

Florez plans to clear the rural air

Two bills would fine dust-rule violators and provide incentives.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Tuesday, February 14, 2006, 7:11 AM)

State Sen. Dean Florez on Monday outlined a California counterattack to a controversial federal proposal that would eliminate the dust health standard in rural areas.

Florez proposed two bills, one levying fines up to \$50,000 against businesses breaking dust rules, the other providing financial incentives for businesses that reduce more pollution than the law requires.

The fines are intended to replace federal enforcement sanctions, such as the withholding of billions of dollars in road funds. The sanctions would disappear if the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency withdraws federal dust protections for rural areas.

"We believe [the EPA proposal] is a major setback to clean the air," Florez said. "There shouldn't be two standards — one for rural communities, one for urban communities."

For weeks, the Shafter Democrat has decried the EPA rollback proposal, which also would provide dust-rule exemptions for farming and mining.

The EPA made the proposal in December after concluding rural pollution sources, mainly farming and mining, do not create city pollution.

The idea casts doubt on research connecting tiny particle pollution with asthma, heart disease and premature deaths. Particle pollution annually kills more than 1,100 San Joaquin Valley people before their time, a state Air Resources Board study showed.

State and regional air officials are concerned about the EPA proposal, and they are not alone.

The federal Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee about a week ago objected, saying there was no evidence to support the rollback.

On Monday, Florez announced an informational hearing Wednesday in Sacramento to discuss the EPA proposal. Federal and state experts are expected to testify.

"We're very interested to hear from EPA why they don't agree with their own scientific board," he said.

In 2003, Florez succeeded in pushing through a reform law, Senate Bill 700, to regulate dust and other pollution from agriculture, which is the biggest source of dust in the San Joaquin Valley. Florez said farmers are cooperating in the cleanup.

Agriculture is not pushing for a dust exemption, said Manuel Cunha Jr., Nisei Farmers League president, who has long been involved in air quality issues.

Valley farmers have set the pace nationally on methods of reducing dust and other pollution, he said. At this point, EPA's proposal doesn't seem to make sense, he said.

The state and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District have their own dust rules that would be unaffected by the EPA proposal. However, federal officials have always held the powerful financial sanctions, such as the threat of withholding road money.

That's why Florez is proposing SB 1252 to put more teeth — \$25,000 to \$50,000 fines — into the state and regional standards. The penalties would be added on top of thousands of dollars in daily fines that state or local authorities already can impose on polluters.

The other Florez bill, SB 1230, would encourage business owners to reduce pollution 30% beyond what the law requires and replace pollution controls sooner than required.

The bill would establish "clean-air enterprise zones" — areas up to two square miles in size where businesses would have the chance to obtain low-interest loans, tax credits or other incentives to reduce pollution.

Both bills were applauded by air advocate Carolina Simunovic of Fresno Metro Ministries. She said the federal health standard for dust is important in rural communities.

"Apparently, the people breathing dirty air in the rural areas of this Valley don't matter to the federal government," she said.

Federal officials Monday said the proposal is not a final decision. They said they welcome "robust" discussion of the issue and would base the final decision on science.

Proposed EPA changes would eliminate dust pollution standards for rural areas

By OLIVIA MUNOZ, Associated Press Writer
Monday, February 13, 2006
Published in the San Francisco Chronicle

(02-13) 18:28 PST Fresno, Calif. (AP) -- With the Environmental Protection Agency proposing to exempt rural areas from federal dust regulations, a state lawmaker proposed a bill Monday that would fine those who help make the San Joaquin Valley one of the most polluted air basins in the country.

The EPA proposal would stop federal monitoring of larger particles of dust and soot in rural places, because they don't contribute much to urban pollution, EPA officials said.

When the EPA was considering the proposed changes, there were no studies that showed that it was necessary to regulate rural areas as stringently as urban cores on larger particle pollution, said Matt Haber, deputy director for the EPA's western office on air quality.

The proposed changes announced in January by EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson have been met with criticism from the agency's own scientific panel.

Environmental groups and lawmakers in areas plagued by persistent air pollution have also spoken out.

If the federal government stops monitoring and gives up its ability to fine polluting industries, states will be left to deal with polluters on their own, without the additional pressure of heavy fines to ensure compliance with clean-air measures, said Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter.

On Monday, he introduced a new bill that would allow the state to fine dusty industries \$25,000 for each offense until 2010, when fines would increase to \$50,000 per violation.

Florez also proposed another bill on Monday that offered incentives, such as long-term loans and grants, to businesses that invested in cleaner-burning engines that perform above the requirements of current emissions standards.

Dust, soot and other microscopic pollutants can linger in the air and become lodged in the lungs, leading to a variety of health problems from asthma to lung cancer.

EPA officials are taking public comment on the proposed rules through April. The agency must adopt final standards by September.

Old plant producing lawsuits

By SUSAN HERENDEEN, BEE STAFF WRITER
Modesto Bee
Feb. 13, 2006

There's an end in sight to the Modesto Tallow Co., but no end to the litigation facing the rendering plant that spewed stomach-turning odors in south Modesto.

Attorneys for the Teamsters, representing the plant's former employees, filed lawsuits in Sacramento and San Francisco seeking back payments they say are owed to health and fringe benefit funds.

Three suppliers have filed lawsuits in Modesto seeking payments they say are overdue.

And Stanislaus County says it is owed \$376,765 in property taxes, with some unpaid bills stretching as far back as 2000.

Modesto Tallow is within the city limits, but the neighborhoods surrounding the plant are in unincorporated areas of Stanislaus County.

Supervisor Jim DeMartini, who represents the area, predicted that creditors eventually will be paid, because judgments in their favor would become liens on the property.

And the property — more than 42 acres bounded by Crows Landing Road, portions of Hatch Road and the Tuolumne River — is a valuable asset that could be sold.

"That is all prime commercial and light industrial area," said DeMartini, who tried to convince plant owners to renovate or relocate after the air district filed a lawsuit in August.

If the plant's property tax bills go unpaid for five years, the county could confiscate the land and sell it to recoup its losses. But a sale by the plant owners is more likely.

Miguel Galvez, a senior planner with the city of Modesto, said a real estate agent hired by the plant owners has made some preliminary inquiries to determine how the company could sell and market the site.

He said the land is zoned for industrial uses and would need an environmental review before it could be redeveloped.

"They're seeing what options they have," Galvez said.

Company officials are not disclosing their plans, and haven't filed answers to the lawsuits.

Jeff Podesto of Stockton, a co-owner of the plant that was run by his family for decades, referred inquiries to a parent company in Texas.

William Shirley of Dallas, company chairman, could not be reached for comment.

Teamsters seek \$39,945-plus

In December, attorney John Provost of Sacramento filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Sacramento, on behalf of the Northern California General Teamsters Security Fund, seeking \$39,945 plus interest.

Provost said the money should have been paid to an employee health and welfare fund in October and November, before the plant closed.

He said the union may file another lawsuit, because the company withheld union dues from employees' paychecks, but stopped forwarding the money to the union in May.

The company signed off on a new contract with the union in July, only months before the shutdown, Provost said.

"I find it hard to believe that when they signed the new collective-bargaining agreement in July, they didn't have some inkling that they were in trouble," Provost said.

Company officials previously issued a statement saying about 65 employees would lose jobs because of the plant closure. Employees were members of the Teamsters Local 386.

In October, Northwest Administrators Inc., a group that handles a pension trust fund for the Teamsters, filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, saying the plant stopped paying fringe benefit contributions in April.

Attorney Robert Gates of San Francisco could not be reached for further comment. In court papers, Gates said fund administrators need to review company records to determine how much money is owed.

Payment sought for rental, paint

Additionally, three creditors have taken their cases to Stanislaus County Superior Court. In court papers, attorneys contend that Modesto Tallow:

Stopped making monthly payments to Ahern Rentals Inc., a company that rents heavy equipment and tools, in May. The Las Vegas-based company filed a lawsuit in October, seeking \$16,552. A court trial is scheduled in April.

Defaulted on a payment to Guntert Steel of Ripon, a supplier for sand and gravel plants, welding shops and major building contractors, in May. The company filed a lawsuit in August, seeking \$10,740. A court trial is scheduled in March.

Never paid Angelo Fokos of San Jose \$18,753 for painting buildings on the plant grounds. Fokos filed a lawsuit in September and a judge ruled in his favor in December. Now it's up to Fokos to collect.

The plant was built on a rural plot of land in 1917, with neighborhoods and nearby Shackelford School springing up later, in the 1940s.

It processed cow carcasses and chicken feathers, turning them into the raw materials needed for animal feed and leather goods. It also produced tallow, which is used in soap, ink, glue and other products.

Complaints about odors — which drifted as far as Ceres and downtown Modesto — increased in the 1990s.

In August, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District filed a lawsuit seeking an injunction to shut the plant down, saying eight years of administrative actions had failed to bring the plant into compliance with air quality regulations.

\$125,000 fine could be dropped

Plant officials settled the lawsuit in early December by shutting down the plant. Only a handful of employees remain, to operate a transfer for restaurant grease, through the end of the year.

The settlement included a \$125,000 fine, but Catherine Tognazzini, assistant counsel for the air district, said the fine is likely to be dropped or reduced if the plant owners surrender their permits, as required.

She said the district has been waiting for a surrender letter that was promised months ago.

In court papers, plant officials said they spent \$277,760 to refurbish and modernize equipment from June to October. Tognazzini said the smell continued, despite the new pollution-control equipment.

"They spent this money to obtain this equipment, then didn't operate it correctly," Tognazzini said.

Supervisor DeMartini said he suspects that the plant was mismanaged, but not bankrupt. He said he has a hard time understanding the management practices of the plant's out-of-town owners.

"They had an unusual way of doing business," DeMartini said. "They would duck issues and not respond and not pay bills."

Pollution legislation passes transportation committee

Saturday, January 14, 2006
Special to the Madera Tribune

Legislation by Assemblyman Dave Cogdill to remove high polluting vehicles from the road unanimously passed the Assembly Transportation Committee recently.

Assembly Bill 184 would create an incentive-based program to replace high-polluting vehicles with cleaner vehicles that have been donated to the state.

"I am pleased by the transportation committee's overwhelming support of AB184," said Cogdill, a Modesto Republican who represents part of Madera County.

Cogdill noted that a great number of high-polluting vehicles remain on California roads because their owners simply cannot afford to replace them. Under smog check II's Consumer Assistance Program (CAP), qualified low-income owners of high polluting vehicles are eligible to receive \$500 worth of repairs or \$1,000 for retiring their vehicle.

However, because most new and used cars cost much more than \$1,000, many participants cannot afford to replace their car and simply opt for the smog check II repair assistance. Repairs can be problematic as older model vehicles often do not hold emissions-related repairs and revert to high polluting status again.

To address this issue, AB184 would create an incentive-based vehicle donation and replacement program that builds upon Smog Check II. Under the provisions of the program, owners of non-high-polluting vehicles (including individuals, car rental companies and governmental entities) could donate these vehicles to the state. The state, in turn, would act as a clearing house, redistributing the donated cars to replace high polluting vehicles that are beyond repair.

If a licensed smog check technician concludes that repairs to a certain high-polluting vehicle will not last, the owner of the vehicle will be eligible to receive one of the donated vehicles. The high-polluting vehicle would then be retired and crushed by one of the state's authorized dismantlers.

"One of the primary ways to achieve cost-effective and equitable air pollution control is targeting the dirtiest vehicles for repairs or replacement, rather than imposing restrictions and requirements on all car owners to prevent the polluting activity of only a few," Cogdill said. "AB184 will accomplish this goal by bringing together concerned citizens with lower income Californians in need of a cleaner running vehicle. It's a win-win situation that will produce measurable gains in air quality."

AB184 passed the Assembly Transportation Committee on a unanimous vote. The bill will now move to the Assembly Appropriations Committee for a hearing. A date has not been set for the hearing. To read the text of this legislation, please visit www.leginfo.ca.gov.

Farmer-friendly no more

By Brenda Huang

Tracy Press, Monday, Feb. 13, 2006

When Philip Martin drives his tractor through town and stops in traffic, people give him unfriendly hand gestures.

"They say I'm No. 1," the Tracy farmer joked.

To Martin, the complaint that farm machines are noisy and smelly is just another sign that farming is no longer welcome here, a feeling that has become stronger and stronger as Tracy steadily marched toward suburbanization in the last three decades.

As the Bay Area economy juggernaut invades the first town on Interstate 580 west of the Altamont Pass and converts the city into a backyard of inexpensive homes for its workers, agriculture is quickly receding from Tracy's social fabric.

Martin and his friends seem to have every reason to believe their business has not only lost prestige but has shrunk to the fringes in a community where once agriculture was the livelihood.

Farmers are quick to point out the changes in town: The last tractor dealership and the last chemical supplier have left; Holly Sugar and Heinz - Tracy's one-time big employers - are history.

The newcomers who dwell in the new, expansive subdivisions are people who commute to the Bay Area and have no ties to - or liking for - agriculture.

And the transformation is the most dramatic in the landscape. Tracy used to be a sea of crops - tomatoes, beans, corn and apricots. Now there's only one crop that's hip: rooftops.

"Everybody's growing houses," Vernalis farmer Bill Koster said.

Koster remembers a different Tracy two decades ago. It was all fields and pastures outside the small town: west of Lincoln Boulevard, north of Grant Line Road, east of MacArthur Drive and south of Schulte Road.

He used to drive his tractor through 11th Street without a stoplight.

Not any more.

Since 1980, the city has annexed more than 9,000 acres of rural land to build stores and homes, and annexation accelerated in the last 15 years, according to files provided by Tracy planning officials.

The 905-acre Northeast Industrial Park became part of the city in 1996, the 2,725-acre Tracy Hills in 1998 and the 550-acre Tracy Gateway in 2002.

The loss of farmland in Tracy represents what's happening across the Central Valley. San Joaquin County lost 22,806 acres of agricultural land to urban development from 1992 to 2004, according to data from the state Department of Conservation.

In Tracy, while the size of the city multiplied, farming withdrew to more remote surrounding areas and seems poised to withdraw further.

Farmers often find it hard to resist the temptation to sell land to developers, who buy at \$50,000 an acre. Land for farming typically sells for \$4,000 to \$6,000 an acre.

As the city grows, farming becomes more difficult.

A much larger population increases the demand on the water supply, which is shared by agriculture, Koster said.

When a drought hits, the tension will show.

Rancher Pat Connolly, who owns land in the hills 10 miles southwest of Tracy, said he's lucky enough to escape the encroachment of urban development, yet he's not immune to its ripple effects.

He used to herd his cattle down county highways and from field to field, but now as traffic increases, he has to load them in trucks and haul them from one place to another, Connolly said. As a result, costs go up.

And farmers complain agriculture seems to bear the brunt of the environmental impact of a population growth. As air quality and water quality worsen, agriculture becomes the target of state regulations.

Bruce Blodgett, executive director of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation, said state environmental regulations, which have been strengthened in the last 15 years, pose a bigger threat to agriculture than urban sprawl.

"Nobody's looking at the cumulative effects of these regulations," Blodgett said. "As a small farmer, you have to have a consulting team."

Farmers are required to comply with air quality and pesticide rules, test water in streams and chip orchard waste instead of burning it, he said. All add to costs and make farming less profitable.

Martin said he would consider selling his farm along 11th Street to a developer if approached.

"You're beating your head against the wall in a business that's not wanted here anymore," he said. "If you're offered a mountain of money, you take it and go to a farming-friendly community and are in a stronger financial position."

Harlan Ranch tracts approved

Clovis City Council gives the go-ahead for 514 lots.

By Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Tuesday, February 14, 2006, 4:54 AM)

Harlan Ranch's first four housing tracts won the Clovis City Council's approval Monday night.

Homes will begin sprouting from the ground east of DeWolf Avenue and south of Shepherd Avenue in the next couple weeks, said Goldie Lewis, chief operating officer for CVEC Group, which is the land owner.

The council approved 514 lots on 131 acres north of Highway 168 and south of Shepherd. The approved tracts will have densities from about three homes an acre to eight homes an acre.

When completed, Harlan Ranch will cover 400 acres with more than 1,300 homes, and include an elementary school and about 10 parks ranging in size from about a quarter of an acre to nearly four acres.

Wilson Homes, one of the project's developers, is paying \$4.28 million to build a fire station at Temperance and Alluvial avenues about two miles southwest of Harlan Ranch.

Building the fire station was a condition for the development's approval. The developer eventually will be reimbursed by the city.

CVEC Group is a partnership of homebuilders Wathen-Castanos and Wilson Homes. The homebuilders will buy home lots from CVEC to build the homes.

A second phase will cover 114 acres with about 600 homes, Lewis said.

In other action, the council also approved a 15,000-square-foot drive-through Walgreen's drugstore at the southwest corner of Shaw and Fowler avenues. The project also includes an additional 21,000 square feet of office space.

Walgreen's will move from a shopping center on the east side of the Shaw and Fowler intersection. The developer's representative, Dirk Poeschel, said Ace Hardware has indicated that it will move into the existing Walgreen's site.

At the request of Clovis Unified School District, Walgreen's said it will pay for a crossing guard at Jefferson Elementary School on the north side of the street.

Study to chart course for proposed commuter freeway

Erin Sherbert, Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Sunday, Feb. 12, 2006

If only there was a less-congested highway for Nagaraju Kotha to commute from Mountain House to Sunnyvale, the software programmer wouldn't have to travel back roads to skirt bottlenecked traffic clogging regional freeways.

San Joaquin County transit officials think such a new highway running south of Tracy to San Jose is worth pondering, so the San Joaquin Council of Governments, the county's transportation planning agency, will study what it would take to build a 25-mile freeway more directly linking the two regions.

While commuters like Kotha see minutes shaved off their travel time, environmentalists say the highway would be a detriment to wildlife in that area.

Nevertheless, transit officials are moving ahead. They plan to begin the study in the next few months and complete it within a year.

Rep. Richard Pombo R-Tracy, who secured federal funding for the study, says he envisions a six-lane highway, with no onramps or offramps, designed specifically for commuters. Other ideas for the highway suggest carpools and vanpools could use the lanes for free while solo drivers would pay a toll.

The study will examine how a new highway would affect the environment and accommodate growing commuter and truck traffic. The exact route of the freeway has yet to be determined, but transit officials say its general path most likely would run through or near several reservoirs, mountain peaks, a state park and a world-famous observatory.

"When you look at the scope of opening a new corridor for transportation purposes, this is a significant project," said Andrew Chesley, executive director of COG.

But environmentalists worry a highway like this would cut through sensitive environments where many protected species live, including the red-legged frog.

"It's a very undeveloped area," said Lloyd Wagstaff, Mount Hamilton project manager with The Nature Conservancy in San Francisco, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving diverse regions. "It's an area (where) we see an opportunity to protect the resources and the dynamic environment for the species native to that area that continue to be protected."

This is not the first time transportation leaders have considered building a highway between San Joaquin County and San Jose. The concept was first proposed in the 1920s and again in the 1950s. But the state never pursued the project, officials said.

In 2003, Pombo failed to secure federal funding to research the highway, but he landed \$7.6 million for the study last year. San Joaquin County is expected to contribute about \$1 million in matching funds.

Pombo said a new highway between the two regions would help take pressure off regional freeways, including Interstate 205, where more than 120,000 vehicles travel daily, twice the amount it was designed to carry. Also, a 2000 survey, the most recent numbers available, shows that 9.7 percent of San Joaquin County commuters head to Santa Clara County each day, according to COG.

"It would make a big difference in terms of commute time, which has a big impact on air quality and the quality of life," Pombo said.

Residents helped reshape Valley's landscape

Dana M. Nichols, Record staff writer
Stockton Record, Sunday, Feb. 12, 2006

SAN ANDREAS - Humans have radically reshaped the Central Valley and the neighboring Sierra Nevada foothills in the past 157 years.

Gold Rush miners armed with water cannons washed away entire hills. Silt from that mining flowed down to the Valley where it plugged rivers, filled in parts of San Francisco Bay, and by 1884 triggered the state's first environmental court decision.

In the mountains, miners chopped down entire forests to fuel heating fires, build towns, and timber the shafts of hard-rock mines.

In the Valley, farmers converted oak woodlands and marshes into the world's most productive food basket. State and federal engineers raised mighty dams, changing the course of rivers to slake the thirst of those farms and of huge cities arising on the coast and in southern deserts.

After World War II, population from the coastal cities sprawled inland. The automobile made it possible for hundreds of thousands of newcomers to settle in Valley suburbs and in ranchettes scattered in the hills.

This remaking of the land yielded tremendous wealth from gold, grain, grapes, timber, real estate and hundreds of other products. It also killed some rivers, choked others, decimated or destroyed salmon runs, and doomed millions of people to live in a place with tainted air and water.

Some of the pollution dates back to the Gold Rush. Toxic mercury from then is still concentrating in Delta fish caught and consumed by some Valley residents.

Air pollution is more recent, largely but not entirely tracing to the massive use of motorized vehicles in the past 60 years in a place where mountains sometimes trap stagnant air.

Perhaps the strangest corner of the region is the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, where ocean-going ships tower over rows of corn and tomatoes growing on below-sea-level islands.

"It is completely transformed," said John Thompson, a retired professor of geography at the University of Illinois, Champaign, who earned his doctorate at Stanford and wrote his dissertation on the geography of the Delta.

Until the Gold Rush, the Delta was a sea-level marsh. In some places, it had deposits of peat soil up to 65 feet deep, Thompson said.

Scientists say the soils built up as plants died in the water and sea levels gradually rose over the 6,000 years since the end of the last ice age.

The San Joaquin, the Sacramento and other smaller rivers carved channels through the Delta. During spring floods, the rivers deposited banks of mud that served as a sort of low natural levee for the peat soil marshes.

Farmers arriving after the Gold Rush discovered that they could make the levees higher - first by hand then after 1878 by using powered dredges - thus creating 'islands' of rich peat soil.

Then they started farming

"Land preparation was done by fire, because the tules were pretty tough to break by plow," Thompson said.

As the soil burned, its level inside the islands sank. The sinking continues today. Even without fire, the peat soils oxidize and blow away once they are drained of water.

Now, much of the Delta is 20 or more feet below sea level. Even some neighborhoods on the edge of the Delta in Lathrop and Stockton are below sea level, protected by levees built on the ancient peat soils.

"It's a pretty unstable foundation on which to build, I was going to say a culture," Thompson said. "But in a sense it is a culture."

One legacy of the altered landscape is California's eternal series of lawsuits over water and the environment. The first environmental suit was filed by farmers along the Yuba River whose orchards were buried under hydraulic mining debris.

Judge Lorenzo Sawyer of the California Supreme Court ruled in 1884 that mining companies could not destroy the value of property downstream by discharging mine debris in to the river.

Another major legal and political battle was the struggle over whether to allow San Francisco to dam and inundate Hetch Hetchy, a Sierra valley of which famed naturalist John Muir said "... no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man."

Environmentalists lost that battle but it triggered Muir and others in 1892 to form the Sierra Club, still a major player in environmental matters.

The legal battle over how to balance the conflicting interests of different California cities, industries and interests continues today.

A state court later this year, for example, is expected to approve a plan to restore at least some water to now-dry stretches of the San Joaquin River below Friant Dam.

That battle dates back to the 1940s when Friant dried up the river, destroying a huge source of salmon harvested by both recreational anglers and commercial fishing operations.

The huge forests of the Sierra Nevada seem to have survived better than the fish in Valley rivers, despite the depredations of the Gold Rush.

"The gold mining and that era probably devastated the woodlands more than anything else has before or since," said Steve Stocking, a retired biology instructor from San Joaquin Delta College and the Mother Lode chairman for the California Native Plant Society. "At that time there were uncontrolled fires because there wasn't anybody to control them."

Today's forests are largely regrowth that has happened since the late 19th century, Stocking said.

That regrowth and the ranching that has kept much of the lower altitude Sierra hills as open space has made it possible for many native species of birds, plants and animals to survive, Stockton said.

"We probably have most of the same suite of animals that we had before," he said.

COS to host global warming discussion

Report released warns of effect on the Valley

By Jed Chernabaeff, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2006:

California could be in big trouble if the current levels of greenhouse gas emissions aren't reduced, according to a recent study.

Researchers with the Union of Concerned Scientists - who helped draft a document titled "Possible Scenarios of Climate Change in California" - say if nothing changes, average temperatures could rise as much as 10 degrees over the next 100 years.

The San Joaquin Valley, in particular, could face the most potential danger with some fruit crops being eliminated from production, a shrinking water supply because of a decreasing snowpack in the Sierra Nevada, extreme heat over an extended period of time and a decrease in "chill" hours during night time. Those are just some of the possible effects, said Amy Leurs, a climate impact scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists.

On Friday, the latest scientific findings will be presented at College of the Sequoias by Erin Rogers, a Union of Concerned Scientists outreach coordinator.

Rogers will present the findings on how global warming could affect the San Joaquin Valley and California. She will also explain why a 2006 California legislative session to reduce global warming emissions is critical for the state and nation.

Rogers said Valley lawmakers will be important players in the upcoming legislative session, when assembly bills to place a cap on global warming emissions are reviewed.

"[Lawmakers] from the Valley could make or break some of these bills," Rogers said.

"A lot of legislators in the Valley play a very important leadership role in the Latino and moderate caucuses and could have a lot of influence on the legislative process," he said.

Rogers said with laws that would cap emissions, California could be in the forefront of a new economy that capitalizes on emission-saving technologies.

"Some of the regulations will spur more technology innovations," Rogers said. "California will be in the forefront as far as creating technologies that would lower emissions."

Rogers said the passage of the laws could lead to the research of "cleaner car technology, solar panel technology and hydrogen power technology."

"There is a lot of different fuel technologies that will be researched," Rogers said.

"A lot of the technologies we won't know about until they come up with it," he said.

Report on global warming

The Union of Concerned Scientists joined other state agencies to form a Climate Action Team - prompted by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last June - to devise a plan to cut the state's greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010, to 1990 levels by 2020 and to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Leurs said California is one of the 10 largest economies in the world and the 12th largest producer of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, which are byproducts of industry, agriculture and motor vehicle use.

Effects of global warming on the Valley

Some of the effects of global warming are already taking place, Leurs said.

"There is already a documented decrease in snowpack and over the next few decades, the effects can be exacerbating," Leurs said.

Leurs said if greenhouse emissions are not cut, global warming is expected to raise temperatures between 8 degrees and 10 degrees in California and diminish the snowpack by 90 percent in the next century.

"The biggest projection the report states is the loss in snowpack," Leurs said.

"If emissions continue at this rate, we are expecting to lose all snowpack in the Sierra Nevada, which accounts for 50 percent of the water storage for the state," he said.

Leurs said these effects could harm the state economically by threatening agricultural production, increasing the risk of forest fires and increasing utility costs for cooling.

"Rising temperatures can decrease productivity for many crops in the San Joaquin Valley," Leurs said. "Many of the fruit tree crops may not be able to be grown. Also, wine grapes might not be able to be grown as temperatures rise."

Leurs said what San Joaquin Valley residents currently know as the 15 to 20 "extreme heat" days - days in the summer that exceed 100 degrees - could increase to more than 100 days per year if global warming continues.

"What we know now as extreme heat will be considered normal if global warming continues," Leurs said.

- What: Talk of the Town: Global Warming and the Central Valley
- When: 7 p.m. Friday
- Where: Lecture Hall No. 350, College of the Sequoias, 915 S. Mooney Blvd.
- Who: Union of Concerned Scientists outreach coordinator Erin Rogers - keynote speaker.

Despite state order, ash still sitting on Wasco land

County will refer issue to code compliance if Oxnard company doesn't act soon

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2006

The city of Oxnard is in for trouble with Kern County code enforcement if it doesn't remove a moonscape of hazardous waste in rural Wasco, according to the county planning department.

The vast piles of ash, used to kill pathogens in land-applied sewage sludge, were declared hazardous waste by state toxics officials earlier this month.

Since then, the county has had no communication with Oxnard or the trucking firm that operates the site, according to county Planning Director Ted James.

"If I don't hear anything soon it will be referred to code compliance," James said. "So long as state toxics has determined that is hazardous waste ... (they) need to make immediate arrangements to remove that material."

This week he'll warn Oxnard and its operator, U.S.A. Transport Inc., of possible enforcement action, he said.

Oxnard officials say the piles don't deserve the "hazardous waste" label, and are arguing that to the state.

"We're not sure how that's going to shake out," Mark Norris, Oxnard's wastewater superintendent, said Monday. "Our intent is to remove that material if, in fact, that material is a problem."

The ash piles exceed the pH threshold for hazardous waste, meaning they're more "basic" than the allowable limit. The high-pH powder reacts with moisture in sewage sludge and the heat is used to kill bacteria and pathogens. The treated sludge is then spread on 1,300 acres of cropland near Gun Club Road.

The ash, which can cause pneumonia and chemical burns to the eyes, nose and throat, comes from a Los Angeles-area oil refinery, BP West Coast Products LLC.

Oxnard is no longer sending sewage sludge to the Wasco farm, Norris said, but he hopes to have it running again in the next several weeks. Instead of ash, the farm will use lime, which has a similar effect on sewage sludge, Norris said.

The piles were always recognized as a hazardous material, but the state's "hazardous waste" designation means they must now be handled and disposed of according to strict rules.

The county had begun its own investigation of the piles last spring when the state Department of Toxic Substances Control and the FBI took over, said Supervisor Ray Watson, who represents the Wasco area. The results were kept under wraps until early February.

"Environmental Health and I have known about this (investigation) for some time and have been working behind the scenes on it," Watson said. "If there were any danger to the public, certainly we would have put out a notice and we would have been out there covering (the piles)."

The piles, which are about as wide as a football field and stretch a half-mile long, stand a mile or two from Semitropic elementary school. They're adjacent to a portion of Semitropic Water Storage District's water bank.

County Supervisor Michael Rubio wants to vigorously pursue action against Oxnard and U.S.A. Transport, which had already violated county codes by stockpiling far more than a year's supply of ash on-site.

"I want to send a message," Rubio said. "It's unacceptable for people to violate our laws that protect public health and not get a fine for it."

He'll raise the issue at the supervisors meeting this afternoon, he said.

Semitropic school officials did not return calls for comment Monday, and the school is on vacation this week.

Semitropic Water Storage District officials have offered to buy Oxnard's sludge farm in the past, and are still interested in seeing it moved away from the water bank.

"It's a concern, no doubt," said Will Boschman, the district's general manager. "But where we're drawing the water from is 300 feet down. The samples we've taken (show it's) very, very good water."

Court OKs canyon mine deal

Santa Clarita attorney reviewing city's options

By Judy O'Rourke, Staff Writer

LA Daily News

Feb. 14, 2006

SANTA CLARITA - One of the city's pivotal bids for scaling down the 56.1 million-ton gravel mine planned in Soledad Canyon has been hammered by a federal appeals court decision that upholds an agreement allowing the mine project to proceed.

In a ruling issued Friday and announced Monday, the 9th District U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said a consent decree between the county of Los Angeles and Cemex Inc. allowing for the mine was negotiated in good faith and is "fundamentally fair, adequate and reasonable."

Attorneys for the Mexico-based conglomerate were delighted.

"Cemex is gratified that the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, in reviewing the record in this matter, has recognized the great effort by Cemex, the county and the United States to try to settle their legal differences in a manner that allowed the county to retain its environmental authority, allowed the U.S. to proceed with its mineral material sales program and which allowed Cemex to pursue its Soledad Canyon project," said Kerry Shapiro, the lead attorney for Cemex's Soledad Canyon project. "The court recognized the settlement was fair to all parties."

Cemex spokeswoman Susana Duarte said the company hopes to "be able to move forward in planning for production as soon as possible. We still have numerous hurdles we hope will be resolved in a timely manner. We are open and willing to work with the community and our neighbors."

Attorney Debra Prosser, who represented the city, said the decision was disappointing, but stopped short of saying what comes next.

"We are reviewing all of our options as to how we're going to respond to this," Prosser said Monday.

The proposed mine is in county territory between Canyon Country and of Agua Dulce, but the city has battled it claiming it will pollute Santa Clarita's air and add heavy truck traffic to local roads.

Attorneys for the city and Cemex had presented arguments to the appellate court Feb. 7. The city claimed the consent decree was invalid because it contained a finding of preemption of state and local authority by the federal government that is not authorized by law.

Cemex was granted the mining rights by the Bureau of Land Management in 1990. The county had rejected the mine, but conceded when Cemex filed a lawsuit in federal court. County supervisors granted the mining permit in June 2004 under a court-approved consent decree.

The city appealed the decree, claiming it and the environmental impact report violate the California Environmental Quality Act, the federal Clean Water and Clean Air acts and the National Environmental Policy Act.

In October 2004, the state Attorney General's Office filed a friend-of-the-court brief in support of the city's stance, questioning the legality of the consent decree. The brief argued the settlement between Cemex and the County could hamper state and county enforcement of environmental laws. The consent decree says the county cannot "interfere with, conflict with, or otherwise frustrate or impair" the agreement with Cemex.

The attorney general argued the provision would undercut the county's enforcement of environmental laws and right of free speech.

"We respectfully disagree with the court's ruling," Tom Dresslar, a spokesman for state Attorney General Bill Lockyer's office said Monday. "I think the county settlement surrendered too much of its regulatory authority over the mine. We think the provisions of the consent decree, some of them, were overly broad and unconstitutional."

Dresslar went further.

"The Bush administration intervened in this action; it took the position the federal government's contract with Cemex trumped California laws to protect the environment," he said. "That's a dangerous precedent. We hope the Bush administration or the federal government refrains in the future from taking a position that California's environmental protection laws take a back seat to its contracts with private parties."

In January, a federal judge rejected the city's claims that the BLM and the Interior Board of Land Appeals failed to perform sufficient environmental analysis before approving the mine. In the lawsuit, the city raised claims under NEPA, the Clean Water Act and several federal mining laws. The city is appealing the decision.

An appeal filed in December for a case lodged under the Endangered Species Act is pending. In a November ruling, the court sided with the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Cemex.

Cemex filed a lawsuit in state court in December, challenging an environmental review in the city's plan to annex 1,885 acres, which includes the area where the mine is proposed.

El Dorado air quality plan backed

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer
Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Feb. 12, 2006

The El Dorado County Air Quality Management District board approved a regional plan designed to meet federal clean-air standards by limiting emissions that contribute to formation of ozone.

The Board of Supervisors, sitting as the air quality board, approved the plan Tuesday, noting that it would impose no new restrictions on El Dorado County but might help reduce high ozone levels often recorded in the Cool area.

Marcella McTaggart, air pollution control officer, said the Sacramento region has been out of conformity with federal standards since October 2004. In addition to the El Dorado district, the non-attainment area includes the Sacramento Metropolitan and Yolo-Solano air quality management districts, and parts of the Placer County Air Pollution Control District and the Feather River Air Quality Management District.

McTaggart said federal funding for 27 transportation projects in the non-attainment area has been withheld until the region adopts a plan that demonstrates it can meet the standards for ozone.

Hybrid Perks May Become Problems

As Vehicles Pack HOV Lanes, Experts Fear Advantages Could Turn Counterproductive

By Steven Ginsberg
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, February 14, 2006; B08

The purchase of a hybrid car is more and more likely to put its driver into a privileged class of motorist with access to carpool lanes, special parking spots and other perks -- the kinds of things most drivers can only dream about when they're stuck in traffic or circling a block.

But many commuters and some transportation experts say the generous incentives intended to reduce oil consumption and help clean the air are working too well and are in danger of becoming unfair, unnecessary and, ultimately, counterproductive.

Hybrids are helping clog carpool lanes in Virginia, the first state to let solo motorists in the combination gas-electric cars use them. Last year, the state's Department of Transportation was worried enough about the impact of hybrids on traffic flow to call for an early end to the perk, scheduled to expire in July. Instead, Virginia is in the process of extending it.

The House of Delegates gave preliminary approval yesterday to a bill allowing hybrids to continue using carpool lanes under certain conditions. The state Senate already approved an extension, and Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) supports it, despite the qualms of his transportation officials.

An incentive -- whether it's access to a carpool lane or cut-rate financing -- still aims to put another car on the road, and that undermines efforts to encourage carpooling.

Hybrids accounted for nearly 25 percent of cars in the high-occupancy vehicle lanes on Interstate 95 in Virginia, according to a state study conducted last fall. That was up from 4 percent two years ago.

The Transportation Department is alarmed by the rapid increase. The additional drivers could slow traffic in the HOV lanes to the point where carpoolers decide they might as well go back to driving their own vehicles in the regular lanes.

"We're concerned about the unrestricted growth of hybrids because if HOV stops working for one class of vehicles, it stops working for all classes, including buses and carpoolers," Transportation Secretary Pierce R. Homer said.

Many commuters recognize the dilemma.

"The whole point of HOV is to get fewer cars on the road," said Bill Faith, an Annandale resident and sometime carpooler. "To allow them to come in as single cars doesn't make any sense. Don't let them clog up roads and have more traffic. It's just silly."

But more are probably on the way as automakers rush to bring out new hybrids and drivers buy them nearly as quickly as they come off assembly lines. More than 200,000 hybrids were sold last year, compared with 83,000 the year before, according to the Electric Drive Transportation Association.

"I think this country has gone crazy with incentives for hybrids at a time when they're selling like hot cakes," said Robert Poole, director of transportation studies at the Reason Foundation, a libertarian think tank in Los Angeles.

"The HOV lanes will get clogged up, as they're starting to in Virginia, and they won't any longer serve the purpose of giving people a carpool time advantage," Poole said.

Hybrid buyers enjoy federal and local tax incentives that can offset the extra cost of buying the vehicles, which are generally priced a few thousand dollars higher than other types of cars in their class. Last year, for example, the District passed a law exempting hybrid buyers from its 6 percent excise tax on car purchases.

Spurred by a change in federal law in the fall, five states joined Virginia in allowing hybrids to use carpool lanes, said Christina Rewey of the National Conference of State Legislatures. At least five others, including Maryland, are considering similar measures.

Numerous cities, such as Los Angeles, Albuquerque and New Haven, Conn., allow hybrid owners to park free in metered spots. Baltimore approved a measure in October that allows hybrid owners to pay half-price for parking in certain city garages.

The privileges are being pushed by environmentally conscious politicians and by automobile manufacturers, many of whom trumpet the perks in their sales pitches.

"We'd like to see incentives for all alternative-fueled vehicles as widespread throughout the country as possible," said Eron Shosteck of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, who said the perks are designed to stimulate the market for the cars. "What you're doing is creating a greater incentive for consumers to spend the extra money that these vehicles cost."

Shosteck envisions a separate driving world that includes hybrid-owner-only express lines at motor vehicle department offices and even free carwashes.

Lawmakers behind the measures in Virginia and in other states say their goal is to spur sales of the low-emission, high-gas-mileage vehicles to improve air quality and reduce the nation's oil dependence.

"I know a lot of people put the focus on easing trips on HOV lanes, but my interest has always been in the clean air aspect," said Del. Kenneth R. Plum (D-Fairfax).

Plum, echoing other hybrid supporters, added that if the HOV lanes are clogging, the state should target cheaters, who constitute about 15 percent of users.

Sen. Jeannemarie Devolites Davis (R-Fairfax), who sponsored the Senate bill, added that the HOV incentive gets people out of their gas-guzzlers, not out of carpools. "If they're going to be a single driver, this encourages them to drive a fuel-efficient vehicle," she said.

Hybrids might not serve the purpose of improving the environment while they're cruising the carpool lanes.

According to statistics maintained by the Environmental Protection Agency, the cleanest and most popular hybrids, the Toyota Prius and Honda Civic, emit half as many smog-causing pollutants as a standard Honda Accord, Ford Explorer and other popular models.

In most cases, that clearly favors hybrids. But in carpool lanes, where two or three passengers are normally required, the benefits are negated. A car such as the Explorer with three people in it, for instance, pollutes less than three hybrids with solo travelers.

Still, the Prius, Civic and some other hybrids use less oil and emit far fewer greenhouse gases than virtually all gas-only models.

In 2000, Virginia lawmakers came up with the carpool perk as a way to encourage sales in the nascent hybrid market. The state's measure countered federal law but was allowed to remain while Congress resolved its position.

The extension moving through the General Assembly could come with new limits. The one-year extension approved by the House yesterday says hybrids bought after July 1, 2006, would not be able to use the HOV lanes on I-95/395.

When the hybrid exemption was instituted, 32 cars in all of Virginia had "clean fuel" tags -- a designation necessary for solo commuters to use HOV lanes. Six years later, more than 8,500 hybrid vehicles are in Northern Virginia, about three-quarters of the state's total of 11,600, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"Virginia is now the second-largest market in the country for hybrids, after California," Shosteck said, "and [the HOV exemption] is one of the biggest reasons."

World Ag Expo set to begin on Tuesday

The Porterville Recorder

By Joann Groff

Feb. 14, 2006

Tuesday begins the world-renowned World Ag Expo in Tulare, kicking off a venue where more than 1,500 exhibitors will display the latest in farm equipment, chemicals, communications and technology on 2.5 million square feet of exhibit space.

More than 100 free seminars will take place Feb. 14 through Feb. 16, beginning Tuesday with guest speakers and panels addressing ag crime, water conservation, meeting marketplace demands and irrigation options, among others. Cooking demonstrations will be led by chefs Jon Koobatian, Mike Vejar and Tunny Ortali throughout the day.

The Outstanding Dairy Producer Award will be presented to Paul Rovey of Glendale, Ariz. at 11:50 a.m. Tuesday's notable guest speakers include A.G. Kawamura, secretary of agriculture, California Department of Food and Agriculture.

The Quilt Trunk Show, presented by the Tulare County Quilters, and a fashion show led by Espi's Diapers to Dates will debut Tuesday as well.

Opening ceremonies kick off at 9:45 a.m. and events last until 3 p.m.

This year's Expo will also again present the West Coast Nationals Power Pulling Series Feb. 14 and 15 at the Tulare Fairgrounds. Also, the World Ag Expo opens the top floor of Heritage Complex every year to the International Business Center, hosting visitors from countries as diverse as China, Vietnam, Russia and Canada.

The 2005 show saw visitors and exhibitors from 60 countries.

The 2006 volunteer chairman, Erin Ferguson, said the Expo is a place to find everything a farmer has been looking for - an even things that he hasn't.

"As far as for me - I'm a farmer - it's a place I can go to find the latest technology and farm equipment," Ferguson said. "It's easy for me to look at something I've been thinking about, or even something I've never heard of."

The World Ag Expo will take place at the International Agri-Center, 4450 S. Laspina St., Tulare. Cost is \$7, or \$18 for a three-day pass. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday.

Parking is free, as is shuttle service for off-site parking.

Contact (800) 999-9186, or e-mail info@farmshow.org, for more information. The 2006 World Ag Expo Web site can be accessed at.

TUESDAY, FEB. 14 WORLD AG EXPO SCHEDULE

9:45 a.m. Welcome and introductions

10 a.m. Opening ceremonies

10 a.m. Introductions and announcements

10 a.m. Quilt Truck Show presented by Suzanne Kistler and Tulare County Quilters

10:10 a.m. Water conservation in 2006, by Ken Morris, Agri-Valley Irrigation, Inc.

10:30 a.m. Red Tape and Red Ink - How regulations impact today's farmers, by Jack King, California Farm Bureau Federation

10:30 a.m. Sun Empire Foods, by Philip and Sandra Dee of Kerman

10:50 a.m. Dairy Check-Off Producer Comments

11 a.m. The Farm Bill and Trade Reform: Lessons Learned Panel: Jean Marc Trarieux of the European Commission; Fran Freeman of the Australian embassy; representative from American Farm Bureau Federation

11 a.m. Looking Ahead: Meeting Marketplace Demands Panel: Jim Sullins, UC Cooperative, moderator; Beth Mitcham, UC Davis, Post Harvest Quality; Chuck Nichols, Nichols Farms, Visalia; Jack Breech, CEO of Pandol Bros., Delano.

11 a.m. The Economics of Irrigation Uniformity, by Inge Bisconer, Rain Bird Corporation, Agri-Products Division.

11 a.m. Cooking Demonstration by Chef Koobatian, Jon's Bear Club in Reedley and Kopi Sotiropulos, Channel 26 News

11 a.m. Intervet

11:50 a.m. Water Application Solutions for Row Crops and Tree & Vine Crops, by John Rowel and Reid Nelson, Nelson Irrigation Company.

11:50 a.m. Outstanding Dairy Producer Award - Paul Rovey, Glendale, Ariz.

Noon Cooking demonstration by Chef George Quilty, Orange Blossum Junction in Exeter with Connie Conway, Tulare County Board of Supervisors.

Noon Guest speaker: A.G. Kawamura, secretary of agriculture, California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Noon Calf Raising: Getting a Good Start, a Western Dairy Business Dairy Profit Seminar. Panel: Lee Mielke, DairyLine, moderator; Case Vlot, Vlot Bros. Calf Ranch, Chowchilla; Leslie McRee, Triangle M Dairy, Chowchilla; Jon Robison, CSU Fresno, Animal Science.

12:40 p.m. So Many Filters - So Many Choices, by Randy Delenikos, Lakos Separators & Filters

1 p.m. International Trade Agreements and Their Effect on Your Business

1 p.m. Cooking Demonstration by Chef Mike Vejar, Vejar's on Cross Street in Tulare and Rich Rodriguez, Channel 24 News.

1:10 p.m. Presentation, TBA

1:30 p.m. Cutting Edge Precision Agriculture

1:30 p.m. Platinum Sponsor Presentation

1:30 p.m. Low Volume Irrigation versus Surface Irrigation: Pros and Cons, by Erick Hopkins and Keegan O'Bannon, Fresno Valves & Casting.

2 p.m. Platinum Sponsor Presentation

2 p.m. Cooking Demonstration by chef Tunny Ortali, McLintock's & Steamers, Shell Beach with Faith Sidlow, Channel 24 News

2:10 p.m. Presentation

2:30 p.m. California Agriculture: A Frequent Flyer Panel: Dr. Herbert Mason and John Hagen, CSU Fresno, Agricultural Economics; Jack O'Connell, Clark Street Group of Sacramento

2:30 p.m. Platinum Sponsor Presentation

3 p.m. Ag Equipment Theft: What Can You Do? by Phil Cline, Tulare County District Attorney

3 p.m. Fashion Show by Espi's Diapers to Dates, Visalia

3 p.m. Platinum Sponsor Presentation

[Visalia Times-Delta, Commentary, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2006:](#)

Point: Medicare drug act is last straw

Have you had enough? I have. We should no longer stand by and watch the greatest democracy in the world being dismantled and disabused, piece by piece, in the name of George Bush's concept of a better world for his wealthy corporate friends.

This administration has consistently delivered the most unfair, most insensitive and most corrupt government imaginable, and they smile and smirk as they do it. They have given us cronyism, corruption, incompetence, and secret deception that makes Richard Nixon's misdeeds look like simple juvenile pranks.

Where to begin? The list is staggering. We have corruption at the highest levels. Dick Cheney's chief of staff, charged with lying about improper acts, Karl Rove still under investigation. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist under investigation by the SEC for insider trading and lining his pockets, and secretly sneaking provisions into a bill to strip consumers of rights against medical abuses.

Former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay under indictment for a series of money-related crimes. Another Republican House member admitting bribery and resigning in disgrace. Lobbyist Jack Abramoff showering Republicans with obscene amounts of money and vacations. Secret meetings with Cheney and energy corporation executives hiding secret deals to get them even higher profits.

Phony domestic programs with catchy, appealing titles, but nothing more. "No Child Left Behind" leaving thousands behind because it is purposely underfunded. [A "Clean Air Act" that guts existing regulations against pollution.](#) A "Clean Water Act" that allows higher levels of arsenic in drinking water.

Forty million Americans without health care, many of them children, a vital necessity priced out of reach, and Bush does zero.

But the most incompetent and unforgivable single act of the entire Bush presidency is the so-called Medicare Drug Benefit Act. This could be the absolute worst piece of legislation in American history. When seniors and the rest of the public screamed out for this important benefit, the administration crafted a complex, ineffective and incomprehensible mess that literally no one can even begin to figure out.

I challenge any reader to make sense out of this insanity. Please, call your congressman, go to any Web site, ask any insurance expert, talk to any health care administrator, go to any government agency, read any expert analysis, talk to your pharmacist, your doctor, your clergyman ... anyone. You won't get a straight answer, because there isn't one.

But do not under any circumstance ask your parents, or any senior about how, or if, this program works. You will get frustration, anger, tears or any combination of those. Our senior citizens, have worked too hard, contributed too much, and raised too many fine families, to be treated with such contempt by our sorry excuse for a president.

Happy Valentine's Day.

Joe Altschule is a Visalia attorney who writes from a liberal perspective.

[Stockton Record, Editorial, Tuesday, Feb 14, 2006:](#)

Valley choking on dirty air, fickle precepts

The San Joaquin Valley is trapped in a blanket of foul, impenetrable air on its most-polluted days. The region also is stuck in a wayward haze of government regulations that make meaningful cleanup problematic and elusive.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has been ordered to meet federal Clean Air Act standards by 2010, but its leadership is somewhat stumped on how to proceed.

Confusion centers on how much the Valley has achieved thus far in its pursuit of cleaner air and on the exact nature of the shifting U.S. guidelines it is striving to meet. And there is no regional control over the No. 1 culprit: motor vehicles.

So, not knowing where they stand, regional officials are trying to hit a moving target.

Talk about being lost in a fog.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Monday, Feb. 13, 2006:](#)

We have answers, now let's use them

If something is worth doing, it's worth putting it off. I don't think so. And thinking of several items in the Jan. 29 Bee:

Water shortage: Several countries in our world get all their water from the ocean by desalination. Why don't we do this for our coastal cities?

We all have solar power available as well as hydrogen for cars. We also brought from India Bermuda grass for our polo fields. We now have a year-round variety, which we could use on our sports fields.

Why don't we require mufflers on our grass mowers, especially the huge ones in our city parks? Why don't we prohibit dirt blowers that also pollute our air? Why not suck it up?

We have all the answers; why not use them? Because we don't, is why. Of our eligible and legal population, 40 percent don't even register to vote. If we cannot afford to finance these solutions, how come we prefer to pay for our modern crusade?

PAUL E. ILILCK, Modesto