

San Joaquin tops list for worst smog

By Chris Bowman and Elizabeth Hume -- Bee Staff Writers
The Sacramento Bee, Friday, April 28, 2006

The bottom of the San Joaquin Valley has risen to the top of the nation's worst-air chart at the American Lung Association.

That means the air in Bakersfield, and in small towns such as Arvin, and in the virtually unpopulated foothills of Sequoia National Park is unhealthier than that in metropolitan Los Angeles.

The lung association rankings, released Thursday, are the first in six years of annual "state of the air" reports to dethrone the Los Angeles basin as the nation's king of smog. The San Joaquin Valley had the dirtiest air in the country from 1999 through 2004, under the federal government's ranking system. The latest lung association report card shifts more attention from the Los Angeles area, which gradually is winning its war on smog, to the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, which is not.

"This certainly isn't anything we wanted to be first in the nation for," said Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "However, we feel this calls more attention to our air-quality problems."

The Sacramento area continues to rank among the 10 most persistently smoggy regions in the United States, placing eighth.

Sacramento, Placer, El Dorado, Amador, Sutter and Nevada counties each received a failing grade for either particle pollution, such as diesel soot, or ozone, the gas in smog that irritates the eyes, throat and lungs.

They were among 28 California counties that failed the lung association's test of healthy air, which is based on how often local monitoring stations show air quality reaching "unhealthful" levels as defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"That means about 84 percent of California's population lives in areas with unhealthy air," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, assistant vice president for governmental relations for the American Lung Association.

Sacramento-area smog regulators said the lung association's grade masks the region's air quality gains against the steady tide of increasing population, development and vehicle-miles traveled.

"Given all the growth, you would think we would have gone backward in air quality, but in fact we have held the line and made some progress," said Karen Wilson, a manager at Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

While the frequency of violating federal clean-air standards remains high in the region, the duration of the high-smog episodes has steadily declined in recent years along with the number of people exposed to the unhealthy air.

For a variety of reasons, the smog hot spots have shifted from the urban core of metropolitan Sacramento to the less populated foothills.

"We always get an 'F' on this report card, and we don't think it accurately reflects the situation in our region," Wilson said.

The San Joaquin Valley also has steady growth, and then some.

Trapped between the Sierra Nevada and Coast Range, with two major highways and large fields running through it, the agricultural San Joaquin Valley has plenty of dirty air but not as much ventilation as the Sacramento and Los Angeles regions to sweep out the pollutants.

And the valley has yet to regulate its single largest source of smog-forming emissions: ruminating dairy cows.

The flatulence from both ends of 2.5 million dairy cows in the valley produces more volatile organic gases than are generated by cars, trucks or pesticides - emissions of almost 20 pounds from each cow every year, according to the valley air district.

The district is looking at regulating emissions from dairies, possibly through changes in animal feed that produce fewer digestive gases. The first proposed controls are due to roll out in July.

The lung association's report can be viewed at www.californialung.org.

County gets a breather

'Pass' grade awarded for annual air quality

By Mike Lee, staff writer
San Diego Union-Tribune
April 27, 2006

As a new report highlights the need for more clean-air upgrades in San Diego County, air regulators are crafting rules that would impact the region's home sellers and developers.

Under state orders, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District is targeting old, high-polluting wood stoves and construction projects that kick up lots of dust. Also, the state is starting to clamp down on diesel exhaust from ports and trains, but it needs billions of dollars to support that initiative.

The good news is that a key aspect of San Diego County's air quality finally passed muster with the American Lung Association, which for years has issued failing grades to the region for its air quality.

The advocacy group's seventh annual State of the Air report, released today, gave the county its first-ever "pass" grade for annual particle pollution.

The region continued to fail in the areas of ozone and daily particle pollution. All three categories were measured from 2002 through 2004, the latest year for which reliable figures are available.

"Our annual averages are looking better, so there has been some improvement," said Jan Cortez, vice president of environmental health for the association's San Diego chapter.

However, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has proposed stricter goals for particulates in urban areas. "If the federal standard becomes more health protective, then next year our grade could go back to failing again," Cortez said.

Many of the nation's most polluted spots are in California, particularly in the Central Valley and Los Angeles basin. Kern County moved to the top of the list of counties most polluted by ozone, and Riverside County had the worst particle pollution, the lung association said.

As part of a long-running effort to clean up the state's air, the California Air Resources Board last week approved a plan aimed at decreasing diesel pollution from ships, trains and other methods for transporting goods. The goal is a 20 percent to 40 percent reduction below 2001 levels within four years.

In coming months, the state expects to develop rules for upgrading high-polluting trucks at ports and expanding the use of low-sulfur marine fuel.

By 2020, the port-related efforts are projected to save 1,500 lives a year, according to the air board. The changes will come through new regulations, incentive programs and voluntary efforts by truckers and others in the port industry.

Clean-air advocates generally support the plan, but they say it's short on specifics and money – up to \$10 billion over the next 15 years. Funding could come from a variety of places, including federal grants and fees imposed on businesses.

“The price tag is huge,” said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, vice president of government relations for the American Lung Association of California. “There is desperate need for new funding.”

While the state plan takes shape, the county air pollution control district is forming rules to force home sellers to replace old wood-burning stoves and fireplace inserts. More than 10,000 stoves are used countywide as a primary source of heat, with numerous others used less frequently, said Rob Reider, the district's planning manager.

The vast majority of the existing wood-burning stoves are high-polluting units, a category that generally includes stoves manufactured before 1992, according to the air district.

By winter, the district aims to require homeowners to replace older stoves with EPA-certified appliances when they sell their houses. Doing so will slowly decrease the amount of particles emitted by home heating.

The other major initiative that air district officials are preparing for 2007 is to crack down on dust from construction projects, particularly those that involve large-scale grading and earth-moving. Those activities – including road building – are already regulated by other state and local codes, but they continue to generate large numbers of air-quality complaints.

District officials said they need their own rules to make it easier to regulate such projects. “What we think that this will mainly do is give us the authority to enforce things that (contractors) already are used to doing,” Reider said.

At the Associated General Contractors chapter in San Diego, Brad Barnum, the chapter's government relations vice president, said he recognized the need to control dust at work sites.

However, Barnum said, new rules shouldn't create an undue burden on business. He's concerned, for instance, that construction companies could be held responsible for wind-blown particles from outside their work area.

“Fugitive dust is a problem,” he said. “The (question) is how do you implement the issue to make it fair and cost effective?”

Keeping toxic waste at bay

BY Sarah Ruby, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, May, 1, 2006

It was pollution that drew Jane Williams' family to Rosamond, and it's pollution that's kept them busy since.

Jane Williams, left, chats with Rian Correll in a preschool class at Grace Lutheran School where she volunteers in her son's class. Williams won a prestigious environmental award and \$50,000 to donate to her favorite charity.

Williams, a 46-year-old mother of two, has dedicated her life to fighting incinerators, landfills and other polluters that take root in rural towns like her own. In April, she was selected by Volvo as a finalist in the company's search for "America's Greatest Hometown Hero," a distinction that carries a \$50,000 award to the charity of her choice.

Volvo is honoring Williams for her work on behalf of California Communities Against Toxics, an environmental justice network her mother helped found in 1989. As its executive director and sole employee, Williams coordinates 70 community groups into a network that wields much more force than any one of its members would on its own.

Though she's a player in environmental justice issues statewide, Williams is keeping the prize money close to home. She's donating it to Desert Citizens Against Pollution in Rosamond, where her family's environmental journey began.

Refuge in Rosamond

Poor air quality drove Williams' film-executive grandfather from Beverly Hills in 1945. His son -- Williams' uncle -- had asthma, and the family moved into quonset huts under the desert's clear skies.

A generation passed and the family stayed in Rosamond, with Williams' father taking a job in a rocket lab at Edwards Air Force Base and her mother raising Williams and her two brothers. Williams' father died of cancer in 1973, years before the state began investigating a suspected cancer cluster in Rosamond.

California Communities Against Toxics was born out of statewide alliances formed in the 1980s. Williams' mother, Norma "Stormy" Williams, launched a campaign to identify toxins causing a brain cancer cluster among children in Rosamond.

The Kern County Health Department and California Department of Health Services verified this cluster: From 1975 to 1984, eight cases of childhood cancer (ages 0-15) occurred in Rosamond. During those years, the rate at which children in Rosamond developed cancer was several times greater than in areas like Los Angeles and San Francisco, according to the CDHS. The cancer cluster galvanized residents against the region's heavy polluters.

United as Desert Citizens Against Pollution, Rosamond's activists prevented cement plants from burning hazardous waste. They shut down Mobile Smelting, a dioxin-spewing plant dedicated to salvaging aluminum and copper. Dioxin is a carcinogenic ingredient in Agent Orange, the defoliant used by U.S. forces in Vietnam.

Members of Desert Citizens Against Pollution didn't stop protesting at the desert's edge. They fought a state plan to haul Rosamond's dioxin pollution to an incinerator in Kansas.

Even now, the community won't let its pollution go until it can be disposed of safely, Williams said.

"Just because it's Kansas -- we still care about Kansas," Williams said, standing outside a chain-link fence guarding Mobile Smelting's dioxin stockpile. "We see it as a huge environmental victory the dioxin is (still in Rosamond)."

The network

Through her work in Rosamond, Williams' mother got to know other grass-roots community leaders around the state. They attended one another's marches and shared strategies. Finally, after helping protest against a hazardous waste incinerator in East Los Angeles, Stormy Williams and her colleagues created California Communities Against Toxics. It was 1989, and it had 23 member groups.

"Mom founded (the network)," Williams said. "I just get the legacy of it all."

Williams' mother died of breast cancer 10 years ago, but the organization she helped found is one of the longest-running coalitions of its kind. It operates on less than \$100,000 a year and has stopped dozens of incinerators, landfills, chemical plants and other polluters from locating in California's poorest communities.

Its members recently blocked a plastics incinerator in Hanford and a medical waste incinerator in Chowchilla. They've partnered with the California Farm Bureau to fight a sewage sludge incinerator in Imperial County, and enjoyed early success with the board of supervisors there.

"I take personal pride in the fact that (the state hasn't) been able to build a new landfill in California in 15 years," she said.

Her mission is to stop big, rich entities from bullying small, poor ones, she said. With Williams' help, the small, poor ones win "amazingly often" by raising the uncomfortable question: "Why would you concentrate pollution in poor communities?"

It's an argument that resonates with many people, she said, even leaders who typically court industrial development.

Williams' work often takes her to Sacramento, where she does battle with highly paid lobbyists and consultants. In a city full of political players, Williams is a standout, according to her adversaries.

Sometimes people refer to her tenacity -- in a good-natured way -- as "a flame thrower," said Eric Newman, a political consultant who handles environmental issues for companies and industries. "She'll make a deal if it's good for the environmental movement; otherwise she'll fight you tooth and nail to the end."

The recognition

Volvo's grand prize -- a lifetime supply of automobiles -- went to a doctor in Michigan who leads medical missions to Ethiopia. That's as it should be, Williams said. The doctor is absolutely deserving, and Volvo doesn't make a hybrid, she said.

"This is all I need, a polluter-for-life award," she joked.

She seems embarrassed by the award's elaborate fuss. In April, Avril Lavigne played an acoustic set at a New York City gala in her honor, and Williams was shuttled there by limousine. Too many big-city trappings, she said. She'd take Rosamond any day.

Though its finalists might be modest, celebration is in order, said Soren Johansson, Volvo's manager of public relations. Williams was selected from a pool of more than 4,300 nominees. The judge's panel included Maya Lin, Paul Newman, Hank Aaron, Val Kilmer and Sally Ride.

"If you look at Jane's accomplishments ... you wonder how in the heck can one human being do this," Johansson said. "It gives you hope that this earth will be a better place because there's so many wonderful people out there doing unselfish things."

Legislation from Valley lawmakers takes shape

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

The Fresno Bee, Monday, May 1, 2006

SACRAMENTO — As a key deadline passed last week, Valley lawmakers saw a number of their bills die. But several bills cleared important first hurdles as the session reached a critical stretch.

Still alive are a pair of measures that would give businesses incentives to invest in clean-air equipment and another that would restructure the agency responsible for overseeing flood control along the San Joaquin River. "Phishing" perpetrators could see jail time under a bill that seeks to crack down on Internet fraud.

Among the measures that have died is a bill that would give employees the option of a four-day workweek and another that would've required repeat car thieves to be charged with felonies. One Valley lawmaker continued his fight against mountain lion attacks, but to no avail.

Friday was the last day to get budgeting bills passed by policy committees. For most measures, the next stop is appropriations committees, then the stretch run: the Assembly and Senate floors and the governor's desk.

Here's a quick look at some of the bills:

Law-and-order legislation: Sen. Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno, a candidate for state attorney general, had a slew of such bills. For Republicans, the going is often rough in the Democrat-controlled Senate Public Safety Committee, and Poochigian had mixed results.

One measure, Senate Bill 1388, that he got through would add jail time to the list of possible punishments for "phishing," scams in which perpetrators send phony e-mails or use fraudulent Web sites to get personal information.

Poochigian also scored wins on SB 1387, which increases penalties for identity theft involving five or more victims, and SB 1545, which doubles penalties for felons found in illegal possession of a loaded or concealed gun in a public place. The bill would apply to criminals previously convicted of certain violent felonies. Also included would be those on parole, or who have been previously convicted of other offenses such as assault on a police officer or drug trafficking.

Poochigian's losses included SB 1503. The bill would have mandated that repeat car thieves be charged with felonies. Also voted down was a bill, SB 1664, that would have increased penalties on felons who are deported, then come back to the state and commit another crime.

Mountain lions: Assembly Member Bill Maze, R-Visalia, continued his attempts to curb attacks by the animals, but with no success. Maze in the past has unsuccessfully sought to legalize limited mountain-lion hunting.

This year he had legislation, Assembly Bill 2273, that would have required the state to pay the "medical, physical, and psychological costs that are incurred by a person as a result of an attack by a mountain lion." Opposed by animal-rights groups, the bill was defeated in the Assembly Business and Professions Committee.

Smog: Still alive are a pair of competing bills by Valley lawmakers that would create "clean-air enterprise zones." Businesses operating in the state's worst air-quality pockets could get incentives for buying emission-reducing equipment.

Assembly Member Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, is pushing AB 2553, which would extend benefits such as low-interest loans for qualified purchases. Sen. Dean Florez's clean air zone bill, SB 1230, would offer incentives only if the equipment purchased helps reduce pollution by 30% below existing mandates.

Florez, D-Shafter, also had success with a bill that would restructure the state Board of Reclamation. The governor-appointed board is charged with overseeing flood-control projects along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Florez has been critical of Gov. Schwarzenegger's appointees, suggesting members don't take enough of a proactive approach. SB 1796, passed by the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee, would expand board membership from seven to nine and rename the group the Central Valley Flood Protection Board, making it independent of the state Department of Water Resources.

The two new positions would be appointed by legislative leaders, and the entire board would be subject to Senate confirmation. The bill is opposed by the California Building Industry Association.

Enterprise zones: One of Arambula's major initiatives is reforming the state program, which is designed to spark economic growth in designated areas by giving companies tax breaks for hiring disadvantaged workers. The Assembly Committee on Jobs, Economic Development and the Economy, which Arambula heads, issued 46 recommendations, including some that would refocus the program to serve a neighborhood's neediest residents.

Arambula wants to insert the recommendations into a bill that already passed a Senate committee. Negotiations continue, and a hearing could occur in mid-May.

Workplace issues: Assembly Member Mike Villines, R-Clovis, failed to get enough votes on a pair of bills supported by the California Chamber of Commerce.

AB 2217, opposed by organized labor, would have given employees the right to ask to work four 10-hour days. Current law defines a workweek as five eight-hour days, with overtime paid to hourly employees if they work more than eight hours in a day.

Labor also opposed AB 2277, which would have required workplace posters and regulations to be written in "plain language." Unions said simpler language could leave out details, resulting in more disputes.

Some bills did not pass or fail, they were simply abandoned — at least for now.

Transportation: Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, decided last week to give up on AB 1878, which would have created a regional transportation planning advisory council for Fresno, Madera, Merced, Kings and Tulare counties.

The proposal had drawn opposition in each county from councils of government and other transportation planning agencies fearful of yielding too much power to a regional agency.

On Thursday, Parra aide Tom Higgins told the Council of Fresno County Governments that Parra would let the bill die in committee. But he challenged the council — made up of elected officials from each city and the county Board of Supervisors — to come up with an alternative plan for addressing regional transportation issues in Sacramento.

"We want you to come to us with what that proposal looks like," Higgins said. "We have got to be better organized locally within the region for when things come up."

Here's where the general plan update stands

Visalia Times-Delta, Saturday, April 29, 2006

Tulare County is in the process of updating its general plan, which is required by the state at least every 20 years.

Staff members of the Tulare County Resources Management Agency have been developing the general plan update after a series of community workshops beginning in 2004 and continuing with input from the Tulare County Planning Commission and the Tulare County Board of Supervisors. Staff has also been assisted by consultants Minter and Associates and Race Studio.

The staff members developed a series of growth alternatives from which to choose: A City Centered model in which new growth would be concentrated in cities; a Corridor Centered plan in which new growth would be directed toward communities and cities along the major transportation corridors of Highway 99 and Highway 65; and a Rural Communities Centered model that directs a greater proportion of new growth to the small communities.

County supervisors have tended to favor a version of the third model. From their directions to their staff, the general plan update that is emerging would direct some new growth to unincorporated communities through a series of guidelines described here.

All those models presume an increase in county population from about 368,000 according to the 2000 census, to 630,000 people in the year 2030. The preferred county model now would direct some new growth to communities, so that cities would have about 70 percent of the population and the county and communities about 30 percent.

What's next

Tulare County on Monday begins the process of developing an environmental impact report for its general plan update. The report will contain all the conditions and data about how the general plan will affect the environment, in everything from effect on air quality, water quality and quantity, land use, habitat, transportation demands and everything else that affects how we live.

That begins with the General Plan EIR Public Scoping Meeting at 1:30 p.m. Monday, May 1, at Government Plaza, Meeting Rooms A&B, 5961 S. Mooney Blvd.

Staff intend to have a draft EIR ready by early July.

Then will follow a series of public workshops, review by the county planning commission and Board of Supervisors and public hearings.

The expectation is that the general plan update will be adopted by the county by the end of 2006.

Getting involved

Monday's General Plan EIR Public Scoping Meeting is the opportunity for the public to tell the county what the public believes is most important in terms of the environment and planning for the county.

What kind of provisions would you like included that might reduce air pollution? Promote agriculture? Protect natural habitat? Provide for parks and open space? Direct growth? Keep cities from growing together?

The public invited to this session, after which staff will begin drafts of the EIR that will eventually be reviewed at public workshops and hearings.

Where to get more info

For data, reports, schedule and other information regarding the Tulare County General Plan update, visit the county's Web site at www.westplanning.com/docs/tulare <<http://www.westplanning.com/docs/tulare>>.

Countywide planning manager Teresa Szymanis can be reached at 730-6291, Ext. 4201.

Her e-mail is TSzymanis@co.tulare.ca.us <<mailto:TSzymanis@co.tulare.ca.us>>.

Summary of policy directives that are proposed to be incorporated into the general plan update

Key Policy Direction

Based on workshops with the public, Planning Commission, and Board of Supervisors, the following key policy directions were given to help form the basis for the General Plan update.

- ? Provide opportunity for unincorporated communities to grow
- ? Reduce rural residential development potential (e.g., two-acre lots)
- ? Facilitate privately-funded upgrading of facilities in unincorporated communities in conjunction with new development
- ? Allow existing, permitted facilities in rural areas to be used for new businesses (including non-agricultural uses) if they provide employment
- ? Direct new agricultural processing inside UDBs (and Community Growth Boundaries)

Planning for Opportunities

The key to meeting these policy directions in the general plan update is through development of a system of area designations:

- ? City Urban Growth Boundaries
- ? Community Growth Boundaries
- ? Hamlet Boundaries
- ? Places
- ? Other unincorporated areas

It then would match land use planning needs to each area designation. Specifically, land uses will be tailored to match the location.

For instance, residential development will be significantly restricted outside of cities, communities and hamlets to protect viable agricultural areas and help to enhance the communities by encouraging growth within their boundaries.

Urban Boundaries

The county uses two key terms when defining areas for growth around existing unincorporated communities and the incorporated cities. Urban Development Boundary represents the area the county designated as a 20-year growth boundary. The Urban Area Boundary represents the area designated by the county as a long-term growth boundary for a city or community. In the updated general plan, this is proposed for the following changes:

- ? UDB will remain in use for incorporated cities, but will be expanded to a 25-year boundary.
- ? For communities, a Community Growth Boundary will be established.
- ? A new designation, Hamlet Boundary will be used to define developed areas around hamlets.

The area designations

Cities

Working with the cities, verify and update the urban development boundaries to provide adequate areas to support growth over the 25-year general plan timeframe (a change from 20 years).

Boundaries will be set to encourage infill development and higher density.

Boundaries will be set to provide for urban separators between developed areas (both cities and unincorporated communities).

It will also:

- ? Promote incorporation of unincorporated islands.
- ? Promote extension of infrastructure to serve communities and unincorporated areas with current infrastructure failures.

Communities

The Community Growth Boundaries established in the general plan update will be a key element in future planning. Areas within CGBs are presumed suitable for urban development in keeping with their adopted community plans.

CGBs will be sized and located to:

- ? Provide sufficient area to allow a range of potential growth scenarios;
- ? Define a boundary that provides for the efficient provision of services;
- ? Avoid isolated areas or strips of development that may impact agricultural viability; and
- ? Promote a compact development pattern.

All communities will update and maintain a community plan. Communities will also utilize specific plans to create or enhance public use areas (town centers, main street corridors, etc.)

Encourage the location of new industrial development in the county within a CGB.

Hamlets

Hamlet boundaries will be defined to delineate the existing area core with limited areas for expansion.

The general plan will create one consolidated set of land use categories for all hamlets. The allowed land uses will be a subset of the communities, providing for a more limited set of residential, commercial, industrial, and public service land uses.

Land use changes in hamlets will fall under the current system used in the Rural Valley Lands Plan. No separate land use plan is proposed.

New development will follow a more rural development standard than communities, but will include requirements for adequate parks, greenways and public facilities.

New Towns

New towns are currently allowed under the existing general plan

The development of new communities should be discouraged, at least to the extent that haphazard attempts at community development away from established urban centers should be discouraged. However, should circumstances appear to justify development of a 'planned' community with its own complex of residential, commercial, industrial, public use areas; and related facilities, it would have to be judged on its individual merits and functions as it would affect the area as a whole and other policies and proposals of the general plan"

The general plan update will take this a step further by including a set of criteria that will be used by the County in evaluating future new town proposals (or major expansions of existing communities). No specific new towns/locations will be identified in the general plan.

Places

The smallest designated area, these places will be identified but will not have boundaries.

Limited residential development will be allowed adjacent to existing residences.

Other Unincorporated Areas

Areas currently designated for residential land uses will be designated as "Existing Rural Residential" and will be frozen at current development levels/locations.

New residential in viable agricultural areas will be limited to 1 unit/40 acres. Existing residential uses in these areas will not be allowed lot splits below the 40-acre minimum.

Reuse of existing industrial infrastructure will be encouraged. New industrial development will be encouraged to locate in a CGB or along major thoroughfares (highways or major arterials).

Include provisions for ag-tourism uses.

Expansion Community Growth Boundaries

For a few communities, new Community Growth Boundaries are proposed for expansion. The reasons for expansion include the following:

- ? Adjust to match proposed or recently adopted boundaries (Ducor, Terra Bella, Tipton)
- ? Adjust to match parcel lines (several)
- ? Eliminate strips along roadways (London, Plainview, Pixley, Terra Bella)
- ? Adjust to encompass existing development (several)
- ? Adjust to reflect areas considered to be part of that community (commercial area in Lemoncove)
- ? Need room to grow (Goshen, Richgrove)

Real estate 'bubble' idea dismissed

Experts at business breakfast are bullish on Valley market.

By Sanford Nax / The Fresno Bee

Friday, April 28, 2006

Jeff Davi displayed a cartoon of two men overlooking a sea of people.

"Is this a rock concert?" one man asks.

"Nah," replies the other. "It's the swearing-in ceremony for new real estate agents."

That's been the story in California over the past five years. One of the greatest real estate booms in recent history has swelled the ranks of licensed agents to nearly half a million, up 56% from 2000.

One in every 54 adults has a real estate license — and each week brings 1,000 new applicants, Davi, the state's real estate commissioner, told a Fresno audience Thursday.

More than 300 people crowded into TorNino's to hear Davi and John Stewart, president of Grubb&Ellis/Pearson Commercial, and Ashley Swearingin of California State University, Fresno, speak at the 2006 Economic Reporting Breakfast hosted by the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce.

Davi said he's worried that a glut of real estate agents in a slowing market could lead to more accusations of misconduct. Sellers, he said, tend to be more forgiving when they make a tidy profit.

"A good market cures a lot of ills," he said.

On the average, his agency conducts 6,000 to 7,000 investigations annually, many of them routine. This year, it's on pace to do 8,000. About half of those investigations likely will be confirmed as violations.

The real estate market might be cooling, but it should remain strong, Davi said. A real estate broker in Monterey, he said what has been called the real estate "bubble" is an invention of the media.

He said a statewide housing shortage will keep prices from slipping, although sales should slow and more houses will be available for purchase.

Stewart agreed with Davi, saying Fresno-area real estate will continue in a "tail wind" in 2006 into 2007. Population growth, affordable housing prices relative to the rest of California, the growth of University of California at Merced and continued interest from investors will spur demand, he said.

Swearingin outlined the objectives of the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, which is a task force trying to improve the economy and quality of life in the Valley.

Work groups are studying such issues as air quality, economic development, education and work force training. She cited 10 reasons to be optimistic, including joblessness reaching a 20-year low; more attention from state and federal agencies; an increase in venture capital flowing to the Valley; signs of improvement at Fresno Unified School District; and efforts to make engineering programs at Fresno State stronger.

"There is great momentum and great hope but also unbelievable challenges," she said.

Drive less? Politicians won't ask

Republicans and Democrats rail against oil companies for the high price of gasoline -- but they don't dare suggest we change our ways

Marc Sandalow, Washington Bureau Chief
S.F. Chronicle, Friday, April 28, 2006

Washington -- The remedies prescribed by the nation's political leaders this week in response to \$3-a-gallon gasoline might hold political value. But they largely ignore the nation's addiction to oil, raising doubts among economists that they will accomplish their goal.

Though everyone agrees that the nation's economic well-being, its environmental health and perhaps its national security depend on reducing its reliance on foreign oil, the election-year rhetoric from Washington carefully avoids any suggestion that Americans -- who hold about 2 percent of the world's known oil reserves and consume about 25 percent -- take any steps to cut back their use.

"We want fossil fuels. We want oil. We want gas. We want nuclear. We want renewable. We want wind," Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., declared Thursday, reflecting the widely held belief that plentiful energy is an American right.

Behind the finger-pointing at environmental regulations and corporate greed, most politicians understand the straightforward economic reasons that gas prices are rising.

Asked on Thursday why gasoline prices are so high, House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco stated the obvious: "There just hasn't been enough forward thinking to reduce our dependence on gasoline, and that is why the demand is high and therefore the price is high."

That was Pelosi's answer when she talked to a group of children in her office on Take Your Daughter or Son to Work Day.

Moments earlier, speaking with reporters before a bank of television cameras, she had a more politically charged explanation:

"The cost of corruption is so clear in the cost at the pump," Pelosi said, blaming her Republican counterparts and the "oil people" in the White House for cozying up to "big oil and the wealthy few."

The political combustibility of blaming the oil producers is so strong that many Republicans, including President Bush and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, have joined the call to investigate pricing strategies and profits, prompting a defensive outcry from the business community.

The editorial page of the Wall Street Journal ridiculed "Denny Pelosi" and "San Francisco Republicans" this week for playing politics at the oil producers' expense, stating that "Republicans can blame business all they want for high prices, but sounding like liberal Democrats won't save them in November."

Even if investigations reveal collusion or malfeasance, few economists believe such activity is the main cause of high prices.

"The oil companies may be raising it a few cents, but that's not where the action is," said Severin Borenstein, director of the UC Energy Institute in Berkeley.

More important factors are limited refining capacity, uncertainty about world markets and a seemingly insatiable demand for gasoline. Investment in alternative fuels or domestic drilling might boost energy supplies down the road, but the quicker way to get prices to drop would be to curb demand, something politicians believe that Americans aren't ready to hear.

"There seems to be no political traction for reducing demand," Borenstein said. "Consumers don't want to hear about making any changes from the plentiful gasoline of the 1990s. And unfortunately, short of colonizing the Middle East ... there isn't a way back to that."

The determination to keep energy flowing was evident this week when Bush declared the nation must break its addiction to oil, then promptly announced that energy suppliers are being investigated to make sure the addicts -- American motorists -- can purchase their fix at a fair price. The next step, he said, is to boost production so energy junkies can support their habit more cheaply.

Meanwhile, Democrats, who for years have preached the virtue of getting the oil monkey off consumers' backs, raced from news conference to news conference, sometimes in gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles, to decry the one development that is most likely to cut back gas consumption: rising prices.

Americans have grown accustomed to relatively cheap gas, which spurred a booming market in SUVs. For most of the past 20 years, retail gasoline prices in the United States have been at their lowest levels since 1919, adjusted for inflation, according to the Federal Trade Commission. Only over the past few years have prices doubled, prompting a slowdown in SUV purchases and a leveling off of consumption.

Lower fuel consumption has its benefits. It is good for the environment, easing air pollution, global warming and traffic. However, the rising price poses a risk to the economy and a particular hardship for low-income workers who find it increasingly difficult to fill their cars with gas and to buy products whose prices rise along with the cost of energy.

And Californians consumed roughly 16 billion gallons of gasoline in 2004, according to the California Energy Commission, far more than residents of any other state. On a per-capita basis, however, Californians ranked near the bottom, only six states and the District of Columbia using less. The statistics show that the average Californian uses 414 gallons of gas each year, which, at \$3 a gallon, costs \$1,242.

Some economists, including Borenstein, recommend raising gas taxes as a way to depress consumption and using the revenue to assist those who cannot afford the higher prices.

How much high prices will deter auto use is a matter of considerable disagreement. Some economists say it would take a long period of sustained high prices -- several years at more than \$4 a gallon -- to lead to substantial changes. For most consumers, it makes little economic sense to spend \$3,000 to \$10,000 more to buy a hybrid car that uses electricity and gasoline. The decision makes more sense if gasoline prices are high.

"People need to feel as though things have changed, and this is not an anomaly that will go away next week," said Therese Langer, transportation program director for the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy.

Langer said that "most of the policy suggestions coming from Capitol Hill are long- or medium-term," and that consumers who want immediate relief must drive more efficient cars, slow down to 55 mph on the freeway, carpool or ride mass transit.

Many environmentalists promote legislation to raise fuel efficiency in automobiles, which the auto industry has fiercely opposed because of the extra costs.

"This is auto mechanics, not rocket science," said Dan Becker, director of the Sierra Club's global warming and energy program.

Becker is not optimistic that higher prices will push people from their cars. He points out that gas prices have essentially doubled in the past two years, and that there has been no appreciable change in driving habits.

Among the lone members of Congress to chastise both parties for pandering is Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., who is chairman of the House Science Committee.

"Congress ought to be responding by taking a comprehensive, thoughtful look at energy policy -- both supply and demand," Boehlert said. "Unfortunately, very few people in Congress seem willing to do this. The Democratic leadership is offering little but populist rhetoric; on the Republican side, some of the most vocal members are largely seeking the revival of bad ideas that have failed to be enacted in the past."

Boehlert may have good reason not to fear being so blunt. He announced last month that after serving 12 terms, he is retiring from Congress and will not face voters in November.

10 States Sue EPA Over Global Warming

By Devlin Barrett, Associated Press Writer

In the Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Friday, April 28, 2006

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Ten states fired a new legal salvo at the federal government Thursday in a long-running court battle over global warming and pollution from power plants.

The states, joined by environmental groups, sued the Environmental Protection Agency over its decision not to regulate carbon dioxide pollution as a contributor to global warming.

New York, California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin filed the lawsuit in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

The states, led by New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, want the government to require tighter pollution controls on the newest generation of power plants.

"We feel it's incumbent on EPA to regulate carbon emissions from those power plants now in order to help us get our arms around global warming," said Spitzer spokesman Marc Violette.

Also joining the lawsuit are the cities of Washington and New York, as well as Environmental Defense, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Sierra Club.

New York and other states have fought with the Bush administration for years over carbon dioxide emissions.

In July 2005, a three-judge panel in the same court upheld the EPA's decision not to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from cars and trucks under the Clean Air Act. The agency argues the law does not authorize them to regulate emissions to reduce global warming, and maintains there is not enough scientific data to support such a move.

The lawsuit was filed largely in response to the 2005 ruling, in the hopes that the courts will rule specifically whether the Clean Air Act can be used to fight global warming.

"We think this is the case that will decide that question," said Natural Resources Defense Council lawyer David Doniger.

An EPA spokesman did not immediately return a call for comment.

Environmentalists say 40 percent of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States come from power plants. Carbon dioxide is believed to be the greatest single contributor to global warming.

A growing number of scientific studies bolster the theory that increased levels of carbon dioxide, methane and other gases are accumulating in the atmosphere, where they trap heat and raise the earth's average temperature.

[Tulare Advance-Register commentary, Friday, April 28, 2006:](#)

Hop on your bike to avoid high prices at the pump

If your budget is stressed by high gasoline prices, just think about what it's costing your city, which operates more than 300 vehicles. Everyone is proposing solutions to the high gas prices, and one of the more popular ones is to reduce consumption where possible.

If supply and demand economics works with oil, a lower demand should bring prices down. But there are other good reasons to think of alternative modes of transportation. Driving everywhere, even short trips within our city, passes up opportunities to get some healthy exercise, like walking or bicycle riding.

Did you know we have a pedestrian and bicycle friendly community?

First, we have a very lucky topography for walking and biking. The city is very flat, so we can travel easily with no hills to cause us to break a sweat. While our city gently slopes from northeast to southwest, it is such a small grade that it is hard to notice it.

Second, we have pedestrian and bicycle designated routes in town.

In fact, the master plan for our trails was just updated by the City Council last year. The centerpiece of our trails is the Santa Fe Trail, which connects the entire length of our city east to west. It is a \$6 million, linear park not adjacent to city streets and is well landscaped. Its five-mile length makes it the city's largest park.

If you are going north or south, there are existing bike lanes on the following streets (starting on the west): West Street, E Street, M Street and Laspina Street. All of these lanes connect to the Santa Fe Trail. The master plan provides that, as the city grows, many more accommodations for pedestrian and bicycle travel will be added.

With today's prices, saving a tank of gas per month by bicycling or walking will pay for a new bicycle in just a few months.

In addition, you are reducing air pollution, and getting healthier. With our area having one of the highest rates in the country for lung and heart problems, taking advantage of our terrain and facilities to get healthy exercise is a wise choice.

City Works columns are written by or under the direction of City Manager Darrel Pyle. He can be reached at 684-4200 or dpyle@ci.tulare.ca.us.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Monday, May 1, 2006:](#)

Rock bottom, again

Visit California, home of the nation's dirtiest air. That's not a slogan that anyone wants, but it sums up a shameful distinction.

A Lung Association survey of airborne soot -- the tiny specks that burrow into respiratory systems and coat outdoor surfaces -- puts five California urban areas on a list of the 10 worst places in the nation. The state is also notably excessive in levels of ozone, the mix of chemicals that produce smog. It's a double whammy that leaves residents gasping.

This state has long led the country in air pollution, thanks to smog-trapping mountains, extensive freeways and population growth. But the latest report should kick both Sacramento and Washington into realizing the health dangers and job-killing effects of dirty air.

The worst of it lies in the Central Valley and the Los Angeles Basin, where smog and soot levels are well-known problems. Valley smog officials boasted last week that one soot level has eased, a feat attributed to controls on farming, machinery and fires. That's a big step forward. But smaller-sized soot and ozone levels remain serious health hazards and shouldn't be forgotten, even in the breezy Bay Area.

On one level, the report makes the case for a change in driving and personal habits. But the low ratings should push Sacramento and Washington to bear down with stricter tail-pipe emission rules, clean-fuel mandates and research in efficient technology.

Some specifics: the Los Angeles and Long Beach port complex, one of the world's biggest, must find a way to curb the exhaust from idling trucks, trains and ships. Also, carmakers should drop a lawsuit holding up tighter tailpipe emissions approved by the Legislature. The Bush administration, which has joined Detroit in fighting the rules, should get out of the way and let California clean up its skies.

The state has a serious smog problem. Yet it also has solutions. It's time to give them a chance to work.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, April 30, 2006:](#)

Cleaner, but not clean

News on Valley's air offers hope, and a reminder of the task ahead.

One story last week brought us good news in the fight to clean up the Valley's dirty air; another served to put that news into perspective.

The good news came from the state Air Resources Board, which announced Tuesday that the San Joaquin Valley has met a federal health standard for dust, soot and chemical specks, the so-called "particle pollution" that causes many lung and heart problems among Valley residents.

That was tempered by the annual "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association. To no one's surprise, several Valley counties are at or near the top of the list for bad air.

The state air board's announcement on particle pollution said the Valley now meets the federal standard for PM-10 pollution — particles about one-seventh the width of a human hair.

That finding now goes to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which can then declare the Valley in compliance with the federal rule.

That would indeed be a milestone in the Valley's clean-air effort. Officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said more than one-third of the particle pollution in the eight-county district has been eliminated since 1990.

However good the news may be on PM-10, the Valley faces a tougher task addressing the presence of PM-2.5, particles that are much smaller and, as we continue to learn, much more dangerous than previously suspected. Because they are smaller, the PM-2.5 specks can lodge even deeper in human lungs, doing even more damage.

The lung association's report underscores the magnitude of the job ahead.

In the report, Bakersfield ranks No. 1 in the nation among cities for ozone pollution, one of the building blocks of smog. Kern County topped the list of most-polluted counties for ozone.

The Visalia-Porterville area comes in third place for ozone, behind Los Angeles. The Fresno-Madera area ranked fourth; Merced, fifth; Hanford-Corcoran, 11th; and Modesto made the list at No. 13. The rankings were based on pollution readings from 2002 through 2004.

Valley cities and counties won similarly bad rankings for particle pollution, despite the good news on PM-10 from the state.

Dr. John Balmes, a San Francisco pulmonary physician who is part of the American Lung Association of California's Clean Air Technical Advisory Group, said, "It's premature to say the Central Valley has turned the corner in controlling air pollution."

Yes, it is. So, while we may be excused if we take a moment to celebrate what's been achieved to this point — and the achievements are real — we should not fool ourselves about the enormous challenges we still face. It's going to be a long time before we have truly clean air.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Saturday, April 29, 2006:](#)

Pick a cause

Waterston needs to find a pressing challenge and take the lead.

Dear Supervisor Bob Waterston:

We hear that you've been telling your colleagues on the Fresno County Board of Supervisors that our letter to you on Tuesday was criticism intended for the entire board.

You're wrong. That one, like this one, was meant only for you.

You see, Bob, we see leadership and initiative from the other board members. We may not always agree with them, but they offer ideas and solutions to improve the quality of life in this county. We haven't seen much of that from you.

There are a lot of issues you could tackle. Air quality. Infrastructure repair and expansion. Better transportation systems. Water supply. Mental health. Health care. Employee pensions. Pick one or two and be a champion. Study. Become an expert. Be a leader.

Here's an idea. How about leading on the consolidation of public safety services in the county? You're a former firefighter. You should have some expertise in that area, and you know the turf battles that get in the way of combining public safety services.

Your first inclination may be to side with the police and fire unions who fear that they will lose jobs if public safety services are consolidated. But you represent all citizens, not just the unions, and you must do what's best for the entire county.

Why don't you immerse yourself in this effort, get people together, work on efficiencies and solutions? You should have ideas on how to improve service to taxpayers while reducing costs.

Stop shooting from the hip, Bob, and think issues through before spouting off.

We know there are a lot of sticky issues facing this county. For once, take a bold step. Pick a couple of them and work hard to get them solved. That's leadership.

And when you get something accomplished, we'll gladly give you a thumbs up.

Best regards,
The Editorial Board

[Letter to the S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 1, 2006:](#)

Senator speaks on her role in emissions case

Editor -- Jon Carroll's column (April 27) rightly decries efforts by Sen. Christopher Bond (R-Mo.) to prevent California from curbing smog emissions from lawn mowers and other small engines. However, I do not believe he characterized my role correctly.

Sen. Bond is a senior appropriator from the majority party and in a strong position to get his way. In previous years, he has introduced "riders" to appropriations bills and has taken other steps to block California from implementing these clean air rules.

The price for protecting California's ability to regulate lawn mower emissions was to agree to two studies we were confident would support California's plans. The studies, now completed, came out in California's favor -- showing that curbing pollution by requiring catalytic converters on these small engines was both beneficial and safe.

These small engines annually account for 7 percent of the state's mobile emissions, the equivalent of more than 3 million cars. Now that the studies have been completed, we have urged the EPA to expeditiously grant California the waiver it needs to regulate these emissions. And we are hopeful that Sen. Bond will honor his earlier agreements and not seek further to forestall California's efforts to clean up its air.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, California