

Air district implements new scoring system to warn of bad air

By Mark Rivera, Staff Writer

Turlock Journal Wednesday, May 7, 2008

The San Joaquin Valley Air District announced Friday that it has adopted a more health-protective scoring system that will give residents an early warning for upcoming bad air episodes.

The new scoring system stems from research that illustrates the negative health effects from ozone exposure occur at lower levels than previously thought. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has recommended the system for use nationwide.

"While the new scoring system provides a greater safety margin for the public, the more severe rankings under the new system should not be confused with worsening air quality in the Valley," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director and air pollution control officer.

Ozone, or smog, is a summertime air pollution problem. Ozone season extends from May through September. The air district covers eight counties including Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and parts of Kern.

According to statistics provided by the district's Senior Public Information Representative Maricela Velasquez, there were an average of 321 healthy, or "good," days from 2005 to 2007. Under the new standards, that number would fall to 303. Out of 37 days that were rated "moderate" with the old system, there would have been an average of 47 moderate days through the three-year period.

The average number of unhealthy days for sensitive people, such as those with asthma and the elderly, would rise from seven to 15 with the new scoring system, and there would have been one occurrence of a general unhealthy day.

In 2007 alone, there were 339 good days, falling to 321 under the new scoring system. The district forecasted 24 moderate days, which would rise to 39, two unhealthy for sensitive people days, which would rise to five, and no unhealthy days, which would stay the same.

The district forecasts and publishes an Air Quality Index every day that indicates the severity of air quality conditions in various regions in the Valley. The AQI categories -- green for "good," yellow for "moderate," orange for "unhealthy to sensitive groups" and red for "unhealthy" -- are not changing.

Under the old calculations, moderate air quality encompassed daily ozone concentrations between 65 parts per billion and 84 ppb. The new AQI scale ranks moderate conditions between 60 ppb and 75 ppb. This shift ranges across all categories.

The EPA recently announced that it is proposing the Valley air basin be designated in attainment of particulate matter 10 microns and less, and that the air district's PM10 maintenance plan be accepted.

New Kern power plant to capture, bury pollution

The Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 8, 2008

One of the world's first emissions-free power plants will be built in Kern County in the next few years as part of a government-funded test to capture carbon dioxide from large sources and store it underground, the California Energy Commission has announced.

The 50-megawatt plant will be built on Kimberlina Road, about 20 miles north of Bakersfield, on the site of a former biomass plant.

Rancho Cordova-based Clean Energy Systems will build and operate the facility, which will generate power by combusting natural gas using technology based on rocket engines.

The plant is expected to come online in 2011.

Much like oil companies re-inject wastewater deep into the ground, the power plant's exhaust pipe will divert carbon dioxide into geological formations more than a mile underground.

"I hope 20 years from now people look back and say, 'Why did we ever have (smoke) stacks on power plants?'" said Keith Pronske, Clean Energy Systems chief executive officer.

The Central Valley's geology is prime for storage because it has layers of porous sandstone capped by impermeable shale rock, scientists say. The shale acts as a seal to trap the carbon dioxide within the porous sandstone.

The project is expected to prevent more than 1 million tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere over several years. Following a four-year run, the plant may begin supplying carbon dioxide to local oil companies who can use it for enhanced oil recovery.

The Kimberlina project is one of several the federal government is supporting to develop technology to combat climate change through the capture and underground storage of carbon emissions from large facilities like power plants and refineries.

The project is particularly relevant in California, which must reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Clean Energy Systems was founded by aerospace and rocket scientists and has tested its new rocket-engine combustion technology for the past few years at a transformed biomass plant on Kimberlina Road.

The biomass plant was mothballed in 1986 due to stringent air regulations, according to Pronske.

"This is really a unique project and it's exciting for California. This is the first commercial-scale application of a new combustion technology coupled with an injection (of carbon dioxide) into the subsurface," said Larry Myer, a staff scientist with the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and technical director for the West Coast Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership, one of seven regional groups established by the federal government to explore clean energy technology.

"The idea is to show industry and utilities in California that not only is this ecologically sound and safe, but it's quite valuable as a business model to have industry embrace this," said Adam Gottlieb, a spokesman for the California Energy Commission.

Californian writer wins valley journalism award

The Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 8, 2008

Stacey Shepard, a staff writer for *The Californian*, won a San Joaquin Valley-wide journalism award Wednesday night.

Shepard was one of six San Joaquin Valley writers awarded Gruner prizes this year. Judges recognized Shepard's 2007 investigation into "the vast quantity of spills and leaks from a Shell oil refinery (which) further exposed the disinterest of the state agency that was charged with enforcing a cleanup."

Other winners included Megan O'Laughlin and Jillian Brackett of the Sanger Herald; David Castellon and Paul Hurley of the *Visalia Times-Delta*; and George Hostetter of *The Fresno Bee*.

Winners of the Gruner prize receive a plaque and \$500.

The Gruner Prizes were established to honor George F. Gruner, the former executive editor of *The Bee*, who retired in 1988. Entries must be investigative or interpretive stories with important social, economic or governmental topics.

Governor to attend 'historic' Tejon Ranch announcement

The Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 8, 2008

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is scheduled to attend a news conference at Tejon Ranch Company headquarters on Thursday regarding an agreement on the future of the Tejon Ranch.

The news conference is scheduled for 10:30 a.m., a news release said. The release did not detail the agreement, but said it would be historic.

A release from Tejon Ranch said the agreement involved major environmental groups.

The Mountain Enterprise, a newspaper for residents of the mountain communities around Tejon Ranch, reported that the deal would have the Sierra Club and several other major environmental groups agreeing not to oppose the ranch's plans to develop its Tejon Mountain Village and Centennial projects.

Tejon Ranch is home to numerous plant and animal species.

Also, the Tejon Ranch Company is working on a master-planned community of 23,000 homes just south of the Kern County line and a 28,000-acre resort community.

Construction of the Tejon Industrial Center, a 606,000-square-foot industrial spec building on the west side of Interstate 5 was completed earlier this year.

Activists and builders OK a conservation plan for the sprawling property in Kern and L.A. counties that would permit some development

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
Los Angeles Times, Thursday, May 8, 2008

A coalition of environmental groups and a developer have agreed on a landmark plan to conserve 90% of the largest chunk of privately owned wilderness remaining in Southern California.

The agreement ends years of debate over the fate of an untrammelled tableau of mountains, wildflower fields, twisted oaks and Joshua trees in the historic Tejon Ranch in the Tehachapi Mountains, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

The developer, the Tejon Ranch Co., has agreed to set aside 178,000 acres and provide an option for public purchase of 62,000 additional acres -- 49,000 to create a state park, 10,000 to realign a 37-mile segment of the Pacific Crest Trail through the heart of the wild lands and the rest to provide docent-led tours of sensitive habitat. It also will pull back development plans along some ridgelines considered crucial to the California condor.

In exchange, a coalition led by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, Audubon California, the Planning and Conservation League and the Endangered Habitats League will not oppose the company's plans to build three urban centers, including more than 26,000 homes as well as hotels, condominiums and golf courses at the western and southwestern edge of the ranch.

Those groups and others had threatened a campaign against development of the property, saying it would extend Southern California's suburban sprawl to the Central Valley, add to regional traffic and [air pollution woes](#), and harm endangered species such as the condor.

The pact was the second major truce among environmental groups and developers in as many months in Southern California, where such projects can be tied up in court for decades. Last month, conservationists struck a deal with a Houston oil company that would allow for offshore drilling this year in exchange for early retirement of several large-scale oil facilities along an otherwise pristine coastline in Santa Barbara County.

In a prepared statement, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the success in reaching the Tejon agreement underlines how "we can protect California's environment at the same time we pump up our economy."

Some environmentalists expressed reservations about the accord, to be announced today. Ilene Anderson, a biologist and spokeswoman for the Center for Biological Diversity, said her group remains worried about habitat for the condor.

"So while we support significant open space," she said, "it's precedent-setting that critical habitat for a species just brought back from the brink of extinction would be written off for development."

Eight times the size of San Francisco, the unfragmented 270,000-acre property embraces the juncture of four ecosystems: Mojave Desert grasslands, San Joaquin Valley oak woodlands, Tehachapi pine forests and coastal mountain ranges.

Like Louisiana Purchase

The 165-year-old ranch, first cobbled together by Edward Fitzgerald Beale, was owned for decades by an investment group led by former Los Angeles Times owner Harry Chandler and land developer Moses Sherman.

"For Southern California, this is the ecological equivalent of the Louisiana Purchase," said Bill Corcoran, senior regional representative for the Sierra Club. "It is the only place in the region where within a few minutes a visitor can ascend from Joshua tree woodlands to oak-filled canyons on up to vast plains with views across the coastal range."

Permitting for residential and commercial development of the remaining 30,000 acres is expected to be easier with the agreement, although plans still must be approved by state and federal regulatory authorities, as well as Los Angeles and Kern counties, according to Robert A. Stine, president and chief executive of Tejon Ranch Co.

"Our vision has always been to preserve California's legacy and provide for California's future, and this agreement does exactly that," Stine said in an interview. "It's good for conservation, good for California and good for the company and its shareholders."

Finding common ground between the nation's most powerful environmental groups and the Tejon Ranch Co. wasn't easy.

"We've come a long way from where we started," said Joel Reynolds, senior attorney and director of the Southern California Program of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "This was an extremely complicated deal, but also a once-in-a-lifetime conservation opportunity."

The agreement guarantees Tejon Ranch Co. the right to proceed with massive development projects near Interstate 5: Centennial, a planned community of 23,000 homes east of Quail Lake in northern Los Angeles County; and Tejon Mountain Village in southern Kern County, which will include a resort featuring spas and boutique hotels, commercial space, golf courses and 3,400 estate homes. The Tejon Industrial Complex in the Kern County portion of the ranch is already home to IKEA's 2-million-square-foot main distribution warehouse, among others.

In each project, Stine said, "a whole set of design parameters will be reviewed by all parties to ensure that all development activity that takes place will consider all green opportunities into the future; that means transportation, building and landscape materials, water usage. Everything."

The agreement also creates an "independent Tejon Ranch Conservancy" composed of 12 members appointed by the company and its environmental partners to manage the preserved land in perpetuity. The company will provide about \$800,000 a year for seven years to get the conservancy off the ground. Later, it will be funded through transfer fees from the sale of residential properties.

"It's not enough to simply set aside land," Reynolds said. "We also need an entity whose focus is restoration and conservation."

Tejon Ranch remains a vast wildlife stronghold where deer, elk, bobcat and wild turkey flourish. Canyon bottoms are full of oaks. Along old lumber roads edging the brows of hills, flocks of wild pigeons rise. On the uplands, pine and cedar hold their own, and golden eagles ride warm air currents from coastal mountains to the Sierra.

Graham Chisolm, director of conservation for Audubon California said, "There is probably no more important property for the future of the California condor." Only a week ago, he said, roughly half of the 38 California condors in Southern California were foraging on the property.

4 ridgelines spared

A key to unlocking the stalemate was the developer's agreement to pull back from four of five northern-facing ridgelines, including one hemming scenic Bear Trap Canyon, that are prime foraging grounds inside critical California condor habitat.

"By removing the potential obstacles that have plagued similar development efforts in California, we'll be able to move ahead with the entitlement processes on our current development projects in a much more timely fashion," said Michael H. Winer, portfolio manager for Third Avenue Management, Tejon's largest shareholder, and a member of its board of directors.

The company had been seeking an "incidental condor take permit" from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which would have relieved it of liability in the event that its projects were linked to the death of

any of the endangered raptors. However, the company recently determined that such a "lethal take permit" was no longer needed given the reconfiguration of development plans under the agreement.

Reynolds, of the Natural Resources Defense Council, said he was satisfied that the condor would be protected under the new plan.

"The condor is a very high-profile species, and there's been significant public investment in its recovery," he said, "and throughout these negotiations an enormous amount of attention was paid to ensuring that this agreement would be consistent with its recovery, and we believe it does so."

Judge orders EPA to hurry on carbon monoxide

Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, May 8, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO -- The Bush administration has violated legal deadlines for updating the nation's clean-air standards on carbon monoxide, a federal judge in San Francisco has ruled.

U.S. District Judge Jeffrey White told the Environmental Protection Agency on Monday to follow a schedule that would allow a full scientific review, public comment and any proposed changes in the standard to take place by May 2011. The EPA had proposed a timetable that would extend through October 2012.

Carbon monoxide, an odorless and invisible by-product of incomplete combustion in auto exhaust, refinery fumes and other emissions of fossil fuels, is lethal at high levels and can cause health problems and birth defects at lower levels. It is one of the pollutants for which the EPA sets a nationwide standard, requiring states to devise their own plans for compliance.

The current national standard was set in 1971. Federal law requires a reassessment every five years, but the EPA last reviewed the standard in 1994 and made no changes, said Shana Lazerow, a lawyer for Communities for a Better Environment, one of the groups that sued the federal agency.

Environmental groups in the lawsuit said recent scientific studies have found that carbon monoxide is dangerous at levels that were previously considered safe. They said two reports in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*, published in 2001 and 2005, both found low birth weights among children born to women who were exposed to carbon monoxide at levels far below those allowed by the 1971 standard.

"Current health standards allow our children to be exposed to dangerous levels of carbon monoxide across the country," said Jeremy Nichols, director of Rocky Mountain Clean Air Action, another plaintiff in the case.

Lazerow said studies also show that poor and minority children are most at risk.

Environmental advocates and officials in California and other states have accused President Bush's EPA of foot-dragging in regulating pollutants, including greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming, and ignoring scientific recommendations.

The EPA says it has come up with a new approach to clean-air regulation that will streamline the process while incorporating the latest scientific information. But White, in his ruling, noted that the agency's own advisory panel of independent scientists called the new procedures "entirely unsuitable" in January, saying they failed to provide timely information about the contents of proposed regulations.

The judge said the EPA conceded it had missed the deadline for reassessing the carbon monoxide standard but argued that it should now have five years from the time the suit was filed in 2007, shortly before the agency took the first steps in the review process. White disagreed, saying the evidence showed a thorough review could be completed 17 months earlier.

There was no immediate comment from the EPA.

Air quality officials OK Carmichael crematory

By Ramon Coronado

Sacramento Bee Thurs. May 8, 2008

Despite a pending lawsuit in Sacramento Superior Court challenging the location of a crematorium surrounded by homes, restaurants and schools, air quality officials are giving the green light to a Carmichael funeral home to cremate up to four bodies a day.

"The particulate concentration from the exhaust stack is within limits," said engineer Ady Santos of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

"He will be issued a permit to operate in the near future," Santos said of Chris Meyer, an owner of Hood Funeral Home, which is using the former owner's name of Lind Brothers Mortuary, 4221 Manzanita Ave.

Pat Barnard Remus, one of the neighbors suing the mortuary, the county and the air quality board, said she was not surprised by the air quality decision.

"All the crematory owners we have spoken to told us the first test always passes, but that over time there will be particulate buildup," Barnard Remus said.

She also faulted county planners in allowing such an industrial use in a residential neighborhood.

Meyer, who describes himself as a businessman providing a community service, said he was pleased by the decision and said the court battle is an issue that shouldn't involve him.

"It is the government bodies that are in charge of regulating particulates and zoning," he said. "I understand my neighbors have strong feelings, but those feelings are not based in the law."

"This is the cleanest crematorium in Sacramento County. They held us to a more exacting standard," Meyer said.

According to testing in March by a private Bay Area environmental firm using three bodies and witnessed by Santos, the emissions measured about 10 microns, which is thinner than a strand of hair.

"That is smaller than dust and is virtually invisible," Santos said of the exhaust emitted in nine hours of testing.

The three cremations were the 56th, 57th and 58th cremations at Lind Brothers since Feb. 22, when procedures and methods were worked out, Santos said.

The written report for the testing was submitted to the board April 23, and all that is left before an operational permit is issued is the planting of trees to hide the smokestack on the mortuary's roof, Santos said. Some neighbors complain they can see the smokestack from their backyards.

Once the permit is granted, the mortuary will be allowed to cremate 4.4 bodies a day from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.

The testing of the multi-chamber incinerator that operates at or above 1,600 degrees will be the only testing required of the mortuary, unless unannounced annual inspections show there are problems, air quality officials said.

The Manzanita Avenue crematorium is one of 11 human crematoriums regulated by air quality officials in Sacramento County, including Sierra View Funeral Chapel, which is two miles from Lind Brothers at Kenneth Avenue and Fair Oaks Boulevard. It is an area that also is surrounded by homes and restaurants.

Two pet crematoriums are within a mile of Lind Brothers.

Lind Brothers was issued a temporary permit to construct a crematorium in August after county planners found that existing law did not require a full environmental impact report with public hearings.

The air quality board did send out fliers notifying the neighborhood of the proposed crematorium because Cameron Ranch Elementary and St. John the Evangelist schools are within 1,000 feet of the mortuary.

After residents expressed concerns, the air quality board decided to do a thorough evaluation of the emissions and applied state air quality standards in the testing procedures, Santos said.

"The state standard is more stringent," Santos said.

The only issue, however, was the scientific analysis of the emissions and whether they fell within state guidelines, Santos said.

The neighbors' lawsuit alleges in part that the county planning department had an obligation under county and state law to hold public hearings before granting the permit.

"Without public hearings, noise and visual impacts, smells and emotional concerns are not figured into the equation," Barnard Remus said.

Barnard Remus and her neighbors claim in their suit that a crematorium is a physical and emotional nuisance. Issues in the suit are scheduled to be heard at a hearing in June to see if the suit is legally sufficient to go to trial.

Martinez refinery to pay \$1.5M for pollution violations

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Thursday, May 8, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO - Air quality regulators say the Tesoro Refining and Marketing Co. has agreed to pay a \$1.5 million civil penalty to settle air quality violations.

The settlement with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District covers violations, which occurred over a three-year period at its Golden Eagle Refinery in Martinez. The company was accused of failing to inspect tanks and equipment, air pollution releases that resulted from equipment malfunctions, and administrative and reporting violations.

Tesoro also has agreed to undertake a number of capital improvement projects and equipment upgrades.

Air quality officials say several thousand tons of pollutants will be reduced through these settlement agreements.

El Segundo air passes most tests

By Andrea Woodhouse, Staff Writer

LA Daily News, Thursday, May 8, 2008

Despite living between a major airport and an oil refinery, El Segundo residents are apparently breathing pretty decent air, at least according to the results of a city-commissioned air quality study.

City staffers on Tuesday presented findings in a \$10,000 analysis conducted in recent months that show concentrations of various common pollutants in town mostly fall below thresholds set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's good news, and I'd consider it pretty routine," said Stephanie Katsouleas, the city's public works director.

Forensic Analytical Consulting Services collected air samples during two 24-hour periods from three indoor City Hall locations, one spot in the police station, and three outdoor locations scattered around the town's west side.

The Rancho Dominguez-based company in September analyzed levels of 67 volatile organic compounds as well as particulate matter larger than 2.5 micrometers but smaller than 10 micrometers.

In March, the consultant tested again for particulate matter, that time for particles smaller than 2.5 micrometers. Particles collected from outdoor sites at that time were the only pollutants in El Segundo air to register at levels higher than standards set by the EPA, Forensic Analytical found.

But those findings - all higher than the EPA threshold of 35 micrograms per cubic meter - are consistent with what other Los Angeles County cities found in the same time period, according to city officials.

Former City Councilman Jim Boulgarides requested the air-quality study in August with hopes of settling long fears in town that El Segundo had poor air quality.

"Basically, our air is about the same as everybody else's," he said Wednesday. "The air in the L.A. basin is not as pristine as we'd like it to be, but we deal with it."

Boulgarides, whose one-term council stint ended last month, hoped the study's findings would put an end to community concerns about air quality, despite the city's industrial neighbors.

"You hear these horror stories because we're by an airport, refinery and Hyperion (wastewater treatment plant), but we're breathing what everyone else is," he said.

AIR QUALITY FINDINGS

Here's a look at what El Segundo's recent air-quality study discovered:

Volatile Organic Compounds:

Concentrations were generally below U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards in El Segundo's indoor and outdoor collection sites, results showed. VOCs are emitted as gases from solids and liquids like paints, cleaning supplies and pesticides.

Particulate matter with diameters larger than 2.5 micrometers but smaller than 10 micrometers (PM 10):

Samples of PM 10 gathered from all collection sites were well below EPA's 24-hour standards of 150 micrograms per cubic meter. Airborne particulate matter consists of many different substances suspended in air in the form of particles that vary in size.

Particulate matter with diameters smaller than 2.5 micrometers (PM 2.5):

EPA's standards limit PM 2.5 at 35 micrograms per cubic meter over a 24-hour period, but El Segundo's three outdoor test sites each registered higher - two sites twice as high.

Oil companies agree to settle MTBE contamination lawsuits

By Adam Schreck, AP Business Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Thursday, May 8, 2008

NEW YORK At least two major oil companies said late Wednesday they have agreed to settle lawsuits over the use of the gasoline additive MTBE, a potential carcinogen that has been found in drinking water.

Representatives of Valero Energy Corp. and Chevron Corp. said they had joined the settlement, although a number of other oil companies are also named in a memo supporting the deal that was obtained by The Associated Press.

The companies confirmed their involvement after The Wall Street Journal reported on its Web site that several oil companies agreed to pay \$423 million plus cleanup costs to settle groundwater contamination litigation involving 153 public water providers in 17 states. That would make it the largest settlement to date involving the additive.

"We've worked hard to reach a responsible resolution to the cases being settled and are pleased to be moving forward," Chevron spokeswoman Stephanie Price said.

Valero's agreement "resolves many of the lawsuits" filed against the oil refiner over its prior use of the gasoline additive, company spokesman Bill Day said in a brief statement to the AP.

He said the "settlement agreement is being reviewed by the court and is not yet final." He did not provide details of the agreement and declined to name other companies involved in the deal.

According to the Journal, the other defendants settling include BP PLC's BP America Inc., ConocoPhillips, Royal Dutch Shell PLC's Shell Oil Co., Marathon Oil Corp., Petroleos de Venezuela SA's Citgo Petroleum Corp. and Sunoco Inc.

Those companies were among those listed in the court document obtained by the AP. Messages left with the companies seeking comment were not immediately returned.

At least six companies declined to settle, the largest being ExxonMobil Corp., the Journal said.

Each company's contribution to the settlement was undisclosed, as was the potential cleanup cost. Past estimates have put the tab to remediate all tainted sites as high as \$30 billion, the Journal reported.

The newspaper's report quoted Scott Summy, an attorney for the plaintiffs, who said covering the cleanup costs for 30 years was a "creative approach" to resolving a matter that involves so many parties. That provision of the settlement removes the threat of litigation over future contaminated wells, he told the Journal.

The AP could not immediately reach the plaintiff's attorneys for comment.

MTBE, or methyl tertiary butyl ether, is a chemical added to gasoline to boost its octane level and cut air pollution. It was first added to gasoline in 1979, but its use declined after it was banned in a number of states.

MTBE has been found in ground water, including in some communities' drinking water supplies. The Environmental Protection Agency said the chemical is a potential human carcinogen at high doses, although it is unclear at what level it poses a health risk.

Air pollution in Wyo. community rivals that of big cities

By Bob Moen, Associated Press Writer

In the Washington Post, Modesto Bee, SF Chronicle and Contra Costa Times, Thursday, May 8, 2008

BOULDER, Wyo.-There isn't anything metropolitan about this tiny unincorporated town in southwest Wyoming, where a few single-family homes and a volunteer fire station stand against a skyline of snowcapped mountains.

But Boulder, with a population of just 75 people, has one thing in common with major metropolitan areas: air pollution thick enough to pose health risks.

"Used to be you could see horizon to horizon, crystal clear. Now you got this," said Craig Jensen as he gestured to a pale blue sky that he says is not as deeply colored as it used to be. "Makes you wonder what it's going to do to the grass, the trees and the birds."

The pollution, largely from the region's booming natural gas industry, came in the form of ground-level ozone, which has exceeded healthy levels 11 times since January and caused Wyoming to issue its first ozone alerts. Now the ozone threatens to cost the industry and taxpayers millions of dollars to stay within federal clean-air laws.

Sublette County is home to one of the largest natural gas reserves in North America, and it is dotted with hundreds of gas wells to supply the nation's growing demand for cleaner-burning fuel. Thousands more wells are planned for the future.

But pollution from vehicles and equipment in the gas fields-along with dust, weather and geography-have raised ozone to a level that rivals those of big cities in the summertime.

Wyoming's ozone problem comes at a time when the federal government has strengthened its ozone restrictions to better protect public health. In March, the Environmental Protection Agency set a new ozone standard of 75 parts per billion, down from 80 parts per billion.

The peak eight-hour average for ozone near Boulder reached 122 parts per billion on Feb. 21 and 102 parts per billion on March 11. By comparison, the Los Angeles area hit a peak average of 152 parts per billion last summer, and Denver recorded a peak of 98 parts per billion last July.

Failure to meet federal air-quality standards could result in mandatory pollution-cutting measures ranging from restricting wood-burning stoves in homes to placing limits on the booming oil and gas industry.

Jeremy Nichols, director of the Denver-based Rocky Mountain Clean Air Action, said all economic development in the region-not just the energy industry-could be affected.

"If we don't get ahead of the curve, we could be suffering serious consequences in the future," Nichols said.

Conservation groups have seized on the ozone alerts in their efforts to curb drilling for natural gas in the area.

"Obviously, the pace and level of development is just too much," said Linda Baker of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition.

The energy industry says it has been working with regulators to ease the problem and insists drilling should not be curtailed.

Ozone is a component of smog, a yellowish haze of pollutants that lingers near ground level and can raise the risk of asthma and heart attacks, especially among the elderly and children with respiratory illnesses.

Ozone needs sunlight to form, and state environmental officials believe the ozone levels in Wyoming this past winter and spring were exacerbated by heavy snowcover, which intensified the sunlight by reflecting it off the snow. In 2007, when the area had little snowcover, there were no elevated ozone readings.

Also contributing to the situation are rare temperature inversions, when cold air is trapped close to the ground, and the surrounding mountains, which enclose the pollution in the Green River valley.

Gas developers in the area are sharing information on how best to reduce ozone, according to Randy Teeuwan, a spokesman for Encana Corp., one of the largest gas suppliers. Encana already is using natural gas-powered drilling rigs that emit less pollution, and it is consolidating field operations to reduce emissions.

State officials are working with the industry to reduce emissions without waiting for new federal regulations to take effect.

"We understand that the people who are living up there cannot wait two or three years for us to develop regulatory tools," said David Finley with the state Department of Environmental Quality.

For instance, the state is considering a plan that, when conditions appear ripe for ozone formation, would ask companies to curtail truck traffic or use more drilling rigs powered by cleaner-burning natural gas.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Land Management is reviewing a proposal by several companies to allow nearly 4,400 more wells in the county.

Jim Sewell, environmental project manager with Shell Exploration and Production, said the expansion project would have lower emissions than existing facilities. The companies also are offering \$36 million to pay for environmental monitoring and other measures that lessen the effects of drilling on air quality, wildlife and plants.

Jensen, whose family has lived in this part of Wyoming for four generations, said he has seen both sides of gas development.

On one hand, he has received royalties from wells on his land, enabling him to buy a boat, snowmobiles and other "toys."

But the pollution leaves Jensen longing for the days of clear skies, little traffic and fewer people.

"I'd give it up right now if all them rigs moved," he said.

Transit systems travel 'green' track

By Charisse Jones

USA TODAY, Thursday, May 8, 2008

NEW YORK - This year, the surging current of the East River will help provide power to a nearby subway station. The lights that lace the ornate interior of Manhattan's Grand Central Station have largely been replaced by bulbs that burn brightly but save energy. There are plans to make the rooftop of a Queens bus depot bloom like a garden.

"Carbon footprint" has become part of the national lexicon, and mass transit systems throughout the country are taking steps to ease their impact on the environment even as they strive to provide more service to a growing number of riders.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the nation's largest public transit agency, is undertaking what some experts call the most comprehensive effort, but examples abound of bus and commuter rail systems trying to preserve the environment.

"The transit industry is no different from the rest of the country," says William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association, which lobbies to improve public transit. "We're all looking for ways we can do a better job ... but at the same time put out less pollution and fewer carbon emissions."

According to the APTA, members of households closest to public transportation drive an average 4,400 fewer miles a year than those who aren't near bus or rail lines. That reduces the nation's carbon emissions by 37 million metric tons a year, equal to the electric power used by 4.9 million households.

Beyond the ecological benefits, going green could give cities an edge in attracting new businesses and residents.

"Making this transition from an economy with a heavy dependence on fossil fuels to a low carbon economy is an opportunity for New York," says Ernest Tollerson of the MTA, which supports residential development near subway and commuter rail lines. "We can create a new competitive advantage. It becomes a magnet."

Elsewhere, transit agencies are redesigning facilities to meet environmentally friendly standards, purchasing hybrid buses that are more energy-efficient and encouraging employees to change habits that add to pollution and waste:

- In Oregon, the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District (TriMet), which includes Portland, is adjusting the automatic transmissions of vehicles to conserve fuel and encouraging bus drivers to not keep the heat or air conditioning on while idling.

When all its "greening" strategies are practiced, the agency sees up to a 15% higher fuel efficiency, TriMet general manager Fred Hansen says. "We're the largest purchaser of diesel fuel in Oregon," he says - 6.5 million gallons a year. "Anything we can do to cut that down is very, very important."

- Last month in St. Cloud, Minn., the vegetable oil that cooks french fries and chicken fingers at St. Cloud State University began fueling a public bus that ferries students between their apartments and the campus.

The oil, which otherwise would have been discarded, is mixed with diesel to power the bus dubbed "The Husky Fried Ride," says Dave Tripp, executive director of the St. Cloud Metropolitan Transit Commission.

"We really want to make additional conversions to our other buses," says Tripp, noting that the local bus system provides more than 2 million passenger trips a year. "This is just a smart plan to be able to use waste product for fuel."

- The transit agency in the area encompassing Minneapolis and St. Paul plans to buy 170 hybrid electric buses by 2012. It has put a carbon counter on its website showing how much emissions are reduced when commuters ride local buses. It will kick off a program this month that offers personalized biking plans to entice motorists to get out of their cars.

- Last month, the city of North Miami, Fla., began offering a steep discount to employees who buy a monthly bus pass, becoming the first city to take advantage of a countywide transit discount program, says Pam Solomon, a North Miami spokeswoman.

The city's roughly 550 workers can pay \$12.50 for a bus pass valued at \$75. "With gas prices increasing like they are, more people are interested," Solomon says.

In New York, a commission was asked in September to develop an environmental plan for the MTA, a network of commuter rail lines, buses and subways that carries more than 8.5 million riders a day.

"Some of the things we're doing are very simple -- like changing all of our light bulbs to the most energy-efficient," commission chairman Jonathan Rose says. "Some will be transformational, like completely rethinking how we power our trains and moving to digitally controlled signals. ... It's a very comprehensive look at the greening of the system."

Largely because of New York's vast transit network, the energy consumption of New Yorkers is just one-fourth of the national average, Rose says. Still, the commission recommends that the MTA cut energy use by at least 15% by 2015.

This year, the authority plans to use turbines in the East River to generate power to a subway station on Roosevelt Island.

The MTA, whose 68,000 employees used roughly 1.6 million gallons of bottled water in 2006, will stop offering it, switching to tap water instead.

"It's important to point out the little things that people can do," the APTA's Millar says. "They seem small, but they make a big difference."

Clean air could kill the Amazon, researchers say

By Michael Kahn, Reuters

In the Washington Post and San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, May 8, 2008

LONDON - Cleaner air due to reduced coal burning could help destroy the Amazon this century, according to a finding published on Wednesday that highlights the complex challenges of global climate change.

The study in the journal *Nature* identified a link between reduced sulphur dioxide emissions from coal burning and increased sea surface temperatures in the tropical North Atlantic that boosts the drought risk in the Amazon rainforest.

With the rainforest already threatened by development, higher global temperatures could tip the balance, they said.

'Generally pollution is a bad thing but in this case improving the air may have ironically led to a drying of the Amazon,' said Peter Cox, a researcher at the University of Exeter in Britain, who led the study.

'It shows you have to deal with greenhouse gases.'

The Amazon -- the world's largest tropical rainforest -- plays a critical role in the global climate system because it contains about one tenth of the total carbon stored in land ecosystems.

The researchers used a climate-carbon model to simulate the impacts of future climate change on the Amazon and compared it to data from a 2005 drought that devastated a large chunk of the rainforest.

They estimated that by 2025 a drought on the same scale could happen every other year and by 2060 such a crisis could hit nine out of every ten years - enough to turn the rainforest into savannah grassland, Cox said.

In the pre-industrial age, the Amazon was less vulnerable. But higher temperatures and destruction of the forest make droughts far more likely than in the past, the researchers said.

'The Amazon is said to be the lungs of the planet,' Cox said in a telephone interview. 'You don't want to damage it.'

The researchers believe that efforts to clean up sulphate aerosol particles from coal burning at power stations in the 1970s and 1980s helps to explain the threat.

The pollution predominately in the northern hemisphere had limited warming in the tropical north Atlantic, keeping the Amazon wetter than it normally would have been.

But with that protection evaporating due to cleaner air and as greenhouse gases fuel global warming, the rainforest now faces a deadly drought risk, the researchers said.

'Reduced sulphur emissions in North America and Europe will see tropical rain bands move northwards as the north Atlantic warms, resulting in a sharp increase in the risk of Amazonian drought,' Chris Huntingford, a researcher at Britain's Centre for Hydrology and Ecology said.

The findings highlight the need to deal not only with greenhouse gas emissions but also with the direct destruction of the rainforests as well, the researchers said.

They said 20 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions stem from burning of trees to build new homes and roads as development pushes farther into the delicate region, they added.

'You can argue there is a greater urgency to deal with the deforestation issue in our model,' he said.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Thursday, May 8, 2008:](#)

Our View: Bees a reason for cleaner air

New research provides understanding of how smog is linked to crop losses in the Valley.

Scientists are suggesting that pollution might limit the effectiveness of bees as pollinators -- not that we need another reason to clean up our dirty air.

If that's true, it might help explain why bee populations are falling in the Valley and elsewhere. It could also provide new understanding of how air pollution is linked to crop losses.

Writing in the March issue of the journal Atmospheric Environment, a team of University of Virginia researchers suggests that air pollution reduces the distance the scent-bearing hydrocarbon molecules released by flowers are able to travel. They found that air pollution can eliminate as much as 90 percent of flowers' aroma.

That limits their exposure to bees, which are keenly sensitive to the aromas. And that makes it harder for the bees to feed, which might be a reason bee populations are declining. As bee populations drop, it becomes harder and harder to propagate fruits and vegetables that depend on the bees for pollination.

With an enormous almond crop developing, this might not appear to be much of an issue. But farmers and agricultural experts are taking it seriously; they see enormous implications for our Valley, with its vast acreage of flowering orchards and other bee-dependent crops.

There is no evidence yet that the pollution is to blame in any degree for the phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder, or CCD, which causes bees to abandon otherwise healthy hives. Scientists have identified many other reasons to explain declining bee populations in some areas -- from some forms of pesticides to overworked bees. But air pollution could be another.

Ozone, in particular, is suspected of stifling plant aromas. And ozone pollution increases as the weather warms, just as plants are blooming. One of the largest contributors to increased ozone is vehicle exhaust.

We have plenty of other -- and perhaps more pressing -- reasons to diminish air pollution from Valley skies. Start with 1,000 premature deaths each year, and additional health costs of \$3 billion annually borne by Valley residents. Maybe we need to add declining bee populations to this growing list of consequences of having bad air.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, May 8, 2008:](#)

Out of focus

Tim Russert's recent interview of Barack Obama on "Meet the Press" makes me sorry I skipped the Fresno mayoral-race interviews. I would have asked each candidate for mayor: What church do you attend? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior? Do you endorse everything your pastor or priest has said for 20 years? If not, do you repudiate what your pastor or priest has said?

This is a vital issue. Doesn't it override dealing with gang violence? The homeless? Gross unemployment? The failed downtown experiment? The mortgage crisis? Our frustrated and frustrating educational "test factories?" Our health care crisis? Even the quality of the air we breathe?

I tell myself: "Focus!" Tim Russert, focus! Voters, focus!

Wayland Jackson, Fresno

[Bakersfield Californian, Letters to the Editor, Thursday, May 8, 2008:](#)

Refinery overreaction

The worrying list of issues regurgitated by Bakerfieldians is amazing. The list is much longer than the use of hydrofluoric acid by Big West Refinery. The well-meaning stances from Sen. Dean Florez to citizens are unlikely to be resolved by Kern County hiring an outside consultant on our taxpayer account.

Consider, in contrast, the major damage to us all of the transportation of greenhouse gases in the air we breath every moment. How about the threat of an earthquake bursting the Isabella Dam wall? We happily dump sludge from Los Angeles and are waiting for that to pollute our underground aquifer. What about the approved routes to transport radioactive waste through the community? Which has priority?

It is time to provide good knowledge to all these long-term risks in which we find ourselves geographically. It is difficult to protect nature and humankind from all these potential disasters.

However we live above a most valuable natural resource -- oil. Extraction and refinement have gone on for hundreds of years. The present HF technology should be carefully weighed in terms of incremental improvement to satisfy our needs for safety and future mobility.

Should Bakersfield be given a break in diesel costs to drive our variety of vehicles? Maybe we should all turn to riding horses, driving carts again and have teams of Clydesdales pulling plows to provide us with food. We should rather import Citroens or Peugeots so that we can get 50 to 80 miles to the gallon from diesel and not pollute our air!

GRAHAM KAYE-EDDIE, Bakersfield

Thanks to whistle-blower

Thank you to oil industry veteran Donald Hall for blowing the whistle on Big West's misguided efforts to bring modified hydrofluoric acid to our community in his recent Community Voices article. Big West tried to bring a pure version of the chemical into Bakersfield and hit a wall.

Hall blows huge holes in Big West's arguments. What else is the oil company not telling us? Big West could bring this ridiculous debate to a quick halt by canning their hydrofluoric acid proposal and, instead, adhere to the industry standard and use sulfuric acid.

BETSY RAMSEY, Bakersfield

Choose safer alternative

I learned more in Donald Hall's recent Community Voices article than I have from Big West's glitzy television advertising campaign about the so-called Clean Fuels Project. He discredits Big West's main argument for using the potentially deadly modified hydrofluoric acid: They can eliminate the truck trips by having a sulfuric acid generating facility on site.

I can only conclude that Big West is trying to jam a square peg into a round hole because they would make more profit from modified hydrofluoric acid. Sure, sulfuric acid may shave a few pennies of profit from Big West's pocketbook, but it's better and safer alternative for our community.

DEANNA ARAUJO, Bakersfield

Refinery must be safe

I thank former refinery manager Donald Hall for his experienced input regarding the Big West expansion. The potential hazard of modified HF acid versus sulfuric acid is concerning.

The 2006 accident at the refinery is also concerning. It's Big West's responsibility to never have similar mishaps happen again.

We need this refinery in these economic times. But it must be operated with the best and safest technology to protect humans, water and the environment. Increased traffic resulting from an expansion is not the refinery's fault. It's a shame our roads are overcrowded, causing pollution and congestion. This is due to growth and poor road planning.

DONALD ZAJAC, Bakersfield

Just out for the buck

Gas prices are approaching \$4 a gallon and oil companies are making billions of dollars in profits. Big West can afford to earn just a little less by using sulfuric acid in its expansion program.

I'm sick and tired of paying my hard-earned income to record gas prices, and the last thing I want to do is compromise the safety of my family so Big West can make a few extra bucks using the potentially deadly chemical, modified hydrofluoric acid, in its expansion plan.

SAM AMES, Bakersfield