

## **Asthma-friendly flags to fly at elementary schools**

By Maddy Houk

Patterson Irrigator, Saturday, May 6, 2006

Elementary schools in the Patterson Unified School District soon will use different colored flags to indicate outdoor air quality.

The Asthma-Friendly Flag Program already is being used in the Newman-Crows Landing School District, and has become increasingly common in an area known for its smog and high ozone levels.

"The San Joaquin Valley has some of the worst air quality in the United States," Dr. Arlaine Gutierrez of Modesto told local elementary school teachers Wednesday afternoon at Northmead School.

On good air days, the green flag will fly. On moderate days — when sensitive children and adults, such as those with asthma, should avoid exertion — the yellow flag will be displayed. The orange flag will be raised on days when air quality is poor, allowing sensitive groups to know they should limit the time they spend exercising outdoors. A red flag means the air outside is unhealthy for everyone.

Gutierrez, a pediatrician with Sutter Gould Medical Foundation, said about 11 percent of children and 12 percent of adults in Stanislaus County — more than 35,000 people — have asthma. Common symptoms of asthma are wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and pressure, coughing and pain. It all can mean a loss of time at school and work.

The San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District joined with the Stanislaus Asthma Coalition to provide colored flags and air quality information to schools and groups throughout the county, using funding from Turlock-based Medic Alert.

Participating schools must raise the appropriate flag each day under the U.S. and California flags. Each day, staff receives an e-mail that describes the air quality for the next day. The partnership also provides brochures in Spanish and in English.

"This is important, because it provides awareness of air pollution for people who have asthma or respiratory problems," Gutierrez said. Patterson Unified School District nurses Debbie Azevedo and Cecilia Cordiero said letters have been sent to parents of elementary school children in the district to tell them about the program.

The program begins this month at local elementary schools — Northmead, Las Palmas, Grayson Charter in Westley and Rising Sun in Vernalis. Creekside Middle School and Patterson and Del Puerto high schools will join in when the new school year begins in August.

Kelly Hughes, asthma coordinator, said 145 of the 249 schools in the county take part in the program. Newman-Crows Landing School District started the program in the fall.

School nurse Bernice Arnett said children stayed inside for recesses and lunchtime during three "red flag" days in December, just as they would have on rainy days. "We're hoping to educate everyone in the community," Arnett said Thursday. "The children look for the flags and want to see what color flies that day. It has been a very positive program, one that has really involved basically our whole community, schools, families and community clubs that funded the flags."

For information: Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition, 558-4846.

## **East Bay hospitals honored for cutting mercury pollution**

By Suzanne Bonan, Staff Writer

Tri-Valley Herald Tuesday, May 9, 2006

Hospitals throughout the Bay Area are clearing their inventories of products containing mercury, and winning environmental awards for their efforts.

More than two-dozen health care facilities, from Fremont to Oakland to Tracy, and from South San Francisco to Redwood City, have won "Making Medicine Mercury Free" awards from Hospitals for a Healthy Environment. The awards are among the top prizes awarded nationally to hospitals for innovations in reducing the harmful environmental effects of their operations.

"Hospitals have been huge contributors to mercury in the waste stream," said Stacy Malkan, a spokeswoman with Health Care Without Harm in Berkeley, which partners with Hospitals for a Healthy Environment. "We've seen enormous progress in the health care industry to reduce their contribution to mercury pollution."

Bay Area health care organizations winning the award included the major operators, such as Kaiser Permanente, Sutter Health, Catholic Healthcare West and John Muir Medical Center.

In 2004, Kaiser Permanente launched a program to rid its medical centers and clinics of products containing mercury, said Linda Jensen, a senior vice president with Kaiser and area manager for its Redwood City medical center. The HMO won 12 awards, including one for its Fremont facility, for meeting criteria set by Hospitals for a Healthy Environment for clearing the heavy metal from its facilities. Mercury exposure can cause neurological impairment in children and adults.

Though patients in hospitals rarely are exposed directly to mercury -- except those receiving vaccines with a preservative that contains mercury -- hospitals historically have been significant contributors to mercury in air emissions through the incineration of medical equipment, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But since the late 1990s, hospitals have become increasingly aware -- and uneasy -- with their role in contributing mercury to the environment, Malkan said.

That awareness in part was triggered by the declining availability of medical incinerators, said Laura Brannen, executive director of Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, which is based in New Hampshire.

In 1997, the EPA issued regulations mandating reduction of mercury emissions from medical incinerators. Due to the stringent guidelines, the agency also predicted that more than 50 percent of medical incinerators at health care facilities would discontinue operations.

But it was not just declining access to incinerators that spurred the zeal to reduce the use of mercury in health care settings. Hospital personnel also become uncomfortable with the conflict between their mission to support health, and their contribution to the environment of one of the most potent pollutants, said Brannen.

"Health care workers have been horrified," she said. "They realized hospitals shouldn't be implicated as part of the problem."

Hospitals earning the award met numerous criteria, including replacing equipment and supplies that contained mercury, such as X-ray tubes, thermometers, light switches, blood pressure cuffs and thermostats, with mercury-free versions of the same equipment.

Lab solutions containing mercury also are gradually being replaced, as acceptable substitutes -- which yield equivalent accuracy in providing lab results -- are found.

Mills-Peninsula Health Services in Burlingame and St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton each won an Environmental Leadership Award, Hospitals for a Healthy Environment's top prize. The award recognizes achievements not only in meeting mercury-free standards, but for environmental innovations in reducing waste, increasing recycling and reducing use of toxic chemicals.

Nationwide, about 1,200 hospitals have signed up with Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, pledging to replace mercury-containing products with more benign substitutes, as well as to reduce waste and the use of harmful chemicals, Malkan said. "It's become the standard to look at these issues," she said.

To learn more about Hospitals for a Health Environment, visit <http://www.h2e-online.org>.

## **A Burning Trash Problem**

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, May 9, 2006

A pile of household garbage burned in Modesto's Waste Management disposal yard for nearly two hours Monday, sending smoke and smell over much of southwest Modesto. Burbank-Paradise, assisted by the Ceres and Woodland Avenue fire departments, fought the fire that broke out just before 1 p.m. in the 2700 block of West Hatch Road. Waste Management used heavy equipment to pull apart the burning pile

that was about 12 feet deep and 75 feet across, Burbank-Paradise Fire Chief Les Alderson said. He said he doesn't know for sure how the fire started but most likely it was ignited by hot ashes or an oily rag dumped among the garbage.

## **Program gives Valley residents chance to trade gas mowers for discount on electric**

Southwest Voice (Bakersfield), Wednesday, May 3, 2006

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will be offering Valley residents a \$229 discount on an electric lawn mower when they trade in their gasoline-powered lawn mowers during this year's annual Clean Green Yard Machine program.

Neuton non-polluting, cordless, electric lawn mowers will be available at the event on Saturday, May 20, at CSUB Lot "I."

To be eligible for the promotion, Valley residents must bring their old gas-burning mower, drained of all fluids, for trade-in. They will then be able to purchase one of 1,200 electric mowers for \$150 — a 60 percent discount off the retail price of \$379.

Trade-ins will be on a first-come, first-served basis and the offer is good only while supplies last. The event will begin at 9 a.m.

Participants will also be eligible for T-shirt and garden rake giveaways, and drawings will be held at each event for Neuton electric trimmer lawn mower attachments.

"We understand that Valley residents are looking for ways they can personally help clean the air, and this is a great, economical way for them to get involved," said Seyed Sadredin, the District's Air Pollution Control Officer.

The Clean Green Yard Machine program, now in its sixth year, highlights the negative impact gas-powered lawn equipment has on the Valley's summertime smog problem. One gas mower can emit as much pollution as 40 late-model cars operating over the same period of time, while electric mowers produce no on-site emissions.

The Air District thanks the following partners and sponsors for making this event possible: Neuton Lawn Mower Company; Operation Clean Air; Valley Clean Air Now; the California Air Resources Board; Golden State Metals; Levi's Iron; and Metal and Stockton Recycling Center.

The Valley Air District serves San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the valley portion of Kern counties.

For more information, log onto: [www.valleyair.org](http://www.valleyair.org) or call 326-6900.

## **Valparaiso Helps With NASA Ozone Study**

S.F. Chronicle and Washington Post, Tuesday, May 9, 2006

Valparaiso, Ind. (AP) -- Valparaiso University researchers are monitoring northwestern Indiana air quality as part of a nationwide NASA-funded project measuring pollution wafting from distant Asian factories.

Physics professor Gary Morris and his students this spring launched six-foot helium weather balloons carrying air-sampling equipment to measure ozone and fine particulates that originate in Southeast Asia.

So far, they've sent 11 balloons.

"They're going through their Industrial Revolution right now," said Morris, an assistant professor of physics and astronomy.

He said NASA is providing \$200,000 for startup costs and 30 launches a year for the next three years of weather balloons carrying instrument packages called "ozonesondes." Those balloons measure ozone levels from the ground up to 90,000 or 100,000 feet.

"It takes an hour and 25 minutes to get that high. Then the balloon pops, and the package takes about 25 minutes to parachute back to earth," said one of his assistants, David Peterson, 21, a junior meteorology major from Schererville.

The data, radioed back to a lab computer during each flight, is sent to NASA, where it is part of the big picture of similar measurements from a dozen U.S. sites and aircraft flying over the Pacific Ocean, Morris said.

NASA's project is called the Intercontinental Transport Part B (INTEX-B).

Morris said the data being collected is useful in devising ways to track air pollution and movements of weather systems over long distances.

Before every launch, he notifies the Federal Aviation Administration and regional air traffic controllers at O'Hare Field. Scrawled on the side of each instrument package are the word "REWARD" and Morris's office phone number.

"The reward is \$30. We've got two back so far. We're getting a GPS monitor, so that we'll be able to go right to it," said junior Anna Gasper, 21, a meteorology major from Overland, Kan.

## **Cruise ships plug in at Seattle port**

Associated Press

Published in the LA Daily News, Monday, May 8, 2006

SEATTLE - Seattle is inviting more cruise ships to plug into its electric grid and shut off their engines, hoping to cut about 30 percent of the air pollution created by the big ships as they load passengers for Alaska cruises.

Seattle has two electric berths for cruise ships, but environmentalists point out that still leaves plenty of diesel-powered ships to belch more than a ton of pollution every time they're in town.

"We're encouraged that the port is considering increasing the number of shore-side hookups," said Teri Shore of the Bluewater Network, a San Francisco group that fights cruise-ship pollution.

"But that is not going to get them off the hook for increased emissions to surrounding communities. They still need to do more."

Valencia-based Princess Cruises started plugging two of its ships, the Diamond Princess and the Sapphire Princess, into city power last year. Holland America Line will do the same with two of its three Seattle-based ships this season, at \$1 million per ship to install new electrical equipment plus \$1.8 million to install hardware on shore. The company is paying most of the cost.

"I think the fact that we're the first cruise port, to our knowledge, in the world that has two berths with shore power available speaks for itself," said Mick Shultz, a Port of Seattle spokesman. "I think this shows the cruise industry and the port are eager to reduce their emissions."

Juneau, Alaska, began plugging in Princess Cruises ships at a berth there in 2001.

The addition of Holland America Line ships to the program means at least 30 percent of the 200 cruise-ship visits this year will use electricity while in port, Shultz said.

The cruise ships, which can accommodate thousands of people, typically rely on their diesel-power engines to produce electricity even while docked. On the West Coast, cruise ships typically use fuel with 2.4 percent sulfur, and that sends up as much as 2.5 tons of pollutants in an eight-hour stay in port, the Port of Seattle estimates.

Next year, the port will start requiring the ships that don't plug into the grid to use fuel with a 1.5 percent sulfur content while in Seattle.

## **Mirant to Spend \$130M to Cut Pollution**

By JOHN HEILPRIN, The Associated Press

Published in the Washington Post, Monday, May 8, 2006; 5:34 PM

WASHINGTON -- Mirant Corp. will spend more than \$130 million on new pollution controls at four power plants in Maryland and Virginia under an agreement reached Monday between the company and state and federal governments.

The pollution controls are intended to cut emissions of nitrogen oxides linked to acid rain, smog and haze and to ensure the plants meet federal and state health-based air standards.

The company, based in Atlanta, also agreed to spend \$1 million on nine other projects that would cut fine particle pollution such as soot and dust linked to childhood asthma and other respiratory problems, and to pay a \$500,000 civil penalty that would be split by the federal government and Virginia.

Installing new pollution controls at four of the company's 25 U.S. plants will cut an estimated 29,000 tons of nitrogen oxides from the air, the Justice Department said. Federal and state officials said the result will help millions of people breathe easier by improving air quality throughout the Washington, D.C., region.

If approved by the U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., the settlement would resolve claims that Mirant exceeded its permit limits for emissions of nitrogen oxides at its Potomac River plant in Alexandria in 2003.

The three Maryland plants where Migrant agreed to cut nitrogen oxide pollution are in Prince George's, Montgomery and Charles counties, the Environmental Protection Agency said.

Mirant had no immediate comment.

The settlement makes minor revisions to an earlier 2004 agreement, imposing new yearly limits on nitrogen oxides at the plants instead of just to deal with a summer smog problem.

[USA Today, Editorial, Tuesday, May 9, 2006:](#)

### **'Boutique' is for clothing, not for gasoline**

Drivers of a certain age will recall when there were only two types of gasoline: regular and high-test.

Today, government mandates across the USA have spawned more than a dozen categories of special gasolines, known as "boutique" fuels. Each comes in multiple octane grades and varies slightly with the seasons of the year.

These requirements strain the nation's overstretched refineries, contribute to high gasoline prices and cause inefficient distribution.

Each day, for example, millions of gallons flow through pipeline past Atlanta on the way from the Gulf Coast to the Northeast. Little of this fuel can be used in Atlanta, however, because it's a conventional formulation, and the city requires a special kind of gas to meet its air pollution needs. Fuel produced in some East Coast refineries, meanwhile, travels out of the region because it's made for the needs of other communities.

These individualized fuels are not wholly without merit. Places such as Southern California, for instance, have intense smog problems that require ultraclean gasoline. But what started as a sound idea has spun out of control as states have rushed forward to adopt their own fuel requirements.

There are 15 or 16 categories of boutique fuel, depending on how they are counted. Gasoline is becoming like coffee at Starbucks -- unnecessarily complex and pricey.

The state and local fuel mandates are being driven as much by politics and budgetary concerns as by air pollution. They have helped to raise the price of gas by at least several cents a gallon while not always having a positive air quality benefit.

In some cases, these requirements are seen as an alternative to comprehensive pollution control efforts. Ohio, for instance, is considering a mandate for a special kind of gasoline to make up for its decision to eliminate statewide tailpipe emissions testing.

In other states, these mandates are simply an excuse to reward key constituencies. The ethanol lobby, which had been content with federal requirements in the 1990 Clean Air Act, has been busy pushing states to adopt their own mandates.

Montana, Hawaii, Minnesota and Colorado have done so already, and several others are considering such action. Of these, Hawaii has to be the oddest. It is hoping to develop a sugar-based ethanol industry.

But for now, nearly 10% of its fuel will be shipped in by train and boat from ethanol plants in the Midwest.

Some environmentalists argue that state fuel mandates are simply not that big an issue. Gasoline prices are driven primarily by oil prices, and the best way to bring them down - while also cutting air pollution - is to encourage conservation and more economical cars. This is true. But just because fuel standards are not the prime cause of price spikes does not mean they should be immune from sound policy considerations.

The federal government can help identify places where special fuels are truly needed. It has begun that process with a law passed last year and an Environmental Protection Agency task force empanelled last week.

Variety is fine for ketchup, beer and toothpaste. Not so for gasoline. Too many exotic fuels are flowing around the country, producing too few environmental benefits and too much pain at the pump.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Tuesday, May 9, 2006:](#)

### **Study effects of dairy discharge before making new rules**

By David Bultena

Black lung disease adversely affects the respiratory tracts of miners who breathe the fine particles of coal in mines. It is quite debilitating and often results in premature death.

The fact that you are in close proximity to a foreign substance, you breathe it in continuously and that it has an adverse effect on your health should come as no surprise to anyone — especially scientists studying the problem of black lung.

But enter a new breed of scientists who appear more interested in obtaining the proper result than in engaging in basic research. There is considerable controversy and significant financial impact surrounding state Senate Bill 700. It would allow the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to go after dairies.

Environmentalists claim the rule would clean up ammonia discharge and aid air quality.

That raises the question of whether there is really a problem with ammonia and the other alleged sources of pollution from dairies. It does not appear scientists ever did a protracted study of the overall effects of ammonia, volatile organic compounds or such other substances.

The best place to start such research would be at dairies. Dairy personnel should suffer the same as coal miners and for the same reason, i.e. close proximity to airborne pollutants.

We have a lot of dairies, large and small, in the area that could have been the source of scientific study. Those who work in dairies would be great guinea pigs for such research. The researchers could have followed the health patterns of dairymen, their families and employees over years, and even generations, to see if living with all this so-called pollution had any ill effects. I'm not aware of any such study.

The thing that kills most dairymen is old age or farm accidents. There is no study that shows close proximity to dairy waste is any more dangerous to the general public than it is to dairymen, assuming it is dangerous in the concentrations found around dairies.

Ammonia released on a daily basis by dairies was estimated at 315 tons, or about 114,975 tons a year. With that much ammonia, all you would have to do is add water to everything outdoors, scrub, rinse, and the entire area would be sparkling clean.

Could it be that the reason the miners and the dairy workers don't share the same fate is that the dairy atmosphere isn't anywhere near as toxic as some people think?

I suggest that before any more legislation is passed at any level, an independent survey be made of dairies and their environs. Monitor the air, check the health of those working in the dairies from both a present and a historical perspective and get some real facts so we can create a real solution.

As it stands, the milk industry is being victimized by bad science and good politics.

*Bultena, a retired Merced County deputy district attorney, served as a visiting editor earlier this year.*

[Letter to the Editor, LA Times Tues., May 9, 2006:](#)

### **Wind power**

So even with our current energy crisis, they want to stop construction of the Cape Cod wind farm near Massachusetts (May 5).

That just shows how far Sen. Ted Kennedy's commitment to the environment really goes. Would you rather have an offshore wind farm that produces clean energy, or an oil derrick? Or maybe a nuclear power plant right next to your house? The choices are clear; we must get our power from somewhere, and wind power is the most cost-effective of all renewable energy sources. We need to approve this project and get others going to help reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

Kennedy should be deeply ashamed at his own hypocrisy to call himself an environmentalist.

MATHEW ANDRESEN, Lompoc