

As season changes, smoke chokes Valley sky

By Carol Reiter

Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

Wes Unruh woke up last week, convinced there was a wildfire somewhere in the foothills. He and his wife could smell smoke in the air, and they checked online to see where the fire was burning.

But there was no fire in the foothills. The smoky smell came from local fields, where brush and tree trimmings were being burned.

This time of the year, when the heat and smog of summer are gone, a lot of people believe that the air quality here is better than it is in the summer.

They're wrong.

Because the San Joaquin Valley sits in a bowl surrounded by mountains, bad air tends to get trapped in the Valley, with nowhere for it to go. A lid on a pot is what some people call it.

Add in the inversion layers of fog that keep bad air from escaping the Valley, and fall and winter turn out to be as bad, or worse, as summer in terms of air pollution.

Anthony Presto, spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said that air pollution in the Valley varies from season to season, but it doesn't go away.

"In the summer, we have the ozone pollution that comes from sunlight mixing with car emissions, making smog," Presto said.

In the winter, the pollution is caused by all kinds of burning -- from agricultural burning to fireplaces.

The season's first fireplace and wood-stove prohibitions in three northern Valley counties and ongoing prohibitions in Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley air basin portion of Kern counties were issued for today because of deteriorating air quality. The day-long mandatory curtailment will be in effect from midnight Friday through midnight Saturday. Possible bans may continue through the weekend.

The prohibition is effective in all eight San Joaquin Valley counties -- San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley air basin portion of Kern counties. It's the first ban called in the three most northern Valley counties.

The prohibition applies to burning wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs, and also to outdoor devices such as chimineas and fire pits. The wood-burning curtailment program, Check Before You Burn, runs each year from Nov. 1 through the last day of February and aims to reduce wintertime particulate pollution by restricting the use of wood-burning devices when air quality is forecast to deteriorate. Forecasts are issued on a county-by-county basis.

This year, the Valley air district said it expects more prohibitions than in previous years because the threshold for curtailments has been lowered to be more protective of public health. Residential wood burning pumps dangerous particulate matter (PM) into Valley skies. PM has been shown to cause bronchial infections, exacerbate respiratory and cardiac illness, and even cause lung cancer.

There are now just two levels of wood-burning forecast instead of the three levels in previous years: "Wood burning Prohibited" or "Please Burn Cleanly," depending on expected air quality.

Although ag burning does affect the air, the air district said new laws have severely limited just when ag burns are legal. Meanwhile, a large portion of the pollution in the winter months comes from fireplace burning.

"The particulate matter that comes from burning wood is very fine, and ends up in the lungs and bloodstreams," Presto said.

Mary-Michal Rawling, program manager for the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, said pollution affects everyone. But too many people think pollution means smog. "Too many people don't realize that winter pollution can be worse than summer," Rawling said.

When the Valley's tule fog, named because it usually originates where the ground is wet and tules grow, has moved in for a few days, and sunlight can't get through, the pollution is held at ground level, making the air dangerous for everyone.

While ag burning is slowly being phased out, people in the Valley still use fireplaces, which can be big-time polluters.

"Wood fireplaces are the worst thing that people can do to the air," Rawling said. "Plus, it's a huge trigger for asthma."

People who have no other way to heat a house other than a fireplace or the use of propane should be careful what they burn in the fireplace. Pellets burn the cleanest, and second-best is manufactured fire logs. If wood must be used, it should be seasoned, dry wood. Dry wood burns hotter and cleaner than other types of wood.

Consumers who have an alternate method of heating are urged not to use fireplaces. If they insist on using them on no-burn days, fines can be levied, according to Presto, the air district spokesman.

"If you see a neighbor using their fireplace on a no-burn day, report it and an inspector will go out," Presto said.

The first offense will cost a homeowner \$50, and subsequent fines can go up to \$1,000.

Rawling said most fireplaces are used as a luxury, not to heat homes or to keep warm.

"If you have a fireplace, switch it over to natural gas, or decorate it with candles," Rawling said. "Just don't burn in it."

Although it may seem that air pollution will never go away, Unruh said he's lived in the area for about 50 years and has seen improvement:

"I think it's a bit better."

Report burning

Complaints about nonessential fireplace burning can be reported to 1-800-281-7003. For more information on burn days, go online to www.valleyair.org.

Regional Roundup

Local residents can't burn today

By News-Sentinel Staff

Lodi News Sentinel, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

People in Lodi and San Joaquin County are prohibited from burning today, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district regulates burning during the winter to control air pollution. On days when burning is prohibited, burning any solid fuel such as wood, pellets or manufactured wood is barred.

When burning is allowed, residents are advised to use dry, seasoned wood to avoid excessive smoke.

It is always illegal to burn trash or other materials not intended for a fireplace.

For more information on wood-burning days, up-to-date advisories or other information, contact the air district at (209) 557-6400 or visit www.valleyair.org.

Bad air day forces burn ban

By The Record

Stockton Record, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

Wood burning in San Joaquin County is banned today because of deteriorating air quality, officials said Friday.

The prohibition extended to all eight counties in the San Joaquin Valley.

Residents may not burn wood, pellets or manufactured fire logs. They also may not use outdoor devices such as fire pits. The ban aims to decrease the number of harmful particles in the air.

Officials toughened the program recently in the hopes of cleaning the air and meeting federal standards for the smallest and most dangerous particles, known as PM2.5.

Under the old rule, San Joaquin County on average saw just one day each winter when burning was banned. The new rule could result in bans averaging nine days each winter.

Burning restricted throughout Sacramento County today

By Niesha Lofing

Sacramento Bee, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

Today marks the first day residential burning is off limits to many Sacramento County residents.

A Stage 1, or "no burn unless exempt," status has been declared for the county, limiting residential burning to homes with EPA-certified fireplace inserts or stoves or pellet stoves, according to the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District's Web site.

First-time violators will be fined \$50 or be required to attend compliance school. Fines for subsequent violations are higher.

The air district restricts or prohibits wood burning in the county when particulate matter pollution is forecast to be unhealthy. The "Check Before You Burn" program covers unincorporated Sacramento County and the cities of Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Folsom, Galt, Isleton, Rancho Cordova and Sacramento.

There are four stages in the program: all burning prohibited, no burn unless exempt, burning discouraged and burn cleanly.

Residents of Yolo and Solano counties also are being asked to not use wood burning stoves or fireplaces today. The Yolo-Solano Air Quality Management District runs the voluntary "Don't Light Tonight" program for the two counties. For more information, go to <http://www.ysaqmd.org/burn-DLT.php>.

For more information about the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District's program or burn status, go to www.sparetheair.com.

Environmental conference will target regional governors from around the world The event, organized by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, aims to promote cooperation on technology and reduction of emissions in major industries.

By Margot Roosevelt

L.A. Times, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

The eyes of the world may be on President-elect Barack Obama, but when it comes to the issue of climate change, Arnold Schwarzenegger is muscling his way into the international spotlight.

On Tuesday, the California governor will convene a two-day Global Climate Summit in Beverly Hills. More than 600 environmental officials and activists from Borneo to Bulgaria, along with five U.S. governors and regional politicians from foreign nations, are expected to attend.

Grandiose gabfest? So whisper the Sacramento cynics, but Schwarzenegger calls it a "historic summit" that will create "an alliance of states, provinces and regional governments" to influence upcoming negotiations on a new global climate treaty.

He plans to join Illinois and Wisconsin in signing agreements with two Indonesian and four Brazilian states to work on tropical forest preservation.

Schwarzenegger also will issue a declaration endorsed by 12 U.S. governors, along with regional representatives from Brazil, Canada, India, Indonesia and Mexico, to share technology and cooperate on reducing global-warming emissions from high-polluting industries.

California, being merely a state (albeit the eighth largest economy in the world), has no standing in treaty negotiations, which are conducted between nations. That would be the purview of an Obama administration.

Even Mary Nichols, Schwarzenegger's top greenhouse-gas regulator, acknowledges that she wondered, at first: "Why are we doing this now, with a new administration in Washington? I was concerned it would look like grandstanding."

But on reflection, she concluded, "The governor is established as a leader on climate issues. It is something he cares about passionately." Moreover, she added in an aside, "it is a lot more fun than working on the budget."

The summit agenda includes panels on greenhouse-gas measuring and reporting, and on developing methods to cut emissions in the energy, forestry, agriculture, transportation, cement, steel and aluminum sectors.

"American states have coordinated regionally, as in the Western Climate Initiative," said Eileen Tutt, deputy secretary of California's Environmental Protection Agency. "But as states, we haven't reached out to China, Brazil and India before. That's a big step."

The Western Climate Initiative, endorsed by seven U.S. states and four Canadian provinces, would slash regional global-warming emissions by 15% below 2005 levels in the next 12 years.

Fast-developing nations such as China, which has surpassed the United States as the globe's biggest emitter of planet-heating greenhouse gases, have refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, the treaty to limit global-warming pollution, claiming it would limit their industrialization.

The Bush administration has refused to ratify a climate treaty until China, India and other emerging nations agree to cap emissions. The U.S. is the only nonsignatory among major industrial nations: European countries, Australia and Japan have agreed to national caps, and the European Union has set up a carbon-trading system.

Tensions are far from resolved as diplomats prepare to gather in Poland next month to begin negotiating a successor to the 2005 Kyoto pact. A new treaty is expected to be signed in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Schwarzenegger's summit, Tutt said, will allow California to "set an example for Poland and Copenhagen" by showing that even if nations don't agree to overall caps on emissions, they can still reduce greenhouse gas pollution in heavily emitting industries such as automobiles and cement.

California was the first U.S. state to design a comprehensive, technical plan to slash its own emissions across every sector of its economy. Five other states are following suit.

"Provinces and states can move the ball down the field a lot faster by targeting specific sectors and sharing best practices," Tutt said. "We are more nimble. When they sit around the huge table at the U.N, we can point to progress at the local level. . . . It is hard to say to India: 'You must cap your emissions' when it has 40 million people without electricity. But India can still reduce emissions in its energy sector."

Nichols, who as chairwoman of the Air Resources Board has been struggling with how to lower cement-related emissions without driving the industry overseas, said she hopes that the summit will produce concrete results. "If California and a couple of Chinese states and one or two others could get together and decide on common rules for the cement industry, then we don't have to wait for Copenhagen to be signed," she said.

Forestry agreements could offer benefits to California if industries in the state are able to fund preservation initiatives in nations such as Brazil as a cheaper way to reduce global warming and get credit under state climate plans. But the so-called offset projects are controversial, with some environmental groups questioning the validity of foreign projects.

Anthony Brunello, deputy secretary of the California Resources Agency, noted that tropical deforestation, which accounts for a large portion of the imbalance of carbon in the atmosphere, will be a major issue in the treaty negotiations. Trees store carbon, and when they are burned, they emit large amounts of carbon dioxide.

"This will be one of the biggest topics in Poland," he said.

Executives from such companies as Pacific Gas & Electric and Wal-Mart will participate in the Beverly Hills confab, along with a broad range of politicians from Santa Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido to Irwandi Yusuf, governor of the Indonesian province of Aceh. Representatives of such wealthy nonprofits as the Nature Conservancy and the Rockefeller Bros. Fund are also on panels.

Schwarzenegger won't be sitting in on the workshops. He will make welcoming remarks, participate in signing ceremonies and take dignitaries on a tour of corporate exhibitors and of the L.A. Auto Show.

Schwarzenegger had invited all 49 other U.S. governors, but only four plan to attend part of the conference: Republican Charlie Crist of Florida and Democrats Rod Blagojevich of Illinois, Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas and Jim Doyle of Wisconsin. In addition, seven others have said they will add their names to the declaration.

Of 31 governors of Mexican states, only Sonora's accepted. Of 10 Canadian premiers invited, only one, from Manitoba, will be at the conference. None of the six Australian premiers, nor any top regional politicians from India or China accepted Schwarzenegger's invitation. But three Brazilian governors and two Indonesian governors will be present.

From a global-warming perspective, it may be fortunate that not all of the 1,400 people Schwarzenegger invited are planning to attend. The Associated Press calculated that the full list would have emitted more than 2,500 metric tons of carbon dioxide in air travel alone.

Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Lisa Page said conference organizers were trying to minimize the carbon footprint of the summit by such measures as using name badges, lunch boxes, plastic utensils and coffee cups made of recycled materials. A private firm, EcoSecurities, is donating offsets for the conference, including payments made for wind farms in China and India.

The governor, known for his fondness for high-polluting Hummers, "is taking thoughtful, thorough steps to offset the carbon footprint of every last piece of this summit," Page said.

Will all the talk promising technology transfer, research cooperation and incentives produce results or just add more hot air? There's no guarantee, but "the declaration is one step," Tutt said. "Going forward, there is an expectation we will follow up."

Sacramento trash-to-energy plan raises red flags

By Terri Hardy and Chris Bowman

Sacramento Bee, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

Presented with a controversial and highly technical proposal to vaporize garbage into energy, Sacramento City Council members earlier this month wondered what other cities had found – and whether those lessons were being considered in Sacramento.

The plan's chief proponent, Councilwoman Lauren Hammond, said Friday that while she remains committed to working on a viable waste-to-energy plan for Sacramento, she believes the vetting process by the city's upper management was "done wrong."

"If we have to start all over, we start all over," Hammond said.

On Dec. 9, the council is scheduled to vote on whether to bind itself for decades to a company that vows to zap Sacramento's trash at the same price it would cost to bury it in a landfill.

Under the proposed deal, Sacramento-based U.S. Science & Technology and a consortium of energy and engineering companies would build a "plasma arc gasification" waste-to-energy plant at no cost to the city, then sell the energy for profit.

But a Bee review of two other municipalities that have considered the same technology – and evaluated proposals from companies involved in the Sacramento deal – raises several red flags:

- The effort is faltering financially in St. Lucie County, Fla. The developer there, GeoPlasma of Atlanta, has scaled back the proposed project by at least 80 percent.
- Los Angeles County rejected GeoPlasma's pitch at the outset, saying financial details and performance data were lacking.
- Environmental experts in both locales have questioned whether toxic metals would be filtered from the waste gas produced for sale to various energy buyers.

Process touted as clean, safe

The technology is alluring, scoring high in "gee-whiz" value and as an alternative to filling landfills. Gas heated to temperatures approaching those on the sun's surface vaporizes trash, producing a synthetic fuel. Also, the residual molten glass and metals can be sold as filler for road and building construction.

U.S. Science & Technology has told Sacramento the technology has been used for decades in steel plants. The group portrays the process as safe and cleaner than many other alternatives.

"We don't just want to build a facility in Sacramento to address the problem on municipal waste," the company's president, William Ludwig, said recently. "We want to give Sacramento the opportunity to be in a leadership position solving environmental problems."

The deal before the City Council would have Sacramento relying on the company to process waste at a steady flow of 2,100 tons per week.

GeoPlasma, the energy company that would build and operate the St. Lucie County plant in Florida, told officials there that the process would empty the landfill in 20 years.

Troubles with Florida contract

That promise fell through before construction even began. Initially, the plant was to process 1,000 tons of garbage daily, gradually ramping up to 3,000 tons a day. In September, two years later, GeoPlasma announced that it would vaporize only 200 tons a day, said Chris Craft, a St. Lucie County commissioner.

The St. Lucie team also includes Alter NRG and its subsidiary, Westinghouse Plasma Corp., which would design the plant. (Alter NRG and Westinghouse are part of the Sacramento deal, and GeoPlasma once was listed as a partner here, too.)

Craft said revenue troubles, not technological ones, were rocking the deal there. For instance, he said, a plan for GeoPlasma to sell steam from the facility to a nearby Tropicana juice plant didn't materialize.

Now GeoPlasma is scrambling to find more customers for the energy and recyclable leftovers, Craft said, to keep its promise not to charge the county more than it pays for sending its trash to a landfill.

Lack of details sends up 'red flag'

In Sacramento, financial details have not been shared with the city. U.S. Science & Technology said it would not divulge that information until the council had approved a binding agreement – a demand City Councilman Steve Cohn, an attorney, recently called a "red flag."

Officials in Florida said they, too, have been in the dark, though they have not pressed for financial details.

"We don't care how they pay for it," Craft conceded. "They have to own it and finance it and operate it for 20 years. They've kept their cards close to their vest about this."

How thoroughly Sacramento city staff members have vetted U.S. Science & Technology's proposal is being probed by the City Council. After The Bee raised questions about financial ties between experts who testified before the council and companies behind the project, council members told Jim Rinehart, the city's economic development manager, to provide unbiased information.

Last year, the city issued a call for waste-to-energy proposals. A panel with members from the city and California State University, Sacramento, and University of California, Davis, evaluated the responses and focused on plasma arc gasification. Officials from the City Manager's Office, staffers from the Economic Development Department and City Council members viewed a small-scale plant in Japan, although that facility does not vaporize only garbage.

City Manager Ray Kerridge was not available Friday for an interview regarding the city's vetting process. Nor was Rinehart, who is acting as the city's point person on the project. In the past, Rinehart has said his staff has "absolutely" done thorough due diligence.

Councilman Rob Fong said that with more information to be presented, he believes the city is on the right track.

"We're very excited about the possibility of figuring out a clean way to get out of the landfill business – but we've got to do it right," Fong said. "In a perfect world, there would have been more discussion upfront. But the good news is that's happening now."

Firm's proposal too fuzzy for L.A.

Fuzzy financing was what kept GeoPlasma from advancing its pitch in Los Angeles County, according to Coby Skye, a county engineer who has analyzed a variety of alternative technologies.

On a scale of 0 to 100 set up by those reviewing the proposals, Skye said GeoPlasma scored 0 on "economics," 25 on "operational experience," 25 on "engineering the complete system" and 50 on "supplier credibility."

"The economic data supplied to us was not well detailed or supported," Skye said. "They had limited, pilot-scale experience managing municipal solid waste using their technology."

Over four years, Los Angeles County evaluated 28 suppliers of alternative waste technologies before settling on four of them to build pilot waste-to-energy plants, each using a different technology. Officials also selected potential sites for the plants and identified prospective energy buyers – all in preparation for county supervisors' vote on the plan, anticipated early next year.

The county sent no fewer than six representatives to inspect each of the four companies' pilot projects in Japan, Israel, Poland and England. Unlike Sacramento city officials' tour of a Japanese plant earlier this year, the Los Angeles delegation was all technical experts and no politicians.

"We looked at each stage of the process for potential breakdowns, how they prevented the operation from creating a public nuisance, and what they might need to do differently if they built in Southern California," Skye said.

They also required independent verification of air pollution data based on actual, not predicted, emissions. U.S. Science & Technology officials have not made their emissions data public, and Ludwig did not provide comment on Friday.

Disagreeing on potential dangers

Environmental concerns extend beyond what comes out of the plant stack to the safety of the gas produced for sale, said Thomas Cahill, an air pollution expert and retired UC Davis atmospheric physics professor.

The combination of super-high heat, chlorine-rich paper and plastics waste and metals in an oxygen-poor environment creates a particularly toxic gas that Cahill likened to what wafted off the smoldering World Trade Center. Cahill analyzed emissions in the aftermath of 9/11 in a groundbreaking scientific report.

When that gas is sold to be burned, say at a power plant, it could emit ultrafine particles of nickel, lead and other toxic metals that can lodge deep in the lungs, enter the bloodstream and raise the risk of a heart attack, Cahill said.

"If you were near a power plant that burned this, you would be in serious trouble," he said.

U.S. Science & Technology officials, however, disputed Cahill's conclusions, saying that references to the World Trade Center are "completely inappropriate."

Plasma gasification operates at higher temperatures in a controlled environment. Synthetic gas created by the process would be cleaned, so it is equivalent to natural gas in purity, said Nick Narsavidze, a company vice president, in an e-mailed statement.

"These details will be heavily scrutinized by experts through the environmental permitting process," Narsavidze said. "We will work through the environmental processes to ensure that all aspects of the process are safe for our neighbors and the community at large."

But in a 2007 evaluation of plasma arc gasification, Florida state environmental officials also noted that the high temperatures could "increase the concentrations of volatile metals" in the resulting gas. The Florida report said the technology shows promise but falls short on data to determine its viability or safety.

"There is insufficient information available to know if this technology will be successful treating large volumes of (trash) on a continuous basis," the report concluded.

Tens of Thousands Flee As Fires Rage Near L.A. 10,000 Acres Consumed; Highways Closed in Sylmar Area

By Ashley Surdin

Washington Post, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 15 -- Erratic, ember-blowing firestorms tore through Southern California on Saturday, consuming more than 10,000 acres, or about 15 square miles, forcing the shutdown of power in several neighborhoods and sending tens of thousands of people fleeing from their homes.

The worst was the Sylmar "Sayre" wildfire, which charred more than 8,000 acres of the northern San Fernando Valley, fanned by winds of up to 75 mph that sent the flames jumping over Interstate 5 and 210 and shut down a handful of other roads.

Hundreds of houses were destroyed by the blaze, including about 500 in a mobile home park. Thousands of structures remained under threat with the fire 20 percent contained. Six firefighters and one civilian had been injured, according to media reports.

Other fires burned in Palos Verdes, Brea and Carona, spreading to Yorba Linda and later Anaheim Hills in Orange County.

Temperatures above 90 degrees, low humidity and powerful Santa Ana winds that sent embers flying through the air fanned the firestorm and sparked additional hot spots in neighborhoods and rugged hillsides. Tanker planes were grounded because of the strong winds.

Firefighters from across the state, who began battling the blaze Friday night with helicopters and bulldozers, numbered more than 1,500 by Saturday morning, said Capt. Mike Brown of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

"We plan ahead, but when you've got a fire as large as this one being fanned by the fuels that we have and the winds that we have -- makes things very difficult to combat," Brown said. "This is nonstop."

In Carona, about 40 miles southeast of Los Angeles, fires burned more than 800 acres and destroyed 12 structures, said Lynette Round of the Orange County Fire Authority, before it headed toward Yorba Linda. About 30 houses were destroyed there.

Steve Sprenger, whose home was among those destroyed, said he tried to put out the flames at the back with a fire extinguisher before grabbing photos and fleeing with his wife and two children. His mother, who saw his house burn down on television, broke the news to him by phone.

"The fire is so hot, it's so intense, with the smoke and the ashes," Sprenger said. "I did what I could."

What Southern Californians were calling the Freeway Complex blaze jumped the 91 freeway -- where some drivers moved through black smoke and others abandoned their cars -- before exploding into the Anaheim Hills on Saturday afternoon, forcing 3,100 mandatory evacuations. Massive plumes rose from

the raging flames in orange and red flickering bursts as firefighters rushed to the area, not knowing how bad the damage was.

In Sylmar, the fierce, western-moving flames produced massive white-brown clouds of smoke and licked at power lines, threatening to send rolling blackouts across the area. The flames prompted the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to shut down transmission lines.

Outages and blackouts were reported in Sherman Oaks, Northridge and Granada Hills. Traffic lights on surface streets shut off, further slowing traffic, and some people in blackout areas were reportedly trapped in elevators. Anticipating further blackouts, officials pleaded with residents to conserve energy and not use air conditioners or appliances.

About 165 homes in Sylmar were reportedly destroyed, and thousands of structures were threatened. In the Oakridge Mobile Home Park, flames melted street signs, rendering them illegible, and devastated about 500 residences. Officials declared the area a crime scene; arson investigators were on the property, they said.

"When you walk around the areas that were devastated, it looked like hell today," Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) said at a news conference Saturday. Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency in Los Angeles County.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D) also declared one in the city of Los Angeles.

A handful of evacuation centers were opened and quickly filled. Horses were moved by the truckload to stables outside the area.

One Sylmar hospital, Olive View Medical Center, transferred 18 babies and 10 adult critical-care patients, some on ventilators, out of the hospital overnight as flames surrounded the building and the hospital's backup generators gave out, a hospital spokeswoman said. The power was restored about 5 a.m. Saturday, she said.

Along the Palos Verdes Peninsula, about 25 miles south of Los Angeles, a fire burned about 10 acres before firefighters and water-dropping helicopters contained it, said Inspector Daryl Jacobs of the Los Angeles County Police Department. No one was injured, and no structures were destroyed, Jacobs said.

Saturday's blazes follow the still-burning Tea fire that started Thursday night in Montecito, an area of Santa Barbara about 90 miles northwest of Los Angeles. About 800 firefighters are battling that blaze, which forced more than 5,400 evacuations, injured 13 and was connected to one death.

Smoke from the fires was so thick that nearby firefighters and reporters wore goggles and face masks, unable at times to look in the direction of the blaze. Because of the "very unhealthy" air quality, officials asked residents in parts of the San Fernando Valley and Santa Clarita, and Ventura and Riverside counties, to stay indoors with the windows shut.

Last month, fires whipped by Santa Ana winds killed two people, destroyed thousands of homes and burned more than 27,000 acres statewide.

Even as winds calm, more Californians flee fires

By JUSTIN PRITCHARD

Washington Post, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

DIAMOND BAR, Calif. -- More residents of Southern California were urged to leave their homes Sunday despite calming winds that allowed a major aerial attack on wildfires that have destroyed hundreds of homes and blanketed the region in smoke.

Fires burned in Los Angeles County, to the east in Riverside and Orange counties, and to the northwest in Santa Barbara County. More than 800 houses, mobile homes and apartments were destroyed by fires that have burned areas more than 34 square miles since breaking out Thursday.

No deaths have been reported, but police brought in trained dogs Sunday morning to search the rubble of a mobile home park where nearly 500 homes were destroyed. They didn't find any bodies after searching about a third of the homes.

"This has been a very tough few days for the people of Southern California," Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said after touring damage.

The smell of smoke pervaded metropolitan Los Angeles. Downtown skyscrapers were silhouettes in an opaque sky, and concerns about air quality forced organizers to cancel a marathon in suburban Pasadena where 8,000 runners had planned to participate.

Fierce Santa Ana winds that fanned the fires on Saturday weakened Sunday morning, allowing firefighters to set backfires to prevent flames from advancing to hillside neighborhoods. Air tankers swooped low over suburbs, red fire retardant billowing from their bellies as they painted defensive lines between brushlands and homes. Big helicopters shuttled back and forth on water drops.

The most threatening blaze had scorched more than 16 square miles in Orange and Riverside counties after erupting Saturday and shooting through subdivisions entwined with wilderness parklands. Multimillion-dollar homes were threatened in Diamond Bar in Los Angeles County as the out-of-control fire pushed northward.

Fire officials on Sunday morning ordered 1,400 more residents to evacuate, in addition to 26,500 who had already been told to leave.

Retired aerospace engineer Joe Gomez, who has lived in his palm-tree-lined Diamond Bar neighborhood for 45 years, stayed put despite being under a mandatory evacuation.

"I'm trying to use some logic here," said Gomez, 72, trying to gauge the direction of the wind and flames. "I don't think it's going to come down this way."

In the early morning, winds pushed flames dangerously close to a church and adjacent mobile home park in the Olinda Village area north of Yorba Linda, but firefighters were able to beat it back. Only one mobile home was lost.

Little fire activity was apparent in Orange County after dark Sunday, but the official containment estimate remained at zero.

On Saturday, the fire burned 119 homes in the communities of Corona, Yorba Linda and Anaheim. In addition, 50 units of an apartment complex burned, Orange County fire spokeswoman Angela Garbiso said.

Capt. Guy Melker of the Los Angeles County Fire Department stood on a balcony of a multimillion-dollar home in Diamond Bar, looking down into a canyon with flames on the far side.

"It's an interesting chess game right now," Melker said. "Sometimes Mother Nature puts us in check, and our job is to put her in checkmate."

As Melker spoke, a small spotter plane slipped low across a ridge, followed by a big air tanker that dropped its load along a ridge.

In the Orange County city of Brea, fire destroyed the main building of a high school.

About 50 miles to the northwest, a large fire that torched a mobile home park in the Sylmar area of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley had moved into the rugged San Gabriel Mountains and was burning vigorously -- but well outside the city.

Authorities said Sunday that 484 of the Oakridge Mobile Home Park's 608 units were lost. The fire also destroyed nine single-family homes and 11 commercial buildings.

The park was home to many elderly residents, and though no fatalities were reported and no one was reported missing, investigators were searching the site using trained dogs. The search was about 30 percent complete by midday Sunday.

"To this point no human remains have been found," said Deputy Police Chief Michael Moore.

Fire officials estimated that at the peak of the Sylmar fire, 10,000 people were ordered to evacuate. However, many evacuation orders were lifted Saturday night, Fire Department spokesman Ron Haralson said. Five looting arrests were reported.

About 90 miles northwest of Sylmar, a 3-square-mile fire that began in the upscale Santa Barbara County community of Montecito on Thursday night was 75 percent contained by Sunday morning after injuring at least 25 people.

County spokesman William Boyer said 130 homes burned in the city of Santa Barbara and 80 burned in adjacent Montecito. Some of those destroyed were multimillion-dollar homes with ocean views. All evacuees but those from 260 homes were allowed to return by Sunday night.

California firefighters make gains on fires

By Justin Pritchard, Associated Press Writer

Washington Post and Contra Costa Times, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

DIAMOND BAR, Calif.—Winds were calm again Monday, allowing firefighters to make gains on two raging wildfires that destroyed hundreds of homes and forced thousands of residents to flee.

Wind gusts had peaked at more than 70 mph at the height of the fires over the weekend, but on Sunday they had weakened to about 20 mph, the National Weather Service said.

"It's wonderful news," Angela Garbiso, a spokeswoman with Orange County Fire Authority, said Monday. "When it calms down, it obviously makes it easier for us to handle this massive undertaking."

The fires that started Thursday night and burned in Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, have burned nearly 41,000 acres or 64 square miles.

In Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, the fires chewed through nearly 29,000 acres and were pushing toward Diamond Bar in Los Angeles County. A major aerial attack on Sunday raised containment to 40 percent.

Meanwhile, a 10,000-acre fire that hit hard in the Sylmar area of northern Los Angeles on Saturday had moved into the Placerita Canyon area of the rugged San Gabriel Mountains and was burning vigorously, but well away from homes. It was also 40 percent contained.

The Santa Barbara-area fire that swept through tony Montecito has burned 1,940 acres and was 95 percent surrounded Monday.

The cause of all the fires were under investigation, although officials labeled the Santa Barbara-area fire "human caused," said Doug Lannon, a spokesman with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Lannon said the fire started in a Montecito landmark known to be a popular hangout for teenagers. He said it was possible someone was smoking in the brush or started a campfire there. Investigators have set up an anonymous tip line in hopes of getting the public's help in finding out who started the fire.

Far away from the flames, the smell of smoke pervaded metropolitan Los Angeles. Downtown skyscrapers were silhouettes in an opaque sky and concerns about air quality kept many people indoors. Organizers on Sunday canceled a marathon in suburban Pasadena where 8,000 runners had planned to participate.

Officials warned of another bad air day on Monday, and classes were canceled at dozens of schools near the fire zones in Orange County.

Many evacuees began the agonizing process of making their way back to their destroyed homes.

Starting Monday morning, anxious residents of the Oakridge Mobile Home Park in Sylmar, where 484 homes were destroyed by fire early Saturday, will be allowed to return to inspect their property. Firefighters were able to save about 120 homes in the community, but many were badly damaged.

Cadaver dogs had been searching the burned units to determine whether anybody perished during the fast-moving fire, but so far no bodies have been found, police said.

Tracy Burns knew her Sylmar home was gone but still wanted to get into the gated community to see what remained.

"Even those of us who know there's nothing left, we want to go in and kick over the rubble and see if we can find something, anything," Burns said.

Tears welled in her partner Wendy Dannenberg's eyes as she echoed: "If I can find one broken piece of one dish—anything, anything at all."

Warnings issued as wildfires create filthy air

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

Smog officials warned residents Sunday to avoid unhealthy ash and smoke from Southland wildfires by staying inside.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles school officials were pondering whether to close some campuses in the San Fernando Valley because of swirling soot and the haze of smoke.

"Obviously, if you can see falling ash, the air quality is pretty poor," said Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District. "Everyone should remain indoors."

The AQMD warned that air quality will remain unhealthy in Orange and Los Angeles counties through today because of ongoing wildfires stoked by Santa Ana winds.

In areas affected by the fires, the agency urged everyone to avoid vigorous outdoor and indoor exertion.

People with respiratory or heart disease, the elderly and young children should remain indoors, Atwood said, and people in smoke-impacted areas should keep their windows and doors closed with the air conditioning on.

As fires raged north of Sylmar, ash rained across the San Fernando Valley, cloaked in an acrid gray haze.

Atwood said that it was difficult to monitor smoke pollution levels because measuring devices must be downwind. He said AQMD crews were moving mobile measuring devices Sunday to accommodate the breeze.

A shift in the winds, however, means that Southern Californians could be inhaling fine particulates from the fires after they're put out.

"If the Santa Ana winds turn around and we get a typical onshore breeze, we'll get the same smoke recirculated," Atwood said.

Concerns about air quality forced organizers to cancel a marathon in Pasadena, nixing the plans of 8,000 runners.

Meanwhile, all schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District will hold classes as normal today, but all outdoor activities will be canceled, a spokeswoman said Sunday.

Gayle Pollard-Terry said public schools near the fire zone will also be in session. Sylmar High School, the site of a relocation center for persons burned out of the Oakridge Mobile Home Park, will hold normal classes.

All physical education activities, including any outdoor interscholastic sports, are canceled across the entire LAUSD, she said.

Residents warned of poor air quality in fire zones

Sylmar, Corona, Brea and Yorba Linda are problem areas where everyone should avoid outdoor activity, the South Coast Air Quality Management District says.

By Ari B. Bloomekatz and Esmeralda Bermudez

L.A. Times, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

As wildfires flared across Southern California this weekend, health officials issued air-quality warnings and told residents to avoid areas where they could smell and see smoke.

"What we're forecasting is that the air quality will be unhealthy for everyone" in Sylmar, Corona, Brea and Yorba Linda, said Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

"When air quality is unhealthy for everyone, that means not just those who are sensitive for smoke and smog, but everyone. They need to not exercise vigorously outdoors. And if you're indoors, stay indoors," Atwood said.

Rose Barush, 79, said she was evacuated from her Granada Hills home before 6 a.m. Saturday and had been sneezing ever since.

"I'm sneezing and coughing. It makes me feel icky, like I want to escape from it," Barush said while sitting on a cot at San Fernando High School, one of the evacuation centers.

Los Angeles County public health officials warned residents to take precautions and advised that some sports organizations, notably youth leagues, take the day off.

"We are also advising schools that are in session in smoke-impacted areas to suspend outside physical activities in these areas, including physical education and after-school sports, until conditions improve," said Public Health Director Jonathan E. Fielding, quoted in a news release from the county.

Some other tips from Los Angeles County officials to help cope with bad air:

- Avoid unnecessary outdoor activity.
- Do not use fireplaces, candles and vacuums.
- When indoors, keep windows and doors closed. Air conditioners can remove particles from the air, but if residents do not have an air-conditioning unit and are getting too hot, they should consider going somewhere with air conditioning. The county warns residents not to use air conditioners that draw in air only from the outside and do not have a recirculating option.

Investigators still without answers in most of this year's Santa Cruz County fires

By John Woolfolk, Mercury News

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

The November breezes blowing over the Santa Cruz Mountains are an eerie reminder of the predawn gusts that in May whipped up the devastating Summit wildfire, scorching more than 4,200 acres and 35 homes.

The blackened ridges are once again turning green. But to survivors' frustration, investigators still can't say what started the blaze.

"There's negligence there, no doubt about it," said Mark Hamlin, whose Mount Madonna Road home narrowly escaped the flames that torched his car. "I think somebody should be held responsible."

The Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office continues to investigate the cause of the May 22 fire, which also destroyed 80 outbuildings and 159 cars in a weeklong rampage while racking up damage and suppression costs estimated at more than \$16 million.

"We've been actively working the case since it came in," said district attorney spokesman Nick Muyo. "It was so big, we want to make sure we review every piece of evidence we can before we make a decision."

Investigators have already narrowed the fire's origin to property along Mount Madonna Road where there had been brush clearing earlier in the spring. Andy Napell, who owns land in the area where the fire started, had notified air quality officials, as required, of plans to burn 20 tons of fallen pine and overgrowth from mid-March through April 6.

Napell told the Mercury News earlier this year there was no burning on the land after that, and air quality officials said there were no other burn notices on record. Napell, who said investigators had told him not to discuss the matter, did not return phone calls last week.

The investigation's stakes are high, even if authorities find no evidence the blaze was intentionally set. Each year, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection bills hundreds of people for the costs of fighting fires caused by carelessness.

Past cases have included a \$37,000 bill to a motorist whose trailer hitch dragged on the road and sparked a 40-acre fire near Red Bluff, and a \$1 million payment for a 345-acre Riverside County fire caused when a landscaper's weed trimmer blade hit a rock and sparked.

Last year, San Juan Bautista teacher Margaret Pavese was charged with misdemeanor "improper use of incinerator" related to an illegal trash burn on her property east of Morgan Hill that ignited the 47,000 acre Lick fire. Her next court date, a pretrial conference, is scheduled Dec. 18.

Deputy district attorney Cindy Hendrickson said the case has been dragging on because of delays from Pavese's insurance company over restitution coverage. State officials declined to bill her for the \$13 million fire suppression costs, but three property owners who lost their homes are seeking restitution of \$550,000 to \$750,000.

Hendrickson said Pavese is trying to arrange payment before resolving her criminal case, as that could lead to a more lenient sentence.

Most wildfires in recent years have been assigned some sort of human cause:

- Arson accounted for 6 percent of wildfires in 2007 and 12 percent the year before.
- About 1 percent to 2 percent in those years were sparked by power lines.
- About a third of last year's wildfires, and more than half the year before, were attributed to various human activities or carelessness. Significant numbers were caused by equipment use or debris burning; others by vehicles, campfires, smoking or playing with fire.

But investigators never determined a cause for more than a quarter of last year's wildfires or nearly a fifth the year before.

"You get something like a roadside fire, where you know it wasn't lightning and there were no power lines there, but you can't confirm what else it could have been," said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Paul Van Gerwen.

Lightning, which caused just 1 percent to 2 percent of the wildfires in 2006 and 2007, was a big factor this year. A June 20 thunderstorm system that roared through Northern and Central California sparked some 2,000 fires statewide.

Nine of the 10 biggest fires in the summer were caused by lightning. Those included the Whitehurst and Hummingbird fires west of Morgan Hill and Gilroy that together consumed more than 1,000 acres, and the massive Basin Complex blazes that burned more than 138,000 acres in the Big Sur area.

Two other major Santa Cruz County fires over the summer, the 520-acre Martin fire in Bonny Doon and the 630-acre Trabling fire north of Watsonville, were believed to have been caused by human activity. But it appears unlikely anyone will be held accountable. Fire officials received no solid leads after releasing a sketch of a man wanted for questioning about the June 12 Martin fire, which destroyed three homes and eight outbuildings, Van Gerwen said.

And while investigators quickly ruled out a host of false rumors to determine the June 20 Trabling fire was lighted in dry grass along Highway 1 by car exhaust, they don't expect to ever identify the motorist responsible, Van Gerwen said. In the few minutes it would have taken for smoke to appear along the roadside, that car would have been long gone.

The Indians fire, which burned more than 76,500 acres in the Los Padres National Forest west of King City after a campfire got out of control June 8, remains under investigation by federal authorities.

Although the Summit fire, too, is still under investigation, resident Hamlin said having the disaster behind him now is a relief.

"We've always been on pins and needles," he said as dry winds began picking up again this week. "It was always just a matter of time."

EPA vacates dust-control measure for power plant

By FELICIA FONSECA - Associated Press Writer
Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.—The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has vacated a regulation requiring that a coal-fired power plant in northwestern New Mexico adhere to dust control measures, saying it could have done a better job explaining why the measures were needed.

It's the same argument that Arizona Public Service Co., which owns three units on the Four Corners Power Plant, had made with the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver last year.

Steve Frey, an environmental engineer with the EPA's Pacific Southwest Region in San Francisco said the agency asked the court to remand the issue to the EPA so that it could take another look at the regulation.

"We looked at it, and we didn't believe our dust measure was adequately justified in the documentation for the regulation," he said. "We think its appropriate, of course. Most other plants under state regulation have this control."

The Rio Grande chapter of the Sierra Club in New Mexico had sued the EPA in 2006 over emission controls at the plant, but the group settled its claim after the agency agreed to finalize a pollution control plan.

The EPA's plan for the power plant located on the Navajo Nation was finalized in May 2007 and included stricter limits on sulfur dioxide and set federal limits on nitrogen oxides, total particulate matter and opacity.

The plan also required APS to put in dust control measures by Nov. 5, giving APS about 18 months to do so.

Steven Gotfried, a spokesman for APS, said the company is working on ways to eliminate ash in the air.

"We use materials that we put on the ash, we use non-potable water on the ash. We're even looking at ways to cover it," he said. "This will not change any of what we're currently doing or planning on doing."

To Daniel Patterson, Southwest director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility in Tucson, the EPA's decision published in the federal register on Thursday is just another example of changing course within the agency.

"It's a huge problem, and the EPA under the (Barack) Obama administration has got to put a stop to these political reversals coming from headquarters," he said.

Frey disputed that and said it's a matter of being fair.

"It's hard to expect a company to comply with something that's going to cost them money to put in the control equipment when we said we'd re-look at it," he said.

China's coal fires belch fumes, worsening global warming

By Tim Johnson, McClatchy Newspapers
In the Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

RUIJIGOU, China The barren hillsides give a hint of the inferno underfoot. White smoke billows from cracks in the earth, venting a sulfurous rotten smell into the air. The rocky ground is hot to the touch, and heat penetrates the soles of shoes.

Beneath some rocks, an eerie red glow betrays an unseen hell: the epicenter of a severe underground coal fire.

"Don't stay too long," warned Ma Ping, a retired coal miner. "The gases are poisonous."

Another miner tugs on the sleeve of a visitor.

"You can cook a potato here," said Zhou Ningsheng, his face still black from a just-finished shift, as he pointed to a vent in the earth. "You can see with your own eyes."

China has the worst underground coal fires of any country on Earth. The fires destroy as much as 20 million tons of coal annually, nearly the equivalent of Germany's entire annual production. The costs go beyond the waste of a valuable fuel, however.

Scientists blame uncontrolled coal fires as a significant source of greenhouse gases, which lead to global warming. Unnoticed by most people, the coal fires can burn for years -- even decades and longer -- seeping carbon dioxide, methane and other gases that warm the atmosphere.

"Coal fires are a disaster for all of humanity. And it's only due to global warming that people are finally beginning to pay attention," said Guan Haiyan, a coal fire expert at Shenhua Remote Sensing and Geo-engineering Co.

This article is part of an occasional series by McClatchy Newspapers on how human activities affect global warming. The rising demand for coal worldwide to satisfy a hunger for energy has given way to greater mining, and a proliferation of fires in coal seams and abandoned mines. China, which has tripled coal production in the past three decades, has mobilized thousands of firefighters to combat the 62 known coal fires that are scattered across its north.

Major fires have been extinguished. However, Dutch scientists scribbling back-of-the-envelope calculations say that coal fires in China may still be the cause of 2 to 3 percent of the world's annual emissions of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels. They call for greatly increasing efforts to extinguish China's coal fires -- and those in places such as India, Russia and Indonesia -- as a practical step to fighting global warming.

"It's a relatively cheap way to stop greenhouse gas emissions," said Horst Rueter, a German geophysicist who's the scientific coordinator for a Sino-German initiative to combat China's coal fires.

Rueter said he thought that China's coal fires accounted for at least half the global emissions from coal fires around the world, making them a steady source of pollutants.

Others said that such runaway fires, while significant, paled beside overall emissions from the United States, a fossil fuel glutton that may give off a quarter of the world's greenhouse gases.

Coal fires can occur naturally and are not a new phenomenon. Australia's Burning Mountain has smoldered for thousands of years. An underground coal fire in Centralia, Pa., began in 1962, eventually opening sinkholes that threatened to gobble and incinerate pets and children. Centralia became a ghost town, and experts say that the fire there may burn for a century or more.

At the Rujigou coalfield in the Ningxia Autonomous Region of western China, fires have burned since the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Legend has it that coal miners who were angry over not being paid started a coal fire more than a century ago.

"It was industrial revenge," Guan said.

Many coal fires begin spontaneously when underground seams come in contact with the air -- either through fault lines from earthquakes or mining activity -- generating a chemical reaction that can slowly heat and ignite the coal. Human activity is an intensifier of the fires, however, especially when workers abandon dust-filled mines without sealing the airshafts, allowing temperatures to build.

China's coal fires stretch across a northern belt that runs nearly 3,000 miles from east to west. A cluster of them are in Ningxia and a little to the north in Inner Mongolia at the edge of the Gobi Desert. The concentration of coal fires in the region puts it in the running for one of the world's worst ecological disasters, and only humans can extinguish the problem.

"These fires just don't go out," said Anupma Prakash, an expert on mapping coal fires at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks.

Coal fires pollute the air with putrid smoke and wreak havoc on water supplies and aboveground ecology, creating "heat islands" where little vegetation can grow, not even hardy grasses. Wildlife flees.

"There used to be rabbits and pheasants around here, but not anymore," said Liang Guobao, who oversees a generator facility at the San Kuang coal mine in the sprawling Wuda coalfields in Inner Mongolia. His generator powers fans to clear the air in underground shafts.

Liang walked with a visitor around the barren landscape, pointing out places where the ground had collapsed after subterranean coal fires ate away seams and left empty caverns.

"The mine started here in 1958, and almost immediately the fires began," Liang said.

Coal fuels China's roaring economy, powering its factories but also taking a human, social and environmental toll. China uses coal for 70 percent of its primary energy needs, far higher than the world average of 40 percent. China's coal production topped 2.3 billion tons last year, equaling the output of the United States, Russia, Australia and India combined, said Yang Fuqiang of the Beijing office of The Energy Foundation, a San Francisco group that promotes energy efficiency.

Even as it provides power, coal exploitation leaves a trail of deaths.

Last year, 3,786 Chinese miners died in accidents, a rate 70 times higher than for miners in the United States.

Coal burning is a principal cause of air pollution in China, where 400,000 people die each year from illnesses related to that pollution, the World Bank estimates, mainly heart and lung diseases.

For those who grew up in the region, the scarring of the hilly environment from unseen coal fires is part of the landscape. Ma recalled walking in the hills as a youth and discovering long, deep fissures in the earth.

"We wouldn't know how deep they were. If we dropped a stone in, we could hear it bounce off the walls ... but we couldn't hear it hit bottom," Ma said.

As much as 40 percent of China's coal comes from small local mines rather than big state-owned enterprises. Small operators follow a pattern when their mines catch fire.

"When they have a fire, they just leave and go to another place," said Li Jing, the director of the Institute of Resource Technology at Beijing Normal University.

Over the past decade, China has put far greater emphasis on attacking coal fires. The work is labor intensive, costly and dangerous in its initial stages. The blazes can reach underground temperatures of 1,300 to 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit, imperiling firefighters.

"First, they shape the terrain and cool down the surface so the heavy machinery can work," Rueter said. Teams drill holes down through the burning coal in 50 to 60 spots and inject water for several months "to cool down the entire rock volume."

Later, they may make up a slurry of sand, water, cement and some chemicals, and pour it into the holes. Once the fire is out, the entire rock area must fall below 158 degrees Fahrenheit to ensure that the coal doesn't reignite. A layer of clay is put on top and trees planted to gauge whether the fire has begun anew.

Prakash, the coal fire expert in Alaska, said she thought that worldwide efforts to combat coal fires had fallen short.

"The coal exploration is more intense than the coal firefighting efforts," she said. "In the areas I have seen - China, India, Indonesia, South Africa -- they haven't gotten any better."

China is sensitive to charges that it may not be doing enough to put out the fires.

Fourteen months ago, it announced with fanfare that it finally had put out the Rujigou coal fires that had burned for decades. A story from Xinhua, the official news agency, said the state had spent \$53 million over a decade to douse the fires.

A visit to the site, however, showed that the fires weren't completely extinguished.

"The leaders said they'd put out all the fires," said one miner, declining to give his name for fear that he'd be fired for exposing a falsehood.

"There are many reasons" that the work never was completed, he said. "One reason is that the investment to put out the fires was not enough. And the leaders changed too frequently."

Natural gas rush stirs environmental concerns

By Mary Esch, Associated Press Writer

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

ALBANY, N.Y.—Advanced drilling techniques that blast millions of gallons of water into 400-million-year-old shale formations a mile underground are opening up unconventional gas fields touted as a key to the nation's energy future.

These deposits, where natural gas is so tightly locked in deep rocks that it's costly and complicated to extract, include the Barnett shale in Texas, the Fayetteville of Arkansas, and the Haynesville of Louisiana. But the mother lode is the Marcellus shale underlying the Appalachians.

Penn State geoscientist Terry Engelder believes it could supply the natural gas needs of the United States for 14 years.

But as word spread over the past year that a 54,000-square-mile shale field from southern New York to West Virginia promised to yield a trillion dollars worth of gas, environmental alarms were sounded.

Would gas wells damage water wells? Would chemicals poison groundwater? Would fabled trout streams be sucked dry? Would the pristine upstate reservoirs that supply drinking water to New York City be befouled?

"This gas well drilling could transform the heavily forested upper Delaware watershed from a wild and scenic natural habitat into an ugly industrial landscape that is forever changed," said Tracy Carluccio of Delaware Riverkeeper. She'd like a moratorium on drilling to allow an inventory of natural areas to be done first.

So loud were the protests in New York that Gov. David Paterson directed the Department of Environmental Conservation to update its oil and gas drilling regulations to reflect the advanced drilling technology, which uses millions of gallons of water and poses waste-disposal challenges.

Now, while new drilling rigs sprout in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, development of the Marcellus in New York is on hold until next year, while the DEC holds hearings and drafts regulations.

Gas developers say environmental alarms are exaggerated and New York could miss out on much-needed capital investment and jobs if it takes a heavy-handed regulatory approach.

"These are surgical operations utilizing the most advanced drilling technology known to man," Tom Price Jr., senior vice president of Chesapeake Energy, told state lawmakers in Albany at a recent hearing.

The heaviest Marcellus Shale drilling activity is believed to be in Pennsylvania, where regulators say they need to hire dozens more inspectors to monitor the rapidly proliferating drilling sites and add capacity to treat waste water from the wells.

Concerns over impact on water wells and communities has prompted a state Senate panel to schedule a hearing for Tuesday.

Pete Grannis, New York's environmental commissioner, said there are 13,000 active gas wells in upstate New York and there has never been a documented case of groundwater contamination resulting from gas drilling.

The technology that has raised concern involves horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking. Thousands of wells have been drilled and fracked in New York in the past 50 years, Grannis said. But refinement of the technology makes it feasible to extract gas from deeper, denser shales.

The latest technology, known as "slick water fracturing," uses far more water than earlier methods—1 million to 5 million gallons for each fracking operation, Grannis said. That fact, and the proximity of the Marcellus to New York City's watershed, prompted the regulatory review.

Deborah Goldberg is an attorney for the environmental law firm Earthjustice. She said the water used to frack wells is mixed with chemicals that pose human health hazards, but federal laws don't require disclosure of them.

However, New York and Pennsylvania regulators promise full disclosure of all chemicals, which industry insiders say are not hazardous. John Pinkerton, chairman and CEO of Range Resources, said used fracking fluid is no more toxic than what goes down the drain at a hair salon.

Roger Willis, who owns a hydraulic fracturing company in Meadville, Pa., said thousands of frack jobs have been done in rock formations above and below the Marcellus shale in New York state with no damage to aquifers.

Willis said frack fluids are isolated from groundwater by steel and concrete well casings. The well bore goes thousands of feet deeper than potable water supplies, through multiple layers of rock, until it reaches the gas-rich shale. Then it turns sideways and continues horizontally for several thousand feet.

The fracking fluid is blasted into the shale, opening cracks that let trapped gas escape. The fractures are held open with sand mixed with the fluid.

Flowback pipes collect the gas and used fracking fluid, which now has a high concentration of salt from the ancient sea where the shale sediments formed.

The well casings that are meant to protect groundwater have been known to fail.

"There are going to be some problems, although they're not commonplace," said Bryan Swistock, a water resources expert from Penn State. "Laws on the books are adequate to take care of that."

The biggest problem is that there aren't enough state inspectors to make sure drillers follow regulations, Swistock said. "There has been discussion of raising permit fees to hire more inspectors," he said.

Disposal of salty fracking water is problematic because of limited capacity in existing treatment plants, which can't remove salt but can only dilute it to an acceptable level for discharge into rivers.

Alternatives include new recycling technologies and injection well disposal.

More than 5 billion gallons a year of frack water is shot into the earth for permanent disposal in Texas, said Gene Brock, president of STW Resources of Midland, Texas. "That's water that could be reclaimed and utilized," Brock said.

STW provides portable desalinization plants for drilling sites.

While New York and Pennsylvania require that waste water be stored in a holding pond with an impervious liner until it's disposed of, critics fear such ponds could leak, or overflow in a rainstorm.

Earthjustice wants regulators to require storage of all wastes in steel tanks.

The Delaware and Susquehanna river commissions regulate water use in much of the Marcellus region of New York and Pennsylvania.

Susan Obleski, spokeswoman for the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, said the agency expects the gas industry could require up to 28 million gallons of water a day from the Susquehanna watershed when it ramps up.

"To put it in perspective, golf courses take about 50 million gallons a day, and nuclear power plants use 150 million gallons," Obleski said.

The concern isn't how much water is used, but where and when it's taken. Withdrawals during dry seasons or from small streams in remote areas would have a greater environmental impact than in other cases, Obleski said.

Tom Rathbun, spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, said the agency favors recycling and reuse of wastewater and encourages withdrawals from streams during high-flow periods such as early spring.

"One of the most expensive items in the drilling process is water, so the less we can use, the better," said Scott Rotruck, a Chesapeake executive. "We're finding ways to use less water, transport less water, and find ways to reuse it."

Besides water concerns, the Natural Resources Defense Council is worried about air emissions from the hundreds of tanker trucks that will haul water to and from each well, and the clearing of large land areas for each site, said NRDC attorney Kate Sinding.

"There are reports of well and surface water contamination, human and animal health impacts, and air quality impacts" at drilling sites around the country, Sinding said. "No regulatory agency has done the work to compile all of those, so you just have a lot of individual reports collected over time. To us, all of those reports substantiate the potential risks."

On the Net:

<http://www.dec.ny.gov>

<http://www.depweb.state.pa.us>

USD, UCLA look for some breathing room for game

By Mark Zeigler, Staff Writer

San Diego Union-Tribune, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

USD women's soccer coach Ada Greenwood didn't wait for NCAA tournament representatives to officially postpone yesterday afternoon's second-round game against No. 1 seed UCLA in Los Angeles due to poor air quality from wildfires burning across Southern California.

He figured it out the night before, when he stepped outside the team's hotel.

"The ash was like snow," Greenwood said. "Some of the kids started having chest problems. They kept saying we were going to play at 1 o'clock (Sunday), and it was so obvious we weren't going to play. It was beyond obvious. I took the chance and called their bluff. We just left, mate, and drove home."

It wasn't until yesterday morning that the NCAA announced the postponement. The current plan is to try again today at 6 p.m. at UCLA's Drake Stadium – maybe.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District listed pollution levels in the L.A. area as "unhealthy" with an AQI (air quality index) over 150. Today's forecast still calls for an AQI in the low 100s, which is considered "unhealthy for sensitive groups."

USD officials offered to move the game to Torero Stadium, where air quality is at healthy levels, but UCLA refused.

"Why would they (play in San Diego)?" Greenwood said. "That's not a good scenario when you're a No. 1 seed. They earned home-field advantage. It's obvious they're trying to do everything they can to play the game there."

"I don't care about playing at our place. That's not the issue. It's about the welfare of the student-athlete. . . . We don't want to play if the air quality is still bad."

The Toreros (15-4-2) beat Long Beach State 1-0 in Friday night's first round and returned to their hotel in Woodland Hills, northwest of UCLA. But the smoke from the fires was so bad Saturday morning that they moved to a hotel in Culver City.

The smoke and ash began to accumulate there, too, and by Saturday night at 11 Greenwood had them back on the bus, this time for home.

"Hopefully the air quality clears up (today) and we can play," Greenwood said. "I will get upset if we drive up there and they tell us we're not playing. If that happens, someone needs to step in and say (to UCLA): 'Drive down to San Diego or Irvine and just play.' "

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008:](#)

Cleaner air will save us money

Costs of mitigation may be covered by reducing billions in health, other costs.

We've known for some time that we pay a steep price for air pollution in the Valley. Now a new study has set that price much higher than we had thought, and lends an increased sense of urgency to efforts to clean the air.

A good place to start is with the new rules for diesel engine pollution now being considered by the California Air Resources Board. The board is scheduled to vote on the rules on Dec. 11.

The new study says our bad air costs us \$6.3 billion annually. Most of that cost is related to more than 800 people who die prematurely in the Valley each year because of air pollution. That's about twice the cost the same researchers, from California State University, Fullerton, estimated in a similar study three years ago.

Part of the rise in costs is because we know more now about the damage that small particles of dust and soot -- called PM 2.5 -- do to the human body. With each new bit of research, it seems, the health implications of particulate matter pollution grow.

The numbers in the new study are sobering. Our failure to meet federal standards for ozone and small particulate matter costs the Valley \$1,600 per person each year.

Add that to the costs of bad air in the Los Angeles basin, which was also included in the study, and the state bears an annual burden of \$28 billion. And that cost is borne by the entire state, not just L.A. and the Valley.

When children miss school and their parents miss work, productivity declines. That adds to the cost of goods and services produced in the affected region. If people need additional medical attention because of bad air, that affects insurance premiums everywhere.

Diesel engines get special attention because they are the single largest source of the ozone and particulate matter that pollutes our air. Diesel trucks account for almost 40% of the particulate matter and half of the oxides of nitrogen pollution in California skies.

The new rules proposed by CARB would require diesel exhaust filters to reduce particulate matter emissions. Then older trucks -- the worst polluters -- would be gradually withdrawn from service by 2022. Some new and existing trucks would be fitted with aerodynamic devices and fuel-efficient tires to reduce fuel consumption and greenhouse gas pollution.

The state would offer funding to help truck operators pay for the costs of complying with the new rules, which won't be cheap. The trucking industry and others have objected to the new rules because of that high cost.

But that misses an important point: As the new study from Fullerton State shows, the savings from mitigating air pollution are huge, and may be more than the costs of the measures we must take for cleaner air.

Another important point: All Californians benefit from cleaner air, even those who live in regions less affected by air pollution. If all of us benefit, all of us should pay. We've already spent millions helping farmers clean up the diesel engines they use to power irrigation pumps. Truck operators must pay a fair share of their own expenses, but the rest of us owe them a hand with that burden.

None of this will be easy in the current economic climate. We may have to slow or postpone the actual implementation of these measures until better times. But we need the rules in place. We ask all those concerned about air quality to contact CARB -- at the Web site arb.ca.gov/board/comments.htm -- and urge its board to adopt the new diesel rules next month.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008:](#)

**Our View: Clean air too costly? Not by a long shot
California must clean up its act to save lives and money.**

California has the dirtiest air in the country, and two regions of the state, the Los Angeles basin and the San Joaquin Valley, account for the highest levels of pollution.

An estimated 3,860 residents of those regions will die prematurely because of tiny soot particles and smog they breathe. In addition to the human toll, the cost of dirty air to families, hospitals and businesses in those regions totals \$28 million annually.

Those are the latest sobering findings of a new air pollution study just released by Jane Hall and Victor Brajer, economics professors at California State University, Fullerton.

Their study concludes that dirty air costs Valley residents \$1,600 per person per year. Costs in the Los Angeles region are pegged at \$1,250 per person.

The costs are not confined to those regions. When people suffering from air pollution-related illnesses are hospitalized in Los Angeles or Merced County, it drives up health insurance premiums for residents elsewhere in the state.

The newest air study comes just as the California Air Resources Board is poised to vote on landmark regulations designed to reduce emissions from heavy-duty diesel trucks.

If adopted, the rules would require truck owners to install exhaust filters on their rigs starting in 2010.

The rules also would require long-haul truckers to equip their vehicles with fuel-efficient tires and aerodynamic devices that lower greenhouse gas emissions and improve fuel economy.

The new rules will cost an estimated \$5.5 billion over 15 years, beginning in 2010 when the rules kick in.

The state has provided \$1 billion in loans and grants to help pay for the pollution fixes.

Still, the economic benefits of the new rules -- amounting to \$48 billion to \$68 billion over that same 15 years the rules are in place, mostly in avoided health care -- far exceed the costs.

The Fullerton professors' study validates what the Air Resources Board's diesel truck research has shown. The cost of doing nothing is unacceptable.

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008:](#)

Cost of smog high for California businesses, too

Smog takes a physical toll on the human body in many ways, most of them well documented.

But what sort of monetary impact does bad air have? That's a different way of looking at the problem -- and one that may resound more clearly for many Californians.

Researchers Jane V. Hall and Victor Brajer of California State University, Fullerton, looked at the monetary impact of poor air quality in the San Joaquin Valley and the South Coast Air Basin, which covers all or part of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties. They found that smog costs plenty.

In the San Joaquin Valley alone, the cost of breathing dirty air pencils out to \$6.3 billion -- and 823 premature deaths -- per year.

Kern County has the valley's second-highest number of premature, particulate-related deaths each year with 183, behind only Fresno County's 212.

Kern residents lose 14,280 annual work days to bad air, endure 81,228 cases of bronchitis or other respiratory symptoms, and send their asthmatic children to emergency rooms 93 times.

The good news: Meeting federal standards for ozone and particulate matter of less than 2.5 micrometers (PM 2.5) translates into total savings of nearly \$6 billion.

In the San Joaquin Valley overall, annual benefits from achieving compliance comes out to an average of more than \$1,600 per person. Kern County stands to gain the most of any city in either air district: \$2,150 per person.

Statistics on the South Coast air basin, which has about five times as many residents, greatly surpass the valley's numbers. For example, some 3,000 people die prematurely each year from Southern California's dirty air, at a cost of \$11.4 billion in Los Angeles County alone.

The researchers placed monetary values for clean air vs. dirty air based on a formula that weighed everything from work-loss days and school absences to the cost of hospitalizations and ER visits, as well as more arcane measurements.

Here's another way to look at the health significance of smog: In many of the counties studied, reaching the federal standard for PM 2.5 would save more lives than reducing the number of motor vehicle deaths to zero.

Among the leading sources of PM 2.5 pollution is diesel emissions, and the California Air Resources Board is expected to decide on a controversial new regulation affecting the trucking industry soon.

Many have been saying that the regulation's costs are too high, but the Fullerton study (funded by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation) puts the economic cost of the status quo in a new perspective.

The regulations, which would affect everything from school buses to big-rigs to delivery vans, include financial help to assist vehicle owners in installing costly, soot-trapping canisters on their engines.

But as the economy worsens and credit tightens, the proposition becomes more difficult, even with the state assistance. Is the economic impact of putting these regulations into effect offset by public health-care savings?

In any other year, we would say yes. But given the state's present economic circumstances, CARB must consider the impact of its regulations on the trucking industry and other businesses that rely on diesel engines.

California must continue to lead the way in clean-air technology, as this study of smog's economic toll only further underscores.

But we cannot drive businesses to bankruptcy, especially now. California businesses must continue to make sacrifices for public health, but they need a break until the economy regains its balance.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008:](#)

Pollution quietly kills many in valley

If someone is killed in a car accident, people talk about it. If the victim is a family member or friend, we grieve. If it is someone in the community, we at least take note of how and where the crash occurred, thinking of traffic trouble spots and asking whether alcohol or drugs were a factor.

We're reminded often of the dangers on the road.

But when someone dies prematurely as a result of air pollution, who hears? Worse, who seems to care?

A new study on the costs of air pollution puts forth some startling numbers: In most counties in the San Joaquin Valley and the Los Angeles basin -- two of the most polluted regions in the country -- the number of people who die prematurely because of fine-particulate pollution exceeds the number dying in vehicle accidents each year. (See the Annual Deaths chart for a county by county breakdown.)

Specifically, the researchers compared vehicle deaths with the harmful effects of PM2.5, the tiny particulate matter emitted by gasoline-powered vehicles, diesel engines, wood burning, power plants and so forth.

High levels of PM2.5 and ozone make people sick, causing adults to miss work and children to miss school. They send people to hospital emergency rooms, provoke bronchitis and asthma attacks and, in the worst cases, contribute to early deaths.

In addition to the human toll, the cost of dirty air to families, hospitals and businesses in these regions totals \$28 million annually.

These sobering findings are part of an air pollution study released last week by Jane Hall and Victor Brajer, economics professors at California State University, Fullerton, and Frederick Lurmann of Sonoma Technology Inc.

Their study concludes that dirty air costs San Joaquin Valley residents \$1,600 per person per year. Costs in the Los Angeles region are pegged at \$1,250 per person.

The 108-page study breaks down the impact by county, and it's a little comforting to know that the impacts are slightly less at the north end of the San Joaquin Valley. The number people hospitalized with

respiratory ailments related to ozone, for example, is twice as high in Fresno and Kern counties than it is in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties.

This study was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, not by an industry group or environmental advocacy organization. It comes just as the California Air Resources Board is poised to vote on landmark regulations designed to reduce emissions from heavy-duty diesel trucks.

If adopted by the board next month, the rules would require truck owners to install exhaust filters on their rigs starting in 2010. The rules also would require long-haul truckers to equip their vehicles with fuel-efficient tires and aerodynamic devices that lower greenhouse gas emissions and improve fuel economy.

A coalition of truck owners, farmers, building contractors and others want the rules relaxed and postponed, in large part because of the bad economic climate. There's no doubt the economy is bad, and the rules would have a big cost. But, according to this study, the cost of staying with the status quo is even higher.

This study also lends a sense of urgency to other efforts to reduce air pollution, even to things as basic as the tighter restrictions imposed on fireplace use in the valley this winter. (See adjoining editorial.)

Though we've made some advances in reducing air pollution, we have a long way to go, and we must keep going.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Sunday, Nov. 17, 2008:](#)

It would be costly mistake to disregard no-burn days

With cooler weather expected soon, people are looking forward to throwing a few logs in the fireplace and lighting up a warm and cozy fire. But that's going to be illegal on quite a few more days this winter than in the past. And the consequences of violations could be steep.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has tightened the rules on wood burning. Officials predict that in some valley areas, there could be four times as many no-burn days called this winter as last year. And an exemption for those living in the foothills is history.

The only exemption still on the books is for those who have no access to natural gas in their homes and who use stoves as their primary means of heating. In an emergency or blackout, fireplaces may be used when other heating sources are cut off.

Some predict that there will be a lot of scofflaws burning wood in their fireplaces anyway. That may be so, but it could be costly. The first offense carries a fine of \$50. That can be waived if the offender attends an air pollution class, but subsequent offenses could draw fines of \$150 and higher.

Not being able to burn wood in fireplaces means little more than forgoing a pleasant winter ritual for many. For those who struggle to pay utility bills, it can be a genuine hardship. But the cost is worthwhile -- wood smoke contributes much of the wintertime particulate pollution that is responsible for serious health problems in the valley.

Particles from wood smoke can lodge deep in the lungs and cause asthma and other lung diseases. The particles also are implicated in heart disease. In the winter, when weather conditions often make wood smoke hug the ground, the impact can be exacerbated.

For some of those who face economic hardship, there may be help. The air district plans to revive a program that offers rebates to residents who buy and install pellet stoves or natural gas fireplaces, devices that don't pollute as badly as conventional wood-burning fireplaces.

Pacific Gas & Electric also may be able to help. Some residents could qualify for discounts or programs that spread the cost of energy bills evenly across the year.

As in the past, the air district will have employees out looking for violations on no-burn days. Complaints about violations also will be taken from the public. Some people are uncomfortable about "snitching out the neighbors," but that should not be a concern.

All of us have a responsibility to participate in the effort to clean the air, and that includes those who burn wood in fireplaces. They contribute a small part of the pollution problem, but all those small parts add up to the mess we have. Every little bit helps when it comes to cleaner air.

[Sacramento Bee, Guest Commentary, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008:](#)

My View: Gas surcharge could help deficit, environment

By Severin Borenstein

California is faced with an unprecedented budget crisis. The state is also committed to significant reductions in greenhouse gases that cause climate change. Meanwhile, the price of gasoline is plunging as the world economic slowdown cuts oil demand. At the intersection of these three situations lies an opportunity.

The state can take a big step toward solving the budget crisis, and avoid a giant step backward on climate change, by putting a floor under the price of gasoline. There's no doubt that the \$4-plus prices we experienced last summer caused a painful crunch for many households, but the economy has adjusted to prices substantially above the low-\$2 range where they are now heading.

If the state were to put in a sliding-scale gasoline surcharge, it could stabilize gasoline prices at levels that a few months ago would have been celebrated by consumers and still go a long way toward filling the state's budget crater. It would also head off the return to gas-guzzling SUVs that will no doubt result if prices stay at current levels.

Here's how it would work: The state would set a gasoline surcharge that moves inversely with the price of oil. Targeting an oil price of \$85 per barrel would mean that gasoline prices would stabilize around \$3 per gallon. If the price of oil increased, the surcharge would automatically decline so that gas prices would stay about constant. If the price of oil went above \$85, the surcharge would automatically disappear.

The surcharge would be based on world oil prices, not the local price of gasoline, so California refiners would have no incentive to raise wholesale gasoline prices to capture some of the surcharge revenue.

What can the state get out of this? More than \$10 billion. That's how much the surcharge would likely raise in the first year, which would greatly reduce the deficit. The best forecasts are that oil prices will gradually rise, so the revenue would probably decline over the next few years, though oil prices are hard to predict.

But the surcharge would support another important goal in stabilizing gasoline prices. It would signal to consumers and automakers the continued importance of using fuel efficiently to minimize greenhouse gas emissions. In the short run, it would encourage those habits we've developed over the last year: leaving the SUV in the garage whenever possible, driving the family's smaller car, car-pooling, walking and taking public transit.

In the long run, it would avert the surge in demand for gas guzzlers that is otherwise certain to follow low-\$2 gasoline. And a gas price that more accurately reflects its full cost, including greenhouse gases, would encourage better land-use planning and shorter commutes.

Does a gas surcharge fall disproportionately on the poor? Yes. But compared with the alternative plan being pushed in the Capitol – draconian cuts in government services and an increase in sales taxes – this would hurt the poor a lot less. If the budget hole starts to close, and we are lucky enough to see oil prices stay low, it would make sense to continue the surcharge but use some of the revenue to reduce income taxes on poorer families.

The other likely concern is that the revenue stream from such a surcharge would be unpredictable. That's true. Volatile oil prices would cause volatile surcharge revenues, but on the other hand, it would reduce the volatility of gas prices and allow better planning on energy costs.

In the short run, the surcharge would bring in substantial revenues, but in the longer run, the revenues are uncertain. That makes it a poor way to fund the operating budget year by year but a natural way to pay for the "rainy day" fund that everyone in Sacramento says we need but no one sees a way to pay for.

There's not much positive economic news these days, but falling oil prices are a rare bright spot. California has an opportunity to harness a slice of that benefit to patch a large part of the state's budget hole while preventing the state's climate change policy from being derailed. Any attempt to raise revenues will no doubt be opposed by some in Sacramento. Still, I hope that the governor and most legislators have the vision and courage to see this opportunity and grab it.

Severin Borenstein is director of the University of California Energy Institute and a professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008:](#)

No bailout for over-drawing nature

By Mathis Wackernagel

President-elect Barack Obama will face his first 100 days with extreme national - and global - scrutiny. The economic crisis is clearly at the forefront of Americans' minds and was a determining factor in this election.

What surfaced - from the housing to the credit crises - are the consequences of years of living beyond our financial means. But largely ignored during the campaign was the fact that for years we have also been living beyond our ecological means. There is a pressing need to build an economy that can deliver prosperity for Americans in the face of growing resource constraints.

It is encouraging that Obama pointed to our "planet in peril" during his speech at Grant Park. Obama also must recognize that sustainability is at the core of any long-term financial recovery.

Quite simply, materials on which the economy relies comes from natural resources. In 1997, University of Vermont professor Bob Costanza placed a price tag on the free services nature provides to the global economy: \$33 trillion, nearly twice the \$18 trillion global GNP at the time.

Globally, humanity's demand on nature for the past two decades has exceeded what the Earth can renew. According to new data just released by our organization, Global Footprint Network, it now takes the planet almost a year and four months to regenerate the resources humans use in one year. The impacts of this debt may not be as obvious as they are on Wall Street, but alarming consequences such as climate change, collapsing fisheries, soil depletion, air pollution and water shortages are already affecting the economy.

In the land of plenty, it is difficult to imagine running an ecological deficit. Yet since 1970, that is exactly what we have been doing. Part of this deficit stems from putting polluting carbon into the atmosphere faster than it can be reabsorbed by forests and oceans, and part from depleting our own ecosystems. The remainder is a result of importing significant amounts of resources from elsewhere in the world.

The United States has maintained its position as a global financial leader, but we are at a crossroads. If we are to continue in this role and remain competitive, we must look to balancing our ecological budget, as other countries have already begun to do. Creating resource-efficient cities, buildings and infrastructure, and fostering best-practice green technology and innovation are all pivotal ways to start. Not only would these efforts benefit our environment, they would create much-needed jobs and help those who are disproportionately affected by the ecological deficit: low-income families, who cannot afford the higher cost of living triggered by resource scarcity, as we've seen in climbing food prices.

In the ecological scenario, there is no bailout. If neglected, ecological debt will make financial crises such as the current one more common, and more intractable.

There are no easy answers when it comes to living within our limits, financially or ecologically. What is clear, however, is that one cannot be solved without considering the other.

Our new president will have 100 days -- and the next four years -- to prove he can rise to that challenge.

Mathis Wackernagel is co-founder and executive director of Global Footprint Network, an Oakland nonprofit research organization whose mission is to make ecological limits central to decision-making.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008:](#)

We still need oil

Drilling for oil does not pollute. Using its various products to power cars and other machines does pollute. So nothing is gained by not producing as much oil as is possible or needed. We will produce it or buy it, until we find a substitute for it.

We need to seek oil on land and sea. It can be drilled for in an environmentally safe manner. In beautiful places, we can bury the pumps and landscape over them. At sea, they can be placed about 20 miles offshore.

Oil is used to produce plastics, medicine and many other useful products. Even if it is cheaper to import oil, we need to produce it here in case we are attacked. We should not enrich our enemies and other countries.

We should make a valid effort to get a power source that will not pollute our atmosphere. Putting our heads in the sand and thinking that not acquiring needed resources is somehow going to cause less pollution is nuts.

Darrell V. Imperatrice, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008:](#)

'One more roadblock'

I found the Nov. 11 Bee very interesting. There were two articles on the use of rail for intercity transport and another on the ethanol boondoggle. Their content basically supports the positions taken in my letters over the years.

Now there is one more roadblock we must overcome -- the environmentalists. If these people are serious about reducing pollution and congestion, then they must not stand in the way of the construction of a modern rail system. They simply can't have it both ways.

Paul Volker, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., Nov. 15, 2008:](#)

Suspect source

Your newspaper allowed a front-page story about alleged exaggerations in ozone violations to be planted by the American Enterprise Institute. Google them and you will find they are a far right-wing group which denies the possibility of global warming, has supported the tobacco industry and also supported the Bush administration in its attacks on veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The AEI calls such veterans "malingerers."

To use information supplied by the AEI in a news article is unconscionable. Why don't you give all sides to an issue instead of just parroting a report by one so-called analyst working for AEI? Are The Bee's editors gullible, or do you support the political positions of the AEI?

John Travinsky, Fresno

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008:](#)

Letter: Sleepless in Atwater

Editor: As I write this letter, my wife and I are suffering another sleepless night here in Atwater.

It isn't because we are worried about the economy or the multiple wars our country is involved in, or even worries about work. We are concerned about all these issues.

However, last night and tonight, we cannot breathe because of all the smoke in the air. We are nonsmokers and have not had any problems with asthma. If we did, we would have to drive west and try to get away from the smoke.

It seems unbelievable that with all of the problems we have in Merced County with asthma and lung disease we are still allowing agricultural burning.

The experts have all agreed that chipping and composting ag waste is beneficial to both farmers and residents. I come from a farming background so I understand the value that farmers bring to our Valley, but it's time to farm smarter and pollute less.

Wes Unruh, Atwater

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the risk of losing billions of dollars due to climate change in California. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Riesgo de dos mil 500 billones de dólares en pérdidas por cambio climático en California

Manuel Ocaño

Noticier Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Friday, Nov. 14, 2008

El cambio climático se traduce en un riesgo de pérdida de hasta dos mil 500 billones de dólares en propiedades en California, de acuerdo con un estudio de la Universidad de California en Berkeley.

El análisis dice que el sobrecalentamiento terrestre prácticamente afectaría todas las propiedades de todos los residentes. La cifra es en billones de dólares en español, diferente a la que sería en inglés, que significarían miles de millones únicamente esta última.

El estado y la universidad buscan diseñar una estrategia de adaptación a ese cambio.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses ecology dialog: Can I convert my '06 Prius into a pluggable hybrid vehicle?](#)

Diálogo Ecológico: ¿Podré convertir mi Prius (2006) en un vehículo híbrido enchufable?

La Opinión, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

Entiendo que Toyota está planeando vender un Prius enchufable que mejorará grandemente la eficacia de combustible ya impresionante del coche. ¿Podré convertir mi Prius (2006) más viejo para hacerte un vehículo híbrido enchufable? -- Albert D. Rich, Kamuela, HI

Toyota está alistando una producción limitada de un Prius enchufable, que puede hacer un promedio de 100 millas por galón (160 km/g), para uso en flotas comerciales y del gobierno a partir de 2009. Toyota supervisará cómo estos coches, que tendrán baterías de ion de litio de alto rendimiento, y que no se han probado completamente todavía, aguantarán el uso diario.

Esencialmente, la versión enchufable del Prius invierte los papeles de los dos motores debajo del capó. El Prius regular utiliza más su motor a gas, cambiando (o combinando) al uso del motor eléctrico en tráfico lento, para mantener velocidad de cruce, y durante períodos de inactividad.

El coche no necesita ser enchufado porque su batería permanece cargada por el motor del gas y por el movimiento de las ruedas y de los frenos. El enchufable, por su parte, utilizará sobre todo su motor eléctrico, permitiendo que los viajeros usen la carga eléctrica en viajes breves, reservando el motor de gas para viajes más largos que excedan la distancia que el coche puede lograr a base solamente de electricidad.

Toyota no ha anunciado aún cuando los consumidores podrán comprar un coche enchufable; eso depende en gran parte de los resultados de la prueba en el terreno de la versión de flota. Pero los dueños de un modelo corriente o pasado no necesitan esperar. Los que posean habilidades mecánicas automotoras podrán convertir sus Priuses a modelos enchufables ellos mismos.

"La conversión es un proyecto fácil de DIY [hágalo usted mismo] que puedes hacer por cerca de \$4,000, si eliges utilizar las baterías de plomo selladas," dice Jim Philippi, basado en Houston, que convirtió su Prius el año pasado, usando instrucciones que descargó gratuitamente del sitio Web de PriusPlus.org de la Asociación de Autos Eléctricos. Philippi recomienda que los mecánicos caseros consulten RechargeIT.org también para información más detallada.

Para los menos inclinados a trabajar con sus propias manos, varias compañías venden ahora kits listos a instalar (algunas compañías también tienen kits para convertir Ford Escape Hybrid SUVs). Hymotion, basada en Ontario vende kits enchufables para los años modelo 2004-2008 de Prius por alrededor de \$10.000 vía distribuidores/instaladores contratistas en San Francisco, Seattle y otras partes. Otros abastecedores incluyen Plug-In Conversions Corp., Plug-In Supply, EDrive Systems, Energy Control Systems Engineering Inc. y OEMtek. Todos trabajan típicamente con garages selectos que se especializan.

Una preocupación potencial sobre estas conversiones es si Toyota honrará la garantía que venía con el vehículo original. La Iniciativa de Coches de California (CCI), que ha convertido varios híbridos a versiones enchufables para fines de investigación y demostración (lo sentimos, no están para la venta), dice que el fabricante de automóviles necesita aclarar la materia, puesto que los coches híbridos tienen típicamente cuatro o cinco garantías separadas. Hay precedente legal, dice CCI, que las modificaciones no pueden anular totalmente las garantías—solamente las piezas afectadas por una modernización.

Si estás indagando una conversión, ten presente que tal movida no tiene nada que ver con ahorrar, pues tardará un cierto tiempo para que las economías de combustible justifiquen el coste inicial, incluso de una conversión hecha a mano. La mayoría de la gente interesada en tal conversión lo están haciendo por el ambiente, no sus billeteras.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses climate change is a reality and it is changing the lives of millions of people in Latin America. The question is, what can we do to mitigate its impact?](#)

El cambio climático es una realidad y está cambiando la vida de millones de personas en América Latina.

La gran pregunta es: ¿qué podemos hacer para mitigar su impacto?

Terra, Monday, Nov. 17, 2008

En BBC Mundo iniciamos una serie destacando algunas de las acciones concretas que se están tomando en la región: desde la producción de combustibles limpios en el Altiplano a la reforestación en El Salvador o la instalación de paneles solares en la Amazonia venezolana.

Cada vez más comunidades en la región están tomando acciones positivas para adaptarse y reducir los daños al medio ambiente.

Retroceso de glaciares, sequías, lluvias y granizos más intensos, inundaciones y deslaves más frecuentes, son parte de las nuevas circunstancias que requieren respuestas creativas.

Ahora o nunca

"Si no actuamos ahora, el impacto del cambio climático será devastador", dijo el secretario general de Naciones Unidas, Ban Ki Moon, antes de la cumbre sobre cambio climático en Bali en diciembre del año pasado. Allí se acordó iniciar un proceso de negociaciones que se extenderá hasta 2009. La próxima conferencia internacional de la ONU sobre cambio climático tendrá lugar próximamente en Poznan, Polonia, en diciembre de este año.

Mientras los negociadores buscan un consenso, ya muchos en América Latina están beneficiándose de soluciones prácticas.