

Air activists sound smog alarm

Cleanup could be faster than district plans, they say.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Friday, February 9, 2007

Amid dueling opinions over how quickly the San Joaquin Valley's smog can be cleaned up, air activists sent a clear message Thursday to local air authorities:

Make the corrosive summertime haze go away as fast as you can.

"If you can do it even 10% faster, we need it," said respiratory therapist Kevin Hamilton, speaking for the American Lung Association and Fresno-based Medical Advocates for Healthy Air.

Hamilton and others commented on a proposed smog cleanup plan presented Thursday in a workshop by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which forecasts clean air by 2024.

A respected Southern California research group this week disagreed about the time frame, compiling an independent study that said the cleanup could be finished 11 years sooner.

Inspired by the study, activists told the air district that residents cannot wait extra years for healthy air. Each year, dirty air causes at least 460 premature deaths and more than 3,000 acute cases of bronchitis, the latest studies show.

"We're in a state of emergency in this Valley," said Liza Bolaños, coordinator of the Fresno-based Central Valley Air Quality Coalition. "This delay is unacceptable."

Rick McVaigh, deputy air pollution control officer, said the district is taking a hard look at the independent study, which was done by the nonprofit International Sustainable Systems Research Center.

He said the district will take advantage of any idea that's useful in the study, but he added that the study appeared flawed, because it doesn't identify enough pollution reduction to clean the air.

"Our preliminary review shows it falls short by 50%," McVaigh said.

The independent study emphasized adding pollution-control devices on diesel engines, rather than relying on replacing them over time, as the district proposes. The study also suggested more stringent rules, such as prohibiting the use of older farm tractors on bad-air days.

The district's proposal, which probably will come before the governing board in April, said half of the Valley's residents will be breathing clean air by 2015, and 90% by 2020.

Four years later, the remaining dirty-air pockets - in Arvin and northwest Fresno - would have clean air, according to district estimates.

District staffers explained the 25,000-square-mile Valley has one of the country's most tenacious smog problems.

During summer, pollutants hang in the calm Valley air, trapped by mountains. The area's sunny, warm climate cooks the pollutants into ozone, the main ingredient of smog.

The two gases in ozone are oxides of nitrogen, mostly from vehicles, and volatile organic compounds, which come from sources such as dairy waste.

Government scientists said that much of the reduction effort should be focused on sources of oxides of nitrogen - cars, buses, trucks and farm equipment.

But state and federal governments, not the local air district, control standards for vehicles and fuels.

District officials said they need to get \$150million annually for the next 17 years from state and federal treasuries to help replace older vehicles, particularly those using diesel.

"We need to reduce oxides of nitrogen - I hope that's the take-home message today," said district planning director Scott Nester.

However, Kathryn Phillips of the national nonprofit Environmental Defense said the district's plan made a poor case for the \$150 million. She wanted more specifics about where the money would go.

"I'm extremely disappointed," she said. "I expected to see a road map of how the money would be used. Instead, it looks like a big giveaway."

Study group urges swifter air cleanup

Center: More than \$5 billion would be saved in health care

By Mark Grossi - the Fresno Bee

in the Modesto Bee, Friday, February 9, 2007

FRESNO - Valley residents could breathe clean air 11 years sooner than the local air district has predicted and save more than \$5 billion in health care costs, according to a Southern California air research group.

The nonprofit International Sustainable Systems Research Center released a study Tuesday that encourages swifter cleanup of diesel pollution and tougher rules for businesses such as forbidding the use of older, polluting tractors on bad smog days.

"We're not trying to imply this is easy," said researcher Nicole Davis. "It is a choice that the valley will have to make."

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said that even if he followed all the suggestions, the valley would still come up short.

He said the research center used outdated estimates of pollution emissions. Sadredin said the estimates are short by more than 100 tons of pollution per day, meaning more reductions should have been identified.

The district last week announced a proposed smog cleanup plan that would not clear the air until 2024, 11 years later than the federal deadline of 2013.

Tops in the country

Last year, the valley and the South Coast Air Basin each recorded 86 violations of the smog standard, tying them for the most bad-air days nationwide.

But after the district's new smog cleanup plan was announced last week, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, said he thought the district staff was "raising a white flag too soon" on the 2013 deadline.

Florez announced Tuesday that he would convene a hearing of his Senate Select Committee on Air Quality on Feb. 20 in Sacramento to discuss the new study. Florez

has introduced several air quality bills that have helped regulate pollution from fireplaces, dairies and traffic from city sprawl.

"Yes, there may be some flaws in the assumptions of this study," Florez said. "But I like the points being made. We should find out if there are more reductions we can get."

The study suggests changes on more than a dozen rules, including more stringent regulation of far more dairies, which produce one type of smog-making gas.

The recommendations also address further restriction of farm irrigation engines and wine fermentation. Another suggestion would regulate composting and green waste facilities years earlier than the district anticipates.

But those changes would affect only 30 percent of the problem. The study noted the air district does not have direct control over 70 percent of the problem - vehicles. The state and federal governments regulate vehicles, planes, trains and other so-called mobile sources.

The center suggested helping diesel truck owners buy better pollution-control equipment for their engines now rather than waiting possibly decades for engine replacement. Funding would be needed to pay for part of the costs, the study says.

"The retrofit devices are very effective," said researcher Davis. "The idea is to target the right engines; the ones that are used the most."

The research center's study, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, is likely to attract wide interest in California, especially among health advocates.

The center's leader is James Lents, the former top executive of the South Coast Air Basin. He presided over the South Coast cleanup between 1986 and 1996, when the area made big strides in pollution reduction.

"It is a matter of will and how much you want clean air," Lents said. "A lot of things in this study are fairly straightforward and accepted."

Sadredin said the study did not take into account the differences in air problems between the valley and the south state.

He said the valley needs to focus more on reducing oxides of nitrogen, one of two building-block gases in the formation of ozone, the main ingredient of smog. Yet the study does not identify enough of such reductions to make the standard by 2013, he said.

Said Sadredin: "Nothing would please me more than if someone came up with a big idea that we missed. Unfortunately, this study does not do that."

Council gives support to explosion increases

An appeal against a permit allowing an increase in outdoor explosives testing has been postponed until March

By John Upton

Tracy Press, Thursday, February 8, 2007

The morning after the Tracy City Council's Tuesday 3-1 vote to support additional outdoor explosives testing at Site 300, an appeal against a permit that allowed the increase was postponed until March 7.

Activist Bob Sarvey, whose appeal against the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District permit charged in part that Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory had not

sufficiently investigated the health or sound impacts of the blasts, was granted the postponement after the district failed to provide him with data he had requested.

The proposed 5,500-home Tracy Hills development next to Site 300 has dropped its appeal against the permit.

The permit allows as many as 20 blasts up to the equivalent of 350 pounds of TNT at Site 300 in the hills southwest of Tracy, but Lawrence Livermore spokespeople have said that only three such blasts are planned in the coming 18 months. Outdoor blasts greater than 100 pounds have required an air district permit since 1997.

Larry Sedlacek, deputy associate director of operations in the lab's Defense and Nuclear Technologies Group, said recently that the planned blasts wouldn't include tritium, but he wouldn't rule out scheduling additional tests or using tritium in those tests. Forty-four pounds of depleted uranium were included with a 350-pound blast in a computer model simulation performed for the Environmental Protection Agency.

Only Councilwoman Irene Sundberg voted to oppose the increased explosives tests Tuesday. Mayor Brent Ives did not vote because he works for the lab.

Councilman Steve Abercrombie said Wednesday he supported the blasts because explosives testing "is what they do out there."

Sundberg was one of a handful of locals to attend a Wednesday evening information session in Tracy that explained steps being taken by Lawrence Livermore to clean uranium, tritium, volatile organic compounds, perchlorates and nitrates from soil and groundwater at Site 300, which is owned by the U.S. Department of Energy.

Longtime resident Hector Hernandez attended the session. He said he can remember one of Site 300's first blasts in 1955, because it blew the window out of the front room of his home near the airport.

"It's nice that they're going to do something," Hernandez said of the cleanup effort, which could take decades to complete. The EPA considers the site one of the nation's most polluted areas.

The city last year asked the lab to spend \$74 million to excavate contaminants. Instead, cleanup funding will be cut from \$16.2 million in 2006 to \$8.7 million in 2008.

At least a dozen Lawrence Livermore and Department of Energy employees were available to answer questions Wednesday, though they ended up chatting mostly among themselves. Watchdog group Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment provided its own information at the workshop.

Lab spokeswoman Lynda Seaver said posters from the information session would be added in the coming days to www.envirinfo.llnl.gov.

Hospital run on overload

Stanislaus facilities managing the situation 'hour-by-hour'

by Ken Carlson

Modesto Bee, Friday, February 9, 2007

Hospitals in Stanislaus County have been so packed with patients this week that emergency medical officials considered diverting some ambulances to San Joaquin County facilities.

Officials said they considered the idea Wednesday, and then dismissed it, because hospitals in the neighboring county were just as full.

The primary acute-care hospitals were near capacity with patients suffering from wintertime respiratory illnesses, as well as asthma, chronic lung disease and cardiac illness.

"We manage it on an hour-by-hour basis," said Steve Mitchell, chief operating officer for Memorial Medical Center in Modesto.

The 313-bed hospital consistently had just over 300 acute-care patients this week, about 20 percent above normal.

Memorial also reported high acuity, meaning that more patients who came through its emergency room needed to be admitted overnight. Its 35 beds designated for intensive care have averaged 34 patients a day, Mitchell said.

Hospitals were taking measures such as postponing elective surgeries, including 25 cancellations at Memorial this week, and assessing which patients could be safely discharged to make room for more.

[Dr. John Walker, county health officer, issued a statement Thursday expressing concern that the increased admissions for breathing problems and cardiac illness coincided with severe air pollution in the valley.](#)

He said he could not prove it was related to dirty air but recommended that residents minimize their time outdoors and strenuous activity.

"I am really trying to put two and two together and reached the point where I thought the public should be aware of the concern so they can take precautions," Walker said.

He added, "We are hopeful that the rain will help to clear the air."

While influenza has not been a major factor in the county, there are scattered reports of flu in the San Joaquin Valley.

Walker said residents who have not received flu shots could ask for the vaccine from the county public health department or their physician. The flu season runs until March. People age 50 and older may consider a pneumonia vaccination, he said.

John Gilbert, spokesman for Emanuel Medical Center in Turlock, said influenza was not a cause for the increased admissions.

Emanuel's new emergency department was seeing close to 200 patients a day, compared with the normal 150. The caseload of medical conditions was "across the board," he said.

Catherine Larsen, spokeswoman for Doctors Medical Center in Modesto, said the hospital was treating many patients with pneumonia, chest pain and other respiratory illnesses.

The hospital, with 398 acute-care beds, has averaged 295 patients a day this week; it had 320 patients Wednesday.

Oak Valley Hospital in Oakdale, with 35 acute-care beds, was averaging 28 patients, about 27 percent higher than expected for early February, a spokeswoman said.

Memorial, which is two months from opening a new patient care wing, noted an increase in children with severe asthma this week. Only two beds were empty in its 27-bed pediatric department Thursday.

Mitchell said the hospital had to postpone elective surgeries to preserve bed space for seriously ill patients coming through its emergency room. Surgeons were rescheduling the operations.

"If we had the new tower open now," he said of the 112-bed addition to debut in April, "it would make a huge difference in the entire county."

Ambulance services were on diversion 62 percent of the time from early Monday morning to Thursday, according to the Mountain-Valley Emergency Medical Services Agency.

When more than one emergency room in the county is close to saturation, the EMS system has ambulances distribute patients evenly among the hospitals.

Douglass Sisk, deputy director of Mountain-Valley, said there was no dramatic surge in ambulance calls this week. It was a matter of finding hospitals that still had room for patients.

Sisk said the emergency-room crunch had eased up as of Thursday afternoon.

EPA Toughens Toxic Emissions Standards

By Matthew Daly, The Associated Press
The Washington Post, Friday, February 9, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Toxic fumes from gasoline, motor vehicles and fuel containers would be cut significantly under new federal rules the Bush administration developed under legal pressure from environmental groups.

The new requirements, to go into effect between 2009 and 2011, would reduce toxic emissions of benzene and other pollutants from passenger vehicles by 80 percent in the next two decades, the government said.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the new rules would toughen benzene standards for gasoline, require cleaner-starting engines in cold temperatures and tighten fuel container standards to reduce the evaporation of harmful fumes.

"Americans love their cars. By clearing the air from tons of fuel and exhaust pollution, President Bush and EPA are paving the road toward healthier drivers and a cleaner environment," said EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson.

The new rule meets a court order that EPA require refineries to meet an average 0.62 percent benzene fuel limit by 2011, down from the current average of 0.97 percent. The proposal also would create a trading program that would allow refineries to buy emissions credits to meet the new limit, rather than install emissions controls.

Benzene is a highly toxic pollutant that is known to cause cancer, and is one of the worst sources of cancer risk in many parts of the country.

While hailing the stricter standards for benzene emissions, some critics attacked the credit-trading program, which they said would allow refineries in some parts of the country to avoid reducing _ or even increase _ benzene levels in their gasoline.

"Having benzene levels go down in Newark, New Jersey won't do much for the health of people in Portland, Oregon," said Emily Figdor of U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

She and other critics called it disappointing that EPA would "undermine" its own program by adopting the trading plan.

Pacific Northwest lawmakers have complained that because much of the region's gasoline comes from benzene-rich oil from Alaska, its gasoline has nearly twice as much benzene as the national average.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said the new regulations would still leave Oregon and Washington residents breathing air with more benzene than in other parts of the country.

The EPA defended the standards. Because benzene levels vary widely from refinery to refinery, a program that required all refiners to reach the same benzene level at the same time would be extremely costly for a large number of refineries, said EPA spokesman John Millett.

By setting a national average, the program provides refiners "a degree of flexibility in the amount of benzene reduction they pursue," resulting in an overall reduction in benzene levels while minimizing extremes in costs, Millett said.

The EPA plan would set new evaporative standards for fuel containers, beginning in 2009. It would require, starting in 2010, that passenger vehicles started up at cold temperatures emit fewer pollutants.

And, by 2011, the agency would require that all gasoline, which is now allowed to contain little more than 1 percent benzene, have only 0.62 percent or less benzene.

Congress required EPA to issue mobile source air toxic regulations by 1995. Two environmental groups, represented by environmental law firm Earthjustice, won a court order in 2005 forcing EPA to issue a preliminary proposal last year and a final rule by Friday.

Firm sues to revive gas plant plan

The company asks court to order Long Beach to finish an environmental report on the proposed harbor terminal.

By Gary Polakovic, Times Staff Writer
LA Times, Friday, February 9, 2007

The company backing a \$750-million natural gas terminal in Long Beach Harbor filed a lawsuit Thursday seeking to revive its project after officials in that city terminated it last month.

Sound Energy Solutions, a partnership of ConocoPhillips and Mitsubishi Corp., filed a writ of mandate in Los Angeles County Superior Court that seeks an order to compel the Long Beach Harbor Board of Commissioners to direct its staff to complete an environmental impact report on the project.

The company charges that the commissioners violated California environmental laws by not completing a final report.

After years of consideration, the commissioners in January unanimously voted to end work on the environmental document.

Acting on the advice of Long Beach City Atty. Robert E. Shannon, the commissioners decided that the project faced insurmountable legal and safety issues.

Critics, including staff at the California Coastal Commission, the Public Utilities Commission and the Energy Commission, say that a catastrophic accident at the proposed natural gas terminal would bum much of the harbor, one of the busiest in the nation, and the Long Beach waterfront.

But company officials contend that the risk of an accident is low and that the project could be safely operated.

The company says that the project would provide jobs and low-polluting fuel to help efforts to cut air pollution in the smoggy Los Angeles Basin.

"The Harbor Commission wrongly curtailed an established environmental review process that is designed to objectively evaluate the project on a comprehensive basis and provide the facts to government agencies and the public so they can make an informed decision," said Thomas E. Giles, chief executive officer of Sound Energy Solutions.

But opponents of the project said the applicant had run out of time.

"SES hasn't been able to complete the EIR satisfactorily," said Bry Myown, of Long Beach Citizens for Utility Reform.

"The Harbor Commission took a long look at the project and said no to it and now it should go away," Myown said.

A Port of Long Beach spokesman declined to comment, saying that port attorneys were reviewing the lawsuit.

Sound Energy Solutions seeks to build a plant to process 800 million cubic feet of gas daily on a 25-acre parcel in the harbor.

The gas would arrive as liquid shipped aboard tankers and would be warmed to vapor for use in power plants, businesses and residences across Southern California.

Four other LNG terminals are proposed off the Southern California coast, including two near Malibu and one near Ventura. Sempra Energy Co. is building another near Ensenada in Baja California, Mexico.

Massive wave of ash spills at Port of Stockton

By Scott Smith - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Friday, February 09, 2007

STOCKTON - Part of a huge building near the Port of Stockton collapsed Thursday morning, spewing a wave of fine ash that tipped empty rail cars onto their sides and then sent a crew to work cleaning up the powdery mess.

Nobody was injured when concrete walls of the building used by Headwaters Resources fell outward, spilling the fly ash. Fly ash, a byproduct of coal burned for power production, is so named because it is spewed into the air from coal plants if it is not filtered.

The ash is delivered to Stockton by train and is used in concrete.

City inspectors ordered Headwaters Resources to vacate the building, finding that about one-third of the building had been affected by the collapse. The Utah-based company has one month to have an independent engineer decide if the building can be fixed or needs to be demolished, said Connie Cochran, a spokeswoman for the city of Stockton.

At first reported as an explosion, the collapse occurred when the building's wall buckled out, breaking under the weigh of the ash, said Stockton Fire Department Battalion Chief Kim Olson. There was no explosion, he said.

Olson said the ash is vacuumed from railcars and blown into the massive building where it is stored. The ash could be bad for people to breathe if the wind kicked it up,

which was not the case Thursday thanks to the rain, he said. "Now that it's sprinkling on it, the dust is diminished," he said.

Firefighters who responded to the 8:29 a.m. call first checked to make sure nobody was trapped or injured. Emergency calls to the port and the surrounding industrial property happen a few times each year.

The building was not on property owned or controlled by the port, said Port Director Richard Aschieris.

He said the powdery ash that enveloped five toppled railcars like a lava flow blocked the port's main rail line but would not pose a huge inconvenience to tenants who use the port, he said. The rails would be opened again by this morning.

Green Book ranks top cars

by John O'Dell

Modesto Bee, Friday, February 9, 2007

Kermit the Frog may have been right about the difficulties of being green, but a growing number of automakers are trying.

An annual online rating of what's "green" and what isn't, published this week, has four new models on its list of the dozen most environmentally friendly vehicles for 2007.

Equally notable, though, is the large number of vehicles that nearly made the list in the Green Book, an environmental guide to cars and trucks by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy in Washington.

"There are a lot of eco-friendly vehicles that just missed the cut" for the top 12 ranking, Green Book author James Kliesch said.

"It used to be the case that the greenest vehicles were a select number of models that stood far above the pack," he said. "Today, the eco-friendly field has become much more crowded, and that's good news for consumers."

Honda Motor Co.'s natural-gas-powered Civic GX was the nation's greenest vehicle for the third time in four years - after being knocked into second place last year by the company's since-discontinued two-seat Insight gasoline/electric hybrid.

Toyota Motor Corp.'s popular Prius, another gasoline/electric hybrid, was second, followed closely by Honda's Civic hybrid.

Two newcomers - Nissan Motor Co.'s Altima hybrid, which went on sale in February, and Toyota's Yaris subcompact - rounded out the top five.

The other newcomers are Toyota's Camry hybrid, in seventh place, and Honda's Fit subcompact, in eighth.

A third new subcompact in the market, Nissan's Versa, was one of a growing number of vehicles that scored well but not high enough to make the top rankings.

The dozen greenest cars this year are Asian models, blanking out American automakers for only the second time in the 10 years the Green Book has been published. Japanese automakers captured nine of the top 12 positions, and South Korean car companies took the three others.

But the U.S. auto industry, considered by some critics to be a reluctant entrant in the green-car race, didn't miss the top ratings for lack of trying, Kliesch said.

Models such as Ford Motor Co.'s Focus and Escape hybrid and several from General Motors Corp. - the Pontiac Vibe and G5, the Chevrolet Cobalt and Aveo and the Saturn Ion - all scored well, he said.

The ratings cover 467 models but a total of 1,336 vehicle configurations. The large number stems from the various combinations of engine and transmission types, as well as emissions systems, with which various models can be equipped. All of those affect the green score.

The score is computed on the basis of each vehicle's fuel economy and emissions, including those deemed unhealthful, smog-causing and contributing to global warming. The listings are available from the council, a nonprofit environmental lobbying group, at www.greencars.com <<http://www.greencars.com>>.

Proposed burning ban sparks debate

Lawmaker seeks end to field fires by Oregon grass seed growers, who say such a plan would hurt their business

By Brad Cain, Associated Press

In the LA. Times, N.Y. Times, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Friday, February 9, 2007

Silverton, Ore. - Around the world, golfers, soccer players and proud homeowners tread on grass grown from Oregon seed.

With its mild, rainy winters and warm, dry summers, Oregon is ideal for growing grass seed and has been the world's No. 1 producer of grass seed for the past 50 years.

But dominance comes at a price: Every summer, after the grass is cut and the seeds are harvested, the farmers in the populous Willamette Valley, Oregon's main grass-growing region, burn away the stubble, creating towering pillars of smoke that make asthma victims suffer and alarm environmentalists.

A state lawmaker who wants to end the burning is running into stiff opposition from the grass seed industry.

"When people are having to go to the hospital because of this practice, I say it's time for the state to take action," said Rep. Paul Holvey, a Democrat from Eugene, in the Willamette Valley.

With Democrats now in charge of both chambers of the Legislature after taking the House in November, supporters of a ban think they have a shot.

The grass seed industry plans an all-out lobbying effort to try to kill the bill, saying that field burning helps Oregon's growers maintain their competitive edge by producing some of the purest grass seed available.

Oregon supplies nearly 50 percent of the seed used to grow grass around the globe, including China. Each summer, smoke billows 6,000 feet and higher over the landscape as farmers set fires to kill weeds and pests and sanitize their fields for the next planting.

Holvey said the burning contributes to global warming and threatens public health. During the summer, hundreds of people complain of eye and throat irritation or say the hazy air aggravates their asthma.

Dave Nelson of the Oregon Seed Council said the burning accounts for 2 percent of [particulate pollution](#) in the Willamette Valley during the summer. The burning has been sharply scaled back during the years, Nelson said, and banning it altogether would be an overreaction to an "insignificant" environmental issue.

Moreover, a ban would hurt the competitiveness of Oregon's \$500 million-a-year grass seed industry, which provides income for 10,000 Oregonians, because it would force growers to pay for chemicals and more frequent tilling to cleanse their fields, he said.

Oregon's grass seed farmers face competition from growers in northern Europe who are heavily subsidized by government and from producers in places such as Minnesota and Wisconsin, where land is less expensive than in the Willamette Valley, Nelson said.

"We export seed to every state in the U.S. and to over 60 countries around the world," Nelson said. "The higher we make our costs of production, the more vulnerable we become to competition from other places."

Holvey's proposed ban has the wholehearted backing of Cheryl Baugh, a 61-year-old medical office worker who lives in the foothills of Oregon's Coast Range. Baugh, an asthma sufferer, was among the 1,182 people who filed complaints with the state in the summer about smoke.

"I was out in the yard working, but after less than one hour, I could hardly breathe and had to go back inside," Baugh said. "It's a horrible thing when you see those smoke plumes. They look almost like Hiroshima."

The debate over field burning intensified after seven people died in a 1988 chain-reaction traffic accident along an interstate highway that had become shrouded in smoke.

The furor over the accident prompted the Legislature in 1991 to approve a phased reduction in burning. The number of acres that can be burned each year is now capped at 65,000, or one-fifth of the 320,000 acres set ablaze in 1972.

Over the years, the state Agriculture Department has allowed field burning only when the winds can carry the smoke over the Coast Range to the west or the Cascade Mountains to the east. The science is imperfect, though.

Grass seed farmer Doug Duerst said burning is a more environmentally friendly means of cleansing fields than using lots of chemicals or tilling the soil more. And though those giant plumes of smoke may look menacing, he said they mean the smoke is safely going up and over the mountains.

"When people see those big mushroom clouds, they can be assured that it's not going to fall back down and make it smoky" in populated areas, he said.

Lung cancer study counts nonsmokers

About 20 percent of women with the disease have never lit up a cigarette

By Rebecca Vesely, Medianews Staff

Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, February 9, 2007

Women who have never smoked account for more cases of lung cancer than previously thought, with rates comparable to cervical cancer, Stanford University researchers reported Thursday.

About 20 percent of lung cancer cases in U.S. women and 8 percent of lung cancer cases in men are among those who have never smoked, according to the study published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology.

Previously, oncologists had speculated that about 10 percent to 15 percent of lung cancer patients were never smokers.

"I see lots of women in my practice in their forties who have never smoked and have metastatic lung cancer," said Heather Wakelee, oncologist and assistant professor at Stanford University School of Medicine and lead author of the study.

Using detailed patient databases in the United States and Sweden, the researchers looked at incidence of lung cancer in more than 1 million people ages 40 to 79. Among the databases used was the California Teachers Study, a long-term health study of 133,500 current and former public school teachers statewide.

They calculated the lung cancer incidence rate in terms of new cases per person-year, representing every year someone was included in the study.

They found that the lung cancer rate in women who had never smoked ranged from 14.4 to 20.8 cases per 100,000 person-years. In men, from 4.8 cases to 13.7 cases per 100,000 person-years were among those who had never smoked.

In smokers, the lung cancer rates were 10 percent to 30 percent higher, according to the study.

Cervical cancer and thyroid cancer rates in American women of the same age range have similar incidence -- 15.4 cases and 17.3 cases per 100,000 person-years, respectively.

"This gives us a baseline to work from," Wakelee said in an interview. "It's great to be able to have firm numbers for the first time."

Lung cancer among women who have never smoked gained national attention when Dana Reeve, wife of actor and disabilities activist Christopher Reeve, was diagnosed with the disease.

Dana Reeve died of lung cancer in March 2006.

It's unknown why nonsmokers develop lung cancer. Second-hand smoke has shown to play a role. Environmental and occupational factors, such as air pollution and asbestos, could also be culprits, but those links have not been definitively proven.

In Asia, several studies have put the incidence of lung cancer among nonsmoking women from 50 percent to 95 percent of cases.

Some researchers have speculated that poorly ventilated cooking areas as well as second-hand smoke have contributed to the high percentage of nonsmoking women diagnosed with the disease in Asia, Wakelee said.

Ellen Chang, epidemiologists at the Northern California Cancer Center and member of the Stanford Comprehensive Cancer Center, said second-hand smoke could account for many cases. Chang was a co-author of the study.

"Non-smoking-associated lung cancer is an increasingly important issue," Chang said in a news release. "Even if only because the population of never-smokers is growing."

Stigma continues to surround lung cancer. Although it is the biggest killer among all cancers worldwide, funding has been paltry, the researchers said.

More than 100,000 Americans are diagnosed with lung cancer each year, and it kills more patients than breast, colon and prostate cancers combined.

Berkeley foundry will reduce emissions Pacific Steel settles with neighborhood group, but two other lawsuits are still pending

By Kristin Bender, Medianews Staff
Contra Costa Times, Friday, February 9, 2007

Pacific Steel Casting, the West Berkeley steel foundry sued three times in the past year for emitting a foul smell and allegedly causing health problems, will reduce its hazardous air pollutants by at least two tons annually under a settlement agreement with an Oakland health and justice nonprofit organization.

Last year, Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) filed a federal Clean Air Act lawsuit against Pacific Steel because it claimed the foundry, which makes steel castings for trucks, buses, water valves and agricultural equipment, had for years been causing a nuisance in the community.

The two sides reached a settlement agreement last week that requires Pacific Steel to reduce emissions, create a scrap metal inspection program, and establish a joint consultation committee to recommend and oversee ongoing pollution-reduction efforts.

Pacific Steel still faces two other lawsuits.

CBE senior attorney Adrienne Bloch called the settlement agreement a "great first step."

"This agreement will result in real, on-the-ground emissions reductions, will keep community members at the center of defining community needs, forge a meaningful relationship between environmental justice and labor, and create the opening for a long-term process to tackle a complex set of issues with business," she said.

The settlement agreement is favorable for Pacific Steel because the lawsuit sought to fine the plant between \$27,500 and \$32,500 per day for every violation of the Clean Air Act between December 2002 and March 2004.

"There is a new spirit of cooperation that the company wholeheartedly welcomes," Pacific Steel spokeswoman Elisabeth Jewel said.

Specifically, Pacific Steel will:

- Establish a scrap metal inspection program to insure that metals used in making product molds don't contain mercury, fluids or lead that could increase emissions. This will be accomplished through the notification of scrap suppliers and regular inspections.
- Form a joint consultation committee of Pacific Steel leaders, representatives from the company's 600-member union and CBE to meet quarterly to look at ways to continue to reduce emissions. This will be accomplished through updating older emission control equipment and examining air flow issues.
- Deposit \$350,000 into a fund that will be used to make equipment upgrades based on what the joint consultation committee advises. The company will decide if additional funds will be spent. The consent decree expires when the funds are depleted or after three years, whichever comes first.

The 73-year-old company, one of three remaining big steel foundries in the nation, faces two other lawsuits in connection with air pollution that residents and community members say has long caused them headaches, nausea and chest tightness.

Neighborhood Solutions, which works with residents to solve neighborhood issues, last year sued Pacific Steel on behalf of 25 plaintiffs, each seeking up to \$7,500 under the suit. A hearing date is pending.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District sued the foundry in August because the company, under an earlier settlement agreement, had failed to release a health assessment report and install a carbon absorption abatement system to reduce odor emissions.

That \$2 million pollution control system is up and running, but the lawsuit is still pending.

Firefighters douse last flames at Kansas City plant as investigators roll up their sleeves

By Dave Skretta, Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Friday, February 9, 2007

KANSAS CITY, Mo. - Firefighters doused the last flames and watched for hot spots Thursday at a chemical distribution plant that was devastated by fire a day before.

Robert Garner, senior vice president of environmental affairs for plant owner Chemcentral Corp., said an environmental team was ready to begin its investigation in tandem with the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

Evacuation orders remained in effect Thursday for people within a half-mile of the site.

On Wednesday, two workers at the plant were injured when 55-gallon drums ignited, producing fireballs.

Firefighters were finally able to approach the site Wednesday night and use flame-suppressing foam, and the last of the hot spots were being doused Thursday morning when another explosion occurred, Battalion Chief Joe Vitale said.

Some workers at businesses in the evacuation area who had returned Thursday left again after the new explosion. No new injuries were reported.

Fire Chief Richard Dyer said it appeared that a chemical was released and ignited, which set off additional explosions.

The chemical may have been polybutene, which is used in a variety of products, including liners for cereal boxes, Garner said.

"It's a product that we've handled for 30 years, always very carefully, safely," Garner said. "Employees were following the procedures and precautions."

The threat of additional explosions had kept investigators from examining the site and determining the cause of the initial explosions.

Despite the smoke plume's ominous appearance, officials said tests had found no threat to human health. Residents were cautioned against touching any debris or what appeared to be a sticky substance deposited by the cloud as it streamed southwestward, but Dyer said the material was not highly toxic.

The Environmental Protection Agency monitored the air quality across Kansas City, and all toxins appeared to be within acceptable levels, according to Dianna Whitaker of the EPA.

EU May Make Harming Environment a Crime

By Aoife White, The Associated Press

Washington Post, Friday, February 9, 2007

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Harming the environment should be treated as a crime, the European Commission said Friday as it put forward a draft law that would punish serious offenses across the EU with up to five years in prison or a \$975,000 fine.

The rules would also allow courts put a company out of business and order ungreen criminals to clean up the environment.

They would punish people and companies behind environmental disasters _ such as the Dutch trader that chartered the ship blamed for dumping of illegal toxic waste in Ivory Coast last summer that killed 10, the EU executive said.

EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini said corporations were behind 73 percent of crimes against the environment.

"It is not enough to punish and prosecute managers. It's very important also that corporations pay fines," he told reporters.

Dumping toxic substances, shipping hazardous waste or trading in endangered species can have "devastating effects on human health and the environment," the EU executive said.

"In serious cases, criminal sanctions such as prison sentences should be applied, as they have a much higher dissuasive effect than, for example, administrative sanctions," it said.

The EU's 27 nations currently have different standards for what a crime against the environment is and the Commission said many set "inadequate" punishments.

France, Italy, Malta and Cyprus will have to make the most changes to existing laws, said EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas.

The draft rules will force governments to make sure that a list of environmental crimes _ all already banned by national and EU law _ are treated as criminal offenses.

They will cover releasing hazardous substances that [pollute the air](#), water or soil; illegal shipments or treatment of waste; the unlawful trade in endangered species or ozone-depleting substances; and running a plant either involved in "dangerous activity" or storing dangerous substances.

Prison sentences or maximum fines should be reserved for serious breaches where people have been killed or seriously injured or in cases where there has been "substantial damage to air, soil, water, animals or plants," the EU said.

But the law will not cover oil spills. The EU says it will put forward a separate proposal to cover pollution from ships later this year.

Group Names Top 10 Polluting Refineries

By ALAN ZIBEL, AP Business Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle, N.Y. Times and other papers, Thursday, February 8, 2007

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Environmental activists on Thursday said more stringent air-quality regulations are needed for oil refineries along the Gulf Coast, a region densely populated with petroleum industry plants.

The Environmental Integrity Project blamed state-level regulations that are weaker than in other parts of the country, as well as lax oversight, for above-average levels of noxious emissions.

The Washington-based advocacy group also released a list of the top 10 most polluting refineries in the country, based on an analysis of 2004 emissions data from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Topping the list, with nearly 2.1 million pounds of carcinogens such as benzene and formaldehyde was BP PLC's refinery in Texas City, Texas, though the advocacy group

said that number was skewed dramatically upward due to a one-time release of nearly 2 million pounds of formaldehyde in 2004.

Eric Schaeffer, director of the Environmental Integrity Project, said the high numbers from BP, compared with other companies, raise questions about whether oil refiners are reporting their emissions accurately to the government.

"There's a gap between what people are breathing and what companies are reporting," Schaeffer said.

But BP spokesman Scott Dean said the number resulted from a "sizable error" the company made in its 2004 data, which inflated its carcinogen results by at least 1.2 million pounds.

"We're working very hard to get real monitoring data that can give us some real numbers," Dean said. In addition, he said, BP is spending \$300 million in upgrades to cut down on toxic emissions at Texas City.

The National Petrochemical and Refiners Association called the report "misleading." Specifically, the association said that while the EPA data count total emissions, they do not measure human impact. A better measure, the group said, is air quality stations around the country, which have shown declines in toxic air levels since the early 1990s.

Moreover, all of the refineries in the report are operating "well within" EPA-permitted levels, Charlie Drevna, the group's executive vice president, said. "We are making cleaner and cleaner burning products, whether it's gasoline or diesel, and we have also significantly reduced emissions," Drevna said.

Second on the list was Exxon Mobil Corp.'s Baytown, Texas refinery. Third was privately held Koch Industries Inc.'s Flint Hills refinery in Corpus Christi.

Fourth was Delek US Holdings Inc.'s La Gloria refinery in Tyler, Texas, and fifth was Lyondell Chemical Co.'s refinery in Houston.

Fred Green, vice president and chief operating officer of Delek Refining, said in an e-mailed statement that his company, which acquired the Tyler refinery in spring 2005, has installed new testing equipment and expects to report a "substantial reduction" in benzene emissions for 2006.

Environmentalists noted that California's stringent pollution regulations kept that state's refineries off the top 10 polluters list, which included six in Texas, three in Louisiana and one in Pennsylvania. California's strict clean-air rules are also one reason the state's motorists pay some of the highest fuel prices in the country.

Texas refineries spewed more than double the amount of carcinogens per barrel of oil than California refineries in 2004, the study found.

Several activists said the Environmental Protection Agency has not been aggressive enough under the Bush Administration in overseeing refinery pollution, and also said public officials in Texas and Louisiana have been reluctant to confront oil interests.

"There simply isn't the political will, in Texas anyway, to impose the kinds of regulations that California has," said Meg Healy, research director of the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention, an environmental group.

Jennifer Wood, an EPA spokeswoman, said in an e-mail the agency has entered into settlements covering nearly 80 percent of the country's refining capacity and is "committed to holding polluters accountable."

House Puts Energy Technology Onus on EPA

By JIM ABRAMS, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle, N.Y. Times and other papers, Thursday, February 8, 2007

WASHINGTON, (AP) -- Determining how best to speed ethanol and other alternative fuels from refinery to gas pump would rest with the government under legislation the House passed Thursday.

President Bush is promoting such fuels as a way to reduce dependence on foreign oil and cut air pollution. But their widespread use has been hampered by problems with the current system of transporting and storing the fuels.

Ethanol and some biodiesel blends, for example, can corrode tank and pipeline materials, build up sediment, clog filters and cause emissions volatility. In addition, it costs tens of thousands of dollars for the nation's 160,000 gas stations to refit pumps to dispense biofuels.

The bill, which passed by a 400-3 vote, directs the Environmental Protection Agency to study new technologies that would eliminate some of these infrastructure problems.

The bill by House Science Committee chairman Bart Gordon, D-Tenn., also directs the government to develop an affordable and quick way to test the sulfur content of Ultra Low Sulfur Diesel fuel.

At issue is whether such low sulfur diesel may absorb enough residual sulfur as it moves from the refinery through pipelines and trucks to exceed EPA limits.

"This bill not only addresses our energy independence issues but it also addresses clean energy issues by working to mitigate potential problems that can rise from transporting clean fuels," said Rep. Ralph Hall, R-Texas, the committee's top Republican.

The measure now goes to the Senate for consideration.

Bush said in his State of the Union address last month that alternative fuels are essential to his goal of cutting U.S. gasoline usage by 20 percent in the next 10 years. He said there should be a requirement of 35 billion gallons of renewable and alternative fuels in 2017, nearly five times the current target.

The House spent nearly two hours on an amendment supporting the use of domestically produced alternative fuels on aircraft.

The measure, which passed 385-23, gave Republicans a platform to complain about the expense of the Pentagon's supplying Speaker Nancy Pelosi with a jet large enough to travel nonstop to her home in California.

House Republicans also demanded second votes on four amendments to protest a new Democratic-generated rule that allows the delegates from the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and three territories to vote on amendments, but not on final passage of legislation.

"We're creating the record in case there is a lawsuit" regarding the constitutionality of the new rule, said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb.

Cemex, city agree to talk deal Gravel mining giant puts plans on hold

By Judy O'Rourke, Staff Writer
LA Daily News, Thursday, February 8, 2007

Santa Clarita - Santa Clarita has agreed to lay low in its aggressive \$8 million battle against gravel mining giant Cemex, a fight that included a bitter annexation struggle of a neighborhood near the company's proposed quarry in Soledad Canyon.

In this first sign of some sort of compromise, residents and activists who have led the impassioned fight are upbeat.

"I'm optimistically cautious," said Andy Fried, founder and president of Safe Action For the Environment, a nonprofit corporation formed eight years ago to oppose the mine. Fried declined to say more because the group hasn't met since Cemex announced Tuesday the mine is on hold.

SAFE has spent roughly \$120,000, hiring an expert in air quality and health issues whose studies contradicted results found in county and federal environmental reports. Fried, an Agua Dulce resident, says the group would accept mining at "historic levels" of 300,000 tons a year, as would the city.

Under federal contracts spanning about 20 years, Cemex planned to mine 2 million tons a year in the first decade, ramping up to 4million to 5million tons a year over the next decade.

Cemex officials announced Tuesday that they called off plans to open the 56.1 million-ton mine next year and want to negotiate a compromise with the city instead. The city has bankrolled a roughly \$8 million campaign to scale down or block the mine, planned for a hilly area outside city bounds between Canyon Country and Agua Dulce. Details of the compromise were not given.

The Sulphur Springs Union School District abuts the mine property, and school officials worried mine operations could snarl traffic and pose a health risk for kids at the district's eight schools. The district partnered with the city in opposing the project.

"I'm happy they sort of postponed it," said Kerry Clegg, who has served on the school board for about 17 years. "The mining (operations) would have generated a lot of dust, and we're downwind from it. We're concerned about indoor air quality problems for kids."

The district had planned to monitor indoor air and take action if it deteriorated. Clegg, a semi-retired research molecular biologist, said many were concerned pollution from increased truck traffic might kindle childhood asthma cases.

Clegg lives in one of the Stonecrest neighborhoods that were annexed in July after a sometimes heated battle that saw city officials pushing for jurisdiction over the community - which provided a landbridge to acreage it owns at the mine. Clegg favored annexation, noting the city is better positioned than the county to fight the mine.

County supervisors granted the mining permit under a consent decree in 2004.

City activists honed their sparring moves decades ago battling BKK Corp.'s plan to site the world's largest trash dump in Elsmere Canyon - in the Angeles National Forest - with the county's blessing. Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean, then a civilian who founded the SCV Canyons Preservation Committee, dug in until federal legislation enacted in 1995 protected the area.

"No matter what we did or said, proponents of the dump would not come to the table and talk about alternatives," she said. "This ... is an entirely different situation."

City officials have drawn some parallels, noting both were multiyear battles to retain the community's character and quality of life. McLean said there's a notable difference.

"Cemex, however, at this point is willing to come to the table to try and come to an equitable solution," she said. "We are sitting at the table, and we have almost a year to discuss what will or will not happen on that site."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, February 9, 2007:](#)

No hybrids need apply

The state calls them carpool lanes for a reason - change them back.

In 2004 the Legislature opened up the state's carpool lanes to the first 75,000 solo drivers of hybrid vehicles who applied for the privilege. When the first 75,000 stickers were snapped up in less than a year, lawmakers approved 10,000 more to be distributed on a first-come basis. They have all been taken. So legislators are now talking about expanding the experiment - letting more solo drivers of hybrid cars onto carpool lanes.

That would be a mistake. In fact, the whole experiment should end now.

The more solo drivers are allowed in car pool lanes, the more those lanes turn into just another parking lot at commute time. The incentive to car pool or to buy hybrid vehicles is lost.

Carpool lanes were created not just to help clean the air but also to relieve congestion. The more that otherwise solo drivers left their own cars at home and took the bus, a van pool or joined two or three others in a carpool, the more congestion was eased for everyone else. These real carpoolers were justifiably rewarded by being allowed to zip along in relatively unclogged special carpool lanes.

By opening the lanes to solo drivers of hybrid vehicles, legislators degraded the carpool ethic itself. As one driver told the Los Angeles Times recently, "This is why I spent over 25 grand on a car - just to get the (carpool lane) sticker."

Proponents claim the law gives people incentives to buy cleaner vehicles, but even before it passed there were waiting lists to buy the one high mileage hybrid car that qualified, the Toyota Prius.

Those lucky enough to buy their hybrids early were able to get the limited number of stickers that allow them into the carpool lane; those who bought later are out of luck. That makes no sense. Lawmakers should return carpool lanes to carpoolers, and the sooner the better.

[Sacramento Bee, Commentary, Friday, February 9, 2007](#)

Stuart Leavenworth: Governor makes global warming fight sound easy

One of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's great talents as a politician is his ability to sound relentlessly upbeat.

Whether he's discussing the 6 million Californians who lack health insurance, the gridlock of the state's freeways or budget gaps that involve billions of dollars, the governor always seems to bubble with optimism.

He's really tapped into that "Morning in America" thing that made President Reagan so popular, and so far, it's worked for him. Voters apparently don't want another Jimmy

Carter gloom head in office, someone who wears sweaters and tells them to turn down their thermostats.

The trouble, of course, is that few of the world's challenges lend themselves to easy and painless solutions. Some are so complex and daunting they will require tradeoffs and personal sacrifice. In the post-Carter era, it would be nice to find a few politicians who could talk bluntly about these realities, even if it doesn't poll very well.

Consider the threat of global warming, arguably the greatest challenge facing the planet. Carbon and methane gases from power plants, cars and industries waft into the atmosphere, where they trap heat that would otherwise dissipate. As scientists confirmed in a major report this month, these greenhouse gases are raising the world's thermostat, causing glaciers to melt, sea levels to rise and weather events to become more extreme.

Over the last year, Schwarzenegger has rightfully gained international fanfare for acknowledging this threat, and signing legislation, Assembly Bill 32, to reduce greenhouse gases in California. His support for this cause is tectonic. Before he became a convert, the Rush Limbaughs of the world were able to dismiss global warming as the mad mutterings of Al Gore and a handful of geeky scientists. Now nearly everyone -- including GOP candidates for president -- is acknowledging the need for action.

But what kind of action?

To hear many Democrats and Republicans describe it, the transition to a less carbon-intensive economy will be fairly smooth. No need to worry about taxes or conservation. All we need to do is place emissions caps on industries and power plants. Those with the cleanest practices will be able to trade "credits" to dirtier industries, and all this trading will save the planet from catastrophe.

Schwarzenegger himself tends to feed this false confidence. Unlike his former environmental adviser, the sweater-wearing Terry Tamminen, Schwarzenegger never talks about turning out lights or riding bikes to conserve energy. In Schwarzenegger's view of the future, Californians will continue to drive and fly around as they normally do, except that their vehicles and planes will be powered by ethanol and fuel cells. There will be a hydrogen Hummer in every driveway.

Last year, Schwarzenegger was asked if his love for big, energy-intensive vehicles contradicted his stance against global warming.

"I think that people in America enjoy big SUVs," Schwarzenegger responded. "I think that especially women feel much more protected when they drive their kids in those cars. But we must make sure that we have alternative-powered vehicles rather than just living off fossil fuel."

This year, Schwarzenegger acted on these words by ordering a fuel standard that aims to reduce carbon emissions from transportation fuels by 10 percent. Although a step forward, the standard by itself won't do much to reduce greenhouse emissions. That's because, every year, California adds more vehicles to its highways, with many motorists driving longer distances for work or play. In 2005, California motorists and truckers logged a combined 182 billion miles, a 26 percent increase from a decade earlier.

In other words, Schwarzenegger's attempt to reduce emissions with cleaner vehicles could easily be offset by population growth and the tendency of Californians to spend more time on the road. And since transportation accounts for 40 percent of California's

annual greenhouse gases pollution, failure to reduce emissions from cars, trucks and aircraft could unravel the state's entire law to fight global warming.

Although they may sound far in the future, Assembly Bill 32's deadlines are fast approaching.

In 13 years, the state will need to cut its greenhouse emissions 25 percent even while adding several million more people. And once the state achieves that 2020 mandate, the law requires a further, huge cut in emissions -- 80 percent by 2050.

Complying with the mandates will require monumental changes. Californians will need to transform how they get energy, how they build homes, how they travel and design their communities. In all likelihood, they will have to pay more for a less carbon-intensive economy, either through taxes, higher energy bills or steeper costs for cement and other products.

Don't get me wrong: The threat posed by global warming demands this type of transformation. If California can lead the way in reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, there will be myriad opportunities for trailblazing companies, as well as cleaner air here at home.

But it won't be an easy trail, and it may force Californians -- even jet-setting Arnold -- to examine their own patterns of consumption.

It would be refreshing to see the governor acknowledge this, even if he chooses not to turn into a sweater-wearing gloom head.

[Modesto Bee, Guest Commentary, Friday, February 9, 2007](#)

Railroad between Crows Landing, Oakland on right track

By Mark Hollingsworth

I'm heading to the Bay Area at 6 a.m. in order to avoid the worst of the traffic. As I enter Interstate 5 from Gustine, I have to run the gauntlet of trucks that line both sides of the onramp. It feels like I'm entering a narrow, steep-walled canyon, especially in my little hybrid.

All along my way, at Newman, Crows Landing, Patterson, Westley, and especially at the rest area before the I-5 and I-580 split, the offramps and onramps are lined with trucks. A couple hundred truckers are waiting, often with engines running, for the right time to get back on the freeway to deliver their loads in the Bay Area.

It is a minor irritation, I know. But I wonder if the situation might change, at least a little for the better, if there were a short-haul rail line from Crows Landing to the Port of Oakland.

What if truckers could deliver their loads and pick up new ones at a facility right off I-5? What if they didn't have to haul them over the Altamont Pass and into city traffic?

I can't imagine a driver pulling off at the Gustine exit to park and wait for the right time to drive the next 10 miles to the Crows Landing terminal.

The large number of trucks parked at each of the I-5 exits is just one sign of the inefficiency of the current system for getting freight into and out of the Bay Area.

A short-haul rail line, such as the one being proposed by Gerry Kamilos and his associates, would make the system more efficient.

It would replace hundreds of trucks with a few trains. This would save much of the fuel used by the trucks. It also would save truck drivers the time they would waste by being stuck in traffic and time they would waste by parking and waiting to avoid getting stuck in traffic.

Every system that increases energy efficiency brings with it a variety of other benefits. Less fuel used means less dependence on foreign oil, less air pollution, less greenhouse gas emissions. All of these are good things.

Fewer trucks on the road would mean less traffic and less congestion. That brings greater energy efficiency for everyone else on the roads and another round of benefits. And fewer trucks on the road would mean less highway repair and construction.

There are two proposals for developing the Crows Landing air base going before the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors on Feb. 13. Both proposals promise development and more jobs for the area. Only one of these includes a plan for a short-haul rail line with an intermodal terminal.

That's bold and that's risky. But the benefits are worth the risk. Due to the efficiency of the short-haul rail line, the benefits for the county, the valley, and much of Northern California will only increase over time.

Hollingsworth is a pastor and a poet who lives in Gustine. E-mail him at columns@modbee.com <<mailto:columns@modbee.com>>.

[LA Daily News Editorial, Friday, February 7, 2007](#)

Subway to Nowhere II

Wilshire Boulevard plan offers too little bang for the buck

The excitement among Los Angeles political leaders about building a "subway to the sea" suggests that our politicians have lost touch with two concepts that should underlie all public works: priorities and value.

In the abstract, a train beneath Wilshire Boulevard sounds great. It would relieve some of the Westside's wretched traffic congestion while causing minimal blight and pollution.

But in reality, it would take decades to complete, while costing untold billions of dollars, thus tying up funds for countless other desperately needed transportation projects.

Is this really the best way to spend the public's limited funds now?

That takes us to the matter of priorities.

Subways, especially in earthquake-prone Los Angeles, are outrageously expensive. And putting a subway under some of the region's most expensive real estate - land that is laden below the surface with explosive natural gas - would no doubt be especially so. It will take every ounce of L.A.'s political clout to get the necessary funds out of Sacramento and Washington to complete this project.

But if all our revenue streams are channeled into the Westside, what becomes of other crucial projects throughout L.A.? What becomes of our crippled freeways? What becomes of our inadequate bus lines, which are being cut even as L.A.'s leadership fantasizes about a subway to the sea?

And that takes us to the matter of value.

The Orange Line busway, which has done wonders to relieve traffic in the San Fernando Valley, cost just \$300 million - a fraction of what the subway to the sea would cost - and was completed in just a couple of years. Similarly, other much-needed

improvements, such as a diamond lane on the northbound 405 Freeway, would cost far less while offering greater, more immediate relief.

The subway to the sea simply doesn't offer enough bang for the buck. And given L.A.'s limited resources and severe traffic problems, we need to get the most out of every dollar.

That means more small projects that accomplish much good quickly, not grandiose schemes that demand more time or money than we have.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, February 9, 2007:](#)
Fresno needs to 'change our way of thinking'

Does anyone else see the irony in our way of thinking in Fresno?

We complain about rolling blackouts, energy and water shortages and utility fee increases, yet we gladly embrace one of the biggest drains on our resources: tract development.

We've convinced ourselves that manure is the real cause of Valley air pollution.

We apply suburban planning principals and zoning ordinances that were developed in the 1960s to today's projects and developments. Have we not progressed in the last 50 years?

Visible trash cans constitute visual blight, yet endless seas of parking, retail centers repeated on every corner and stucco everywhere you look are not?

We complain about the 100-plus degree heat, yet we have one of the smallest percentages of park space per capita to mitigate the heat island effect that seas of asphalt have created.

We have literally driven most bicycle riders and pedestrians, both of which reduce traffic congestion in our traffic-jammed city and promote healthy living in our obese country, off the streets of Fresno. Do we really love our automobiles that much?

If Fresno is to have any chance of survival and revitalization of its core, we need to change our way of thinking.

Jamie Dronyk, Fresno

[Letter to the Editor in the Contra Costa Times, Friday, February 7, 2007:](#)
Poisoning the air

Albany is being poisoned by a factory in Berkeley!

For the last 73 years, a steel foundry in Berkeley has been dumping hazardous material into the air and onto the streets. But what residents of Albany don't know is that the toxic air plume from that factory blows over most of Albany, including San Pablo, Marin and Solano avenues.

The company itself reports that it produces more than 25,000 pounds of toxic pollution every year, including benzene, phenol, manganese, nickel, copper, lead and chromium. These chemicals are known to cause cancer, reproductive disorders, respiratory disease, and birth defects.

The worst part is, residents of Albany don't even realize they are being poisoned. This must stop; it's not right!

Shame on Berkeley for allowing a factory to pollute for so long. Shame on Pacific Steel Casting for poisoning residents of Berkeley and Albany.

There is plenty of information on the Internet; just plug in the words "Pacific Steel Casting hazard."

Andrew Galpern, Albany

[Sacramento Bee, Letter to the Editor, Friday, February 9, 2007:](#)
Scuttle the car, ride mass transit

Re "More carpool lanes: The right path?" Feb. 5: It's time we begin thinking long-term regarding our transportation needs. More freeway lanes alleviate problems for about five years, maybe 10, and then the congestion is just as bad again as more people move into the area.

The Sacramento metropolitan region has the seventh worst air quality in the nation, and with the population expected to double in the next 30 years, it may become second worst, better only than Los Angeles. Is this really what we want?

A much better option that will accommodate vast numbers of people's needs with even less-than-current pollution levels would be a comprehensive, realistic mass transit system. Not the paltry two light rail lines we now have, but a system like New York City, or Portland, or what Denver has recently decided to aim for: mass transit line averaging every 10 blocks, running every 10 minutes.

Any of us who has ever lived in a place with excellent mass transit knows that it's a joy being able to walk more and not have to worry about parking. And it would feel good knowing that your simple act of daily commuting and errand-running isn't ruining our children's future.

Sandra Watt-Weld, Sacramento