

Calif. Monitors Air Pollution in Farm Town

By JULIANA BARBASSA

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PARLIER, Calif. -- With crop dusters buzzing the skies above, spray rigs stalking the fields and the occasional pesticide drift that hospitalizes scores of people, airborne chemicals are a fact of life in the little farm towns of the San Joaquin Valley.

But no one knows what chemicals linger in the notoriously polluted air and whether long-term exposure could lead to increased rates of asthma, cancer or neurological problems.

To find out, the state Department of Pesticide Regulation began a yearlong air monitoring program this month to gauge levels of 40 airborne chemicals for the first time.

While some farmers worry the results could prompt stiffer regulations, doctors and school officials who deal with chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma said it's about time someone found out what rural residents are breathing.

"If there's something we can do to decrease these numbers, we need to move in that direction," said Dr. Rogelio Fernandez, who has seen increases in respiratory diseases in 15 years. "And the first step is to find out if there is something in the air."

The department has measured pesticides for shorter periods, but the \$1 million project is part of a comprehensive push to ensure the chemicals needed to protect crops from weeds, insects and fungi don't harm the families that tend them, state officials said.

Pesticides are only one component of the noxious chemical soup that makes this valley _ the nation's most productive farm region _ also one the nation's most polluted air basins. Car exhaust, soot from fireplaces, even gases rising from cow manure also contribute.

No state or federal agency has spelled out how much of the chemicals are safe to breathe. Determining what is in the air is the first step.

The agency, with help from the state's Air Resources Board, installed pumps that draw in air around three schools in Parlier, gauging levels of chemicals such as methyl bromide that are either harmful to human health or contribute to air pollution.

Parlier, a largely Hispanic town of about 12,000 about 20 miles southeast of Fresno, is the kind of place often overlooked by policymakers in the state capital _ and that's precisely why it was chosen, officials said.

"We want to ensure that our environmental laws provide a fair measure of protection for everyone who lives and works in our state," said Mary-Ann Warmerdam, the department's director. "We are particularly concerned about the health and welfare of children."

The economy here relies on farming and in winter when there's nothing to plant or harvest, a third of adults don't work, making it one of the state's poorest towns.

At Cesar Chavez Elementary School, one of the monitoring sites, even second graders are aware that the air they breathe can be harmful.

"They know the stuff that's hurting them isn't always natural, that sometimes it's introduced by us," said second-grade teacher Paul Martinez.

With three or four children out of 20 with asthma in his class every year, Martinez has gotten used to bringing inhalers on field trips in case a child has an asthma attack.

Even some farmers, still chafing from recent air quality rules meant to curb their contribution to the region's dirty air, see the need for more testing.

"If we can find out if there are things we can do different, or better, it's very important," said Harold McClarty, whose family has grown peaches, plums, nectarines and citrus around Parlier for four generations. He has two children in local schools _ one has asthma.

"It's our livelihood," he said, "but it's also our land, and our families."

Walk on the wide side

Fresno boosts sidewalk width on major streets from 4 to 6 feet.

By George Hostetter / The Fresno Bee

Monday, January 30, 2006

Fresno is getting friendlier to pedestrians.

The Fresno City Council last week raised the minimum width for sidewalks that developers must build along major streets as part of their new residential projects.

The standard was 4 feet; it's now 6 feet.

At first glance, an additional 2 feet may not seem like a big deal. But city officials and pedestrian advocates say wider sidewalks help improve Fresno's quality of life in many ways.

It's easier to be social on a wide sidewalk because two adults can stroll comfortably side-by-side.

People in wheelchairs find it easier to pass each other on a wide sidewalk.

Wide, well-maintained sidewalks encourage people to walk. The goal: healthier residents and more automobiles left in the driveway.

"This one step toward pedestrian heaven is a great move," says Ed Eames, chairman of the Fresno Americans with Disabilities Act Advisory Council. "I congratulate the City Council for doing it."

Eames says 4-foot-wide sidewalks comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. City officials say sidewalks with objects such as bus stops or light poles need at least 36 inches of clearance to be ADA-compliant.

Council Member Larry Westerlund came up with the idea for wider sidewalks while driving recently on Maple Avenue in northeast Fresno. He says he noticed two women jogging on the side of the busy street.

He says he asked himself: "Why aren't they running on the sidewalk?"

Then he looked at the joggers' option. "They've got this big, beautiful boulevard and these little, tiny sidewalks," Westerlund says.

He says he thought to himself: "This is ridiculous."

Westerlund, who represents District 4 in east-central Fresno, says he learned that commercial projects usually have wide sidewalks for customer convenience. But, he adds, a residential project's sidewalks along major streets only had to be 4 feet wide, although a developer could voluntarily make them wider.

Major streets generally refer to those throughout Fresno that are a half-mile apart and carry substantial traffic. For example, Bullard and Barstow avenues for eastbound and westbound traffic; Fruit and Palm avenues for northbound and southbound traffic.

Westerlund told his council colleagues Tuesday that Fresno needs "sidewalks that are friendly to pedestrians." The result was a unanimous vote for his proposal.

The new standard does not apply to sidewalks inside a residential project, nor does it require the city or a developer to widen existing sidewalks.

Public Works Director David Healey says he has the discretion to decide whether to apply the new standard to infill projects. He says the department also is focusing on building sidewalks in neighborhoods without them.

Michael Prandini, president of the Building Industry Association of the San Joaquin Valley, says his organization supported the council's action because it didn't require an extra 2 feet of "right of way."

In other words, the additional sidewalk would come at the expense of landscaping and not land earmarked for homes and their yards.

He says the width of a neighborhood sidewalk probably won't be a big factor in most consumers' homebuying decisions. But, he adds, "they'll care when they try to walk down it."

Public Works Assistant Director Michael Kirn says that even with the wider sidewalks, new residential projects typically still will have 12 to 13 feet of landscaping plus the park strip along major streets.

Charlie Zegeer, director of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center in Chapel Hill, N.C., says America's attitude toward walking has changed in the past 10 to 15 years.

The center is part of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center.

Zeeger says people began "to realize they want to live in neighborhoods where they can walk. ... It was very much a grass-roots effort." He says government agencies and the "health community"

also crafted more policies that encourage walking.

Zeeger says a good sidewalk is a joy to use: smooth, flat, featuring curb cuts where needed and with a "planting" strip with trees or grass between it and the street.

Kelly Morphy, spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, says a rule goes into effect March 1 that requires developers of large residential and commercial projects to reduce air pollution caused by their projects.

Air-friendly additions - such as sidewalks - can lower fees the developer must pay to help deal with air pollution caused by the project, she says.

"The more sidewalks, the better," Morphy says.

City Planner Dwight Kroll in Clovis says the city has pushed for sidewalks at least 5 feet wide since the late 1980s.

"Four feet is very narrow if you're passing people you don't know," he says.

The proof, of course, comes not from talking the talk, but walking the walk.

Westerlund did this last week, taking a reporter on a tour of sidewalks along major streets in his district. He gets out often to test his theory that a wide sidewalk is more inviting.

Perhaps the most telling example comes when he stops his car on Shields Avenue, about a mile east of Clovis Avenue. The area is booming with new houses in various stages of construction.

Westerlund says he is 6 feet, 3 inches tall and weighs about 220 pounds. Striding along a 4-foot-wide sidewalk, he must turn his shoulders slightly so that he and the reporter can walk side-by-side without bumping into each other.

Then he reaches the corner and heads north on Fowler Avenue. His trail is a new, 6-foot-wide sidewalk. His personal space once again is his own.

A smiling Westerlund says of the walk: "This certainly relaxes it."

Panel says Mexican trucks must meet pollution rules

By Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee, Saturday, January 28, 2006

SACRAMENTO - Foreign commercial trucks coming into California soon will have to meet U.S. air pollution standards, state air regulators ruled this week as they weighed in on an international fight that went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

At least 4,000 trucks operate in California on any given day without meeting U.S. Environmental Protection Agency pollution standards, said California Air Resources Board spokesman Jerry Martin. Most are from Mexico, the air board found, since most Canadian vehicles are built to U.S. specifications.

A 2004 state law requires truck operators to carry proof that they meet federal standards, but until now inspectors have not been able to enforce it.

The teams already check to make sure trucks are burning diesel certified for use in California and check the engine and other equipment.

"Now they will also look for a seal under the hood that the truck is being built to U.S. standards," Martin said.

Only trucks belching heavy diesel smoke generally are stopped at border agriculture check stations or California Highway Patrol weigh stations, Martin said. The inspection teams use an electronic monitor to see whether the smoke exceeds California emissions standards.

If it does, the teams search for the cause, including whether the truck meets federal pollution standards.

A violation for driving a substandard truck brings the same penalty as failing the smoke test, Martin said: an \$800 fine for the first offense and \$1,800 for a second. On a third offense, the shipper must find a different vehicle to deliver the goods.

"Companies sending goods to California, we want them to use trucks built to U.S. standards," Martin said.

The regulation adopted Thursday must be approved by the state's Administrative Law Office, which likely means a delay of as long as a year before it can be enforced, Martin said.

The debate over the use of Mexican trucks on U.S. highways culminated in 2004 with a U.S. Supreme Court decision supporting the Bush administration's decision to let trucks into the country beyond what had been a 20-mile commercial border zone

Let the sun shine in Rebate programs paying for solar panels on homes

By John Holland, staff writer
Modesto Bee, Sunday, January 29, 2006

OAKDALE - The fog lifted on a recent morning, letting the sun go to work at a home north of town.

Glenn Daniel and his wife, Chris, showed off their new solar panels, which turn the sun's energy into electricity for their house.

"It was a big investment," Chris said, "but it's going to serve us well for many years."

The couple got help with that investment from a rebate program offered by the state. That program has just lapsed, but a more ambitious one, aiming to put solar panels on 1 million California roofs, took its place.

The new program could cover up to a third of the \$24,000 to \$30,000 cost of a solar system for a typical home, said Steve Vella, owner of Acro Electric in Oakdale.

He said that system would meet most of the home's needs, allowing the owner to greatly reduce the use of increasingly expensive power from a utility. Eventually, he said, the savings will exceed the installation cost.

"It's a big dollar item," Vella said, "but for people with financial sense, it's a go."

The program, approved Jan. 12 by the California Public Utilities Commission, will run until 2017. The rebate amount per kilowatt will drop about 10percent each year because of the expected decline in the cost of the systems, thanks to mass production.

It's a good program because the incentives are being offered on technology that is good for people and good for society, said Roland Winston, a University of California at Merced professor who does solar energy research.

The rebates are mainly for home and business use of photovoltaic cells. They generate electricity as sunlight strikes the devices, knocking electrons into a current.

Widespread adoption of this technology has been slowed by the high cost of the cells. They have been used on low-power appliances, such as calculators, and at remote locations where running a conventional power line would be costly.

Supporters said the rebates would reduce the use of fossil fuels, which can contribute to air pollution, global warming and reliance on foreign sources of energy.

Vella said owners of solar arrays benefit from a state law that requires utilities to accept surplus electricity from a system. On days when sunlight produces more power than the home needs, the surplus is fed into the state's power grid. The owner gets a credit toward the purchase of conventional power on days when the solar system falls short.

The Daniels' system is 14 kilowatts, far larger than most home installations. It cost about \$100,000, before the rebate of about \$33,000 from the previous state program.

Glenn Daniel, who is on medical retirement from a career in computers, said he likes an especially cool house in summer and needs a well-heated swimming pool for therapy.

"I sized my system to basically eliminate a \$500 electric bill per month," he said.

The 80 panels cover almost all of the west slope of the roof, but they were installed in an eye-pleasing way, said Chris Daniel, who works from home as a nursing consultant.

Vella said systems far smaller than the Daniels' can pay off for their owners.

"They are very dependable," he said. "There are no moving parts, no maintenance. They literally sit there and create electricity."

On the Net:

California Department of Pesticide Regulation:

<<http://www.cdpr.ca.gov>> www.cdpr.ca.gov <<http://www.cdpr.ca.gov>>

Water beds help create happy cows

A Chowchilla dairy leads the nation in posh bovine beds, which are cleaner and help keep the animals comfy

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee

Saturday, January 28, 2006

Water beds for cows.

Can lava lamps and Muzak be far behind?

Edgar De Jager would soon disabuse you of that notion. The bovine bedding is far from a quirky indulgence for his spotted, four-legged creatures.

De Jager's Chowchilla dairy apparently leads the nation in the number of water beds - roughly one for each of his 2,850 animals. Adding the beds was a business decision aimed partly at pleasing his neighbors just a mile away within the city limits, he said, because the beds are easier to clean and thus reduce odor.

They also please the animals that pay his way with the milk they produce.

De Jager is far from alone among dairy operators with the 48-by-72-inch beds. They include principals with Hilmar Cheese Co. in Hilmar, a Riverdale farmer and another in Visalia.

GNE Farm Equipment and GNE Distributing in Visalia have sold more than 30,000 of the industrial-duty beds, owner Gerard Niessink said. Some 250,000 have been sold worldwide since they first came on the market about a decade ago in Europe, he said.

"That's what you want to see," De Jager said, pointing to one of his reclining Holsteins, "a cow lying and chewing her cud. If you can achieve that ..."

It's that contented cow quality that producers like De Jager are seeking, along with the ability to provide bedding that doesn't take much maintenance and doesn't stink. He and others believe the beds offer added comfort, which is important to keeping milk production up.

Those who sell the beds say they also can keep injuries down.

And the beds may be less likely to harbor bacteria because they are engineered so that most of what lands on them runs off.

In California, they're an alternative to the most common form of bedding - dried manure. That form of cushioning requires more time to put in place and maintain. Sand is also sometimes used but also requires more maintenance and can clog pumps and other machinery during the cleanup process.

"It takes a lot less labor," said Edwin Brasil, who has more than 500 of the beds on his Visalia dairy.

Mark Ahlem with Hilmar Cheese Co. said using dried manure means "raking our bedding every day." He said a third of the 2,700 cows at one of the company's dairy facilities use water beds.

"Cows like consistency," Ahlem said, pointing out that the beds retain their shape, unlike dried or composted manure or other materials that shift around underfoot, or under cow.

The beds sit in what are termed "free stalls" above a manure lane at De Jager's dairy. The manure and other waste collects in the lane and is scraped out routinely. Partially due to environmental concerns and also because water may be a welcome home for bacteria, De Jager has his lanes scraped rather than hosing them down.

He cited other steps he takes to keep neighbors, and government regulators, content. They include putting the scraped waste into what he calls "a honey wagon," then using machinery that

injects the waste a few inches below the top of the soil in nearby fields, which cuts down on odors.

Lucinda Roth, an air quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, has visited the De Jager facility. "We went out there to see different manure management practices," she said.

Roth said it's not known whether the water beds reduce emissions into the air, adding "we need more research."

It was De Jager's father, Edward, a co-owner of Double DJ Farms, who first suggested checking out the water beds.

The younger De Jager said it took his cows about 2 1/2 weeks "to figure out" the beds when he first began installing them three years ago. The movement of the water-filled beds would "freak them out" at first, he said: "Cows are suspicious animals. When they saw it was not detrimental, they were fine."

To help acclimate them to the beds, which are made of fiber-reinforced rubber, he put just a little dried manure on the top "to give that home-grown smell; just dusted it a bit."

De Jager said he has seen a decline in the number of miscarriages among his cows and believes it may be connected to his use of water beds and to scraping rather than flushing manure lanes.

"It's unscientific," he said.

Science on the use of water beds is limited.

Debora Bacon, who will become the University of California Cooperative Extension dairy farm adviser for Tulare County on Wednesday, said a look at the Internet and scientific literature presented mixed views.

"Cow comfort is highly related to milk production and overall health," Bacon said. "When you maximize cow comfort, you are automatically reducing cow stress, which in turn increases milk production."

Those who sell the water beds and those who have studied them stop short of claiming a documented direct link to increased milk production.

Niessink's GNE Farm Equipment is a dealer for California and his GNE Distributing handles sales of Atlanta water beds in 12 other Western states. The beds are made by Dunlop Manufacturing in the Netherlands and come with a 10-year guarantee. Expected life is 15 to 20 years.

The list price is \$185.

The beds are also available in other sizes with the cost varying accordingly. Sizes and other details are available at www.gerardniessink.com <<http://www.gerardniessink.com>>.

Most of the beds sold worldwide are in U.S. dairies, Niessink said. Some Japanese and Canadian dairies have them, as well as dairies in Europe, where it's believed their use first began in 1996.

Niessink's company has been in business since 2001.

The beds are delivered in strips of multiple linked beds, filled with water on-site and clamped in place.

"It's a new product, and we're getting more sales every year," Niessink said.

Air board refuses to scrap agreement with railroads

The Associated Press

In the Fresno Bee, Saturday, January 28, 2006

SACRAMENTO (AP) - State air regulators refused Friday to scrap an agreement with two railroads that is supposed to reduce railyard pollution by 20 percent.

A motion to terminate the agreement with Union Pacific Railroad and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway drew only two votes from members of the California Air Resources Board. Three members opposed it and two abstained, said Jerry Martin, a spokesman for the board.

The agreement, announced last June, includes provisions requiring the railroads to eliminate unnecessary engine idling at the yards, quickly repair smoking engines and begin maximum use of low-sulfur diesel fuel in locomotives six years sooner than required by federal regulations.

The pact has been criticized by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a regional agency based in Los Angeles that is considering tougher idling standards than those in the CARB agreement.

But Martin said the agreement has already produced results. Most engines are already using low-sulfur fuel and a third that operate in California have been equipped with devices that shut them off after a certain amount of idling, he added.

He said the CARB decided to negotiate an agreement with the railroads rather than adopt regulations or seek legislation that could be tied up in court fights over whether the state has the authority to control railroad pollution.

"We don't think this agency or the air districts have a real lot of authority to make the railroads do what they don't want to do because we're pre-empted by federal law," Martin said. "South Coast has a different opinion."

Although it refused to scrap the agreement, the board ordered its staff to report back in six months on whether the railroads were still abiding by the agreement, Martins said.

Air Panel Declines to Rescind Rail Pact

In Brief

From Times Staff and Wire Reports, Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2006

State air officials Friday decided to maintain a controversial railroad pact despite protests from Southland regulators and community groups that the agreement could block new measures to cut air pollution at 11 Los Angeles-area rail yards.

The Air Resources Board declined to rescind the state's June 2005 agreement with Union Pacific Railroad and BNSF Railway. State and rail officials say the deal will ensure reductions in locomotive diesel pollution that has been linked to heightened cancer risks.

Project Is Counting On the Power of Hydrogen

Filling stations and converted Priuses for five cities are part of a long-term energy effort.
By Michelle Keller, Los Angeles Times, January 20, 2006

Hidden amid a sea of asphalt, heavy machinery and city buildings is Riverside's only fueling station where the stench of gasoline is a thing of the past.

The station dispenses what city officials and the South Coast Air Quality Management District hope will be the fuel of the future: hydrogen.

Riverside's hydrogen station is part of a project sponsored by the AQMD to test the practicability of hydrogen fueling stations and hydrogen-powered cars on California's roads. Five cities - Riverside, Santa Ana, Ontario, Burbank and Santa Monica - each have fueling stations, as well as a fleet of five Toyota Priuses converted to run on hydrogen fuel.

The five stations will bring the number of hydrogen stations in California to more than 20, further establishing the California Hydrogen Highways Network, a plan proposed by the California Environmental Protection Agency to build 50 to 100 hydrogen stations by 2010.

"We're piecing together a basic network so people can feel comfortable driving around . knowing they won't run out of fuel," said Chung Liu, deputy executive officer at the AQMD's Science and Technology Advancement division.

Other small hydrogen demonstration projects, run by car manufacturers such as Toyota, Honda and BMW and a few universities, have also cropped up around California, clustering in the Bay Area and Southern California. In August, Irvine became the first city in the nation to receive a fuel-cell vehicle, leased by UC Irvine's National Fuel Cell Research Center.

Cities around the state are jumping on the hydrogen wagon as well: Fuel-cell buses are running in public transportation systems at Alameda-Contra Costa Transit, SunLine Transit in Thousand Palms and Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, according to the California Energy Commission.

Using hydrogen as a fuel has captured the imagination of environmental engineers for decades. Gasoline-powered cars spew carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and other pollutants into the air; hydrogen-powered cars emit almost no pollutants.

One of hydrogen's key advantages is that it can be stored in multiple ways, either in gas or liquid form, or combined with other compounds. The AQMD's five-cities project will rely on highly pressurized hydrogen gas that can be dispensed easily and quickly from a pump.

Hydrogen also offers the possibility of lessening the dependence on fossil fuel, which will become increasingly expensive and scarce over time, said Keith Wipke, senior engineer at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado.

But significant barriers make hydrogen a risky venture.

The primary goal for environmentalists is producing the hydrogen in a clean way. Unlike oil or coal, hydrogen is not a fuel that exists readily in the environment in a usable way.

One method of isolating hydrogen requires splitting molecules such as water. That process takes energy, usually supplied by power plants - the largest source of pollution in the United States.

"The beauty of hydrogen, though, is that it is the only energy carrier that can be produced from a

variety of sources," said Daniel Emmett, executive director of Energy Independence Now, a nonprofit that promotes alternative fuels. "You can use wind, solar or geothermal sources to produce hydrogen - and those have net zero greenhouse emissions."

Riverside officials are planning on eventually building a canopy over the fueling station that can be covered with solar panels to produce energy for the pump's electrolyzer - which splits water into hydrogen and oxygen, said Martin Bowman, fleet operations manager for Riverside. Until the city gets funding for the canopy, however, the electricity will come from the city's power plants.

All of the energy used for Santa Monica's electrolyzer, the only one of the five stations not yet in operation, will come from renewable resources.

In 2003, the five municipalities were approached by the AQMD to participate in the project. City officials agreed, eager to take an opportunity to test the technology and comply with an AQMD mandate that cities in the South Coast Air Basin use some alternative fuel vehicles in all of their fleets.

Given the converted Toyota Prius' range of about 80 miles, city inspectors who make short trips are the most likely to use the cars.

The hydrogen fueling stations are not designed to accommodate more than the small fleet, although they will be open to owners of hydrogen cars around the state. They can only fill up 10 cars a day but can be expanded to handle up to 20.

The bulk of the project is being paid for by the AQMD, at a total cost of about \$7 million, but the cities are required to buy the cars. The cost of each Prius is about \$25,000; the conversion from a gasoline to a hydrogen engine - which will be paid for by the AQMD - is \$86,200 per car.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill in July that would set aside \$6.5 million for future hydrogen demonstration projects.

The cost of hydrogen fuel per mile in a converted hybrid car runs from 14 to 27 cents, compared with 4 cents per mile for a gasoline-powered hybrid.

The cost of hydrogen fuel isn't optimal, conceded Matt Miyasato, technology demonstration manager at the AQMD. "But we've got to test all of the technologies now. We can't wait for it to become economical; we're doing research."

The cost of producing hydrogen for cars would drop dramatically if it were ever commercially produced by processing plants on a scale similar to gasoline refineries, alternative-energy supporters said.

Labor Lends Its Clout to Port Pollution Battle

Dockworkers union says it will pressure shipowners to cut diesel fumes at all West Coast facilities. Emissions have been linked to asthma.

By Deborah Schoch, Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2006

The powerful union representing 60,000 West Coast dockworkers is stepping publicly into the port air pollution arena for the first time, saying it will pressure seaports and shipowners to slash emissions.

Leaders of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union on Monday will join Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in Long Beach to announce a campaign to reduce pollution in seaports from Seattle to San Diego. The union is expected to focus on ships because they are the single biggest source of port pollution but are largely immune from U.S. environmental laws.

West Coast seaports handle most Asian exports entering the country and are integral engines for the U.S. economy.

But mounting pollution from diesel-burning ships, trucks and trains is heightening health concerns in cities such as Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland and Seattle. Diesel fumes, a carcinogen, have also been linked to asthma, other respiratory problems and heart disease.

Those concerns have triggered emotional battles in Los Angeles and Long Beach over the last three years, as residents opposed port expansion plans and business leaders worried that the regional economy could suffer.

Now, dockworkers union leaders say they have become so concerned about the potential for related health problems - among their members and in the community - that they are making clean air a priority.

Because of the union's size and clout, its efforts could significantly speed up clean air initiatives, union and business officials said Friday.

"This is the most significant step in this discussion probably in the past five years," said Wally Baker, a senior vice president at the Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. who has been studying how port pollution affects the economy. "There couldn't be a better gift that [the union] could give to Southern California at this time than reducing diesel pollution and making a difference in this environment."

Harvey Shaiken, a UC Berkeley professor specializing in labor issues, said the ILWU can play a pivotal role because it is the ports' principal union and has a history of social vision.

"It is an important moment," Shaiken said. "To be an environmentalist at the ports both builds an alliance with the community and addresses a very key issue for its own members. They're breathing that air."

ILWU officials plan to target the giant container ships responsible for most of the diesel fumes in port cities nationwide. In the Port of Los Angeles alone in 2001, ships contributed 55% of all diesel emissions and 36% of all emissions of nitrous oxides, a key component of smog.

The union on Monday plans to call for a 20% reduction in emissions by 2010 for all ships calling on West Coast ports.

"Ports such as Los Angeles and Long Beach are taking significant steps, but more needs to be done everywhere," said union spokesman Steve Stallone, adding that the union plans to reach out to other unions on the East Coast and overseas.

The Port of Los Angeles is the nation's largest seaport, followed by the Port of Long Beach. Together, they comprise the single largest air polluter in Southern California, air regulators say.

Officials at both ports have expressed fears that, if they impose too many clean-air restrictions, companies will simply divert their ships to other ports with less stringent rules.

But the San Francisco-based ILWU represents workers at all West Coast ports, so it could make it harder for shippers to pick and choose among ports, said ILWU member Joe Radisich, a crane operator whom Villaraigosa appointed a port commissioner last year. Radisich introduced the idea of a clean-air initiative to ILWU officers in December, and they agreed to push forward, Stallone said.

The union's importance in U.S. global trade came into focus in 2002, when a lockout at West

Coast ports closed down trade and cost billions in lost sales. The current contract expires in 2008. The union negotiates its contracts with the Pacific Maritime Assn., which handles contracts and payroll for shipping lines and terminal operators at all West Coast ports.

In response to the ILWU initiative, Jim McKenna, the association's chief executive, said Friday: "Reducing emissions and expanding port capacity are connected, and both are a priority for the industry."

Town Hopes Pesticide Study Will Bear Fruit

Project will monitor pollutants for a full year to see if chemicals mix to spur asthma in youths.
By Lee Romney, Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2006

PARLIER, Calif. - Pesticides are pervasive in this tiny Central Valley town ringed by fields of grapes, peaches, plums and nectarines.

So are children. Their playgrounds abut groves of fruit trees. The stink of chemicals has wafted into their classrooms. And, increasingly, their lungs are strained by asthma and other respiratory ailments.

Whether pesticides are linked in any way to the region's compromised pediatric health, however, is an open question. Now, a yearlong state project could point to an answer.

The state has typically tested for air- and water-borne pesticides one at a time. This project, which community leaders and scientists from California's Department of Pesticide Regulation will introduce to residents here today, will monitor 40 pesticides as well as other airborne pollutants.

The goal is to determine how they act in concert and whether they are present at levels damaging children's health. Nearly 40% of Parlier residents are younger than 18.

Testing began this month on the rooftops of schools scattered beneath the jet stream that funnels smog, fog and possibly pesticides into this dent of a valley within a valley. One of the city's wells also will be tested.

"There are auto emissions, smog, particulates kicked up by tractors," said Dr. Rogelio Fernandez, assistant medical director of Parlier's United Health Centers clinic and a member of the local advisory board that helped create the project.

"Now we're going to see exactly what's in the air," he said. "Are the health problems correlated to the use of pesticides? What levels are safe? What levels aren't? We're going to have some data."

The 1.6-square-mile enclave of mostly farmworker families was chosen from a list of 83 Central Valley towns. It is 97% Latino with a median family income of \$24,000. And in 2003, commercial growers applied 249 chemicals - 2.4 million pounds of them - to crops within a five-mile radius.

Also factored into the selection, said State Department of Pesticide Regulation spokeswoman Veda Federighi, were the number of illnesses reported as a result of pesticide drift, and the availability of complementary data from university researchers and the state Air Resources Board.

It is the only community-based effort in the state to test so many chemicals over such a long period, she said.

A local advisory group is key to the effort - one of six California Environmental Protection Agency projects created with community help statewide. The group, which includes local growers, a longtime asthma educator, Parlier's city manager and activists who have battled to reduce

pesticide exposures in nearby towns, spent hours negotiating compromises.

They helped choose the testing locations and select the chemicals that should be monitored.

Still, the study has not come without controversy.

It pits residents' hunches about the effects of pesticides against the agriculture industry's fears that products which are already regulated will be banned.

At the Parlier Health Education and Access to Life Project last week, Spanish-speaking mothers sat through a class about detecting and managing asthma in their children. Educators also told the mothers about the pesticide-monitoring project.

Maria Pacheco, 45, noted that she has broken out in rashes that feel like "ants biting me" in the months when spraying on nearby fields is most prevalent.

The mothers think there must be a connection between the pervasive chemicals and pediatric asthma, which has surged by 75% among Parlier children in the last decade, according to the health project.

"There's clearly a relation," said Victoriana Loreda, 46, whose three daughters, ages, 15, 11 and 8, developed asthma about five years ago. "It's in the air," she said, "On the fruit, in the water."

Medical experts are more measured. "Any irritating chemical is more likely to be a problem for somebody with asthma," said Dr. Michael O'Malley, a UC Davis occupational environmental medicine specialist who is a consultant for the state pesticide agency.

O'Malley studied acute exposures to pesticides in recent cases of overspray in nearby towns. Although those who already had asthma suffered more severely, "whether more routine [exposures] are causing asthmatic problems, I'm not sure," he said.

The data from Parlier's project, advocates hope, will give a much clearer picture of the prevalence of less acute pesticide exposures and may shed light on the asthma problem.

Growers' advocacy groups, meanwhile, are worried. Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, which represents more than 1,000 growers in California, Oregon and Utah, said monitors cannot differentiate between commercial and residential uses - such as backyard spraying or city fumigation on public land.

Although his members care about air quality and children's health, Cunha said, he fears that the data "will be interpreted the wrong way.. They want to show that farmers go crazy on pesticides and want to hurt society."

State officials emphasize that growers are not the enemy. The project includes research and education on less toxic alternatives, many of which are already in use.

A final report is not expected until 2007. Regulators will then decide if any response is necessary.

Mary-Ann Warmerdam, director of the state pesticide agency, said the goal is to ensure "that all members of our society receive strong and equal consideration for their health and safety. This especially applies to children."

But she added that "we're also working closely with industry, because wise use of natural resources helps preserve the economic bottom line."

For Parlier residents, the city's selection was a surprise - one that its leaders chose to embrace

despite the potential bruises to civic boosterism.

There have been unexpected benefits: Schools have already incorporated the study into their science curricula, inviting researchers to share their project with fourth- through sixth-graders, who rarely meet professional role models.

"You could hear a pin drop," S. Ben Benavidez Elementary School Principal Armando Ayala said of a recent science assembly.

The project has also sown some rare cooperation between farmworker advocates and some local farmers.

"I would like to see this piece of the puzzle put in the total context of quality of life and the quality of the air that we breathe," said Harold McClarty, a fourth-generation Parlier grower who belongs to the project's advisory group.

"We have kids here. Our neighbors are here. Our friends are here," said McClarty, whose son has asthma.

"We're the ones breathing the air. I'm looking at this as purely educational. If there's a combination of pesticides that [are damaging], if there's drift, then let's change our practices."

Forest doctors prescribe fire **Effort designed to reduce fuels in national forest**

By David Castellon , Staff writer
Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, Jan. 30, 2006

The U.S. Forest Service is planning to set a series of fires over 75 acres in the Sequoia National Forest in southeast Tulare County next month.

"Most of that is around the wildland-urban intermix [areas] around the Poso area" northeast of Bakersfield, said Brent Skaggs, fire management officer for the national forest.

Since October, Forest Service crews have been cutting acres of brush and small trees and using them to make dozens of "hand piles" about 12 feet wide and about 5 feet high that will be ignited to start the series of controlled burns starting Feb. 13.

Each of the 75 acres will have about 10 to 40 piles to burn, the flames from which should spread to surrounding brush to reduce fuel for bigger fires, Skaggs said.

The burns are designed to protect homes around Poso along with protecting groves of big trees, Skaggs said, adding that fire breaks cut by the federal crews should prevent the flames endangering the big trees.

The burns should also benefit those big trees by reducing brush that would compete for water and nutrients in the soil.

Since Oct. 1, the Forest Service has conducted about 1,200 acres of prescribed burns in the Sequoia National Forest and thinned about 600 mostly by hand, Skaggs said. In the year prior to that, the Forest Service conducted about 2,400 acres of prescribed burns and work crews thinned another 2,400 acres.

Skaggs said this latest prescribed burn should last about two days, and during the daytime Forest Service firefighters will monitor them in case they start to get out of control.

"Smoke from the burn operations will be visible from the communities near the burn areas," states a Forest Service press release. "We are working closely with the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) to manage smoke production and reduce any local impacts."

Skaggs added that warning signs will be posted around the burn areas and will include phone numbers people can call if they have questions. If people notice problems or dangerous situations arising from the burns, he suggested they call 911.

'05 a boom year

Another strong construction year expected

By Julie Fernandez, Staff writer

Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Jan. 28, 2005

While Planning Director Mark Kielty doubts Tulare will issue another 520 permits for single-family homes in 2006, he does predict this will be another strong year in construction.

The city issued a record 1,574 permits in 2005 for building projects with a total value of \$128.92 million.

A hot housing market and several large commercial and industrial projects were factors as permits surpassed the 2004 record of 1,092.

The 520 permits pulled for new single-family homes - 184 more than last year - had a total value of \$68.04 million.

The largest number of home permits - 123 - were issued in June just before the city increased development impact fees.

Local developers said the market remained strong but slowed down after that rush.

"I'm glad it did because we need a breather," Tulare developer Paul Daley said. "The prices are getting out of hand. New housing is no longer affordable in general."

Cal Rossi, community relations manager for McMillin Homes, agreed the market "was getting a bit overheated."

While new housing construction may have slowed a bit, Tulare will continue to see many new homes built this year, Kielty said.

Spurring the housing growth will be the construction of a new high school, expected to begin this year, and the planned retail commercial developments at the Cartmill Avenue/Highway 99 interchange, he said.

Small-lot developments with private streets are expected to debut on the housing scene now that the City Council has approved an ordinance that makes them possible, Kielty said.

"We still have a good mix of larger lots, so there's a lot of variety out there for everybody," Kielty said.

The city issued 32 permits for \$34.48 million in new commercial and industrial construction in 2005.

The largest permit was issued to United States Cold Storage for a \$12.05 million expansion at 1021 East Walnut Ave.

In addition to that, permits were issued for:

- Salvation Army's \$5 million Silvercrest senior housing project at 350 North L St.
- Horizon Group Properties' \$3.77 million expansion at the Horizon Outlet Center, 1407 Retherford St.
- Home Depot's \$2.5 million store at 1600 East Prosperity Ave.
- Tulare Firestone's \$2 million warehouse at 838 Industrial Ave.
- Rite Aid's \$1.7 million store at 1645 East Tulare Ave.
- Tulare Community Church's \$1.04 million alteration at 1820 North Gem St.
- Coulter's Design Gallery's \$900,000 store at 2309 East Tulare Ave.
- A \$900,000 Cool Hand Luke's restaurant at 1470 Cherry Court.
- A \$755,250 expansion of Tulare Mini Storage, 201 North West St.

City Manager Darrel Pyle said he believes the city will see more commercial activity than industrial in 2006 because of the scarcity of large industrial parcels.

The city hopes to increase the number and provide a better mix of small and large industrial sites as it continues its general plan update over the next 18 months, Pyle said.

"That will attract immediate investment in Tulare," he said.

The city has enough commercial sites for now, Pyle said, reporting "the activity and buzz around them continues at a fast pace."

"There is also substantial pad development in the shopping centers currently under construction and I would anticipate constant activity on Prosperity over the next 12 to 18 months," he said.

Kielty said the mammoth Cartmill Crossings retail development and the new Wal-Mart project - both planned near the Cartmill/Highway 99 interchange - are unlikely to break ground this year.

Home improvement giant Lowe's, however, is expected to take out a permit this month or next, he said. The company plans to build across the street from Home Depot.

Plans to expand the Horizon Outlet Center also are under way, Kielty said.

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Sunday, Jan. 29, 2006:](#)

We must protect Bakersfield's future

When you get what you ask for, you are expected to make good on your promises. Bakersfield officials fought long and hard to enlarge the city's sphere of influence. They promised if allowed to add miles to Bakersfield's growth boundaries, they would better plan land uses and public services, and improve the area's quality of life.

Last week, the boundary-setting Local Agency Formation Commission granted Bakersfield's request to add about 100 square miles to the city's sphere of influence, a designation of land that some day may be annexed to the city. Bakersfield already has about 115 square miles of land within the city's borders.

Now that Bakersfield has cleared the LAFCO hurdle, residents expect city officials to make good on their promises.

During a joint meeting of the Bakersfield City Council and the Kern County Board of Supervisors in late February, a proposal to revise metropolitan Bakersfield's general plan will be considered.

Nearly two decades ago, city and county officials set aside long-standing animosities to jointly develop the plan, which is a blueprint for how metropolitan Bakersfield will grow. The plan was updated in 2004.

But the present housing boom, which prompted Bakersfield's request to enlarge its sphere of influence, now requires a more comprehensive review of the general plan and the adoption of development policies to reflect existing environmental challenges and community concerns.

Metropolitan Bakersfield's astronomical growth requires city and county leaders to take a larger view of what is happening to our community and how it will develop into the future.

We can no longer endure the consequences of approving development on a project-by-project basis. The cumulative effects of development on the air we breathe, the streets we drive and the public services we depend on must be considered.

We must decide: What amenities must developers include in their projects? Should they include parks, trails, open space, retail and innovative transportation systems?

Each year, approximately 2,500 acres of agricultural land in metropolitan Bakersfield are lost to urban development. A revised general plan must include preservation policies and infill incentives to encourage more efficient use of available urban land.

Revising the general plan and studying the environmental consequences of development requires public input, deliberations by city and county planning commissions, and final adoption by the City Council and Board of Supervisors.

With the proper commitment both of political will and financial resources by City Council members and Kern County supervisors, the process will take at least two years.

[Clean air](#). Open space. Parks. Smooth-flowing traffic. Public protection. Innovative neighborhoods. Tree canopies. Viable retail centers. Entertainment and cultural features. A good quality of life.

These things just don't happen. Our elected officials must set the standards and adopt the policies to make them happen.

City and county leaders must focus on building balanced, creative communities, rather than ordinary subdivision tracts that are designed just to house people in rows and make money for builders.