

Smog study finds fatal pollution link

Even a small rise in ozone has deadly effects, research says.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

also in the Modesto Bee

Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

Scientists are reporting the strongest link to date between smog and higher death rates in cities across America, including Fresno, Bakersfield, Modesto and Stockton.

Small, temporary increases in summertime smog correspond with the premature deaths of almost 3,800 people annually in 95 cities, according to a study published today in The Journal of the American Medical Association.

Using data from 1987-2000, the study showed the death rate increased slightly after temporary smog increases, even though the pollutant levels did not violate the federal health standard.

The elderly and people with lung or heart problems fared the worst, but people of all ages were affected, say researchers from Yale and Johns Hopkins universities.

Though the study does not rank the severity of the problem for each area, the San Joaquin Valley leads the nation in daylong smog violations. Dr. Malik Baz, a Fresno allergist, said he is not surprised by the link between early death and ozone-related pollution.

"I expected it all along," said Baz, who has treated Valley patients for 22 years. "Respiratory problems haven't gotten better. They have gotten worse in the last four or five years."

The chief villain in smog is ozone, a corrosive gas that forms on still, warm days when chemicals from cars, power plants and other sources combine in the air. Ozone, the main ingredient in smog, can trigger asthma episodes or other lung problems.

While many studies connect short-term ozone exposure to lung problems and increased hospital admissions, no one has found a strong link between ozone and death rates until now.

Though ozone levels have dropped in the last decade, the new study is evidence that cleanup efforts must continue, said John L. Kirkwood, president and chief executive officer of the American Lung Association.

"Some in Congress and the administration have expressed the desire to ease the 'burden' on polluters by rolling back key provisions of the Clean Air Act," he said. "This study confirms that the true burdens of air pollution are borne by the millions of Americans who breathe air that not only makes them sick, but may shorten their lives."

The study adds to established evidence showing pollution can be a killer. Previous studies have established a connection between about 1,200 Valley deaths each year and microscopic airborne particles of dust, soot and chemicals.

Last month, a German study found that people sitting in a traffic jam were more likely to suffer heart attacks due to air pollution.

The new ozone study, funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, focused on small increases in ozone levels and death rates.

The average daily ozone level for the 95 cities in the survey was 26 parts per billion — the equivalent of several drops of water in a swimming pool.

The 26 parts per billion average is far below the federal standard that allows 84 parts per billion over an eight-hour period. The Valley violated that health standard 109 times this year.

Scientists believe thousands of lives would be saved if the national 26 parts per billion average were reduced by 10 parts per billion.

"A 10 ppb reduction is modest given the available technology," said Michelle L. Bell, the study's lead author, who began the project at Johns Hopkins and is now an assistant professor at Yale.

Study Finds Smog Raises Death Rate

Scientists researching pollution's short-term health effects in 95 U.S. urban areas link mortality rates to higher daily ozone levels.

By Marla Cone, Los Angeles Times

also in the S.F. Chronicle

Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

On smoggy days, deaths from heart and respiratory ailments and other diseases rise, causing several thousand more people throughout the United States to die each year, according to a study published Tuesday that links air pollution and mortality in 95 urban areas.

Scientists have long known that ozone, the main ingredient of smog, aggravates asthma and other respiratory illnesses and causes hospital visits to surge, particularly in severely polluted areas such as Southern California. But the study in the *Journal of the American Medical Assn.* is the first major nationwide endeavor that links day-to-day ozone levels with an increased number of deaths.

About 40% of the U.S. population lives in the areas analyzed - including Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, which have some of the nation's worst smog - according to the authors, from Yale and Johns Hopkins universities.

Other places studied include parts of the Bay Area, the Central Valley and San Diego. Outside California, cities include Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, New York, Atlanta, Detroit, New Orleans, Nashville and Seattle.

Francesca Dominici, a biostatistician at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a co-author of the report, said the study "provides strong evidence of short-term effects of ozone on mortality" because it pooled results from a large number of urban areas.

The researchers said they found a link between mortality and ozone even in areas with low pollution, at concentrations less than the current federal health standard. Previous smaller studies reached varying conclusions, some finding an increase in deaths and some not.

Scientists have already documented in several dozen studies around the world that deaths increase when airborne pollutants called particulates, or fine pieces of soot, rise. Particulates come mostly from diesel engines. In contrast, ozone, a colorless gas that develops mostly in summer, is formed when nitrogen and hydrocarbon gases from cars, industries and consumer products react with sunlight.

The Los Angeles basin - with its large population, pollution-trapping mountains and stagnant, sunny conditions - is like a smog-forming machine. The region has battled ozone for half a century with state and local controls on cars, businesses and other sources. As a result, levels have declined sharply.

"This is a reminder call for the public and for this agency that ozone still is a pollutant with some very serious health effects and one in which we have to be just as aggressive in reducing as particulates," said Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which regulates air pollution in the Los Angeles basin.

The study found that, when ozone levels increased by a fairly small amount, 10 parts per billion, the daily deaths from noninjury causes over the next few days increased an average of 0.52%. For cardiovascular and respiratory deaths, the increase was slightly higher, 0.64%, and for senior citizens, deaths increased by 0.70%.

"In terms of the overall mortality risk, these changes are small, but they do add up," said Jean Ospital, the air quality agency's health effects officer. "Because so many people are exposed, the cumulative effects can be significant."

In New York, the small increase in ozone caused an additional 319 deaths annually. For the 95 areas nationwide, 3,767 more people died per year when ozone increased by 10 parts per billion. Ozone levels fluctuate greatly, and increases of that magnitude occur routinely. In the Los Angeles region, the current federal health standard, 120 parts per billion, was violated 27 days this year. One day last year, it reached as high as 216 parts per billion, almost double the amount deemed healthful. The worst levels occur in San Bernardino County.

Dr. Henry Gong, a professor of medicine at USC and a leading air pollution researcher, called the increase in deaths "plausible" because ozone was a potent irritant that inflamed airways and triggered asthma attacks and other breathing problems. Recent research also has implicated air pollutants, especially particulates, in heart attacks, based on evidence that they damage the nervous system's ability to vary the heart rate to handle stress.

"Ozone is still lurking out there, particularly in Southern California during the summer, and there are many sensitive people to it, such as asthmatics," Gong said.

The study's lead author, Michelle Bell of Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and the co-authors said the study underestimated the number of deaths because it only captured those within a few days of high pollution levels, not from lifetime exposure.

"We've known for a long time that smog is unhealthy, but this is some of the strongest evidence yet that smog actually kills," said Nat Mund of the Sierra Club.

John L. Kirkwood, president of the American Lung Assn., said the study, funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other federal sources, comes "at a critical time in the fight against air pollution" when the Bush administration and Congress are proposing to ease environmental regulations.

Port Officials Say Critical Report Will Not Undergo Revisions

By Deborah Schoc, staff writer

L.A. Times, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

Harbor area residents on a panel that advises the Port of Los Angeles accused officials this week of trying to revise a consultant's report that was critical of the port's environmental record.

But the panel's co-chairmen assured members Tuesday night that the report won't be changed by port staff, and a port official concurred.

The controversy raised questions in recent days about how much power the port has when dealing with the advisory panel created by Mayor James K. Hahn to give the public more of a voice in port projects.

The report was commissioned by a panel subcommittee as part of Hahn's 2001 campaign pledge to assess how the port has dealt with air pollution and other effects and to make any needed amends.

Environmental consultant Sandra Genis studied the port's environmental reviews of proposed projects and concluded that some underestimate air pollution and other effects from major terminals built in the last decade.

The Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex has grown to become the single largest air polluter in the region.

Port officials, complaining that the report contained factual errors, said Monday that they planned to study it and make revisions where needed. They said that the \$25,000 report, which was paid for by the port, was still just a draft.

"We're looking at it in an objective fashion," Ralph Appy, the port's environmental management director, said Monday. "We really want to make sure she did it right."

After the panel meeting on Tuesday, however, Appy said his staff would continue reviewing the report but would not change it. He said it contained some valuable information that port staff could use in preparing future environmental documents.

The dispute illustrates the shifting relationship between the port and residents who have complained for years that the port was ignoring their concerns about pollution, traffic and noise.

Port officials' earlier comments angered some members of the advisory panel, who claimed the port was attempting to censor a public report.

Dr. John Miller, a physician who chairs the subcommittee that requested the report, insisted earlier Tuesday that it was a finished work.

"They don't have the right to take an independent report and do a revisionist history to get rid of things that are awkward for them," he said. "It will not be an independent report if they rewrite it."

Port spokesmen denied a Times request to speak with Genis. The port's contract with Genis does not allow her to share information without port permission, said spokeswoman Theresa Adams-Lopez. However, Harbor Commission President Nicholas Tonsich said late Tuesday afternoon that he would have no problem with Genis talking to The Times about her report.

USC preventive medicine professor Edward Avol, who is also a consultant to the advisory panel, said that he was cautioned last week not to speak to the media without port approval.

Genis critiqued 10 environmental impact reports required by law before the port could build expansion projects such as the massive Pier 300 and Pier 400 container terminals. She concluded that most of those reports fail to address how much cargo will pass through those projects, especially if cargo volume increases over time.

She was particularly critical of how the reports dealt with air pollution, traffic and blight. Those reports found that nine of the 10 projects would have "significant unavoidable adverse effects on air quality," she wrote, calling those effects "a significant cumulative impact which has not been mitigated."

Genis also found fault with how the port measured the air pollution created by a project, noting that the port used estimates ranging from 10 minutes to 20 minutes for how long trucks idle. "Current modeling used by the California Air Resources Board assumes that an average truck will idle for 104 minutes per day," she wrote.

In a written statement, port officials said Genis did not take into account certain regulatory standards in place when the environmental reports were prepared. It criticizes her for not considering the port's most recent environmental impact report, which they said reflects current port practices "and in some ways, should have been the only document that was necessary to review."

Hahn has appointed a special panel of experts to create a plan to reduce port pollution to 2001

levels and keep it there. Port officials said this week that the panel's meetings are closed to the public, including a session this afternoon at the San Pedro Sheraton.

Study ties death rates to rise in air pollution

Researchers conclude from 95 urban areas that lowering ground-level ozone by about 35% on a given day could save 4,000 lives a year nationally.

By Michale Conlon, Reuters

in the Orange County Register, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

CHICAGO - Increases in air pollution caused by cars, power plants and industry can be directly linked to higher death rates in U.S. cities, a study said Tuesday.

Reducing such ozone pollution by about 35 percent on any given day could save about 4,000 lives a year across the country, researchers at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies said.

The conclusion came from a look at 95 urban areas where about 40 percent of the U.S. population lives, comparing spikes in ozone pollution there with death rates from 1987 to 2000. The research included greater Los Angeles and Orange County.

The finding held true across much of the country and for all age groups, though most of those who died were elderly and had a previous heart or lung illness.

"It's a problem for everyone," said lead author Michelle L. Bell. "This actually underestimates the total impact of ozone on mortality, because it only captures the mortality impact associated with high ozone levels in the past few days, not the impact associated with a lifetime exposure to high ozone levels."

The government-financed study, published in this week's Journal of the American Medical Association, found that an increase of 10 parts per billion in ozone pollution in the previous week was associated with an increase of 0.52 percent in the daily death rate and specifically with a 0.64 percent increase in cardiovascular and respiratory-related deaths.

People ages 65 to 74 had a slightly higher increase in the death rate, at 0.70 percent.

The 10 parts per billion increase would correspond to an additional 319 annual premature deaths in New York City and 3,767 premature deaths annually for the other urban communities, the study concluded.

Ozone pollution can be reduced by lowering energy consumption through such things as car-pooling and using public transportation.

The authors said the 10 parts per billion figure chosen as a unit for the study has no special significance in itself other than that it helps demonstrate that higher ozone is associated with higher mortality.

While ground-level ozone is considered a hazard, stratospheric ozone is not because it helps protect the Earth from harmful solar rays.

The study is one of several recent efforts shedding new light on threats from pollution common in the industrial world.

A smaller European study with similar findings was published Monday in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine. And last month, a German study found that people sitting in a traffic jam were more likely to suffer heart attacks due to air pollution. Other research found an association between hardening of the arteries and small airborne particles from burning coal or diesel fuel.

State Commission Backs Power Plant Project

L.A. Times, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

The California Energy Commission on Tuesday recommended approval of a \$75-million power plant for Riverside's city utility.

The 96-megawatt plant would help meet the city's peak and emergency needs, said David Wright, interim director of Riverside Public Utilities, in a written statement.

The recommendation will be final after a 30-day comment period.

The utility still needs clearances from city planners and state water, wildlife and air-quality officials.

News in Brief

S.F. Chronicle, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

LEBEC, Calif. (AP) -- A Kern County cement company that has been burning tires as fuel over their neighbors' opposition might get permission to do so on a permanent basis, according to local air officials.

The Kern County Air Pollution Control Board recommended that National Cement get permission to burn tires regularly after an experiment that air officials said showed health risks to nearby residents were minimal. The company, based in Lebec, in southern Kern County, had sought the air board's approval to replace up to 50 percent of its current fuel source, petroleum coke and natural gas, with old chopped up tires.

Before getting the permit, the company must pay application fees, and the environmental impact report's health risk assessment must be reviewed by other state agencies. The California Air Resources Board is expected to approve the assessment by Nov. 25. Approval from the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessments should come by Jan. 9.

But neighbors are alarmed over the air board's recommendation. Burning tires did lower some of the plant's emissions levels, they said, but raised others. The level of dioxin -- a group of hundreds of chemicals that linger for a long time in the environment -- went up by 20 percent when the factory burned tires, neighbors said.

"Obviously, what they have been burning, petroleum coke, is pretty nasty stuff and does pretty bad things. But as far as the tire burning, one of the pollutants is dioxin and we're very concerned about that because it's very toxic," said Lebec resident Linda McCay.

13 countries sign on to methane reuse plan

Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post

in the S.F. Chronicle, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004

Washington -- Thirteen countries agreed Tuesday to a global plan proposed by the Bush administration to curb methane emissions by capturing the greenhouse gas and using it as an energy source before it is released into the atmosphere.

Methane ranks second only to carbon dioxide among human-generated contributors to global warming: Carbon dioxide accounts for 50 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, methane for about 16 percent. The administration pledged to spend up to \$53 million over the next five years to encourage companies to provide participating countries with technologies that can trap the gas and make it available to power utilities, private homes and even pottery kilns.

In the United States, most methane comes from decomposing trash in landfills, though it also escapes during mining operations and drilling for natural gas. There are 370 landfills in the

country where companies recover methane and convert it into fuel, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

James Connaughton, who chairs the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, predicted that by 2015 the effect of reducing methane emissions would be equivalent to taking 33 million cars off the road. China, India, Japan, Mexico and Russia are among the countries that agreed to participate.

"It's a big deal because we're focusing on an unappreciated opportunity to significantly reduce one of the most potent greenhouse gases," Connaughton said. "We know how to do it, we know we can do it, and we know what the results will be."

Some scientists who have questioned Bush's climate change policies praised the "methane to markets" initiative as a practical effort to avert further warming. The program is "a great idea," said James Hansen, who directs NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and just published a paper suggesting that curbs on methane and chlorofluorocarbon emissions can offset considerable carbon dioxide pollution.

On Capitol Hill, however, debate continued Tuesday over the administration's resistance to mandatory limits on carbon dioxide emissions. John McCain, R-Ariz., who will relinquish his chairmanship of Senate Commerce Committee once Congress adjourns this month, held a hearing and called Bush's climate change policy disgraceful.

In testimony, the deputy associate administrator for NASA's Science Mission Directorate, Ghassem Asrar, said the United States should ratify the Kyoto Protocol's restrictions on carbon emissions "as soon as possible." Bush rejected the treaty soon after taking office in 2001, saying the restrictions would cost American jobs, calling for voluntary measures and additional research.

Farmers check pesticide talks

Prague conference will decide use levels for methyl bromide

By MICHAEL DOYLE - BEE WASHINGTON BUREAU

Modesto Bee, Wed., Nov. 17, Modesto Bee

WASHINGTON - California farm advocates have Prague on their minds and in their passports as international negotiators refine the future of methyl bromide.

On the eve of crucial decision-making in the Czech Republic, the farmers and their Capitol Hill allies are maneuvering to maintain use of the effective, but ozone-depleting, farm chemical.

Some seek signal-sending congressional hearings, while others are preparing to kibitz negotiating sessions starting Monday.

"It's important for American agriculture to show a concern and interest in what's going on there," Rodger Wasson, president of the California Strawberry Commission, said Tuesday. "The decisions they're making will have real consequences for real farmers."

Formerly chief executive officer of the Almond Board of California, Wasson is joining three other strawberry commission representatives at the Prague Hotel Hilton. Along with a cadre of lobbyists, the Californians will be monitoring what's formally called the Sixteenth Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol.

"It's going to be interesting," Dan Haley, a Washington-based lobbyist for the walnut industry, said from Prague on Tuesday. "Things could blow up, or things could go well, or anything in between."

The Montreal Protocol is the international agreement to phase out methyl bromide, a potent fumigant historically used on more than 100 crops.

California farmers used 15 million pounds in 1999, according to the state Department of Pesticide Protection, but by 2002 this had fallen to 6.5 million pounds. Methyl bromide ranks fourth among all pesticides used in California. Almonds, walnuts, tomatoes, grapes and raspberries continue to be major users, though more than half of the total was applied in the state's strawberry production.

Farmers have complained for years that the phase-out is moving too fast. Mariposa Republican George Radanovich, joined by 46 House co-sponsors, is pushing long-shot legislation that would keep U.S. methyl bromide production at higher levels.

While the Montreal Protocol calls for a methyl bromide phase-out by Jan. 1, 2005, the agreement also allows for "critical use exemptions," where there are no technically and economically feasible alternatives.

The U.S. position going into the weeklong Prague meeting is that methyl bromide use for 2005 should be set at 35 percent of its 1991 level, State Department negotiators said Tuesday. An international scientific panel is recommending that use be set at 28 percent of the 1991 level.

In addition to the overall use level, negotiators will be deciding use levels for particular crops, including strawberries. California flower growers and pepper and tomato farmers are also among those seeking use exemptions next week, as are British raspberry growers, Japanese watermelon farmers and the Israeli potato industry.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004:](#)

Air plan lacked details, chance for public input

By Mike Nelson

Much discussion has been held over the years about the effects of air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley air basin has recently been classified as an "extreme ozone non-attainment" area by the federal government.

There is no argument that the Valley suffers from some of the worst air pollution in the United States. The causes are from both man-made and natural sources.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District utilizes three funding sources to operate the various programs designed to reduce air pollution in the region:

Permit fees paid annually by applicable businesses operating within the district.

Federal and state grants that the district receives annually from the California Air Resources Board and the Environmental Protection Agency. Motor vehicle registration fees generated by a \$4 surcharge fee for every vehicle registered within the district. A part of these fees are used for the internal operations of the district and a portion is distributed to qualified applicants for programs intended to reduce vehicle emissions. These include the REMOVE and Heavy-Duty Engine Incentive programs. This surcharge provides the air district with approximately 35% of its funding.

New fee

In January, the Department of Motor Vehicles will begin collecting an additional \$1 for a total of \$5 per vehicle per year. This is a result of SB709, which was enacted in 2003.

The air district board recently was asked to increase this surcharge by another \$2, with collection to begin in April 2005. This increase is authorized by AB923.

The motion to increase this surcharge failed on a split vote 5-5. While arguments for the proposal were well thought out, an equal number of board members felt that this proposal wasn't necessary at this point for a variety of reasons.

I had three main concerns with this proposal:

A lack of public input. The public should be given adequate notice of fee increases that are going to affect their wallets. Several radio stations noted on the day of the board meeting that this item was to be discussed. This short notice does not give the public enough time to provide their comments and concerns to board members.

At the time of the board's discussion of this matter, district staff did not have a complete list of proposed uses for the additional funds. The board should not be asked to authorize fee increases until such time as a plan to use the funds is in place.

Equity. Is it right for the motoring public to be forced to pay for clean air projects that do not relate directly to the operation of their cars? While funds generated by this additional surcharge may be used to reduce emissions from registered vehicles, they may also be used to reduce emissions from non-registered sources such as agricultural vehicles and school buses. Not that these aren't important pollution sources that need to be controlled, but whose responsibility is it to pay for them?

Second time

While this proposal failed, it will come back for reconsideration at the board meeting at 9 a.m. on Dec. 16.

Members of the public wishing to express their comments or concerns may attend the meeting in person or they can provide written comments to their representative on the board. This information can be found at www.valleyair.org <<http://www.valleyair.org>> or by calling the San Joaquin Valley

[Orange County Register editorial, Wed., Nov. 17, 2004](#)

Put the brakes on a mileage tax

New DMV director hits the ground stumbling

A radio transmitter could be embedded in your car's electronics to track your mileage for tax purposes, if a proposal by the new director of the state DMV becomes law. On Monday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Joan Borucki to be the director of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Ms. Borucki has some good credentials, but look out for the red flags - like the mileage tax proposal - that are flapping in the wind.

Her experience includes more than 24 years working within state government on transportation issues, and most recently as a team leader for the California Performance Review. Before that she served for nearly two years as chief deputy director of the California Transportation Commission.

Unfortunately, she placed into the CPR - an otherwise mostly praiseworthy document - a chilling proposal to change the way Californians pay for road construction. The proposal would replace taxes currently paid on each gallon of gasoline with a tax on how many miles one drives.

How would the mileage be tracked? One of several different technologies could be used. "In one scenario - currently being tested in Oregon - tracking devices send a signal to a GPS satellite following the car, and that information would be used to calculate the tax bill," reported the Nov. 16 Los Angeles Times. "Other devices send a signal directly from the car to the pump, which calculates the tax based on the odometer reading."

CPR director George Passantino told us that Ms. Borucki would "be very good in the DMV" and that the mileage tax was part of the CPR's approach to "throwing some ideas on the table. There's a clear sense that the traditional way of funding the roads has serious challenges." He also mentioned that she is favorable toward private-public solutions to road problems, such as privately funded toll roads.

Proponents of a change to mileage taxation say that, under the current system, drivers of heavy vehicles such as SUVs don't pay enough at the pump to cover the damage they do to the roads and that a mileage-based system would better calibrate payments according to use. It's not clear whether this would raise more or less in taxes than the current system.

But the whole idea "completely misses the point," Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Simi Valley, told us. The current system is "funded by both the gasoline excise and sales taxes. It is simple, very inexpensive to collect and provides a rough approximation of proportional use because heavier vehicles use more fuel. The more you drive, the more you pay."

He pointed out that the reason California's roads are in such poor shape is not for lack of money but because, although the state has the fourth highest gas-tax rate in the country, it's 48th in highway construction spending. This is due to "gross mismanagement of highway dollars," he said. Proposition 42, which voters passed in 2002, was supposed to mandate that highway taxes go to build and repair highways.

But "it has been suspended the last three years, with approximately \$2 billion raided" in just the last two years and redirected to general-fund spending, Sen. McClintock explained. He said that is the total of gasoline sales tax money for those two years, except for \$250 million. So the way to build highways is to stop raiding the funds all Californians already pay in gasoline taxes.

Two final points. A mileage tax would give drivers from other states a free ride. Attempting to hook them into the system likely would trigger lawsuits over the "equal protection" clause in the Constitution.

And do Californians want to give the government an immense new way to snoop on us, tracking our every move?

We hope Ms. Borucki, and the governor, forget the new tax scheme and instead emphasize spending all the Prop. 42 money on roads and advancing public-private solutions.