

Fresno goes online to help cut pollution

By Denny Boyles

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008

Picnic tables, baseball diamonds and spots on city athletic teams now can be reserved online through the Parks and Recreation Web site, thanks to a grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The \$93,000 e-mobility grant paid for computer hardware and software that allows the city of Fresno to offer online reservations for a variety of facilities or activities, and to take credit-card payments for the reservations.

Both are expected to be welcome changes, said Heather Heinks, a Parks Department spokeswoman. "In the past you had to come into our office in person, or mail in a check, to make a reservation," she said.

The e-mobility grants are part of a multimillion-dollar investment in cleaning the Valley's air, said Aaron Tarango, grant program supervisor for the air district.

"Our goal through the grants is to decrease vehicle miles traveled in the Valley. This e-mobility grant, which encourages using the Internet, is a great example of how we can meet our goal in new ways," Tarango said.

The online reservation system has been on the city Web site for several weeks, with employees using it to test the system.

Heinks said some residents already have made online reservations. "We've had some children enroll in sporting leagues, and some picnic shelters be reserved," Heinks said.

The system can't be used for larger facilities, such as the Rotary Amphitheater or Eaton Plaza, but the system will show whether those areas are available, Heinks said.

The online system also allows park officials to track which programs or facilities are the most popular.

Residents without access to a computer at home can use computer labs at their community center to make online reservations. The system also allows city staff members to process reservations over the phone.

"The response is already very enthusiastic. I'm sure it's a program that will expand in the future as we find new uses for the online reservations," said Cesar Alvarez, an administrative clerk for the Parks Department.

With increased density comes transit Fresno County to unveil plan to boost ridership.

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008

It's a classic chicken-and-egg problem and the crux of the public-transit dilemma in Fresno and Clovis.

Buses and other mass transit work best when densities are high. The more people who live on each acre, the more likely they are to use public transit.

But which comes first? The density or the buses?

Metropolitan area planners have concluded it's the density -- or at least the land-use rules that encourage higher densities.

Tuesday night at a public meeting, they will unveil their new plan for achieving that goal.

Fresno's interim development director, Keith Bergthold, characterizes the "activity center and corridor intensification study" as an effort to decide where development should be intensified to encourage transit use.

"The intensification is what would support transit," Bergthold said. "If we have a Bus Rapid Transit station every mile, we would need 20 dwelling units per acre."

Bus Rapid Transit, a hybrid of light rail and traditional city buses, is under consideration for a corridor running east from downtown along Ventura Avenue and Kings Canyon Road.

The study is mapping other such corridors, including Blackstone, Shields, Shaw, Herndon, Clovis and DeWolf avenues. Lined up along them are the activity centers, many of them already in existence, such as major shopping centers and business parks.

"We're not going to change instantly most of the landscape that's already here," said John Wright, retired Clovis planning and development director. "But we can work within that existing fabric and connect a lot of our activity centers."

Bergthold emphasizes that the maps are first drafts and subject to change. Tuesday's meeting, he said, is "meant to introduce an idea and see if this is something people can grasp and help shape."

When the centers and corridors are finally selected, the next step would be to update land-use plans to permit the 20-units-per-acre densities. Typical densities in the area at present are more like five units per acre.

Reaction to the study is muted so far, largely because its details are not widely known.

"I don't have a whole lot of information," said Michael Prandini, president and chief executive officer of the Building Industry Association of Fresno and Madera counties. "This is just kind of a shout-out, getting the information out, getting people to talk about it."

Sierra Club representative Kevin Hall said a brief review of the study left him pleased that planners were drawing connections between transportation and land use, which he said could reduce traffic and thereby air pollution

Requiring solar on new development: Bright idea?

BY STACEY SHEPARD

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008

Is it time for Kern's rooftops to become power producers?

Requiring solar electric panels on new homes and businesses hasn't been pushed by county supervisors yet but that may change after the board was provided a set of options by county planners this past week on possible ways to boost the number solar-equipped homes.

The information was provided in response to a request early this year from Supervisors Don Maben and Jon McQuiston for information on the possibility of creating an ordinance to mandate solar on new development projects. The request came following a discussion on utility-scale solar and renewable energy projects planned for open land in eastern Kern.

“One of the things I’m concerned about is they want to put all these big solar projects on land in the desert,” Maben said. “I wanted to see if we could be more proactive in putting energy production closer to the user, and rooftop solar was one way of doing that.”

The options planners provided supervisors range from an ordinance that would mandate a certain percentage of solar-equipped homes in a new subdivision to delaying action until solar prices decline.

“There are pros and cons to all of them,” said county planner Lorelei Oviatt.

The options provided to supervisors include:

- Adopt an ordinance that requires builders of larger subdivisions to install solar water heaters on all homes and solar electric panels on a certain percentage of homes. Commercial facilities could also be required to install solar panels or some other form of renewable energy generation to reduce energy use by a certain percentage.
- Change general plans for Bakersfield and other communities to promote solar installation on new developments, or require solar as standard mitigation for new development that creates significant air quality impacts.
- Issue micro-loans funded through county bond sales to homeowners who install solar panels. Loan payments would be included in property taxes.
- Wait to take action until solar technology has progressed, prices stabilize and tax incentives and rebates become standardized.

According to planners’ research, installing solar panels on a home could increase its price by up to \$15,000, something local builder Matt Towery of Towery Homes thinks is a bad idea. With the economy in a tailspin, home buyers simply can’t afford the extra costs, he said.

“People looking at homes now are looking at every penny,” said Towery, who agreed solar is a good idea but prefers the idea of micro-loans or waiting until the costs come down.

McQuiston could not be reached for comment and Maben said he hasn’t seen the information planners provided yet.

The issue will be discussed at Tuesday’s board meeting but no immediate action is anticipated.

ALSO ON THE AGENDA

Supervisors will also Tuesday consider allowing businesses that operate card rooms under county permit to expand from 30 to 45 tables.

No new card table businesses would be permitted.

Planning staff will also report to the board about how Senate Bill 375 will impact urban planning in Kern County.

The new state law ties all transportation project funding to how well a community controls its growth patterns to minimize urban sprawl and global warming.

Supervisors will also receive a report about efforts by Grimmway Farms to close a chicken manure composting facility in Arvin.

And they will hear a request to put up two new billboards on Highway 99 near Peterson Road.

Supervisors will also meet at 2 p.m. Monday at Kern Medical Center to review the troubled county hospital’s financial condition.

Reports submitted to the board this week show the hospital is \$1.5 million over its annual budget as of the end of October and owes the county \$60 million on the operating loan that keeps the hospital solvent. The hospital, which provides medical care for the county’s poor and uninsured, has been operating in similarly dire straits for years.

It's cold, but don't light a fire

By Denis Cuff - Contra Costa Times
Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, December 7, 2008

Despite the cold weather, wood fires in fireplaces and stoves are banned in the Bay Area through noon Monday because of a Spare the Air alert for unhealthy air.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District issued the declaration for the nine counties in the region shortly after noon today because of weather conditions that trap smoke near the ground, creating an elevated public health risk of asthma, bronchitis and other lung ailments.

Burn violators can be fined after getting a written warning from the air district.

In winter, wood smoke fires can account for up to a third of the fine particles in the air in the Bay Area.

Temperatures hovered in the 40s in Contra Costa County today.

Fireplace incentive program offered

L.A. Daily News, Saturday, Dec. 6, 2008

In an effort to decrease pollution, the South Coast Air Quality Management District is offering a \$125 incentive to encourage residents to convert their current fireplaces to cleaner-burning gas sets.

The "Healthy Hearths" program was approved in March by the AQMD, to help eliminate wood-burning fireplaces from new construction among other regulations.

Officials with the AQMD say residential fireplaces are often overlooked as sources of harmful, and even deadly, emissions.

The incentive program is offered at more than 60 area retailers. Installation prices average about \$500.

For information go to www.healthyhearths.org.

Wood-burning ban in effect for Bay Area

By Elizabeth Fernandez
S.F. Chronicle, Monday, December 8, 2008

Bay Area residents are prohibited from burning wood at least through noon Monday due to a forecast of unhealthy air quality, officials said Sunday.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District issued a Winter Spare the Air alert. While the alert is in effect, all wood burning, both indoors and outdoors, is banned by residents and businesses in the nine-county region. The alert will remain in effect at least until noon today. The prohibition includes wood-burning fireplaces, pellet stoves and outdoor fire pits.

State air monitors gunning for diesel

Soot-control plan worrying truckers

By Michael Gardner
San Diego Union-Tribune, Monday, December 8, 2008

SACRAMENTO – California's air-quality regulators once again find their pursuit of aggressive public health safeguards in conflict with the economy.

This time, the state Air Resources Board is closing in on diesel soot emissions from nearly 1 million trucks.

“Ultimately, we have no choice but to proceed to control this source,” said Mary Nichols, the air board's chairwoman. “They are a huge source of emissions that up until now have been essentially uncontrolled.”

The proposed regulations – considered to be the nation's most restrictive – would require many truckers to either gradually replace their rigs or install anti-pollution devices starting in 2010, depending on the model year and fleet size. By 2023, most diesel rigs “would have the cleanest engines available,” according to an air board report.

Moreover, during its two-day meeting Thursday and Friday in Sacramento, the air board also is expected to adopt rules to squeeze better fuel efficiency out of long-haul big rigs.

That proposal is part the state's ongoing quest to reduce reliance on fossil fuels contributing to greenhouse gas emissions linked to global warming. To move in that direction, regulators want truck cabs and trailers, depending on size and age, to be outfitted with smoother rolling tires and better aerodynamic equipment to cut wind resistance, for example.

The rules also would apply to out-of-state trucks that deliver goods to California. Most shuttle buses, such as those at airports, also must comply. In all, 900,000 trucks and 170,000 businesses could be affected.

“Any way we look at this, it's going to be a watershed change,” said Bob Ramorino, president of the California Trucking Association. “It's going to increase the complexity and cost of moving goods.”

Critics say the new pollution standards could cost some operators their rigs and act as a drag on retail and construction. The air board's analysis reports that compliance will cost fleet owners \$5.5 billion through 2020.

“If this activity happens, I'll be forced to quit,” said Tom Williamson, who makes his living with one 12-year-old truck, mostly hauling construction debris and materials in San Diego County.

The industry has also warned that the cost will be passed along to customers, adding to the price of food and other commodities.

Regulators, though, describe any potential increases as negligible. If the air board adopts the regulations, no further approval is required.

Public health advocates are lobbying for the air board to stick to its timetable, arguing that the public is paying a high price for diesel pollution through premature deaths and escalated rates of respiratory illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and emphysema.

The health impacts are staggering, according to regulators. They estimate that over the next 15 years the new rules would prevent 9,400 premature deaths, result in 150,000 fewer asthma cases, save 950,000 work days lost because of illness, and reduce public health costs by as much as \$68 billion.

“These regulations are critical to public health,” said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, who tracks the issue for the American Lung Association of California.

Without action, the state will fail to meet federal air-quality standard deadlines, risking millions of dollars in federal highway funding, Nichols said.

The air board estimates that, by 2020, the regulations would cut particulate matter in the soot emitted by diesel engines by 5.2 tons per day, a 43 percent decline. Emissions of oxides of nitrogen, a primary contributor to smog, would be cut by 79 tons per day, a 23 percent reduction by 2020.

Truckers say they want to do their part, but worry about the financial costs.

“We are breathing the same air. We want it cleaned up, too,” said Jennifer Secord, owner of Pacific Coast Truck and Warehouse in San Diego.

But the recession makes that goal even more challenging, particularly for contract truckers, she said. Equipment to clean the soot, such as particulate filters, could cost \$40,000 for a truck worth \$10,000. At the same time, the number of runs has dropped off precipitously.

"It's going to be tough. I don't know how it's going to happen," Secord said. "They're doing half the trips they were doing at this time last year."

Industry representatives say the tight credit market makes it virtually impossible to buy new trucks or equipment.

The vehicle resale market has largely dried up, said Williamson, president of the California Dump Truck Owners Association, which has about 100 members in San Diego County.

"At the end of 2012, my truck will have to be pulled off the road," Williamson said. "There will be no market to sell my truck in California – possibly in other states or countries. But they would only want it at a bargain price."

Used trucks that drew bids of up to \$40,000 a year ago now bring in less than \$8,000, according to Robert Tennes, a salesman at Western Truck Center in West Sacramento.

"These trucks are going out of state for 10 cents on the dollar . . . Even if they wanted to sell a truck today, they are really not in a position where they can afford to," Tennes said.

State regulators have put together a \$1 billion package of grants and loans to help the industry comply over the coming years, Nichols said. The state plans to tap several different existing accounts, including bond money passed by voters and funding approved by lawmakers, to come up with the aid.

Truckers have prepared alternatives, including providing more time to comply and exemptions if proven clean technology is not readily available.

The industry also proposes a hand-me-down program that it says will help clean the air without economic hardship. First, the state would buy trucks required to have soot-cleaning equipment installed. Then, after being retrofitted, those trucks could be used to replace some of the oldest and dirtiest rigs that are exempt from the regulations because they are driven so few miles. Operators who sell their vehicles initially to the state could use the money to buy new trucks.

"We want to take the oldest vintage trucks and scrap them as quickly as we can. They pollute the most," said Ramorino, the trucking association president.

Reports says air pollution harder on infants, children

Daily News Wire Service

L.A. Daily News, Saturday, December 6, 2008

LOS ANGELES -- Researchers at UCLA's Institute of the Environment say federal smog regulations do not factor how smog affects pregnant women, infants and preschool-age children.

UCLA epidemiologist Beate Ritz cited a growing body of evidence linking prenatal and postnatal exposure to air pollution to premature birth, lower birth weight, birth defects and respiratory diseases in early life.

Bureaucrats should consider the special vulnerability of weaker or more-vulnerable people when formulating air quality regulations, the researchers reported.

"To achieve air clean enough to have only negligible effects on pregnancy and infants, and young children's health will likely require drastic changes to motor vehicles and transportation systems, as well as industrial processes, all of which may take years or decades," said Ritz.

Ritz and a fellow researcher emphasized that the in-utero period and early childhood years are when the environment may have both immediate and long-term consequences on health.

While their own previously published research and that of other scientists provides growing evidence that air pollution exposures in pregnancy and early childhood put children at increased

risk, the field is relatively new, with the bulk of research conducted only within the past decade, Ritz said.

The researchers said that little is known about exactly which compounds in the air most affect reproductive and young children's health. They urged additional research in the emerging field. The UCLA researchers gave a grade of "C" to Southern California's air pollution in relation to the health of pregnant women, infants and young children.

Vacaville could get new prison facilities

By Robin Miller and Melissa Murphy

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, Dec. 6, 2008

The federal receiver appointed to deal with state prison crowding is making plans to build a 1,400-bed inmate medical and mental health facility on land behind Vacaville's two state prisons.

The proposed site for the facility is within prison boundaries but would require removal of some orchard farmland behind Keating Park.

A public meeting on the project, designed to gather comments on what issues should be included in an environmental review of the plan, will be held from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Monday at the Travis Credit Union Community Room, 1 Travis Way, Vacaville. It is open to the public.

The facility is proposed as part of a mandate by the federal courts to bring medical and mental health care up to U.S. constitutional standards. The courts removed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation from control of the health care system in the prisons and appointed a receiver to take on that role.

In order to achieve improved health care, the receiver plans to have seven health care facilities, providing about 5,000 medical and 5,000 mental health patient beds, constructed at prison facilities across the state.

Vacaville has been selected for one of the sites due to its existing prisons, including California Medical Facility, and its proximity to larger urban areas where a qualified pool of doctors, nurses and other professionals can be found, state officials said.

Exact details of the 1,400-bed facility haven't been mapped out, though information included with the notice of Monday's meeting says it will likely be from one- to three-stories high and will include housing clusters, a diagnostic and treatment center, an armory, warehousing and support facilities, a central plant, outdoor recreation fields, a gatehouse, staff facilities and parking areas. The facility would be surrounded with lethal electrified fencing and a sally port and guard towers would be required.

In addition to the new facility, the receiver is also looking at creation of a 64-bed mental health inpatient facility. That facility is mandated by settlement of another lawsuit by inmates and will be built with or without the 1,400-bed facility.

Richard Stapler, director of community outreach for the receiver, said the plan is to incorporate the mental health beds as part of the larger project. In fact, if built, the 1,400-bed facility would include half for medical patients and half for mental patients, he said.

Due to the scope of the projects, an environmental impact report will be required before anything can be built. That report will look at issues such as aesthetics, agricultural impacts, air quality, geology, soil and mineral resources, hydrology and water quality, land use and planning, noise, population and housing, utilities, water supply and more. Monday's meeting is designed to allow local officials and residents to give input on what they want to see the report cover.

Among those who are anxious to attend Monday's hearing is City Manager David Van Kirk, who said he, Mayor Len Augustine and Assistant City Manager Laura Kuhn all plan to attend.

"We've certainly been briefed on it, but we want to find out more information," Van Kirk said. "We want to make sure that certain issues are addressed in the EIR."

The number one issue, according to Van Kirk is lack of sewer capacity. The pipelines serving CMF and California State Prison, Solano, are already operating at capacity.

Other issues include additional parking for visitors and how many times the Vacaville Fire Department will have to respond to the new facility, Van Kirk said.

He also said that there are several ongoing issues related to the current facilities that the city will bring up during Monday's meeting.

"The EIR will take into account a whole host of things," he said. "We hope to find out more during that process."

A notice of Monday's meeting with more information on the plan is available online at http://www.cphcs.ca.gov/project_const.aspx

The public comment period will continue through Dec. 15 and comments can be mailed to Todd Chambers, CEQA project manager for the California Prison Health Care Receivership Corp., URS/Bovis Lend Lease Joint Venture, 2400 Del Paso Road, Suite 255, Sacramento, 95834.

Growing number of Calif. ag businesses go solar

By Steve Lawrence, Associated Press Writer
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Dec. 5, 2008

RICHVALE, Calif. For more than 70 years, California's abundance of sunshine has enabled the Lundberg family to grow rice in the Central Valley north of Sacramento.

Now the sun is helping the family churn out myriad rice products, from chips to cakes to pasta.

Lundberg Family Farms, which bills itself as the nation's largest producer of organic rice and rice products, is among a small but growing number of California growers and processors who are turning to solar power to help them run their operations.

"It made sense from an environmental point of view and a business point of view," said Jessica Lundberg, whose family has been growing rice in the Richvale area since 1937.

There's no count of how many growers have invested in solar, but Bernadette Del Chiaro, a clean energy advocate with the group Environment California, said she has seen a growing number of agricultural companies install solar panels over the last five years.

That's particularly true among wineries and packing plants that have high refrigeration and air conditioning costs.

"We're seeing a lot of wineries go solar, and it's not just to green their image," she said. "It's because they can actually save money."

Barry Cinnamon, chief executive officer of Akeena Solar, a Los Gatos company that installs residential and commercial solar energy systems, estimates that 50 to 100 wineries are using solar energy. His company has installed about a dozen of those systems.

More than 960 California companies have applied for rebates through the state Public Utilities Commission since Jan. 1, 2007, for installing solar panels, but there's no breakdown available on how many of those applicants are in agriculture.

Besides the rebates, companies that install solar panels can qualify for a federal tax credit on the purchase and installation costs. They also can get credits from utilities for any unused solar-generated electricity they send to the power grid.

Also, installation of solar energy systems does not trigger a property tax reassessment.

Ron Martella said his family's walnut processing company, Grower Direct Nut Co., took a long look at the potential economic benefits before deciding to install solar panels this year.

"We're in one of the cheapest electrical districts in the state," said Martella, a director of the company, which is located in Hughson, about 80 miles south of Sacramento. "We came to the conclusion that with the tax credits and rebates, the money we'd save on electricity would be a positive thing for our company in the long run."

He expects the \$3.5 million project to be paid off in about eight years.

Lundberg farms installed its first solar system, five long sets of panels spread over about an acre, in 2006. It added another set of panels on a warehouse roof in 2007.

Together, those two systems provide 10 percent to 15 percent of the company's electricity, said Lundberg, who chairs the board of directors and manages the farm's seed nursery.

The company has plans to build a new office and warehouse and is considering incorporating new solar systems into those projects.

Lundberg Farms won a Green Power Leadership Award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency this year for its use of renewable energy.

Besides the power it obtains from its solar panels, the company buys renewable energy credits that help develop wind power. That enables Lundberg Farms to say it gets 100 percent of its electricity from renewable sources.

The EPA said Lundberg's energy program was the "the largest U.S. renewable energy commitment by an agribusiness." The company also won the award in 2004.

Lundberg traces her family's interest in renewable energy to her grandparents' experiences farming in the Midwest during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s.

"They had seen what happens ... if you don't take care of your resources," she said. "When they came to California and had a chance to start again, they took it really seriously."

Her grandfather, who started farming on about 150 acres about 70 miles north of Sacramento, took steps to protect the quality of his soil and refused to burn off rice stubble after each harvest, a practice that can turn the Sacramento Valley skies into a smoky haze.

The decisions to buy wind-energy credits and develop solar power were a continuation of that conservation philosophy, Lundberg said.

Her father and his three brothers started the rice mill in the 1960s and began growing rice without chemicals. Now a third generation of cousins and cousins' spouses has moved into positions at the company, which grows 17 varieties of rice on about 15,000 acres.

It turns 45 million to 60 million pounds of rice a year into more than 150 products, including varieties of rice chips, rice syrup, rice pasta, rice cakes and one- and two-pound packages of rice. It also sells rice in bulk quantities.

Company officials figure their solar panels will be providing them with electricity for the next 30 to 40 years.

Rebates and tax credits covered about half the cost of the \$3.5 million projects. They expect to make up for the rest of the cost in eight to 10 years.

"We're still carrying the cost of installation, paying them off," Lundberg said. "But we think it was a good business decision. It's just so satisfying to be able to contribute like that, to have something tangible we are able to do."

Proposed fee on smelly cows, hogs angers farmers

By BOB JOHNSON

Capital Press Info, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, December 5, 2008

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - For farmers, this stinks: Belching and gaseous cows and hogs could start costing them money if a federal proposal to charge fees for air-polluting animals becomes

law.

Farmers so far are turning their noses up at the notion, which is one of several put forward by the Environmental Protection Agency after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that greenhouse gases emitted by belching and flatulence amounts to air pollution.

"This is one of the most ridiculous things the federal government has tried to do," said Alabama Agriculture Commissioner Ron Sparks, an outspoken opponent of the proposal.

It would require farms or ranches with more than 25 dairy cows, 50 beef cattle or 200 hogs to pay an annual fee of about \$175 for each dairy cow, \$87.50 per head of beef cattle and \$20 for each hog.

The executive vice president of the Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation, Ken Hamilton, estimated the fee would cost owners of a modest-sized cattle ranch \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year. He said he has talked to a number of livestock owners about the proposals, and "all have said if the fees were carried out, it would bankrupt them."

Sparks said Wednesday he's worried the fee could be extended to chickens and other farm animals and cause more meat to be imported.

"We'll let other countries put food on our tables like they are putting gas in our cars. Other countries don't have the health standards we have," Sparks said.

EPA spokesman Nick Butterfield said the fee was proposed for farms with livestock operations that emit more than 100 tons of carbon emissions in a year and fall under federal Clean Air Act provisions.

Butterfield said the EPA has not taken a position on any of the proposals. But farmers from across the country have expressed outrage over the idea, both on Internet sites and in opinions sent to EPA during a public comment period that ended last week.

"It's something that really has a very big potential adverse impact for the livestock industry," said Rick Krause, the senior director of congressional relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

The fee would cover the cost of a permit for the livestock operations. While farmers say it would drive them out of business, an organization supporting the proposal hopes it forces the farms and ranches to switch to healthier crops.

"It makes perfect sense if you are looking for ways to cut down on meat consumption and recoup environmental losses," said Bruce Friedrich, a spokesman in Washington for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

"We certainly support making factory farms pay their fair share," he said.

U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt, a Republican from Haleyville in northwest Alabama, said he has spoken with EPA officials and doesn't believe the cow tax is a serious proposal that will ever be adopted by the agency.

"Who comes up with this kind of stuff?" said Perry Mobley, director of the Alabama Farmers Federation's beef division. "It seems there is an ulterior motive, to destroy livestock farms. This would certainly put them out of business."

Butterfield said the EPA is reviewing the public comments and didn't have a timetable for the next steps.

Borough considers wood stove trade-in program

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008

FAIRBANKS, Alaska—The Fairbanks North Star Borough will consider a wood stove and outdoor boiler trade-in program to reduce the number of inefficient home-heating systems.

Wood stoves and furnaces have been targeted as one of the sources for chronic air pollution problems in Fairbanks and borough authorities are preparing for sanctions by the federal government.

The state and borough governments are conducting a \$2 million study of borough pollution.

Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker says he expects a trade-in program to include some type of incentive, possibly through a break on property taxes, to encourage residents to switch old home heaters for more efficient ones.

Information from: Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, <http://www.newsminer.com>

Climate envoys battle over forests, emissions

By ARTHUR MAX and VANESSA GERA, Associated Press Writers

In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Monday, December 8, 2008

POZNAN, Poland (AP) -- Negotiators at a U.N. climate conference worked Monday to resolve differences over a deal to protect the world's forests and pressed industrial countries to drastically reduce their carbon emissions.

The top U.N. climate official, Yvo de Boer, said the talks were going well, despite "problematic" issues, but nongovernment groups described the negotiations as "slow" and said they had even moved backward on several points.

Nearly 190 countries are working on a global warming treaty to regulate pollution by greenhouse gases and to help poor countries handle the effects of climate change, from rising sea levels to more severe storms, droughts and floods.

The agreement, to be concluded next December in Copenhagen, Denmark, would replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012 and requires industrial countries to slash emissions mainly from heavy industries and vehicles.

On Monday, a deal on rewarding tropical countries for preserving their forests was stuck in a committee, as delegates debated the technicalities of measuring deforestation and the degradation, or thinning, of forests.

Until that is resolved, the convention could not discuss how to finance conservation.

Scientists say deforestation accounts for about 20 percent of carbon emissions caused by man, since vegetation breathes carbon and removes it from the atmosphere, while burning or clearing forests releases the stored carbon back into the air.

"It's frustrating," said Stephanie Tunmore of Greenpeace, an environment group. "They haven't made any progress in the last week."

Also in dispute was a demand that industrial countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions some 25 to 40 percent from 1990 levels by 2020. Under the Kyoto Protocol, 37 countries must bring pollution down to an average 5 percent below 1990 levels.

De Boer said the delegations were discussing the idea of incorporating insurance schemes into the climate change treaty, giving lower premiums to countries that take steps to reduce the risks of major climate disasters. That could include actions like building sea barriers and reinforcing homes to withstand hurricanes.

As with any insurance policy, "premiums are linked to risk," said Andrew Torrance, chairman of an association of 42 insurance companies called ClimateWise.

Torrance said \$83 billion was paid in insurance claims for natural disasters in 2005, a record year that saw Katrina and other hurricanes devastate southern coastal U.S. cities.

"The science is clear — there will be more severe and more frequent catastrophes," he said on the sideline of the conference.

The insurance proposal was raised by Tuvalu, an island country threatened by extinction if the Pacific Ocean rises by several feet. That could happen if the Greenland or Antarctic ice sheet melts.

The global financial crisis shadowed the talks, as delegates debated how to raise the hundreds of billions of dollars needed every year to help developing countries adapt to climate change and lower the rapid growth of their emissions.

The head of the International Energy Agency, a 28-country group that advises governments on energy security, called for a "clean energy new deal."

IEA chief Nobuo Tanaka said countries must act now to develop renewable energies and make traditional energy sources more efficient, such as capturing carbon released by coal-burning power plants.

"It's not an exaggeration to say the world stands at a crossroads on climate change. The science is clear — action is urgently needed," he said. "At the same time, global emissions are continuing to rise and we are now facing a really serious financial and economic crisis that could hamper our efforts to curb emissions."

Tanaka cited an IEA study forecasting that global energy demand will increase by 45 percent from 2006 to 2030. If the world continues to rely on its current mix of polluting energy sources, the report said that would lead to a rise in global temperatures of 6 degrees Celsius (10.8 degrees Fahrenheit). Even a 2-degree-Celsius (3.6-degree-Fahrenheit) rise could subject up to 2 billion people to water shortages by 2050 and threaten 20 percent to 30 percent of the world's species with extinction, according to the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger told delegates in a video message Monday that fighting climate change will also help the global economy recover from recession.

"There are some people who say that we can't afford the fight against global warming while our economies are down — but the exact opposite is true," he said. "The green rules and regulations that will help save our planet will also revive our economies."

Port air pollution riles regulators, neighbors

By Denis Cuff

Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Saturday, December 6, 2008

Community groups and clean air advocates and regulators were counting on big commitments from the Port of Oakland this fall to slash diesel truck pollution that has contributed to a higher cancer risk in West Oakland.

Now they are fuming, saying the city-owned seaport has pulled back rather than pay out for cleaner air, and public health as well as the port's long term financial health may suffer as a result.

The tensions are ramping up as ports and truckers struggle to meet new California pollution requirements in the midst of hard economic times sweeping over the shipping industry.

Oakland port commissioners voted Nov. 19 to indefinitely postpone a planned \$5 million contribution to a government pool of grants for owners of old trucks to install diesel soot filters required by the state for trucks that want to keep visiting ports after Jan. 1, 2010.

Without enough clean trucks, port business could be severely disrupted, air quality regulators say, because hundreds of the 2,000 trucks that use the port are believed to need pollution upgrades.

Port commissioners also postponed a Dec. 2 vote on a master plan to cut port pollution, and a container fee that would make companies that ship the goods pay millions of dollars annually to finance pollution reduction measures for diesel trucks, ships and trains.

"We see the port as essentially pulling back from their commitments to deliver cleaner air," said Jack Broadbent, chief executive officer of the nine-county Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "We are extremely disappointed that the port did not follow through."

One environmental leader was harsher.

"These delays in reducing pollution protect the interests of shipping companies and their customers, like Wal-Mart and Costco, at the expense of public health in Oakland," said Brian Beveridge, co-director of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project.

Port officials said the troubled economy is hitting the shipping industry so hard that the port, a landlord for many interrelated maritime businesses, has a fiscal responsibility to reassess how it spends to reduce pollution.

"We haven't any way abandoned our commitments to air quality," said Richard Sinkoff, the port's manager of environmental programs and planning. "The central issue for the port is its financial health and making sure that the benefits from it can accrue."

The port is the region's biggest concentrated source of diesel soot, which can penetrate deep into the lungs and contribute to a variety of health problems, including asthma, cancer and heart disease, regulators say.

In March, the California Air Resources Board released a risk analysis that concluded the 22,000 residents of West Oakland face a cancer risk some three times higher than the rest of the Bay Area because of air pollution, much of it from traffic on local roads and freeways, but some from port traffic. The pollution also escalates cancer risk to a lesser degree in much of western Alameda and Contra Costa counties, officials said.

Vowing to cut pollution risks quickly, the California Air Resources Board, the Bay Area air pollution district and the port each planned to chip in \$5 million to create a \$15 million pool for grants to clean up diesel truck models from 1994 to 2003. The maximum grant would be up to \$15,000 per truck for soot filters that can cost up to \$20,000, leaving a large share for truckers to pick up.

The grant program will go ahead, but if the \$5 million in port money is not restored, fewer trucks will receive help to upgrade,

When they balked at approving the money last month, port commissioners discussed the dark cloud over port finances, and a dispute arose about who should bear the burden of truck filter costs not covered by grants.

Some of the many independent truckers who do business at the port complained the filter costs are an extreme hardship on their modest incomes.

To solve the problem, the truckers and Teamsters union representatives have urged the port commission to require trucking companies to put the independent truckers on their payroll as full-time employees. If that is done, it's up to the trucking companies to absorb the costs.

But other truckers have told the port commission they want to remain contractors to keep their freedom as independent businessmen, even if it means absorbing the cost to clean up trucks. As independent contractors, the truckers cannot legally be organized by labor unions.

The labor issue remains unresolved as the port waits for a study to be issued next year on how to address the truckers' status.

In the meantime, air pollution officials said they are growing more anxious that trucks using the port may not be ready for the 2010 deadline to clean up.

"We need the port to show leadership instead of coming up with more reasons for delays," said Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman on the Bay Area air pollution board. "They have lagged behind Southern California ports in cleaning up."

Port officials acknowledge they are concerned about the clean truck deadline, but they said that some cargo owners are considering giving financial assistance for truck upgrades or replacements.

"I think we'll hear more about partners that are receptive to helping," said Tim Leong, a port environmental scientist. "They understand that operating green is part of doing business at the port."

Be wary of carbon monoxide

Modesto Bee, Monday, December 8, 2008

Furnaces, space heaters, fireplaces and wood-burning stoves are all potential sources of carbon monoxide. Typical symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include aches, dizziness, headaches and flu-like symptoms. Follow these steps to protect yourself and your family:

Have your furnace, chimney, fireplace, wood stoves and flues inspected. Take care of any needed repairs.

Do not use charcoal grills indoors for cooking or heating, and do not use your oven for heating your home.

Don't leave your engine running in an enclosed garage, even if the door is open. Install a carbon monoxide detector outside every sleeping area in your home.

To find a poison control center near you, call 800-222-1222, and visit www.aapcc.org for more information about carbon monoxide poisoning.

Health risks stack up for students near industrial plants

By Blake Morrison and Brad Heath
USA TODAY, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008

ADDYSTON, Ohio — The growl of air-monitoring equipment has replaced the chatter of children at Meredith Hitchens Elementary School in this Cincinnati suburb along the Ohio River.

School district officials pulled all students from Hitchens three years ago, after air samples outside the building showed high levels of chemicals coming from the plastics plant across the street. The levels were so dangerous that the Ohio EPA concluded the risk of getting cancer there was 50 times higher than what the state considers acceptable.

The air outside 435 other schools — from Maine to California — appears to be even worse, and the threats to the health of students at those locations may be even greater.

Using the government's most up-to-date model for tracking toxic chemicals, USA TODAY spent eight months examining the impact of industrial pollution on the air outside schools across the nation. The model is a computer simulation that predicts the path of toxic chemicals released by thousands of companies.

USA TODAY used it to identify schools in toxic hot spots — a task the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had never undertaken.

The result: a ranking of 127,800 public, private and parochial schools based on the concentrations and health hazards of chemicals likely to be in the air outside. The model's most recent version used emissions reports filed by 20,000 industrial sites in 2005, the year Hitchens closed.

The potential problems that emerged were widespread, insidious and largely unaddressed:

- At Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in East Chicago, Ind., the model indicated levels of manganese more than a dozen times higher than what the government considers safe. The metal can cause mental and emotional problems after long exposures. Three factories within blocks of the school — located in one of the most impoverished areas of the state — combined to release more than 6 tons of it in a single year.

"When you start talking about manganese, it doesn't register with people in poverty," says Juan Anaya, superintendent of the School City of East Chicago district. "They have bigger issues to deal with."

- The middle school in Follansbee, W.Va., sits close to a cluster of plants that churn out tens of thousands of pounds of toxic gases and metals a year.
- In Huntington, W.Va., data showed the air outside Highlawn Elementary School had high levels of nickel, which can harm lungs and cause cancer.
- At San Jacinto Elementary School in Deer Park, Texas, data indicated carcinogens at levels even higher than the readings that prompted the shutdown of Hitchens. A recent University of Texas study showed an "association" between an increased risk of childhood cancer and proximity to the Houston Ship Channel, about 2 miles from the school.

The 435 schools that ranked worst weren't confined to industrial centers. Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania had the highest numbers, but the worst schools extended from the East Coast to the West, in 170 cities across 34 states, USA TODAY found.

In some school districts, emissions from the smokestacks of refineries or chemical plants threatened students of every age, preschool through prom. Outside those schools, reports from polluters themselves often indicated a dozen different chemicals in the air. All are considered toxic by the government, though few have been tested for their specific effects on children.

Scientists have long known that kids are particularly susceptible to the dangers. They breathe more air in proportion to their weight than adults do, and their bodies are still developing. Based on the time they spend at school, their exposures could last for years but the impact might not become clear for decades.

That was the case in Port Neches, Texas, where more than two dozen former students of Port Neches-Groves High School have been diagnosed with cancer several years after they graduated, according to court records. So far, 17 have reached legal settlements with

petrochemical plants located less than a mile from the school. In court filings, the plants' operators had denied they were to blame for the illnesses.

The U.S. EPA, which has a special office charged with protecting children's health, has invested millions of taxpayer dollars in pollution models that could help identify schools where toxic chemicals saturate the air. Even so, USA TODAY found, the agency has all but ignored examining whether the air is unsafe at the very locations where kids are required to gather.

If regulators had used their own pollution models to look for schools in toxic hot spots, they would have discovered what USA TODAY found: locations — in small towns such as Lucedale, Miss., and Oro Grande, Calif., as well as in large cities such as Houston — where the government's own data indicated the air outside schools was more toxic than the air outside the shuttered Hitchens.

"Wow," says Philip Landrigan, a physician who heads a unit at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York focused on children's health and the environment. "The mere fact that kids are being exposed ought to be enough to force people to pay attention. The problem here is, by and large, there's no cop on the beat. Nobody's paying attention."

Smokestack effect: Problems are widespread

Page 2 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

Factories, chemical plants and other industries are the lifeblood of many towns, providing the jobs and the tax base that sustain communities. The industries and the schools nearby often have co-existed for decades. For just as long, residents in cities large and small have tried to accept — or simply ignore — the tradeoffs: air pollution that leads to breathing problems or worse.

To identify locations where dangers appear greatest, USA TODAY used a mathematical model, developed by the EPA, called Risk-Screening Environmental Indicators. It estimates how toxic chemicals are dispersed across the nation and in what quantities.

With the help of researchers from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA TODAY plotted the locations of schools to rank them based on chemicals likely to be in the air outside. Some of the schools — and the companies responsible for the chemicals — may have closed or moved since the government collected the data. Others may have opened. The rankings showed 435 of those schools with air more toxic than the air outside Meredith Hitchens.

The good news: The model showed levels of industrial chemicals declined at three-quarters of U.S. schools since 1998, a trend that mirrors improved air quality across the nation.

The more ominous news: Outside one-quarter of schools, the model showed students were exposed to higher levels of industrial pollution in 2005 than they were 10 years ago.

Regulators caution that conditions at some schools may be far different than the model makes them appear. That's because the data used in the model are based on estimates submitted by the companies themselves. Clerical errors or flawed interpretations of what needs to be reported can result in misleading impressions about what's released.

Of the 435 schools that ranked worse than Hitchens, Ohio EPA toxicologist Paul Koval believes about "half of those could be better but half could be worse." The economist who helped create the model for the U.S. EPA, Nick Bouwes, takes a different view. The modeled results, he says, "may be a gross underestimate," in part because companies only approximate what they release. Without long-term monitoring, Koval and Bouwes agree, no one can be certain which schools have problems and which might not.

Among the hot spots that might justify monitoring, the government's model identified:

- Deer Park, Texas, near Houston, where students at elementary, middle and high schools faced dangerously high levels of butadiene, a carcinogen, and other gases from petrochemical plants on the Houston Ship Channel.

- Lucedale, Miss., where kids at five schools faced air with high levels of chromium, a metal that, in one form, has been linked to cancer.
- Oro Grande Elementary in California's Mojave Desert, where students breathed a variety of metals, including chromium, manganese and lead.

The likely exposures weren't simply the product of living in a part of town where pollution is heavy. In thousands of cases, the air appeared to be better in the neighborhoods where children lived than at the schools they attended, USA TODAY found.

At about 16,500 schools, the air outside the schools was at least twice as toxic as the air at a typical location in the school district. At 3,000 of those schools, air outside the buildings was at least 10 times as toxic.

But in all of these cases, precisely what risk children face remains a mystery — to parents, school officials and government regulators responsible for protecting public health. No laws or regulations require the sort of air monitoring that would tell them.

"There are health and safety standards for adults in the workplace, but there are no standards for children at schools," says Ramona Trovato, the former director of the EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection, who has since retired from the agency. "If a parent complains, there's no law that requires anybody to do anything. It's beyond belief."

Smokestack effect: 'What if we're next?'

Page 3 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

Cancer found Matt Becker before he turned 16. It gave him nosebleeds that lasted for hours and a melon-size tumor inside his chest. It kept him in the hospital for weeks at a time, a tube draining quarts of fluid from the lining of his lungs. It stole his sophomore year of high school and almost took his life.

"I never thought a kid my age could go through what I went through," he says now, as calmly as if he were recounting a boring day at school. For eight years, Matt went to school across the street from his house, at Saylor Park School in the Cincinnati neighborhood of the same name.

Now, at 17, he's back in the classroom, in a different school not far from where he lives with his parents and younger brother. His cancer, a non-Hodgkin lymphoma, was diagnosed in 2006 and has since gone into remission, and his life seems much the same as it was before he got sick.

He goes fishing and shoots pool. His hair, closely cropped, has grown back brown and full. Except for a 7-inch purple scar along his right shoulder blade — where doctors went in for exploratory surgery — cancer appears to have left no marks.

Matt knows better. His life has barely begun, but already he harbors a fear no child deserves: He worries that the chemotherapy needed to save his life may have left him sterile. "There's a good chance," says his mother, Pam.

The causes of many cancers, especially those in children, are varied and often unknown. Epidemiologists usually fail to pinpoint the culprits, and no one knows what caused Matt's cancer. His mother is haunted by a fear: that the same chemicals that prompted the shutdown of Meredith Hitchens Elementary, 2 miles away, might be to blame.

Like most kids, Matt spent much of his childhood outdoors. He remembers seeing and smelling what came out of the plastics plant. But, like most kids and many parents at schools across the country, he seldom considered what he was breathing and how it might affect his health.

After the diagnosis, "my doctor ... asked me if there was any kind of pollution where I lived," Matt recalls. "It never really crossed my mind how bad it could be."

The model used by USA TODAY indicated the school where Matt spent kindergarten through eighth grade — Saylor Park — and his home across the street were touched by the same chemicals that led to the closure of Hitchens. Although the concentrations of carcinogens outside

Matt's school were not nearly as high as those found at Hitchens, the model indicated elevated levels there, too.

Ohio EPA's Koval, who supervised monitoring at Hitchens, says concentrations from the model showed cancer risks at Saylor Park would have been about six times higher than what the state considers acceptable.

The company cited by the Ohio EPA — Lanxess Corp. — no longer runs the plastics plant. But a company official who used to manage the Addyston facility says state regulators overstated the dangers. "The situation wasn't so dire that there was a serious public risk," says A.J. "Sandy" Marshall, now president and managing director for Lanxess Inc., the company's Canadian subsidiary. In 2005, Lanxess reported emitting 55,000 pounds of butadiene and acrylonitrile, both considered carcinogens by the Ohio EPA.

Marshall says the state EPA used flawed or outdated studies to claim that cancer risks were high. Although Marshall says Lanxess took major steps to curb its emissions, he says the company does not believe the 369 kids moved from Hitchens faced any serious dangers.

The Ohio EPA says otherwise.

In its air-quality study issued in December 2005, the agency explained how it determined the risks outside Hitchens were 50 times higher than acceptable. The state considers an "acceptable" cancer risk as one additional cancer for every 100,000 people, based on the idea that residents would breathe the air there for 70 years.

At Hitchens, the air showed concentrations of chemicals that the state concluded could cause 50 more cancers for every 100,000 people. It also noted that "children may be at higher risk" than adults.

During the years Matt was growing up, Koval says, equipment problems at the plastics plant meant emissions of one of the carcinogens probably were much worse than what monitoring found. That's because an industrial flare, a tall flame used to burn off butadiene, wasn't working properly, Koval says. That problem, Koval says, and fewer regulations on what the plant could emit likely meant butadiene was being released at levels Koval calls "alarming."

Lanxess' Marshall says the company believes it ran the flare properly and met its permit requirements. How much butadiene Matt or the children at Hitchens breathed will never be clear.

Marshall cites a study released in 2006 by the state and county health departments, which found a higher-than-expected number of cancers in Addyston and concluded that "smoking history and multiple other risk factors are likely to play a role" in the excess cancers. But the study also said that "exposures from the Lanxess facility cannot be ruled out" as a cause. It never examined cases in Matt's Saylor Park neighborhood, nor did the state monitor there.

Children's health experts such as physician Landrigan say "it's plausible" that Matt's cancer might be related to his exposure to the chemicals. Too little is known — about childhood cancer and toxic chemicals — to ever be certain, and Landrigan made clear he did not examine Matt or his medical records.

Lanxess' Marshall also cannot say. "I feel for the family," he says of the Beckers. "When these diseases hit, there certainly is a lot of questioning as to what happens, what causes it and so on."

That's no comfort to Pam Becker. She worries when Matt loses weight; every pound he drops might be the cancer returning. And she frets about her younger boy, Nick. At 13, he only half-jokes that he holds his breath near the plant.

"How guilty do we feel if we gave our kid this because of where we live and where we sent him to school?" Pam Becker asks. "What if Nick's next? What if we're next?"

Smokestack effect: Cancer at Port Neches

Page 4 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

A few blocks beyond the trees around Port Neches-Groves High School in Port Neches, Texas, gray towers jut into the air. The towers help cool factories that use chemicals to make rubber and plastics — the kind of chemicals that former students there say gave them cancer.

The federal government built the plants in Port Neches during World War II, searching for a substitute for rubber supplies that had been cut off. Now they're owned by ISP Elastomers and Texas Petrochemicals.

For decades, butadiene was released from the plants, often at levels that state monitoring showed could be harmful. So much escaped that it sometimes formed sweet-smelling clouds hovering over roads near the school, remembers Dave Cerami, who graduated in 1984.

Cerami, 43, is in his fourth bout with cancer. This time, it has spread to his brain.

"The last time I was diagnosed, that was a big kick," he says. "It's like, how many times can you dance this dance? How many times can you push your luck before your luck runs out?"

It is one of many questions that he — and those he grew up with — cannot answer. Another: How bad was the air at their schools?

"If you lived here and you have kids in the school, you don't want to believe it's harmful. And if you're the school, you don't want to believe that having a school there would be giving kids cancer," says Dale Hanks, a Beaumont, Texas, lawyer.

Hanks has represented 27 graduates of Port Neches schools, including Cerami, who sued the chemical plants, their former owners and others after being diagnosed with cancer. The emissions they blamed took place before the plants' current owners took over.

Seventeen of those cases have been settled out of court since the late 1990s, and confidentiality agreements bar the plaintiffs from discussing agreements. Ten more complaints are pending. No trial dates have been set.

Five years after Cerami graduated, state regulators tried to find out how bad the air was. When Texas authorities looked in 1989, their monitors detected levels of butadiene near the schools that were more than four times higher than the state's safety standard. A decade later, state workers sent to monitor the air reported dizziness, nausea and "facial numbness," according to a 1999 report by the state Commission on Environmental Quality. Another report, in 2003, noted butadiene levels as much as 120 times higher than the state's standard.

After monitoring began, the state pressed the chemical plants to upgrade their equipment to curb emissions; butadiene levels fell sharply. Texas considers its efforts a success.

But Vic Fair, head of the commission's regional office until he retired in 2001, says he never talked to the school district about what the monitors showed, and the school district never asked. "We didn't really have a way to tell people whether this is dangerous or not," he says. "What can we say?"

Smokestack effect: Who's responsible?

Page 5 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

Regulatory responses, even slow ones, remain more the exception than the rule — especially at schools. Children's health experts have tried, with limited success, to push the EPA to make better use of its own tools.

As early as 2002, an EPA advisory committee now led by Melanie Marty, a California EPA toxicologist, questioned the agency's failure to be more proactive. The group, called the Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee, is composed of 30 experts from industry, state governments, academia and advocacy groups. It reports to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson.

Hundreds of pages of correspondence reviewed by USA TODAY show that among the committee's recommendations were calls for the EPA to develop better information about the exposure of children to toxic chemicals. One letter, sent by the committee to then-EPA

administrator Christie Whitman on May 2, 2002, urged a more aggressive approach by the EPA to "environmental health threats at schools."

Although the letter focused on concerns about air quality inside schools, it asked the EPA to "identify environmental considerations" that communities could consider as they select school sites. Among them: proximity to "hazardous facilities."

"School communities need reliable information about the risks to children's health from exposure to environmental contaminants," the letter read.

A response came almost three months later, from Assistant Administrator Jeffrey Holmstead, restating the agency's commitment to children and listing a variety of programs it supported. The letter did not mention proximity of schools to hazardous facilities.

The EPA has taken many steps toward making children safer.

It has worked with schools to improve air quality inside buildings, primarily by identifying toxic cleaners and other chemicals that might harm students.

Today the EPA is investigating whether athletic fields made with synthetic turf expose children to unsafe levels of toxic chemicals.

What the agency hasn't done is use its models, as USA TODAY did, to look for potential problems around schools — then follow up by testing for toxic chemicals. "Honestly, it didn't occur to me to do this study when I was there, and if it had, we would've initiated it," says Trovato, who directed the EPA's children's health office from 1997 to 2002.

"This isn't something you want to ignore," she says of what USA TODAY found. "If I were still in that job, the only thing I'd feel is, 'I wish I'd thought of it.' "

The current head of the children's health protection office, Ruth McCully, sees her role differently. "It's not my job responsibility to initiate those types of activities," says McCully, who took over this year. "Do I personally have any idea of the chemicals that might be outside kids' schools? Well, I'm not going to answer that," she says. "I'm not out there doing air monitoring."

That's precisely the problem, critics contend: a lack of urgency and initiative on the part of EPA.

"That's the argument EPA puts up: 'We don't know so we don't have to act,'" says Lois Gibbs, executive director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, an advocacy group that focuses on children and schools.

John Balbus, chief health scientist for the Environmental Defense Fund and a member of the EPA children's advisory committee, frames the problem more practically. "To me, the greatest failure of this administration has been the failure to focus on where problems may be occurring now and take action."

At Meredith Hitchens, the Ohio EPA concluded the risk of getting cancer was 50 times what the state considers acceptable. If a school is one of the 435 where the model indicates air worse than at Hitchens, what should parents do?

"If it were me, I would be going to the school board. I would be going to my legislators and raising Cain," says Marty, the California toxicologist.

And the companies near schools? "I would think that responsible industry would be very supportive of monitoring," says Rick Hackman, a former member of the EPA advisory committee and the associate director of regulatory and technical relations for P&G North America.

And what about regulators, state or federal, primarily responsible for protecting health and safety? Says the EPA's Bob Lee, an economist who directs the team that manages the pollution model: "I'd suggest they go do some monitoring."

EU begins developing new air traffic system

By Slobodan Lekic, Associated Press Writer

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, December 8, 2008

BRUSSELS, Belgium The European Union launched a program Monday to develop a new air traffic management system to help cope with an increasing number of flights over Europe.

Europe's air space has reached its limit with 28,000 flights a day, but that number is nevertheless expected to double by 2020, according to the Eurocontrol air traffic management agency.

The EU is developing the euro2.1 billion (\$2.7 billion) "SESAR" system using satellite navigation and data links that would transmit digital messages directly to cockpit displays.

The new system is expected to be up and running by 2020, replacing the radar and radio-based system that dates back to World War II. The current system forces planes to take longer, zigzagging routes that cost airlines about euro4 billion (\$5 billion) annually in wasted fuel.

The EU said the new system should make flights safer, shorter and less polluting by helping air traffic controllers direct planes more efficiently.

In addition, the EU hopes the new system will enable a tripling of capacity, cut air traffic management costs by 50 percent, curb greenhouse gas emissions and achieve an overall punctuality rate of 95 percent, officials said.

"This is one of the most complex research and development programs ever launched in (Europe)," said Antonio Tajani, vice president of the European Commission, the EU head office. Its impact will include fewer delays and increased airport capacity, he added.

The new program will enable so-called "continuous-descent approaches" to the runway - effectively coasting down from cruising altitudes with the throttle on idle - thus decreasing fuel consumption and minimizing CO2 emissions.

"Compared with today's way of managing aircraft, SESAR represents a paradigm shift," said Eurocontrol's director general David McMillan. "We will change the way we manage air traffic - no more skyways, just the most efficient trajectory to save fuel and time."

The planned system will be similar to the new NextGen network being set up in the United States by the Federal Aviation Administration. NextGen also aims to replace the obsolete method of air traffic management where jetliners move in single-file lines along narrow highways in the sky marked by radio beacons.

The European project, like NextGen, has been planned for years but faced repeated delays due to funding shortages and the complexities of the switch-over to the new technology.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, Dec. 7, 2008:](#)

Cleaning our air will be worth the cost Air board should adopt new rules governing diesel engines.

The state air board will meet this week to consider tough new rules governing diesel engines and the emissions they cause. We urge the board to adopt the rules for the sake of cleaner skies and a healthier California.

The new rules are on the agenda of the California Air Resources Board for its meetings Dec. 11 and 12. They are opposed by the trucking industry, among others, as too burdensome in this time of economic crisis.

And we acknowledge that the cost will be high. But the cost of the status quo is even higher.

Diesel emissions are the single-most damaging form of pollution in California's air. Trucks and buses are responsible for 40% of the harmful particulate matter and 50% of the nitrogen oxides -- the main component of smog -- in the state.

Particulate matter is very pernicious, especially in the Valley, where pollution is exacerbated by the combination of geography and climate. The tiny particles can penetrate deeply into human lungs and other organs. There they can cause or aggravate a whole array of cardiovascular and respiratory ailments, including asthma.

Worse, the children exposed to diesel emissions are at special risk. Particulate exposure can retard lung development in the very young, and has been linked to damage suffered by fetuses and other serious health and reproductive problems.

Those emissions are directly responsible for several thousand deaths each year, and cost billions in added health expenses. A telling figure: Truck drivers themselves are almost twice as likely to develop lung cancer as people not so closely exposed to diesel exhaust.

School children are exposed to high levels of diesel pollution on their school buses. And 50% of all Californians live within one mile of a freeway. Very few of us escape the damages from diesel pollution.

CARB is considering two rules. One would require more efficient diesel engines, better aerodynamic designs of vehicles and fuel-efficient tires. The second rule would require particulate filters and other emissions controls on trucks and buses.

The cost is steep -- CARB estimates it at \$5.5 billion over the next 15 years; the trucking industry and others set the figure much higher. And the timetable is tight. Diesel particulate filters would be required by 2014.

The new efficiency rules would apply to 2011 models; older trucks and buses would need upgrades by 2012-13.

But we have little choice, and over the same 15 years, the savings in lives, health costs and reduced diesel fuel consumption could amount to nearly \$50 billion, in CARB's estimate.

It won't be easy for truckers to cover the costs of the upgrades, just as it wasn't easy for Valley farmers to comply with new air regulations that began several years ago. The state is committed to easing the truckers' burden with financial help, just as it did with farmers. In fact, the eminently successful Carl Moyer program is a good model for such aid.

Under the Moyer program, farmers are given help by the state to replace or retrofit older stationary diesel engines used to power irrigation pumps in the fields. The program has helped remove tons of emissions from thousands of older engines.

Such public help is appropriate, because all of us will benefit from cleaner, healthier air. We should all help pay for the cost of those benefits.

None of this will be easy, especially given the fragile condition of both the state budget and the economy. It may take longer than planned to see the benefits of these new rules. But they are badly needed, and we hope CARB will adopt them this week.

[Mark Grossi, Smog Blog, FresnoBee.com, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008](#)

What's the point? Read on

A reader asked a seminal question about our blogging on air quality. Thank you.

I was wondering when someone would get around to asking: What's the point?

The discussion of air quality was in the background during the 1980s and 1990s in the San Joaquin Valley. In fact, it was a conversation stopper, a politically incorrect dud in many circles.

In June 1993, I wrote a story in which people argued long and loud against voluntarily cutting back on fireplace burning. The headline: Wood-burning rules go on back burner.

It was years before people learned what science was slowly revealing. That PM-2.5, the fine particles coming from soot and other chemicals, was deadly to some people and damaging to everyone else.

According to the latest studies, thousands of Valley residents have died before their time because of poor air quality over the last 15 years. These tiny particles are among the biggest villains.

And that's the point: We all breathe the air, and air pollution kills more people in most California counties than car accidents.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., Dec. 6, 2008:](#)

What good is the Valley air district anyway?

I'm sick of hearing about the Valley's dirty air. Because we live in the Valley, we will always have this problem. The dirty air is trapped here until alleviated by a significant storm.

Can't The Bee come up with a better column for the front page of the Local & State section than "The Smog Log"? Tell me something I don't already know, like how the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District gets its power.

It all starts with them trying to control our fireplaces, which is ridiculous! Then they move on to farmers. No more burning for them after 2010. Next in line will be the dairy farms for the gases that their cows are emitting. Might want to install catalytic converters on all the happy cows in California.

The air district has already gotten involved in the hazard reduction burns for the foothill and mountain areas. Cal Fire inspects these properties for proper clearance and will cite you if not in compliance. This can lead to loss of homeowners insurance or worse yet, denied claims due to improper clearing.

The money wasted to operate this air pollution control district could sure be used in the state's schools right about now.

Hal Baptista, Auberry

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Monday, Dec. 8, 2008:](#)

No-burn days unfair

Am I the only person in this town who is infuriated by the past two-week ban on fireplace use?

Around Halloween, I bought one cord of firewood to heat my home. My thermostat is set at 58 degrees. I like to burn firewood. However, I have not been able to, due to the "no-burn status" in the San Joaquin Valley. I believe the PM 2.5 number the air district publicizes is a vague number that cannot be substantiated. Where is that number gathered? What does it mean?

This is one more of my rights usurped by the politically correct thinking we live in now. I presume it is more correct to burn fossil fuels than to burn wood gathered from dead or dying trees. It is so hypocritical to ban burning and allow leaf blowers, almond and pistachio tree shaking, agricultural pesticide spraying, diesel trucks from foreign countries and various other pollutants.

Should I just call my wood man and ask him to pick up the wood I just bought and give me a refund? Even with the "no-burn status," our air quality has not improved. Could it be that wood burning is not the problem?

TRUDI WILLIAMS, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, Dec. 5, 2008:](#)

'Socialist control'

"The Perfect Firestorm" (story Dec. 1) would make Joseph Goebbels smile. The fallacy of global warming intends to subvert the masses into following liberal socialist policies, eventually creating the collectivist states of America.

Sound science and geo-history point to the fact that overall, we are in a cooling period. So why the mantra of "global warming" from propagandists like reporter Tom Knudson? Goebbels, Hitler's chief propagandist, stated, "Propaganda is a means to an end. Its purpose is to lead the people to an understanding that will allow them to willingly and without internal resistance devote themselves to the tasks and goals of a superior leadership."

Liberal socialists see themselves as this "superior leadership."

Why the huge wildfires? Liberals have shut down logging and obstructed grazing on public lands. The resulting buildup of fuel on the ground feeds out-of-control fires. Combined with current drought conditions, huge wildfires are inevitable.

Liberals have shut down access to natural resources like timber, coal, oil and water. Their goal is to break the U.S. economy and create a scenario where full socialist control comes to the rescue.

Wake up! It's happening before your very eyes.

John Rankin, Orange Cove

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses ecological dialogue: what of the two options pollutes more—to drive or to fly? For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Diálogo Ecológico: ¿Conducir o volar?

El Diario NY, Monday, December 08, 2008

Diálogo Ecológico: ¿Cuál de las dos opciones es más contaminante: volar o conducir? --
Christine Matthews, Washington, DC

La respuesta simple es que la conducción en un coche relativamente económico en combustible (25-30 millas por galón) genera generalmente menos emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero que el volar. En la determinación del impacto del calentamiento del planeta de un viaje de Philadelphia a Boston (cerca de 300 millas), el sitio Web de noticias ambientales Grist.org calcula que la conducción generaría cerca de 104 kilogramos de dióxido de carbono (CO₂) —el gas invernadero principal—por cualquier coche de tamaño mediano típico, sin importar el número de pasajeros, mientras que el volar en un jet comercial produciría unos 184 kilogramos de CO₂ por pasajero.

Esto también significa que mientras conducir sería levemente mejor del punto de vista de emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero, compartir los autos tiene realmente impacto ambiental. Cuatro personas que comparten un coche serían colectivamente responsables de emitir solamente 104 kilogramos de CO₂, mientras que las mismas cuatro personas que tomaran cuatro asientos en un avión generarían cada una 736 kilogramos.

El periodista Pablo Paster de Salon.com amplía la comparación aun más a un viaje a través del país, y llega a las mismas conclusiones. (Las diferencias en la matemática son atribuibles a las suposiciones levemente diferentes con respecto a las ecuaciones de uso y fuente de combustible.) El volar de San Francisco a Boston, por ejemplo, generaría unos 1,300 kilogramos de gases de efecto invernadero por pasajero, mientras que usar un auto representaría solamente 930 kilogramos por el vehículo completo. Así entonces, compartiendo el viaje con uno o más pasajeros reduciría la huella ecológica de cada uno proporcionalmente.

Una vez que has tomado tu decisión de si conducir o volar, considera comprar compensaciones de carbón para neutralizar las emisiones que estás generando con donativos en efectivo para el desarrollo de energía renovable. TerraPass, entre otros, hace fácil calcular tu huella de carbón basada en cuánto conduces y vuelas (así como el consumo de energía casero), y después te venderá compensaciones en proporción. (Los dineros generados mediante compensaciones de carbón financian energía alternativa y otros proyectos, tales como granjas de viento, las que no solamente hacen un impacto positivo en el ambiente, sino que en última instancia eliminarán totalmente las emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero).

Por supuesto, las emisiones de un individuo que usa un autobús (la mejor manera de compartir un modo de viaje) o un tren (muchos de los cuales dependen solamente de la energía eléctrica generada por su propio movimiento) serían perceptiblemente más bajas. Paster agrega que un viaje a través del país por tren generaría aproximadamente la mitad de las emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero de conducir un coche. La única manera de hacer tal viaje en forma super ecológica sería hacerlo en bicicleta o a pie—pero el viaje tomaría mucho tiempo.