

Wind carries more smoke into Valley

Air currents shift for the worse, but some residents still venture outdoors.

By Farin Montañez

Fresno Bee, Monday, Sept. 10, 2007

Valley air quality improved Sunday, and area residents took advantage of the respite to spend a few hours outdoors. But with shifting wind gusts stoking the 62,000-acre Moonlight fire in Plumas County on Sunday afternoon, air district officials warned that sooty skies could return this week.

Air quality Sunday was significantly better than it was Friday, but it remained unhealthy for asthmatics and other sensitive people, said Gary Arcemont, meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"There's still plenty of smoke in the air," he said Sunday. "It gets trapped in the Valley and tends to stay here until we get a breeze."

Residents should check weather and air quality forecasts before they head outdoors for at least the rest of the week, he said.

On Sunday, though, local residents felt it was safe enough to venture outside.

Damaris Champion brought her nephews Jayven, 9, and Luke, 5, to a Woodward Park playground to get them out of the house and away from the TV and computer screens. Although Luke has asthma, she felt that the air was clean enough to let him play outdoors.

"The air smells and feels cleaner than it did on Friday," Champion said. "Plus there's a nice breeze. It was really hard to breathe on Friday morning, but today is really nice." Sunday's breezes pushed smoke from the 47,000-acre Lick fire in Santa Clara County away from the Valley, Arcemont said. More than 1,700 firefighters were expected to fully contain the Santa Clara County blaze Sunday night, according to the California Department of Forestry.

But the Plumas County blaze remained just 15% contained, and more than 2,700 firefighters struggled to dampen the flames and bulldoze fire lines as winds picked up Sunday, the U.S. Forest Service reported. Wind gusts were expected to increase overnight and today, according to the Forest Service.

Unfortunately, Arcemont said, those winds today could send more smoke from the Plumas fire into the Valley.

"It's still a good idea for people to be very careful and curtail their outdoor physical activities if they're smelling smoke," Arcemont said. "Expect smoke to still be in the air. It will come in waves."

On Sunday morning, the Fresno Cross City Race went off as scheduled, drawing about 1,500 participants downtown. Organizers had been uncertain Friday whether the air would clear up enough to allow the race to proceed.

In Clovis, Courtney Lowitz and Teryn Dukart, 14-year-old freshmen volleyball players at Clovis East High School, didn't smell smoke in the air Sunday morning, so they decided to ride their bikes around Fresno's Woodward Park for the first time in four years.

The two athletes felt the need to get some exercise after sitting indoors during P.E. class Friday and staying home after their all-day volleyball tournament was canceled Saturday because of poor air quality.

"They canceled all sports except varsity football on Friday," Courtney said. "They even canceled practices. I remember at school you would walk outside and you could see the smoke just sitting there. It looked like fog."

Although Teryn has a slight asthma problem, she doesn't like being kept inside.

"I always come out," she said. "The bad air quality has never affected me."

But the air quality has affected many others, forcing them to keep inhalers on hand in case of asthma attacks.

Joe Gonzales, 33, was wary of bringing his asthmatic 7-year-old son, Diego, to Roeding Park on Sunday for a birthday party.

"Even though it's not that bad out here, I still made a trip back to the house to get his inhaler," Gonzales said.

If the air had been worse, the party would have been held indoors or not at all, he said.

"We wouldn't be out here -- no way," Gonzales said.

Smoky conditions persist

Staff and wire reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, Sept. 10, 2007

Smoke will continue to pour into the San Joaquin Valley from northern California wildfires today and Tuesday — but a cooling trend and stronger winds should help improve air quality by late Wednesday, forecasters said Sunday.

"There was some improvement and we removed our smoke warning for [Sunday], but stagnant conditions will likely remain until mid-week," said Steve Mendenhall, forecaster for the Hanford office of the National Weather Service.

Shifting winds sent smoke from the northeast Sierra Nevada heading back toward the San Francisco Bay Area as well as the San Joaquin Valley, officials said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced that today's air-quality conditions are unhealthful for sensitive groups, but that no severe "spare-the-air" conditions are projected for Tuesday or Wednesday.

The massive smoke plumes that had prompted haze and health warnings in cities hundreds of miles away last week had largely dissipated by Saturday. But gusts late Sunday morning started pushing flames from the toward the south and southwest as the Plumas National Forest blaze topped 52,000 acres, the U.S. Forest Service reported.

Mandatory evacuations remained Sunday for 50 to 100 people in the North Arm of Indian Valley and other small communities. Residents of Genesee and Taylorsville were advised but not required to leave their homes as the fire headed back in their direction, forest service spokesman Mark Beaulieu said.

Two campers at Antelope Lake campground were evacuated Friday, and roads to the campground were closed.

Blaze only 16 percent contained

The fire has destroyed an unoccupied summer home, trailer and small shed since it began Monday, and five firefighters have suffered minor injuries.

The fire remained just 16 percent contained, and more than 2,700 firefighters struggled to dampen the flames and bulldoze fire lines as winds began picking up Sunday, Beaulieu said. Gusts were expected to reach up to 30 mph by the afternoon, he said.

Eight air tankers and 15 helicopters were dropping water and fire-retardant chemicals on the fire, Beaulieu said. There was no estimate when the fire might be contained, he said. In Santa Clara County, more than 1,700 firefighters were expected to fully contain a blaze Sunday night that had burned more than 47,000 acres in Henry W. Coe State Park south of San Jose, said CAL FIRE spokesman Guy Martin.

The week-long blaze has destroyed three cabins and two small structures and injured four firefighters, Martin said.

The blaze was caused by a person who started a fire in a trash barrel, but there was no indication that it had been intentionally set, authorities said.

Smoke fades but still could be a health risk

By BEE STAFF REPORTS

Modesto Bee, Sunday, September 9, 2007

Hazardous wildfire smoke that caused some concern in the Modesto area last week moved south Saturday to Kern and Tulare counties, but air district officials warned that the Plumas County fire burning to the north could still pose a health threat to the region.

Smoke coming from the Lick fire burning in Santa Clara and western Stanislaus counties kept air quality in the Modesto area out of the "good" range Saturday, and the same "moderate" conditions were expected today, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. A "moderate" rating is one step away from an "unhealthy for sensitive groups" rating.

Firefighters had 50 percent of the Lick fire contained Saturday night and were expected to have full containment today, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Air district officials said pollution levels could rise today if predicted wind patterns change and smoke from the Plumas fire blows into the San Joaquin Valley. The National Weather Service predicted winds of 6 to 11 mph out of the north and northwest.

Firefighters had 16 percent of the Plumas fire contained as of Saturday night, fire officials said. Steep, rocky terrain and erratic high winds were contributing to the extreme behavior and growth potential for the wildfire.

Tracy holds 21st annual festival

Event continues from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. today

By Paul Bugarino, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, September 9, 2007

TRACY — Cindy Williams is once again gaga for garbanzo beans. In fact, she's pretty keen on all types of beans.

Williams, a 23-year resident of Tracy, had a large stack of tiny Styrofoam bowls in front of her as she sat and talked with friends. She sampled bean dishes Saturday afternoon outside the bean-tasting pavilion at the 21st annual Tracy Dry Bean Festival.

"That's what we came here for — that's the experience that makes our festival unique," she said, adding that she had quit coming because the festival had gravitated away from featuring bean-related exhibits.

Williams and her mates sampled the navy bean soup, red beans and rice, and Southwest bean salad, among others.

The weekend event is a celebration of the western San Joaquin County city's moniker as the "Dry Bean Capital of the World."

After several years of changes — such as adding a chili cook-off and jalapeno-eating contest, and moving the festival to a more weather-friendly date, more of an emphasis was placed this year on bringing back the star of the show.

Dan Maloney, executive director of the Tracy Chamber of Commerce, the organization that puts on the festival, said close to 100 varieties of beans are featured. The bean-tasting pavilion was brought back, while there are more dry beans for sale and a bean-oriented kids zone, he said.

The bean industry as a whole had seen interest in the product "dilute" in the past couple years, said Dave Kirsten, president of the California Bean Shippers Association.

"It's been hard for people to get enthused about the dry bean. It's good that people seem to want the theme here back." Williams and her group of friends agreed.

"This change is exactly what I was looking for," Williams said.

"I remember the reason coming to the Dry Bean Festival used to be the unique experiences," said Emily Ward, who's lived in Tracy most of her life, reminiscing about days when vendors sold bean cake and bean cookies. "It's a start."

One such unique treat on display was the homemade bean pies being sold by Alfred Ra'oof of Santa Clara.

Five-year-old Bronson Garcia of Newman said the pie made from white beans, nutmeg, sugar and flour was "good," but the real seal of approval came when his father, Andy, let him catch a whiff of the aroma.

"Mmmmmm," Bronson said.

Ra'oof's San Jose Bean Pies started as a holiday side dish, but when his daughter opened her own pastry shop, he began to sell them commercially.

When his daughter moved to Tracy and spilled the beans about the annual festival's namesake, Ra'oof had to follow, he said.

The response from Cindy and Rosie Pombo of Tracy was typical of most people walking by his booth. They passed by nonchalantly, before being beckoned by Ra'oof, asking if they wanted a sample. The mother and daughter ended up buying a medium-sized piece, or "Momma Bean."

Thousands of festival attendees strolled the downtown Tracy streets [despite poor air quality caused by pollution from wildfires](#) burning outside the area. Several festivalgoers interviewed said the air pollution hadn't affected them and they didn't have problems breathing.

The festival continues from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. today. The main entrance is at Sixth and Central streets. Admission is free, but bean tasting costs \$5.

Today's nonbean-related fun includes a kids-only Spam Carving Contest at 11 a.m., a Spam Cook-Off and a Jalapeno Eating Contest at 3 p.m. Last year's winner scarfed down 39 jalapenos in three minutes.

Concerns with bad air force rescheduling of some events

Two high school football games are moved to today

By KEN CARLSON

Modesto Bee, Saturday, September 8, 2007

Air quality officials issued warnings to school athletic programs this week that if they can smell the smoke from the wildland fires in Northern California, it can be harmful to competing athletes.

A few school districts postponed or moved games due to poor air quality, while others let their teams compete despite the soot and ash in the air.

School officials and athletic directors from Stockton to Fresno had to make judgment calls based on their assessment of conditions that varied depending on where teams were scheduled to play.

Two football games were rescheduled for today because of air quality concerns. Le Grand and Chowchilla will play today at Le Grand at noon. And Delhi, originally scheduled to play host to San Marin of Novato, will instead travel to San Marin for an 8 p.m. kickoff tonight.

The air quality won't affect the Modesto Youth Soccer Association from opening its season today, said Don Scott, MYSA deputy commissioner.

"It's up to the parents if they want their kids to play," Scott said. "There's no way in the world that we can get in touch with the parents of 3,200 kids."

Due to a shift in wind patterns, the air quality was generally moderate in Stanislaus County on Friday before the kickoff of high school football games. But the smoke cast a brown haze over Fresno and other communities in the central and southern areas of the San Joaquin Valley.

Merced schools called off outdoor athletic events through the weekend.

"It's prudent to protect the health of our student athletes," said Robert Fore, Merced Union High School superintendent. "That's our top priority."

Merced County teams scheduled for away games in areas deemed safe by the district were allowed to compete. Merced High played a football game in Madera, and Atwater, instead of hosting Nevada Union as scheduled, traveled to Grass Valley.

Patterson High School's football game Friday night in Reedley, near Fresno, was nearly canceled because of the smoke. Instead, the teams decided to start play 90 minutes later than originally scheduled, said Dave Klein, athletic director for Patterson High School.

"They claim that when the sun goes down, the air quality gets better," Klein said.

No games involving the six public high schools in Modesto were canceled, according to Marlin Sumpter, director of child welfare and attendance.

Sumpter said Modesto City Schools administrators based their decision on periodic checks of pollution levels through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Web site. Those reports showed the air quality in the county ranged from moderate to unhealthy for sensitive groups, such as people with asthma.

Oakdale followed through with its game against Turlock High School. Principal Rick Jones said Oakdale had an orange alert, which applies to those who are especially sensitive to poor air quality.

"We have to look at it as we get closer to the event because we wouldn't want to cancel something when it's not really an issue," Jones said.

Waterford High School Principal Don Davis said Friday the smoky air seemed to have no effect on athletes.

"We think, with heightened awareness, it won't be an issue," Davis said. "We have been practicing all week, and haven't had any problems."

In Fresno County, school officials pushed back the starting times of junior varsity and varsity football games.

Officials with the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said they were duty-bound to issue the warnings for the entire region. Satellite images showed a blanket of smoke over the valley from the fire in Plumas County and the Lick fire in western Stanislaus and Santa Clara counties.

Young people competing in these conditions are inhaling particles that can get into the deep lung passages, said Michael Peterson, a physician and president of the California Thoracic Society. The irritants interfere with absorbing oxygen into the bloodstream and inflame the lung tissue. As the airways are narrowed, it can cause flare-ups in respiratory conditions such as asthma, he said.

Studies have also suggested that the smallest particles are absorbed in the bloodstream.

Jaime Holt, an air district spokeswoman, said the air district doesn't have authority to cancel games in these conditions.

"At the end of the day, the schools have the authority to make the call," she said. "We understand fully the difficult situation the schools are in with the beginning of football season. But our attitude is to error on the side of public health."

By Friday, a change in the winds caused the smoke from Plumas County to drift over Nevada. Winds out of the northwest drove the smoke from the Lick fire toward the Fresno area.

Stanislaus County got a break, but any change in the winds could inundate the county with smoke again, said Gary Arcemont, an air district meteorologist. Officials expect the smoky conditions will linger into early next week.

Massive blazes cause poor air quality

Written by Jonathan Partridge

Patterson Irrigator, Saturday, September 8, 2007

BEAUTIFUL BUT BAD FOR YOU: The smoky haze that covered the Central Valley on Thursday — the result of two massive fires — created a striking sunset but nasty breathing conditions.

A nearly 28,000-acre inferno in the hills southwest of Patterson and a similar-sized blaze in Plumas National Forest left local residents under a shroud of smoke this week.

Meanwhile, Patterson firefighters and other area residents helped tackle one of those fires, which devoured more than 1,000 acres in Stanislaus County.

The firestorms left a blanket of smoke over much of the San Joaquin Valley, creating eerie light patterns and difficult breathing conditions.

"The main thing (to remember) is that if you smell smoke or are experiencing smoke, it could be damaging your lungs," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District's Modesto office.

As if the smoke wasn't bad enough, plenty of ozone was also in the air Friday, leading the valley air district to declare it a Spare the Air Day. The district also sent memos to schools, urging them to cancel all athletic events.

As a result, Immanuel High School in Reedley delayed its football match with Patterson High School by almost an hour.

Presto advised children, older residents and people with respiratory problems to stay inside as much as possible. He also urged schools to keep recess and school activities indoors until the smoke clears.

The biggest health threat from smoke, according to district officials, is from microscopic particles, which can get into the eyes and respiratory system.

Though the Lick Fire in eastern Santa Clara County and southwestern Stanislaus County is much closer to Patterson than the Moonlight Fire in Plumas County, Presto said the Plumas fire actually caused most of the local smoke earlier this week.

However, that was likely to change if the direction of the wind shifted, he said.

The Lick Fire, which has been generally confined to Henry Coe State Park in Santa Clara County and southwestern Stanislaus County, destroyed one outbuilding this week and threatened 25 homes and 10 other outbuildings, such as barns or chicken coops.

County officials said about 1,000 acres had been consumed earlier this week, but more detailed information was not available Friday.

The blaze started inside the park after a fire in a burn barrel near Booze Lake got out of hand, said John Amos, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's Santa Clara unit. The people who caused the fire have come forward to talk to investigators, Amos said.

Much of the Stanislaus County portion of the fire has been along a ridgeline in areas that are not easily accessible, explained Deborah Thrasher, emergency services coordinator with the county's Office of Emergency Services.

Amos said the Stanislaus County portion of the fire was burning near Orestimba Creek. Stanislaus County sent two strike teams to battle the blaze, including 10 engines, two staff vehicles and 37 firefighters.

A West Stanislaus Fire Protection District engine, crewed by a Newman firefighter and a volunteer and paid staff member from the Patterson Fire Department, also was deployed to the fire Thursday, West Stanislaus Division Chief Steve Hall said. Three replacements from the Patterson Fire Department were sent to help Friday.

Meanwhile, Cal Fire on Monday sent an engine, a bulldozer and five firefighters from its Del Puerto office on Sperry Avenue.

Both Patterson Fire Department and the Patterson Cal Fire station remained fully manned this week, despite the departures.

About 1,825 firefighters and 50 crews had responded to the Lick Fire as of Friday. Firefighters had the blaze 35 percent contained Friday morning, according to Cal Fire.

"We'll get it," Amos said. "We've got our arms wrapped around it. Soon, we'll stamp it out."

Despite air warnings, most schools played

Some outdoor physical education classes cancelled in Central Valley

By Mike Martinez, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, September 8, 2007

TRACY — Prep football games were held Friday night despite a warning from air pollution officials that outdoor athletic activities should be put off due to poor air quality.

Smoke from a fire burning in Northern California has left a haze over much of the San Joaquin Valley over the past week, making for spectacular sunsets but horrible breathing conditions.

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air district, said air levels from Fresno County north are showing readings of "unhealthy" and "unhealthy for sensitive groups" with higher levels in areas directly impacted by smoke.

Sadredin said microscopic particulate matter in the smoke can get into eyes and the respiratory system, and lead to such problems as burning eyes, runny nose and illnesses such as bronchitis. Fine particles can also aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases, and are linked to premature death in people with these conditions.

"I appreciate the inconvenience and disruption that this exceptional event is causing for everyone," Sadredin wrote in the letter sent out Friday morning. "However, I am sure you agree that the health of our children and the general public should always take precedence."

On Thursday, both the Manteca and Tracy school districts decided to push ahead with regularly scheduled activities, including the football game involving Tracy and West high schools.

The districts notified parents and players about the air quality problems and let the parents decide if their sons should play.

But Tracy Unified officials canceled outdoor physical education classes Friday.

"In P.E. they usually don't know who has a respiratory problem," Wakefield said. "In sporting activities, all the high school athletes received a letter yesterday informing them of the outside conditions and to consult a doctor before participation."

At least one Central Valley School District has taken the advice. The Merced Union High School District — where air levels border on unhealthy — canceled all outdoor athletic events and physical education classes through the weekend because of the health warning, said Dr. Robert Fore, the district superintendent.

Merced High School was the Sac-Joaquin Section Division 1 runner-up in football last season.

"As much as we wish to avoid canceling these events for our students and communities, we hold the health of all our student athletes as our highest priority."

Smoke plumes from the Moonlight fire in Plumas County are shifting east toward Nevada but the Lick fire in Henry W. Coe State Park in Santa Clara County has smoke pooling in the Central Valley, air district officials said.

"If you smell smoke or can see haziness due to smoke at ground level, it's strongly recommended that you pretty

much remain indoors," Anthony Presto, an air district spokeswoman, said. "Engaging in sporting activities would be placing yourself at a more unhealthy risk."

Breathtaking

Wildfires' smoke chokes the Valley.

By Mark Grossi and Barbara Anderson
Fresno Bee, Saturday, Sept. 8, 2007

Fresno and Clovis smelled like a sooty campfire Friday morning as smoke from a wildfire 230 miles away caused dangerous spikes in pollution and threatened a Friday tradition -- Valley high school football.

Regional air authorities warned that the stifling pall may hang around for the weekend because of stagnant weather. They advised people to avoid outdoor activity if they smell smoke today and Sunday.

"We want to use an abundance of caution," said executive director Seyed Sadredin of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "These pollution levels are among the highest we've seen in years."

The pollution levels were not high enough to require mandatory restrictions on school activities or driving.

But the smoky air prompted more than 100 people to mistakenly report fires in their neighborhoods. In Clovis -- where an air monitor briefly recorded a pollution peak almost three times above the health standard -- Kathy Kowalczyk, 45, said that "even the dogs won't go outside."

The smoke -- mostly from the 30,000-acre Moonlight fire in Plumas County, northeast of Sacramento -- combined with high levels of smog, or ozone, to turn the air into a lung-damaging brew most of the day even for healthy adults, air officials said.

The Plumas fire and another blaze, the 28,000-acre Lick fire in Santa Clara County, are less than 30% contained. Authorities expect the fires to continue sending out smoke that could wind up in the Valley.

Doctors' offices in Fresno were busy with people who needed treatment for breathing problems.

"We found a lot of people who have cough, wheezing, shortness of breath, burning eyes -- people not doing very well," said Fresno allergist A.M. Aminian.

Air officials asked school districts in six counties -- Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin -- to cancel all outdoor activities Friday, including football games. Recess and other outdoor activities were canceled at schools throughout much of the region. Many intermediate school, elementary, junior varsity and freshman games and practices were canceled.

But school districts allowed most varsity football games to continue, although some junior varsity games were abbreviated by shortening quarters and allowing the game clock to run continuously. Some kickoffs were delayed until later in the evening.

In Fresno, many outdoor activities at local parks were moved inside for the day.

On Sunday, an estimated 1,500 people are still scheduled to participate in the annual Fresno Cross City Race, event officials said.

But officials added that runners should check the race Web site -- fresnocrosscityrace.com -- for possible updates today.

It is difficult to predict where the smoke plume will travel next, said meteorologist Gary Arcemont of the air district. He said the plume apparently traveled slowly over a day or two to the Fresno-Clovis area, and it might move south into Tulare and Kern counties this weekend.

"It's a blob that moves around, shifting from hour to hour," he said. "It's just the luck of the draw that it wound up right over the Fresno metropolitan area."

Many years ago, the Valley had similar bad-air episodes, which resulted primarily because of industrial and vehicle pollution. Since then, there have been many new smog-reducing regulations for industry and vehicles.

But the area rarely experiences both particle pollution and ozone as bad as Friday's episode.

The Plumas wildfire has been burning in heavy timber along the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, dumping columns of smoke into the Sacramento Valley.

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The Plumas wildfire has been burning in heavy timber along the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, dumping columns of smoke into the Sacramento Valley.

Smoke prompts Valley Air District to urge cancellation of games

Sabra Stafford - Staff reporter

Turlock Journal, Saturday, September 8, 2007

A wildfire burning in northern California has caused a haze of smoke to hover over the Central Valley, prompting the air board to recommend the postponement of all school athletic competitions.

The recommendation is for schools in areas where smoke could be seen or smelt. No Turlock area schools canceled their Friday night games. Merced County schools canceled all of their weekend games.

The air district notified all the school districts and county offices of education in their eight counties by 11:30 a.m. Friday.

The recommendation was a first for the air district and came hours before the football season gets underway for the area's high schools.

"Due to the adverse health effects that can be attributed to smoke, such as the aggravation of heart and lung diseases and asthma, we are strongly urging schools and residents to take steps to avoid exposure in those areas where smoke is present," said Seyed Sadredin, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's executive director.

The poor air quality is expected to remain in the Valley for the entire weekend, according to the air district.

Since Monday, the Valley has been under the cloud of smoke caused by two wildfires - the Moonlight Fire in Plumas County and the Lick Fire in Henry Coe State Park in Santa Clara County. Satellite images show the smoke from the Moonlight Fire has shifted and is blowing to the east, towards Nevada. The smoke from the Lick Fire is what is now pooling over the Valley.

The two fires have burned over 40,000 acres this week.

Since Thursday, the air district's monitors have reported air-quality values as "unhealthy" or "unhealthy for sensitive groups."

"The fire is sending a large plume of smoke down through the Valley and elevating particulate readings in some areas," said Gary Arcemont, a meteorologist with the air district. "If you can smell smoke, you are probably breathing it."

The air district has issued health warnings for seniors, children, and those with chronic breathing problems to avoid the outdoors and for the general public to limit their exposure.

According to the air district, the biggest health risk of smoke comes from fine particles that can

get into the eyes and the respiratory system. The particles can cause eye irritations, runny noses, and bronchitis. They also aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases.

Smoke alters sports plans

By Michael Miyamoto, staff writer
Visalia Times-Delta, Sat., Sept. 8, 2008

Poor air quality and outdoor activities don't mix.

Following warnings of smoke danger from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the Visalia division of the American Youth Soccer Organization canceled about 90 matches scheduled for Saturday. Air-pollution officials said smoke from a pair of Northern California fires makes sports and other outdoor activities potentially hazardous.

Forecasts for Saturday call for an air-quality status of unhealthy for sensitive groups. Those with lung or heart disease are considered at greater risk from exposure to particle pollution, and air-pollution officials recommend that schools postpone activities where smoke can be seen or smelled.

Martin Albiss, Region 129 Commissioner for the Visalia AYSO, said canceling Saturday's games was a difficult decision. There are 175 teams in Visalia.

"We're sorry that we have to cancel games any time," he said.

But officials realize that many players suffer from respiratory problems and asthma, he said.

"We didn't want to put any children at risk," Albiss said.

The Visalia division of the California Youth Soccer Association also canceled its Saturday games, according to its Web site.

High schools throughout Tulare County also responded to the air-quality warnings. Football games were postponed and some other activities canceled.

Here's how various high schools handled Friday's air conditions:

- Redwood — Junior varsity and varsity football games scheduled for 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. were pushed back to 7 p.m. and 8:15 p.m., respectively. The junior varsity game featured a "running clock" that shortened the game, Athletic Director Matt Sozinho said. A water polo team's trip to a Porterville tournament was canceled and a tennis team trip to a tournament in Clovis was postponed.
- Mt. Whitney — No football game was scheduled. Boys and girls water polo matches were canceled, as were a junior varsity trip to a Porterville water polo tournament and a girls water polo team trip to a Tulare tournament.
- Golden West — Junior varsity and varsity football games were delayed and the "running clock" was used for the JV game. A Saturday band practice was canceled.
- El Diamante — A JV football game was canceled. No changes were made with the varsity's 7:30 p.m. start in Clovis. A Saturday girls tennis match at Clovis may or may not take place, Athletic Director Greg Flenory said.
- Dinuba — JV and varsity football games were canceled. A water polo match in Tulare and the tennis team's participation in a Clovis tournament also were canceled. Athletic Director Martin Tovar said a Saturday tennis match in Clovis and a golf match in Porterville may still be held.
- Exeter — No changes in weekend activities are planned, Athletic Director Bobby Todd said.

Air-pollution officials advise the general public to take precautions when smoke is present. Among their suggestions:

- If it looks smoky, avoid mowing the lawn or running. Children should not play outdoors.
- Run your air conditioner. Keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean.
- Don't vacuum. That stirs up particles already in the home.
- If you have lung or heart disease or are older, ask your doctor whether you should leave the area.

Smoky air curtails activities

By Seth Nidever, staff writer
Hanford Sentinel, Sat., Sept. 8, 2007

The Valley's air district recommended Friday that school officials cancel sporting events as smoke from two northern California wildfires continues to cloud the area.

In a letter sent to all county offices of education and several school districts, officials from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District urged postponing athletic events until the pollution diminishes.

The pollution affected some prep football games Friday night.

Kickoff for the Lemoore High vs. Tulare Union varsity game in Tulare was postponed until 8 p.m., according to Jim Crichlow, central section commissioner for the California Interscholastic Federation.

Hanford High's game against Yosemite High in Oakhurst proceeded as originally scheduled, officials said.

Other sports were also being impacted.

The Hanford Youth Soccer League canceled a tournament scheduled for Saturday morning at Hanford's Soc-Com Park.

Smoke from a blaze in the northern Sierra Nevada and another in Henry Coe State Park southeast of the Bay Area began filling Central Valley skies on Thursday.

The rapidly expanding northern Sierra Nevada fire reached 28,520 acres and was only 8 percent contained as of Friday morning, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Web site.

The blaze in Henry Coe State Park had scorched 27,640 acres and was 35 percent contained, the Web site reported.

Kings County will likely remain smoky through Sunday, said Chris Stachelski, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Hanford office.

The air district recommends that persons with respiratory conditions refrain from outdoor activities as much as possible.

Smoke out: Merced still has to deal with particularly nasty air thanks to distant wildfires

By Scott Jason
Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, September 8, 2007

Residents hoping that the smoke-filled haze hovering above the Valley would lift this weekend may want to hold their breath as the air quality warnings continue.

The two fires north and west of Merced County are still raging, and the cloud of acrid smoke isn't expected to completely clear until early next week.

But the air is getting cleaner.

Classified as unhealthy on Thursday, it's now considered moderately bad, which means it may cause problems for people with severe breathing conditions. "That can change if the fire flares up," warned Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "But if things hold as they are, we are looking at much better air quality."

The district issued a code-red warning Thursday for Merced and Modesto, which was downgraded to orange and then yellow. Fresno is predicted to be orange today because the smoke is slowly blowing south, she said.

The district only predicts the next day's air quality, and Turner said it's too early to guess what the wind and fires will do Sunday.

Though the ashen air has caused sore throats, dry eyes and the cancellation of outdoor sports games, it hasn't yet led to increase in emergency room visits. However, doctors at Mercy Medical Center Merced are stocking up on extra medicine because they anticipate that they could see up to a 20 percent increase in patients, emergency room director Barbara Mullin said.

The hospital's treatment for breathing problems Thursday remained at its average of just under 100 patients, she said, adding the respiratory problems can worsen as residents breathe more of the particle-filled air. "We want to be prepared and make sure we're not hit by surprises," she said.

The Moonlight Fire in Plumas County, northeast of Sacramento, has burned more than 28,000 acres and is only 8 percent contained.

Meantime, the Lick Fire in Santa Clara and Stanislaus counties has scorched more than 27,000 acres and is 35 percent contained. While the Plumas fire is blamed for first filling the Valley with smoke, the Lick Fire is now sending some of the gray air this way.

John Amos, a CalFire spokesman, said the Lick Fire slowed down Thursday night, burning only 600 acres. However, the terrain is rocky and filled with heavy brush, making it difficult to fight. "The fire is in control, not us," he said.

The temperature is expected to remain in the mid-90s this weekend, and there aren't any predictions for a strong wind to blast out the stagnant smoke, said Chris Stachelski, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Hanford. "It will gradually have to dissolve," he said. "We're still pretty much going to be stuck with what's trapped down here."

The Valley's natural bowl shape allows for both polluted air from the Bay Area and wildfires to settle in over the county's flatlands.

The air pollution district urged schools to cancel or postpone outdoor games early Friday because of the smoke. Recreational leagues joined in, worried that it could be too rough and dangerous for kids to compete.

The Merced Youth Soccer Association and the Atwater Youth Soccer League both plan to begin their seasons next week, with the second round of games scheduled. Eddie Plaza, a field and equipment coordinator with the Atwater league, said coaches decided to delay the season's start because of the warning. "You have some kids with asthma, and it makes it that much harder on them," he explained. "It's just better."

Once the fires are extinguished, he'll be able to breathe easier, knowing that the soccer players can too.

Plumas blaze's danger easing

As winds slow and fire officials' optimism rises, some homeowners are returning to their residences.

By Ryan Lillis - Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Saturday, September 8, 2007

TAYLORSVILLE, Plumas County -- The Moonlight fire continued to burn a huge swath of Northern California on Friday, but dying winds and a strong attack by firefighters left authorities optimistic that the threat to most homes may have passed.

With nearly 2,000 firefighters and support personnel battling the 31,000-acre blaze, a 500-yard buffer had been established in many areas between the 100 homes evacuated earlier in the week and the fire.

The fire was only 16 percent contained, but more progress was expected through the weekend, and homeowners in some areas were being allowed to return to their residences in rugged, hilly terrain near Greenville and Taylorsville.

"We think we're holding our own in that area," said Ron DeHart, a U.S. Forest Service spokesman. "The fire crews have a very positive sense because we think it could have been a lot worse."

The blaze, burning more than 150 miles from Sacramento, has sent a plume of smoke and ash over the city and as far away as the Bay Area.

The air quality levels around the Sacramento region were considerably healthier Friday thanks to fresh air pumped in by the Delta breeze.

"We've had a pretty good clean-out because of the Delta breeze (Thursday) night," said Lori Kobza of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District. "The ground-level ozone -- smog -- it's in the green. It's healthy today."

Kobza said it is still wise to take precautions among sensitive groups, but overall she didn't anticipate the air quality falling to the unhealthy levels recorded earlier in the week.

Fire officials in Plumas County initially said up to 500 homes were threatened. But by late Friday authorities said they had confirmed the loss of only one home and three minor injuries in the fire, which began on Labor Day afternoon.

The home that was lost was in the north arm of Indian Valley on the fire's southern edge, an area so isolated that the homeowner had to lead a Plumas County sheriff's sergeant there Friday morning to see if it had survived the fire.

"We knew when we moved up here if there was a fire we'd lose the house," said Kenneth Zeits, a 64-year-old retired bus driver who moved to the area seven years ago with his wife. "We got to live our dream for a good seven years."

Zeits fled his home Wednesday after collecting his dog and cat and a rifle that had been handed down to him by his grandfather. At the time, a fire crew was battling the blaze in the area, but they later were ordered out.

"There's no sense losing a guy over a building," Zeits said. "I have no complaints."

Firefighters were able to save dozens of other homes in the area. In many places, the fire charred the trunks of trees standing just a few feet from wood-sided ranch-style homes tucked away on steep and narrow dirt roads in the area.

Very few homes received any damage at all, although the landscape Friday was covered with soft gray ash and pockets of steam and smoke rose from the ground.

In one area the fire had threatened, a child's bicycle was parked with no apparent damage. Not far away, a chicken coop -- with the birds running about inside -- sat unscathed.

Ken McIntyre, a 91-year-old resident, had been forced from his home at midnight Wednesday when a sheriff's deputy knocked on the door and told him and his wife to get out.

He grabbed a paper bag filled with clothing, medication and an applesauce cake his wife had baked earlier in the day.

"It's a really good cake," said his daughter, Sally Kafkares. "She's been making it for years."

McIntyre said he was born and raised in the area and has lived there all his life. But, he said, he does not remember a fire as big as this one.

"Sometimes it gets a little smoky, but nothing like this," he said.

Taylorville's population is 154, and many of the residents are ranchers or farmers. Most of the people evacuated from the danger zone went to stay with friends or family or to motel rooms in Quincy or other nearby towns.

While they waited, some used novel techniques to check on the status of their homes.

Chuck Potter was in his home Wednesday when he saw the smoke in the distance.

"When we saw it, it looked like a volcano," he said. "I've never seen anything like it. We thought for sure nothing in there could survive."

After leaving, Potter called his home answering machine periodically to see if his home had survived. Thursday morning, there was no answer.

Worried, Potter headed toward a police checkpoint fearing the worst, but authorities told him they had just cut off electrical service to the area and that his home was safe.

"When they told us the house was definitely there, we had a ton of gratitude," he said.

Big game tonight

Danielle MacMurchy

Tracy Press - Online, Friday, September 7, 2007

West and Tracy high schools will take the field tonight for a highly anticipated football game after the school district was advised to cancel because of high levels of smoke in the air.

The forecast today shows the air is unhealthy for older adults, children and people with heart or lung illnesses, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The control district urged school districts throughout the valley to postpone outdoor athletic activities until the air clears.

"It's not a good idea for anybody to be exerting themselves," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the local air-pollution district. "At an outdoor event, you're exposing a great deal of people to smoke."

The smoky haze that sunk into the valley Wednesday and Thursday came from the Moonlight Fire, a wildfire more than 200 miles from Tracy, northeast of Sacramento.

A wind shift of a west-to-east direction could send smoke from the Lick Fire, near San Jose, into the San Joaquin Valley to worsen air quality into the weekend.

Tracy Unified School District warned student athletes in a letter sent home Thursday to be careful and those with asthma should consult a physician before they play a sport.

"The game is on," district spokeswoman Jessica Wakefield said. "If it gets worse, we will evaluate."

Wildfire's smoke alters light, weather **But San Mateo County spared serious health issues, officials say**

By Jeff Thomas, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, September 7, 2007

It's been looking a lot like Christmas in some parts of the Bay Area — except for the 88-degree temperatures.

The cloud of haze from the Lick fire hanging over much of the area on Thursday was more typical of those winter days when an air inversion and burning fireplaces produce a layer of smog that nestles between the east and west hills.

At least one person from San Mateo County reported breathing difficulties because of the smoky air, according to Jenny Bard, spokeswoman for the American Lung Association.

That person was one of five across the Bay Area who called the association about breathing problems as of late Thursday afternoon, Bard said.

"We definitely have people, particularly those with asthma and emphysema, reporting difficulty breathing," she said. "The smoke is an added burden. We tell them to stay indoors as much as possible." But for the most part, San Mateo County was spared serious health and air-quality concerns.

The county Health Department reported no severe cases, and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District in San Francisco rated the air quality over the Peninsula good on Thursday and today.

Still, residents expressed surprise at unusually smoggy, muggy conditions.

"I looked out the window (Wednesday) and thought, 'Geez, that's kind of hazy. I think that's smoke,'" Patricia Corbin of Belmont said. "It was confusing to me at first."

Then she saw television news about the wildfires.

Health officials in Santa Clara County issued a warning about air quality Thursday, but they also said it is only a precautionary measure. So far.

Similar conditions are expected today, although a National Weather Service forecaster said winds may shift in the afternoon and send the smoke toward the Central Valley. High temperatures are expected to remain in the mid-80s through the weekend. And incidentally, were it not for the smoky haze, we'd be enjoying clear skies and bright sun, forecaster Steve Anderson said.

But as the fire continues, shifting winds may make some spots worse than others. Those most at risk — seniors, children and people with respiratory problems — are advised to stay indoors today if possible.

Firefighters Thursday continued to battle the 18,000-acre blaze east of Gilroy in Henry W. Coe State Park. The fire was about 25 percent contained.

Ed Buller, coach of the Oak Grove High School football team, isn't taking chances with his players' lungs. He cut the team's Thursday practice session in half, from 2 1/2 hours to about an hour and 15 minutes, because of the haze.

"We're going to play it by ear," he said. "If the breeze changes and it gets worse, we'll cut it short and go in and watch film."

The diminished visibility delayed a few flights out of San Francisco International Airport on Wednesday night, but none Thursday. Flights to and from San Jose-Mineta International Airport were not affected, airport spokesman Rich Dressler said.

The haze created a yellowish cast to the day, with only the outline of the hills on either side of the valley visible. But Karen Schkolnick of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District said the air was not as bad as it looked.

"It's unusual to see this in the summer, but not uncommon for what we might see in the wintertime," she said. "The levels of particulate matter are lower than what we might typically see in winter," when air quality is often worse because dirty air can be trapped by a cap of warm air. That phenomenon is called an inversion layer.

She said the highest reading in the Bay Area — 22 micrograms per cubic meter — was still well below the federally set limit of 35. Particulate matter — dust, ash, pollen or any other airborne particles — can irritate the respiratory system.

"It's still in the healthy range," she said. "Conditions can change quickly, though, so if people feel the effects, they should stay indoors, keep doors and windows closed, and use air conditioning if possible."

For those worried about the smoke, the American Lung Association offers these other suggestions:

- Refrain from exercising outdoors, particularly if you smell smoke or notice eye or throat irritation.
- When driving through smoky areas, keep windows and air vents closed. Also, air conditioning should be operated only in the "recirculate" setting.
- People with asthma should make sure to have their medication available in case of an attack and should consult their physicians about appropriate dosages.
- People using oxygen should not adjust their level of intake before consulting their physicians.

For more information, call 800-LUNG-USA.

Staff writer Neil Gonzales contributed to this story.

Two raging wildfires in Northern California have cast a pall over Merced Blanketed by smoke

By Dhyana Levey

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, September 7, 2007

A thick, smoky haze fell over Merced County the past few days, making people outdoors wonder what the darned weather was up to now -- or was it the climate? Meanwhile, air quality officials urged everyone to stay indoors for their health.

The air quality forecast for today is slightly less severe than it was yesterday, according to the San Joaquin Air Quality Control District. While Thursday's conditions were reported unhealthy for everyone, today only sensitive groups, such as asthmatics, should keep their outdoor activities limited.

"I thought, 'It's not winter yet, why is it so foggy?'" said Jamie Barnes, 34, standing outside her downtown Merced business, Juice It Up, Thursday afternoon. Sam Royal, 44, an engineer for the city of Merced, noticed the odd hazy weather during his commute from Turlock. "I thought it was from farming, harvesting almonds," he said. "That wasn't the case."

The skies are actually clouded by smoke from two large Northern California fires, particularly the Moonlight Fire in the Plumas National Forest. The Lick Fire east of Morgan Hill may have contributed some smoke to the Valley, but is mainly sending the swirl toward Monterey, said Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district sent out advisory notices to Valley counties, including Merced, warning residents of possible health risks caused by the smoke. High levels of particle matter were reported in the

Merced area Thursday, meaning that tiny pieces of soot, ash and droplets of liquid were abundant in the air. This matter can aggravate respiratory conditions. "Even those who are healthy, try to stay indoors when you can," Turner warned. "This isn't the time to go out jogging for miles. If you are an avid exerciser, go to a gym."

These conditions are particularly concerning for asthmatics, said Melissa Kelly-Ortega, program associate for the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition. Anyone who uses an inhaler, even sporadically, should make sure it is with them at all times. While severe asthmatics tend to keep sharp watch over their conditions, mild asthmatics can forget their inhalers, which can cause dire problems in situations like this, Kelly-Ortega said.

People with heart disease should also be on the alert, she added. The fine particle matter in the air is so fine that it can pass far into the lungs and into the blood. "But to us, anyone under 18 is in a sensitive group," Kelly-Ortega said. "Their lungs are still developing."

Merced County schools and day care centers use colored flags from the Asthma Coalition to warn students and teachers of air quality problems. Early Thursday the flags were orange, meaning conditions were unhealthy for those in sensitive groups.

But by Thursday afternoon Donnell Smith, family service education coordinator for Merced College Child Development Center, found out her flag should be switched to red. "I'm getting an advisory right now," she said. "It looks like we are keeping our children inside this afternoon. I have to go tell the teachers."

Red means conditions are unhealthy for everyone, but especially older adults and children.

People walking around downtown Merced at lunchtime on Thursday noticed the smoky haze but said they didn't feel it in their lungs. Even asthmatic Trenton Clark, 56, who carries an inhaler, said he hasn't had trouble breathing the last couple of days. "I've had a headache," said Adria Torres, 24. "I can definitely smell it in the air. It's amazing -- if it looks that bad here, it must be really bad for people there."

The Moonlight Fire in Plumas County, northeast of Sacramento, began Monday afternoon and has covered almost 20,000 acres, according to reports from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. North to northeastern winds are carrying smoke from this fire into the San Joaquin Valley air basin.

The Lick Fire in Santa Clara County also began Monday afternoon. By Thursday morning it had covered about 11,000 acres.

Today has been designated as a Spare the Air Day in the San Joaquin Valley because of the poor air quality conditions. Residents are being asked to reduce or avoid activities that might cause air pollution for the next 24 hours. Now if someone could just tell that to Mother Nature.

Football, soccer games canceled because of air-quality warnings

By Michael Miyamoto, staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, Sept. 7, 2007

Tulare County sports officials — heeding the advice of San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials — acted accordingly Friday. High schools canceled or delayed football games while two Visalia youth soccer associations canceled weekend activity.

Large wildfires in northern California continue to send a smoke plume through the Central Valley, prompting a warning from local air-pollution-control officials that schools and organizations should curtail outdoor athletic events.

Regional Roundup

Smoke lingers in area as fires continue burning

By News-Sentinel Staff

Lodi News Sentinel, Friday, September 7, 2007

Lodi residents awoke to ash on their cars Thursday as forest fire smoke lingered over San Joaquin County for a second day.

Most of the smoke came from a Plumas County fire more than 100 miles away, north-east of Chico. The fire, dubbed the Moonlight Fire, nearly doubled in size overnight, going from 15,000 acres on Wednesday to 28,000 acres by Thursday morning.

Nearly 2,300 fire personnel were fighting the blaze, an increase from 1,000 people fighting it Wednesday. It was 8 percent contained as of Thursday evening and was expected to continue burning toward the south-west.

Winds blew the smoke west and then south into the San Joaquin Valley, where the haze lingered all of Wednesday and into Thursday.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health advisory for sensitive groups, and predicted that air quality would remain similar today. District officials recommended that children and older adults avoid prolonged or strenuous outdoor activities, and advised those with lung and heart troubles to follow their doctors' orders regarding bad air quality.

A Bay Area fire burning in Henry W. Coe State Park, in Santa Clara County, was not helping overall air quality in Northern California. Dubbed the Lick Fire, it had grown to nearly 19,000 acres by Thursday morning and was 25 percent contained.

On Wednesday a San Joaquin County strike team went to help fight the Lick Fire. Firefighters from Waterloo-Morada, Liberty, Linden-Peters, Lathrop-Manteca and Ripon fire districts, and the Tracy Fire Department are battling that blaze alongside more than 1,750 personnel.

Fires prompt Bay Area air quality warnings Officials recommend limiting prolonged physical exercise

By Jeff Thomas, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, September 7, 2007

It's been looking a lot like Christmas in the Santa Clara Valley — OK, except for the 88-degree temperatures.

The cloud of haze from the Lick fire hanging over much of the Bay Area on Thursday is more typical of those winter days when an air inversion and burning fireplaces produce a layer of smog that nestles between the east and west hills.

Health officials issued a warning about air quality Thursday, but they also said it is only a precautionary measure — so far.

"We have seen some elevated levels of particulate matter," said Karen Schkolnick of Bay Area Air Quality Management, "but nothing that would exceed health standards. Our San Jose monitor is showing that the air is relatively healthy."

Similar conditions are expected today, although a National Weather Service forecaster said winds may shift in the afternoon and send the smoke toward the Central Valley. Temperatures are expected to remain in the mid-80s through the weekend. And were it not for the smoky haze, we'd be enjoying clear skies and bright sun, forecaster Steve Anderson said.

But as the fire continues, shifting winds may make some spots worse than others. Those most at risk — seniors, children and people with respiratory problems — are advised to stay indoors today if possible.

And if you're looking for an excuse to skip your morning jog, feel free to use this: Health officials also suggest cutting back on prolonged physical exercise.

Ed Buller, coach of the Oak Grove High School football team, isn't taking chances with his players' lungs. He cut the team's Thursday practice session in half because of the haze in the air.

"We're going to play it by ear," he said. "If the breeze changes and it gets worse, we'll cut it short and go in and watch film."

The diminished visibility caused by the smoke delayed a few flights out of San Francisco International Airport on Wednesday night, but none on Thursday. Flights to and from San Jose-Mineta International Airport were not affected, airport spokesman Rich Dressler said.

The haze created a yellowish cast for the day, with only the outline of the hills on either side of the valley visible. But Schkolnick said the air was not as bad as it looked.

"It's unusual to see this in the summer, but not uncommon for what we might see in the wintertime," she said. "The levels of particulate matter are lower than what we might typically see in winter," when air quality is often worse because dirty air can be trapped by a cap of warm air. That phenomenon is called an inversion layer.

She said the highest reading in the Bay Area — 22 micrograms per cubic meter — was still well below the federally set limit of 35 micrograms per cubic meter. Particulate matter — dust, ash, pollen or any other airborne particles — can cause irritation to the respiratory system.

"It's still in the healthy range," she said. "Conditions can change quickly, though, so if people feel the effects, they should stay indoors, keep doors and windows closed, and use air conditioning if possible."

Some things, though, are too important to shut down because of a little thing like smoke in the sky. Michael Hong, 20, and five buddies were playing half-court basketball Thursday afternoon at Flickinger Park in East San Jose.

Haze? What haze?

"We just thought it was a smoggy day," Hong said on a break between games. "But it's not bad enough to make us stop playing hoops."

In depth: Pluses, minuses of alternative fuels

There's a high-powered future in alternative fuels.

By Pat Brennan

The Orange County Register, Monday, September 10, 2007

Maybe it won't be quite like pondering an endless spectrum of supermarket sodas, or the apparently infinite choices on a cell phone menu.

But the world of vehicle fuel is about to get more complicated.

Several alternative fuels are being developed or are already in use. All have advantages and drawbacks.

The Orange County Register spoke to a variety of experts — people who study various fuel types, people who try to sell them, and those who are hard at work in auto shops and laboratories to make them a reality in the marketplace.

We also spoke to government officials who help craft regulations to spur development of alternative fuels. No one can be quite sure yet which of the leading alternative fuel candidates will come to dominate.

Battery/electric

How it works

Rechargeable onboard batteries provide all power.

Pluses, minuses

If the electricity used in the car is produced in a non-polluting manner, battery electric cars offer the promise of zero emissions.

Attempts to market electric cars, however, have so far largely failed. That was noted as far back as 1996, when the California Air Resources Board backed away from more stringent requirements for electric car production from large volume manufacturers – General Motors, Toyota, Ford, Honda, then-DaimlerChrysler and Nissan – as well as lower-volume manufacturers.

While some activists have contended that the failure was engineered by reluctant automakers, other experts point to limited range for electric cars, high costs and a general lack of acceptance by consumers.

Market status

Some electric cars are on the road now, but widespread sales to consumers depend on future developments in battery technology.

Timetable

A recent estimate by a state Independent Expert Panel suggests widespread consumer sales of pure electric cars might not arrive until after 2030.

Biodiesel and vegetable oil

How it works

Used vegetable oil can be filtered and pumped right into the tanks of suitably converted diesel cars; biodiesel can be made from vegetable oil but involves a chemical change that strips glycerine from the mixture to avoid engine clogging.

Pluses, minuses

Vegetable oil is a hit with a small cadre of enthusiasts and can be collected and processed by consumers themselves. Conversions of Mercedes-Benz and other diesel cars are inexpensive, but questions remain about the cars' production of nitrogen oxides, a precursor to smog.

Biodiesel is beyond the technical reach of most hobbyists, but has begun to make its mark among alternative fuels. It can be used in almost any newer vehicle that runs on diesel fuel. Potential uses include interstate trucking. Biodiesel also slightly increases levels of nitrogen oxides.

Market status

Expanded use of biodiesel hinges on increased "feed stock," or sources of oil used to make biodiesel, which include soy, palm, canola and other plants. Entrepreneurs aren't waiting; Kendra McCreary, a former Orange County resident who now lives in Colorado, has made a successful business of marketing carbon credits for use of biodiesel among businesses.

"The tide is turning," said McCreary, whose business is called Eco-Conscious. "Some of the new regulations (in California and other states) are increasing the market viability for biofuels."

Timetable

With increased renewable fuel standards and expanded feed stock, consumer use of biodiesel could increase within 10 years, though experts caution that much depends on whether scientific research can produce a cheaper way to manufacture it.

Flex fuels and ethanol

How it works

Flex-fuel vehicles are designed to run on gasoline or any mixture of ethanol, including so-called E-85 – fuel that is 85 percent ethanol. Burning ethanol instead of gasoline can greatly reduce air pollution as well as greenhouse gas emissions.

Pluses, minuses

The main advantage is versatility. These cars can run on normal gasoline, which often includes some ethanol, until fuel with higher proportions of ethanol becomes available.

But whether that will ever happen is in doubt. Ethanol is mainly produced from corn in the United States, and some experts say producing large quantities is prohibitively expensive and carries a large environmental footprint. Doing so could also drive up food costs.

Experiments are under way in a variety of laboratories to create "cellulosic" ethanol, whether from switch grass, sugar cane or some other plant. This would allow far more of the plant to be used to create fuel.

Market status

Ethanol is already part of the gasoline mix in California – about 5.7 percent, rising to 10 percent by 2012. Producing higher-percentage ethanol fuels, such as E-85, is now costly but could be reduced by future scientific advances.

Many flex-fuel vehicles are being sold, but they're not always obvious to consumers; many probably aren't aware they are driving one, but the auto companies still get the federal fuel efficiency credits.

Timetable

While ethanol has been important in the early days of alternative fuels, several experts say that, barring a major scientific innovation, they expect its star to fade as other alternative fuels become more widely available.

Hybrids and plug-in hybrids

How it works

Hybrids use a combination of gasoline and electricity from onboard batteries; heat from braking is recovered to help recharge batteries.

Plug-in hybrids are just what the name implies. Consumers will plug their cars into a wall outlet when they get home to recharge onboard batteries.

Pluses, minuses

Hybrids are among the first alternative -fuel vehicles to be a big hit with consumers, although big is a relative term: In 2006, Toyota and Lexus sold 191,742 hybrids nationwide out of 2.5 million total cars sold.

"We're definitely making the transition to hybrid vehicle technology," says Dan Sperling, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis. "What we are really making is the transition to electricity-driven vehicle technology. We're gradually electrifying vehicles internally – that is happening for sure."

Although plug-in hybrids will have greater battery capacity than today's hybrids, they have technical challenges ahead – development of batteries that can handle heavy demands and the need for reliable tests of the cars' fuel efficiency.

Market status

Hybrid vehicles are now being sold to consumers by major automakers, including Toyota, Honda, Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. Automakers also are developing plug-in hybrids.

Timetable

Hybrids have arrived and sales have grown in recent years; plug-in hybrids could reach mass commercialization by 2015.

Hydrogen

How it works

With internal combustion engines that run on hydrogen, liquid hydrogen is stored in a tank.

In hydrogen fuel cell cars, the hydrogen is used to power a fuel cell that produces electricity and emits zero pollution.

Pluses, minuses

Several experts say widespread use is problematic because an entirely new hydrogen infrastructure would be needed to replace today's system of gas pumps and service stations.

Hydrogen fuel cell cars are considered by many experts to be the ideal solution to air pollution problems caused by vehicles. The technology is under rapid development, including at the National Fuel Cell Research Center at UC Irvine and at Quantum Technologies in Irvine. Orange County, in fact, has become a regional research center for hydrogen power.

UC Irvine professor Scott Samuelsen, who directs the Fuel Cell Research Center, said he believes hydrogen's benefits – efficiency, simplicity – will ultimately outweigh those of other alternative fuels. "Ethanol is being deployed, biodiesel, we may have another," he said. "But it will coalesce in the end back into hydrogen."

Market status

Some internal combustion hydrogen cars are in operation. California's widely known "hydrogen highway" concept includes 24 refueling stations across the state.

Before consumer fuel cell cars can be marketed, fueling stations must be more widespread, and the production of hydrogen for fuel must be done in a non-polluting way.

Timetable

A state panel says hydrogen fuel cell cars could be mass marketed by 2025, internal combustion hydrogen cars by 2030, although others say internal combustion could be first. The state air board's existing requirement for automakers would put 2,500 fuel cell cars on the road by 2011, 25,000 by 2014.

Natural gas

How it works

Natural gas is derived from underground deposits, some found alongside petroleum. It also results in some of the same kinds of air pollution – though at much reduced levels. Greenhouse gas levels also are much reduced.

Pluses, minuses

Natural gas is now being used in a number of commercial and government vehicle fleets across the country, and as much as 40 percent of public transportation fleets in California. But, as with many alternative fuels, the marketing devil is in the economic details: So far, there are not enough fueling stations and other needed infrastructure to power large numbers of consumer cars.

Passenger cars would use compressed natural gas; liquid natural gas, though used in large vehicles and ships at sea, requires cryogenic refrigeration and is best for heavy engines, and so is considered impractical for consumer use.

Market status

The use of compressed natural gas in company and government vehicle fleets will likely continue to rise, but expanding into consumer markets is problematic. In the future, if gasoline consistently costs \$3.50 a gallon, the cost of providing consumers with natural gas for vehicle fuel will be about even, possibly driving broader marketing of this alternative, said Tim Olson, manager of the Emerging Fuels Technology Office at the California Energy Commission.

Timetable

Already in use for government, private business fleets; more widespread consumer use is uncertain.

BART TURNS 35

Service, communities adapt along the way

By Denis Cuff, Staff Writer

Contra Costa Times, Monday, September 10, 2007

BART's sleek electric trains with plush carpets hummed into service Sept. 11, 1972, with a bold mission.

Bay Area Rapid Transit was going to save the Bay Area from gridlock, smog and urban sprawl. Along the way, BART also would juice up the seedy image of public transit.

The electric train system missed some of its original goals, such as running trains every 90 seconds, and debate is ongoing about whether it has reduced traffic congestion.

What many agree on is that BART helped fuel rapid housing growth in communities east of the Caldecott Tunnel in Contra Costa and Alameda counties, and it helped reinforce San Francisco's role as a big job center.

"BART opened up the East Bay as a place to live because they could commute to jobs in San Francisco," said Dan Richard, a former BART board member from Walnut Creek. "People may see that as good or bad, but there is no doubt that many bedroom communities, including Walnut Creek and Pleasant Hill, wouldn't be what they are today without BART."

BART celebrates its 35th year of service Tuesday as a more reliable and efficient system that people rely on more often to get around in Contra Costa, Alameda, San Francisco and San Mateo counties.

"BART had many problems in its early days. One author called it a planning disaster," said Tom Radulovich, a BART board member from San Francisco "But BART works a lot better now. At 35, it looks much smarter. It's had a net positive effect on the region and its mobility."

Doug Floyd, an Orinda resident, said riding BART for 35 years made his life easier and less stressful. It spared him from driving over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco from 1972 until his retirement in 1999.

"If they say the train will be there at 8:35, it would be there," Floyd said. "I relied on BART so much, my car battery at home would be dead because I hadn't started it in a long time."

BART wasn't always as reliable. In its early days, trains broke down more often, doors on cars opened unpredictably, escalators broke and ticket machines often jammed.

Those problems were addressed as they popped up, said BART spokesman Linton Johnson, some through a \$1.5 billion renovation program that ended in 2004 and was funded by federal grants and fare increases.

As improvements were made to basic services, ridership rose from 32,000 average riders on a weekday in the 1972-73 fiscal year to about 350,000 this year. On Aug. 31, the first day of this year's Labor Day weekend closure of the Bay Bridge, the system set a weekday record of 389,400 riders.

Rider surveys showed customer satisfaction grew to its highest level in 2004. It dipped slightly in 2006 because of unhappiness about dirty cars -- something BART says it will fix by expanding cleaning crews cut in the hard times of the dot-com bust.

BART has extended rail service to Dublin, Pittsburg-Bay Point and the San Francisco International Airport. But it has not completed extensions to Livermore and Antioch, much to the irritation of local taxpayers there. Also, Santa Clara County, which voted to stay out of BART in 1962, is trying to get a rail extension to San Jose.

BART was touted as a sprawl-buster when voters in Contra Costa, Alameda and San Francisco counties were asked in 1962 to pay property taxes to build the system.

As the predictions went, homes and businesses would cluster around train stations in transit-oriented villages. By leaving cars at home, BART riders would cut pollution and traffic.

Today, transit villages built around BART stations have been developed at Fruitvale in Oakland and one is in development at the Pleasant Hill station.

For the most part, though, residential housing boomed in eastern Contra Costa and Alameda counties far from the original BART stations, according to a series of studies by the federal government and UC Berkeley in the 1980s and 1990s.

Cities and counties often did not zone land around BART stations for high-density developments, said Stuart Cohen, chief of the Oakland-based Transportation and Land Use Coalition.

"I think BART, overall, has been a good thing," Cohen said. "But it did not meet its potential to curb urban sprawl. With 35 years of service, I think we're really at the cusp of having land around stations converted to transit villages."

John Landis, a land-use expert and former UC Berkeley professor, said cheap land prices in the East Bay -- not the convenience of train service -- spurred home building in communities east of the Caldecott.

"You can't know for sure what would have happened without BART, but I think these suburban communities would have grown anyway," said Landis, who just left UC to work at the University of Pennsylvania.

Landis said he also doubts BART has played a significant role in reducing auto congestion, which has worsened in the Bay Area.

If voters had not narrowly approved the creation of the train system, the region would have come up with other anti-congestion measures -- including possibly building more freeways or adding more ferries, he said.

BART managers and some other transit experts contend the train system plays an invaluable role in reducing auto congestion -- particularly on the Bay Bridge.

As many passengers ride the BART through the Transbay Tube under the bridge as people drive over it in cars -- about 170,000 a day, said Johnson, the BART spokesman.

According to a 2004 study by UC Berkeley engineers, a sudden BART shutdown would mean morning commute traffic heading west toward the Bay Bridge would back up 26 miles and limp along at 9 mph. A trip from Pittsburg along Highway 4 to Interstate 80 would take 165 minutes instead of the usual 30 minutes, the engineers estimated.

Vukan Vichic, a transportation professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said San Francisco without BART would be overrun with more freeways, parking garages, air pollution and traffic congestion.

"If you rely on cars too much, it corrodes a city," Vichic said.

In one of her biggest challenges, BART's newly appointed general manager, Dorothy Dugger is helping map out a 50-year plan for BART, including deciding whether to build a second Transbay Tube.

BART can't carry everyone, she said, but its mission is to give the public a convenient alternative to the auto.

Matt Ginsburg, a longtime BART rider, said he decided to live in Contra Costa County in part because he can ride BART from Orinda to his banking job in San Francisco.

Even though his BART commute probably takes as long as it would if he drove, Ginsburg said, "It gives me the chance to read. I like being able to choose to do something that is good for the environment."

EPA must let states set fuel-efficiency rules

Contra Costa Times, Monday, September 10, 2007

FOR NEARLY TWO years, California has been trying to persuade the federal Environmental Protection Agency to allow the state to protect the environment. If the lack of success continues

until mid-October, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vows to sue the EPA so California can move ahead on its own plans to reduce auto emissions.

California and 14 other states with 44 percent of the nation's population want to enforce stricter standards for reducing motor vehicle emissions to combat global warming and to improve air quality.

But the EPA under the Bush administration has been reluctant to allow states to create their own regulations. Also, to their own long-range detriment, auto manufacturers have fought the California standards, claiming they were an illegal way for states to enforce their own fuel economy rules.

However, in April, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the EPA, which resisted regulating greenhouse gases as air pollutants. The high court ruled in favor of states, including California, seeking the authority to set their own greenhouse gas rules.

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, the EPA continues to delay a decision on whether California and other states can set their own vehicle emission regulations.

EPA chief Stephen Johnson says he will decide by the end of the year. Why wait? A Congressional Research Service report, obtained by MediaNews a week ago, found that California met all tests in getting a waiver from the EPA to enforce its own state standards.

The report, completed in July and updated Aug. 20, said the state rules had substantial flexibility for the auto industry and included the use of current technologies to meet the new regulations, starting with the 2009 models.

With the Supreme Court ruling and the Congressional Research Service report, there is no reason why the EPA cannot quickly grant California's and other states' requests to begin enforcing their own rules on vehicle emissions.

The EPA should have made that decision nearly two years ago. Better yet, the EPA should adopt the stricter regulations on a national basis.

The most significant impact of the state vehicle emissions regulations would be to require automakers to produce more fuel-efficient cars and trucks.

Using less petroleum has several major benefits. It conserves a critical resource, reduces U.S. dependence on foreign oil from volatile countries, saves money spent on fuel, cleans the air and reduces carbon dioxide, which most scientists believe contributes to global warming.

California has long been a trailblazer in the area of air-pollution regulation, there is no reason for it to stop now.

Moreover, it makes sense to increase fuel efficiency now as new supplies of petroleum fall way behind the increase in demand.

In the not-too-distant future, economic realities will force far greater fuel efficiency on everyone. When gasoline rises to \$4 and \$5 a gallon, which is inevitable over time, the car companies that make the most fuel-efficient cars will be at a great advantage over those that lag behind.

One would think the major U.S. automakers would be taking the lead in producing high-mileage cars instead of lobbying the EPA to block state fuel-efficiency regulations.

It would make a lot more sense for the EPA, states and auto firms to be working together toward fuel efficiency.

Unfortunately, that is not the case, but that is no excuse for the EPA not to act or at least allow forward-looking states such as California to act on their own, ASAP.

Gas costs spark high-speed rail interest

By Jan Dennis, Associated Press

In the Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Sunday, Sept. 9, 2007

Seven hours after boarding a train in Kansas City, Douglas Lewandowski finally arrived at Chicago's Union Station - rested after the 500-mile trip but anxious to get home to Elkhart, Ind.

"How long it takes on these trains is so frustrating," said Lewandowski, 55. "I'd be more likely to take more trains if they were faster, but I'm afraid I'll be six feet under before that ever happens."

While sleek new passenger trains streak through Europe, Japan and other corners of the world at speeds nearing 200 mph, most U.S. passenger trains chug along at little more than highway speeds - slowed by a half-century of federal preference for spending on roads and airports.

But advocates say millions of Americans may be ready to embrace high-speed rail for everything from business travel to vacations because of soaring gas prices, airport delays and congested freeways that slow travel and contribute to air pollution.

"We have to change these things really fast. The era of cheap oil is over," said Rick Harnish, executive director of the nonprofit Midwest High Speed Rail Association. "People want choices in how they travel, and it's time for the states and feds to start providing those."

Still, getting trains moving fast enough, and in enough places, to entice travelers is a funding and logistical challenge.

Track and safety improvements for already-proposed projects could cost billions of dollars - and require reprioritizing of federal transportation funds.

Congress is considering a six-year Amtrak funding bill co-sponsored by 40 senators that would provide the first matching federal grants for rail projects. The measure proposes \$100 million in first-year grants, paltry considering that California alone needs \$40 billion for a mammoth bullet train project that would link San Francisco and Sacramento with Los Angeles and San Diego.

Some argue federal money would be better spent to research electric-powered cars and other cutting-edge travel alternatives, rather than the ribbons of steel that triggered America's westward expansion in the 1800s.

"Solutions to our current problems have to be found, not imposed from previous centuries. High-speed rail is just a polished version of 19th century technology," said William Garrison, co-author of "Tomorrow's Transportation" and a retired civil engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

But supporters contend high-speed trains could be an important alternative, rivaling even air travel once home-to-airport travel times and delays cause by airport security measures are taken into account.

A new European rail line that hits speeds up to 199 mph has cut the 292-mile ride between Paris and Frankfurt from 6 hours and 15 minutes to 3 1/2 hours. At those speeds, the 260-mile ride between Chicago and St. Louis would drop from 5 1/2 hours to just over 3 hours.

"They'd have to go awful fast. When I go somewhere I like to get there in a hurry, not take all day," John Wilson, 79, said while waiting for his son's plane at an airport in Bloomington, Ill.

Few envision U.S. high-speed rail would stretch coast to coast or match the dizzying speeds of other countries in the next few decades, even if Congress approves the matching funds for intercity rail projects.

Instead, supporters see most trains running at about 110 mph between major cities 200 to 300 miles apart, similar to Amtrak's Acela line that trimmed about a half-hour from the usual 4-hour trip from Boston to New York and about 15 minutes from the three-hour ride from New York to Washington.

The six-year-old Acela Express is the only U.S. rail line that tops the 125 mph considered "high speed" by international standards. And even supporters concede it barely qualifies, hitting its maximum 150 mph for less than 20 miles from Boston to Washington, D.C., and averaging just 86 mph over the full 456-mile run.

Even so, Acela's ridership rose 20 percent in May as gasoline prices topped \$3 a gallon nationwide, said Amtrak spokesman Cliff Cole. Nationally, Amtrak is poised for its fifth straight year of ridership gains this year, said Marc Magliari, a spokesman for the railroad.

Ridership was up nearly 18 percent through May on a Pennsylvania line that bumped speeds from 90 mph to 110 mph last October, cutting 15 to 30 minutes off the two-hour ride from Philadelphia to Harrisburg.

States across the country have gambled on increased interest in rail travel, investing millions of their own dollars in studies and construction for high-speed projects that helped launch about a half-dozen routes that now run above 90 mph.

Illinois has sunk about \$80 million into track and crossing improvements over a decade, but has finished less than half of a planned high-speed route from Chicago to St. Louis that would shave 90 minutes off the current 5 1/2-hour train ride.

Completing the estimated \$400 million project will take years, but is projected to boost ridership from 300,000 last year to 1.2 million, said George Weber, chief of the Illinois Department of Transportation's passenger rail division.

Weber said trains could begin running at 110 mph by 2009 on 120 miles of the 280-mile route after the state recently settled on safety technology that will ensure faster trains can coexist with cars and slow-moving freight traffic that shares the line.

"To think this state (Illinois) has known for 10 years how to get Chicago-to-St. Louis to three hours and 45 minutes, and we kind of languish at five and a half to six hours," Harnish said. "Imagine what difference that would make to the St. Louis economy if you could get to Chicago by train (that much quicker)."

California has proposed the nation's most ambitious plan: a 700-mile electric-powered train that would run at up to 220 mph from San Francisco to San Diego, cutting the roughly 9-hour drive to about 3 1/2 hours.

The San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association said recent forecasts show the system carrying up to 117 million passengers a year by 2030.

The massive project, which would lay all new track, could complete its first phase from San Francisco to Los Angeles within 15 years if voters approve a \$10 billion bond issue scheduled for next year. But the vote has been pushed back twice and could be postponed again because of worries that it could hinder the state's bonding authority for roads, schools and other projects.

"How can we say we can't afford this in California, the biggest state in the country, when these systems are being built all over the world? ... It's a matter of priority," said Dan Leavitt, deputy director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

John Spsychalski, a transportation expert and professor at Penn State University, says high-speed rail will continue to languish unless lawmakers provide the same financial backing as highways and air travel. He said some could be swayed if high-profile projects such as California's succeed.

"I don't think there's any question that it would help build momentum for making this kind of service a reality where it makes sense to have it," Sychalski said. "There just needs to be a political will, and right now not enough elected officials see it as a viable alternative."

Associated Press writers Michael Tarm in Chicago and Jim Suhr in St. Louis contributed to this report.

Work starts Tuesday on solar farm

Manteca Bulletin, Sunday, September 9, 2007

Manteca by Jan. 1 will boast of a rare commodity - some of California's "greenest" water.

The \$12.8 million solar energy farm being built to power the South San Joaquin County Surface Water Treatment Plant will significantly reduce annual greenhouse gas and other emissions as breaking ground Tuesday at 1 p.m.

That means solar energy to treat water that will flow through taps in Manteca, Lathrop and Tracy will reduce on an annual basis:

- 4.1 million pounds of carbon dioxide.
- 34,900 pounds of sulfur dioxide.
- 15,000 pounds of nitrogen dioxide.

Manteca still uses wells powered by electricity from PG&E to supplement the SSJID surface water during months of high demand. But during the late fall, winter, and early spring when water use is at a minimum, Manteca switches to essentially 100 percent surface water. When that happens, the water flowing from Manteca taps will have been treated without polluting the air. The mixed use of well and surface water also substantially reduced Manteca's share of paying for the \$126 million treatment plant.

Ground breaking for the state-of-the-art solar energy system that will track the sun takes place at the Dodds Road treatment plant accessible by 26 Mile Road off Highway 120 just west of Oakdale.

It is designed to generate 1.6 megawatts of electricity - enough to power 650 homes - to cover all of the treatment plant's power needs.

Curb on wood stoves in works

Board to vote on banning their use about 30 days each winter for bad-air days.

By Loretta Kalb - Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Friday, September 7, 2007

Sacramento County residents who use pellet- or wood-burning stoves to help heat their homes would be banned from using them about 30 days each winter under a proposal headed to local air quality regulators.

Use of most wood-burning fireplaces -- both indoor and out -- would also be banned on those days.

The move is in response to tougher federal standards aimed at putting a lid on fine-particulate matter, which can be invisible and migrates into the bloodstream after being inhaled.

The 14-member board of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District is scheduled to vote Sept. 27. If the measure passes, Sacramento County would be one of the first in California to ban most stove and fireplace use on bad air days.

"I think the board will adopt something very close to the rule that has been proposed," county Supervisor Roger Dickinson, chairman of the air district board, said Wednesday. "The evidence is very compelling with respect to particulate emissions from fireplaces and stoves" and "the clear connection with human health."

Larry Greene, air district executive director, called the proposed ban dramatic. "But we ... need to take dramatic steps" to attain the standards, he said.

Failure to meet the federal standard threatens consequences beyond increased health risk. Among them: federal delays in approvals and funding for transportation projects.

The threat of federal sanction is not new in California. But this one is attached to the most stringent threshold to date for reducing particulate matter.

In technical terms, the standard adopted in December by the federal Environmental Protection Agency means little to most laypeople: In a 24-hour concentration, no more than 35 micrograms of particulate matter per cubic meter are allowed.

But for those who track the issue, the 2006 EPA decision was attention-grabbing.

"It went from 65 to 35," said Christina Ragsdale, district spokeswoman. "That's huge."

"The fine particulate matter is harder to see," she said. "It's almost like a virus or a bacteria in that it can get into your body in ways that the coarse particulate matter cannot.

"So you breathe it in, and it can get into your bloodstream. It gets into you systemically."

The consequences, the EPA says, can be health problems ranging from asthma, chronic bronchitis and impaired lung function to heart problems.

Under the proposal, a ban on solid-fuel burning would occur only on bad air days, or about about 30 times a year from November to the end of February.

Electric and natural gas fireplaces would be exempt. Also exempt would be solid-fuel-burning fireplaces or stoves that constitute a home's only source for winter heat or for cooking. Fires set as part of religious ceremonies also would be excluded from the rule, said district Division Manager Brigitte Tollstrup.

But owners of all other solid-fuel fireplaces, including backyard fire pits and outdoor fireplaces, would be required to comply or face fines of \$50 for first offenses.

Greene and Tollstrup have been spreading the word at area meetings. They visited the Elk Grove and Folsom city councils in August. On tap next week is the Sacramento City Council.

Elk Grove City Councilman Gary Davis, a member of the air district board, said he believes there is general support for a ban.

But he sees a contradiction in applying it to pellet stoves while the district offers financial incentives for residents to convert from wood-burning fireplaces to pellets.

"The no-burn days would help in the short run," Davis said. "But over the long run, if you want to encourage better burn habits, you need to provide as many incentives as possible for conversion to pellet stoves."

The district's Greene, however, said that while the pellet stoves are far cleaner than the historic options, they still are dirtier than gas.

The ability to ban those EPA-certified devices, he said, "might be the difference between attaining and not attaining (federal standards) on a particular day."

Dickinson, board chairman, said that's something the panel will have to work through.

"I think the board has to decide whether that (projected 30 days of ban) is onerous or not," he said. But he added, "I think the board is moving in the direction that's reasonable."

David Kopp, owner of Leisure Time Pellet Stove Repair in Sacramento, said he hopes a ban won't include pellet stove owners.

"I've got a lot of customers who have gas heaters in their homes but don't use them," Kopp said in an interview. Buying pellets each winter can be far cheaper than paying the winter heating bill, he said.

But winter also brings inversion layers worsened by burning solid fuel.

"It doesn't take a Ph.D. in physics and chemistry to figure out this smoke is hanging around," Dickinson said.

He said he understands that the idea of a ban takes getting used to.

"The first reaction will be, 'Why are you doing this? It's more government intrusion,' " he said.

"But if they take a look at it, they will think, 'Wow, this is too big an item to ignore if we're protecting public health.' "

Air pollution chief proposes six measures to cut emissions

By Jim Downing - the Sacramento Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, September 7, 2007

State air pollution chief Mary Nichols on Thursday unveiled six new measures to trim California's greenhouse gas emissions, including requirements to streamline big rigs, keep vehicle tires properly inflated and stop cargo ships from idling their engines in port.

With the proposal, Nichols made good on a July promise to the Legislature that she would accelerate efforts to implement Assembly Bill 32, which requires the state to cut climate-warming emissions 25 percent by 2020.

She also soothed critics of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose commitment to fighting climate change was questioned earlier this summer following a dispute between Robert Sawyer, Nichols' predecessor as chair of the Air Resources Board, and members of the governor's staff.

Schwarzenegger fired Sawyer in June after he backed a plan to accelerate the adoption of heat-reflecting "cool paints" for new vehicles, which can help reduce the load on automobile air conditioners and thus save fuel. Critics charged that blowup showed the governor was happy to talk about fighting climate change but unwilling to back proposals that might be unpopular with industry.

"This proposal shows that AB 32 implementation is really back on track," said Bill Magavern, senior representative with Sierra Club California. "I think the message was sent from the top." The cool paints provision does not appear on Nichols' list of six measures that, if adopted by the full board, would go into effect by Jan. 1, 2010.

In an interview, Nichols said the agency does plan to introduce a cool paint regulation at some point in the future, but that agency staff don't think it could be ready by 2010. A mandate for cool paints likely would be bundled with other measures, such as tinted windows, she said.

Of the six measures Nichols announced Thursday, only the tire-inflation requirement is likely to impact most consumers -- and that only indirectly. The rule would require mechanics to check and properly inflate tires when servicing a car, something many garages already do. Drivers would not be ticketed for running their tires below the recommended pressure, Nichols said.

Environmental groups applauded Thursday's proposals, particularly a requirement to make electric power available to docked cargo ships so they can turn off their engines. In addition to being a source of carbon dioxide, ship exhaust contributes to poor air quality in communities near ports, so electrifying docks would have a double benefit, said Devra Wang, director of the California energy program for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Nearly half of the emissions reductions under the new proposals would come from a single measure: making tractor-trailers more fuel efficient by requiring proper tire inflation and aerodynamic fairings to reduce drag.

Matthew Schrap, manager of environmental affairs with the California Trucking Association, said the proposed regulations would further burden an industry already dealing with other air board regulations. He said those include engine retrofits that cut emissions of tiny particles and smog-forming chemicals, but tend to worsen fuel efficiency as well.

All told, the six measures proposed by Nichols would cut the state's annual greenhouse gas emissions by the equivalent of 2.8 million tons of carbon dioxide. Combined with plans adopted by the air board in June, the state will have committed to annual reductions of about 16 million tons annually. That total amounts to only a fraction of the 170-million-ton-a-year cut required by 2020.

Still, Nichols said she's optimistic California can meet its long-term target without requiring consumers to make significant lifestyle changes. Though electrical utilities, for instance, likely will struggle to dramatically increase the renewable energy sources in their power portfolio, "that isn't going to be something that's going to affect peoples' ability to turn their lights on," she said.

The 11-member air board is scheduled to vote on the measures announced Thursday at a meeting Oct. 25 and 26. Agency staff will hold a public workshop on the proposals Sept. 17 in Sacramento.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, Sept. 10, 2007:](#)

Flawed model

The California Air Resources Board would like us all to believe that the Valley's air problems are directly related to cow burps and agriculture. After reviewing CARB's model of how they calculate emission rates on all vehicles, it is apparent that all the smoke presently in the Valley must have not received the memo regarding the fact that none of the Bay Area's pollution actually makes it to the Valley.

Shawn Coburn, Chowchilla

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Monday, Sept. 10, 2007:](#)

Open Forum

Washington needs to join climate effort

Joe Nation, Alex Rau

The summer heat in Washington, D.C., often drives congressional observers (and policy wonks) to cooler climates. (After all, who wouldn't rather be boating in Maine or camping in the Rockies?) That heat sometimes obscures the development of important policy. Two amendments introduced during this summer's federal energy debate represent some of the most significant steps yet for the development of legislation to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions in the United States. Yet there's been little discussion of them outside of Washington.

Alternative proposals by Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., call on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to establish a mandatory national registry of carbon emissions, although neither one has been enacted. Their objective, nevertheless, represents a critical step that the federal government should take to speed comprehensive climate legislation and promote early investments to reduce emissions.

For companies, regulators and ordinary citizens alike, there is as much clarity in carbon emissions policy as in a bowl of tomato soup. That must change.

Clarity in how carbon emissions will be measured and documented is essential. Complete, detailed and reliable data of emissions form the backbone of all types of greenhouse-gas regulations, whether carbon taxes, cap-and-trade or hybrid systems. They help corporate managers and investors determine risk exposure to carbon regulations, as well as identify and price strategies to reduce emissions. They also allow regulators to design effective policies and measure their progress.

The Environmental Protection Agency, whose authority over greenhouse gas emissions was recently reaffirmed by the Supreme Court, should begin to develop a nationwide registry for documenting those emissions. (Not surprisingly, California is ahead of the game - a nonprofit, the California Climate Action Registry, is attempting to establish a national registry at the state-level and now claims 39 participating states.) Any utility, factory or business with emissions over a certain threshold would be required to report annually and be subject to independent verification.

So-called early actors, i.e., those that reduce emissions before they are required to do so, will receive credit for those actions. Additionally, the registry should track and document any reductions in emissions that occur as a result of specific projects.

A national registry of emissions will also help the United States avoid one of the most significant problems that plagued the first phase of the European Union's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). The ETS did not have an accurate registry in place prior to the launch of trading, which led to inaccurate data and allowed some members to overstate their emissions levels. That manufactured "oversupply" caused the price of emissions credits to crash and decreased confidence in the ETS.

A national emissions registry will also benefit businesses that are struggling to reduce their carbon footprint. First, an abundance of evidence from programs in the European Union, California, and many companies shows that simply measuring emissions (or energy use) will help reduce those emissions (or energy use) at little cost, and may even generate cost savings. (We sometimes call this the "Prius effect," where drivers closely monitor their mpg-gauge all of the time.) The second benefit to businesses is that an accurate measurement and record-keeping system provides a much clearer pathway for receiving credit from regulators for early actions to reduce emissions.

A national registry, along with standards for documenting individual emission reduction projects, would also encourage increased investment in such projects through "carbon finance." That alone would likely help foster a domestic carbon market in the United States, well in advance of any final consensus on legislation.

Simply tracking and documenting emissions will on its own lead to modest reductions in emissions, but will not reduce emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by the year 2050, which is emerging as a consensus target. Congress must still pass legislation that regulates greenhouse gases.

A national registry can open the door to the regulatory process, bring clarity to the market and engage the private sector in reducing emissions as soon as possible.

Former Assemblyman Joe Nation, a principal at Environ International, teaches climate change at Stanford University. Alex Rau is a principal at Climate Wedge, a carbon-finance firm.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Saturday, Sept., 8, 2007:](#)

Mexican truck concerns are valid

Impact on safety, air quality, U.S. jobs must be measured.

A pilot program that allows Mexican trucks full access to American highways has prompted a barrage of protest. Some of the objections are reasonable, others seem rooted in baser motives.

There are reasonable questions about the safety of Mexican trucks and the rules governing Mexican drivers. Mexican drivers, for instance, aren't required to rest as often as American drivers. They might have to follow American rules once in this country, but what's to prevent them, critics ask, from arriving at the U.S. border already tired and then continuing to drive across this country?

Another concern is whether Mexican trucks will further foul the air in sensitive regions like the Valley. Mexican trucks are older, on average, than their U.S. counterparts, and older diesel engines are much more polluting.

Many American truckers -- especially those who operate as independent contractors -- are worried that Mexican trucking companies will undercut wages, thus endangering American jobs.

The pilot program, which got under way this week, has also sparked anti-immigration forces into loud protests. In some cases, that appears to be little more than paranoia tinged with racism.

But concerns about safety, the environment and the impact on American jobs are real, and will have to be addressed as this one-year program advances.

The official report on the program from the inspector general of the federal Department of Transportation says the agency has taken the proper steps to ensure that Mexican trucks operate safely. DOT's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration plans to go beyond statutory requirements and will check every truck that enters from Mexico for safety. A similar effort is made with trucks crossing from Canada, which have had full access to American roads for years.

That sounds good, but will that rigorous examination always be possible? There is always a danger that budget cuts, for instance, could cause the department to cut back on such inspections in the future. And will the federal government later try to shift the responsibility -- and the cost -- to overburdened border states already impacted by the federal failure to secure the borders?

One of the conditions of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was passed in 1994, requires that all roads in the United States, Mexico and Canada be open to carriers from all three countries. The U.S. has delayed opening the roads to Mexican trucking firms until now.

We support free trade, but it must also be fair. In addition, free trade should not come at the expense of safety and the environment. Participants in such arrangements as NAFTA should pull themselves up to the highest standards, not hew to the level of the lowest common denominator.

The California Air Resources Board estimates the number of trucks crossing into California from Mexico could rise from 3,500 per day to as many as 17,500 per day, a five-fold increase. Many of those trucks will pass through the Valley, exacerbating our already bad air. How much worse it will be is hard to estimate, CARB says, but it certainly won't help.

The pilot program is a good idea, if it gives us answers to all these questions. Some of the concerns about Mexican trucks are easy to dismiss. Others are serious, and cannot be ignored.

[Stockton Record Editorial, Friday, September 7, 2007](#)

Port can be environmental star

Stockton's muscle is learning to be careful when it flexes.

In an agreement that should be welcomed by every San Joaquin County resident, the Port of Stockton has settled its differences with the environmental community over plans to expand shipping operations at Rough and Ready Island.

The deal ends four years of legal wrangling and sets the stage for a new era at the port.

The settlement, announced Aug. 29, requires cleaner-burning diesel trucks and safeguards against impacts of dredging, encourages low-sulfur fuel for ships and pays \$1.65 million in legal and monitoring fees.

It opens the way for the port finally to capitalize on the Navy's transfer of Rough and Ready, which concluded in 2003, when the final 500 acres were turned over to the Port.

The dream is for the one-time military base to become a thriving transportation, industrial and commercial hub for the region's economy. More than 1,000 jobs are expected to be generated over 10 to 15 years.

Port commissioners wasted no time reacting to the lawsuit settlement. This week, they approved a 35-foot dredging project along a 2,000-foot stretch of waterfront.

Their charge from this point forward will be to set an environmental example for the rest of California while maximizing access to an amazing new asset.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, September 8, 2007](#)

Anti-smog devices warming globe

I think vehicles that are loaded with smog devices that reduce fuel mileage and engine performance are contributing to smog and global warming. Twenty years ago, there were cars that got 50 miles per gallon. What happened?

If vehicles got double the mileage, the following would happen: the oil being pumped from the earth would be cut in half, the number of barges shipping the oil around the world would be cut in half, the emission from refineries would be cut in half, the number of railcars carrying the oil across the U.S. would be cut in half, the number of diesel fuel tanker trucks transporting the gas across the U.S. would be cut in half, the number of people waiting in line with their engines running at gas stations would be cut in half.

If you look at the big picture, of course it's the thing to do. Thomas Edison would have figured out the whole electric car thing by now. But he's gone and the average person seems to be the only intelligent life form left. Or could it be the money involved that's causing all the rich, important and brilliant people to draw a blank.

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