all by surprise," said Patricia Castellanos, chairwoman of the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, an environmental group. "We're all holding out hope that Long Beach will rethink its decision to move forward on Tuesday because it jeopardizes the success of the landmark clean air action plan they approved in 2006."

That plan was approved with much fanfare by both ports, which had viewed each other with distrust for decades.

Last November, when the ports took further steps to implement the plan, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said, "For the longest time, we were working on separate tracks. Let's join hands and work together."

Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster added, "Long Beach and Los Angeles continue to lead the world in pushing for cleaner air and healthier environment with our shared goal of having the cleanest ports in the world."

But that was November.

Although the Los Angeles Board of Harbor Commissioners is still studying the matter, it has expressed interest in the option Long Beach has rejected -- of having trucking companies hire the independent truckers.

That option has the backing of the Teamsters, along with the environmental groups.

"Two entities that have worked together toward cleaner air are not exactly on the same page at the same time," said David Freeman, president of the Los Angeles harbor board. "Even in the best of marriages there is a need for discussion every once in a while when one partner decides to move out a little ahead of the other."

"We're not going to turn aloof from this issue until we have a program that provides a fair shake for the drivers," Freeman added. "We cannot leave these drivers on the short end of the stick."

Becki Ames, chief of staff for Foster, agreed, up to a point. "It doesn't scare us that there is a difference of opinion," she said. "What scares us is not acting to clean the air as quickly as possible."

"If their board is not ready to go yet, fine," she added. "Ours is."

Underlying one element of the dispute are opposing views of a continuing effort to try to unionize the ports' independent truckers.

Change to Win, a Washington, D.C.-based labor coalition has partnered with the Teamsters to expand union membership. The coalition in late December gave \$500,000 to Villaraigosa's Prop. S campaign, a \$243-million telephone tax passed Feb. 5.

Critics of the employee provision of the clean truck program, however, are concerned that it could be used by the Teamsters as a springboard to launch unionization efforts at ports nationwide.

A less controversial element in the Long Beach plan would make trucking firms register their drivers with the port, and tag trucks with radio-frequency identification devices so authorities could monitor compliance with security, maintenance and insurance requirements.

It would also establish a \$2-billion financing plan with three options to help truckers acquire clean vehicles: a lease agreement; a grant for an engine retrofit, and grants for up to 80% of the cost of buying a truck.

A new 18-wheeler costs about \$100,000 to \$120,000, port authorities said.

"In order to get one of our grants, an operator would have to agree to scrap their old truck," said Long Beach Port spokesman Art Wong. "The goal is to modernize the truck fleet here and ensure we don't push the old trucks into some other community where they would continue to pollute the air."

In a statement, Port of Long Beach Executive Director Richard Steinke described the proposal to be considered today as "the fastest and most effective way to meet our critical environmental objectives and provide the accountability we need for clean air, while giving the trucking industry the flexibility to meet its business challenges."

But David Pettit, senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the Long Beach proposal was "just the same old pig with a fresh coat of lipstick."

"It doesn't have any more accountability built into it than the current plan," he said. "The burden won't be on some well-capitalized trucking company, it will be on people taking home eight to 10 bucks an hour."

Long Beach port officials did not dispute speculation that their plan might force some already struggling independent drivers out of business.

"It may bring new people into the industry," Wong said, "but the oldest, dirtiest trucks will be pushed out and scrapped."

With Oil Prices Rising, Wood Makes a Comeback

By Katie Zezima

N.Y. Times, Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2008

NEWPORT, Vt. - As a child, Brian Cook remembers hurling wood into the big orange boiler his father bought during the oil crisis of the late 1970s, helping feed the fire that provided heat and hot water to his family.

Thirty years later, Mr. Cook dragged the boiler out of his childhood home and hooked it up in the house that he and his wife, Jennifer, own to cut their oil bills.

"I did not want to pay \$3,000 to heat this house," Mr. Cook said in his garage here in Vermont's heavily wooded Northeast Kingdom. "I see a lot more people burning wood this year."

After years of steep decline, wood heat is back, with people flocking to dealers to buy new wood stoves, wood boilers and stoves that burn pellets made of wood byproducts. Others like Mr. Cook, to the dismay of environmentalists, are dusting off old wood-burning devices that are less efficient and more polluting.

"There's a lot of people buying big stoves, planning on tackling oil head-on," said Roy L'Esperance, owner of the Chimney Sweep in Shelburne, Vt., who has seen sales of wood stoves increase nearly 20 percent this year. "They say, 'I just got a new house and I'm getting killed with oil bills, and propane is just as bad.'"

Nowhere in the nation is wood as beloved as it is here in New England, where winter conjures images of warming up around a potbelly stove. But in the last decade or so, as the price of oil and propane seemed to rise less sharply, devotion to wood stoves waned.

In 1993, 3.1 million homes used wood for heat; the number dropped to 2 million in 2001, according to census data provided by the Energy Information Administration of the Department of Energy.

But now residents like Dina Benoit of Orleans, Vt., are going back.

When Ms. Benoit moved into her home in 1994, it had an old wood stove. Tired of hauling logs through the house and feeding it every few hours, Ms. Benoit switched to a propane heater in 1998. The propane, however, got too expensive, and Ms. Benoit returned to wood. "I didn't want to become dependent on kerosene or an oil supplier," said Ms. Benoit, who bought a wood stove and said it cost \$600 to heat her house last year. "It's just so nice to stand next to; it has more of a personality than a regular heater."

The owners of M and M Forestry and Land Management of Brownington, Vt., say they have been delivering more firewood than ever this year.

"Generally, say they burn a cord of wood a year, this year they are already on their second cord," one of the owners, Michael Moore, said. "Some people are planning on burning two or three times more wood than they have in the past."

Statistics from the last survey about the use of wood for heat, conducted in 2006, are not yet public, but the number of households that report using wood as their primary source of heat is expected to jump sharply, said Marie LaRiviere of the Energy Information Administration.

Chris Foster of Maupin's Stoves-n-Spas in The Dalles, Ore., said sales of wood and pellet stoves were up 65 percent in the last year.

"Sales go up because of the economy," Mr. Foster said. "If the economy is good, people go to gas. If the economy is sluggish, people go to wood and pellet stoves."

Jack Murphy of Winchendon, Mass., has long burned wood in his home, but he was tired of buying and splitting the wood, feeding the stove and cleaning the ash. He switched to a pellet stove last year.

"Wood heat is dirty, it's labor intensive, it messes up your yard and your floors when you carry it in the house," Mr. Murphy said. "With pellets, I put them in my truck, and I bring my entire energy for the year home in one trip. I have two month's worth just on my back porch."

Air pollution is still a major concern, particularly with wood boilers. A 2006 report from the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, a nonprofit association of Northeast air quality agencies, found that average particulate emissions from one outdoor wood boiler equaled that of 22 wood stoves, 205 oil furnaces or as many as 8,000 natural gas furnaces.

The Environmental Protection Agency has set clean-burning performance standards for wood stoves manufactured after 1988, and many communities, including Truckee, Calif., and Dayton,

Ohio, have programs that allow owners of older stoves to turn them in and receive rebates or coupons to buy a new wood stove.

Sally Markos of the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency in Springfield, Ore., said that air pollution from stoves had gone down since the 1988 regulations took effect, but that it was still a problem. On Jan. 24 the authority asked residents to refrain temporarily from burning wood because tests showed the particulate level to be extremely high.

"The air pollution will get worse on days that people are feeling the economic pinch," Ms. Markos said.

The E.P.A. developed similar standards for outdoor wood boilers last year, but unlike the stove standards, they are not mandatory.

Many counties and towns, however, have banned or restricted the use of wood boilers. Last year Vermont became the first state to set emissions limits on new wood boilers.

Air pollution is not the only concern. New Hampshire's state fire marshal, J. William Degnan, said that heating systems were the top cause of fire in the state, and that many local departments were reporting an increase in fires from wood stoves.

"They're seeing a rise in chimney fires," Mr. Degnan said. "Many have fired up stoves they haven't used for years and haven't been maintained. There's creosote in the chimney, and some were improper installations, just a tinderbox waiting to happen."

Randy Swartz of Orleans, Vt., said he spent months researching safety and prices and would not go back to oil. He spent more than \$6,000 last fall to buy a new wood boiler that heats his home and water.

Mr. Swartz, the maintenance manager at the Cabot Creamery, said he had to buy heating oil at work, and seeing the price of crude oil rise from \$18 a barrel when he started his job a decade ago to almost \$100 a barrel now made him want to change his personal energy consumption.

Brown begins tour on global warming

Attorney General to teach local leaders ways to combat climate change

By Steve Geissinger, Medianews Sacramento Bureau
Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, February 19, 2008

SACRAMENTO - Attorney General Jerry Brown is taking the global warming enlightenment skills he honed in the Bay Area across sprawling California today - a move supporters such as San Jose's mayor said will meet resistance.

Brown's aides told MediaNews he will announce he is convening voluntary regional schools for California's more than 500 elected county supervisors and city mayors to advocate tough actions such as new transportation impact fees and costly energy-efficiency as a way to reduce global warming.

"These workshops launch the first statewide movement to reduce the negative impact of local planning decisions on global climate," Brown said in a letter.

Though attendance is not required, Brown has legally leaned on 23 individual local entities for greenhouse gas reduction. In the East Bay, he negotiated an agreement with ConcoPhillips on specific greenhouse gas reduction strategies.

"California must adopt the necessary changes that will encourage economic growth while reducing greenhouse gases," he said. "This difficult transition from our current escalating dependence on fossil fuel demands that cities and counties encourage maximum building efficiency and innovative land-use."

Brown is sending more than 500 letters to elected leaders in 58 counties and nearly 200 cities, with populations of

50,000 or more.

As charter members of the fledgling national "cool" cities and counties campaign, San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed said in an interview that San Jose and its neighbors are pretty cool nowadays in both senses of the word.

Reed said Alameda, Santa Clara and Contra Costa counties and their cities are leading landmark local government efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by making land-use decisions with that problem in mind.

"We're ahead of the power curve," Reed said. "We're hoping the rest of the state will catch up with us.

"But I'm sure there's a lot of people, who haven't given it much thought, that are going to have to focus on the issues," he said. "There will be plenty of resistance."

Brown's classes will center on complying with the state's Environmental Quality Act - a highly controversial law known mostly for stalling development during spring sessions in Oakland and other cities.

The state's Global Warming Solutions Act, Assembly Bill 32, requires California to cut greenhouse gas emission to 1990 levels by 2020.

The act requires local agencies to analyze and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from projects with significant impact, including regional transportation and development plans.

Local government will make hundreds, even thousands, of planning decisions that will have decades-long implications.

Reed said cities are looking for low-cost means of meeting goals and banding together regionally to find answers.

Among all Bay Area counties, Brown's home county of Alameda was the first to join the official national "cool" cities and counties registry.

"We see the Cool Counties partnership as a key step toward local government leading the nation on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for climate change," Alameda County Board of Supervisors Chairman Scott Haggerty said in a statement.

"We're working with our cities through the Alameda County Climate Protection project to address climate change within our own county."

Expert says emissions threaten marine life

Conference in Boston hears report on ocean's chemistry

By Madolyn Rogers, SPECIAL TO MEDIANEWS

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, February 18, 2008

If man-made carbon dioxide emissions continue at their present pace, they will alter ocean chemistry enough to threaten the survival of corals and other marine organisms, scientists reported at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston.

By burning fossil fuels, humans are on track to add 5 trillion metric tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere over the next 400 years.

The last time so much carbon dioxide flooded the atmosphere was 55 million years ago, during a period of extreme global warming known as the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, according to paleoceanographer James Zachos of the University of California, Santa Cruz, who presented the findings.

By studying what happened in the oceans during the last period of extreme warming, scientists hope to learn what the effect of man-made carbon dioxide emissions might be.

However, carbon dioxide was released much more gradually during the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum than it is today.

"We're on track to do in a few hundred years what may have taken a few thousand years back then," said Zachos.

The difference is significant, because the ocean needs time to counter the harmful effects of excess carbon dioxide, according to Zachos. Extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere dissolves in water, making the ocean more acidic.

That upsets the ocean's chemistry and makes it harder for marine organisms to build shells and skeletons of calcium carbonate.

Shells begin to dissolve faster than they can be built. Corals are affected first, and then many types of plankton.

Eventually excess carbon dioxide in surface waters mixes with deeper layers of water and reaches the ocean floor.

Marine sediments are rich in calcium carbonate and act as a buffer, neutralizing the extra acidity of the water.

But the mixing process may take 500 to 1,000 years, according to Zachos, too slow to buffer the effects of a rapid rise in carbon dioxide.

"It means the carbonate concentration in surface waters will get low enough to affect corals and other organisms," Zachos said.

Zachos and his colleagues reached these conclusions by studying sediment cores taken from the deep ocean floor.

Normally, these sediments are rich in carbonate shells, but during the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, the sediments changed to a dark-red clay layer completely lacking in carbonate.

Many species of plankton went extinct, and marine biodiversity plummeted. The oceans took 100,000 years to fully recover.

LA to adopt one of toughest green building laws in country

Modesto Bee, Saturday, February 16, 2008

LOS ANGELES - Los Angeles is poised to adopt one of the toughest green building laws in the nation.

Two city council committees on Friday voted to require that all major commercial and residential developments cut projected energy and water use. The move could help scrub up the city's image as a place famous for its choking smog and fuel-burning gridlock.

Under the ordinance, privately built projects over 50,000 square feet must meet a sustainability standard by adopting a checklist of green practices. The list includes such items as low-flow toilets, paints with low emissions, use of recycled materials, efficient irrigation, solar panels and use of natural light.

Growing trend: Vermont scientists help boost cities' tree efforts

By John Curran, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, USA Today and other papers, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2008

BURLINGTON, Vt.-Increasingly, trees are the new must-have for American cities.

Some prodded by environmental awareness, some by regulatory edict, they're stepping up tree plantings in hopes of improving air quality, reducing energy consumption and easing stormwater flows.

And a four-man team of scientists at the University of Vermont is helping urban planners and foresters gauge the existing "tree canopy"-or cover-in their cities and set realistic goals for increasing it.

Their expertise has been tapped by public and private groups in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., and several Maryland towns eager to green their cities with the help of private property owners.

"Everybody's trying to do their best to improve tree canopies and work with developers and urban planners to make sure they remove as little tree canopy as possible in their projects," said Mark Buscaino, executive director of Casey Trees, a not-for-profit in Washington, D.C., that works to green the nation's capital.

"The benefits are many," Buscaino said. "First, there's the environmental. Trees cool things. They remove particulates in the air. They're linked to mitigating storm water flows, which is an enormous problem in all urban areas because there's so much impervious surface."

Generally speaking, tree canopy refers to the part of a city that's shaded by trees. But quantifying its size was once an elusive task.

The UVM scientists, working with a research scientist from the U.S. Forest Service, have used computer programs and their own expertise to combine satellite images with aerial photos and tax maps to ascertain tree canopy size and break it down by parcel, determining which trees are on public land and which are on private land.

Led by J. Morgan Grove, a research scientist for the Forest Service, geospatial analyst Jarlath O'Neil-Dunne and associate professor of natural resources Austin Troy, the group works out of a "spatial laboratory" in UVM's Rubenstein School of Natural Resources. The team has become a go-to resource on the growing trend in cities.

"If you don't even know what you have, you can't make any decisions," O'Neil-Dunne said. "It wasn't that people didn't want to plant trees or didn't want a tree canopy program. But they needed the hard data to make decisions. That's where we came in."

The group consulted on a study of Baltimore's ecosystem in 2002, and word of its pioneering methods spread, prompting forestry officials from New York, Boston and other cities to reach out to the team for help.

The group's expertise dovetailed with a growing awareness among elected officials that trees could be more than decorations for urban areas.

In addition to giving off oxygen, they cool the air, limit sun exposure and act as sponges for precipitation, catching rainwater and releasing it gradually instead of having it flow directly into storm sewers.

"These guys, in addition to being fun to work with, are really the ones who have pioneered a geographic information system and a graphic depiction of tree cover using aerial photographs and, more importantly, developed a management tool for analyzing the data that allows you to then set your planting targets," said Charlie Lord, executive director for the Urban Ecology Institute, in Boston, which worked with the group.

"They help you gather the data, analyze it and help you answer the basic questions-'Where do we have trees?' 'Where don't we have trees?'-and the more sophisticated ones, like 'Where would we plant to improve our carbon footprint?' or 'Where are the best places to plant to improve our water quality?'" Lord said.

The group's work helped the city of New York establish the goals for a 1 million tree initiative that began last fall, aiming to plant that many trees over a 23-year period.

"It really kicked off everything, from a policy perspective, a natural resource management perspective, a planning perspective. It helped us set our sights on one million trees," said Fiona Watt, chief of forestry and horticulture for the New York Department of Parks and Recreation.

"People used to overlook trees in cities," Watt said. "They're now viewed as increasingly important because of the work of scientists who've helped us quantify those benefits. The environmental benefits and property value benefits are quantifiable, but the social ones are

harder. They make us feel good, they improve our moods, they make neighborhoods more beautiful.

"Tree canopies can make neighborhoods more cohesive and bring people together, bonding them over this common resource," she said.

The fruit of the team's work may not be visible yet, but it will be eventually. In the world of forestry, there's an old proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next-best time is today."

Feds Nip State Efforts to Slash Mercury

By H. Josef Hebert, Associated Press Writer

In the Washington Post, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, February 16, 2008

WASHINGTON -- While arguing in court that states are free to enact tougher mercury controls from power plants, the Bush administration pressured dozens of states to accept a scheme that would let some plants evade cleaning up their pollution, government documents show.

A week ago, a federal appeals court struck down that industry-friendly approach for mercury reduction. It allowed plants with excessive smokestack emissions to buy pollution rights from other plants that foul the air less.

Internal Environmental Protection Agency documents and e-mails, obtained by the advocacy group Environmental Defense, show attempts over the past two years to blunt state efforts to make their plants drastically reduce mercury pollution instead of trading for credits that would let them continue it.

An EPA official said the agency's job "is not to pressure states."

The federal plan capped overall mercury releases from power plants nationwide. But it allowed plants to avoid reductions by purchasing emission credits. Critics have said that creates "hot spots" of mercury releases harmful to communities.

Many states did not want their power plants to be able to buy their way out of having to reduce mercury pollution.

A neurotoxin linked to learning disabilities, mercury is most dangerous to fetuses, infants and small children, usually when pregnant women or children eat mercury contaminated fish. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that 60,000 newborns a year could be at risk of learning disabilities because of mercury their mothers absorbed during pregnancy.

"There was an extraordinary degree of aggressiveness by EPA in pressing states to abandon a more protective mercury program. EPA devoted enormous effort to preventing states from doing more," said Vickie Patton, a lawyer for Environmental Defense. The group obtained the documents through a Freedom of Information Act filing.

The push to rein in uncooperative states continued until the eve of the Feb. 8 appeals court decision that struck down the EPA's program. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit said the agency did not adequately address the health impact of its plan.

The administration was poised to take even tougher measures against maverick states. A day before the ruling, the White House Office of Management and Budget approved a draft regulation to impose a "federal implementation plan" for mercury reduction in states whose mercury control measures did not meet EPA approval.

It would have required power plants to comply with the national cap-and-trade provisions, even if that meant ignoring state restrictions.

Both the emissions trading approach and any further requirement on states have been put on hold after the court ruling, EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar. He denied that the agency was pressuring states.

"Our goal is to have a federal rule. ... Our job is not to pressure states," he said.

But officials involved in developing state restrictions on mercury pollution said the pressure from Washington was considerable. The EPA made it clear it was prepared to reject state plans that limited emissions trading and administer the program from Washington if the states did not back off.

"The administration circled the wagons in fighting the states," said William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, which represents state and county air policy officials. The group worked closely with states to develop their mercury plans.

Yet even as the EPA tangled with the states behind the scenes, government lawyers representing the agency were in U.S. District Court in Washington saying states could require more than the federal program. A state restriction on emission allowances "is not a basis for disapproval" of its program by the EPA, the court was told.

"EPA regulations have provided for decades that states can adopt more stringent standards of performance," Justice Department lawyers representing the EPA in a lawsuit challenging the federal mercury plan said in papers filed with the court last May 4.

But in the two weeks before that court filing, the EPA was, in fact, in a battle with Virginia and Nevada over their plans to be tougher on mercury pollution.

"EPA was contradicting its own claims to the court," said John Walke, clean air director at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "EPA leaned on these states and twisted their arms to keep them from adopting more protective programs."

Many state officials believed under the federal trading program "some plants could go totally unregulated. That was totally unacceptable to many states," Becker said.

"Over 30 states have repudiated in some form EPA's rules by outlawing trading, accelerated compliance or adopted much more stringent emission levels," he said.

Some states wanted their plants to reduce mercury emissions by 90 percent and to do it quicker than what EPA was requiring. They also did not want their plants buying credits to pollute.

Virginia had accepted the EPA trading program, but it also established more protective state regulations that limited emissions trading. After weeks of discussions, the EPA sent a pointed letter to the state on April 26 that said the state rules interfered with the federal program.

"Believe we have firm legal grounds," the Virginia officials replied, to which the EPA official said if the state persists, EPA would reject the state mercury plan.

"It was more than pressure. They were telling people they were disapproving the programs and were going to take them over," recalled Bruce Buckheit, a member of the Virginia Air Pollution Board, which drew up the state's mercury rule.

About the same time, Nevada objected to the EPA's wanting to flood its power plants with pollution allowances far beyond the amount mercury the plants actually produced. That approach included a large bloc of allowances to a coal burning plant that had been shut down because of clean air violations.

"We didn't think it's appropriate to have mercury allowances out there to be available in Nevada or anywhere else in the nation," said Michael Elges, chief of Nevada's Bureau of Air Quality Planning.

In a succession of meetings with Nevada officials, the EPA warned the state's mercury plan would be rejected because of a dispute over the emission allowances.

"They told us from the get-go that they were not pleased. ... They were not bashful about it," Elges said. Nevada did not back off and the EPA notified the state in December it was rejecting the state's plan.

The agency was just as hard-nosed with other states.

When Colorado officials wanted to cut mercury releases by 90 percent and prohibited utilities from selling pollution allowances, the EPA pressed the state agency to find a different.

"Approval of the Colorado plan would encourage other states to restrict trading" and "undermine" the national mercury program, according to an internal EPA memorandum written Dec. 20. It made clear the state plan would not be approved.

While many states resisted EPA's pressure, others ended up bowing to it.

Both Georgia and Montana did not want their plants buying credits to continue polluting. When EPA threatened to disapprove their plans, both dropped their limits on emission trading.

Some criticisms facing Beijing Olympics

The Associated Press

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Feb. 15, 2008

Key criticisms facing Beijing's staging of the Aug. 8-24 Olympics:

--

FOREIGN POLICY - Hollywood director Steven Spielberg announced Tuesday he would no longer act as an artistic adviser for the games' opening and closing ceremonies to protest China's support for the Sudanese government, which is accused of human rights abuses in Darfur. Beijing has also been petitioned by Nobel Peace Prize laureates, former Olympians and 120 members of the U.S. Congress.

AIR POLLUTION - Athletes have been told to arrive late and leave early to avoid hot, polluted air, and Britain, the United States and other countries are considering supplying their athletes with breathing masks. International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge has warned that some events could be postponed and Haile Gebrselassie, recognized as the world's greatest distance runner, said he might skip the Olympic marathon altogether.

RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS - China's officially atheistic communist government maintains strict controls over all religious activity, and is reportedly ferreting out clandestine missionaries ahead of the games. Despite that, evangelical groups say they plan to be active in Beijing. Together with expected protests by the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, that poses the likelihood of protests and arrests that could tarnish the games' image. Protesters have also rallied against Chinese control over the Buddhist region of Tibet.

PRESS GAGS - China's state-controlled media is tightly leashed and press freedom groups regard the country as the world's leading jailer of journalists. China pledged to allow full freedom during the games and has lifted some restrictions over foreign media, but reporters and monitors say the government has failed to live up to those commitments.

China to close gas stations amid measures to ensure clean air for August Olympics

By Christopher Bodeen, Associated Press

San Diego Union-Tribune, Friday, February 15, 2008

BEIJING - Beijing will close 153 gas stations and oil depots during this summer's Olympic Games to meet concerns over air pollution in the Chinese capital, state media reported Friday.

The closures, equal to about 10 percent of capital's total for such facilities, will take place by the end of May because it would cost too much to bring them in line with vapor recovery rules, the Xinhua News Agency said.

Such technology uses specially designed nozzles to keep gasoline fumes from dispersing into the air and return them to underground storage tanks, Xinhua said, citing a report delivered Thursday at a meeting of the city's environmental, quality supervision and transportation bureaus.

In some cases, installing the technology could pose safety risks, while many other stations cannot afford the \$70,000 cost of the upgrade, the report said.

Concerns over hot, polluted air in Beijing during the Aug. 8-24 Games have set national Olympic committees scrambling for ways to protect their athletes, especially those competing in outdoor endurance events.

Ground-level dust, soot and industrial emissions mixed with car exhaust creates a gray haze that regularly blankets the city of 17 million, while high humidity and a lack of wind in August pose an additional challenge.

Beijing has begun shutting down blast furnaces in the city's biggest steel company to improve air quality, and plans to suspend work on city construction sites from May onward.

Temporary traffic restrictions are being planned to ease traffic and reduce vehicle exhaust, and thousands, possibly millions, of temporary residents will be given vacation to return home to further reduce congestion.

With the efficacy of such measures yet to be proven, International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge has warned that some events could be postponed if air pollution presents a danger. Haile Gebrselassie, recognized as the world's greatest distance runner and holder of the world marathon record, said he might skip the Olympic marathon altogether in Beijing and opt for the shorter 10,000 meters.

The British Olympic Association said Thursday it was considering supplying its athletes with masks at the Olympics to counter pollution.

Other associations are reportedly also considering such steps, and most have advised their athletes to arrive in Beijing as late as possible and leave as soon as they can.

HEPA Filters May Improve Cardiovascular Health

Washington Post, Friday, February 15, 2008

HealthDay News -- A breath of filtered indoor air may help your health, according to researchers in Denmark.

Using high efficiency particle air (HEPA) filters for just two days significantly improved a key measure of cardiovascular health in healthy, nonsmoking elderly individuals, according to a study published in the second February issue of the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine.

"Our main finding was a significant improvement in the function of small finger blood vessels after reduction of indoor air particles. This effect most likely indicates a general improvement in the function of the inner lining of small vessels, including those supplying the heart," Dr. Steffen Loft, of the Institute of Public Health in Copenhagen, said in a prepared statement.

Abnormal function of the inner lining of small vessels is known to be a predictor of dangerous or possibly fatal cardiovascular events.

HEPA filtration removed about 60 percent of the ultrafine, fine and coarse air particles in homes, according to researchers, and was associated with an 8.1 percent improvement in individual microvascular function (MVF).

"This suggests that indoor air filtration represents a feasible means of reducing cardiovascular risk," he said.

The researchers measured ambient airborne particles in the homes of 21 nonsmoking couples, aged 60 to 75, who lived close to heavily trafficked roads. Each couple used air purifiers for two 48-hour periods. During one period, the purifier was equipped with a HEPA filter, and during the

other, it ran without it. The size distribution and number concentration of indoor air particles in each home were continuously monitored.

Each couple's individual MVF was assessed using a noninvasive finger sensor.

"We expected that removing air particles with the HEPA filters would result in improvement of MVF, but we were heartened and surprised by the extent it did, considering the modest levels of particles in the indoor air of the homes of the elderly," Loft said.

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Saturday, Feb. 16, 2008:](#)

Senator's bullying hurts appointees

By Marylee Shrider, contributing columnist

Sometimes doing what experience, education and instinct says is right can be hard.

Sometimes it can even cost you your job. Or your governor-appointed seat on a state board.

Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case found that out firsthand when she crossed state Sen. Dean Florez, who not only managed to railroad Case from the California Air Resources Board last month, he also took the unprecedented step of showing up at her Senate confirmation hearing to help things along.

The tactic worked so well, Florez threatened to use it again in late January, this time saying he would lobby the Senate for the ouster of two California State University trustees unless they promised to move up the date of a performance review for beleaguered Fresno State President John Welty.

Perhaps we need a legislator to write legislation banning legislative bullying.

According to an article in *The Fresno Bee*, Florez cited Case's voting record as reason for her ouster, saying he wasn't sure she could "step away from the agriculture interests that have driven her to ... bad decisions on clean air."

Bad decisions, such as not approving legislation sponsored by Florez or supporting an extension of the valley clean-air deadline. An extension, by the way, that was also approved by each of Case's fellow board members.

Case, a longtime supervisor, member of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, registered nurse and an asthmatic, says the board took the "only action possible" on the clean-air deadline. She stands firmly behind her voting record.

"We do need to clean the air, but in a manner that doesn't harm business and will allow people to still make an income and raise their families," Case says. "I think Florez doesn't want anybody on the board who has an ag background."

Sen. Roy Ashburn of Bakersfield, the lead Republican on the Senate rules committee, says Florez "misrepresented and misstated the facts" about Case's voting record during his "unusual" appearance at her hearing.

"It's not unusual for a senator or Assembly member to come to a hearing and introduce someone," Ashburn says. "But to have a member come in with a very specific agenda to destroy someone -- I've never seen it."

In regard to Welty, whose handling of three sexual discrimination lawsuits against the college certainly merits a closer look, Florez says he was "just following Ashburn's lead" when he made an early evaluation of Welty a confirmation condition for CSU trustees Pete Mehas of Fresno and Roberta Achtenberg of San Francisco.

"I was trying to convey that we want to get some clear answers on this, to see where they stand," Florez says.

OK. Fine. But is it necessary or fair to threaten qualified candidates with dismissal if they don't do the bidding of our elected officials?

At least Ashburn doesn't think so.

"Although I do believe that President Welty's evaluation should be moved up, I intend to fight for Pete Mehas' confirmation, regardless of this circumstance," Ashburn says. "We need reformers in education, and Pete's not afraid to mix it up."

Good thing. With micromanaging politicians like Florez on the loose, he may have to.

[Lodi News Sentinel, Guest Commentary, Thursday, February 14, 2008:](#)

San Joaquin County's general plan: Why citizens should care

By Ken Vogel

A General Plan expresses the long-range public policy of a governmental entity to guide the use of private and public lands in regard to development and resource management. Just as the City of Lodi is in the process of working on its General Plan, San Joaquin County will begin the same process in 2008, with completion taking three to five years.

Areas to be addressed in the General Plan will be housing, land use, circulation, safety, noise, open space and conservation, agriculture, and climate change. The Board of Supervisors hopes to approve the hiring of a consultant for this project and to adopt the scope of work for this consulting firm sometime in March.

Following this approval, the county will move forward with the organization of outreach and community workshops, a project Web site, Planning Director meetings, the formation of a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and focus groups, and Board of Supervisor/Planning Commission study sessions. In all of these structured activities, the county will be hoping to draw in as many residents as possible into the process. We want to be sure that people feel that their opinions are welcomed and respected.

Our consultants will also be conducting a background report, which will focus on existing conditions and trends and the regulatory framework affecting the issues addressed.

Another phase of the General Plan process, to commence in mid-2008, includes the issues and opportunities phase, which includes the General Plan team (consultants and staff) working with the community, focus groups, the County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to identify key issues and opportunities. Toward the end of 2008, it is expected that the alternative phase of the General Plan update will begin.

This will include developing, evaluating and selecting land use and policy alternatives that will create a framework for the new General Plan and create an overall vision for the future of San Joaquin County.

The new General Plan is intended to remain in use for 20 years! One of my main focuses is that we plan for the future, and in preparing our new General Plan, we must realize that the economic impact of this plan will also affect our cities.

The procedures I have laid out are lengthy and time consuming. Some of this is dictated by various laws and regulations that must be dealt with. Part of this time is also a necessary "requirement" if we want to do the very best job we can in coming up with a comprehensive, well-thought-out and high-quality document for the future. We must plan to continue to meet county responsibilities well into the future, to meet the challenges of future growth, and to protect ourselves from the gridlock and lack of sufficient infrastructure we see in Southern California and parts of the Bay Area.

The areas we must make well thought out choices include:

- Commerce/Industry - We have approximately 110,000 people who leave the county daily for better paying jobs. This produces gridlock, air pollution, loss of sales tax revenue, loss of property taxes if the jobs were here, etc. We need good-paying jobs here in the county!

- Agriculture - Ag is the number one industry in San Joaquin County, with a value of 1.8 billion with a multiplier of five. This industry is a major supporter of trucking, equipment sales, vehicles sales, etc. Agriculture needs land, water and crop-flexibility. The protection of prime agriculture ground, whenever possible, will be very important.
- Water - This will be a very important issue of the General Plan that cannot be overstated. It seems that we are now operating without sufficient assurances that our water supply is adequate. Along with the need to conserve the water we have, we must look to recharge our underground aquifer and to use more sources of surface water here in San Joaquin County.
- Infrastructure - We have a great need to address our infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, drainage projects, pedestrian facilities, etc. It will be a challenge to address the needs we have now while planning for future needs. Our state and federal funding so far has been less than adequate.

In conclusion, I encourage interested members of the community to take advantage of these opportunities to be involved in planning the future of San Joaquin County.

Ken Vogel is chairman of the San Joaquin Board of Supervisors.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Monday, Feb. 18, 2008:](#)

The Senate's changing climate

One of the risks to passing AB32, California's groundbreaking climate-change bill, was that the state would be locked into a lonely and expensive fight while the rest of the nation polluted, happily and without hindrance, for years. And while it's true that major action at the federal level is highly unlikely until at least 2009, it's also true that California's law has emboldened the U.S. Senate to push further on climate change than it ever has before.

For the first time, national climate-change legislation - S2191, the Climate Security Act - has passed out of committee and will be up for a vote before the full Senate. The bill would cap emissions at 2005 levels in 2012, then reduce them by 20 percent by 2020 and 70 percent by 2050.

"Thank goodness for California's environmental leadership in every way," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. As chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Boxer guided the bill to success through one of its crucial first votes. "I was able to point to California the whole time, to say that it's been a unifying issue there, that jobs are being created to help implement it, and that people are willing to rise to the challenge," she said.

Odds for the bill's passage are not great. It got out of committee, but only one Republican voted for it - the bill's co-sponsor, Sen. John Warner of Virginia. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., wants to bring it up for a vote before the Senate takes a summer break, and Senate Republicans have promised a major floor fight. Then, of course, there's the possibility of getting President Bush's signature on such a bill, which seems to be a distant one indeed. Boxer promises to pull the bill rather than allow it to be gutted with amendments.

"We will go as far as we can," she said. "If four senators cast their votes to weaken it, then we will pick it up from there next time. But next time, we will know who those four senators are, and what the roadblocks will be."

What's also uncertain is how much leadership there is in the House of Representatives on this issue. Rep. John Dingell, chairman of the House's Energy & Commerce Committee, wants 60-80 percent reductions in greenhouse gases by 2050, but the ever-shifting political dynamics in the House might make for an uphill battle there as well.

One thing is certain, however: National political leadership on global warming is moving slowly but steadily. Some of the progress that's been made in the last year can be attributed to the Democratic takeover of the Senate and the House. But some of the progress must also be attributed to California's willingness to take the first step forward.

Now that California is moving into its next phase - implementation - we hope that national leaders will act sooner rather than later.

State Air Resources board chairwoman Mary Nichols told our editorial board last week that the state is modeling different ways to reduce emissions. One of the possibilities being looked at - a cap and trade system for the electric industry - would require at least a regional plan for it to be efficient. It's time for the rest of the country to stop watching us and to join the effort to address climate change.

[N.Y. Times editorial, Monday, Feb. 18, 2008:](#)

Judicial Rebukes on Clean Air

The federal courts have been a bulwark against the Bush administration's relentless efforts to weaken 40 years' worth of environmental law, including statutes protecting the nation's forests, wetlands and endangered species. The courts have been especially important in resisting the administration's assault on the 1970 Clean Air Act, which began with Vice President Dick Cheney's 2001 energy report and continues to this day.

In 2006 and 2007, the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia and the Supreme Court ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to follow the law and require utilities to install pollution controls when upgrading power plants. Another Supreme Court decision last year held that the Clean Air Act required the E.P.A. to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles, an obligation the agency continues to duck.

This month, the D.C. Circuit ruled that the E.P.A. had once again ignored the law by failing to require deep and timely reductions in mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants. Like most clean air cases, this one was mind-numbingly complex. The gist of it was that the E.P.A. - seeking as usual to please industry - had approved a weak set of regulations that would let many plants off the hook for emissions reductions that would be required under any honest reading of the law.

The D.C. Circuit, by no means a radical group of judges, has become so exasperated that it has taken to quoting Lewis Carroll. In 2006, in a reference to "Through the Looking Glass," the court said that the E.P.A.'s reading of the law would make sense "only in a Humpty Dumpty world." This month, invoking "Alice in Wonderland," the court said the agency's reasoning recalled "the logic of the Queen of Hearts, substituting the E.P.A.'s desires for the plain text" of the law.

Desire still burns bright at the E.P.A., which reportedly intends to make one last-ditch effort to weaken the rules requiring new pollution controls on upgraded plants. Our advice to the agency would be to take a dispassionate look at its losing streak in the federal courts and, for once, leave the law alone.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Sunday February 17, 2008:](#)

We need more local jobs

Working parents are spending more time in their cars than they are at home with their families. Our roads, air quality and the quality of life all suffer. In 1980, only 8 percent of Stanislaus County residents commuted outside the county to work. Today it is a staggering 20 percent. This will have long-term impacts on our community.

The policy direction should be crystal clear: We need to create jobs in the area for our residents so they no longer have to make long commutes to find good jobs. The solution is also clear: Act now before the number of people who have to commute out of the county increases. The

Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors needs to move forward with the creation of West Park, which will create more than 30,000 jobs.

Derrick Delhard, Ceres

[Tri-Valley Herald, Letter to the Editor, Saturday, February 16, 2008:](#)

BAAQMD: A bunch of hot air

THE TAX plan being considered by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to tax businesses on the amount of carbon dioxide each business emits will be a death knell for commerce in California. This is nothing more than a blatant and naked attempt to raise taxes without voter approval. If allowed to be implemented, thousands of businesses will be forced to relocate to other states and millions of jobs will be lost. There is no definitive proof that there is a need for draconian cuts in carbon dioxide production. Global warming is a farce, as the evidence of it is based on loose data collected over a few decades while the Earth has been around for thousands of years. It is not based on sound science but on false and flawed assumptions. The people advocating these regulations have a history of wanting more regulations and taxes on people and businesses, and are using the hysteria of global warming as an excuse to circumvent the law on voter-approved tax increases to further their socialist/statist agenda. As a Bay Area native, Teamster and American, I urge all businesses and workers to oppose these unnecessary taxes being proposed by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Paul G. Vargas, San Leandro

[Letter to the N.Y. Times, Friday, Feb . 15, 2008:](#)

Re “Studies Call Biofuels a Greenhouse Threat” (news article, Feb. 8):

Biofuels are providing cleaner and sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels, as indicated in a number of emerging studies from both private and public entities. Unfortunately, none of these conflicting reports have received the same caliber of attention as the two reports published in Science.

A recent joint study by the United States Department of Agriculture and the University of Nebraska indicates that biofuel made from switchgrass reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 94 percent and, moreover, produces 540 percent more renewable energy than what it takes to produce it.

Innovation and research are exploring new realms in biofuel production, and efforts to hamper progress are bad for our environment and our energy security.

Brent Erickson

Sharon Bomer

Washington, Feb. 13, 2008

The writers are executive vice presidents at the Biotechnology Industry Organization.