

State ag gets \$11M for clean air efforts

Federal funds will help replace old motors, shred limbs, control dust

By Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Saturday, January 17, 2009

A nearly \$11 million influx of federal money will help California farmers and ranchers reduce air pollution.

The funding, announced Thursday, will cover part of the cost of efforts such as replacing old diesel engines, controlling dust from roads and fields, and shredding rather than burning limbs pruned in orchards.

"We all want the air to be clean enough so everyone can clearly see the full splendor of California's landscapes," said Ed Burton, state conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, in a news release.

The agency, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provided the money under the farm bill passed by Congress last year. The bill, which lays out five years of farm and nutrition spending, has much more for California pollution control efforts than in the past.

[The San Joaquin Valley](#) fails to meet the requirements of the federal Clean Air Act, so the region has the most stringent air quality rules in the nation. Farmers are expected to do their part to reduce pollution caused by farm equipment and operations.

"Historically, there has been a serious lack of funding to assist agriculture operators with meeting the tough regulations," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, in another news release. "We have unique challenges in preserving the economic viability of our region's No. 1 industry, while working to improve the air quality."

Cardoza and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., worked to include air quality grant funding in the farm bill. California is getting \$10,943,940, nearly a third of the total nationwide in the first round.

The money will be distributed through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. It will be added to about \$5 million already on hand for California air projects.

Paul Wenger, a Modesto-area nut grower and first vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation, said the money is welcome but he would like to see more funding for research on pollution-control methods.

He noted, for example, that shredding tree limbs can provide nutrients for the orchard soil, but research is needed on increasing the decomposition rate.

Farmers can get money to meet air quality rules

The Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Jan. 17, 2009

California farmers are eligible for a piece of nearly \$11 million in federal funds to help growers meet federal air quality standards.

The funds are being distributed through an air quality subprogram authored by U.S. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. The program is part of the Conservation and Innovation Grant Program of the 2008 Farm Bill.

California will receive most of the \$37.5 million in funds, followed by Pennsylvania, which will get \$2.4 million. These funds are in addition to the regular allocation California receives through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, which also provides funding for on-farm air quality improvements.

For information on applying for funds, call the U.S. Department of Agriculture Kern County Service Center at 661-336-0967.

West Park to foot bill for bond money

Written by James Leonard

Patterson Irrigator, Friday, Jan. 16, 2009

The rail lines and inland port needed for the proposed industrial development at the Crows Landing Air Facility — maybe the most controversial aspect of the project — will be paid for with state bond money and money from the developer, according to a payment agreement approved Tuesday by the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors.

The agreement obligates PCCP West Park LLC and developer Gerry Kamilos to pay the estimated \$35 million needed to cover the county's share of the cost of the inland port and short-haul rail.

The California Transportation Commission has set aside \$22 million in bond money for the project, but that money will not become available until construction begins on the project.

That means no money will be given until after the project makes it through a full environmental impact review, which is ongoing.

One of the conditions of receiving the bond money is that supplemental funds must be provided, and the payment agreement ensures the county will not be responsible for that money.

"Our intention is to get in front of this and make certain that if (Kamilos) pulls that trigger, it's on his dime," said Keith Boggs, the county's deputy executive officer of economic development and its project manager for West Park.

The county applied for the money in January 2008, but its application has been slowed partly by a pair of lawsuits aimed at stopping the project.

The city of Patterson and WS-PACE.org, a West Park opposition group, both filed lawsuits against the project last year. The city lost its suit earlier this month, and the WS-PACE.org suit is apparently in limbo because of that ruling.

Negotiations with Union Pacific Railroad regarding rights of way on rail lines — the last requirement of the CTC application — were put on hold because the company was named in the city's lawsuit.

But although the courts seem to have ruled in the project's favor, District 5 Supervisor Jim DeMartini said the existing suit and the possibility of an appeal by the city should be enough for the supervisors to slow down on West Park's progress.

DeMartini, a staunch and consistent critic of the project, was the lone dissenter in the 4-1 vote to approve the payment agreement. In addition to the lawsuits, DeMartini expressed concern about using public money for a project that includes a private developer.

"Considering the lawsuits and the problems and the unpopularity of this project and the public subsidy involved, there's no way I'm gonna vote for it," DeMartini said.

"If this project is viable, I don't think it needs a public subsidy," he later added.

Boggs said last week that because of the presence of a private developer, the West Park project does differ from most of the projects in line to receive CTC bond money.

"Ours is a very large project," Boggs said. "It's been our board's intention that because of the lack of infrastructure, it would need to be a public-private partnership."

The infrastructure Boggs referred to is primarily needed for the inland port, which will connect to the Port of Oakland via short-haul rail. Boggs said the money will be used to take existing rail lines north of here and connect them to tracks along Highway 33 and to cross Highway 33 to the air facility.

Boggs and attorney Steven Mattas assuaged other supervisors' concerns by confirming that the payment agreement did not constitute any sort of additional commitment to the project and would

not limit the county's ability to back out of the project or modify it during the environmental review process.

"This agreement does not cause any physical change to the environment," Mattas said. "It's a funding commitment that obligates West Park to provide the supplemental funding."

DeMartini wasn't convinced.

"I have a general opposition to the project," DeMartini said Wednesday. "I think the thing is being rushed through prematurely."

Traqc suit

By Eric Firpo

Tracy Press, Saturday, January 17, 2009

Tracy Region Alliance for a Quality Community has sued the city and The Surland Cos., hoping to overturn the approval of 2,250 homes in southwest Tracy and a developer deal that could bring an aquatics center to the city.

In a 40-page writ filed Wednesday, TRAQC raised many of the arguments critics used unsuccessfully to convince the City Council to reject the project, which was OK'd Dec. 16.

The lawsuit argues the city violated the California Environmental Quality Act because it failed to analyze or suggest ways to lessen the traffic, air pollution and many other anticipated impacts of the Ellis subdivision slated for about 300 acres on the northwest corner of Linne and Corral Hollow roads.

It charges the city failed to properly study how the project would affect the Tracy Municipal Airport because the subdivision sits underneath the approach for landings and take-offs of the airport's main runway.

It also claims the city failed to account for how the homes would affect underground high-pressure natural gas and oil pipelines.

TRAQC also argues the city failed to follow the rules of its own general plan that governs future growth, as well as Measure A, the law passed by voters in 2000 that restricts homebuilding to an average of 600 a year.

Les Serpa of The Surland Cos. faces another challenge in his quest to build more than 2,000 homes in southwestern Tracy.

And it argues there was a technical violation of the law because the city entered into agreement with The Surland Communities LLC, which was formed Nov. 7, 2008, a partnership that didn't exist when project was being studied and debated.

The city OK'd a deal that will see Surland pay the city \$10 million and hand over 16 acres for a water park in exchange for the right to build homes starting in 2012, when a de facto building moratorium ends.

The company has the right to take back the land slated for the aquatics center and build homes on it if the city fails to start construction of the water park within two years of the subdivision being annexed into the city. Annexation could happen this year.

TRAQC co-founder and attorney Mark Connolly predicts the water park will never get built because the city has no money to operate it and \$10 million isn't enough to build one.

He said that if the Ellis subdivision is built, the people of Tracy "will get all the burdens and none of the benefits."

It's a similar comment to arguments he made during public hearings that led to the council's approval of the Ellis subdivision, and many expected the lawsuit.

"It's not surprising, but real disappointing and sad that he decided to sue," said Chris Long of The Surland Cos. "(Connolly's) actions just slow down the swim center and cause more delays and expense to something the community wants."

Councilman Steve Abercrombie saw the lawsuit coming as well.

"It's like other things in Tracy. We approve a project and a lawsuit gets filed," he said, referring to claims against the city over WinCo's approval and an OK'd Wal-Mart expansion. "We may have to get judges to start showing up at our council meetings."

Groups sue over EPA change in farm emissions rule

The Associated Press

In the Merced Sun-Star, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2009

FRESNO, Calif. -- Six environmental groups have sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Thursday over a new rule exempting dairies and other large-scale livestock operations from having to alert officials when toxic emissions are released.

Earthjustice filed the suit Thursday in a federal appeals court in Washington. It says the exemption threatens the health and safety of people living and working near lagoons that store farm animals' urine and feces, sources of dangerous ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.

Large-scale farms had been required to notify government officials when air pollution levels exceeded safety thresholds.

The EPA rule change goes into effect Tuesday.

The EPA office in San Francisco referred questions about the case to its headquarters in Washington. An after-hours message left in that office wasn't immediately returned.

California emission waiver looms for carmakers

Barack Obama is expected to allow California and other states to enforce tough air quality rules soon after taking office.

By Ken Bensinger

L.A. Times, Monday, January 19, 2009

If the auto industry thinks it has problems now, wait until Barack Obama takes the wheel.

Not long after assuming the presidency, Obama is expected to grant a waiver allowing California and more than a dozen other states to enforce their own greenhouse-gas emission standards on autos.

That would completely change the landscape for vehicle regulation and obligate automakers to produce cars that are far more efficient than those called for under current federal standards -- an average of 3 miles per gallon more by 2015, and 7 mpg more by 2020, according to some calculations.

Environmentalists and state regulators say that the rules are key to combating global warming and point to a series of court rulings backing their implementation.

"This is an essential piece of the nation's environmental strategy," said Tim Carmichael, president of the Coalition for Clean Air. Environmentalists estimate that cars create about a quarter of U.S. carbon emissions.

But it's a nightmare scenario for automakers, which argue that complying with the California guidelines would create regulatory headaches and a technology burden that could add at least \$1,000 and as much as \$5,000 to the cost of each vehicle.

As such, the prospect of the waiver is creating a fierce debate about automotive regulation, pitting

concerns about the environment against the deeply troubled finances of an industry that has thrown itself at the mercy of Washington just to remain solvent.

Asking carmakers to comply with California's rules would be tantamount to forcing a cancer patient to "finish chemo and then go run the Boston Marathon," General Motors Corp. spokesman Greg Martin said. "Right now, we're just trying to make it through the current situation."

GM and other automakers, including foreign companies Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co., have vigorously opposed implementation of the California rules and have fought it in court for years.

Nonetheless, their efforts have provoked judicial rulings in four different federal courts that open the door to California -- along with 17 states that have adopted the Golden State's rules -- regulating its own carbon emissions under a 2002 law.

The final barrier to implementation, a waiver from the Environmental Protection Agency, was held up a year ago when the Bush administration denied the request. California then sued the EPA, a congressional investigation was launched and during the campaign, Obama pledged to grant the waiver if he was elected.

Mary Nichols, chairwoman of California's Air Resources Board -- the agency that would implement and enforce the regulation -- said the likelihood of getting the waiver was "over 95%." She said that Obama's transition team has "had conversations" with her agency to coordinate how and when the waiver should be granted.

"A plan of action is already pretty much in hand," she said.

Last week, Lisa Jackson, Obama's nominee to head the EPA, addressed the emission issue as well.

"If I am confirmed, I will immediately revisit the waiver," Jackson said.

Currently, the only standard that automakers have to meet is Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE. Just over a year ago, Congress passed a law that will ramp up the national average fuel economy for cars and trucks.

Final rules for implementing the new CAFE standard have not been issued -- the outgoing administration threw that football to Obama earlier this month -- but the law calls for a nationwide average of 35 mpg by 2020.

That's a substantial increase from the previous standard of 27.5 mpg for cars and 22.5 mpg for trucks, but pales in comparison with the California rules.

Under those, carmakers have to show a 30% overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions on their vehicles by 2016. That's the same kind of regulation as in Europe and Japan, where cars have strict emission requirements but not specific mileage standards.

Emission reductions do have a direct effect on vehicle mileage, however. Simply put, reduced carbon emissions track very closely with higher fuel efficiency since they are measured in grams of carbon per mile. According to the Air Board, California's rules would require a national average of 34.5 mpg by 2015, compared with 31.6 mpg under the federal rules. By 2020, that could be as high as 42 mpg.

That will require carmakers to spend huge amounts of money on new technology, while penalizing them for selling less-efficient trucks and sport utility vehicles.

"We're committed to increasing efficiency, but these kinds of increases take time and money, and

unfortunately that's something in very short supply right now," said Charles Territo, spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a trade group that has led legal efforts to squelch the California rules.

Only California and the U.S. government are allowed to regulate air quality, but other states may choose the federal standard or the California rules.

A Toyota spokesman said the states adopting California's rules -- including New York, Florida and Massachusetts -- represent about 40% of the U.S. population, and potentially even a greater slice of the vehicle market.

Since the complicated California rules are written based on state-by-state sales of vehicles, the Japanese company fears having to market different vehicles to meet each state's target, as well as another group of vehicles in states that haven't signed on to the California rules.

"For the industry, it's important that there's just one national standard that we're chasing," said Jim Lentz, president of Toyota's U.S. sales arm.

He and others indicate their hopes that the Obama administration will be sensitive to the industry's challenges, including the possibility that in 2009 sales could drop about 20% for the second year in a row.

Unfortunately for carmakers, the industry's top defender in Congress, Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), lost his chairmanship of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee to Henry Waxman, a California Democrat known for an environment-first platform.

GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz said he expected help in negotiating an alternative to the California rules from the so-called car czar, an intermediary to be appointed by Obama under terms of the \$24.9 billion in government aid committed to GM, Chrysler and their financing units.

"We've never had a go-to person in Washington," said Lutz, who estimates that compliance with the rules would add as much as \$5,000 to the retail price of a car. Lacking such help, "we can meet the law, but it's going to take a lot of money."

Based on the restructuring plans submitted to Congress by GM, Ford and Chrysler in November, the Natural Resources Defense Council released a study that indicates all three would be able to comply with California emission standards with current technology.

But to do that, they would have to substantially change the way they do business, said Roland Hwang, senior policy analyst at the council.

"They're going to have to find a way to make money on small cars, because it will be too hard to make the standards with big cars," Hwang said.

Not all companies are kicking and screaming.

Ed Cohen, vice president for government affairs at Honda, believes that carbon-based standards are inevitable. He said Honda had been preparing for the Obama administration to grant the waiver, making plans for a fleet far more efficient than even that called for under the California rules.

"We're setting a pattern for the future," Cohen said. "Any company that is not assuming a constant rate of improvement in fuel economy and carbon emissions is making a big mistake."

Liquid natural gas terminal near LAX suspended
Woodside puts plans on hold for an offshore LNG terminal 27 miles from the Los Angeles airport, citing the economic downturn.

By Jeff Gottlieb
L.A. Times, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2009

An Australian company announced Thursday it had suspended its plan to build a controversial offshore liquid natural gas terminal 27 miles from Los Angeles International Airport, citing the downturn in the world economy.

A spokeswoman for Woodside Natural Gas said the company planned to bring the project back when conditions changed.

Woodside's in this for the long haul," said Laura Doll, the company's vice president for public and governmental affairs. "We can't say when because we can't predict the future that precisely."

The project has been opposed on environmental and safety grounds. On Thursday, project critics spoke as if the project had been killed.

"I've long said the Woodside LNG project posed serious environmental problems and made LAX a bigger security risk," Rep. Jane Harman (D-Venice) said in a statement. "Perhaps there is a role for LNG as a transitional fuel, but our region already has access to adequate gas supplies to meet market demands. I'm glad that Woodside recognized the level of local concern over this project and am grateful to the elected officials and residents who made their opposition known."

The environmental group Santa Monica Baykeeper issued a news release saying that "a local coalition of community organizations, elected officials and concerned citizens successfully placed enough pressure" on Woodside to cause the company to end the project.

Woodside's plan involved taking natural gas from Australia, chilling and condensing it, then shipping it to an offshore terminal 27 miles from the airport. From there it would have been turned back into regular natural gas and sent through pipelines into the Southern California gas delivery system.

Two other liquid natural gas projects have been killed in past years, one for Long Beach Harbor and the other off the Ventura County coast.

One other is still proposed in Southern California off the coast of Santa Barbara County, said Tom Ford, executive director of Baykeeper. Another has been built just south of Ensenada, Mexico.

Woodside had paid lobbyists more than \$400,000 to shepherd the terminal project through a half a dozen agencies in the last two years, according to reports with the Los Angeles Ethics Commission.

Spare the air through Monday afternoon

Kimberly S. Wetzel - BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Sunday, January 18, 2009

The Bay Area Air District has issued a Spare the Air Alert today banning indoor and outdoor wood burning in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, southern Sonoma and southwestern Solano counties through noon Monday.

Air quality in the Bay Area is forecast to be unhealthy, and it is illegal for residents and businesses to burn wood and manufactured firelogs in fireplaces, wood stoves, pellet stoves and outdoor fire-pits. Winter air pollution is mainly caused by small particle pollution, or particulate matter, from wood smoke. Smoke from wood-burning fires is linked to illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and lung disease, and is harmful for children and the elderly.

For more information about the wood burning rule, or to check before burning, visit www.sparetheair.org or call 1-877-4-NO-BURN. There is not a free transit program during the winter Spare the Air season.

Berkeley to kick off bid to fight global warming

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, January 20, 2009

BERKELEY, Calif. — Berkeley officials are encouraging the city's residents to do what they can to fight global warming.

With a voter-approved measure that set a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions citywide 80 percent by 2050, the city is urging its 100,000 residents to reduce their "carbon footprints."

The city is set to begin a program that encourages residents to meet four times a month to set goals and take steps in reducing carbon emissions.

City officials will kick off the campaign with a workshop on Jan. 28.

The City Council is scheduled this spring to approve a plan outlining how the city will reach its goal of reducing emissions.

Air permit sought for Hayward's Russell City generator

By Eric Kurhi - The Daily Review

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, January 19, 2009

HAYWARD — Residents are invited to weigh in this week on the possible air quality effects of the Russell City Energy Center, a 600-watt gas-fired facility proposed for the Hayward shoreline on Depot Road.

The facility had been granted a permit by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, but that was overruled by the Environmental Protection Agency, which said proper public process had not been completed.

The air district has since revisited the matter and will hear public comments on a draft permit on Wednesday.

Opponents of Russell City have said they do not want the plant releasing hundreds of tons of pollutants into the air, and that it represents old technology.

However, representatives from Calpine — which would build the facility — said such plants are needed in the Bay Area and that they will be using the cleanest natural gas turbine systems available.

"Everyone needs power and there's no way to store it," said Richard Thomas, the vice president of project development at Calpine. "Sometimes the wind doesn't blow and the sun goes down. Natural gas can still be counted on to produce energy at the exact time it is needed."

He said that at 17 acres, the facility takes up considerably less space than a wind or solar energy farm.

Mel Scott, public information officer for Calpine, said the company also looked at carbon emissions that are not currently regulated because they expect to see a stiffening of environmental laws under the Obama administration.

Thomas said that with approval already granted by the California Energy Commission, securing the Prevention of Significant Deterioration permit from the air quality district is the last hurdle.

"I want to impress that we are one permit away from being shovel-ready," said Thomas. "We are ready to move forward."

He said they hope to begin construction in spring of next year and complete it by summer 2012.

Rob Simpson, an environmental activist who filed the appeal with the EPA that resulted in the revocation of Russell City's air permit, said there might be some question of the legality of the new draft permit, and that he's been working with "a number of pretty big players who are opposed to the plant," including the Sierra Club, Golden Gate University and the Hayward Area Shoreline Planning Agency.

Simpson said some laws have been changed since the initial studies were performed. He added that the neighboring area of salt ponds is being restored as wetlands, meaning that the plant could have an effect on future attempts to re-establish native flora and fauna in the area.

Some residents also maintain that the plant could create plumes of heated air dangerous to pilots using the Hayward Executive Airport — something that proved to be a major setback for the Eastshore Energy Center, another power plant that was proposed for a site near the Russell City plant but was ultimately denied approval.

However, those issues are not included in the Russell City permitting process that is being revisited, said Scott.

"Those are all matters that were all investigated by the CEC," he said. "It's a very thorough study."

Industry, environmentalists gang up on climate

David R. Baker, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Friday, January 16, 2009

An alliance of environmental groups and big corporations concerned about global warming released a detailed plan on Thursday to slash America's greenhouse gas emissions, hoping to shape legislation that President-elect Barack Obama and Congress have promised to pursue.

The United States Climate Action Partnership - whose members include PG&E Corp., oil giant BP and the Natural Resources Defense Council - called for setting hard limits on the amount of carbon dioxide produced each year by the American economy, with the limits declining steadily over time. Companies would buy and sell credits to emit specific amounts of the gas, essentially setting a price on carbon dioxide.

"We share the view that the time is now, and time is of the essence," said PG&E Chief Executive Officer Peter Darbee. "We firmly believe that climate change can be addressed in ways that create more economic opportunity than economic risk. The key is setting clear targets and timetables and then allowing the power of the market to find the best solutions."

The 2-year-old group had already suggested such a system, but never in great detail. The plan released Thursday delves into the complexities of setting up a carbon market, staking out positions on deeply controversial topics.

For example, the plan proposes giving away many of the carbon credits for free when the market first opens, an idea criticized by Obama during the presidential campaign. The partnership also insists that both coal and nuclear power have a role in America's energy future, a position many environmentalists hate. Carbon dioxide from coal plants should be captured before it reaches the atmosphere and stored underground, an idea that has been tested but remains uneconomical.

"It's critical to use coal in the future, but it's critical that we have the technologies that reduce the carbon from the use of coal," said James Rogers, chief executive officer of Duke Energy, an electric utility that relies on coal-fired plants. "This is not, as some people have suggested, shutting down coal."

The group hopes that its ability to reach a consensus will become a model for Washington. Environmentalists and corporate CEOs spent a year hammering out the details of a plan they could all support. Obama and congressional Democrats say they want to create a cap-and-trade system as soon as possible, but many Republicans remain leery.

"This is a game-changer," said Fred Krupp, president of the Environmental Defense Fund, a nonprofit group focused on solving environmental problems. "Just as we have come together, it is time for both parties to come together, move forward and pass legislation now."

Europe already has a carbon cap-and-trade system, although its rollout has been plagued with problems. California has been working to create a cap-and-trade system with six Western states and four Canadian provinces. Ten Northeastern states are creating their own carbon market.

Among the plan's other details:

-- Within 10 years of creating a cap-and-trade system, greenhouse gas emissions would be, at most, 10 percent lower than they are today. Within 15 years, they would be 10 percent to 30 percent lower than current levels, and by 2050, they would be 20 percent to 40 percent lower than today.

-- Companies would be allowed to use "offsets," projects that trap greenhouse gases or prevent them from being released into the atmosphere. One example: planting trees to absorb carbon dioxide.

-- By the end of the year, Congress should establish a national greenhouse gas registry to take precise measurements of the country's emissions.

-- Companies that are already trying to cut their emissions should get some kind of credit for acting early.

In a sign of just how much the global-warming debate has changed, some of the plan's most pointed criticism on Thursday came from environmentalists.

The Union of Concerned Scientists praised the partnership for coming this far but took issue with some of the plan's key details. The emission cuts aren't big enough, said Alden Meyer, the union's policy director. Giving away pollution credits when the market opens will reward polluters, and allowing too many offsets would give companies an excuse to avoid making real cuts in their emissions, Meyer said.

"This proposed cap-and-trade program is a starting point," he said, "but it must be strengthened significantly to ensure that it's effective."

And there remain people opposed to the entire concept. Myron Ebell, energy policy director at the Competitive Enterprise Institute think tank, says a carbon cap-and-trade system will inevitably raise energy prices.

"It's a sneaky tax," said Ebell, whose organization has long opposed what it calls global-warming alarmism. "The proponents of energy rationing - of forcing us to use less oil, coal and natural gas - know it's not politically feasible to suggest a tax."

Scientific climate is changing as Obama takes office

By Dan Vergano

USA TODAY, Monday, Jan. 19, 2009

The politics of science, which has been storm-tossed for the past eight years, heads for uncharted waters with the inauguration of Barack Obama.

The Bush administration has fought a long battle with the nation's scientific community over funding and philosophy, and great divides have formed over such issues as global warming and stem cell research. Scientists are hopeful that Obama, who has called for increased research

spending, will bring a new dawn. But how realistic are their hopes? And can the nation afford to make them a reality?

"My administration will value science. We will make decisions based on the facts, and we understand that facts demand bold action," Obama said at the nomination of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu, a climate-change technology advocate, as the next secretary of Energy.

Says environmental scientist Donald Kennedy, Stanford University's president-emeritus: "I think we are seeing some really good first steps, appointment of people that the science community takes seriously, people who value science."

But others sound a note of caution.

"The air of anticipation in the nation's laboratories and faculty clubs is not unfounded; the danger is that it will become excessive," writes David Goldston, a former chief of staff with the House Science Committee, in a recent *Nature* magazine.

"Scientists are going to have to contain their insatiable appetite for dollars, and their tendency to see politicians as either with them or against them, for the current mood to survive much beyond inauguration," Goldston says.

The most immediate change may be in the White House's attitude toward global warming.

Obama has selected other key advisers who are strong advocates of taking action to address climate change. In addition to Chu, he picked Harvard's John Holdren, a climate and energy expert, to be his science adviser and marine biologist Jane Lubchenco as head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Obama has pledged to curb heat-trapping "greenhouse" gases by selling industries limited rights to release emissions, creating a "cap and trade" market. Cap and trade markets, such as the existing European Union Emission Trading Scheme, allow firms to buy and sell emission credits while keeping the total amount of emissions under an upper limit, or cap.

For the average household, a cap and trade plan in which credits are sold to polluters — and "dividend" money is returned to taxpayers — would affect power rates, boosting annual household energy costs \$809, a Resources for the Future analysis has found. But the poorest 20% of consumers would gain an average \$145 through tax breaks.

Striving for balance

"We must also take a leadership role in designing technologies that allow us to enjoy a growing, prosperous economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80% below 1990 levels by 2050," Obama pledged during the campaign. His energy plan includes yearly weatherization of 1 million homes, \$7,000 tax credits for fuel-efficient cars and putting 1 million hybrid cars on roads by 2015.

The Bush administration has not capped power-plant emissions, stressing the need for voluntary agreements and technological advances to address climate change. In 2001, President Bush renounced the Kyoto Protocol, an international pact to limit greenhouse gas emissions, on the grounds that it could hurt the U.S. economy and unfairly exempted China.

Research involving human embryonic stem cells is another area that may change significantly.

In his first televised presidential address on Aug. 9, 2001, Bush kick-started a long-running tussle with scientists by limiting funding for such research. The president allied himself with abortion opponents who are against the destruction of embryos required to harvest these stem cells.

"While we must devote enormous energy to conquering disease, it is equally important that we pay attention to the moral concerns raised by the new frontier of human embryo stem cell research," he said.

Obama has pledged to reverse Bush's funding limits and said they "have handcuffed our scientists and hindered our ability to compete with other nations." The National Institutes of Health allocated \$655 million this year for stem cell research of all sorts, so human embryonic

researchers would compete against other stem cell researchers for money from that pot. Studies also focus on animal and adult stem cells.

For the average American, embryonic stem cell treatments are still years away, say researchers such as George Daley of Children's Hospital in Boston. Nearly 1,000 lines of embryonic stems would become eligible for research funding, Daley says, if Obama follows through on his pledge. Only 22 are now allowed under the Bush rule.

Bush detractors, defenders

"Anything would likely be an improvement for scientists after Bush," says physicist Robert Park of the University of Maryland-College Park, who writes an Internet roundup of science politics widely read by researchers.

In 2004, Nobel-winning scientists campaigned against Bush. The 250,000-member Union of Concerned Scientists and the 131,000-member American Association for the Advancement of Science have criticized administration stands on science questions.

But some, such as current White House science adviser John Marburger, say the controversy has overshadowed actions by the Bush administration that have won favor with conservation groups, such as declaring four oceanic national monuments, which created the world's largest marine reserve.

"When you consider the real behavior, as opposed to the symbols, the past eight years have been good for science," Marburger says. He points to the administration's steady support for research funding, including the doubling of the NIH budget to about \$28 billion in 2004.

And Marburger notes that the Bush administration started a new research agency at the Department of Homeland Security while also proposing a doubling of money two years ago for basic research.

But right up to the finish line, the administration is battling it out with science and health advocates in high-profile science-related scraps over mercury levels in fish, the endangered status of polar bears and air pollution limits.

"Science enjoys a very high prestige," Marburger says. "That makes it attractive to anybody who wants to sell something. Everyone who wants to sell patent medicine or a cure for climate change will claim science is on their side."

And Bush has other defenders. "I don't think George Bush changed the fundamental relationship between the scientific and political establishments," says Arizona State University's Daniel Sarewitz, author of *Frontiers of Illusion: Science, Technology, and the Politics of Progress*, who remains critical of some administration moves.

"Federal support for science is usually a function of the size of the federal discretionary budget, no more, no less," Sarewitz says. "Virtuous noises about protecting the purity of science arise from politics just like everything else."

Scientific integrity

So what exactly do the scientists want from Obama?

For one thing, more clout. In an Oct. 30 letter to the presidential candidates, 178 organizations (ranging from AAAS to the business-oriented Council on Competitiveness to the Center for the Study of the Presidency) urged the next president to make the science adviser a Cabinet position.

The adviser heads the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy and has a role in every scientific matter — in today's world that is to say practically everything — the federal government touches.

Marburger wasn't named until five months into the Bush administration and held a lower rank. Past presidential advisers, such as Clinton science adviser Neal Lane, now at Rice University, suggest this made him a less powerful figure. Lane was not the head of a federal agency but enjoyed Cabinet status.

In past interviews, Marburger has downplayed that notion, suggesting that rank matters less than presidential access. The "real challenge" for the science adviser, he says, will be keeping federal support for science amid a budget straitjacketed by mandatory spending and tough economic times.

"President Obama does not need a high-profile science adviser," agrees physicist Richard Muller of the University of California-Berkeley, author of the just-released *Physics for Future Presidents: The Science Behind the Headlines*. "He needs a low-profile one whom he trusts completely, one who knows or can quickly gather the scientific information that the president needs, and educate him so that the scientific, technical and engineering information plays its proper role in the making of the decision."

Also important is the membership of roughly 1,000 scientific advisory committees, called the "fifth arm of government" by Harvard science policy expert Sheila Jasanoff. The administration appoints members of the committees, which can exert tremendous influence on government decisions. Perhaps the best known are the ones advising the Food and Drug Administration on whether new drugs are safe for approval to the market.

Moves by the Obama administration in naming committee members and making their deliberations public, Jasanoff suggests, will influence how scientists see the new administration: "The same virtues of good science, openness and communication are good government and good democracy."

New-Model Wood Stoves Burn Cleaner

By Camilla McLaughlin

Washington Post, Saturday, January 17, 2009

During the energy crisis in the 1970s, interest in heating with wood surged, particularly in regions where oil or electricity were primary heat sources.

Ten years later, as clouds of wood smoke hung over many New England towns and Western cities on winter days, wood stoves were considered major polluters, and many people stopped buying them.

But the newest editions burn much cleaner than your grandmother's stove, and that's rekindling consumer interest.

"There is a fundamental difference between new stoves and old stoves and most of the culture doesn't know that," says John Crouch, of the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association in Arlington.

According to the association's data, shipments of wood stoves and inserts were up 54 percent, and pellet stoves and inserts up were up 212 percent in the first six months of 2008 over the same period in 2007. Compared with older stoves, Environmental Protection Agency-certified devices are more sophisticated, often using blowers and catalytic converters to reduce the number of particulates released into the air.

Pellet stoves cost \$3,500 to \$4,000, and there is a \$300 tax credit for the purchase of a 75 percent efficient wood or pellet burning stove in 2009.

In Libby, Mont., one of several communities participating in a pilot project sponsored by the EPA and other partners to exchange older stoves for more efficient models, pollution from wood stoves was reduced by 28 percent in 2007, the first year following completion of the change-outs. Indoor air quality improved by 72 percent.

EPA-certified stoves operate at 60 and 80 percent efficiency levels, releasing only 2.7 micrograms of particulates per hour compared with 30 to 50 micrograms per hour for pre-1992 stoves. They can burn wood, gas or alternative fuels such as wood pellets. In addition to freestanding models, they can also be inserts into existing fireplaces.

EPA to regulate mercury from cement plants

By JOHN FLESHER, Associated Press Writer

Tri-Valley Herald and Modesto Bee, Friday, January 16, 2009

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. — Federal regulators have settled a lawsuit with environmental activists and nine states over standards for mercury emissions from cement plants, the plaintiffs announced Friday.

Earthjustice, an environmental law firm based in Washington, sued the Environmental Protection Agency in 2007 on behalf of activist groups. The firm said existing federal regulations that exempted older cement kilns failed to impose adequate mercury pollution controls.

Nine states, including New York and Michigan, also joined the suit, contending the agency had not based its standards on the latest pollution control technology.

About 150 kilns around the nation generate nearly 23,000 pounds of airborne mercury a year, according to Earthjustice. Mercury, a toxic metal that can damage the brain and nervous system, is generated from the raw materials and some fuels used in cement-making.

The agency had issued mercury regulations for cement plants three years ago, but they applied only to kilns built after Dec. 2, 2005. Most operating kilns, however, were built earlier and were exempt.

Under the settlement, the agency will propose a mercury rule for all plants by March 31 and make a final decision within a year.

"EPA is carefully considering what an appropriate standard should be for mercury emissions from cement kilns," spokeswoman Cathy Milbourn said.

New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo said the EPA "has made the right choice by going back to the drawing board and committing to adopt new hazardous air pollutant standards for cement plants that comply with the Clean Air Act."

Jim Pew, an attorney for Earthjustice, said the agency finally appeared to be taking the matter seriously.

"Cement plants are among the worst mercury polluters in this country," he said. "It's encouraging that there's been a change of heart."

The Portland Cement Association, which represents cement manufacturers, will ask the agency to make business-friendly demands, said Andy O'Hare, vice president of the association's regulatory affairs.

"The industry's not doing well right now," O'Hare said. "A good chunk of the U.S. cement production capacity is shut down because of market circumstances. We're certainly not looking to add to our costs."

Other states involved in the lawsuit are Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Fast Train to the 21st Century

By Joseph R. Paolino Jr.

Washington Post, Saturday, January 17, 2009

Putting millions of Americans to work and rebuilding our frayed infrastructure are Barack Obama's most pressing priorities when he takes office. He should start by creating a high-speed rail link between Boston and Washington.

More than 20 years ago, in 1988, I traveled as mayor of Providence, R.I., with then-Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis on a new high-speed Amtrak train from Providence to Boston. Our trip took less than half an hour. Unfortunately, the early hopes we all had for high-speed rail in the Northeast have yet to be realized.

Instead of patching yet another rail line, we should take a step back and consider the best way to contribute to our economy and meet our long-term transportation needs. It is past time to give the Northeast a 21st-century transportation system. High-speed rail could cut in half the travel time along the corridor -- the best high-speed systems in Europe and Asia travel at twice the effective speed of Amtrak's fastest Acela train -- and invigorate the metro economies of Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington.

Consider the economic and environmental benefits: During the construction phase, a project of this magnitude would put tens of thousands to work. The faster trains would draw travelers from automobiles and airlines, as they do in Europe and Asia. The London-to-Paris run, via a tunnel under the English Channel, has captured 70 percent of the public-transit market between those cities. Similar demand in the Northeast would significantly reduce gasoline consumption, as well as highway and airport congestion, and it would improve air quality.

Right now, Amtrak's Acela train is high-speed in name only. The Acela travels between Boston and New York (including its stops in Providence and a few other locations), on average, at only 61 miles per hour. For travel between New York and Washington, the average is 79 miles per hour.

By contrast, the fastest Eurostar train between London and Paris averages 136 miles per hour, including stops. It takes only two hours and 15 minutes to go the 307 miles from London to Paris, compared with 3 1/2 hours for the 215-mile trip between Boston and New York.

Investments in high-speed rail are accelerating outside the United States. In Europe, Travel & Leisure magazine reports, 16,000 miles of new high-speed service is in the works. Passengers should be able to hop from Madrid to Lisbon in two hours. In Asia, China plans a high-speed link between Beijing and Hong Kong that will cut the travel time by half.

In the Northeast, the Acela rarely gets to test its top speed, 150 mph, between Boston and New York. Because of limitations on the right of way, the Acela is only 20 to 25 minutes faster on that route than the quickest conventional trains. The full potential of high-speed train travel will never be realized on a 19th-century rail infrastructure that has been only modestly improved over the years.

To accommodate high-speed rail, many areas of tracks in the Northeast Corridor would have to be widened, straightened or even relocated. If trains are to go faster than 100 mph, there would have to be much greater separation between the trains and any nearby pedestrians or motor vehicles. Bullet trains and slow-moving freight trains may not be able to share the same tracks. New tunnels, trenches or bridges could be needed.

Constructing a system for high-speed rail will be expensive, but these are not normal circumstances. Obama takes office next week amid the worst economic crisis since the Depression. Large public investments and innovation are key to reviving the economy and putting people back to work. High-speed train service on the Northeast corridor would be an excellent place to start moving our citizens, and our economy, into the 21st century.

Pork producers sue EPA over new emissions rule

By AMY LORENTZEN, Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Monday, January 19, 2009

DES MOINES, Iowa — The National Pork Producers Council said Monday it is suing to challenge the Environmental Protection Agency's requirement that livestock farms inform communities about estimated emissions.

The rule is scheduled to take effect Tuesday. It requires livestock producers to call state and local emergency response authorities to inform them of estimated emissions and to notify them in writing.

Farms that fail to comply face penalties of up to \$25,000 per day.

The council, based in Urbandale, Iowa, says in the lawsuit that livestock operations should be exempt and that the EPA delayed information on the rule and didn't develop a proper system for the operations to comply. It asks a court to prevent enforcement of the rule until the EPA develops a proper compliance system.

The council said its lawsuit was filed after-hours in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. A copy of the lawsuit wasn't immediately available.

A telephone message at the EPA wasn't immediately returned Monday, a federal holiday.

George Pettus, who oversees environmental compliance at some hog-producing facilities in North Carolina and Indiana, said he started trying to comply with the new law last week, but found incorrect contacts for state officials and misinformation on the EPA's Web site.

"There was no way to fulfill the obligation that we were under," he said during a telephone interview from Goldsboro, N.C., on Monday afternoon. He added that EPA officials who could help were out of the office for the weekend and the holiday.

"It was extremely frustrating," he said.

EPA: Cemex to pay \$2M, reduce pollutants

The Associated Press

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- Cemex Inc. has agreed to pay a \$2 million penalty and reduce emissions at its Victorville cement plant by 40 percent to comply with the Clean Air Act.

The settlement, filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles, would resolve two complaints by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The complaints, filed in 1997 and 2000, said the plant made major changes that led to more pollutants released into the air without getting the required permits.

The EPA says the facility, one of the country's largest cement plants, is California's biggest source for nitrogen oxide, which causes ozone smog and respiratory problems.

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Sunday, Jan. 18, 2009:](#)

Hype clouds our real air pollution picture

BY LOIS HENRY, Californian staff writer

I have no idea how to say this, so I'm just going to say it:

Claims about air pollution's devastating effects on public health are, um, hooley. Or at least largely hooley.

You have no idea how it pains me to say that having many times, and publicly so, taken officials and politicians to task for not doing more to clean our "filthy air."

Ewww, this crow tastes nothing like chicken!

Please don't take this to mean we shouldn't continue to try and make our air as clean as possible. We should.

But it should be done using a reasoned approach based on solid scientific evidence without the wild claims and near hysteria some environmental groups have beaten us over the heads with to keep us in fear of our next breath without more and more and MORE regulation.

Here's what I've concluded after reading a number of studies, talking to scientists and physicians and looking at some common sense trend data:

A) Our air is cleaner than it's been in 30 years. And our air pollution isn't nearly as bad as we've been led to believe.

B) The pollution we do have is not killing us.

Just recently (November) we were told by Cal State Fullerton researchers that bad air costs the San Joaquin Valley \$6 billion a year, most of that due to the “premature” deaths of more than 800 people allegedly cut down by crummy air.

There was some discussion in news stories, including this paper, about how researchers arrived at that figure. Turns out it’s not an actual cost, as if those 800 people were pumping billions of dollars into the economy when they were suddenly felled by a whiff of ozone. It’s a statistical value the researchers placed on human life, and, in my mind, it’s misleading at best.

Other than that, the media reported that more than 800 people actually kicked the bucket last year because of pollution. (Editors in this newsroom were skeptical about that assertion and our story did quote a researcher who said the number of deaths was inflated, but we could have dug deeper.)

Money aside, I think the real question on whether air pollution is killing people in droves ought to be, really?

I’m convinced the answer is a resounding NOT REALLY.

A 2003 study by James Enstrom, a 35-year lifestyle epidemiologist at University of California, Los Angeles, found California did not have a death rate out of whack with our population. That means we don’t have a lot of premature deaths at all, much less from air pollution.

In fact, California has the fourth lowest total age-adjusted death rate in the country, according to Enstrom.

“The irony is, people are living longer in this state than ever before,” he said.

A Johns-Hopkins study using Medicare data released last month, backs up Enstrom’s death rate findings specifically for exposure to PM2.5 (very small particulate matter, such as soot, which is what’s keeping us from being able to use our fireplaces, by the by), at least in the west from Washington state to Southern California.

“For the 32 western U.S. locations, there is little evidence of an association between chronic PM2.5 and mortality,” the study states.

Enstrom is one of a handful of scientists and researchers fed up with groups using small inconclusive studies to draw extreme conclusions that are then used to create stringent regulations.

“The claims have just gotten out of sight,” Enstrom told me. “Unfortunately, this has become an agenda for a lot of organizations that used to be more interested in research on diseases and now want to be advocates for ways to deal with them and they aren’t focused on real research anymore.”

I know the enviros out there are madly Googling Enstrom for any hint of association with “evil industry.” So to save you some time, he did one study funded by the Electric Power Research Institute and beyond that has no ties to corporations that might benefit from him saying we’ve been bamboozled on air pollution.

I also spoke with Joel Schwartz, a Sacramento-based environmental consultant who used to work for the conservatively bent Reason Foundation but who started out working for an environmental group in Los Angeles and didn’t like the kind of “science” he saw being perpetrated on the public.

Most of the studies being used by regulators are epidemiological or meta-analysis, Schwartz said.

The first looks at groups of people and ties them together by common factors, such as people who had heart attacks and whether they were exposed to high levels of PM2.5 in a certain time frame before the attack.

The second type of study, meta-analysis, aggregates the results of a bunch of other previous studies that looked at similar hypotheses. I'd never heard of such a thing and, frankly, it kinda sounds like cheating to me.

"Activists and regulators are in the business of finding dragons to slay," Schwartz said. "The air is so much cleaner now but they keep tightening the standards and finding ways to make false claims that lower and lower pollution levels are more and more harmful.

"They stay in business as long as the public has the perception that there's a problem to solve."

Take asthma, he said.

We've been told for years that pollution and asthma go hand in hand. If that's true how can it also be true that asthma rates continue to climb — even on the central coast, which has virtually no air quality problems — while our pollution continues to drop?

I had no answer for that, other than, "DOH!"

Some months ago, I was hot after a story tip about elderly people who'd lived here all their lives and never smoked reportedly coming up with terrible lung diseases, of course, because of our air.

I spoke with Dr. Augustine Munoz, a pulmonary specialist at Kern Medical Center, and was deflated when he told me, essentially, nah, ain't happening. Air pollution, he said, doesn't hurt healthy lungs.

"The most rapidly growing lung problem we have in Kern County is sleep apnea due to obesity," he said.

His answers didn't fit my theory. I tucked the interview away and only revisited it when I started wondering about those 800 alleged air pollution deaths. Go figure!

When I asked San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District Executive Director Seyed Sadredin about what I'd learned, he wasn't surprised.

He said the Federal Environmental Protection Agency sets the standards for how much of each pollutant can be in the air at a healthy concentration based on "what we have to assume is proper scientific study."

Even as we've reduced pollution in the valley by 80 percent from industrial sources and 60 percent overall since 1980 (despite a massive population increase) the feds have continued to ratchet down our pollution standards, claiming new science shows even smaller concentrations are unhealthful, particularly for sensitive groups such as the elderly, children and people with respiratory problems.

Even with all that, it's not enough for some environmental groups.

Earth Justice recently sued because the feds found the valley in compliance on the old standard for PM10 (airborne particles, like PM2.5, only bigger) as we hadn't exceeded that old standard in five years.

There's a new standard being adopted, but Earth Justice sued over the old one.

Clearly, this is not about Earth Justice fighting for our health. If the valley is found in "attainment" it takes away their legal hammer to demand even greater regulation based on what appears to be dubious science, and collect legal fees, of course.

The real danger is that people won't put up with being lied to, at least not for long, and a serious backlash could undo the decades of good work that have given us cleaner air.

"If you don't objectively and honestly portray the problem, you do lose credibility," Sadredin acknowledged.

Ya think?

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Saturday, Jan. 17, 2009:](#)

Let's start with enforcing smoking laws we already have

By MARYLEE SHRIDER, Contributing columnist

Yet another report came out this week, confirming that Kern County is a miserable place to live.

Just last week, Bakersfield made Forbes.com's list of America's 10 most boring cities. This week we have the news that we were fourth in the nation in property foreclosures in 2008, and, on Thursday, the American Lung Association of California gave Kern County a big fat "F" for its failure to protect its people from second-hand smoke.

Honestly, how do we live with ourselves?

The Forbes list is a bit of fluff based on the amount of media coverage cities get, so, by that measure, boring ain't so bad.

Our number of property foreclosures is indeed a sad reality, but are we really, as one Associated Press story opined, "a haven for Californians yearning to light up in picnic areas and on athletic fields?"

No, we're not. But we may be a haven for Californians yearning for small government and personal freedom.

Kern County already supports and adheres to state smoking laws, which even the ALA acknowledges are among the "strongest in the nation." Granted, there is room for improvement, but if ALA's most recent report card, and media coverage of it, conjures up images of Kern County hayseeds all but blowing smoke in children's faces.

As always, when commenting on the subject of smoking, I must mention I am as repelled by the habit as anyone else. But let's try, at least, to be fair — the ALA report card, which graded 297 cities in 30 counties, is so rife with Ds and Fs, it's simpler to report who passed and how they did it.

In the entire state of California, only one city earned an overall grade of A — Glendale, in Los Angeles County. The county itself earned an overall grade of C, having, like Kern County, failed miserably in the Smokefree Housing category. Glendale, however, was awarded a B in housing and an A in Smokefree Outdoor Air.

How does a city or county earn an A in the category of Smokefree Outdoor Air? By simply declaring a complete ban on smoking in parks, beaches, sports fields, on trails and other recreational areas, with NO designated smoking areas.

Never mind that smoking, while nasty, is still legal.

A perusal of the report card shows while cities and counties, including Kern County, are making strides in reducing the sales of tobacco products, officials are not so quick to impose ordinances that will restrict a legal activity in areas where the possibility of harm is next to nil.

Which is exactly why such proposals didn't get anywhere when brought before Kern County Supervisors in 2007.

"The way the rules were last presented to us restricted a legal behavior even when it wasn't harming anyone else," says Supervisor Mike Maggard. "If it begins to harm someone else, then that's a different story."

We can do better, but we can do that by enforcing the laws we already have. Smoking is already prohibited within 25 feet of "tot lots" and playgrounds. So how about we post a sign or two that says so, for dolts too dense to know it?

Selling tobacco products to anyone under 18 is also illegal, so bringing the hammer down hard on those who do might go a long way in raising that overall grade.

Imagine — enforcing current smoking restrictions while protecting personal freedoms. Sounds like an A to me.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009:](#)

Our View: What the Valley expects

Our needs are many, will require attention and funding for the new president.

The nation and the world expect a great deal out of Barack Obama when he's sworn in today.

We have our own expectations for the new president, things we'd like to see him pursue for the sake of the Valley.

We have needs here that surpass those in many other parts of the country, and there's a history of having them overlooked in Washington, D.C.

Many of our concerns are shared in every part of the country, but some have a particular resonance in the Valley.

Here's our short list:

The economy

Job creation is the overarching need in any stimulus package adopted in Washington. Unemployment is at alarming levels across the nation, but it's even worse here in the Valley -- as always. Right now, the state's unemployment rate is well over 8 percent, but it's above 11 percent in the Valley, with some rural communities facing jobless rates of 20 percent or more.

Saving jobs and creating new ones can be done in several ways. Restoring the housing market with easier credit will help, given the importance of the housing sector to the Valley's economy.

Public works projects have been shown to be effective at stimulating rapid job growth, and there is no shortage of roads, schools, highways, bridges, levees, parks, transit systems and other public infrastructure in the Valley that have been allowed to decay.

Health care

The Valley is woefully short of everything when it comes to health care.

As part of its economic stimulus package, the new administration should fund construction and renovation of hospitals and clinics in the Valley and elsewhere.

Particular attention should be paid to the needs of rural communities, where many small hospitals and clinics have closed. Access to health care -- especially prenatal, neonatal and other preventive care -- is a major component in the rising cost of care nationwide.

For the long term, Obama should make major investments in medical education at every level. We need more doctors, nurses and technicians of every sort, especially in poorer rural areas.

Incentives are needed to get trained people to practice in those areas, and projects such as the proposed medical school at UC Merced should have strong federal support.

Education

Obama has already said rebuilding schools will be an important element of his stimulus plan. That's good news for the Valley.

Additionally, his administration should quickly revisit the whole range for federal education programs, beginning with the No Child Left Behind Act. Many of the strings attached to federal funding should be cut to give schools the flexibility they need to meet local needs.

Transportation

Our crumbling roads, highways and bridges are in need of major investments in the Valley and the state. Such projects -- many of which are ready to go immediately -- are also one of the best ways to quickly inject stimulus funding into the economy.

But the long-term focus must include alternatives to cars and trucks.

Transit systems, from urban buses and trolleys to high-speed rail lines, are essential if we are to move away from our dependence on oil, improve air quality, reduce congestion and offer cheaper and more efficient ways to move about.

Immigration

Janet Napolitano, Obama's choice for homeland security secretary, said at a confirmation hearing Thursday that fixing the "broken" immigration system would have a high priority. That's good news for the Valley and California, which have borne a heavy burden because of federal inability to come up with a policy that makes sense.

A comprehensive immigration reform must have three main elements:

Enhanced border security to limit the growth of the problem, and make our nation safer from terrorists intent on doing damage.

A fair guest-worker program that provides industries needing foreign laborers a reliable pool of workers.

An opportunity for those already here illegally to earn legal residency if they meet strict requirements, including paying fines and showing they have had a responsible work history.

Environment

Lisa Jackson, Obama's nominee to run the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said Wednesday she will move quickly to revisit the Bush administration's decision to thwart California efforts to reduce greenhouse gases.

That would mean new emissions standards in the state -- and some 17 others -- that we believe would go a long way toward cleaning the Valley's polluted air.

Obama and Jackson will serve the Valley well if they turn the federal EPA into a partner rather than an obstacle in the struggle for cleaner air.

Water

Solving the Valley's water problems has always been largely a task for the region and the state. But the federal government has long had an important role, and that should grow, not shrink.

Investment in the infrastructure of water supplies -- dams, underground water banks, levee and channel repair -- should be part of the stimulus package now, and for the long term.

Agriculture

Tom Vilsack, President-elect Obama's nominee for secretary of agriculture, sailed through a Senate confirmation hearing Wednesday, offering assurances that he is aware of the needs of California and other states that produce fruits and vegetables.

That's good news. Federal agriculture policy has long been dominated by the Midwestern states and their heavily subsidized commodity crops, and Vilsack is a former governor of Iowa.

That's a long agenda for a president who faces the toughest tasks of any chief executive in generations. Obama and his team have their work cut out for them.

But Obama's message of hope and audacity, combined with the historic capacity of the American people to overcome great challenges, are beacons of promise and opportunity, even in these grim days.

[Guest Commentary in the Modesto Bee, Monday, January 19, 2009](#)

Protect us from new 'midnight rules'

Excerpted from Saturday's Chicago Tribune.

The Bush administration has issued a bevy of last-minute rules. One rule makes it easier to dump coal-mining waste into waterways. Another allows farms to exceed air-pollution limits. There's a

rule that lets commercial truckers drive for longer stretches without a break, and one that makes the Family and Medical Leave Act harder to use. These "midnight rules" are issued by federal agencies and don't require the approval of Congress. Why do this now? Midnight rules allow an outgoing president to extend his legacy and avoid many of the political consequences. The regulations are difficult to rescind. President-elect Barack Obama will be able to reverse rules still pending, but rescinding a rule that has gone into effect requires restarting the rulemaking process. That can take years. There is a proposal to give new administrations more leeway to recast rules enacted near the end of the previous administration. It's unlikely the bill will be enacted in time to bury the Bush rules -- but that shouldn't stop Congress from passing it.

[Contra Costa Times Commentary, Saturday, Jan. 17, 2009:](#)

Robert Hallstrom: Pining for the scent of burnt leaves

By Robert Hallstrom, Columnist

We were driving home, passing through one of those remnants of country caught between cities, and the plume of smoke caught my eye. It rose straight into the air, with the green hills in the background, unaffected by any wind, slowly dispersing into the ether as smoke does.

Somebody was burning wood scraps or fallen branches, or some such. This struck me as a bit odd because I don't see fires in folk's backyards anymore.

It reminded me of those times years ago when we burned piles of leaves every autumn. In places other than California, the leaves fell from the trees in October and November, and every weekend, you got the leaf rake out of the garage and reclaimed your lawn by removing the layers of dead leaves.

The leaves were raked into big piles, out back of the house or in front by the curb. You always had to rake the leaves into piles at least twice because by the time the kids tired of jumping into a pile of leaves, it wasn't much of a pile anymore. And then somebody tossed a match into the pile, and the leaves slowly burned into dust, and the air was filled with the smell of autumn, which was the smell of burning leaves.

The parking lot at the bank was covered in leaves last week because, in California, the trees wait far too long to shed their foliage. A half dozen hardworking men raked and swept the leaves into piles, to reclaim the pavement.

No kids jumped into the piles. Nobody tossed a match into the piles. The air did not fill with the smell of autumn. A dozen large, clear plastic bags did their duty, and the leaves were hauled away, to somewhere else. Nobody had any fun with the leaves.

You don't burn leaves around here. That's what they call pollution these days. Heck, most nights you can't burn a log in the fireplace because the air is just way too crowded with toxic stuff. It's different from the way it used to be.

The other day, somebody mentioned that the world feels different today. She was reminiscing about the past, about the time of our childhoods, when the air was more fresh, and the rivers ran more clear, and you could do stuff like burn a log in the fireplace and some leaves in the driveway.

Life goes on without jumping into piles of leaves, and you can survive without knowing the smell of burning leaves or a log in the fireplace. Which is a good thing, since that is what we have left ourselves.

But she wanted to know how to reclaim what we once experienced. The answer, of course, is easy. Just lose two-thirds of the population. Trim down the world a bit. Add less pollution from our mere presence, so the world can absorb what we do. Save some resources. Cool it all back down. Reduce our quantity, so we might increase our quality.

Won't happen of course. We just keep growing, despite the obvious disadvantage. Maybe I'll sneak out tonight and light one leaf on fire, just for the smell. Please don't turn me in to the fireplace police.

Dr. Robert Hallstrom is a veterinarian practicing in Pittsburg. His column appears each Sunday in the East County Times. You can reach him at flashdr@starband.net. The opinions in this column are those solely of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the newspaper.

[Letter to the Oakland Tribune, Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009:](#)

Onerous standards

THE CALIFORNIA Air Resources Board dashed the first true progress that was made on electric cars in this country, as chronicled in the documentary "Who Killed the Electric Car." They are poised to do it again, this time to the plug-in hybrid vehicle.

They are poised to make a ruling that will cripple the nascent plug-in hybrid conversion industry by imposing onerous testing and warranty standards that capital poor entrepreneurs cannot provide. In the process, they will violate their own mandate to reduce global warming pollution.

They are validly concerned about air pollution that can increase when a hybrid's gas engine is started less frequently. However, conversion companies have since found that simply having their software turn on the gas engine for a period whenever the car starts renders these air quality issues nil.

Given that the air quality issues are now gone, and with CARB's mandate to reduce global warming pollution, CARB has no rational choice but to work these conversion companies to find an equitable solution to keep plug-in hybrids on the road.

I'd rather not have to watch another documentary in five years about how CARB could have done the right thing but didn't.

Daniel Bell, Oakland

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009:](#)

Air board regulations area not consistent

Where is the consistency? Area residents are very limited as to when they can enjoy burning wood in their home fireplaces; area farmers are being fined for their animals natural living process of breathing and eliminating and thus harms our air — and yet, a race track has been approved to be built in Tulare — what about all the air pollution that will be coming from all those racing cars and the cars arriving to view that show?

DURK SYBESMA, *Visalia*

[Tri-Valley Herald, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, January 20, 2009](#)

Onerous standards

THE CALIFORNIA Air Resources Board dashed the first true progress that was made on electric cars in this country, as chronicled in the documentary "Who Killed the Electric Car." They are poised to do it again, this time to the plug-in hybrid vehicle.

They are poised to make a ruling that will cripple the nascent plug-in hybrid conversion industry by imposing onerous testing and warranty standards that capital poor entrepreneurs cannot provide. In the process, they will violate their own mandate to reduce global warming pollution.

They are validly concerned about air pollution that can increase when a hybrid's gas engine is started less frequently. However, conversion companies have since found that simply having their software turn on the gas engine for a period whenever the car starts renders these air quality issues nil.

Given that the air quality issues are now gone, and with CARB's mandate to reduce global warming pollution, CARB has no rational choice but to work these conversion companies to find an equitable solution to keep plug-in hybrids on the road.

I'd rather not have to watch another documentary in five years about how CARB could have done the right thing but didn't.

Daniel Bell, Oakland

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the Federal Government offers help to private companies to help clean up the air. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Ayuda del gobierno federal a empresas privadas para limpiar el aire

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, January 20, 2008

El Departamento federal de Agricultura informó que financiará a agricultores de California en programas para reducir la contaminación del aire en sus empresas. El proyecto de Servicios de Conservación de los Recursos Naturales destinará diez millones 900 mil dólares a agroindustriales y pequeños empresarios productores de 30 condados de California. Ese proyecto ofrece fondos y asistencia técnica para proteger y conservar el aire limpio en el estado.

California es el estado que más utiliza ese servicio, informó el Departamento de Agricultura. Los interesados pueden contactar a las representaciones de dicha institución en su región.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the new federal administration could authorize California's environmental law.](#)

La nueva administración federal podría autorizar ley ambiental de California

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Sunday, January 19, 2009

La funcionaria que el presidente entrante, Barack Obama eligió para administrar la Agencia federal de Protección Ambiental (EPA), Lisa Jackson dijo a un panel del Senado que se apoyará en la ley y en las bases científicas para dirigir la política ambientalista del país. Se espera que Jackson autorice a California a poner en vigor sus propias leyes ambientales, como determinó el año pasado la Suprema Corte de Justicia, pero ignoró la saliente administración del presidente George Bush. Al autorizar a California, otros 15 estados activarán legislaciones similares en el país. Una de las medidas más significativas en esas leyes es una demanda de mayor rendimiento y menos contaminación para la industria automotriz.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses an agreement between Cemex & the federal government will benefit the environment. The new equipment that Cemex will install will reduce more than 870 thousand tons of pollutants annually.](#)

Acuerdo de Cemex y gobierno federal estadounidense beneficiará al medio ambiente

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Friday, January 16, 2009

Una filial de la fábrica de cemento mexicana, Cemex alcanzó un acuerdo fuera de tribunales con el Departamento de Justicia mediante el que pagará dos millones e dólares en multas por contaminación del aire, y se compromete además a instalar equipo que reduzca las emisiones, especialmente de óxido de nitrógeno, dióxido de sulfuro y monóxido de carbono.

Una demanda había sido sometida en representación de la Agencia federal de Protección Ambiental, con base en dos modificaciones en la planta de Cemex California en Victorville.

La directora regional de la EPA, Barbara Jordan, dijo que esos cambios habían convertido a la planta de Cemex en la mayor fuente de óxido de nitrógeno, un compuesto que contamina y causa males respiratorios.

El equipo que instala Cemex por la demanda reducirá mil 870 toneladas de contaminantes anuales.