

Update: Air quality forecast and woodburning rules

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, January 4, 2010

MERCED

AQI Forecast for 1/4/2010: 78 Moderate (PM2.5)

School Flag color for 1/4/2010: Yellow

Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status for 1/4/2010: Please burn cleanly

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Daily Air Quality Forecast

More information about the Daily Air Quality Forecast can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

More information about the Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm>.

Update: Air quality forecast and woodburning rules

Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, January 3, 2010

MERCED

AQI Forecast for 1/3/2010: 62 Moderate (PM2.5)

School Flag color for 1/3/2010: Yellow

Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status for 1/3/2010: Please burn cleanly

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Daily Air Quality Forecast

More information about the Daily Air Quality Forecast can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

More information about the Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm>.

Update: Air quality forecast and woodburning rules

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, January 1, 2010

MERCED

AQI Forecast for 1/1/2010: 83 Moderate (PM2.5)

School Flag color for 1/1/2010: Yellow

Wood burning prohibited Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status for 1/1/2010: Wood burning prohibited

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

More information about the Daily Air Quality Forecast can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

More information about the Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm>.

Truckers at Oakland port get break from air rules

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010

OAKLAND, Calif.—Hundreds of truckers who haul goods at the Port of Oakland will be able to continue working there for the next two weeks under an agreement that postpones new pollution rules for them.

The Oakland Mayor's Office helped broker a deal Saturday that gives 1,300 truckers more time to comply with stricter diesel emissions standards that went into effect Jan. 1.

The deal allows drivers who were denied grants last fall to keep working while they reapply for \$11 million in new funding to outfit their vehicles with diesel filters. The filters are intended to reduce air pollution that's blamed for higher rates of cancer and asthma in areas surrounding the port.

The truckers had planned a major protest at the port Monday morning but canceled after the weekend deal was reached.

Oakland Mayor helps craft deal to keep Oakland truckers working

By Cecily Burt, Oakland Tribune

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, Jan. 4, 2010

The Oakland Mayor's office has pulled off a New Year's miracle by bringing together state and local agencies and out-of-work truckers to craft a deal that lets the drivers keep working for two weeks, even if their rigs lack new diesel filters that were required by state law on Jan. 1.

The agreement was forged during a lengthy meeting at Oakland City Hall late Saturday afternoon attended by representatives of the state Air Resources Board, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Port of Oakland and the truckers. The deal prevents an economic meltdown for as many as 1,300 truckers, mostly independents, who were denied grants last fall by allowing them to continue hauling cargo at the Port of Oakland while they line up for \$11 million in new grant funding that was made available late last week. Drivers who previously applied can get \$5,000 toward a new filter, or \$50,000 toward a new truck.

"The state's identification of \$11 million within a week to assist the drivers demonstrates (the regulatory agencies) commitment to Oakland and the effective implementation of environmental regulations, Dellums said. "Today's announcement shows that we can balance environmental, economic and equity interests by working collaboratively and in good faith with the key stakeholders. I am pleased that my office was able to facilitate the problem solving effort.

The truckers were quick to credit the mayor, saying that without his involvement, there would have been no relief.

"We're very happy that we came to a resolution and everybody is working on Monday morning and there is no disruption to Port operations and to our customers," said Bill Aboudi, president of AB Trucking.

"We welcome additional business coming to the Port of Oakland in this bad economic time and we're working very hard to make sure our trucks are green and that we honor our commitment to the residential community and to our truckers."

The truckers had planned a major protest at the port Monday morning, but that has been called off now that the drivers have been assured that they can gain access to the marine terminals while their grant applications are reprocessed. The air board and air district have asked the Port of Oakland to extend the clean air deadline for all trucks until Jan. 17. After that time the drivers will have to provide proof of a new truck or filter sales contract in order to apply for an extension that lasts until April 30.

The new Port Truck Rule that took effect statewide on Jan. 1 bans large diesel trucks manufactured before 1994 and requires new filters on trucks manufactured from 1994 to 2003. There was a \$22 million pot for grants to help the drivers buy new trucks and filters, but the money ran out last spring and left 1,200 mostly independent drivers short of cash to pay for filters and 100 other drivers short funds to buy new rigs.

More details about efforts to help truckers who do not qualify for loans to pay the total filter costs will be released Monday. Average filter costs are \$16,000, but can be more.

Representatives from the Air District will be at the OT411 center in the afternoon all this week to meet the drivers who want to renew their grant applications.

Fairbanks emissions program ends after 25 years

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010

FAIRBANKS, Alaska—Fairbanks' vehicle emissions program has ended after 25 years.

Vehicles in the Fairbanks North Star Borough will no longer will have to undergo inspections and emissions tests.

The borough adopted the program in 1985 as part of the municipality's effort to curb carbon monoxide emissions. However, carbon monoxide levels in Fairbanks have been in compliance with federal standards since 2000.

Chuck Machetta, chairman of the I/M and Air Pollution Control Commission, said it was always the plan to end the Vehicle Inspection and Maintenance Program once carbon monoxide levels improved. Officials credit the program for removing 3 tons of carbon monoxide from the air every day, but many people believe emissions improved because of better automobile technology.

Vehicle inspections consisted of three parts: a visual examination of emission components, a test of the components and a tailpipe reading of emissions at idle and at cruise speed. The program ended Dec. 31.

"It is satisfying," said Frank DeLong, a longtime critic of the program. "I just think the money that we spent on it could have been used for other issues more beneficial for the community."

Borough Transportation and Air Quality Director Glenn Miller predicts people who parked vehicles because they couldn't meet the emissions standards will begin driving them again. Even so, Miller expects the community to remain in compliance as far as carbon monoxide emissions.

"We still have enough cushion in our emissions inventory to deal with that," he said.

Groundbreaking plan to tighten reviews of toxic air pollution stirs debate over development

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Sat., Jan. 2, 2010

Suppose a builder pitches a 100-condominium development in Richmond within 1,000 feet of Interstate 80.

Under proposed air-quality guidelines, for the first time in the U.S., if extra cancer risk meets a specific threshold, the developer would be told to study the potential health effects of the freeway pollution on the people who would live in the homes. That would be in addition to what the developer is already required to do: study the effects of the housing on freeway traffic and the surrounding environment.

If the health risk is too great, the developer might need to modify or scrap his development plan, or spend extra time persuading the city or county to approve it.

This proposal to more closely scrutinize how people in new housing would be affected by existing pollution sources — rather than be satisfied just with studying how new freeways or other pollution sources affect existing neighbors — has thrust the Bay Area Air Quality Management District into another heated debate over pollution reduction.

Air district officials say their proposed guidelines for cities and counties to use in development reviews would break new ground in protecting the public from the risks of cancer, asthma, lung disease and other ailments caused or aggravated by toxic air pollution.

"This plan is about protecting public health by providing better air," said Mark Ross, a regional air board member on the Martinez City Council. "This air district once again is in the vanguard of providing clean air."

Builders contend the air district proposal is overzealous, would kick the struggling building industry when it's down and stifle green development in Oakland, San Jose, Richmond and other cities that yearn for housing near transit centers and downtowns.

"You have cities and transportation agencies spending millions to bring about transit-oriented development, yet the air district is throwing up a new barrier. This makes no sense," said Paul Campos, an attorney for the Homebuilders Association of Northern California. "This proposal would mean additional costs, uncertain delays, onerous regulation and expensive litigation for development."

Environmentalists have had little to say about how the proposed guidelines would affect housing applications near pollution sources. They're concentrating on trying to change another part of the proposal that would set up stricter review standards for the development of new pollution sources, such as gas stations, auto body shops or trucking centers, in six heavily polluted sections of the Bay Area.

The 22-member air board may vote Wednesday on the proposal.

Campos said the air district's toxic pollution proposal could have reaching implications on plans to build housing, businesses, or other developments near pollution sources, as well as proposed new gas stations, power plants or other projects that emit pollution.

Air district managers said they made their proposal to steer cities and counties through the complicated, state-mandated reviews of pollution impacts from new development, and ways to reduce human exposure to the contaminants.

Cities and counties would retain their authority to decide whether and how development would occur. But the proposal would force them to scrutinize air quality more closely.

For the first time, the air district proposes to set a specific health-effects threshold, triggering studies to be done on pollution impacts and ways to reduce them.

Under the guidelines, cities and counties would require the studies when people to live in the proposed housing would be exposed to an extra risk of 10 in a million from a pollution source within 1000 feet.

Experts would arrive at the risk by studying the types, potency and amounts of pollution, and the distance to the nearest homes.

The air district already has a guideline calling for industrial developers to examine pollution effects on existing residents. Under the proposal, housing developers would have to do the same thing.

In the proposal, the air district for the first time would add diesel soot and fine particles as criteria for triggering a pollution study.

Cities and counties would be able to ignore the guidelines, but they would risk being sued by project opponents alleging a violation of the California Environmental Quality Act.

Air district managers said having to do a pollution study wouldn't doom a housing or business development plan, but could spur developers to take extra measures to reduce people's exposure to the contaminants.

For example, a builder proposing homes near a freeway or industry could look into ways to locate the buildings and children's outdoor play areas at the far end of the property to provide space for soot or fumes to disperse, said Gregory Tholen, an air district environmental planner.

The air district also proposes giving builders an alternative means to meet their obligation to consider pollution impacts.

Builders would not be required to conduct a detailed pollution study if their project is in a city or area that prepared a communitywide risk reduction plan with long-term measures to reduce toxic air emissions. The communitywide plans are also part of the air district's proposal.

"We think a communitywide approach is the best way to reduce pollution rather than by a project by project approach," said Henry Hilken, the air district's manager of planning and research.

He suggested the community plans — first of their kind in the nation — might look at measures such as putting pollution filters on diesel trucks in local businesses, routing diesel trucks to stay away out of neighborhoods, or switching city vehicle fleets to use cleaner fuels.

That's not good enough, said Campos of the builders association. It could take years and big bucks to prepare the community risk reduction plans, and building projects could lost their financing and die in the mean time, Campos said.

As builders attack the proposal as onerous, an environmental coalition has attacked part of the plan as too weak.

The Bay Area Environmental Health Collaborative contends the district should set a second and stricter cancer risk guideline for reviewing proposed new pollution sources if they are proposed in six areas with elevated concentrations of diesel soot and other toxic air pollution. An air district analysis has defined the areas as parts of Concord, Richmond, San Jose, Oakland, East Palo Alto and eastern San Francisco.

"These heavily impacted areas have already shouldered more than their share of toxic pollution," said Gordon Mar, the health collaborative's interim director. "There should be no new sources of toxic pollution in these areas."

But air district managers and industries object, saying that setting stricter development guidelines in more polluted areas would discourage development and job creation there.

"We should be helping these urban areas that need economic development, not discouraging it," said Dennis Bolt, a spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association. "It's the wrong way to go."

Bolt also said that the environmental coalition's proposal would make it harder to win permission for upgrades or modernizations of industrial plants, fuel pipelines or gas stations in the six areas with elevated pollution levels.

Colo. St. gets funding to study feedlot emissions

Capital Press, Wed., Dec. 30, 2009

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (AP) -- Colorado State University researchers have received \$1.15 million in federal funds to study how much nitrogen and ammonia are emitted from cattle feedlots.

Feedlots along Colorado's Front Range are believed to be a major source of nitrogen pollution in Rocky Mountain National Park to the west. Biologists say the park's rising nitrogen levels could lead to fish die-offs and other environmental harm.

The money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will fund three projects, led by Colorado State's Institute for Livestock and the Environment. Researchers will measure ammonia and other pollutants from feedlots and evaluate influences on emission levels, such as weather, the animals' diet and the handling of manure.

Feedlots along the Front Range can handle a total of about 600,000 cattle.

Scientists take new look at impact of dust

By Robert S. Boyd

Sacramento Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Friday, January 1, 2010

WASHINGTON – Dust, dust, dust. It's everywhere, burrowing under beds, piling up on windowsills, clogging guns and machinery, irritating eyes, noses and lungs. It soars thousands of miles over continents and oceans, sometimes obliterating the sky.

Enormous masses of the stuff – fine grains of soil, sand, smoke, soot, sea salt and other tiny particles, both seen and unseen – pervade Earth's air, land and water.

Now scientists are beginning to have new respect for the way dust alters the environment and affects the health of people, animals and plants. As global warming raises temperatures and forests are cleared for agriculture and other development, the amount of dust swirling through the Earth's atmosphere is expected to grow. The likely impact is unknown.

"Environmental scientists are increasingly recognizing dust as both a major environmental driver and a source of uncertainty for climate models," said Jason Field, a soil researcher at the University of Arizona in Tucson, who co-wrote a paper, "The Ecology of Dust," that was published in the latest edition of the journal *Frontiers of Ecology and Environment*.

By blackening snow and ice, dust even may have contributed to the end of the ice age 10,000 years ago, Karen Kohfeld, an environmental scientist at Queens College in Flushing, N.Y., wrote in *Advances in Science*, a publication of the Royal Society of London.

The amount of dust traveling through the atmosphere is huge, Kohfeld said.

"Although these individual particles are often invisible to the naked eye, billions of tons of material are transported every year" through the air, she said. "Some of these transport events are even visible from space."

Dust plays a complex role in the environment. Some of its effects are benign. Unlike carbon dioxide, a prime culprit in global warming, most airborne dust particles turn back the sun's rays and thus cool the planet. Dust also carries chemical nutrients that help agriculture.

"Dust can be an important and even in some locations essential parent material for soils," said Daniel Muhs, a researcher at the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver.

Windblown dust from Africa "may be critical in sustaining vegetation" in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico and the southeastern United States, he said.

"Dust delivered to the oceans may also provide some essential nutrients, especially iron, for microscopic marine plants that draw down carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, another counterbalance to greenhouse gas warming," Muhs said.

On the other hand, like other airborne particles, dust can spread harmful pollutants around the world.

"The atmosphere connects all regions of the globe, and pollution emission within any country can affect populations and ecosystems well beyond national borders," Charles Kolb, chief executive officer of Aerodyne Research in Boston, wrote in a report published in October by the National Academies of Science.

Kolb called fine particles, particularly smoke and road dust, "the deadliest air pollutant," responsible for about 348,000 deaths in 25 European countries annually.

"The heavy loads of fine particles we find in many large urban areas exacerbate heart problems and also cause deaths from lung cancer and emphysema," he wrote.

Muhs said dust also cause silicosis, a serious lung disease, and asthma.

Natalie Mahowald, a climate scientist at Cornell University, observed that dust particles "may carry microbes, or actually be microbes."

Besides the constant rain of dust, unusual events have greatly magnified the impact of dust.

More than 800 million tons of topsoil were blown away in the great southwestern Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The collapse of New York's World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, produced huge clouds of toxic dust.

Last year, dust clouds threatened the Beijing Olympics.

Climate change bill faces tough Senate fight

By Jennifer A. Dlouhy, Hearst Newspapers
In the S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, January 3, 2010

Washington - -- It took Democratic leaders weeks of negotiations, deal-cutting and floor debate before they could squeak a broad health care overhaul bill through the Senate last month.

But that was nothing compared to the challenge facing Senate leaders this spring if they press forward with controversial legislation to combat global warming.

The plan to cap greenhouse gases blamed for the Earth's rising temperature is complicated by election-year politics and fears about exacerbating the nation's economic woes.

Cap-and-trade issue

It also is hindered by moderate Democrats' wariness about the centerpiece of the leading proposals: cap-and-trade programs that would allow carbon dioxide emitters to comply with steadily tightening greenhouse gas limits either by cutting their emissions or buying and trading allowances to release the substances.

The leading climate change proposals face opposition from Republicans worried about the price tag for utilities, manufacturers and consumers. The proposals also are viewed skeptically by Democrats in coal-producing regions whose home-state industries could be battered by new carbon caps.

Although the House narrowly passed its version of climate change legislation in June, the issue has languished in the Senate, where Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has said the matter will not be debated until spring at the earliest.

In the meantime, Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., Joe Lieberman, independent-Conn., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., are working on a compromise measure designed to attract the crucial 60 votes needed to overcome procedural hurdles in the Senate.

Because a handful of Democrats are unlikely to support a final climate change bill, supporters know they will need to win some Republican votes to prevail.

The three are planning on combining a cap-and-trade plan with expanded offshore oil and gas drilling, new incentives and loans for nuclear power and support for developing "clean coal" technology that can trap carbon dioxide released when the fossil fuel is burned.

Combination strategy

Graham argues that the proposals are too controversial to pass the Senate on their own. But combined, they have a shot.

"The energy bill will never have 60 votes for the nuclear power provisions that I desire," Graham said. "We'll never have offshore drilling standing alone. They'll never get the (House climate change) bill passed standing alone. Let's combine concepts of controlling pollution and energy independence."

The negotiations have been cheered on by the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, an umbrella group of environmental advocacy groups and businesses - including GE, Dow Chemical and Shell - that backed the House-passed bill.

The risk for Kerry, Lieberman and Graham is that some senators vehemently oppose one or more strands of the compromise package. For every vote they gain from a nuclear advocate or drilling proponent, they risk losing support from a carbon cap enthusiast.

Federal agencies may have to consider climate before they act
The Obama administration may issue an order that would expand the National Environmental Policy Act's scope to prevent global warming. The move could open up new avenues to challenge projects.

By Jim Tankersley, staff writer
L.A. Times, Friday, Jan. 1, 2010

Reporting from Washington - The White House is poised to order all federal agencies to evaluate any major actions they take, such as building highways or logging national forests, to determine how they would contribute to and be affected by climate change, a step long sought by environmentalists.

Environmentalists say the move would provide new incentives for the government to minimize the heat-trapping gas emissions scientists blame for global warming. Republicans have opposed it as potentially inhibiting economic growth.

The new order would expand the scope of the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, a landmark statute that turns 40 today. The act already requires federal agencies to consider environmental impacts such as land use, species health and air and water quality when approving projects.

By formalizing a requirement to consider effects on climate -- a step some agencies already take -- the administration would introduce a broad new spectrum of issues to be considered. It could also open up new avenues for environmentalists to attack, delay or halt proposed government actions. The environmental impact statements originally required by the act have become routine battlegrounds for environmentalists, developers and others.

Under the order, agencies would need to account for whether such factors as predicted rises in sea levels would affect proposed new roads along shorelines; or whether, because of temperature changes and species migration, clear-cutting a patch of forest would result in new types of trees replacing the originals.

California lawmakers mandated in 2007 that state-level environmental assessments take climate change into account.

"People will think longer and harder and smarter about what they build when they understand that the environment around them is changing," said David Bookbinder, chief climate counsel for the Sierra Club. Bookbinder was one of several environmental lawyers who petitioned the White House in 2008 to formally recognize climate considerations under the act.

The head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Nancy Sutley, said in an interview this week that federal agencies "should think about both the effect of greenhouse gas emissions, and the effects of climate change, on decisions they make."

She added that the administration's decision was not yet final.

Business groups and many Republicans say that federal environmental reviews already hamstring economic development with red tape and they've warned that adding climate to the process would just make things worse.

"Requiring analysis of climate change impacts during the NEPA process . . . will slow our economic recovery while providing no meaningful environmental benefits," Sens. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.) and John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), wrote in a letter to Sutley in October.

"Projects across the nation are already experiencing delays or being canceled due to inappropriate and inefficient implementation and litigation from existing environmental regulations," the letter said.

In a letter responding to Inhofe and Barrasso, Sutley said the act "cannot be used to regulate greenhouse gas emissions," suggesting that the administration would not block projects simply because they would add carbon dioxide to the air.

She also said that the act had not slowed any projects from being approved under the \$787-billion economic stimulus package passed last year. In the interview, Sutley said that wouldn't change even if climate considerations were included in the process.

"I don't think that we have much to fear in terms of NEPA being a barrier to getting things done," she said.

Studies Find Heavy Heating Oil Has Severe Effect on Air Quality

By Mireya Navarro, staff writer

N.Y. Times, Thursday, Dec. 31, 2009

When it comes to finding a major culprit for the tainted air in a wintry New York, one often needs to look no farther than out the window to see a big building spewing black smoke.

The source is often No. 6 heating oil, the cheapest but most viscous type pumped into aging boilers, or its cousin No. 4 heavy oil, which is only slightly less noxious.

City officials have already promised to introduce regulations over the next year to phase out both types. But the issue has acquired a bit of urgency since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and his health commissioner,

Dr. Thomas Farley, released a comprehensive survey of air quality in the city two weeks ago.

The study found the highest levels of fine particles, sulfur dioxide and other pollutants in neighborhoods where many residential and commercial buildings burn No. 4 or No. 6 oil.

Now pressure is building on the administration to give buildings a firm 10-year deadline for switching to cleaner oil or to natural gas. Environmental groups and the American Lung Association said the move would significantly reduce soot pollution, alleviating heart and lung ailments.

"This is a simple, common-sense solution to ensure that New York City residents are breathing cleaner air," said Michael Seilback, vice president for public policy and communications for the Lung Association in New York State and New York City.

City officials say they have been trying to settle on the best approach for ridding buildings of the dirty oil for about a year and expect to issue new rules early this year.

Building owners say it can take more than \$100,000 to replace oil burners, clean up tanks and switch their heating systems to cleaner oil or to gain access to suitable natural gas pipelines.

Rohit T. Aggarwala, director of the mayor's Office of Long-term Planning and Sustainability, said the city must weigh the costs of a changeover and the availability of natural gas citywide. "We're working on a fix," said Jason Post, a spokesman for the mayor's office. "We want to do this right."

The Environmental Defense Fund, a national environmental group, recently issued its own report, saying that just 1 percent of all buildings in the city — about 9,000 large commercial, residential and institutional structures — create 87 percent of the soot pollution arising from heating oil. (The group has posted a list at www.edf.org/dirtybuildings so New Yorkers can see which kind of oil their buildings burn.)

If those buildings were to burn cleaner oil, the fund's report said, the amount of airborne pollutants they release would decline by as much as 65 percent to 95 percent.

The numbers by which heating oil is classified are based on boiling temperature, composition and other factors. No. 2 heating oil, which is cleaner but more expensive than No. 6 or No. 4, accounts for an estimated 73 percent of the heating oil burned in the city, the environmental group found.

Evan Thies, a spokesman for the group, said users of the most polluting fuels tended to be larger buildings that could accommodate huge boilers that generate the heat necessary to burn heavy oil.

The dirtiest oils can cost about 60 cents less a gallon, which has been another disincentive for buildings to upgrade their boilers. But in its report, the Environmental Defense Fund said that cleaner fuels improve the efficiency of burners and reduce operating costs, compensating for the up-front costs and the higher price of No. 2 oil.

The group, using records from the city's Department of Environmental Protection, which approves boiler permits, points out in its report that heavy oil heats buildings in some of the wealthiest ZIP codes in the city, most of them in Manhattan.

The pollution is aggravated by diesel fuel emissions from heavy car and truck traffic in some areas. But Stuart M. Saft, chairman of the Council of New York Cooperatives and Condominiums, says the assumption that only the rich live in the buildings at issue ignores the reality that even at wealthy addresses, "there are people living on fixed incomes or on Social Security who bought their apartments 40 years ago."

Aside from the \$100,000 that he estimates it would cost up front for the average 100- to 150-unit building to replace its oil burner and clean up its oil tanks to make the switch, the cost difference between the dirty and cleaner oils is substantial, Mr. Saft said.

His group, he said, would oppose any phase-out that did not exempt "functioning" heating systems, as opposed to those at the end of their life.

But some buildings are already converting their systems as part of broader environmental efforts.

Diane C. Nardone, president of the board at 11 Fifth Avenue, a 288-apartment cooperative in two 20-story buildings in Greenwich Village, said it was in the midst of converting to natural gas from two boilers that use

No. 6 oil. She said the switch would cost roughly \$225,000, which the co-op will be able to cover after refinancing its mortgage.

But the cooperative expects to recoup the up-front costs in about two years through fuel savings, she said, given that natural gas will be cheaper than oil in the long run.

"We understand the impact it will have on the economics of the building and, equally important, on the environment," she said.

The co-op is also installing two new roofs with vegetation that will absorb rainwater, and energy-efficient windows. Still, Ms. Nardone said that city and state governments needed to offer more financial incentives to help buildings meet any new environmental regulations.

"Give property tax credits, make loans available at low interest, if you want the general population to take the measures that need to be taken to improve the environment," she said.

City officials say older people and young children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution, which can irritate the lungs and worsen conditions like asthma and emphysema, as well as increase the risk of heart attack and premature death.

Mindful of the health risks, the city is already converting some of its own heavy-oil-burning boilers to natural gas, after identifying 100 city school buildings burning No. 6 oil in neighborhoods with high asthma rates.

[N.Y. Times editorial, Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010:](#)

Where the Action Is on Climate

Even as many members of Congress resist as too hard or too costly the steps necessary to address global warming, American cities and states — the largest of which have carbon footprints bigger than those of most nations — have quietly been making serious commitments to curb

emissions. Instead of finding reasons to do nothing, Congress should build on these actions to fashion a national response to climate change.

According to a recent study by Environment America, an advocacy group, about half of the states have broad plans and specific regulations aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions. When fully realized, these actions would cut emissions by over 7 percent between now and 2020 — a sizable distance toward the 17 percent reductions President Obama promised at Copenhagen.

About half the reductions would come from proposed emission limits in six big states, plus a regional cap on power plant emissions adopted by New York and nine other Northeastern states. The other half would result from legally required increases in the use of alternative energy sources like wind — 29 states have approved such mandates — as well as stronger state and city efficiency standards for appliances, lighting and buildings.

California's goal of cutting greenhouse gases by one-quarter by 2020 is plausible partly because the state has been so successful in improving the efficiency of its power plants and buildings, promoting renewable energy and insisting on fuel-efficient vehicles. The state recently approved strict new energy-efficiency requirements for television sets, which now account for 10 percent of the average household's energy use but are largely unregulated. The rules will save consumers \$1 billion in energy bills and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by three million tons each year. Though that is just under 1 percent of current emissions, it is small steps like these that will take California to its overall goal.

In another positive move, New York City has adopted a new law requiring periodic "energy audits" on 22,000 large commercial and residential buildings that account for half of the city's carbon dioxide emissions.

Owners will not be required to make renovations under the law, although this idea should be revisited if the economy improves. The expectation is that the prospect of saving energy costs over the long term will lead to major investments in more efficient heating and cooling systems. The law is a critical component of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's goal of reducing New York City's carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2030.

A national policy endorsed by Congress that puts a price on greenhouse gas emissions is urgently needed. These states and cities shed a hopeful light on what this nation and others can and must achieve.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010:](#)

Questions AP reporter

Discarding the truth

The debate over "global warming" is being driven by special interests on both sides of the debate. Unfortunately, scientific truth is the first item to be discarded when billions of dollars ride on the resulting policy decisions.

The question of the scientific consensus among climate scientists regarding global warming is the most abused. Environmental groups claim that there is a solid consensus among climate scientists in that if you ask these scientists if the earth is warming, are we in the warmest weather seen in close to one thousand years, and is carbon released into the atmosphere a part of the problem, you will get a definite "yes."

If you ask these same climate scientists if the earth regularly goes through climate cycles as the earth is currently in, the current climate cycle is not unusual, and carbon most likely only plays a part, and is not the only part, of the run up of temperature since 1850, and again you get a definite "yes."

Warming issue is extortion

Regarding the article "Climate talks shift into high gear amid protest" Dec. 13: Desmond Tutu, while in Copenhagen, stated "This is a problem. If we don't resolve it, no one is going to survive."

And now he wanted to outline national pledges to curb carbon emissions and set up a mechanism to provide billions of dollars in help for poor countries.

Can someone in the media let him know that the Climate Research Unit has admitted to suppression and destruction of scientific data, subverting any peer review processes and has been blacklisting and attacking opponents, all of which demonstrate that the scientific anthropogenic climate issue, formerly known as global warming, is simply another means to extort millions of U.S. tax dollars.

C.D. Smith

It was a surprise to see the Dec. 8 Associated Press article by Charles J. Hanley claiming that climate change is gaining speed. He is the reporter who worked with the Climate Research Unit to disseminate climate data falsified to show this trend.

The Bee does not serve its readers when it prints articles by people like Mr. Hanley who have been discredited for manipulating the facts to influence public understanding of the causes of climate change. Why isn't

The Bee more discriminating in printing stories on this topic from the Associated Press.

John McCann, Clovis

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, Jan. 1, 2010:](#)

Cold Christmas

No burning on Christmas Day in Fresno for the second year in a row. The day of the year where families gather for fun and no fire to keep warm with the season.

Why?

Bill Rogers, Clovis

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Monday, January 4, 2010](#)

Another View: RT building future while controlling costs, increasing safety

By Steve Cohn and Steve Miller - Special to The Bee

The op-ed "RT a drain on the county's taxpayers" (Viewpoints, Dec. 19) was misleading and callously dismissed the needs of thousands of seniors, children and disabled persons who rely on transit and thousands more who choose to use the Sacramento Regional Transit District's bus and light-rail system instead of owning, driving and parking a car.

RT is not "grossly overfunded, subsidized, underutilized and plagued by crime." Despite \$26 million less in state funding and \$24 million less in sales tax revenue this year, RT continues to meet every fiscal challenge by controlling costs through hiring freezes, furloughs and shifting health care costs to employees, and generating revenue through parking fees, advertising and other means. The op-ed's budget comparisons are misleading. After factoring in the cost of inflation from 1990 to 2009, RT's operating cost per passenger has actually decreased 9.4 percent.

Crime is hardly rampant. Since July 1, RT has carried 10.8 million passengers, yet received only 25 security-related complaints. Nonetheless, RT has significantly increased public safety and security measures over the last few years.

After experiencing record ridership in 2008 when gas prices were \$4 a gallon, RT was hit hard by the economic downturn, high unemployment and "Furlough Fridays." Nonetheless, RT continues to weather the storm with ridership higher than any year other than 2008.

RT is moving forward with two light-rail extensions – the Green Line to the airport, the highest-rated project by Sacramento voters, and the South Line to Cosumnes River College. Building light rail creates jobs and spurs economic development, while reducing operating costs. Each mile of new track adds 1,700 jobs, at lower costs per mile than freeways, improves air quality and

reduces traffic congestion. In 2009, RT passengers who chose to use transit avoided driving more than 52.6 million miles, saving 20,800 tons of greenhouse gas emissions.

The RT board, representing every city in Sacramento County, recently adopted the TransitAction Plan, to shape the future of transit for the next 25 years. The plan envisions a comprehensive, connected network of light rail, streetcars, buses and neighborhood shuttles where 80 to 90 percent of county residents are within walking distance of frequent service. This plan builds upon the award-winning SACOG Blueprint, supporting a more compact urban community, preserving farmland and open space, improving air quality, reducing greenhouse gases, and promoting healthier lifestyles. RT's mobility vision is focused on Sacramentans spending less time stuck in congestion.

The time to build this future is now.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Friday, January 1, 2010](#)

Problems, solutions from visiting editors

Dwain Zack

Growth continues to be a critical issue for our community. Those who profit from rampant development would have us believe growth is always good, that we must grow or die. But we all pay a price for every new rooftop. Every new house brings greater congestion to our roads, more pollution to our air. Development degrades our quality of life.

As the economy begins to bounce back, we need to resist the temptation to return to our old pave-the-valley philosophy. We need to support slow-growth measures. Vote for candidates who promise a measured approach to development.

[Stockton Record, Guest Commentary, Wednesday, December 30, 2009](#)

We need to hit snooze on global warming alarmists

By Debra J. Saunders

For years, global warming alarmists have pointed to every drought and heat wave as proof that it was a real environmental threat.

They had few qualms about blurring the line between weather and climate to make a PR point. Perhaps, then, it was karma that brought a blizzard and freezing temperatures to the U.N. climate change Conference of Parties confab in Copenhagen (or COP-15 for short) recently.

You may have read about the 1,200 limos and 140 private planes commissioned to transport COP-15 dignitaries in style. Critics love to point to the hypocrisy of world leaders - such as Prince Charles and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown - touching down in separate private planes to a conference ostensibly dedicated to curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

But it's the Flying High Lords of Greendom's air of unreality that concerns me. If world leaders truly believed that global warming will lead to famine, rising sea levels and melting of the North Pole ice - along with countless deaths - surely they would want to set an example by flying commercial.

Instead, they travel like pooh-bahs of the stratosphere, then justify their excesses by tossing \$100 or so into a carbon-offset fund.

In that godlike spirit, President Obama lauded the COP-15's pact to limit global warming to a rise of only 2 degrees Celsius by 2050 as "an unprecedented breakthrough."

What's the next trick? An eclipse? Now I am fairly skeptical about global warming alarmism - largely because it's hard to heed true believers when they fail to behave in a way that addresses their big issue.

My advice to true believers: If you really believe global warming is caused by man and threatens Earth, stop supporting treaties that don't mandate greenhouse-gas reductions.

For too long, the issue of global warming has hinged on whether politicians said they believed in global warming, not whether they worked to reduce their nation's greenhouse-gas emissions. If the alarmists are correct, then it doesn't matter what people believe if they don't act on those beliefs.

Instead of pretending that critics don't exist, debate them. Stop pretending that consumers can fight global warming simply by using politically correct light bulbs, and recycling. Environmentalists have argued that developed nations will have to cut emissions by 80 percent - and that requires bigger changes than sorting your trash.

Don't support treaties with untenable goals that are to be met decades into the future. Enough with the worst-case scenarios. Al Gore has a penchant for repeating the most dire predictions on global warming - and not always accurately. As the Times of London reported last week, Gore told a Copenhagen audience, that according to a Dr. Wieslaw Maslowski, "there is a 75 percent chance that the entire north polar ice cap, during the summer months, could be completely ice-free within five to seven years."

Except Maslowski told the Times he had no idea where Gore got that idea. "I would never try to estimate likelihood at anything as exact as this."

Polls show Americans are cooling on global warming. It could be that voters don't buy into the all-bad scenarios predicted by Gore and company.

[Tracy Press, Commentary, Tuesday, December 29, 2009](#)

Green Living: Green goes back to the future

by Christina Frankel/For the Tracy Press

As we approach the New Year, there is the inevitable review of how well we met our resolutions from last year. But what if the past held our future?

In 2010, new regulations will be established that will revisit what we were doing in 1990.

Do you remember what you were doing in 1990? For my husband and me, 1990 was B.C. — before children — and to paraphrase a famous literary quote, it was “the best of times and the worst of times.”

The best involved buying a house in Tracy, establishing roots after renting and living in a tiny condo for a year. The worst was a skiing accident I had, with a long road to recovery to simply walk again.

For Tracy, 1990 was a year for population boom, as every builder — good and bad — was building homes. Although hard to believe in this economy, people in 1990 were camping out at subdivisions to buy their homes as builders released new houses in limited lotteries.

The Tracy of 1990 had fewer than 35,000 residents, no mall, no movie theater, no Walmart, no outlet center, no sports complex.

The Holly Sugar factory and the H.J. Heinz factory were in full operation, and avoiding kamikaze tomatoes from overfilled trucks was a real driving hazard in Tracy.

And now 1990 will be the benchmark year, the proverbial line in the sand, that everyone in California will be held to, as we reduce our greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

In 2006, California's Legislature passed Assembly Bill 32, called the California Global Warming Solutions Act. Simply put, by 2020, Californians will need to reduce GHG emissions to 1990 levels.

This will require a 25 percent to 30 percent reduction in GHG emissions. That doesn't sound like much, except for the fact that we have already exceeded 1990 levels by more than 15 percent and continue to go in the wrong direction.

Think about it like you're on a road trip, and you miss your turn-off. The farther you go the wrong way, the harder and more irritating the trip becomes: Not only do you have to stop going the wrong way, you have to backtrack before you can start making progress the right way.

If we ever hope to make the deadline in 10 years, we need to change today what we are doing. And the ante only increases, because by 2050, California will need to reduce GHG emissions by 80 percent.

From where we are now, that is essentially a net gain of zero, especially after our economy starts growing again.

A companion bill, Senate Bill 375, was passed in 2008 to direct land-use decisions to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT). For the average person, reducing VMTs, and therefore GHG emissions, means that we have to get out of our cars and walk, bike or use public transportation options to shop or work.

Tracy just completed a city-wide GHG inventory that reported that transportation alone generated 63 percent of the GHG emissions in the city. Three-quarters is due to Tracy's business and residential travel on the triangle of highways around Tracy. Suburban sprawl sets up residents to get in the car to meet their basic needs, increasing GHG emissions.

Mountain House, a beautiful, planned community, is a textbook example of suburban sprawl: a car-centric community with no bus services, limited shopping and no jobs.

The Senate bill will require a "sustainable communities strategy," in which city growth will need to be smarter, denser, infill development that's more walkable — closer to existing businesses and services.

Most people are unaware of the bills, because for the most part, they haven't impacted their lives yet. But by the end of 2010, regulations will be in place to achieve the goals — everything from where communities can grow to our regional transportation options; how our goods are transported; the type of refrigerants in our air conditioners, cars and refrigerators; how our power is generated; and ways to green our schools and our homes.

With 2010 approaching, the countdown clock has already begun. Tracy's effort with the Emerald City initiative and revisions to the general plan are pre-emptive steps to stave off the inevitable: The status quo has changed, and we need an immediate course correction, or we will miss the mile marker to reduce our GHG emissions.

- For a change: Walk more and be healthy.
- To make a difference: Reduce your car trips. Think of it as if you were paying a taxi for every trip, and you will be smarter about your errands.
- To make a stand: Carpool, take public transportation or telecommute to work at least once a week. This will reduce your GHG emissions by as much as 20 percent.

Christina D.B. Frankel is a 20-year Tracy resident, architect and mother of three. Her column, Living Green, runs twice-monthly in the Tracy Press.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the Association of Independent Truckers of California Ports informed that they expect that the state's government will postpone rule that would only allow entry to trucks with emission reduction equipment. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

California podría emplazar la orden de cambio de motores a camiones del primero de enero

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingue, Monday, January 04, 2010

La Asociación de Camioneros Independientes de los Puertos de California informó que espera que el gobierno estatal postergue este lunes una orden de que a partir del primero de enero en

California sólo circulen camiones con equipos de reducción de contaminación de diesel. Representantes de la referida asociación y de la Oficina de Recursos del Aire de California se reunieron el fin de semana para discutir la situación. Ron Dickens es un dirigente de los camioneros, y dijo que si el problema que se pretende resolver es ambiental, en los puertos ya hay muchos menos camiones de los que había anteriormente porque fueron retirados por ser contaminantes. Los camioneros piden una moratoria al plan estatal mientras consiguen préstamos y otros recursos para cambiar motores o instalar filtros contra la contaminación.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses solar parks put at risk turtles in California. BrightSource energy has been pressuring for the past two years to receive a permit to construct more than 400 thousand solar panels, but this puts in jeopardy the wild life in that region.](#)

Parque solar pone en riesgo a tortugas en California

MICHAEL R. BLOOD / Associated Press

La Opinión, Saturday, January 02, 2010

LOS ÁNGELES (AP).- En una zona del desierto de Mojave, en California, dos docenas de tortugas raras podrían interponerse en el camino de un extenso complejo de energía solar, en un caso que pone de relieve las crecientes tensiones entre la conservación de vida silvestre y la búsqueda de energía más limpia en los Estados Unidos.

BrightSource Energy, una empresa de Oakland, ha estado presionando por más de dos años por un permiso para construir 400 mil paneles solares en Mojave. Este podría convertirse en el primer proyecto de su tipo que autoriza el gobierno en terrenos públicos, y crearía una premisa para que otros sigan solicitando grandes extensiones de tierra pública en el país.

La construcción vendría con un costo: los científicos han concluido que más de seis millas cuadradas (15 kilómetros cuadrados) de hábitat de la tortuga del desierto se perderán si el gobierno federal otorga el permiso de construcción del parque solar.

Sierra Club y otros ambientalistas quieren que el complejo se traslade a otro sitio, para preservar esta reserva natural de plantas y vida silvestre, incluyendo la tortuga del desierto, el tecolote llanero occidental y el borrego cimarrón.

"Es realmente un buen proyecto. Sólo se encuentra en el lugar equivocado", dijo Ieene Anderson, del Centro para la Diversidad Biológica de Tucson, Arizona, que estudia el medio ambiente.

La disputa es un indicio de lo que sucederá en el futuro, a medida que más compañías busquen desarrollar energía solar, eólica y lgeotérmica en tierras que los ambientalistas desean proteger, al mismo tiempo que apoyan el desarrollo de energías alternativas.

En un área de belleza austera, en el desierto de Mojave, se decide lo que merece la pena conservar y a qué costo, en un estado que aspira a generar un tercio de su electricidad a partir de fuentes renovables en 2020.

La Oficina de Administración de Tierras (Bureau of Land Management) ha recibido más de 150 aplicaciones para grandes proyectos de energía solar en 1,8 millones de acres (730 mil hectáreas) de tierras federales en California, Nevada, Arizona, Nuevo México, Colorado y Utah.

Sólo en California, estos proyectos podrían reclamar un área del tamaño de Rhode Island, transformando al estado en el proveedor más grande de energía solar en el mundo.

BrightSource Energy quiere este permiso para construir tres plantas de energía solar en Mojave, donde se generaría la energía suficiente para 142 mil viviendas cada año, y miles de millones de dólares de ingresos.

La energía del sol se utiliza para calentar agua y producir vapor, que a su vez lleva a las turbinas para generar electricidad. El proyecto que debe construirse en varias fases, incluyen siete torres metálicas de 459 pies (140 metros), una tubería de gas natural, tanques de agua, generadores de turbina de vapor, las calderas y los edificios de la administración y mantenimiento. Cada planta estaría rodeado por vallas de acero de 8 pies de altura.

El desierto de Mojave recibe la luz del sol durante la mayor parte del año, y el terreno en disputa está cerca de líneas de transmisión que pueden llevar la electricidad a los consumidores.

Biólogos federales y estatales propusieron en noviembre pasado que la empresa capture y desplace a las tortugas a otro sitio, una propuesta que podría costar a BrightSource un estimado de \$25 millones de dolares.

La empresa se negó a comentar directamente sobre estas cuestiones.

Probablemente pasarán meses antes que los reguladores estatales y federales tomen una decisión sobre el destino de las tortugas.

John Woolard, presidente de BrightSource, advirtió que una regulación estricta podría desalentar esta inversión, al referirse a las "desmedidas y extremas" exigencias que pesan sobre la empresa.

En un momento en la Casa Blanca está presionando para que el rápido desarrollo de la energía verde, Woolard predijo el resultado en el desierto de California repercutiría ampliamente.

Sierra Club propuso a los reguladores el desplazamiento de este parque solar a un espacio cercano a la carretera interestatal 15, la autopista que conecta Los Ángeles y Las Vegas, para evitar lo que sería una sentencia de muerte para las tortugas.

El grupo sostiene que los reptiles son una variedad "genéticamente distinta" de las tortugas del desierto y que la población de esta especie está disminuyendo en el país.

En 1994, el gobierno federal asignó 6,4 millones de acres (2,6 millones de hectáreas), como "hábitat protegido" para la tortuga en los estados de California, Nevada, Arizona y Utah.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses California activates almost 250 renewable energy projects on January 1st.](#)

California activa cerca de 250 nuevos proyectos de energía renovable este primero de enero

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingue, Thursday, December 31, 2009

Este primero de enero comienzan a activarse en California unos 250 nuevos proyectos de generación de energía limpia, basados en nuevas leyes de protección y energía aprobadas a lo largo del 2009.

Todos los proyectos en conjunto equivaldrán, al entrar en operaciones, a unos 70 mil megavatios. Un sólo megavatio -en términos generales- equivale a la electricidad que consumen unos mil hogares californianos.

La estrategia de California incluye la construcción de generadoras de energía solar, las más grandes que se construyan hasta ahora en el mundo, que se desarrollarían en el Valle Imperial y en el desierto.

Exactamente dentro de una década, al iniciar el año 2020 California deberá consumir por lo menos un tercio de su electricidad generada de fuentes limpias.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses an airplane that flies on solar energy. "Solar Impulse" does not use fuel, does not add emissions into the atmosphere and can fly 36 hours straight.](#)

Un avión que vuela con energía solar

"Solar Impulse" no utiliza carburante

Marta Ragel, EFE

Univision, Monday, January 04, 2010

Que un avión pueda volar 36 horas seguidas gracias a la energía solar ya parece un sueño, pero que incluso pueda hacerlo sin utilizar ningún tipo de carburante y sin lanzar emisiones contaminantes parece mucho más que una utopía. Sin embargo, el prototipo de este avión ya ha levantado el vuelo en Suiza.

Impulsado por el sol

Después de seis años de trabajo, los ingenieros de "Solar Impulse" contuvieron la respiración el pasado 3 de diciembre mientras veían el prototipo del primer avión impulsado cien por cien con energía solar cuando intentaba levantar el vuelo por primera vez. Y lo consiguió.

Uno cree tener delante de sí la venganza de Ícaro, quien según la mitología griega perdió las alas en pleno vuelo al derretir el sol la cera con la que estaban sujetas a su espalda. Ahora el astro no sólo no impedirá el vuelo del hombre, sino que le dará la energía necesaria para mezclarse con las nubes.

La pipa de la paz entre el sol y el hombre es el prototipo HB-SIA de la empresa "Solar Impulse", un avión de la envergadura de un Airbus A340 que no supera el peso de un automóvil. Un logro nunca antes alcanzado por la aeronáutica en términos de rigidez, ligereza y de control de vuelo con los 63,40 metros que separan los dos extremos de las alas del avión y sólo 1.600 kilos de peso.

Más ligero que un planeador

Para este desafío, el presidente de "Solar Impulse" y cofundador del proyecto, André Borschberg, explicó que "cada pieza del prototipo es única y debía ser concebida y luego diseñada para poder optimizarla y aligerarla al máximo. Considerando su peso y su tamaño, ¡el prototipo es diez veces más ligero que los mejores planeadores!".

Sin embargo, el carácter totalmente inédito del prototipo suponía también una amenaza al desconocerse sus condiciones de vuelo. Para aprender a controlar esta nueva nave, los pilotos han trabajado con un simulador de vuelo en el que se familiarizaron con las peculiaridades de dirección del avión.

"Gracias al simulador hemos entendido mejor la lentitud del avión, su pequeño radio de giro así como su comportamiento de vuelo típico de los aviones de gran envergadura, como una estabilidad lateral y de dirección más bien reducida", dijo el director de vuelos de prueba, Claude Nicollier.

Este prototipo no es el primer avión solar que se construye, pero sí es el proyecto más ambicioso en el sector, ya que posee la capacidad de almacenar la energía para poder volar de noche. Un objetivo en el que comenzarán a trabajar el próximo año.

Una vez que se supere esta etapa, "Solar Impulse" espera rescribir los grandes logros de la historia de la aviación con su nave solar HB-SIB, fabricada a partir del prototipo actual. Atravesar los Estados Unidos o el Atlántico son algunos de los trayectos que planean repetir en 2012 antes de la esperada vuelta al mundo.

La vuelta al mundo

Hecha en primera instancia en cinco etapas, el objetivo mayor del proyecto es realizar la vuelta al mundo sin escalas cuando la eficacia de las baterías permita reducir el peso de la nave y embarcar así a dos pilotos en los vuelos de larga duración. Un sueño que parece sacado de una novela de Julio Verne, a la manera de su principal protagonista, Bertrand Piccard.

Nacido en una familia de exploradores, el abuelo de Bertrand cumplió dos de los sueños más locos del hombre: convertirse en pájaro o en pez. Inventor del globo estratosférico presurizado y del submarino batiscafo, el profesor Auguste Piccard es el científico en quien se inspiró el dibujante Hergé para la creación del profesor Tornasol de la serie de libros de Tintín.

Siguiendo la brillante estela de su abuelo, Bertrand realizó en 1999 la primera vuelta al mundo en globo aerostático sin escalas. Un 21 de marzo, a las 6 horas GMT, Piccard y Brian Jones aterrizaron sobre el desierto de Egipto después de 19 días, 21 horas y 55 minutos en el aire.

Una vuelta al mundo en 20 días que le guiñaba el ojo a los libros de Julio Verne y le daba la idea a Piccard de repetir la experiencia sin carburantes ni emisiones contaminantes. “Si los vientos hubieran sido un poco más flojos nos habríamos quedado sin carburante y habríamos caído al mar sin llegar a Egipto. Esta dependencia del petróleo me hizo pensar mucho”, declaró el explorador.

Un avión solar

Entre los motivos por los que decidió construir un avión totalmente solar, Piccard explicó que el precio de los recursos naturales no puede más que aumentar, debido a que cada vez son más escasos. Además, recordó que el cambio climático aumenta de manera mucho más rápida de lo que se había previsto hace diez años y subrayó la importancia de apostar por las energías renovables.

Como ya lo dijo su abuelo en 1931, “la cuestión ahora no es tanto saber si el hombre podrá ir todavía más lejos, sino conseguir que la vida en la tierra valga más la pena”.

Fiel defensor de la naturaleza, Piccard declaró que “si un avión es capaz de volar día y noche sin carburante, propulsado únicamente por energía solar, que nadie venga después a decir que es imposible hacer lo mismo con los vehículos, las calefacciones, los aires acondicionados o los ordenadores”

Cada hora el planeta consume alrededor de un millón de toneladas de petróleo, sin mencionar las otras energías fósiles, y las emisiones realizadas a la atmósfera alteran el clima afectando a la población que ya de por sí es más pobre. Sin embargo, el explorador criticó que las energías renovables carecen de una auténtica campaña de promoción y de marketing.

“Si conseguimos que un edificio entero funcione con energía solar es algo a lo que la población no le da importancia. No obstante, conseguir que un avión vuele únicamente gracias a la energía solar llama la atención. Supongo que esto se debe a que volar siempre ha sido el sueño del ser humano”, señaló Piccard.

Aunque el prototipo HB-SIA tan sólo puede transportar al piloto, el explorador recordó que cuando Charles Augustus Lindbergh realizó el primer vuelo sin escalas a través del Océano Atlántico en 1927 iba solo y tardó más de 33 horas. “Veinticinco años después los aviones que cruzan el Atlántico llevan 200 pasajeros y tardan mucho menos tiempo”, declaró.

Así, señaló que el avión de "Solar Impulse" demostrará que el primer paso es posible, aunque hace seis años pareciera una locura. Por ahora, la parte técnica avanza en la dirección correcta, así como la financiera, después de que la empresa consiguiera 45 millones de euros de los 70 millones que necesita y cuente con socios tan importantes como la Asociación Internacional de Transporte Aéreo (IATA) y la Comisión Europea que apuestan por este sueño.

Será a 70 kilómetros por hora y a 8.500 metros de altura, pero realizando un consumo equivalente a la energía necesaria para alumbrar un gran árbol de Navidad. “Estamos consiguiendo lo imposible”, dijo Piccard.