

In The News 05-29-07

Florez fumes at air board's vote

State senator says vote to allow some farmers to burn orchard waste defies law.

By Pablo Lopez

Fresno Bee, Saturday, May 26, 2007

State Sen. Dean Florez on Friday fired a salvo at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, calling the district's leadership a "rogue board" for allowing some farmers to burn orchard waste at the expense of the public's health.

He demanded that air board members reverse their May 17 decision-- or face the prospect of Florez's lobbying against them and losing millions of dollars in state funding.

Afterward, two air board members -- Kings County Supervisor Tony Barba and Tulare County Supervisor J. Steven Worthley -- said they won't change their vote. Doing so, they said, would hurt small-farm operators who can't afford to hire someone to get rid of the agricultural waste with a wood chipper.

The public's health is not in danger, Worthley said, because farmers still need a permit for open-field burning and can only burn when the air quality is good.

The air district manages air-quality issues in eight counties from Stockton to Bakersfield. The board is composed of eight county supervisors and three city council members.

Florez, who made his demands known at a news conference at his Fresno office, is a longtime board critic who recently has bashed the board's decision to delay a smog cleanup plan deadline by more than a decade to 2024.

The senator also is supporting a bill that would increase the air board's membership to add more city representatives and public-health experts. The Senate passed the bill May 17, the same day the Valley air board voted 9-1 to allow farmers to burn waste from orchards of 20 acres or less until 2010.

Florez said the board's decision defies a law he authored in 2003 to prohibit open-field burning. A portion of that law that prohibits orchard burning is set to take effect Friday.

"It is beyond comprehension to me why the air district is working so hard to weaken the implementation of clean-air laws, while Valley children trudge off to school each day, inhalers in hand," the senator said.

Under the law, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District could make exceptions to the open-field burning rule, but the California Air Resource Board must concur with the decision, Florez said.

According to Florez, the Valley's air board never sought an official request for concurrence from the state air board. Instead, "the air district went ahead with its vote to pollute," Florez said Friday.

Worthley, however, said that among those who spoke out at the May 17 meeting on the exception to the open-field burning, nobody raised the issue of having to get the state air board's concurrence.

In addition, he said, some diseased trees must be burned and can't be eliminated with a wood chipper.

"We're not a rogue board. We heard both sides of the issue," Worthley said, noting that the board adopted the state rules that prohibit open-field burning. "We just have an exception for a small group of farmers who can only burn when it is not a health hazard."

The local air district receives millions of dollars from the state to clean up the air, Florez said. Instead of polluting the skies, the senator said, the board could offer financial incentives to farmers to take their agricultural waste to biomass power plants, or help them purchase wood chippers.

Barba, however, said open-field burning is a small part of the Valley's pollution problems. The board is tackling bigger issues, such as diesel and automobile emission. "We are doing the best we can at this time," he said.

The state Assembly has yet to vote on the Senate bill that would increase the board's membership. An Assembly committee is expected to discuss the bill on June 27.

Florez fumes over revised burning rule

BY TARA MCLAUGHLIN, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, May 26, 2007

Exemptions to a law banning agricultural burning approved by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District should be repealed because the agency acted without authority from the California Air Resources Board, state Sen. Dean Florez said at a Friday news conference.

"They didn't follow the law. They didn't follow the spirit of the law. In fact, I think they thumbed their nose at the law," the Shafter Democrat said. "The board has gone out of its way to accommodate polluters."

The valley air district last week passed two exemptions allowing agricultural waste burning through 2010 for orchards less than 20 acres and for citrus, apples, pears, quince, figs and rice. The exemptions are in line with the law's criteria, said valley air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

SB 705, passed in 2003 and written by Florez, eliminated burning effective this June 1 with criteria for exemptions, including a requirement for state air board concurrence on exemptions made by the local board.

But the local governing board did not request or receive concurrence from the state, said Rob Oglesby, legislative director for the state air board.

The law, however, does not specify that approval must be attained before the exemptions are passed, and there are no procedures in place for gaining or granting exemptions. This is the first case.

When asked if the valley air district would be required to repeal the exemptions or formally seek state board approval, Oglesby said he wasn't qualified to answer. A message left for the state air board counsel was not returned.

Holt did not know if the governing board intends to enforce its exemptions come June 1 or if it will wait until and if it receives concurrence from the state board.

Messages left for the valley air board's executive director, Seyed Sadredin, were not returned.

New Madera Co. town awaits OK

Planned Gateway Village project would plant a community of 21,000 in Rio Mesa area.

By Russell Clemings
Fresno Bee, Sunday, May 27, 2007

Eleven years after it was proposed, the first big development across the San Joaquin River north of Fresno now needs only a July vote of approval from the Madera County Board of Supervisors.

Backed by Bakersfield-based Castle & Cooke, the Gateway Village project would plant a new town of more than 21,000 people on 2,062 acres west of Highway 41 at Avenue 12, where only olives, oranges and pistachios grow.

It is one of more than a half-dozen major developments planned for southeastern Madera County's Rio Mesa area, currently an ocean of green orchards and tan pastures with few buildings other than the 9-year-old Children's Hospital Central California.

Having won unanimous approval Tuesday night from the county Planning Commission, Gateway Village stands at the front of the line.

Its builder is ready to break ground as soon as next year -- if the project can escape court challenges of the kind that have greeted it and other Rio Mesa projects in the past.

After a previous board vote to approve Gateway Village in 2002, several county residents sued over what they called inadequate plans for dealing with effects on air quality, water supplies and other resources.

The lawsuit prompted the builder to rework those plans, and the results won praise from the commission.

"This is really a great project. I haven't seen one like it since I've been on the board," Commission Chairman Donald Holley said before the vote.

Several residents of the semirural Rolling Hills subdivision, adjacent to the Gateway Village site, lined up to lend their support as well. John Voss, president of the Rolling Hills Citizens Association, called the plan "a guide to holding the feet to the fire of the other developers" in the Rio Mesa area.

But opponents, including some who sued over the previous Gateway Village plan, still have their doubts. They raised concerns about how effectively the new plan can deal with its environmental effects -- and they questioned whether it is a good idea to turn the Madera County countryside into a new urban area.

"When you build on this side of the river, you're increasing the size of Fresno. There's no question about it," said Coarsegold resident Burke Zane, one of the 2002 plaintiffs.

Before voting to recommend that the Board of Supervisors approve Gateway Village, the planning commissioners were told about elaborate arrangements Castle & Cooke has made to deal with ground-water shortages, air quality problems and other issues.

The farmland where the project would be built relies mainly on well water, and over time, it takes more water from the ground than nature puts back. Gateway Village project manager Steve Krueger said the builder will bring in enough surface water for its homes and businesses-- plus enough extra to replenish the depleted aquifer.

Perhaps the most unusual provision is a long-term contract with the Westside Mutual Water Co., a subsidiary of Paramount Farming Co., one of the state's biggest farms and owner of shares in two ground-water storage banks in Kern County.

The contract gives the nascent Root Creek Water District, which would serve Gateway Village and surrounding farmland, the right to buy up to 7,000 acre-feet of water per year. That is more than what the project is expected to use in a typical year, Krueger said.

"So in a dry year, you have 100% backup?" Commissioner Larry Wright asked.

"That is right," Krueger replied.

Also, to compensate for air pollution from the project, the builder has agreed to spend about \$2.5 million on pollution-control measures, such as replacing obsolete diesel engines throughout the Valley.

Nevertheless, the commission followed its staff's recommendation and ruled that the project will have unavoidable effects on air quality, loss of farmland, traffic and noise levels, and would contribute to urban sprawl. It then decided that the project's benefits-- including new housing, jobs and increased tax revenues -- would be significant enough to justify approval anyway.

Krueger said that the start of construction will depend on the supervisors' vote and whether there are any further legal challenges. If not, he said, detailed design work and preparation of the first subdivision maps could begin later this year.

"We'll be at least another year in definitive planning before we're ready to break ground," he said.

County to step into dispute over proposed ethanol plant

BY JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, May 27 2007

A duel over the environmental impacts of a proposed ethanol plant at Famoso Road and Highway 99 goes public Tuesday.

Kern County supervisors will review the project and a challenge from a Fresno attorney during their Tuesday afternoon meeting.

Cilion Inc., a Goshen company, has proposed construction of the plant.

It will use corn to distill 55 million gallons a year of high-powered grain alcohol that will be used as a fuel additive to create clean-burning fuels.

Fresno attorney Richard Harriman, known locally for helping to derail two local Wal-Mart supercenters, claims the environmental report that clears the Cilion plant for approval is flawed.

Harriman has claimed the air quality impacts of an existing Cilion feed plant, located next to the proposed ethanol plant, were not considered as part of the larger project.

Cilion attorney Timothy Jones states, in a May 11 letter, that the feed plant was approved by the county separately and its environmental impacts were studied at that time.

County staff are recommending the supervisors approve the plant.

Noise ordinance

Supervisors also will look over a proposed construction noise ordinance Tuesday afternoon.

The ordinance, a new step for the county, would prohibit construction noise within 1,000 feet of homes between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Complaints from residents of the North Meadows area of Oildale about early morning construction of a nearby apartment complex triggered drafting of the ordinance.

How to go

The Kern County Board of Supervisors meets at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesday at the county administrative center, 1115 Truxtun Ave., across N Street from the Rabobank Arena downtown.

You can also watch the meeting live on KGOV, the county's local cable television station. Available channels are listed at www.co.kern.ca.us/gsd/KGOV <<http://www.co.kern.ca.us/gsd/KGOV>>.

The board's agenda as well as some background materials are available online at www.co.kern.ca.us/bos <<http://www.co.kern.ca.us/bos>>.

Corrections

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 25, 2007

- A story in Thursday's Sun-Star about agricultural burning contained incorrect information.

Burning prunings from almond orchards will be permitted until 2010. It is only the burning of orchard removals of more than 20 acres that is restricted (removals of any size citrus, apple, pear, quince and fig orchard can still be burned until 2010).

Rule would clean up polluting off-road vehicles

By SAMANTHA YOUNG, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, May 24, 2007

SACRAMENTO, (AP) -- State air quality regulators on Friday will consider a sweeping mandate that would clean up or replace some of the most polluting equipment driven at construction sites, airports and ski resorts.

The proposal - which would be the toughest in the nation - would require owners of the diesel-fueled equipment to begin transforming their fleets as soon as 2010 to help California clean up its smoggy skies.

If the new rules are adopted, equipment such as backhoes, forklifts, snowcats and airport baggage trucks would have to be retrofitted with pollution filters or new engines or replaced with newer, cleaner machines.

The pollution targets would eclipse all diesel emission regulations adopted by the Air Resources Board since 2000, part of a state diesel strategy to reduce toxic air pollutants known as particulate matter and nitrogen oxide, which are blamed for thousands of premature deaths each year.

"This by far is the largest diesel rule ever undertaken," said Diane Bailey, a scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco. "Nobody writes air pollution on the death certificate, but the fact is it is responsible for thousands of deaths in California."

Regulators have spent the past three years attempting to strike a compromise between the positions taken by environmentalists and public health advocates, who argue for tougher limits, and the

construction industry and rural governments, which fear the price tag is too much to ask in a short time frame.

The board had planned to vote on the regulations at Friday's meeting in San Diego, but delayed action until July. Instead of voting Friday, it will take testimony, giving both sides more time to argue for changes to the rules.

At the heart of the issue is how quickly businesses and local governments can reasonably upgrade 180,000 off-road vehicles that run on diesel engines, which by design were built to last for more than 30 years and aren't replaced as quickly as other diesel-powered vehicles.

Construction officials said the cost to the companies and government agencies that own the equipment would top \$13 billion, ten times the price estimated by regulators to lower the ozone-eating nitrogen dioxide and soot-forming particulate matter over 21 years.

"We don't think there's enough money in the construction industry or enough capacity in the manufacturing industry to make those replacements," said Mike Lewis, executive vice president of the industry-based Construction Industry Air Quality Coalition.

While some of the technology exists - in large part because of new federal engine standards - filters and retrofits for old equipment might be hard to come by, Lewis said.

Industry officials also say the proposed regulations would increase the price of road and other construction projects.

The construction industry - which operates about half of the vehicles that would be regulated - plan to ask the board to give it another five years, until 2025 for large fleets, to comply with the new pollution standards.

Bulldozers, backhoes and other kinds of off-road vehicles comprise the state's second-largest source of diesel-generated particulate pollution, a toxic group of soot, ash and other compounds that embed themselves deep in lung tissues. Trucks and buses are the biggest source.

According to more than 20 years of research, the two pollutants - particulate matter and nitrogen oxide - lead to premature death and increased asthma and heart attacks, said Dr. Tony Gerber, a pulmonologist and assistant professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. Asthma patients routinely list diesel exhaust - from driving behind a truck or passing a construction site - as a trigger of respiratory attacks, he said.

If adopted later this summer, the new standards are projected to prevent 4,000 premature deaths, 110,000 asthma-related cases, 680,000 lost work days and 9,200 cases of acute bronchitis over 20 years, according to an analysis by the board.

The requirements would also save up to \$26 billion in health care costs by 2030, according to the board's projections.

By 2030, the board estimates that the tighter controls would cut nitrogen dioxide by 187,000 tons and particulate matter by 33,000 tons. Such aggressive reductions would help the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California meet federal air standards.

The proposed rules do not impose specific emission requirements on individual machines, but set an average pollution target for entire fleets each year. Small companies and some rural counties would face looser requirements than large industrial fleets with more horsepower.

State air board to hear arguments on diesel rule

By Samantha Young, Associated Press
Contra Costa Times, Friday, May 25, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- State air quality regulators today will consider a sweeping mandate that would clean up or replace some of the most polluting equipment driven at construction sites, airports and ski resorts.

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The board had planned to vote on the regulations at today's meeting in San Diego but delayed action until July. Instead of voting today, it will take testimony, giving both sides more time to argue for changes to the rules.

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The requirements also would save as much as \$26 billion in health care costs by 2030, according to the board's projections.

Does planting trees offset our emissions?

By Michael Hill, Associated Press Writer
Hanford Sentinel, May 28, 2007

ALBANY, N.Y. - If you plant some trees, is it OK to drive an Escalade?

The question isn't as silly as it sounds. People worried about global warming increasingly are trying to "offset" the carbon dioxide - the leading greenhouse gas - they spew into the atmosphere when they drive, fly or flick on a light. One idea popular with the eco-conscious is to have trees planted for them. You get to keep driving and flying, but those trees are supposed to suck in your trail of carbon.

Whole forests have been funded by tree-loving celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and Coldplay, and more modest packages tailored to typical consumers are proliferating.

But some researchers say planting trees - while a good thing - is at best a marginal solution to global warming. Still others decry tree planters who continue to jet off to Cannes, drive their SUVs or generally fail to reduce their fuel-hungry lifestyle. To those critics, plantings and other carbon offsets are like the medieval practice of selling indulgences to wash away sins: It may feel good, but it doesn't solve much.

"The sale of offset indulgences is a dead-end detour off the path of action required in the face of climate change," says a report by the Transnational Institute's Carbon Trade Watch.

Groups that offer tree offsets typically rely on Web calculators requiring users to type in how many miles they drive, how much electricity they use and how far they fly. Figure out how much CO₂ someone is responsible for (output), compare it to the work average trees can do (input), and you have a formula for neutralizing a person's "carbon footprint."

While the band Coldplay famously funded 10,000 mango trees in India to soak up emissions related to the production of a CD, the average consumer can get off far easier. For \$40, Trees for the Future will plant 400 trees in a developing country to handle your car emissions. In June, Delta Air Lines will allow online ticket buyers to help offset emissions of their flights through tree plantings in the U.S. and abroad: \$5.50 for domestic round trips, \$11 for international.

"It's easy to do and it makes a big difference," said Jena Thompson of the Conservation Fund, Delta's partner and one of many groups that will plant trees on your behalf.

The science is sound: Trees take in carbon dioxide as part of photosynthesis and store the carbon. But even conservationists caution it's not as simple as planting a sapling so you can crank up the air conditioning without guilt.

Offset groups use averages to estimate how much carbon a given tree or forested acre can capture. For instance, the nonprofit Conservation Fund figures that each tree planted captures less than 1 1/2 tons over 100 years.

To put that in perspective, consider that about 7.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide was produced from the burning of fossil fuels worldwide in 2003, the most recent estimate available.

And how much carbon dioxide a tree can soak up varies, said John Kadyszewski of Winrock International, a nonprofit that works on environmental projects. A huge California redwood might have 30 tons of carbon stored while a 100-year-old pine might have less than a ton.

"Trees are all different," said Kadyszewski, coordinator for ecosystem services for Winrock, "and the amount of carbon in the tree depends on how old it is and where it's growing and what kind of tree it is."

Kadyszewski notes that most of the calculators use conservative numbers, meaning they're not likely to exaggerate benefits. The Conservation Fund and Carbonfund.org both say they plant more than enough trees to deliver on promised offsets.

There are other potential problems, however. Some researchers suggest forests in the snowy North might actually increase local warming by absorbing sunlight that would otherwise be reflected into space. And dead, decaying trees release some of that captured carbon back into the atmosphere.

Maybe most importantly, some researchers say it's simply not possible to plant enough trees to have a significant effect on global warming.

Michael MacCracken, chief scientist at the nonpartisan Climate Institute in Washington, said tree-planting has value as a stopgap measure while society attempts to reduce greenhouse gases. But University of Victoria climate scientist Andrew Weaver fears tree offsets could steal the focus of a problem that requires technological advances and behavioral changes.

"The danger is that you could actually think you're solving a problem," Weaver said. "It makes you feel good. It makes you feel warm and fuzzy, like changing a couple of light bulbs. But the reality is it's not going to have a significant effect."

Eric Carlson of the tree-planting nonprofit Carbonfund.org notes that his group does not promote trees as the only solution to climate change. And he bristles when critics focus on the perceived hypocrisies of the jet-setting, tree-planting rich people.

He fears the indulgence argument shifts the focus from what normal, everyday people can do to fight global warming: Cut down on electricity and gasoline use, support renewable energy and, yes, plant trees.

"You can find pluses and minuses to all the offset options," Carlson said, "but the worst thing is to do nothing."

Lawmakers want more than governor proposed for high-speed rail

By STEVE LAWRENCE - Associated Press Writer
Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 24, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- Two legislative budget subcommittees want to give California's high-speed rail project significantly more money than proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

But Schwarzenegger will have the final word in determining if the 700-mile, \$40 billion project stays on track.

An Assembly subcommittee on Wednesday approved \$55.2 million for the state's high-speed rail board, which is overseeing planning for a system that would link the state's major cities with trains running at top speeds of more than 200 mph. The day before, a Senate subcommittee authorized \$45.2 million for the board.

Schwarzenegger has proposed \$5.2 million, despite a recent op-ed column in which he said high-speed rail would be a "tremendous benefit" that would help relieve freeway congestion, improve air quality and create greater mobility.

On Thursday, Mehdi Morshed, the board's executive director, said the money proposed by the subcommittees could provide enough funding to keep the project on track and allow some construction to begin within three years.

He said the board was considering how best to spend the additional money, assuming it remains in the final budget signed by the Republican governor.

"We still have the potential of keeping the project on target rather than closing it down and saying that's the end of the line," he said. "There is a huge difference" between the legislative proposals and the governor's offering.

The board asked for a \$104.2 million budget for the 2007-08 fiscal year, including \$66 million for engineering and environmental work and \$37 million to buy rights-of-way that could be threatened by other development.

A spokesman for Schwarzenegger, H.D. Palmer, said the governor wants to see a "comprehensive financing plan" before deciding whether to commit more money to the project. The board is working on one.

Most of the high-speed rail money in the governor's budget plan - \$3.5 million - would come from the Orange County Transportation Authority but only if the state puts up a like amount for high-speed rail work between Anaheim and Los Angeles.

Differences between the Assembly and Senate's budget proposals will be worked out by a conference committee made up of lawmakers from both houses, but Schwarzenegger will get the final say on how much the board receives.

Under a plan adopted by the board this week, the first segment of the 700-mile system would run from Anaheim to San Francisco via Los Angeles and Fresno. Later links would take the trains to San Diego and Sacramento.

Adding Anaheim to the first segment is a new wrinkle. Lawmakers already placed a \$9.9 billion bond measure on the November 2008 ballot to help pay for the segment between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Planners hope to get the rest of the money from the federal government and private investors.

Assemblyman Jose Solorio, D-Santa Ana, has introduced legislation that would allow the bond funds to be used on the Anaheim-to-Los Angeles stretch, as well.

Board officials say adding Anaheim, a popular destination because of Disneyland and other attractions, would boost ridership.

Merced accused of favoring Wal-Mart

Opposition group uses e-mail from city staffer as evidence

By LESLIE ALBRECHT-MERCED SUN-STAR
in the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, May 29, 2007

The group fighting a proposed Wal-Mart distribution center in southeast Merced says it's uncovered evidence that city staff could be biased in favor of the controversial project.

The Stop Wal-Mart Action Team says e-mail it obtained with a public records request shows a city staff member promoting the distribution center project. The group claims other internal documents reveal that Wal-Mart chose Merced for its 1.2 million-square-foot distribution center because the project would be "an easy sell" to local leaders.

"It seems like Wal-Mart is predestined almost to come into Merced based on some of those documents, which we know shouldn't be the case," said Dylan Kenny, a member of SWAT who presented the group's findings to the Merced City Council last week.

SWAT cites an e-mail from Planning Manager Kim Espinosa to other city staff that reads: "Not everyone hates Wal-Mart. See the above article." Attached is an article titled "In Praise of Wal-Mart."

"This certainly doesn't help our confidence that the city is going to be neutral," said Nick Robinson, an organizer for Wal-Mart Alliance for Reform Now, a Florida-based group that's been helping local opposition to the distribution center. "We think the city's role should be to protect the health and welfare of the people who live here and not maintain the operational integrity of the largest corporation in the world."

Opponents of the Wal-Mart distribution center say the 450 diesel trucks that would serve the center daily would worsen Merced's poor air quality. Supporters say it would eventually provide 900 jobs. The center is undergoing environmental review. The City Council likely will vote on it this fall.

Espinosa said SWAT took her e-mail out of context. She said she's sent out hundreds of e-mails about the Wal-Mart project. Among them are local news articles, letters to the editor, and letters to the City Council raising concerns about the distribution center. Most of those messages include negative opinions on the project, she said.

"If you saw the rest of the e-mails that go out, the vast majority of them are, 'We don't like this, we don't like that,' Espinosa said. "... So I made the rather innocent comment, 'Here's something positive.'"

Wal-Mart says SWAT misinterpreting

In a memo to the City Council, SWAT called the e-mail "grossly inappropriate" and asked for assurance that staff members don't use "city time ... seeking out propoganda or arguments for or against the project."

Espinosa said she did not seek out the article; it was on the front page of the MSN.com Web site when she logged on to the Internet.

SWAT also took issue with a list of possible alternative sites for the Wal-Mart distribution center. Before Wal-Mart selected a 275-acre parcel between Gerard and Childs avenues west of Tower Road, the company considered nine other cities. SWAT says a list of those cities and the reasons why they were ruled out shows that Wal-Mart selected Merced because it would see relatively little opposition here.

Wal-Mart rejected five of the 10 cities on the list because "political issues made entitlement difficult," according to the document SWAT obtained. "Entitlement" refers to city zoning permits required to build the distribution center. The cities listed are Livingston, Delhi, Escalon, Oakdale and Tracy.

"Presumably, these cities have a city council and/or city staff that is unwilling to compromise the health and welfare of their residents," said SWAT's memo to the City Council.

Wal-Mart spokesman Keith Morris said SWAT is misinterpreting the phrase "political issues." Merced was selected because it offered the only site that met key criteria for Wal-Mart: it's near the highway,

it won't require trucks to travel through residential neighborhoods or downtown, and, most importantly, the site is already zoned for industrial use, Morris said.

"If we go to a site and it's zoned ag or commercial, that's a huge issue because then the debate becomes why would we rezone this just for this use," Morris said. "It has nothing to do with, if we go to Livingston would we have the votes there, or does the council like us there."

SWAT has asked city staff to respond in writing to its questions and claims by the June 4 council meeting. Espinosa said the city is preparing a response.

Councilman Jim Sanders said he appreciated the group's presentations. But he said the documents SWAT had presented to the council were "almost like hearsay, because you don't know the context."

Sanders said he'll make his decision on Wal-Mart based on his own research.

"When it comes down to a decision about a business coming here that promises jobs, I want to make sure those promises come true and they're not just pie in the sky," Sanders said.

Councilman Bill Spriggs said he'd read SWAT's memo to the council, but found little to concern him.

"The decision we'll make is purely based on what are the environmental consequences of this development and can they sufficiently mitigate those negative consequences," Spriggs said.

Vegetable oil powers Hummer

Half Moon Bay auto repair shop owner converts cars to run on alternative fuels

By Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, May 29, 2007

HALF MOON BAY - Dave Eck is used to getting flipped off by locals who think his H-1 Hummer is a typical gas guzzler.

"I get people giving me trouble all the time - until they see the stickers on my windows that say it runs on veggie oil. Then I get the thumbs up," said Eck, the 15-year proprietor of Half Moon Bay Auto Repair Shop.

For an auto shop owner, Eck's attitude toward the environment is surprisingly green. A certified "model pollution prevention shop" by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, Eck has made it the garage's policy to recycle everything - including antifreeze, all metal parts, catalytic converters and even used motor oil.

In spite of these accomplishments, the garage is as practical and unassuming as Eck himself. The only sign that something different is afoot is a faded green decal from the DTSC stuck to the front door.

That's until you visit the back of the garage, and notice a propane pump and several tanks of vegetable oil lining the edge of the parking lot. The propane, one of America's earliest alternative fuel and still its most widely used one, is pumped into cars, tractors, forklifts and motor homes that stop by Eck's shop.

The veggie oil is for his family's own use. His son, his daughter and her husband have 6 or 7 vehicles between them that Eck converted to run on veggie oil, from an orange Volkswagen Rabbit to a 2006 Dodge pickup truck. He picks up the veggie oil, mostly recycled fryer oil and animal grease, once a week as a free service to several local restaurants. Then he adds the clean-burning fuel to his Hummer and the other cars, which he has fitted with several external heaters that transform the viscous grease into usable fuel.

Both types of fuel get mileage comparable to gasoline or diesel. But the expense of converting one's car to use either veggie oil or propane - which runs up to \$3,000 - can be prohibitive for some car owners, said Eck. And there's not enough outside incentive to change.

"If they raise gas prices to \$7 or \$8 a gallon, people would start talking about alternative fuels and stop polluting the world," he said. "We've got to get the smog down, the pollution, and the cars are the biggest thing. The government's working on it, but they're not working fast enough."

Eck, 54, taught himself to convert a gasoline-based car to run on propane 20 years ago when he oversaw maintenance for forklifts, trucks and tractors running on propane at a local flower nursery.

He opened his shop with his son and daughter in the early 1990s and has since converted a handful of customer's cars to run on propane.

One customer who stops by on a regular basis to fill up his with propane is Half Moon Bay resident Don Freese, whose 1972 Lincoln Mark IV was converted in 1991. Hunching next to his rear fender Thursday at Eck's garage, Freese pointed to a large propane tank under his car that had replaced his gas tank. He loaded the propane pump into a special spout under his license plate. A regulator installed under the hood of his car pumps hot water around the machine, turning the propane gas into liquid.

Eck said he converted his car to propane after the 1970s gas crisis convinced him of the importance of alternative fuels.

"This is an old technology. In the 1920s, you couldn't find a farm without a propane tank, because they were running their tractors on it. That's one of the reasons I was attracted to it- it's already proven," said Freese.

Propane is the most popular alternative fuel in the U.S., with more than 200,000 propane vehicles in the United States and about 9 million worldwide, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. It's available at more than 3,000 propane fueling stations across the country, including most U-Haul facilities.

But the best part of using propane, Freese said, is its green appeal. Propane vehicles can produce 60 percent less carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides than gasoline, according to the Department of Energy.

"It's what's not coming out the tailpipe that makes the difference. I like to live, and if we don't do something to clean up the air, it won't be anything but hospital bills," Freese joked.

As alternative fuels go, Eck believes propane is more promising than veggie oil because a distribution system is already in place and the price runs similar to gasoline- \$3.15 to \$3.50 per gallon.

"Right now, people don't know about it," said Eck, who regularly discusses alternative fuels with his customers. If they can't reduce the smog their cars create, he encourages them to replace them with something newer and smarter.

"We breathe these fumes in our shop everyday. It's horrible," he said.

U.S. balks at climate statement

Objections snag paper set to be OK'd at G-8 summit

Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post

In the S.F. Chronicle, Saturday, May 26, 2007

U.S. officials have raised a second round of bluntly worded objections to a proposed global warming declaration that Germany prepared for next month's G-8 summit, according to documents obtained by the Washington Post.

Representatives from the world's leading industrial nations met Thursday and Friday in Heiligendamm, Germany, to negotiate over German Chancellor Angela Merkel's proposed statement, which calls for limiting the worldwide temperature increase this century to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit and cutting global greenhouse gas emissions to 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Bush administration officials -- who raised similar objections in April -- rejected the idea of setting mandatory emissions targets, as well as language calling for G-8 nations to raise the overall energy efficiencies of their countries by 20 percent by 2020.

With less than two weeks left, said sources familiar with the talks, the climate document remains the only unresolved issue in the statements the world leaders are expected to sign at the June 6-8 summit.

"The U.S. still has serious, fundamental concerns about this draft statement," a U.S. government paper dated May 14 states. "The treatment of climate change runs counter to our overall position and crosses multiple 'red lines' in terms of what we simply cannot agree to. ... We have tried to 'read lightly,' but there is only so far we can go, given our fundamental opposition to the German position."

The most recent draft, dated Thursday, shows that the two sides remain at loggerheads. While Germany has offered to alter language identifying a 3.6 degree Fahrenheit rise in global temperature as a dangerous tipping point and instead accept a Russian proposal that targets a range of from 2.7 to 4.5 degrees, the United States has yet to accept the modified language.

The United States also remains opposed to a statement that reads, "We acknowledge that the U.N. climate process is an appropriate forum for negotiating future global action on climate change."

Negotiators also are debating language that calls for improving energy efficiency in the transportation sector over the next 13 years by at least 20 percent, compared to 2005.

Kristen Hellmer, spokeswoman for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said Friday that "the discussions are ongoing, and what's important is what is in the final document."

President Bush has consistently called for the development of advanced technology to help meet the country's energy needs and cut global warming pollution without imposing a mandatory cap on emissions.

California says no to coal, but world disagrees

Dirty but plentiful energy source seen as oil alternative

Robert Collier, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 28, 2007

California took its final step toward weaning itself off coal last week, while the rest of the nation-- and the world -- continued going resolutely in the opposite direction, one that environmentalists say bodes ill for the fight against global warming.

On Wednesday, the California Energy Commission announced rules that bar municipal utilities from signing new contracts with coal-fired power plants. Combined with a similar step announced in January aimed at investor-owned utilities, this move means California is bucking a largely unpublicized trend toward generating electricity with coal, the dirtiest energy source of all.

"We're moving to free the state from coal and move to a clean-energy future, which voters have shown they want," said Claudia Chandler, spokeswoman for the Energy Commission.

But coal has powerful supporters throughout the nation, and environmentalists are gearing up for what they say will be a major fight over whether the nation turns toward coal as a means of reducing its addiction to imported fuels.

"Coal is a dirty power source and getting dirtier, and we need to find cleaner sources of energy rather than always going down the dinosaur path of coal," said Rebecca Tarbotton, who directs a campaign by Rainforest Action Network of San Francisco that is pressuring banks like Wells Fargo and Bank of America to stop financing coal-fired power plants.

The lure of coal is seductive. As a source for electricity generation, coal costs one-sixth the amount of natural gas, and its supplies are seemingly limitless. The United States has larger coal reserves than any other country, enough for about 236 years at current usage levels.

In Congress, Democratic and Republican lawmakers from coal states like West Virginia, Kentucky, Montana and Illinois are advocating a crash program to develop coal-to-liquids, in which coal is converted into synthetic gasoline or diesel. Even presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., is a supporter, although he recently bowed to environmentalists by saying he backs only the most experimental coal technologies that emit less greenhouse gases than gasoline-- and are much more expensive.

"I believe that fuel derived from coal will be the most beneficial fuel source for our country over the next 20 years," said Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo. "Those who ignore coal-to-liquids are only helping the Middle East oil giants and hurting American families stuck with costly fuel bills."

Opponents of coal-to-liquids include Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee. "When I say alternative fuels, that's a reason to step back and say, 'Well, what are you talking about?' I am not talking about coal-to-liquids," Boxer said last month. "I'm talking about clean alternative fuels. We don't want to go backward."

California already is less coal dependent than the rest of the nation, with only 20 percent of its electricity generated by coal, while the figure for the rest of the country is 50 percent.

Over the past five years, coal consumption by the electric power industry has risen by 1 percent a year. But because power plants take about five years to build, the Bush administration's pro-coal policies are finally bearing fruit. Utilities nationwide are building or obtaining permits for 94 coal-fired projects and are planning as many as 65 more, intended to generate enough power for nearly 100 million homes.

Much of this growth is fueled by federal subsidies, such as an Agriculture Department loan program to rural electric cooperatives that is financing the construction of \$35 billion in conventional coal plants over the next decade.

Internationally, the trend is even starker.

A study published last week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed that the rate of growth of greenhouse gas emissions has tripled in recent years, with most of that increase coming from coal.

China was largely responsible for this growth, with 51 percent of the world's emissions growth after 2000 coming from that country alone, the data showed. While China in the 1990s was becoming progressively more energy efficient and was switching toward imported oil and natural gas, the country's sudden shift after 2001 toward using its huge coal reserves has sent energy consumption and global warming emissions soaring to previously unimagined heights.

China is currently speeding ahead with a huge program of coal power generation, building more than one large coal-fired plant per week, most of which use antiquated equipment that spews out huge amounts of greenhouse gases. China is also constructing its first major coal-to-liquids plant, and the government is planning to produce 1 million barrels of coal-to-liquids a day by 2020.

Many environmentalists and energy experts say the United States and other industrialized nations should greatly expand programs to help China adopt cleaner-burning coal technologies.

On Thursday, U.S.-China negotiations in Washington yielded a modest agreement in this regard, in which Washington will provide China with energy-auditing software that it can use to curb industrial energy consumption and [air pollution](#).

"We did gain some significant ground with the Chinese in the area of energy and the environment," said Katharine Fredriksen, the Energy Department's principal deputy assistant secretary for policy and international affairs.

The Bush administration's main coal technology recipe for home and abroad is FutureGen, a \$500 million, 10-year program that is intended to perfect the cleanest version of coal-generating technology, in which coal is converted into a gas and the carbon dioxide is siphoned off and pumped into depleted oil and natural-gas formations underground. Scientists say the program will allow huge amounts of greenhouse gases to be permanently removed from the atmosphere.

"This is extremely relevant for China and other nations that use large amounts of coal, as we do," said Joseph Strakey, head of the Strategic Center for Coal at the National Energy Technology Laboratory in Pittsburgh, which manages FutureGen.

However, many experts believe the commercialization of FutureGen's technology would require market incentives such as a cap or tax on carbon emissions to counterbalance the expense of coal gasification and underground storage, which would add at least 30 percent to operating costs of the cleanest-burning coal plants. The Bush administration has opposed proposals for a carbon cap or tax, saying they would overburden the nation's economy.

Another factor is safety -- to ensure that carbon dioxide will not seep out of the underground formations in quantities potentially lethal for people on the surface.

One of the Energy Department's large-scale tests is a California program called WestCarb, in which significant amounts of carbon dioxide will be pumped into depleted gas wells near the San Joaquin County town of Thornton.

"We are extremely confident that we know what we know. But it's not just a number of scientists agreeing that in their opinion it's OK to do this. You need to demonstrate it to the public," said Larry

Myer, staff scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and technical director for WestCarb.
"This can and should be started today, here and around the world."

Sprawl clashes with warming in California

Mark Martin, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau
S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, May 27, 2007

Sacramento -- California's pioneering push to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is colliding with one of the state's most ingrained legacies: urban sprawl.

In litigation and legislation, environmentalists, lawmakers and Attorney General Jerry Brown are using a landmark law enacted last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to argue that the state must rethink the kind of immense and far-flung housing developments that have defined California land-use patterns for decades.

The global warming fight has given new ammunition to the battle against sprawl, which detractors argue creates more cars on the road and energy use and is therefore a key ingredient in the climate-change crisis that threatens the California coastline and snowpack.

The need to rein in sprawl has not received much attention from Schwarzenegger, who has garnered international attention as he has talked about creating more efficient cars, boosting solar power, and developing new carbon-trading markets for industry. But experts, including the governor's own climate advisers, argue that changing how housing is developed is key to meeting the emissions reductions that AB32 calls for.

Those changes, aimed at nothing less than altering how and where Californians live and encouraging a car-crazy state to drive less, may be the most profound-- and difficult -- challenge for the state's global warming fight.

"This is just a preliminary step in the turbulent waters of AB32," Brown said.

Last month, the newly elected attorney general filed an unusual lawsuit against San Bernardino County over the county's recently adopted 25-year growth plan.

Brown accuses the Inland Empire county of failing to consider how growth and new development will impact climate change, suggesting the passage last year of AB32 requires that the county detail strategies to help limit the growth of carbon emissions as it contemplates how to accommodate an expected 25 percent increase in population. Brown has asked a state superior court judge to require the county to redo its general plan, account for the amount of greenhouse gas emissions new developments could create, and provide strategies for lessening those emissions or mitigating them.

The lawsuit could have significant impacts on Bay Area counties and outlying bedroom communities as they develop long-term growth plans. Brown said he would be watching other counties and would sue them as well if they didn't consider ways to help alleviate global warming.

"We can no longer pretend that carbon emissions don't exist," Brown said. "This is a plan that won't be changed again until 2030, and to not have a word in it about climate change is ignoring a very real problem."

The lawsuit is one of at least seven around the state using the global warming threat to challenge building or planning proposals by developers and local governments. Targets include proposals to build an 11,000-home development in Lathrop in the delta, a 2,600-home development in Riverside County, and a facility that would make agricultural compost in San Bernardino County.

Brown and the groups behind the other lawsuits argue that state environmental review laws require planners to calculate the effects on climate change that a project or general growth plan would have, and to attempt to mitigate them.

"Given the obvious impacts of climate change on California, we felt the time was right to push the issue into litigation," said Julie Teel, an attorney for the Center on Biological Diversity, which is behind four of the lawsuits.

Defendants argue, however, that the lawsuits are asking them to consider an issue they've never considered before, and one that isn't legally required.

"There is no requirement that general plans account for greenhouse gases," said David Wert, a spokesman for San Bernardino County.

"We think these lawsuits are way ahead of the game," noted Tim Coyle of the California Building Industry Association, a lobbying group for home builders.

But the lawsuits broach a topic that virtually every climate-change expert in California agrees on: Sprawl is contributing to global warming.

"We have to address land use to reach the AB32 targets," said Dan Skopec, undersecretary of the governor's Environmental Protection Agency.

The problem is this: Low-density housing developments built far from where people work, and far from public transportation, increase everything from the energy use generated to bring water to outlying areas to the amount of miles people drive in their cars. Brown's lawsuit against San Bernardino, which is one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, notes that the current population logs 28 million miles per day in vehicles.

The answer to this, many agree, is to change land development patterns to encourage more high-density housing near public transportation and employment centers to get people out of their cars.

Jackalyne Pfannenstiel, chairwoman of the California Energy Commission, noted that the state has pursued laws to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars, ratcheted up regulations requiring more energy-efficient buildings and homes, and initiated efforts to increase the use of renewable power.

"But while all of these different pieces of the global warming puzzle are being addressed, we also need to look at the system as a whole," said Pfannenstiel, who is heading a group of state officials looking at land-use issues and global warming for Schwarzenegger.

According to projections compiled by the Bay Area's Transportation and Land Use Coalition, statewide emissions from automobiles will continue to rise during the next two decades even with cleaner-burning gasoline and more efficient cars, because of population growth and continuing sprawl.

"You can have more efficient cars and houses, but until we get to a point where people don't have to drive to do anything, from buying a loaf of bread to going to work, we won't be truly addressing climate change," Pfannenstiel said.

Speaking at a climate change conference in Santa Barbara in March, Pfannenstiel declared that the state needed a cultural revolution when it came to land-use planning.

In Sacramento, reforming land-use planning is likely to be one of the most contentious issues of the year.

Legislation by state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, would require state regulators to set emissions reduction targets in each region of the state, and would restrict some transportation funds from going to regions that don't develop growth plans that discourage sprawl and encourage development centered around public transportation and job centers. The idea behind SB375, Steinberg said, was to reward regions that meet their new housing needs in a way that doesn't lead to dramatic increases in the amount people drive.

"We need to get people out of cars, and if they're in cars, it needs to be for a shorter period of time," he said.

Steinberg's bill has advanced through two committees in the Senate and faces another hearing in the Senate Appropriations committee this week. With the backing of Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, it seems likely to eventually pass out of the Senate.

But whether the bill will clear the state Assembly and win support from Schwarzenegger remains unclear. The governor has not taken a position on the bill, which is opposed by developers groups and faces skepticism from local government officials. Those groups have significant influence in the Legislature and with Schwarzenegger.

Bill Huggins, a lobbyist with the League of California Cities, noted that cities support the idea of reducing sprawl but are concerned with more restrictions from the state. He noted past emphasis on things like providing more affordable housing may conflict with new efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"Local governments often end up dealing with how to reconcile all of the different demands," he said.

Cancer risk rises for those near rail yards

A study says Commerce neighborhoods near several major facilities face a greater threat from diesel soot than residents elsewhere.

By Janet Wilson, Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Friday, May 25, 2007

Residents who live in the shadow of Southern California's booming rail yards face cancer risks from soot as much as 140% greater than in the rest of the region, according to new studies by state air regulators.

In addition, clouds of diesel exhaust blown by the wind from the rail yards blanket wide swaths of Greater Los Angeles, upping annual cancer risks slightly for millions more residents.

"The risks are much higher than they ought to be, and we need to do everything we can to reduce them," said Michael Scheible, deputy executive officer of the California Air Resources Board.

The health risk assessments, which were released in draft form this week, were prepared as part of a voluntary agreement between the nation's two largest railroads and the state air board. Such assessments have been done only once before in California, at a Roseville rail yard.

Hardest hit in the region are neighborhoods in Commerce that are near one Union Pacific and three BNSF yards. Residents in the tidy, working-class neighborhoods of Bandini and Ayers-Leonis are 70% to 140% more likely to contract cancer from diesel soot than people in the rest of Los Angeles. Regulators said some homes are only a few feet from rail-yard fence lines, and there are schools and parks near the yards, which operate around the clock 365 days a year.

Other rail yards and neighborhoods covered by the initial round of studies include Union Pacific's Los Angeles Transportation Center, Mira Loma near Union Pacific's yard in Riverside County and a BNSF facility in Wilmington. In those places, residents are 11% to 26% more likely to contract cancer from soot.

Railroad officials said the studies showed that the rail yards produce less than 1% of the region's diesel particulate emissions. But they said they were concerned about their contribution to local health risks and were spending millions of dollars to slash emissions in coming years with hundreds of new locomotives, anti-idling devices, cleaner fuels and other measures.

"We're certainly part of the issue," said Lanny Schmid, director of Union Pacific's environmental programs. "We like to think we're a small part of the issue, and we're going to get it even smaller."

But angry, anxious Commerce residents and others who were informed of the higher health risks at a City Hall briefing Wednesday night said faster action was needed. They also were disturbed that risks of respiratory disease, asthma and impaired lung function - all shown in numerous studies to increase with exposure to diesel soot - were not included in the health assessments.

"We need to figure out what we can do now, right now," said Commerce Mayor Robert Fierro, who added that as a schoolteacher he regularly received absentee notes for children who have suffered from asthma attacks or bronchitis.

"We've lived in Commerce since the 1950s, and I come from a family of four generations of asthma in the home," resident Nancy Ramos said. "My 4-year-old grandson is already dealing with asthma, including two ambulance visits."

"Quite honestly it's laughable" not to include health risks such as asthma and respiratory disease, said Ian MacMillan, who conducts similar health risk studies for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Scheible said state health guidelines, which were prepared in the late 1980s, don't call for non-cancer health risks to be included, and, he said, they are more difficult to assess accurately. But he said that if enough people wanted officials to try, they would see if it could be done for the final reports.

The analyses showed that in addition to locomotives, giant cranes, refrigerated cars and aging short-haul trucks contribute to diesel emissions in the yards.

Trucks on nearby freeways and busy streets also add risk. The Commerce yards, for instance, spewed out a combined 40 tons of soot in 2005, while short-haul trucks on nearby streets put out about 113 tons.

Modeling and weather data used in the study showed that lower levels of soot spread for miles from the yards. The Union Pacific Los Angeles facility, which is less than a mile from downtown, spread a fine blanket of soot as much as four miles east and north of the facility, increasing cancer risk for 1.2 million residents by an average 10 chances in a million.

A past study has shown that cancer risks are highest at the ports that feed the rail yards.

But activists and local air regulators said the elevated cancer risks near the yards were "extremely high" compared with those near refineries and other "stationary sources," which are tightly regulated.

Allowable levels of risk from factories and other industrial sources are between 10 and 25 chances per million in the Los Angeles air basin, said South Coast Air Quality Management District spokesman Sam Atwood. Railroads claim exemption from local and state air pollution laws under interstate commerce clauses.

"Living next to a rail yard is like having a factory with 100 smokestacks going all the time," said Angelo Logan, head of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice.

Mark Stehly, assistant vice president of environmental for BNSF, said it was unfair to compare factories with rail yards because locomotives and other mobile equipment cannot be fitted with the same types of heavy, high-volume emission control devices as factories.

"For [a rail yard] to be treated as a stationary source, it's appealing in its simplicity, but it's really not true. They are mobile sources," he said.

Additional meetings will be held on the studies in the next two months. The study findings are at <http://www.arb.ca.gov/railyard/hra/hra.htm>

Motorists driven to Mexican fuel

The cost of a fill-up south of the border can be 25% less than in the U.S. But some say cheaper gasoline may not be a bargain.

By Marla Dickerson and Elizabeth Douglass, Times Staff Writers
L.A. Times, Saturday, May 26, 2007

TIJUANA - U.S. motorists are flocking to gas pumps south of the border to save 25% or more on the cost of a fill-up - courtesy of the Mexican government.

Worried about inflation, Mexican officials are keeping a lid on retail prices at the state-owned petroleum company Pemex. Regular-grade gasoline in this border town is selling for about \$2.60 a gallon. With prices in California averaging \$3.43 a gallon - and topping \$4 at some stations - Golden State residents such as Roger Moore are grabbing a deal while they can.

The 63-year-old management consultant owns a second home in Baja California. He made a point of stopping at a station here this week to top off the tank of his Ford Aerostar van before heading back to his place in West Hollywood.

"It costs \$65 for a tank of gas up there and it costs me \$45 here," Moore said. "It's a monopoly and it's cheaper!"

Mexican station owners, too, are pumped up by the surge in business. Although they say few Americans are traveling to Mexico specifically to fill their tanks, many more than usual are taking advantage of the chance to buy cheap gas when they cross the border to work or play. Station owners also are seeing increased sales to Mexican residents who work in the U.S.

Pemex outlets along the nearly 2,000-mile border are serving more cars with U.S. plates. The jump is reflected in Pemex's pump sales, up 10.5% through the first four months of the year compared with the same period last year. Vendors are girding for a rush of business this weekend as Americans head to their Mexican vacation homes and take home a cheap souvenir in their tanks.

"This has been very, very favorable for us," said Jorge Farfan Gonzalez, general manager of a franchisee that operates 17 Pemex outlets in Baja.

But some say that low-cost gas may not be such a bargain.

Mexican stations are notorious for dispensing short liters. And their fuel isn't as clean as that mandated in California. That's tough on the environment, and it could harm your vehicle too, said Rich Kassel, a clean-fuel expert with the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York. Mexico's regular gasoline is loaded with sulfur. Kassel said frequent fill-ups could wreak havoc on the catalytic converters of the newest cars and trucks sold in the U.S.

"This is the extreme version of driving across town to save a nickel," Kassel said. "It doesn't make sense if you ... end up with fuel that is dirtier and can damage your engine."

But the prospect of a big mechanic's bill down the road couldn't dissuade San Diego resident Miguel Duarte from fueling his Ford pickup at a Tijuana Pemex this week. He owns a house in the Mexican beach community of Rosarito and couldn't resist stopping by while in the vicinity.

The quality "is not as good," Duarte said of the \$20 worth of fuel he bought. But "it's priced high in the United States."

Analysts say motorists have the weak Mexican economy and a new Mexican president to thank for the cut-rate gas.

The government regulates every aspect of the industry, including the retail price that consumers pay at the pump. There are two sets of prices: one for stations in select cities along the northern border and another for the rest of the country. Officials tend to peg border prices to those in the U.S. so that Mexican operators can stay competitive with their American counterparts.

But as U.S. gas prices have soared, Mexico's border prices for regular have remained at 7.41 pesos a liter, or about \$2.60 a gallon, for most of the year. Prices in the interior are even lower at 6.88 pesos a liter, or about \$2.41 a gallon.

Rising demand is straining Mexico's refining capacity. In April, the world's No. 5 oil producer had to import almost 45% of its gasoline, Pemex statistics show. Most of that came from the U.S. But the Mexican government hasn't boosted retail prices significantly to reflect tight supplies.

The reasons are economic and political. Rising prices for staples such as tortillas have already fueled inflation. President Felipe Calderon, who has been on the job only six months, has little to gain by socking Mexicans at the pump.

"He needs to avoid any significant increase in inflation this year," said Christian Stracke, Latin America analyst with New York-based research firm CreditSights. "Keeping gas prices stable helps him do that."

Calderon is certainly scoring points with U.S. motorists, who are voting with their feet- and their tires.

Juan Carlos Robles Hiusar, owner of a Pemex station in Mexicali, said cars with U.S. plates accounted for nearly one-quarter of his weekend business, a threefold increase from earlier in the year.

Ramiro Zuniga Salazar, head of the Assn. of Gasoline Dealers of Rosarito, says stations around Rosarito are pumping about 20% more fuel than they were a few months ago. He said more American visitors were taking advantage of the low prices. Still, he said most of that increase was from Mexicans who commute daily to the U.S. to work and were now buying more of their gas at home.

"The price difference is very attractive," Zuniga said. "We're talking about almost a dollar a gallon."

Whether the customers are Mexican or American, motorists would be well advised to pay attention. Mexico's top consumer watchdog last year launched a nationwide crackdown on dishonest station owners after random checks revealed that nine in 10 Pemex outlets rigged their pumps to dispense less than what their meters promise.

All Pemex stations are full service, a welcome change for Americans accustomed to pumping their own gas and cleaning their own windshields. But many of those attendants outfitted in jumpsuits with the official Pemex logo are actually unpaid freelancers hustling for tips- and the chance to shortchange distracted drivers.

Exchange rates vary from station to station. And some franchisees have been known to dilute their fuel with additives to stretch profits.

Tijuana resident Jose Valles pulled into a Pemex station recently to add air to the tires of his late-model Chevy Blazer. He said he preferred to fill up north of the border, despite the higher cost.

"I've heard horror stories about the [Mexican] gas," said Valles, who used to live in Phoenix. "I go to the United States if I can."

Gasoline facts, tips

What's happening: U.S. drivers are buying more Mexican gasoline.

Why: Mexico is holding its border-region gasoline prices down while U.S. prices soar, increasing the usual spread between the two.

Problems: Mexican gas is loaded with sulfur, which is hard on U.S. vehicles' catalytic converters and produces more pollution than California's cleaner-burning blend.

Tips

- Pemex's premium (red pump) has less sulfur than its regular, which is known as Magna (green pump). That's easier on your engine - and better for the environment.
- Stations don't post prices. Be sure that you're not paying more than the government-mandated 7.41 pesos at border stations and 6.88 pesos everywhere else. Exchange rates vary.
- Make sure the attendant sets the pump to zero before he starts fueling your car. Tipping is customary.

Source: Times research

Manual Lawn Mowers Are Making a Comeback

By DON BABWIN, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 28, 2007

Chicago (AP) -- Powerful, loud mowers have been showing lawns who's boss for decades. But now contraptions that couldn't cut butter without a good shove are quietly - really quietly - making a comeback.

Manual lawn mowers, long the 98-pound weaklings of the tool shed, are pushing their way, or, more accurately, being pushed around more yards all over the country.

"It's phenomenal," said Teri McClain, inside sales administrator at the 112-year-old American Lawn Mower Co. in Shelbyville, Ind., which she said is the only manufacturer of reel mowers in the United States. "Sales continue to rise every year."

Phenomenal might be a little strong. Exact statistics aren't available, but McClain estimates 350,000 manual mowers are sold in the United States each year - most made by her company. That is just a fraction of the 6 million gas-powered walk-behind mowers that hit the market last year.

Still, that number is about 100,000 more than were sold just five years ago and seven times as many as the estimated 50,000 a year sold in the 1980s, McClain said.

American Lawn Mower was one of about 60 domestic manufacturers of manual mowers at the end of World War II, when power mowers began taking over the industry, McClain said. Now, it is the only one making the mowers in the U.S., although some U.S.-based companies make the mowers in other countries.

According to buyers and sellers, the resurgence of these quaint reminders of yesteryear is due most notably to growing environmental concerns and an increasing number of women who do the mowing.

Headlines about global warming, pollution and vanishing natural resources have people - and not just those wearing Birkenstocks - making changes.

"I'm not a tree hugger but I think we all think about being more environmentally friendly and leave less of a footprint on the world," said Ben Kogan, a Chicago architect who started using his new mower this spring.

"It's an introduction into green gardening and a more green lifestyle," said Jim Grisius, 45, of Homewood, Ill.

And the mowers provide one way to respond to pollution from gas-powered mowers, not to mention the warnings from at least one former vice president.

"I definitely see a bigger selection of people all the time, especially since the Al Gore movie ('An Inconvenient Truth')," said Lars Hundley, the owner of Clean Air Gardening, a Dallas-based gardening equipment retailer.

The mower also is appealing because it is inexpensive - around \$200 - and so simple.

It looks different than the one invented in England in the 1830s to take over a job that once belonged to scythe-wielding people or hungry sheep. And with the use of lighter metals and plastic, it's a lot lighter than the heavy iron and wood mowers some baby boomers remember pushing around for a measly 50 cents an hour.

But it works pretty much the same way it always did: Just push it and it cuts.

"I don't have to worry about gas, repairs and getting it (the mower) started," said Eric Skalinder, a 35-year-old Chicago teacher.

Perhaps just as significant, more people are finding they don't need a power mower because they have less lawn to mow.

McClain said houses in many new developments are being built on lots of a third of an acre or less. And with yard sizes reduced even further by increasingly popular amenities like rock gardens, sitting areas and dog runs, "the mowing area is really very small," she said.

Kogan and Skalinder said that, considering their yards are the size of apartment bedrooms, power mowers didn't seem necessary.

"I felt a gas-powered (mower) was a little over the top for my needs," said Skalinder, adding he didn't want to use the kind of screaming power mower that keeps him awake when he's trying to nap.

Those are welcome words to those in the manual lawn mower business, who well know the hold that big, roaring machines have on the public. "For a lot of people power is the thing," said McClain.

Even for all his talk about a "green lifestyle," Grisius wondered if he really wanted to buy a powerless lawn mower.

"There was a little bit of ... do I want to be the only guy on the block with a reel mower?" he said.

Luckily for the manual mower business, there is a whole segment of the population that isn't enamored with power tools or worried about looking wimpy: Women.

"We noticed very quickly that two out of three people buying manual mowers were female," said Terry Jarvis, president of Sunlawn Inc., a Fort Collins, Colo.-based company that's been selling the mowers for 10 years and making its own for two.

"Women like the simplicity of the machines, the fact that they work," he said. "I constantly hear women commenting, 'I love the useful exercise.'"

Melissa Vesper, 32, of Arlington, Texas, appreciates how she can spend time with her two small children while she's mowing - something she couldn't do with a noisy gas mower that turned pebbles and twigs into projectiles.

"I can hear them and not worry about things getting flung at them," she said.

Nobody suggests that manual mowers - still rare enough that Kogan's neighbors confessed they didn't realize they still existed - are going to push power mowers aside.

Reel mowers, which Hundley said many people buy over the Internet, increasingly are showing up in large hardware chains and small mom-and-pop places alike. But Hundley said stores aren't likely to let push mowers that cost about \$200 or less to take valuable display place from power mowers that can cost hundreds of dollars more.

"They'd rather sell an \$800 Toro they make a couple hundred bucks on than (make) a few bucks on a push mower," he said.

Still, some owners say they plan on sticking with manual mowers- and maybe get others to follow.

"I hope my neighbors see me," said Skalinder. "I hope people see it and I can offer them a loaner (and) get more people to use them."

Soccer league banned from field over smoking complaint

Team denies claim, calls rule too harsh

By Liz Neely, STAFF WRITER

San Diego Union-Tribune, Tuesday, May 29, 2007

La Mesa is putting athletic leagues on notice: follow the rules or face banishment from city fields.

For the first time, the city has revoked field-use privileges for one of the 13 leagues that play in La Mesa. The California Soccer League's adult players were recently banned after a resident complained of people smoking at a field on a day booked by the league.

Tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs are not allowed at any of the city's 20 fields- 14 of which are jointly managed by the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District.

Although the league's season was cut short by the ban - it hasn't used the fields since the end of March - it can reapply next month. Scheduling for games and practices is done in June and December.

Still, the decision doesn't sit well with the California Soccer League. Its members say they weren't smoking and are being unfairly punished.

"Our players go to play soccer, they don't go to smoke cigarettes," said Ricky Franchi, who leads the San Diego-based nonprofit league. He says 3,000 adults participate in the California Soccer League. Their fees cover the 300 or so youth players.

City officials say they had no choice. The school district and the city have a zero-tolerance policy toward smoking, alcohol and drug use. The school district could lose state or federal funding if it bends the rules, which are laid out in a contract every league signs.

The city plans to consult with the school district to see if in the future it could impose a lighter punishment before revoking field-use privileges.

Mayor Art Madrid said he knows the policy is harsh. It has to be, he said.

"This city is very serious about imposing (rules) and holding teams that violate contractual agreements accountable," Madrid said.

Yvonne Garrett, a community services director, said leagues usually police themselves.

"It's been a complaint-based system because we don't have the staffing capacity to be in every field for all the times people are using them," Garrett said. "This is the first time we had a complaint, so it tested the process."

The issue came before the City Council last week after wending its way through two advisory panels, the La Mesa Athletic Council and the Community Services Commission.

The athletic council, made up of representatives from each league, initially handed down a 10-day suspension in April, but Garrett said the zero-tolerance policy allowed for nothing less than a lifetime ban.

The league unsuccessfully appealed the decision to the commission and the City Council, though the council shortened the ban to the present season.

Franchi said he thinks his league is being singled out. He hired an attorney to represent the league at the City Council meeting. The attorney submitted several declarations from players who said they never saw anyone smoking, as well as photographs of other leagues breaking the rules.

Some pictures show a coach from another league smoking in a parking lot. That league is now being investigated, Garrett said, and will go before the athletic council next month.

Patrick Beas, a California Soccer League player from Chula Vista, said the policy is too strict, especially because the city didn't have any material evidence.

"Even if it did happen, it's kind of a severe penalty," Beas said.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Tuesday, May 29, 2007](#)

Expanding air district board a good idea

The state Senate has approved a bill that would expand the makeup of the valley air district's governing board by four people, including two who have medical or scientific experience in the effects of air pollution on health.

These two would be appointed by the governor. That's raised the hackles of the air board's supporters. They complain that "local control" would be sacrificed to Sacramento bureaucrats. That argument isn't legitimate, since the experts would have to be valley residents, as do all the other board members.

Normally we support local government. But in this case, "local control" has become a euphemism for "maintain the status quo." And the status quo means more delay, more years of breathing bad air, more kids with asthma, more premature deaths, more economic loss because of air pollution.

Sens. Dave Cogdill, R- Modesto, and Jeff Denham, R-Merced, both opposed Senate Bill 719, which was written by Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden. With the Senate's passage, largely along party lines, it now goes to the Assembly. That's where two similar proposals have died in the past.

The biggest reason to expand the air board is to broaden the citizen representation. The board hears most from developers, the oil industry and others who oppose changes that could cost them money -- and who contribute heavily to political campaigns. The public members could add credibility and energy to the body and a strong voice for residents who are suffering from asthma and other medical problems related to air pollution.

SB 719 deserves the Assembly's approval, too, and then the governor's signature.

The text of the bill can be read online. Go to www.sen.ca.gov <<http://www.sen.ca.gov>> and then click on Legislation. Type in SB 719.

Fresh Air For Board?

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board of directors:

- Currently: 8 county supervisors, 1 from each county; and 3 city representatives
- Proposed: 8 county supervisors; 5 city representatives (2 from cities over 100,000 population and 3 from smaller cities); 2 public members with medical and scientific expertise.

[Sacramento Bee Editorial, Saturday, May 26, 2007](#)

Editorial: An air of unhealthiness

San Joaquin air board needs a makeover

The San Joaquin Valley is rapidly becoming the nation's smog and soot capital. This unwelcome distinction is largely due to farm practices and pollution spewing from tens of thousands of trucks and vehicles.

Health experts suspect this pollution is a prime cause of increased asthma, which afflicts one out of five children and one of eight adults in the Valley.

For years, residents from Bakersfield to Stockton have looked to the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District to clean up the region's air. For years, the district's board has failed them.

Now there is hope that the Legislature will alter the composition of this board and make it more attuned to basic health needs.

Last week, the Senate approved a bill by Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden, that will give cities and medical experts more representation to set the air district's agenda.

If the Assembly approves Senate Bill 719 later this session, it could go a long way toward helping the Valley's air quality and attract the kind of high-wage, "green tech" industries the region has long sought to attract.

To see why change is needed, look no further than the board's April 30 meeting. At that meeting the air board accepted a staff recommendation to postpone full cleanup of the Valley air until 2024, some 11 years after the current deadline. The move was a wrenching setback for the Valley's medical community and civic activists, who urged the board to stick to its original deadline.

That was bad enough. But then, as if to reaffirm its strategy of delay, the district's board voted last week to relax a ban on open field burning enacted by the Legislature in 2003. The board decided it was just too onerous for San Joaquin Valley farmers to meet the terms of the law.

For years, supervisors from eight rural counties that make up the air district have dominated this 11-member board. More often than not, these supervisors vote in step with agribusinesses and development interests that have resisted regulatory efforts to clean up the region's air.

That might change if lawmakers enact SB 719 and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signs it. The bill would add four members to the board, bringing the total to 15.

Two new members would represent the large cities in the air district. The other two would be required to have medical or scientific experience in the effects of air pollution on health. They would be appointed by the governor.

Opponents say Machado's bill would cede local control to Sacramento "bureaucrats." That's an old scare tactic and especially off the mark in this instance.

For the record, all experts appointed by the governor would have to be San Joaquin Valley residents. They still would represent a local viewpoint, just one that is less willing to sacrifice the health of Valley residents to benefit certain business interests.

Machado deserves credit for pushing this bill. Now the Assembly needs to put it on the governor's desk. And the governor needs to sign it with a flourish. The sooner this board is reconfigured, the sooner the San Joaquin Valley can become a healthier place to live.

[Editorial in the Merced Sun-Star, May 25, 2007](#)

Our View: Air board shouldn't be pressured

To protect kids and the public from potentially deadly diesel soot, California has retrofitted or replaced more than 4,000 school buses in recent years. This effort has cost the state and school districts tens of millions of dollars. Voters last year approved \$200 million in bonds to help further this cleanup crusade.

Now the state is turning its attention to one of the largest sources of diesel pollution-- "off-road" equipment, such as bulldozers and backhoes. Today, the California Air Resources Board will begin deliberations on rules to control diesel pollution from this equipment. Board members need to resist pressure from the construction industry to weaken these proposed rules.

Diesel soot is an especially toxic type of particulate pollution. When inhaled, these particles lodge deep in the lungs. Scientists have linked this pollution to asthma, heart attacks and premature deaths. Construction equipment accounts for 20 percent of the diesel particulates emitted in California, largely because contractors generally use old and durable machines built with few or no pollution controls.

Under the air board's proposed regulations, contractors and public utilities would have several options in reducing particulate pollution 85 percent in 13 years.

In the near term, they could purchase cleaner used equipment. They could install filters or replace the engines in their current machines. Alternately, they could save up and purchase the cleanest possible models -- known as Tier IV equipment -- that will be available in a few years.

No doubt, this transition will be expensive. More than 180,000 pieces of equipment will be affected, from forklifts to huge earth-moving machines. It will cost the industry about \$3 billion over 13 years, according to CARB's estimates. Yet the payoff will be worth it. The air board says the new standards could save about 4,000 lives by 2030 and more than \$18 billion in health costs.

The construction industry, which is about to get a multibillion-dollar infusion of funds from the infrastructure bonds, has known for seven years these regulations were coming. Instead of preparing and gearing up, the industry is now spending its money on a publicity campaign headed by two of Sacramento's better-connected consulting firms. These spin doctors are trying to dupe lawmakers

and the media into believing that the CARB regulations will slow down upgrades of highways, schools and levees that voters approved last year.

These scare tactics should not sway lawmakers or the air board. Reviews by CARB staff have found that, contrary to industry claims, there is readily available used equipment to meet the proposed deadlines, and manufacturers ready to produce new engines.

The regulation also includes "safety valves" that allow the industry to forgo purchases if cleaner equipment isn't available. If anything, these safety valves are too generous.

Indeed, air districts in Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley want the California air board to be more aggressive and to seek more reductions of nitrogen oxides from construction equipment. Without those cuts, the air districts fear they may miss federal deadlines for reducing ozone smog. Missing the deadlines could also result in a suspension of federal transportation dollars. (Hear that, construction firms?)

Possibly because of industry pressure, the air board isn't deciding on the off-road diesel regulations this week but will wait until its July meeting to vote. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who campaigned for governor on an ambitious promise to reduce the state's air pollution by 50 percent, needs to tell his air board appointees to avoid further delays, and vote for clean air.

[L.A. Times editorial, Monday, May 28, 2007:](#)

Time to tax carbon

A carbon tax is the best, cheapest and most efficient way to combat cataclysmic climate change.

IF YOU HAVE KIDS, take them to the beach. They should enjoy it while it lasts, because there's a chance that within their lifetimes California's beaches will vanish under the waves.

Global warming will redraw the maps of the world. The U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that sea levels will rise 7 to 23 inches by the end of the century; as the water gets higher, the sandy beaches that make California a tourist magnet will be washed away. Beachfront real estate will end up underwater, cliffs will erode faster, sea walls will buckle and inlets will become bays. The water supply will be threatened as mountain snowfall turns to rain and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta faces contamination with saltwater. Droughts will likely become more common, as will the wildfires they breed.

Global warming is happening and will accelerate regardless of what we do today, but the scenarios of climatologists' nightmares can still be avoided. Though the cost will be high, it pales in comparison to the cost of doing nothing.

The proposed fixes for climate change are as numerous as its causes. Most only tinker at the edges of the problem, such as a California bill to phase out energy-inefficient lightbulbs. To produce the cuts in greenhouse gases needed to slow or stop global warming, the world will have to phase out the fossil fuels on which it relies for most of its power supply and transportation - especially the coal-burning power plants that account for about 32% of the annual emissions of carbon dioxide in the U.S. and that generate about half of our electricity. There are three basic methods of doing that, which are the subject of debate and legislation at every level of government.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Monday, May 28, 2007](#)

Ranking should be a motivation

Joy Madison

I bought the book. You know, the one that says Modesto is the worst place. The one that is mesmerizing reporters, who call and ask, "So, whaddya think about it? Do you agree?"

I'm the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Do you think I'm going to agree?

I wanted to look at the book and see how and where they gathered their information. I couldn't find the 850-page publication in town. I asked the newspaper, radio and television reporters where they got their version, because I was coming up empty. I guess it didn't matter in the feeding frenzy that they didn't have the book.

Here's what the authors ranked us on, what our scores were, and why. Please note that we never held the worst ranking in any category. However, due to the weight, assumptions, and, "some of these formats are designed to present a bigger picture by grouping multiple facts and occasionally combining them with subjective assessments" we end up being 373 out of 373 cities with populations higher than 50,000.

Economy and jobs - We ranked 308, not great. Our per capita income is under the national average. We have a higher unemployment average than the United States, but we are trending in the right direction - up. We have a higher percentage of our population working in construction and manufacturing than the national average, which is good.

Cost of living - 348. This is a kick in the keister. The average cost of a home is \$180,000 higher than the national average, but the appreciation in value over the last five years is 155 percent compared with 10 percent for the country. Naturally, your interpretation depends whether you're buying or selling. Necessities cost more than the national average, but that is so in every California metro area.

Climate - 27 (yes, near the top). We are sunnier. Our tornado risk is well below national average. We don't have hurricanes.

Education - 357. We are above U.S. average with two-year degree holders. Our percentage of population holding a high school diploma is a deplorable 70 percent, but we don't touch the worst rate of 50.6 percent in McAllen, Texas. While we see local test scores improving and two and four-year institutions making huge strides, the snapshot of info came from 2005. We are average for SAT and ACT scores.

Health and healthcare - 357. While we harp on air quality, this publication doesn't even list us among the 20 worst. The book says we have a lower cancer mortality rate but are very stressed. We can't compete for number of physicians per capita with Rochester, Minn. We have 146.3 physicians per 100,000 residents. They have 1,386.4.

Crime - 309. Not as skewed as you would think. Property crime is declining; violent crime escalating slightly.

Transportation - 107, a surprise. One of the narratives that plummeted us to bottom of the list is that "incredibly, some people make the 2-3 hour commute into the San Francisco Bay Area." Yet we ranked in the top third for transportation because we have access to rail, air and roads. At publication time, the book lists gas prices at \$2.60 a gallon.

Leisure - 157. On a scale of 1-10 we are a 1 with the national average a 2 for quality and availability of restaurants. Mostly, we are average. But we soar above the national average in outlet malls and the number of Starbucks. We falter a bit with zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens. And compared to the national average, we have 0.0 miles of coastline in Central California. Duh.

Arts & culture - 302. We don't have enough libraries or books. We are pretty average with performing arts like classical music, ballet and university arts. We lack museums of all types. But the book doesn't know about the Gallo Center for the Arts, the YES Company or the Townsend Opera Players.

Quality of life - This includes physical attractiveness, preservation of heritage and overall ease of living. We got a 2 out of 100 for our "unremarkable downtown." (This category was not ranked like the others.) Yuma, Ariz., got 0 while Fort Collins, Colo., received a 98.

So, should you pack your bags and head for No. 1, Gainesville, Fla.? I looked at their demographics and scores and am not convinced.

This is wine country, not "whine" country. We could complain about where the numbers came from, their veracity and how recent they are. We could, like many of the press that contacted me, relish and wallow in the rank.

Or we can see this as an opportunity to inventory our strengths and weaknesses. We can capitulate or rally. We can improve, address and adapt or apathetically live down to the book's expectation. I know what direction I'm taking and it isn't south.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, May 27, 2007:](#)

'Inviting disaster'

The quality of life in Fresno is declining due to uncontrolled growth. Stressed essential services (water delivery, landfill availability, air pollution control, etc.) are locked in a never-ending spiral of rate increases. We also keep paying more for those services to deliver less. Yet the powers that be keep inviting more detrimental expansion.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a growth proponent, is advocating abolishing the Williamson Act, which preserves California agricultural land. This would invite disaster. We shouldn't become dependent on imported produce lacking our quality regulations. The recent gluten tragedy offers a good example of that.

Shouldn't China, India and other overburdened countries be enough to demonstrate the importance of uncurbed growth? Sooner or later, the politicians will be forced to face the undeniable reality that everything in this world has its limitations.

Shirley J. Secrest, Fresno

[Letter to the editor, Merced Sun-Star, May 28, 2007](#)

Air plan irresponsible

Editor: City Council members gave a weak and worrisome response to comments made by Mr. Seyed Sadredin at their meeting last Monday. Mr. Sadredin, director of our air district, continued a pattern of dissembling about our air quality problems that has been typical of the air district and its board members. Our air is much cleaner but it's still dirty. We're making great progress and we'll soon see "unprecedented improvement" but we need 16 more years to clean up our air because it's such a "monumental" problem. We are instituting "tough regulations" but they won't matter much because we can't regulate cars and trucks. Of course, if a race car facility or a huge truck center wants to locate here we'll do our best to help them by pretending we can mitigate their air pollution. Anyway, it is mostly out of our control because of the "God-given conditions that we have no control over" such as our bowl-like geography and poor air circulation.

The City Council needs better information about our air quality problems and the impact a truck center will have on our public health, which is why the public health officer should be involved. The Sun-Star should consider an investigative report on our air district as we have gone over the past five years from serious to severe to extreme nonattainment for the one-hour ozone standard then to serious nonattainment for a "new" eight-hour ozone standard. Now the air district with Sadredin leading the charge wants to go immediately from serious, past severe, to extreme nonattainment for the "new" eight-hour standard so we can have until 2023 to clean the air. This is a grossly irresponsible plan.

JOHN S. HOLMES, M.D., Merced

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, May 29, 2007](#)

Cars beat cigarettes for pollution

Regarding "Drivers: Keep your smoke to yourselves"
<<http://www.modbee.com/opinion/letters/story/13589314p-14188709c.html>> (May 16, Letters): Did you know that starting up your car to go shopping or to the post office puts out more contaminants than one pack of cigarettes? People have no trouble with city buses or big rigs, but one little cigarette and all heck breaks loose. If you want clean air, you should move to the top of the hill, just on the other side of nowhere.

JESSE HERRERA, a nonsmoker, Modesto