

Again, Valley air flunks grade

Schools are flying flags showing quality of air, bad for 6th straight year.

By Barbara Anderson and Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, April 28, 2005

It's getting easier to grade the air quality in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Just drive by a school, like Edison Bethune Charter Academy in southwest Fresno, and look at the flagpole.

If a green flag is flying, like the one that flapped in the breeze Wednesday — breathe easy — the air gets an "A."

But don't expect too many green flags at schools, especially in warm weather.

The American Lung Association's annual air-quality "report card," made public today, flunks the air quality in many San Joaquin Valley counties for the sixth consecutive year.

The American Lung Association ranked several Valley counties and cities among the most unhealthy places in the country to breathe. Fresno, Kern and Tulare counties failed almost every test of clean air.

Schools participating in an air-quality flag program likely will be flying yellow, orange or red flags, signifying poor air quality on many days in late spring and summer.

The flags match the colors in the Air Quality Index, a health-based rating of air quality issued daily by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

A yellow flag means the air is unhealthy for extremely sensitive children or adults; orange represents unhealthy air for sensitive people; and a red flag warns the air is unhealthy for everyone. Scattered schools from Parlier to Burrel are flying air-quality flags.

By next school year, buildings throughout the Fresno Unified School District should have the flags. Fresno Unified received a federal Emergency Planning and Crisis Response grant to purchase 125 flag sets. Clovis Unified plans to fly flags at two schools next year.

The 34 schools in the Visalia Unified School District began flying air-quality flags this year. More than a dozen schools in Tulare raise the flags each morning; and all Merced Unified schools are flying them.

A flag is an easy way for people to note the air quality, says Susie Rico, an American Lung Association of Central California program associate. Rico is working with Fresno Unified to get flags flying at the district's schools.

The lung association, with help from the air district, provides education materials to explain what the color of a flag means for the health of students, as well as teachers.

Smog, a summertime problem in the Valley, can irritate the lungs, skin and eyes and trigger asthma attacks. In the fall and winter, small airborne particulates are the health scourge.

The lung association's annual State of the Air report found 32 counties in the state do not have healthy air.

Kern and Fresno counties are right at the top of the worst-offender list nationally. Kern was second and Fresno was third behind Riverside as the most unhealthy places in the country for ozone or smog.

The lung association has ranked the three counties in the same order since 2000.

From 2001 to 2003, the three-year period considered in the lung association report, the San Joaquin Valley had 368 violations of the long-term federal smog standard, the highest number in the country. Los Angeles was second with 297 violations.

The combined population of the L.A. basin and the Valley is about 20 million people, more than half of the state's residents.

"Too many Californians are breathing too much dirty air on too many days," said Dr. John Balmes, a pulmonary physician who serves on the lung association's clean air technical advisory group.

Those are scare tactics, according to Joel Schwartz, visiting fellow with the American Enterprise Institute, a nonprofit think tank.

"ALA exaggerates air pollution levels and risks in an effort to keep people unduly scared about current, historically low, air pollution levels," he said.

"But [the California Air Resources Board's] and [the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's] own estimates show that air pollution affects far fewer people, far less often, and with far less severity than activists or regulators would like to admit."

For those who follow the lung association's annual breakdown, there were familiar names on the list of cities. Four of the country's five dirtiest metropolitan areas are in the Valley. Only Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside ranked ahead of Bakersfield, Fresno-Madera, Visalia-Porterville and Merced.

Bakersfield and Fresno-Madera also landed in the worst five for tiny specks of pollution called particulate matter.

Edison Bethune did not wait for the lung association's report. The school began raising the air quality flag two months ago. Students and parents notice it, says Principal Felicia Quarles.

Onjanae Davis, 10, knows a red-flag day means she won't be running at recess. "I better not play too rough or I can pass out from the heat or just stop breathing. So I'll just slow it down."

Pete Summers, coordinator of emergency planning and crisis response at Fresno Unified, expects air-quality flags will trigger a community-wide response when they begin flying at Fresno schools.

And he has one hope: "Wouldn't it be a nice thing in our community if we could just have the flags worn out (from flapping in the wind) that are green and yellow? And that the two unhealthy groups stay in their boxes."

Report: Air Pollution Lower, Still Threat

By Ryan Pearson, Associated Press Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, April 28, 2005

Los Angeles (AP) -- Fewer Americans have had to breathe unhealthy levels of smog or microscopic soot in recent years, but air pollution remained a threat in counties where more than half the nation lives, the American Lung Association said in an annual report Thursday.

Using data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the group found that the number of counties in which unhealthy air was recorded fell significantly for the first time in six years, to 390 from 441 in last year's report. The new report covered 2001 to 2003, while the previous one analyzed pollution levels from 2000 to 2002.

The association attributed the dip to cool and wet weather in the years studied, government controls on Eastern coal-fired power plants and improved vehicle emissions standards. Areas of the Southeast accounted for much of the drop in pollution.

But Janice Nolen, the group's director of national policy, emphasized that the counties where problems persist are home to 152 million people, or 52 percent of the U.S. population.

"People's lives are shortened by months to years because of the air they're breathing," she said. "The trend has gotten a little bit better in the last few years ... but we're not out of the woods."

Counties were considered to have unhealthy air if their pollution levels exceeded federal standards for an average of about three days a year.

Most of the violations were for ground-level ozone, a precursor to smog that causes respiratory illnesses that can be especially harmful to the elderly, children and people with asthma. Ozone

pollution occurs when hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides — released when fossil fuels burn or chemicals evaporate — combine with heat and sunlight.

California remains the nation's ozone capital, with nine of the top 10 most smog-choked counties. Five counties in Ohio and three in Pennsylvania also were among the 25 worst.

One in five Americans, meanwhile, face year-round unhealthy exposure to particulates, tiny soot from diesel-burning trucks, fireplaces, agriculture and other sources, the report found. It can lodge deep in the lungs and contribute to heart problems.

The EPA credited tougher standards for the drop in air pollution, including its 1998 rule requiring Eastern states to reduce power plant nitrogen oxide emissions. Impending emissions standards for trucks, cars and sport-utility vehicles will help cut pollution further, the agency said.

Conservatives and energy-industry groups have criticized the Lung Association's methodology, saying it's misleading to give counties "failing" grades for air pollution that might have been recorded at just one monitoring station.

"I wish they would do more informing and less scaring," said Ben Lieberman, a senior environment and energy policy analyst at the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, a conservative research group. ___

On the Net:

www.lungusa.org <<http://www.lungusa.org>>

L.A. air graded as clearly bad

Pollution way down, but not far enough

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News

Thursday, April 28, 2005

Each day that Phillip Franco pedals from his Glendale home to the fire station where he works in East Los Angeles, he keeps 21 grams of smog-forming pollutants from wafting into the air.

That might not sound like much, but Franco believes that even one less car on the road makes a difference, especially in a region that received a failing grade from the American Lung Association on its annual State of the Air report this week.

"There's 400 miles a month that I don't put pollution into the air," he said. "I'm glad that I'm not contributing to that."

The national report, based on Environmental Protection Agency data from the 2001-03 period, found that the number of U.S. counties with unhealthy air recorded by monitors dropped to 390 from 441 in the previous report -- the first significant decline in six years.

In its report, the association said California remains the nation's ozone capital and that San Bernardino County had the worst smog, followed by Kern, Fresno, Riverside, Tulare, Los Angeles and Merced counties.

The nationwide decline was attributed to cool and wet weather, tighter controls on coal-fired power plants and improved vehicle-emissions standards.

Locally, experts say that, while the air is dramatically cleaner than it was 10 years or 20 years ago, there are still too many days when asthmatics struggle to breathe and children are advised to play indoors.

Since motor vehicles and consumer products are among the region's biggest polluters, experts say simple changes in lifestyle can make a significant difference in air quality.

"We've already regulated power plants and industrial sources about as much as they are going to be regulated. We can make choices about what we drive. A hybrid vehicle is a lot better on emissions than a big SUV," said Dr. John Balmes, chairman of California's Clean Air Technical Advisory Group for the American Lung Association.

A Bay Area resident, Balmes carpools three days and rides his bike two days a week.

"Those are the easier, more feasible personal choices that one can make, and they do make a difference."

Some other simple choices can add up to air pollution reductions.

"Every bit helps," said Sam Atwood, AQMD spokesman.

Aerosol hair sprays, floor waxes and paints produce about 100 tons per day of volatile organic compounds, key ingredients of smog.

"It's going to take efforts on every front," Atwood said. "Individual actions will be increasingly important as we get closer to meeting our goals. Using a nonpolluting lawn mower or other lawn equipment or the choice of car can make a big difference."

Franco considers his 17-mile bicycle commute a pleasure compared with sitting in traffic on congested freeways. He has pedaled to work in Watts and Huntington Park, and he will soon be transferred to a station at Inglewood. He carries necessities in a courier bag and is able to shower at the fire station.

That long bike ride would be difficult for some folks. Another option is to pair cycling with transit, as Sherman Oaks resident Jon Turner does.

A youth counselor and adventure guide, Turner frequently commutes from home to Redondo Beach by pedaling five miles to the Red Line station. He takes the Red Line to the Blue Line to the Green Line to the Douglas-Rosecrans station and then cycles 10 more minutes to work.

The car-free commute takes him about 90 minutes, often faster than it takes to drive.

"It's all been explained to me why Los Angeles collects smog. ... As a resident of this valley that does collect smog and particles, I have a responsibility to reduce my impact." Northeast San Fernando Valley Assemblywoman Cindy Montanez has preached environmentalism and drafted legislation encouraging more development designed to facilitate walking and using public transportation.

Now she's walking the walk, literally. Next month, Montanez will move her district office from Mission Hills to San Fernando, where she and much of her staff can walk to work, walk to lunch and even walk to the Metrolink station to take the train to downtown meetings.

"I can leave the car parked or leave it parked at home, and if I do get into a car, it's a (hybrid) Prius, which has one of the lowest emissions," said Montanez.

In addition to her gas-electric hybrid, her aides are switching to more fuel-efficient sedans to help lessen pollution when they drive around town on district business.

"Now we're asking ourselves, 'Why am I taking my car down the street?' where before we would just get in the car and go there," said her district director, Steve Veres. In the midday sun, Paul Scott's electricity meter runs backward. Photovoltaic panels on his Santa Monica house generate wattage that is sold into the energy grid during the day. Scott buys electricity back from the grid at a cheaper rate at night when his family runs the washer and recharges his electric car.

Most people don't associate their electricity use with air pollution, Scott said, but every flick of the light switch requires energy generated by power plants that create smog ingredients and particulate matter.

"You look at the air that's coming out of these (plants), and you have to understand that your use of electricity causes that pollution, and that pollution is causing asthma and illnesses downwind."

Actor Ed Begley Jr. now powers his Studio City home, his car and even his oven with solar energy. He often rides his bike to appointments in Santa Monica and recently drove his wife's hybrid to Portland, Ore. It cost \$44 for the gas to drive 950 miles.

He didn't adopt his smog-conscious lifestyle overnight, and he advises folks to start with simple changes -- such as switching to fluorescent bulbs that use less electricity or cycling on short errands.

"I made these choices and, at first, they seemed difficult. It probably was difficult the first time I rode my bike to Santa Monica," Begley said. "I'm a small foot soldier in this battle for clean air. We've come so far, and we need to be proud of our accomplishments."

Report: Bad Valley air cause of medical woes

By Michael G. Mooney

THE MODESTO BEE, April 28, 2005

Also published in the Merced Sun-Star

Children in the Northern San Joaquin Valley pay a high price for the region's inability to clear its air of pollution.

An American Lung Association study released today shows that children in the valley have:

- Diminished lung capacity
- Increased susceptibility to asthma and many other chronic respiratory diseases
- The loss of months or even years from expected life spans

In its "State of the Air 2005" report, the Lung Association gives failing grades to Stanislaus, Merced, Tuolumne, San Joaquin and Calaveras counties.

It lists Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin among those having the most severely polluted air in the nation for smog and particle pollution.

"That we continue to fail these surveys is nothing new, really," said Dr. Wallace Carroll, a leading valley medical expert.

Carroll, a Modesto allergist and chairman of the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition, said the Lung Association is not exaggerating the valley's pollution problem.

"It's the way it is," he said. "This is science. There's a lot known about the harmful effects on developing lungs."

According to the report, more than 31.6 million Californians inhale dangerously high levels of particle pollution, ozone or both.

Air quality data shows that "too many Californians are breathing too much bad air on too many days," said Dr. John Balmes, a member of the American Lung Association's California Clean Air Technical Advisory Group.

Balmes, a pulmonary physician and professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco, took part Monday in a news briefing sponsored by the American Lung Association.

"The threat may be invisible to the human eye," Balmes said, "but it is real, can make people sick and even kill."

Improvement not quick enough

Balmes said oil refineries, diesel exhaust from trucks and buses, and agricultural burning are among the state's biggest sources of particle pollution, as well as contributing key raw ingredients of ozone pollution.

"We cannot forget that the family car is a significant part of the problem," Balmes said.

Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the valley's air quality has improved, but not quickly enough.

The region's rapid population growth, said Presto, is making problems worse.

"All those people moving into all those new homes are bringing one, two or three cars with them," Presto said. The report "underscores the air pollution problems we have within the district."

The report drew criticism from Joel Schwartz, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who formerly headed the state agency charged with evaluating the vehicle emissions inspection program. He claimed the Lung Association has exaggerated the problem.

Record low in 2004 not noted

In an e-mail to The Bee and other news outlets, Schwartz said the report ignored improvements in air quality that have been made since the inception of the federal Clean Air Act in the 1970s.

The statement says "2004 was a record-low year for both ozone and fine particulates, but (the report) does not mention this."

An estimated 4.2 million people in California live with lung diseases such as asthma, emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

The American Lung Association said more than 35,000 will die prematurely this year as a result.

In Stanislaus County, Carroll said, an estimated 22,000 adults and 12,000 children have asthma.

While not all those cases can be attributed to pollution alone, Carroll said, numerous scientific studies show the condition is worsened by ozone and particle pollution.

About 12 percent of all children living in the Central Valley have asthma, he said, adding that the valley has one of the highest child asthma rates in the nation. In Fresno County, one in every six schoolchildren carries an inhaler, Carroll said.

About half of all school absences are due to asthma, he said.

Takes months, years off life

The American Lung Association said recent studies show that as ozone levels increase, so does the risk of premature death.

Ozone air pollution is a powerful irritant that can cause chemical burns on lung tissue, the report stated. Symptoms include shortness of breath, chest pain when inhaling deeply, wheezing and coughing.

Studies also have found that ozone triggers asthma attacks, the Lung Association contends, and increases the need for emergency room visits and hospital admissions.

Particle pollution is a mixture of microscopic solids and aerosols that, according to the American Lung Association, have been found to take months to years off a person's life.

In addition to children, the elderly, and those with asthma, other lung diseases or heart disease, the Lung Association's report adds diabetics to the list of groups most at risk from particle pollution.

Presto said problems in the Northern San Joaquin Valley are complex and will take everyone's cooperation to solve.

Without that cooperation, he said, "our children and grandchildren are going to suffer. The State of the Air report is just a reminder about what's going on here."

Air-quality fixes still needed

Lung association report calls for aggressive action

By Dana Nichols, Staff Writer

The Record

Published Thursday, April 28, 2005

STOCKTON -- California needs to aggressively cut the total amount of gasoline and diesel burned by motor vehicles if the state is to have any hope of reducing air pollution and improving the health of people, American Lung Association officials say.

The Association's annual State of the Air report, released today, says California still has some of the filthiest air in the nation despite decades of efforts to improve it. The report gives San Joaquin County and all of its immediate neighbors failing grades in at least one air pollution category.

"We need to drive less and emit fewer pollutants," said Dr. John Balmes, chairman of the Lung Association of California's Clean Air Technical Advisory Group.

Rapid growth in the number of people and cars, especially in the Central Valley, is keeping pollution levels high, even though cars have become cleaner over the decades, the association said.

Recent improvements in air quality in some places -- like the reduction in particulate pollutants such as smoke and dust in 2003 in the San Joaquin Valley -- are likely due to new restrictions on winter burning in wood stoves and fireplaces, said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The number of counties nationwide with unhealthy air recorded by monitors dropped to 390 from 441 in the last report -- the first significant decline in six years, according to the group.

In its report Thursday, the ALA attributed the dip to cool and wet weather in the years studied, government controls on Eastern coal-fired power plants and improved vehicle emissions standards.

But Janice Nolen, the group's director of national policy, emphasized estimates that half the U.S. population continues to live in areas covered in blankets of unhealthy smog, and one in five Americans faces year-round unhealthy exposure to tiny soot from diesel-burning trucks and other sources.

Local air districts don't have the power to directly regulate pollution that comes from cars and trucks.

"But we cannot forget that the family car is a significant part of the problem," Balmes said.

Cars contribute to ground-level ozone pollution, which is the major component of smog. Recent state research found that ozone is a bigger threat to children's health than previously realized. The California Air Resources Board today is considering setting tighter standards for ozone based on those health studies.

American Lung officials support the tighter ozone standard but also say they want to see the state get at the root of the problem by reducing the use of oil-based fuels and forcing a transition to cleaner vehicles.

A bill by State Sen. Christine Kehoe, D-San Diego, is intended to do just that. The bill, SB757, sets a goal for halting the increase in oil-based fuel consumption by 2010 and calls for a "significant" reduction by 2020.

San Joaquin County received a D grade for ozone pollution, logging seven days from 2001 to 2003 when ozone levels were considered unhealthy to sensitive groups, like children and asthmatics. Delta breezes probably prevented the score from being worse.

Counties to the south that don't get as much wind from the ocean received failing grades. Calaveras County also got a failing grade for ozone pollution, although the county's grade for particulate pollution improved to an A with zero unhealthy days registered. Last year, Calaveras got a B for particulate pollution.

At least one motorist is skeptical that Kehoe's law would do much to reduce fuel consumption.

"How are you going to stop someone from using gas unless it goes up way higher than it is now?" said Annie Kelley of Stockton, a retired laundry worker.

Kelley said she already limits her driving as much as possible and drives a fuel-efficient Geo Metro.

Kehoe's bill doesn't have any language that would allow increases in the price of gasoline to discourage consumption. In fact, the bill is intended to stabilize gasoline prices by reducing demand, Kehoe legislative aide Gil Topete said.

"We are not asking anybody to drive any less," Topete said. "We are not asking anybody to pay more at the pump."

But clean-air advocates say people should drive less in order to protect themselves and their children from air pollution.

"Whenever you turn on your engine in your car, you create pollution," said Paul Scott of Santa Monica, an activist with the lung association who drives an electric car. "There is personal responsibility that goes with any choice like driving."

Children suffer the most damage from the pollution. State research estimates that in San Joaquin County alone, there would be 114,400 fewer school absences each year if the air met the proposed ozone standard the Air Resources Board is considering today.

Kehoe's bill faces opposition from the refining industry.

"It will discourage investment that is needed in California's petroleum infrastructure and possibly reduce transportation and general fund revenues," said Joseph Sparano, president of the Western States Petroleum Association.

And even people who are sympathetic to the idea of driving less say that may not be possible.

"I would like to drive less," said Joseph Flores, 64 of Stockton, a retired construction worker. "But I have doctors' appointments, and I have to pick up my wife at work."

- The Associated Press contributed to this report

Nation's air praised but not this state's

As it did last year, Orange County received an 'F' in three pollution categories involving ozone and fine particles.

By RYAN PEARSON, The Associated Press

Published in the Orange County Register and the Sacramento Bee

Thursday, April 28, 2005

LOS ANGELES - Rules limiting power plant emissions in the East and other cleanup efforts have reduced air pollution from smog and microscopic soot nationwide in recent years, but Southern California continues to get low marks, the American Lung Association says in its annual air quality report.

The number of counties with unhealthy air recorded by monitors dropped to 390 from 441 in the latest report - the first significant decline in six years, according to the group.

The ALA attributed the dip to cool and wet weather in the years studied, government controls on eastern coal-fired power plants and improved vehicle emissions standards.

But Janice Nolen, the group's director of national policy, emphasized estimates that half the U.S. population continues to live in areas covered in blankets of unhealthy smog, and one in five Americans face year-round unhealthy exposure to tiny soot from diesel-burning trucks and other sources.

"People's lives are shortened by months to years because of the air they're breathing," she said. "The trend has gotten a little bit better in the last few years ... but we're not out of the woods."

California remains the nation's ozone capital, with 14 of the 25 most smog-choked counties, as determined by a weighted average number of days per year with unhealthy ozone pollution.

The report, which is based on EPA data from 2001-2003, found that San Bernardino County had the worst smog, followed by Kern, Fresno, Riverside, Tulare, Los Angeles and Merced counties.

The county surrounding Houston - Harris - was ranked 8th, the only one making the top 10 outside California.

Last year's ALA report used EPA data from 2000-2002.

As it did last year, Orange County received an "F" in three pollution categories: number of days with unhealthy levels of ground-level ozone, fine particle pollution averaged over a 24-hour period and fine particle pollution averaged over an entire year.

Experts at the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the regional smog regulator, said the ALA's method for assigning grades is fair. But they also said the group's report does not reflect air quality improvements in the area over the past decade, or the fact that about half of Orange County - the half closest to the ocean - did not exceed ozone limits at all in 2002.

While the five most soot-polluted counties are also in the Golden State, that problem is more widespread, according to the ALA. Five counties in Ohio and three in Pennsylvania were among the 25 worst for unhealthy concentrations of microscopic soot.

"America's air is cleaner than it's been in 30 years, and it will continue to improve," the Environmental Protection Agency said in a statement.

The ALA analysis comes the day that the California Air Resources Board meets in El Monte to consider adding a new regulation to limit ozone levels in the state's 34 air quality districts. State standards are already tougher than federal ones and the new eight-hour ozone limits would tighten those regulations even more.

Kern panel to weigh new dairy operation

800-acre project would join existing ones on Bear Mountain Boulevard

By Gretchen Wenner, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, April 28, 2005

A stretch of rural highway south of Bakersfield known as "Dairy Row" will likely get another moo-cow facility soon.

Tonight, county planning commissioners will hold a hearing for the proposed Petrissans Dairy, an 800-acre operation set for the south side of Bear Mountain Boulevard, east of Ashe Road.

Whether the project will generate serious opposition remains to be seen.

On one hand, a sudden influx of dairies into Kern from the Chino area has alarmed some locals concerned about possible water and air pollution, odors, flies and other impacts.

That's especially true in the city of Wasco, 30 miles northwest of Bakersfield, where a cluster of proposed projects appeared out of the blue last June.

On the other hand, the Petrissans project will snuggle in among a group of existing operations along Bear Mountain Boulevard. Sixteen other dairies and a cattle feedlot already operate within a six-mile radius, according to county planners.

What's more, the operation is relatively small. About 3,100 head are expected to live on site, including milk cows and support animals.

By comparison, the Borba cousin's twin mega-dairies a few miles northwest, each with about 14,000 animals, caused a stir when first proposed in the late 1990s.

The Petrissans project has been on the books for more than five years. Unlike most other new dairy facilities in Kern County, the operation is being studied and reviewed on its own.

That's because owners George and Marie Petrissans had nearly finished years of complicated environmental studies last August, when county supervisors decided to process new dairies in groups. When adopting that policy, the board also gave the Petrissans project special permission to move forward on its own.

The operation will go next to an existing facility to the east, Petrissans Brothers Dairy, run by the owner's brother, according to county planners.

Nine written comments trickled in regarding an environmental report on the dairy. Two high-profile environmental groups made comments: the Sierra Club and the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, a Bay Area-based organization. The center's lawsuits over the Borba projects in the late 1990s eventually changed Kern County's policy for reviewing new dairy projects. Now, stricter environmental reviews are part of the process.

The planning commission is slated to vote on a permit for the dairy. The commission's decision will be final unless it is appealed to the Board of Supervisors. In recent years, dairy projects have typically been bumped onto supervisors that way.

In other business, the commission will consider:

- A proposed 335-unit ministorage facility in Tehachapi. Developer S&J Rentals wants to put the five-acre operation at 48510 Valley Blvd. Planners recommend the commission turn down the plan because it could clash with emerging traffic patterns. The project will eventually go on to county supervisors.
- A proposal to allow four homes on 10 acres in a rural part of Tehachapi. Developer Morris Klempfner wants to put the houses on a 25-acre patch at the northwest corner of Banducci Road and Vincent Street. Four neighbors wrote letters opposing the plan, citing concerns about septic systems, floodwater issues and development of agricultural land. County planners recommend approval of the project, which will eventually go on to supervisors.

Council members take look at goals

By James Burger, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, April 28, 2005

The Bakersfield City Council pulled together their future goals for the city and took a look at them Wednesday night. Council members will look at them again and discuss some revisions at their next meeting.

The goals show what the council wants to achieve in both the short term and long term.

They can be as specific as:

"Facilitate 40-acre soccer park development."

Or they can be as philosophical as:

"Encourage pocket revitalization of commercial centers and/or individual city blocks which may benefit from a targeted approach to economic assistance, which does not conflict or duplicate existing redevelopment efforts."

From a practical standpoint, the City Council goals are an overall direction to City Manager Alan Tandy and his staff about what they should work to accomplish.

The council also walked some familiar air pollution ground Wednesday night.

They denied an appeal by the Sierra Club and approved a northeast Bakersfield project.

The Sierra Club has been routinely opposing such development projects and asking for an air quality mitigation fee of around \$1,200 for each home.

The council has routinely overruled the club.

And the club has sued the developments or gotten their fee out of negotiations.

Roger McIntosh, speaking for the developer of the 120-acre project north of Paladino Drive Near Queen Street, said the Sierra Club's tactics are extortion.

Sierra Club spokesman Harry Love said the money will go into cleaning up pollution -- not into the Sierra Club's pocket.

McIntosh said the developer will do enough cleaning up of polluting cars and engines to balance out the pollution that will come from the new homes.

And -- in a small invasion of homeowners' pocketbooks -- the council approved a 4.2 percent increase in the annual sewer fee.

That will raise the sewage taxes on single-family homes from \$120 to \$125.

Ex-Caltech Economist Guilty in Fraud Case

From Times Staff and Wire Reports
Los Angeles Times, April 27, 2005

A former Caltech economist who helped design an air cleanup plan for Southern California's largest firms to buy and sell pollution credits pleaded guilty in federal court Tuesday to defrauding a New York investment firm during a trade she brokered.

Anne Masters Sholtz, 40, of Bradbury faces a possible 27 to 33 months in prison when she is sentenced in July, federal prosecutors said.

Sholtz founded a Pasadena-based firm where companies could buy and sell pollution credits much like any commodity. It was in her role as a broker that prosecutors said she bilked the New York firm, AG Clean Air, out of \$2.5 million to \$5 million.

Air pollution still abysmal in Bay Area

Alameda, Contra Costa counties flunk tests for particle, ozone levels

By Rebecca Vesely, staff writer
Tri Valley Herald, April 28, 2005

The Bay Area's air quality hasn't improved and is contributing to high rates of asthma and other chronic illnesses, according to an annual scorecard from the American Lung Association released today.

For the second year in a row, Alameda and Contra Costa counties flunked air-quality tests in ozone air pollution - or smog - and short-term microscopic particle pollution, according to the report.

San Mateo and San Francisco counties received A's in ozone pollution but a D and F, respectively, in short-term particle pollution, according to the report.

"San Francisco and San Mateo always get good grades in ozone levels because the prevailing winds push the ozone over to Oakland and the East Bay," said Linda Weiner, director of air-quality advocacy for the American Lung Association of the East Bay.

Nationally, the Bay Area ranked 23 out of 25 metro areas with the most short-term particle pollution - microscopic soot from exhaust fumes of diesel trucks and buses, wood fires, power plant emissions and dust.

Health experts are concerned about particle pollution because the tiny particles can become embedded in the lungs, causing asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. People with other chronic diseases such as diabetes are also adversely affected by air pollution, according to recent studies.

"Particle pollution may be invisible to the human eye but it is real, can make people sick and it can even kill," Dr. John Balmes, professor and chief of Environmental and Occupational Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said in a statement.

The national report indicated that half of the U.S. population - or 152 million people - live in areas with unhealthy levels of either smog or particle pollution. In California,

31.6 million people breathe air with high levels of particle pollution or smog. An estimated 4.2 million state residents have lung diseases such as asthma, emphysema and chronic pulmonary disease.

California has 14 of the top 25 ozone-polluted counties and 11 of the top 25 short-term particle pollution counties nationwide - most in Southern California and the Central Valley, according to the report.

People can reduce their risk by choosing fuel-efficient or hybrid-electric cars, not using wood-burning fireplaces and avoiding exercise near high-traffic areas, the association said.

The association's State of the Air 2005 report is based on 2001 to 2003 data from counties and local air agencies. It included data on the number of days a county enters unhealthy ranges of pollution according to the Air Quality Index.

The report can be found at www.californialung.org.

A Down To Earth Event

Enterprise Staff Report

The Selma Enterprise, April 28, 2005

Plenty of sunshine made for a beautiful Earth Day event on Saturday.

The threat of rain was a concern by organizers, with dark clouds on the preceding day -- but mother nature proved to be welcoming of the festivities in Selma.

The fourth annual Selma Earth Day brought out a larger crowd than last year says organizer Melissa Harding, the city's recycling coordinator who is also affiliated with the Americorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program.

More informational booths were available than last year, and the day's events included live music by the Saltwater Merchants, recycled "earth-friendly" craft-making, prizes, dance performances by the Second Street Dancers, story-telling, and children's games.

"These events are designed as a way for individuals to learn more about how to care for the environment while having fun," Harding said in a release.

Highlights included rounds of "Environmental Jeopardy!" which quizzed volunteers on recycling and conservation; recycled artwork contest from students of several of Selma's elementary schools; and presentations by organizations including San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to educate the public on issues such as burn restrictions.

Harding had worked on putting the Earth Day event together for the past several months and setup booths for recycled crafts, recycled products, recycled oil and environmental games for kids. Dozens of community volunteers pitched in to make the day possible.

Winners of the recycled artwork contest, where students used cans, recycled paper and crafts to create art projects were:

kindergartner Arion Becker from Indianola Elementary School;

second grader Jose Garcia from Eric White;

third grader Haley Stump from Cathedral Christian School;

fourth and fifth grade category winner Ashley from Roosevelt Elementary School;

and winner of the California Refund Value (CRV) award was Alexis Bryant from Indianola Elementary School.

Some organizations setting up booths were:

Selma Police Department
Fresno County Department of Resources
Native Plant Society
Department of Water Resources
San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District
Tree Fresno
Selma High School Art Club

Experiment Creates Nuclear Fusion in Lab

By Alicia Chang, AP Science Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, April 28, 2005

Los Angeles (AP) -- A tabletop experiment created nuclear fusion — long seen as a possible clean energy solution — under lab conditions, scientists reported. But the amount of energy produced was too little to be seen as a breakthrough in solving the world's energy needs.

For years, scientists have sought to harness controllable nuclear fusion, the same power that lights the sun and stars. This latest experiment relied on a tiny crystal to generate a strong electric field. While falling short as a way to produce energy, the method could have potential uses in the oil-drilling industry and homeland security, said Seth Putterman, one of the physicists who did the experiment at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The experiment's results appear in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*.

Previous claims of tabletop fusion have been met with skepticism and even derision by physicists. In 1989, Dr. B. Stanley Pons of the University of Utah and Martin Fleischmann of Southampton University in England shocked the world when they announced that they had achieved so-called cold fusion at room temperature. Their work was discredited after repeated attempts to reproduce it failed.

Fusion experts noted that the UCLA experiment was credible because, unlike the 1989 work, it didn't violate basic principles of physics.

"This doesn't have any controversy in it because they're using a tried and true method," said David Ruzic, professor of nuclear and plasma engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "There's no mystery in terms of the physics."

Fusion power has been touted as the ultimate energy source and a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels like coal and oil. Fossil fuels are expected to run short in about 50 years.

In fusion, light atoms are joined in a high-temperature process that frees large amounts of energy.

It is considered environment-friendly because it produces virtually no air pollution and does not pose the safety and long-term radioactive waste concerns associated with modern nuclear power plants, where heavy uranium atoms are split to create energy in a process known as fission.

In the UCLA experiment, scientists placed a tiny crystal that can generate a strong electric field into a vacuum chamber filled with deuterium gas, a form of hydrogen capable of fusion. Then the researchers activated the crystal by heating it.

The resulting electric field created a beam of charged deuterium atoms that struck a nearby target, which was embedded with yet more deuterium. When some of the deuterium atoms in the beam collided with their counterparts in the target, they fused.

The reaction gave off an isotope of helium along with subatomic particles known as neutrons, a characteristic of fusion. The experiment did not, however, produce more energy than the amount put in — an achievement that would be a huge breakthrough.

Commercial neutron generators work in a similar way. But the UCLA instrument was "remarkably low-tech" in comparison, Michael Saltmarsh, a retired physicist from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, wrote in an accompanying article.

UCLA's Putterman said future experiments will focus on refining the technique for potential commercial uses, including designing portable neutron generators that could be used for oil well drilling or scanning luggage and cargo at airports.

On the Net:

Nature journal:

University of California, Los Angeles:

www.nature.com/nature <<http://www.nature.com/nature>>

www.ucla.edu <<http://www.ucla.edu>>

GOP Plans Vote to Overcome Dems' EPA Block

By John Heilprin, Associated Press Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, April 27, 2005

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Senate Republicans will try this week to overcome a Democratic senator's block on President Bush's nominee to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

Republicans on Wednesday set up a confrontation over the hold on Stephen Johnson's nomination imposed by Sen. Thomas Carper, D-Del. Undoing that Senate hold can require a lengthy process and a motion requiring a 60-vote majority in the 100-member body.

They acted days after Bush expressed frustration with Carper's gambit to extract more information from the administration on competing proposals to modify the Clean Air Act.

Carper told the Senate he hoped Republicans and the White House "would see that maybe the better part of the valor, and the way to get to a win-win situation, is to simply say, 'We'll provide the information that's been requested.'"

Democratic senators also have in place or are threatening to place holds on Bush's nominees to head the Food and Drug Administration and the office of the U.S. trade representative.

Johnson, an EPA employee for about 25 years and the first person with a science background to be nominated for the top job, joined Bush for Earth Day activities last week.

"I put this good man's nomination in front of the United States Senate for a reason — because he's plenty capable of doing the job," Bush said. "And now is the time for the United States Senate to confirm him."

Under Senate rules, a single senator can delay a vote to confirm a nominee. Carper has sent at least four letters to EPA since April 2003 seeking data to help him and his colleagues compare a Bush proposal on air pollution with two competing plans that also address carbon dioxide, the main "greenhouse" gas blamed for global warming.

In a letter to senators, Johnson offered last week to provide more modeling data within six to eight weeks. Carper replied with a counterproposal.

Sens. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and Bill Nelson, D-Fla., lifted their holds on the nomination only after Johnson canceled a pesticide study in Florida involving children.

On the Net:

White House:

EPA:

www.whitehouse.gov <<http://www.whitehouse.gov>>

www.epa.gov <<http://www.epa.gov>>

Editorial, Merced Sun-Star, April 28, 2005

Our View: New buses could help clear the air

There's no disputing our school children deserve the very best. Each day they ride to and from school on a fleet of buses that range from nearly antiquated to, well, maybe a bit more recent.

A Fresno state senator is pushing legislation that would help California school districts phase out older school buses in favor of newer models. That undoubtedly would make the state's schoolchildren much safer and would also help reduce air pollution significantly -- good news for children and adults alike.

The measure by Sen. Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno, Senate Bill 698, would first address buses built before 1977 that are still in service. Those buses were built before the federal government began mandating certain safety features.

When those vehicles have been replaced, the measure would begin to phase out pre-1987 buses, built before the state began to regulate particulate emissions. Those are the microscopic bits of dirt and soot that can lodge deeply in human lungs and cause serious and sometimes deadly diseases -- especially among children.

Diesel emissions in general are a serious problem in the Valley's mix of foul air. Newer diesel engines pollute less, and new regulations are coming that will further reduce the problem.

But diesel engines also last a long time -- that's one reason for their popularity -- and thus the newer, cleaner engines would be slower to come into use without some measure such as Poochigian's. That's especially true of school buses, given the difficult budgetary times most districts face. The state would spend about \$250 million over five years in the first phase of Poochigian's measure.

The measure would be funded under a provision of Proposition 98, which mandates that the state spend 40 percent of its revenues on schools. That may not be exactly what voters had in mind for Proposition 98, but it's difficult to see how such a useful effort could otherwise be funded today.

The bill sailed through the Senate Energy, Utility and Communications Committee on Tuesday. It heads next to the Senate Appropriations Committee. We hope it finds its way to a signature by the governor.