

As smog thickens, so does the debate

By Miguel Bustillo, Times staff writer

L.A. Times, May 24, 2004

As Southern California experiences a resurgence of smog, a growing number of scientists say the government's long-standing strategy for reducing air pollution may be making it worse.

The doubts have arisen because ozone, the main ingredient of smog, is becoming more common in Los Angeles and many other large cities on

weekends, when big trucks and other heavy polluters are least active.

Known as the "weekend effect," the phenomenon has long perplexed scientists and air pollution officials, who remain divided over why ozone is so abundant Saturdays and Sundays.

Now, some scientists, armed with new research about the weekend effect, are suggesting that environmental officials may be putting too much emphasis on the wrong pollutant because they misunderstand how smog forms in the atmosphere.

The dispute centers on one of the two main groups of chemicals that react to form ozone: nitrogen oxides, which are released into the air when fuel burns. Air quality regulators have pushed hard to reduce those chemicals as much as possible. It's been a costly process, particularly for the auto industry, and some scientists say it may be time to pull back.

"It seems like motherhood and apple pie to reduce pollutants. That sounds like a common-sense approach," said Douglas R. Lawson of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado.

"But things are not that simple. The more intelligent way to approach the question of pollution controls is: How will the atmosphere respond to the changes?"

Lawson and those who agree with him argue that regulators should put less emphasis on nitrogen oxides and focus more on reducing the other main constituent of ozone, a class of chemicals called volatile organic compounds. Those compounds have many sources, natural and man-made, including household cleaners, cars and trees.

A lot is at stake in the debate.

Auto industry groups have tried to use the weekend effect as a rationale for weaker antipollution rules. During state hearings in 1998, for example, automakers said sport utility vehicles should not have to meet the same emissions standards as regular cars.

The scientific arguments against cutting nitrogen oxide emissions may bolster their case.

At the same time, a push to reduce volatile organic compounds could boost efforts to get old cars off the road. Those vehicles are major sources of the chemicals. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration has proposed such a program; its plan would cost hundreds of millions of dollars and weigh disproportionately on people who can't afford newer vehicles.

Officials from the California Air Resources Board and the South Coast Air Quality Management District concede that the arguments by Lawson and others cannot be dismissed. But they say that changing successful strategies based on unproven claims would be irresponsible.

"The weekend effect is something you can see in different parts of the country and the world, but people tend to overemphasize it," said Leon J. Dolislager, a state air board official who has researched the phenomenon. "We have to keep our eye on the big picture, not overreact."

In Southern California last year, 68 days exceeded federal ozone standards — nearly twice as many as two years earlier. A disproportionate number of the bad air days over the last five years have been Saturdays and Sundays. In Los Angeles County, 43.5% of the 260 days exceeding a federal ozone standard fell on weekends.

It remains to be seen whether the smog increase is a sign of serious problems or an anomaly caused by unusual weather and massive wildfires, as some air experts have theorized.

Ozone, a colorless and odorless gas, is formed in a photochemical reaction involving nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds. Laboratory research has shown that altering the ratio of nitrogen oxides to volatile organic compounds in the air can cause more ozone to form. Some scientists theorize that by slashing nitrogen oxide pollution in recent years, state and federal regulators have made the air above Los Angeles more conducive to ozone formation.

Although officials have been cutting both pollutants, they have reduced nitrogen oxides more rapidly over the last decade.

Some experts — most notably Lawson and Eric Fujita of the Desert Research Institute in Nevada, both former California air pollution officials — believe that regulators could keep ozone in check better by slowing the pace of nitrogen oxide reductions while doing more to cut volatile organic compounds.

Over the last quarter century, by drastically reducing both pollutants, regulators have slashed peak ozone levels in the Los Angeles area by 60%, even as population has grown by 50% and traffic nearly doubled. By 2010, environmental regulations will have reduced nitrogen oxide enough that the atmospheric changes seen on weekends will be present all week, Lawson predicts.

"What we are saying is that in 2010, ozone could be worse than it is now; that is the bottom line," he said.

California officials said in a detailed report last year that there might be other explanations for why ozone in urban areas was often worse on weekends.

One theory holds that emissions from weekdays remain aloft and "carry over" to the weekend.

According to another theory, nitrogen oxide emissions from regular cars and trucks, which typically crest during the morning commute on weekdays, peak around noon on weekends. At that hour, the sun is brighter and atmospheric conditions are different, which might cause ozone to form faster.

"There are plausible hypotheses that do not involve the [nitrogen oxide] reduction question," said Richard Corey, head of the California air board's research branch.

State officials, however, increasingly appear to be in the minority. Researchers have found the weekend effect in American cities as diverse as San Francisco, Chicago, Denver and Philadelphia — and many experts say reduced nitrogen oxide appears to be a big reason.

The state officials "are the only ones who seem to believe" that reduced nitrogen oxides are not a leading cause of the weekend effect, said George Wolff, principal scientist for General Motors, who published an article on the phenomenon last year.

Robert Harley, a professor of environmental engineering at UC Berkeley, analyzed 20 years of air-monitoring data throughout California and found that the weekend effect, once seen only in coastal urban areas, could now be observed as far inland as Sacramento and the northern San

Joaquin Valley. Like other experts, he concluded that reductions in nitrogen oxides on weekends seemed the most credible explanation for the spike in ozone levels.

"We found the change in diesel truck emissions to be much more important" than the later start time for regular cars on weekends, said Harley, who considered both hypotheses.

California officials remain committed to rapidly cutting nitrogen oxides. In addition to helping cause ozone, they note, nitrogen oxides contribute to another type of pollution: particulate matter, tiny flecks that can become lodged in the lungs and cause serious respiratory problems. Diesel particulate matter is responsible for 70% of the cancer risk from airborne toxic substances in Southern California, according to a government study.

"To address that, we have to do everything possible," said AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood.

GET going cleaner

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

The Bakersfield Californian, May 23, 2004

The odds of riding a clean-running bus in Bakersfield recently got a lot better, with Golden Empire Transit adding 17 new low-polluting people haulers to its fleet.

The new buses cost about \$350,000 each and went into service a few weeks ago.

They replace an equal number of old diesel-fueled buses, which were among the dirtiest in the fleet.

The GET bus fleet of 79 vehicles is now 75 percent fueled by compressed natural gas, spokeswoman Cheryl Scott said.

And the system is getting closer to its goal of eliminating all diesel buses, with another 22 new vehicles about to be ordered.

"Once those come in, we'll be all (natural gas)," Scott said.

Exhaust from older diesel vehicles is one of the largest contributors to particulate pollution in the valley. These tiny specks, as small as one-seventh the width of a human hair, cause a host of breathing problems and contribute to heart disease.

Compressed natural gas produces significantly less particulate pollution and sharply reduces most other smog-forming emissions. The valley does not meet federal Clean Air Act standards for particulate pollution, so the switch to natural gas will help move the region toward compliance.

The new buses might be hard to spot for the average observer.

They don't look much different from the old machines, except that the familiar plume of black diesel exhaust is now gone.

But inside is a different story. The new buses have a lower floor, with a set of inside stairs to reach the rear-most seats.

"What that means is that when standing on the curb, passengers have just a single low step required to get on the bus," Scott said. "It's just an easier boarding process."

The low-floor configuration also requires the new buses to be 5 feet longer, though they still hold the same number of seats -- 39 -- as the old buses.

Mower Swap Aims to Cut Down Smog

A gas-burner and \$100 get 1,300 people an electric replacement from AQMD.

By Stanley Allison, Times Staff Writer

L.A Times, May 23, 2004

They came to the Verizon Wireless Amphitheater in Irvine as early as 1 a.m. Saturday, prepared to wait for hours in a line more than 1,000 cars long.

Not for Prince, U2 or Beyonce.

Under a program sponsored by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, they came to exchange their noisy, fume-spewing, gasoline-powered lawnmowers for quiet, environmentally sensitive, cordless electric models worth \$400.

They brought Toro, Craftsman, Briggs & Stratton and McLane mowers in car trunks and in the backs of pickup trucks and SUVs.

Some trade-ins were rusty carcasses - even antique reel mowers with engines atop the blades - and some were as clean as the day they left Sears or Home Depot.

The AQMD's offer was for each mower owner to bring in a working gas model and trade it and \$100 for a Neuton electric mower with cutting power equal to a 5-horsepower gas model.

Wayne and Connie Stahnkey of Huntington Beach brought their 10-year-old Lawnboy after hearing about the program on the radio.

Connie Stahnkey said she usually does the lawn. "I like the exercise and the suntan," she said. The gasoline, however, is a big turnoff. "I don't want the smell on me, and then it's a hassle to get gas. Electric? Rechargeable? Works for me," she said.

Ronald Barron of Irvine got in line at 5 a.m. to swap his 8-year-old Craftsman for the Neuton.

"I won't have to spend money on gas anymore, and it's much quieter," so he can stop worrying about disturbing his neighbors early on weekends. "I can go out there any time now," he said.

AQMD officials exchanged 1,300 mowers on a first-come, first-served basis at the amphitheater in about four hours. The Irvine event was the third of four planned this year. An additional 1,000 electric mowers will be offered at Hollywood Park on June 12. The program is a repeat of one last year.

Workers from Pick Your Part, an Anaheim-based salvage yard, unloaded the mowers, started one up occasionally to make sure they weren't junk, and then cut wires and control cords.

Another worker used a hydraulic cutting tool to snip the handles off.

The handles, clipping bags, and the mowers themselves were tossed into separate 40-foot trash containers. Officials said they expected to fill seven containers - six for mowers and handles and one for bags.

Cynthia Verdugo-Peralta, an AQMD board member, said the agency picked up 75% of the tab for the exchange, budgeting \$820,000 for this year's program. The balance was made up by the \$100 payments of individuals taking part in the exchange.

Officials estimate that this year's exchange of 4,000 mowers could reduce hydrocarbon emissions by nearly 20 tons a year - or what 43 new cars, driven 12,000 miles each, would emit.

Farmers told to find ways to cut dust, pollution

Friday, May 21, 2004

S.F. Chronicle
(05-21) 09:40 PDT FRESNO, Calif. (AP) --

The Central Valley's air quality control agency approved a plan to get farmers to control the dust - and dust-borne pollution -- that comes from their land.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's new rule, approved unanimously, will require about 8,000 farmers to pick measures from among 100 options to help their businesses curb particle pollution.

"These are reasonable measures," said board member Judy Case, who is a Fresno County supervisor. "I think it will bring change that won't bankrupt farmers."

Growers managing more than 100 acres, or running animal operations with more than 500 mature cows, will have to comply with the new rule.

Agriculture generates about half the microscopic specks that form the particulate pollution plaguing the valley, according to reports. Medical research has linked particle pollution to heart problems, lung disease and premature deaths.

"It's going to take a lot of effort," said Debbie Jacobsen, president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. "This is not a one-size-fits-all situation."

But even as the nation's biggest farm belt gears up to fight dust, environmental advocates are questioning whether the new rule will do much to reduce pollution, since many of the recommended clean-up measures are already practiced by farmers.

Sierra Club member Kevin Hall said the rule leaves too much room for growers to choose methods already in practice on their farms.

"All I see you getting is a database," Hall said. "These aren't new reductions. If you think you're getting a new 34 tons of reduction a day by next year, that's not happening."

Air officials and farm groups will start offering workshops to help farmers develop their plans, which must show which method they will use to protect air quality in each of five categories: land preparation, harvest, unpaved roads, unpaved vehicle areas and a miscellaneous section covering many areas, such as pesticides and farm engines.

The first workshop is scheduled for Tuesday in Stockton.

[Fresno Bee column, May 23, 2004:](#)

Blackstone could be a bike haven

By Bill McEwen
The Fresno Bee

(Updated Sunday, May 23, 2004, 5:55 AM)

I rode my bicycle to work Friday on a perfect spring morning. There was cool air in my face and, better yet, I didn't worry about getting plowed from behind by a coffee-gulping, cell-phone-using, late-to-work motorist.

People walking along Blackstone Avenue waved and drivers passing in the left lanes honked their support. For a few hallucinatory minutes, I felt as if I were Lance Armstrong pedaling through a French village.

It's amazing the respect you get on a bike.

When you've got a police escort.

About 110 riders pedaled in the Fresno County Bicycle Coalition's Bike to Work Day. In a city of more than 450,000 people, 110 is a speck in the air-pollution pie. But the ride from Manchester Center to downtown accompanied by police Sgt. Dennis Ball's bike-patrol unit got me thinking about ways to get more people out of their cars.

First, the reality. Ninety-five percent of adults won't ride a bike to work or school. For them, one of the best things about getting a car was never having to sit on a bicycle again.

A car is convenient. Most cars have air-conditioning. They rarely get flat tires. People see someone riding a bike on a city street on a weekday morning and they think: He's either crazy or unemployed.

Bike commuters are a different breed. They're hardy, adventurous, eclectic -- and work for companies with dressing rooms and showers.

Some riders are just cheap. With gas approaching \$3 a gallon, let's call them smart. And they help out SUV owners by not adding to the demand for fuel.

That brings us to the challenge for Fresno: How to entice the 5% of people who might be inclined to ride a bike to work to put down the car keys?

John Downs, a transit planning manager for Fresno Area Express, says the first step is to make riders feel safe.

Downs should know. He regularly rides from his Old Fig Garden home to the city bus yard on G Street.

Short of providing a police escort, as we had Friday morning, how can the city make safe riding routes?

We should try something bold and see whether it works.

That something is reserving the right lane of Blackstone heading south for bicyclists for three hours each morning and the right lane heading north for three hours in the evening. The reversed flows are to accommodate downtown workers.

Why Blackstone? Because it's a major street handy to people east and west and it connects the north side to downtown. Blackstone is well-traveled. If motorists see large packs of bicyclists using it to commute, they might be encouraged to pump up the tires of bikes collecting dust at home.

"People have to see that it can be done before they'll try it," says Evan Shipp, a meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. He rides seven miles to work five days a week, rain or shine.

Why give bicyclists the entire right lane instead of a narrow bike lane? Many business-owners hate bike lanes because they take away customer parking. Giving bikes the right lane provides room at the curb for cars to park.

According to city officials, there will be 40,000 people working downtown when current construction is done.

If 5% of them switch to bikes, that would take 2,000 tailpipes out of commuter circulation and free up 2,000 parking spaces.

There's another reason for my apparent madness. It puts the pressure on bicyclists to show up or shut up. If the lure of a dedicated lane through the heart of the city doesn't entice large numbers of riders, nothing will.

Ball says the idea to turn Blackstone into a bicycle boulevard is "awesome." Theresia Rogerson, chair of the county bike coalition, also approves.

"It could be a really great experiment," Rogerson says. "We need to get creative."

To succeed, Bike Blackstone must be promoted, and employers must get involved. Motorcycle officers would have to see to it the right lane is reserved for bikes and vehicles making right-hand turns.

Police Chief Jerry Dyer won't turn down a chance for his troops to write a few thousand more tickets.

Let's start this fall or next spring, when the weather is ideal, and see how it goes.

Maybe there's a street other than Blackstone that would do the trick. But we need to do something. Fresno keeps growing, and our worst-in-the-nation air isn't cleaning itself.

[Stockton Record editorial, Monday, May 24, 2004:](#)

Gauging the impact

Port of Stockton must move forward with careful expansion

Ambitious expansion plans for the Port of Stockton -- 10 years in the making -- reach a crossroads at 3:30 p.m. today.

Port Commission members will discuss plans to redevelop Rough and Ready Island when a final environmental impact report is made public.

Commissioners should listen closely to public comments, which are certain to be contentious.

They should ask hard questions about potential impacts. They should seek new, unexplored ways to mitigate concerns of residents who live across the channel from their bustling enterprise.

They should ask themselves how best to reduce the impact of increased noise, [air pollution](#) and bright lights.

Then they should certify the report and move forward on two components of the plan:

* Dredging the Stockton Deep Water Channel.

* Construction of a new bridge at the end of Daggett Road.

It's easy to empathize with shoreline residents who face the prospect of increased shipping volume and everything that entails. They've organized a group -- Stockton Standing Up -- to oppose port expansion.

Their lawsuits, full-page advertisement and vocal opposition shouldn't sway commissioners from certifying their own environmental impact report.

The approved work will be beneficial, even to the concerned and angry homeowners.

Dredging eventually will allow port officials to move shipping activity further away from residential areas, particularly the Riviera Cliffs neighborhood.

Dredging at the docks also promises to improve water quality along the channel.

Port officials estimate dredgers will remove 300,000 pounds of scrap metal left over from Navy activities during World War II. At the same time, 250,000 pounds of oxygen will be injected annually into the channel to offset the impact of dredging on water quality.

The new bridge, coupled with improvements to Daggett Road, will redirect truck traffic away from the Boggs Tract neighborhood.

Port managers began moving down this road in 1994, when the Navy announced its intentions to sell Rough and Ready. Commissioners today should reaffirm that course.

Even if they approve the environmental impact report, they still must make public any "overriding considerations" -- such as showing that increasing the port's size will lead to more jobs and economic development -- that can justify converting the base to private use.

As tough as this might be for those waterfront homeowners to accept, the port was there first, by a wide margin.

Shipping activity has defined Stockton -- California's largest inland port -- for 150 years. If it weren't for the port, there might be no Stockton.

Commissioners must be careful as they try to secure a sound future for the port.

Though lawsuits appear to be inevitable, it's imperative they begin that forward motion on a positive note today.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Monday, May 24, 2004:](#)

College classes on ACE are just the beginning

The ACE train was a great idea when it was just a way [to reduce air pollution](#). But this good idea keeps getting better.

The folks who run the three Altamont Commuter Express trains out of Stockton could well be changing the way people think about commuting. They're turning downtime into highly productive time for some of their 1,500 daily riders, and they've got ideas that could make it more worthwhile for a great many more.

ACE can claim two important commuter-train firsts:

A rolling high-speed Wi-Fi connection to the Internet, allowing commuters with laptops to interact with home offices, customers or e-mail pals.

A rolling classroom that has already helped at least one commuter earn a bachelor's degree and has 35 more student commuters well on their way.

ACE train riders who live in Modesto and work in San Jose spend four hours a day on the train (round trip). Through University of Phoenix, they can spend that time in "study teams" and completing coursework toward business, nursing and other degrees.

The University of Phoenix pays for the trains' Wi-Fi connections, meaning there's no cost to ACE or its riders. When Phoenix students use the connection, they can download lessons, study aids and texts or upload completed assignments. Working every day, they complete a course every five weeks.

Soon, a professor at the Stockton station will be beaming out lectures for those with laptop-streaming capabilities. Phoenix was the first to form a partnership with ACE and is proud of its "classroom cars," decorated inside and out.

Meanwhile, back at the station, ACE hasn't forgotten your car. They've arranged with Modesto-based Don's Mobile Glass to fix windshields while riders are on the train. Another company will detail your car. Maybe laundry pickups will be next.

Clearly, there's more coming. Heather Swenddal says she and her ACE co-workers are trying to figure out how an enterprising coffee entrepreneur can cater to 1,500 captive commuters each morning. Then there's the "gym car" idea for those who want to work out before or after work.

This is a special. Not just the Wi-Fi link and partnership with a college or even the gym car idea, but the entire approach. ACE isn't content to merely get people to and from work, it's accommodating the commuter lifestyle. Apparently, ACE is dedicated to helping customers use the "time in between" effectively so that there are fewer chores, fewer obligations and fewer tasks and more time for family and friends.

ACE is taking service to commuters seriously, on and off the tracks. Such enhancements to commuting can only help convince people they're better off out of their cars and on the train.

[Los Angeles Times commentary, May 23, 2004](#)

In Lake County, inhale, exhale and repeat frequently

The view from a glider soaring in pristine skies 4,900 feet above sea level confirms what the author has been told: That's some clean air.

By John Muncie, Special to The Times

I was 3,000 feet above the khaki-colored foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains. To the west, I could see the bright line of the Pacific Ocean; to the east, the edge of the Central Valley. And straight overhead, an eagle carved the sky, a small shape swooping around the sun.

"What's he doing up this high?" I asked Chris O'Neil, the pilot of my two-person glider. "Having fun," O'Neil said, "just like us."

The glider ride was the high point of a recent trip to Lake County. For 45 minutes, I thrilled to 90-mile views while O'Neil, a pilot for Crazy Creek Gliders in Middletown, rode the thermals and surfed the air.

Air, in fact, is what drew my wife, Jody Jaffe, and me to this rural county 110 miles north of San Francisco. People around here like to brag about their air. "The cleanest in California" is practically the first thing out of any Lake County dweller's mouth. "Smog?" they say. "What's that?"

Curious about just how clear and clean it was, we flew to Sacramento, drove to the coastal range, took a deep breath and plunged in.

From glider perspective, the locals have a point. When we let loose of the tow plane and started to soar, we were 4,900 feet above sea level, outside the village of Middletown and just a few miles north of the Napa County line. There was no band of dirty air on any horizon.

I went up alone. Jody, a fearful flier, said she'd rather have a "recreational root canal" than go gliding.

As we circled around, O'Neil, 27, pointed out local landmarks and talked about his love of flying - instilled at age 11 when a family friend took him soaring. He got his pilot's license before his driver's license and five years ago learned to soar. It's now his primary passion. "I like the mental challenge of harnessing the Earth's natural energy to fly - just like the eagles do," he said.

The warm air currents rising from the hillsides could have kept us aloft all day, but cost and waiting customers brought us to earth; soon, Jody and I were back exploring the countryside at ground level.

One reason Lake County is so breathable is that only about 60,000 people inhabit its 1,261 square miles. Vineyards, walnut groves and pear orchards checkerboard the rolling hills and flat lands that surround Clear Lake, the county's centerpiece.

Clear Lake is California's largest all-natural (no dams) freshwater lake. (Lake Tahoe is shared with Nevada, Goose Lake with Oregon.) It's 19 miles long and 8 miles at its widest point. Boaters and bass fisherman know it well. The county is neither wealthy nor ritzy, but Clear Lake has attracted vacationers for more than a century, and it's ringed by innumerable docks, boat launches, modest resorts and trailer parks.

Beginning in the 1870s, the county was a destination for San Franciscans who came to visit the area's mineral spring spas. But the spa business died as tourists became enticed by more accessible pleasures, such as skiing at Tahoe.

Aside from lake activity, the county has slumbered along for years, its mountains and rural beauty often overlooked. But change is coming. More than 12 million people live within a two-hour drive. There are Indian casinos here and a growing spillover from neighboring Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino. Lake County is beautiful, warm and relatively affordable.

"Real estate is jumping," said Ben Chwastyke, a contractor who specializes in log homes. Ben and his daughter Carin were sitting at the table next to us at a restaurant in Kelseyville one night. After a real estate lesson, they filled us in on other local facts, figures and gossip.

Lake County is like that: small-town friendly. It's "the kind of place where, if someone asks how you are, they stop to listen," said Nancy Yost, owner of Studebakers, an upscale coffee shop in Kelseyville.

The biggest town, the city of Clearlake (population 13,800), seems to have more than its share of boarded-up buildings, but much of the county is charming. During our explorations, we drove the 68-mile lake loop and wandered elsewhere in the county. We particularly liked the tidy 19th century towns of Lakeport (the county seat), Kelseyville, Lower Lake and Middletown and the vineyard-covered hills that surround them. The county boasts 11 wineries, including Guenoc, which was begun in 1888 by famous Victorian beauty and actress Lillie Langtry.

We spent one night at the comfy little Kelseyville Motel and another at the comfy big Konocti Harbor Resort and Spa. The 120-acre Konocti is the area's largest hotel-resort facility. The complex overlooks the lake, and views from many of the hotel rooms are sweeping.

Konocti is known for its 5,000-seat outdoor concert amphitheater, where performers play against a spectacular backdrop of Clear Lake and the north shore mountains beyond. This summer's lineup includes such acts as Jackson Browne, Reba McEntire, Counting Crows, Linda Ronstadt and ZZ Top.

If we'd thought to bring camping gear, we'd have stayed at Clear Lake State Park. The park, about three miles from Kelseyville, hugs the lakeshore and features nature trails, overlooks and camp sites so close to the water that campers can come in by boat.

With all the camping, boating, biking, hunting and fishing the county offers, we figured we had to do something outdoorsy, so Saturday morning we went hiking in Boggs Mountain State Forest near Middletown.

The forest is crisscrossed by more than a dozen marked hiking trails. We walked the enchanting Houghton Creek trail for an hour or so, enjoying the wild iris, blossoming dogwoods, dew-covered ferns and clear mountain air.

Which brings us back to breathability.

Aside from its country charms, Lake County is also the site of one of the world's largest geothermal energy complexes. Called the Geysers, the complex generates 850 megawatts of electricity (enough to run 850,000 homes) by tapping into the naturally occurring steam vents in this geologically active area. No fossil fuels are burned.

Clean air is a matter of gospel here. One night at dinner we were chatting with Marie Steele, the owner of the Saw Shop Gallery Bistro, one of the county's toniest restaurants. The subject of air quality came up and before Steele could finish bragging, Pam and Gary Maes, who were sitting at the next table, chimed in unsolicited. "Best air quality in the state," they said.

Still, just to make sure, I called the Lake County Air Quality Management District, which monitors the air around here. And Ross Kauper, deputy air pollution control officer, set me straight.

"It is the best air in the state," he said. Of California's numerous air basins, he explained, Lake County's is the only one to have met federal and state air quality standards for 13 consecutive years.

Kauper moved to the county 21 years ago from the San Gabriel Valley area "for the cheap land and the visibility," he said. "It really makes a difference when you can see the stars at night."

Two decades later, Lake County's land prices - like other land prices in the state - are skyrocketing, but the air's still clean and the stars at night are magnificent.

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, May 24, 2004:](#)

Racetrack construction urged

Last Updated: May 24, 2004, 07:15:20 AM PDT

Editor: We wish to show our support for the Riverside Motorsports Park. We believe most of the oppositions are unfounded and some are just wrong. The worries about noise and air pollution are good ones; we too care about the air we breathe; however, rather than look at a facility that will run a handful of major events a year, they need to look at the traffic that already flows down Highway 99.

We find it interesting that some of these same people are in full support of the Air National Guard coming to Castle. Those of us who remember when the base was in operation know what that will bring to our eardrums. It is ironic that the same complaints being championed by these folks were brought up about the new UC site and more. (Remember the poor ferry shrimp?)

But all these negative concerns were quickly swept away in the name of progress and the education of our young people. We would be willing to wager that the motorsports park will bring more jobs and opportunities for local people than the UC brings into town -- not our local people.

Also they talk about traffic congestion then turn around and bless the new \$40 million complex the city of Merced is going to build. We have to wonder if they ever try to get to downtown Merced from the freeway, or from Atwater, and we can't imagine trying to get there down M Street, especially when a train goes through town.

The big money that Riverside will bring in is the best kind -- tourist dollars. That means that people come here, drop off their money and go home, with minimal negative economic impact to our community. We don't have to build schools for their kids or hire additional fire, police and other civil service people. At the same time these out-of-towners will need places to stay, eat, buy groceries, gas and much more.

We believe the economic benefit, added to the obvious entertainment and socialization issues, far outweigh any negative impact this facility will bring. We believe property values, currently being hurt by the proximity of the federal prison, will receive a boost by the influx of much-needed commerce to this area. We believe that all local businesses will benefit from this enterprise, not just automotive-related ones.

We believe this will offer our young people not just needed family entertainment, but will also bring many entry-level jobs and training for lifetime careers.

Therefore we wish to express to our elected officials and their staffs that we request they support this positive, community-beneficial endeavor. And, we would ask that they do all in their power to help expedite the opening of this facility.

All over the country communities are investing millions of their tax dollars to try to lure promoters to their areas. The people behind Riverside Motorsports Park are only asking us to let them build it. Our leaders should be jumping at this, not putting up roadblocks.

JIM BECKER

Merced