

Smog link to asthma to be probed

By Kerry Cavanaugh
The Los Angeles Times
March 17, 2004

The link between asthma and air pollution generated by vehicles in Los Angeles will be investigated in one of several studies being launched with a \$700,000 grant, officials said Wednesday.

One study in Long Beach will look at air contaminants from vehicles to see if traffic-related air pollution can cause new cases of asthma.

Another study involves 64 children in East Los Angeles and Riverside who will carry personal air samplers in a backpack to measure their exposure to traffic-related pollution.

Other studies will look at the impact of air pollution on cells in the lungs.

The grant from the South Coast Air Quality Management District aims to understand what role air pollution plays in asthma and what regulations might be needed to lessen the health damage from pollution.

More than 17 million people nationwide, including 5 million children, have asthma.

"Clarifying the role of mobile sources such as motor vehicles and trucks play in the symptoms and onset of asthma is of ever-increasing importance, especially as the region's densely packed roads and freeways expand," said John Froines, a professor of environmental quality and health at the University of California, Los Angeles, and head of the consortium looking at asthma and air pollution.

News Briefs

From the San Francisco Chronicle
March 18, 2004

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. (AP) -- The hot, stagnant weather the San Joaquin Valley has seen for the past weeks may be good for agriculture, but air officials said it is contributing to unusually poor air quality.

The air in March normally doesn't present problems, but a high-pressure system and high temperatures have combined to raise pollution to levels that officials consider unhealthy for children and sensitive groups.

The air quality index on Wednesday peaked at 106 in Bakersfield and 124 in Fresno -- well above the normal readings that tend to fall below 100 at this time of year.

Officials said children, the elderly, and anyone with breathing problems should avoid strenuous outdoor activity while the system lasts. Forecasters expect weather conditions to change by the middle of next week.

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) -- An academic expert who travels the world studying air quality issues said the San Joaquin Valley's pollution problems are unlike other critical areas he's studied, and may need a unique solution since the current attempts to clean up are not working.

Physicist Thomas Cahill, a University of California at Davis professor spoke at spoke in Fresno's Saroyan Theatre, and said he's a bit baffled by what he sees in the valley.

Even as Los Angeles was able to fight back the smog and ozone pollution that plagues it, reducing levels significantly in the past 12 years, the valley has not made many significant improvements. In fact, the valley violates ozone levels more often over an eight-hour period than any other place in the nation.

"Clearly, we're doing something wrong," Cahill said. "Science is not up to explaining this."

Cahill said the valley's particular topography -- the long basin that goes from Stockton to Bakersfield_ traps pollutants.

The professor urged the valley to step outside one-size-fits-all approaches to cleaning its air.

"The Central Valley is going to have to take charge of its own destiny," he said, after explaining the dangers in air pollution, particularly fine specks of dust, soot, ash or chemicals, which research shows can raise the rate of heart problems.

"The fine particles remain in the lungs, enter the bloodstream and move to the heart," Cahill said. "The more dirt you have, the more death you get."

Particle pollution in the valley comes from unpaved roads, fireplaces, construction, agriculture and chemicals combining in the atmosphere.

Firm Cancels LNG Facility

Community opposition causes Calpine to withdraw its plans for a natural gas terminal on Humboldt Bay.

By Emily Gurnon and Deborah Schoch, Special to The LA Times
March 18, 2004

EUREKA, Calif. - Independent power producer Calpine Corp. on Wednesday abruptly withdrew plans to build a liquefied natural gas terminal on Humboldt Bay, astonishing and delighting hundreds of residents who had rallied to defeat the project.

Calpine's announcement came the afternoon after a raucous meeting at which 900 people packed the auditorium of this small coastal city, the vast majority denouncing the idea of importing the flammable gas through their community.

"It is the policy of Calpine not to build projects in areas where there is insufficient community support," company project development director Ken Abreu wrote in a letter hand-delivered to city officials Wednesday. "Based on feedback received from the local community and public officials, we feel this decision is best for all parties."

The cancellation, just days after the town of Harpswell, Maine, rejected a similar plan, raises questions about the future of LNG imports into the United States.

Energy companies nationwide are turning to LNG as a ready source of natural gas, especially in the face of price increases and a dwindling domestic supply. But public opposition has stalled or defeated projects in Mobile, Ala., Vallejo, Calif., and other communities where residents feared that the highly flammable gas could pose a risk to residents.

Opposition is surfacing to a similar project planned for Long Beach and two facilities proposed off the Ventura County coast.

The Calpine proposal for an LNG terminal on Humboldt Bay met with a storm of protest in and around this North Coast community of 26,000 people, many of them daunted by the sheer size of the project.

Calpine would have built two 13-story storage tanks at the terminal, where mammoth 900-foot-long tankers would have unloaded the liquid gas. The area's tallest building, the Humboldt County Courthouse, stands only five stories high.

Crowds jammed the municipal auditorium Tuesday night, where the City Council was poised to decide whether to authorize the first step toward building the plant: an "exclusive right to negotiate" with San Jose-based Calpine.

After hearing more than 75 speakers, the council voted to continue its meeting tonight, but the Calpine cancellation ended the debate.

"It was a pretty clear message that there was a strong opposition to this project, and it's not just radical environmentalists, it's a pretty broad cross-section of the community," said Eureka Mayor Peter La Vallee.

Cynthia Elkins of the Garberville-based Environmental Protection Information Center said she was ecstatic.

"It's great for us to have a resounding victory and be assured that this terrible project is not going to become a part of our future," she said.

Calpine officials touted the project as a boon for the local economy, which has lost many timber and fishing jobs.

A minority at Tuesday's meeting urged the City Council to approve the exclusive right to negotiate, thereby keeping the project alive.

"What kind of future can I expect for myself and my kids?" asked Joe McKenzie, a construction worker and lifelong resident of Eureka. "I wonder if there will be any local jobs here for them when they're grown."

Natural gas cooled to its liquid form is highly compressed, making it cheaper and easier to transport from distant producing countries.

Four LNG facilities currently exist in the United States, with 30 more planned.

[Editorial, The Fresno Bee](#)
[March 22, 2004](#)

Close to home

The Valley must rely largely upon itself for air quality improvements.

When it comes to cleaning up the Valley's air, we're not going about it in the best possible way. That's because we don't really have enough science available to suggest the right measures, and most of the rules we have in place were largely crafted for other places, where conditions aren't the same.

On top of that, we can't expect a lot of help from the outside.

That cheery message came from atmospheric scientist Thomas Cahill, who addressed the Valley Town Hall lecture crowd on Wednesday.

Los Angeles has made remarkable progress over recent decades in reducing the ozone pollution that once afflicted its residents. That's a good thing, of course, but the experience down south doesn't translate perfectly into Valley applications because conditions are so different in the two regions. In fact, there is no other area of the country so well designed by nature to create and trap ozone (in the summer) and particulate matter (in the winter), with all the concomitant health and economic costs.

"The Central Valley is going to have to take charge of its own destiny," Cahill told his audience. That's something the state as a whole has done -- to this point -- in the battle for a safer environment. California fought for and won the right to make stricter rules than the federal government's with all manner of pollution and environmental dangers. The state has been such a leader that many other states have adopted California standards, going beyond what's called for by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

That hasn't happened yet with the Valley, though. And it must.

One place to start, Cahill offered, would be a regular series of symposia hosted by Valley universities, starting with one at California State University, Fresno. It's an excellent idea: Experts

of all sorts could be brought here to do Valley-specific research, out of which could come solutions crafted especially for Valley conditions.

We've also got to get gross-polluting vehicles -- the worst sources of pollution -- off our Valley roads. That will take state and federal intervention, which Cahill suggests we won't get unless we really start hollering at the tops of our voices.

Good advice. Let's all take a deep breath -- as deep as the air quality will permit -- and start screaming for help. That might get everyone's attention.

[Letter to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian](#)
March 22, 2004

Politicians hurt our air

If your recent headline story on the EPA downgrading the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley to the "worst category under the law" does not scare residents, nothing will.

Developers, big oil and big agriculture failed to prevent the state Legislature from creating air pollution control districts; but they managed to undermine the law's effectiveness by persuading legislators to limit board memberships to elected local officeholders -- i.e., city councilmembers and county supervisors, most of whom had received campaign contributions from the businesses they were now supposed to regulate.

No scientists, no public health officials, no unbiased experts. Only politicians beholden to the biggest polluters!

Anyone who expects the EPA's action to improve air quality should not hold his breath -- if he has breath to hold. As long as compliance and enforcement are left to the political toadies of developers, growers and oil companies, air quality will only worsen. The solution is to replace the politicians.

-- FORREST G. WOOD, Bakersfield

Struggling to clean up its own air, N.C. asks government to force others to do the same

Paul Nowell, Associated Press Writer
Published in the San Francisco Chronicle
Thursday, March 18, 2004

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) -- The state attorney general, seeking to shield North Carolina's air from pollution by coal-burning power plants in neighboring states, asked the federal government Thursday to force 13 states to cut emissions.

Attorney General Roy Cooper said polluters in other states are interfering with North Carolina's ability to meet national air quality standards. More than 20 of 100 counties have failed to meet national air-quality standards in North Carolina.

"We in North Carolina are cleaning up our air, but we believe our neighboring states need to do it too," Cooper said.

The attorney general's petition to the federal Environmental Protection Agency targets coal-fired plants located in Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

"The time has come for EPA to level the playing field and make other states take responsibility for their contributions to this problem," North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley said in a statement.

Several states targeted in the petition criticized it as unnecessary, and a spokesman for South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster called it "an election-year stunt."

"If North Carolina is successful in its petition, it could chill economic development and cost South Carolina jobs at a time when we can't afford to lose any more," said spokesman Trey Walker.

"We tried to work with North Carolina, but it seems a fight is what they want, well, a fight is what they'll get."

EPA spokesman Cynthia Bergman said the problem goes beyond North Carolina, and that many states are struggling with air pollution from neighboring states.

Bergman said an Interstate Air Quality rule, which the agency intends to finalize later this year, "will result in the deepest cuts in sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides emissions in more than a decade."

West Virginia Air Quality Director John Benedict said North Carolina's petition was unnecessary because several regional initiatives are under way to reduce pollution. "We think it's premature," Benedict said.

Patricia Spitzley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, said North Carolina's petition and its potential consequences were being reviewed. "Michigan could also make a case, but we have chosen not to," she said. "We have chosen to work with our neighboring states."

North Carolina asks EPA for help

It says other states are polluting its air

Jennifer Lee, New York Times

Published in the San Francisco Chronicle

Friday, March 19, 2004

Washington -- In a move that opens a new front in the clean air wars, North Carolina has petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency to crack down on pollution that it says is seeping across its borders from power plants in 13 other states.

If the petition succeeds, states as far away as Michigan would have to cut power plant pollution by more than 50 percent, while states closer to North Carolina would face reductions of 70 to 80 percent.

In addition to Michigan, the states named in the petition are Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

Traditionally, Northeastern states and California have led the legal battles for clean air. North Carolina's action is a reflection of pressure on state and local governments, which face economic repercussions if they do not comply with tough new ozone standards that take effect on April 15 under the federal Clean Air Act.

States are considering such actions as cracking down on power plants, lowering speed limits and discouraging house painting during sweltering summer months, in an effort to reduce the dangerous combination of ingredients that produce ozone. Those ingredients are heat, nitrogen oxides and the volatile organic compounds that are often found in consumer products like paint and charcoal lighting fluid.

The EPA estimates that more than half the nation's population will be living in areas that violate the Clean Air Act after April 15.

North Carolina, despite enacting one of the nation's strictest power plant pollution laws in 2002, says it will not be able to meet the new standards in part because of pollution wafting in from other states. In its petition, North Carolina is invoking a little-used but powerful section of the Clean Air Act that allows states to ask the EPA to address pollution from out-of-state sources.

The EPA has 60 days to respond to North Carolina's petition. If the agency grants the petition, the pollution sources must halt operations within three months unless the EPA approves a plan that will bring them into compliance as quickly as possible.

Whitman Denies Knowing Mercury Study Was Stalled

Democrats say, as EPA chief, she knew analysis needed to pursue lower industrial emissions had been shelved, and promised to deliver it.

By Alan C. Miller and Tom Hamburger, LA Times Staff Writers

March 19, 2004

WASHINGTON — On her final day as Environmental Protection Agency administrator, Christie Whitman assured members of Congress that the EPA would do required economic and technical studies before proposing a rule to reduce mercury emissions from power plants.

Despite Whitman's assurance, EPA career staffers say this analysis was put off on orders from agency political appointees — and the proposal was written in part by utility interests who strongly supported it.

Whitman said in interviews this week that, if she had known the studies of the mercury proposal were not being done, she would have intervened.

But according to a June 27, 2003, response from Whitman made public Thursday by Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles), she had been alerted to such concerns and promised four Democratic lawmakers that all necessary analyses would be completed by Dec. 15, 2003.

Waxman was one of the lawmakers who received Whitman's letter after inquiring about reports at the time that the analysis had been shelved.

"Her statements now are indefensible," Waxman said. Whitman, a former New Jersey governor, rejected Waxman's criticism as unfounded. She said it was her expectation that the agency would deliver on its commitments to the lawmakers after she departed.

"It was always my understanding that the full process was being followed," she said in an interview. "I was never given any indication that all the numbers weren't being run."

Waxman's criticism, she suggested, was motivated by partisanship. He should have shown similar concern when the Clinton administration only began the process of regulating mercury emissions from power plants after environmentalists filed suit, Whitman said.

The Bush administration emphasizes that its proposal would be the first to regulate this pollution.

But environmentalists and their congressional allies have attacked the EPA's plan and the process that produced it. Some have urged the administration to scrap the proposal because it violated federal requirements that an agency review alternatives and publish its analysis at the time it makes a major regulatory proposal.

"Everyone told EPA they needed to do their homework in writing these mercury standards," Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) said in a statement Thursday. "They intentionally did not, and their plan predictably has turned out to be deeply flawed. The mercury rule should be withdrawn and done again the right way, grounded in sound science."

EPA Administrator Michael O. Leavitt, who succeeded Whitman in November, said this week that he has instructed his staff to do additional analysis to help the agency "maximize the level of reductions" based on available technology. The EPA has until mid-December to adopt the final rule. Leavitt characterized the new studies as part of the ongoing process.

Whitman's letter to the lawmakers also pledged to share relevant data with a federal advisory committee helping the EPA develop the rule. But the panel never received the data, apparently because it wasn't produced.

The advisory committee, made up of regulators, environmentalists and industry representatives, was promised comparative data on various alternative proposals that it requested last March. But its next meeting was canceled by the EPA and the group never met again.

"If I had known the administration was committed to getting this data, I would have said, 'We need to make the arrangements to get it and plan the next meeting,' " said John A. Paul, the co-chairman and an Ohio pollution-control official.

Paul, a Republican, said the committee's extensive work was ignored by the EPA in part because its members were suggesting alternatives that ran contrary to the administration's wishes.

The EPA only studied options that would support White House preferences on regulating mercury, agency staffers said.

The EPA's preferred regulatory approach is a market-driven system that the agency initially said would cut mercury emissions from power plants 70% in 15 years. It has since hedged on when it would achieve that goal.

Environmental, health and labor groups maintain that emissions could be reduced by as much as 90% by 2008 through tighter controls under the Clean Air Act. Utilities counter that such a mandate would create financial havoc.

There is growing evidence that mercury which has made its way into the aquatic food chain is a serious health threat, especially to children. A National Research Council study in 2000 found that about 60,000 children a year could suffer learning disabilities from exposure to mercury while in the womb because their mothers ate fish contaminated by the toxin.

Whitman said Thursday that the specific commitments to the lawmakers that accompanied her letter were prepared by Jeffrey R. Holmstead, head of the EPA Office of Air and Radiation, who represented industry interests on air pollution issues before joining the administration.

EPA employees say it was Holmstead who informed them that the studies were being postponed indefinitely, partly because of "White House concern."

Holmstead was unavailable for comment Thursday.

An EPA spokeswoman said criticism of the mercury proposal was unwarranted. "All the analysis has not been done," said Cynthia Bergman. "And any judgment on the rule and the process should be withheld until the rule becomes final in December."