

Advocates set to oppose delay in compliance

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 31 2007

Valley air officials will likely get an earful at an upcoming public workshop on a draft plan to meet federal air standards.

That plan, released by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Monday, called for more time, money and regulation to combat the valley's severe ozone problem.

Air quality advocates aren't happy with the plan's proposal to delay meeting the ozone standard by an additional 10 years.

"I think what the district is doing here effectively makes valley residents subsidize ozone cleanup with their lungs," said Brent Newell, an attorney for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

Newell and other air advocates feel cleaner air could happen sooner if the district would impose tougher regulations on industry.

But air district officials said the plan does call for more industry regulations.

Cleaner air, they said, largely depends on valley residents and businesses buying cleaner vehicles, something that won't happen fast enough to meet the current federal deadline of 2013.

Trucks and cars create nearly 80 percent of the emissions creating ozone, according to the district.

"We've done an exhaustive search to find more ways that would bring us into attainment prior to 2023 and we haven't been able to do that," said Rick McVaigh, one of the district's top air officials.

No one's come up with a solution so far, he said.

Farmers, meanwhile, are lamenting the tighter regulations the plan will inevitably bring.

"We're so over-regulated already," said Kern County Farm Bureau President Richard Jelmini. "Sometimes it's hardly worth doing this stuff anymore."

Rules for other industries, including dairies, developers, and oil and gas production, will get stricter under the plan. New rules also may affect residents, large employers, and cities and towns.

Not everyone is blasting the new plan, however.

Even though it calls for a deadline delay and additional regulations, Suzanne Noble of Western States Petroleum Association, an oil industry trade group, said the district's plan was well-prepared.

"I don't think anybody loves it," she said, "but it's the only option the air district has."

PLAN HIGHLIGHTS

- The valley will need 10 additional years, 19 new or amended air regulations and \$188 million a year to meet federal standards for ozone.
- The federal deadline would extend from the current 2013 to 2023.
- 50 percent of the valley could meet the federal standard by 2015 and 90 percent by 2020.
- A public workshop to take comments on the plan will be held 9 a.m. on Feb. 8 at the local San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District office, 2700 M St., Suite 275, Bakersfield. A copy of the plan is available at www.valleyair.org.

Air meeting could get testy

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 31 2007

Valley air officials will likely get an earful at an upcoming public workshop on a proposed plan released Monday for meeting federal air standards.

Air quality advocates aren't happy with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's proposal to delay meeting the federal ozone standard an additional 10 years. "I think what the district is doing here effectively makes valley residents subsidize ozone clean up with their lungs," said Brent Newell, an attorney for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

Farmers are lamenting tighter air regulations that are all but guaranteed in order to reduce emissions, even if the deadline is extended from 2013 to 2023. Stricter air rules in the next several years will affect other industries as well, including dairies, developers and oil and gas producers. New rules also may affect residents, large employers and cities and towns.

Air regulators seek 11-year extension to cut smog in valley

By GARANCE BURKE, The Associated Press

In the San Diego Union-Tribune, SF Chronicle, Sacramento Bee and Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 31 2007

San Joaquin Valley air regulators said they would miss a federal deadline to clean up the region's smog and requested an additional 11 years and more than \$3 billion to meet federal standards.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's draft cleanup plan proposes the lengthy extension to avoid facing federal sanctions that could cut off more than \$2 billion in federal transportation funds to the eight-county region, air district officials said.

The valley, stretching 240 miles from Stockton to Bakersfield, remains one of the dirtiest air basins in the nation for emissions that create ozone, the main ingredient of smog.

"Even if money were no object, we could not achieve these reductions on time," said Seyed Sadredin, the air district's executive director. "The technology does not exist today to get us all the reductions we need."

Smog, which is created when pollutants from tailpipes, smokestacks and livestock waste react with summer heat, is blamed for causing asthma and makes it harder for people with respiratory conditions to breathe. In the San Joaquin Valley, dust, smoke and soot get trapped inside an air basin bordered by mountains and hot summer temperatures create a layer of warm air that seals in pollutants.

District officials said the plan was guided by new scientific data that showed automobiles - rather than dairies and other stationary industrial polluters - were the biggest source of smog. The extra \$3 billion the district planned to request in federal and state funds will help offer companies incentives to use new, cleaner-running vehicles, Sadredin said.

Clean air activists said they were disappointed in the plan and suggested that the air district simply asked for the extension so it could avoid sanctions for exceeding ozone pollution standards.

"They chose this path because it's less on them and pushes the responsibility onto the state and federal government who have direct authority to regulate emissions from cars and trucks," said Sarah Jackson, a research associate with the environmental law group Earthjustice.

The 2007 Ozone Plan requests that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency extend the valley's cleanup deadline from 2012 to 2023 by classifying the region as being in "extreme nonattainment" with federal ozone standards. In 2004, the agency granted the local air district a similar extension on a previous plan, by downgrading it to the EPA's worst-offender category for smog.

To comply with today's clean air standards, the district estimates they will have to remove 75 percent of the valley's smog-forming pollution. For example, nitrogen oxides emissions will need to drop from the current 690 tons per day to just 160 tons per day.

By 2015, air district officials said more than half of the valley's population will live in areas with air that meets the federal ozone standard; by 2020, that number will increase to 90 percent.

Regulators said the draft ozone plan, combined with improvements expected from another proposal to reduce airborne dust and soot, will result in 460 fewer premature deaths, 260 fewer hospital admissions, 23,300 fewer asthma attacks and 3,230 fewer cases of acute bronchitis in children.

Community groups said the plan didn't adequately address the effects of long-term exposure, particularly for people who live in northwest Fresno and areas east of Arvin, which are projected to have the worst air quality problems in 2020.

"I'm very worried about people living with asthma," said Liza Bolanos, coordinator of the Fresno-based Central Valley Air Quality Coalition. "People will have to suffer longer."

The district will hold a public workshop on the draft plan before seeking approval from the district board and the California Air Resources Board. It is scheduled to be presented to the EPA by June 15.

Local Briefs

Voucher available to make burning cleaner

The Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

The local air district and the voluntary group Operation Clean Air are offering to help residents pay for new wood stoves and fireplace inserts that will reduce air pollution.

Vouchers are available on a first-come, first-served basis starting Thursday, said the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The \$198,000 campaign is called the Burn Cleaner Fireplace and Woodstove Change-out program.

Officials will give residents vouchers in varying amounts. For instance, a \$25 voucher is offered for a gas-log set and a \$350 voucher for a natural gas or propane stove or insert.

Application forms and supporting materials are available at www.valleyair.org and district offices beginning Thursday. For more information, call (559) 230-6000.

Use of fireplaces discouraged today

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

People in Stanislaus and Merced counties are asked to refrain from using fireplaces and older wood stoves today because of concerns about air quality. Forecasters say the air will be unhealthy for sensitive people — children, older adults and those with chronic breathing problems. The "burning discouraged" advisory comes from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The next step is a ban on burning. On the Net: www.valleyair.org.

RMP, Foster Farms formalize agreement

By Corinne Reilly

Merced Sun Star, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

Following more than a year of disagreement over plans for the Riverside Motorsports Park, Foster Farms and raceway developer John Condren have reached an agreement to keep the dispute out of the courtroom.

Foster Farms has argued that noise, traffic and pollution from the 1,300-acre motorsports complex would significantly disrupt operations at its Fox Ranch chicken ranch, which borders the raceway's planned northern Merced County site.

In a six-page agreement signed Monday, RMP conceded to a number of measures to reduce the racetrack's expected impacts on the chicken ranch, including the installation of taller sound barriers, security fencing and a new access road to the ranch.

"As to our chicken ranch, this is a satisfactory agreement and we're moving on," Foster Farms senior vice president Randall Boyce said Tuesday. "We recognize that there are still a number of outstanding issues for other parties, but we're not involved in that."

Foster Farms, which employs 3,000 people at its Livingston processing plant, is the county's largest private employer and the West Coast's largest producer of fresh chicken.

The ranch borders the raceway's proposed site on the ranch's north and west sides.

Condren and RMP spokeswoman Jeanne Harper Condren couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday.

RMP previously agreed to relocate one of the racing complex's tracks farther from the ranch, to install double-paned windows on the ranch's buildings and to construct 6-foot-high sound barriers between the racetrack and the ranch.

In written statements and in public hearings, Foster Farms said those measures weren't enough, and openly threatened to sue to stop the racetrack.

With the new agreement, RMP has pledged to increase the height of sound barriers to 10 feet. The agreement also states RMP will install security fencing around portions of the ranch, build a new access road to the ranch and provide Foster Farms with written notice of its event schedule six months in advance.

The agreement also states Foster Farms won't file a lawsuit challenging the project's approval and environmental reviews, or assist other parties suing to stop the racetrack.

The Merced County Board of Supervisors approved plans for the \$240 million racing complex last month.

Four groups -- the Merced County Farm Bureau, the San Joaquin Raptor Rescue Center, Protect Our Water and Citizens for the Protection of Merced County Resources -- have since filed suit against the county for approving the project.

All of the groups have cited inadequate environmental reviews as grounds for their legal challenges.

Merced County's lead attorney, James Fincher, said the county has approved the agreement between RMP and Foster Farms.

"The county is very pleased that it won't be involved in any litigation with Foster Farms," Fincher said.

Objections can't stop Stockton Crematorium

By David Siders

Stockton Record, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

STOCKTON - A plan to build a crematorium in a southeast Stockton industrial park was approved Tuesday by the City Council, which rejected an appeal by nearby business owners and residents who said burning bodies would upset them and foul the air.

The crematorium, to be built on Station Drive, will be the city's only one. There are four others licensed by the state in San Joaquin County: two in Lodi and one each in Manteca and Tracy.

The council's 7-0 decision on Tuesday upheld the Planning Commission's 6-0 vote last year to approve the crematorium plan.

Jerry Carrol, an owner of the nearby T.H.E. Office City, said mercury emitted from the crematorium - the product of incinerating dental fillings - would be harmful.

And he said its presence would trouble his employees and reduce the value of his property.

Environmental regulators have dismissed concerns about the environmental impact of cremation.

They have found mercury, which can harm the nervous system in small children, is produced in such small quantities that it is not dangerous.

In its decision to permit the crematorium, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District found it would not emit black smoke or hazardous gas and that it would have no more effect on the environment than that of two small water heaters.

Clinton Love, president of Bay Area Cremation & Funeral Services, said the crematorium likely will open by summer.

It will be built in an unmarked building and will not serve the public; it will cremate bodies for the company's storefront offices, which are planned to be built in or near Stockton, he said.

Councilwoman Rebecca Nabors said the crematorium would offer residents a local alternative to burial.

And Councilman Clem Lee said it was appropriate to approve a project that met emissions standards and was not in a residential area.

Two nearby business owners said they supported the project, claiming the 24-hour operation and staffing could deter crime. Brian Vargas, the owner of a commercial and industrial plumbing company in the south Stockton complex, said the crematorium would not bother him. He said he has worked near one before and found it so innocuous he did not know it was there until someone told him that it even existed.

EPA Scientists Urge Tighter Smog Limits

By John Heilprin, The Associated Press

Washington Post, Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2007, and LA Daily News, NY Times and Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Federal scientists want to tighten smog standards, a step that would allow tens of millions of Americans to breathe easier. The plan also would run head-on into President Bush's hopes of weaning Americans from gasoline by using more smog-producing ethanol.

Environmental Protection Agency scientists on Wednesday will say that tougher standards "would provide greater health protection for sensitive groups, including asthmatic children and other people with lung disease, healthy children and older adults -- especially those active outdoors, and outdoor workers."

Nearly 160 million people now breathe illegal levels of ozone pollution -- smog -- mostly in and around major cities in California and the East.

"The overall body of evidence on ozone health effects clearly calls into question the adequacy of the current standard," EPA scientists say in their final recommendation to Administrator Stephen Johnson, a Bush appointee. Details were obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press.

What the scientists will recommend has stirred controversy within EPA, said a senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak about the subject.

EPA staff members have felt they were under pressure from administration officials, including people at the White House, not to give a specific recommendation for tightening the standard, the official said.

Bush, in his State of the Union speech last week, urged Americans to reduce gasoline consumption by 20 percent over 10 years by substituting alternative fuels, mainly ethanol. The ethanol would be in gasoline blends of 10 to 85 percent.

Smog is produced mainly when tailpipe and smokestack pollutants react with summer heat. Other major sources of the pollution are gas vapors and chemical solvents.

Stricter standards could make it even more difficult for states and counties to comply with the Clean Air Act. Billions of dollars might have to be spent on cleaner-burning factories, power plants and cars and more mass transportation.

Johnson has until June 20 to decide what to do with the recommendation, agency spokeswoman Jennifer Wood said Tuesday.

Last year, EPA was sued for ignoring its scientists' recommendations for tighter restrictions on soot, fine particles from smokestacks and tailpipes that contribute to premature deaths and respiratory illness.

A federal appeals court in December struck down the Bush administration's strategy for reducing smog, saying it allowed "backsliding" by states instead of making them order new pollution controls on industrial plants, more public transportation, tougher vehicle inspection programs or cleaner-burning gasoline.

Ethanol, a focus of Bush's gasoline-reduction plan, helps cut carbon monoxide in winter but can raise smog levels in summer, air pollution experts say. Ethanol releases more nitrogen oxides, a key element of smog, and evaporates more easily than gasoline, adding other air pollutants.

EPA documents show that more ethanol use could raise smog levels about 1 percent, mainly in parts of the Midwest that don't use cleaner-burning reformulated gasoline.

"If you're a state air pollution official trying to lower the smog, that's not helpful," said A. Blakeman Early, a lobbyist for the American Lung Association, whose legal battle with the EPA over air quality standards forced Wednesday's deadline. "The data we have is pretty thin. We need to look at this question much more carefully."

Bill Wehrum, head of EPA's air and radiation office, acknowledged that ethanol poses "a possibility of a very small increase" in smog-causing pollutants but said cleaner-burning motor vehicles and 85 percent ethanol blends would minimize it. He said EPA doesn't view tougher smog limits as being in conflict with Bush's ethanol goals.

As long as refiners spend enough to offset the volatility in ethanol that leads to smog, there's no problem, said ethanol lobbyist Bob Dinneen of the Renewable Fuels Association.

"A lot of concerns that have been out there are unfounded," he said. "It's not an air quality issue, it's an economic issue for refiners."

Bush proposes a fivefold boost in the use of ethanol and other alternative fuels.

Stanford University atmospheric scientist Mark Jacobson said that would add 200 deaths a year to the 4,700 now blamed on smog. "It's a significant concern," said Jacobson, who believes the worst effects would be around Los Angeles and along the Boston-New York-Washington corridor.

Alexander Karsner, who heads the Energy Department's efficiency and renewable programs, downplayed the possibility of more smog from increased ethanol use.

"I don't have concerns as yet. I think concerns will rise with the impact of alternative fuels, as the alternative fuels grow in terms of their percentage of the market," he said. "The point is, you can look at the boulders in the path, or you can, even as the boulders arise in the path, try and find the pathways around them, over them, under them, through them."

CO2 injection newest tool in global warming fight

By Jeff Hood - Lodi Bureau Chief

Stockton Record, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

THORNTON - Ancient, deep deposits of sand and saltwater near Thornton, which once yielded 54.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas before being tapped out, may soon be filled with a different gas.

Researchers want to inject carbon dioxide more than 3,000 feet into the ground to study if the gas linked to global warming can be diverted from the atmosphere and stored deep beneath Earth's surface. Roughly 3,000 metric tons of CO₂, or the amount of carbon dioxide emitted each year by 650 cars, would be injected. It will take up only one-five-thousandth of the space at that site.

The \$5 million test is funded by the federal government through the West Coast Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership, known as WESTCARB, a coalition of more than 70 public agencies and private companies from Arizona to British Columbia.

A spokesman for the California Energy Commission, which is leading the study, said the Thornton site is ideal because of its deposits of porous sandstone and salty water capped by a layer of shale that will keep the CO₂ from escaping.

Carbon dioxide produced by power plants as a byproduct of burning natural gas will be trucked to the site for injection, spokesman Adam Gottlieb said. Another source could be emissions from an oil refinery, according to the WESTCARB Web site.

"What's exciting is we're on the cutting edge on a lot of this science, and it's fascinating to study and explore this in the backyard of our Central Valley," Gottlieb said, saying the site is "geologically perfect."

The CO₂ will be compressed to a consistency similar to oil, according to Sally Benson, a Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory scientist and pilot test leader for WESTCARB.

"Since that area is known to trap natural gas, it makes a lot of sense" to test in Thornton, she said. "If it's in those gas formations, there's no reason to believe it's going to leak," Benson said, adding she hopes to start the injections this summer.

"We'll have CO2 sensors at the injection sites to see if anything is released and, beyond that, we'll be looking to see how it moves in the reservoir," she said.

The state Energy Commission is still negotiating with the property owner for the right to use the land for the test, Gottlieb said, declining to identify the owner or the location. Vince Tafuri, chief of the Thornton Fire District, said he was told the test site is between Thornton and the Sacramento County line east of Interstate 5.

The Central Valley is home to a large number of natural gas wells, both active and depleted. A massive, highly productive field lies beneath Rio Vista, and the Lathrop field west of I-5 has been active for 45 years, although long in decline.

In the West Coast, underground pockets have the potential to store hundreds of years of the region's carbon dioxide emissions, according to WESTCARB.

While some Thornton residents said their neighbors are concerned about the safety of a carbon dioxide well, others have pointed out that trains that travel through town sometimes carry chemicals that are far more toxic.

"As far as I'm concerned, it puts us on the map for something other than the Portuguese festival," said Marlene Corbitt, an elected member of the Thornton Municipal Advisory Committee. "I can't find anything bad about it. People say, 'Why don't you do it in your own backyard?' But it's stored natural gas for years; it should be able to hold this."

Keeping greenhouse gases from the atmosphere is becoming more important to world governments and businesses, as a vast majority of climate scientists say human activity is hastening global warming, which experts say will have serious environmental and economic consequences.

Injecting carbon dioxide into the ground isn't a new technology. Benson said CO2 byproducts of natural gas and oil drilling are returned to the ground beneath the North Sea, in Algeria and in Saskatchewan, Canada.

In Acampo, Lodi Gas Storage injects natural gas into a depleted field, holding it underground until it's later withdrawn for use at Northern California power plants.

Underground storage is only one way to sequester carbon, Gottlieb said. WESTCARB also is planting trees in Shasta County and Lake County, Ore., to absorb carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. One acre of forest can offset the carbon emissions of a car driven 26,000 miles a year.

Boxer, Feinstein support nationwide approach on global warming

By Erica Werner, Associated Press Writer

In the Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

WASHINGTON (AP) -- A strong federal law to combat global warming would be better than states passing their own measures as California did, Democratic Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein agreed Tuesday as Boxer chaired her first hearing on climate change.

When Feinstein introduced a global warming bill earlier this month, criticism from California officials led her to drop language that would have pre-empted the state's first-in-the-nation law capping greenhouse gas emissions, she said.

The language "became very controversial," Feinstein said in testimony before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that Boxer chairs. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office and environmental groups voiced concerns about whether Feinstein's bill would reach the same strong standards set out in California law.

Feinstein believed it would, but state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez and others disagreed.

Nevertheless, Feinstein said, "I think we need to grapple with a national standard so everybody plays with the same standards across the board."

"If we have a good system with good goals then one system is clearly the best," said Boxer, while making clear she would not support having strong state laws pre-empted by weaker federal measures.

Boxer called the hearing to get senators' views on climate change as the new Democrat-controlled Congress prepares to grapple with the issue.

A number of senators - including several 2008 presidential hopefuls - endorsed imposing mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming.

Boxer and Feinstein both support that approach, though Feinstein has limited her bill to just the utility sector, while Boxer support deeper, economy-wide caps.

"The broad consensus of those who spoke is that the time for action is now," said Boxer. "I think that this is the moment where we will take a stand."

She faced opposition from several Republicans, including Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the former committee chairman, who has called global warming a hoax.

There is "no convincing scientific evidence" that human activity is causing global warming, declared Inhofe. "We all know the Weather Channel would like to have people afraid all the time."

"I'll put you down as skeptical," replied Boxer.

Among senators testifying Tuesday were Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Barack Obama, D-Ill., who have introduced a bill with Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., calling for mandatory caps. The bill aims to return releases of heat-trapping gases to 1990 levels by 2020, and to 60 percent below 1990 levels in 2050.

That bill is supported by Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., a committee member.

Boxer has co-sponsored a different bill that seeks to return emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, and 80 percent below 1990 levels in 2050.

Those are among at least four competing bills in the Senate, and Tuesday's hearing was a first step toward reconciling them. In the House, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has announced creation of a special committee to study the issue, something that annoyed members of existing committees with jurisdiction. But Pelosi has said it's necessary to focus attention on the issue.

President Bush in his recent State of the Union speech acknowledged that climate change needs to be addressed, but he continues to oppose mandatory emission caps, arguing that industry through development of new technologies can deal with the problem at less cost.

California's law seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 but doesn't go past 2020. It allows for the creation of a cap-and-trade program, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger supports over the opposition of some Democrats in the Legislature.

Carbon dioxide, produced from the burning of fossil fuels, is the primary greenhouse gas. U.S. emissions of that gas have increased an average of about 1 percent year since 1990.

House, Senate target climate change

White House efforts to alter scientific reports draw rebuke

Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington Bureau
S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

Washington -- The clash between the White House and Congress over climate change escalated Tuesday as House Democrats accused the administration of censoring scientific research on global warming and top senators pledged to pass mandatory limits on greenhouse gases despite the president's objections.

Many of the top 2008 presidential contenders are leading the calls for reductions in emissions, setting up this year's debate as a policy dispute and a political duel.

Democrats are using their new power in Congress to increase pressure on the White House. Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, the chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee,

charged Tuesday that top White House officials have deliberately distorted federal research about global warming.

"We know that the White House possesses documents that contain evidence of an attempt by senior administration officials to mislead the public by injecting doubt into the science of global warming and minimize the potential danger," said Waxman, complaining that the White House had rebuffed requests from Democrats and Republicans to release the documents.

The administration has repeatedly maintained that it never suppressed or manipulated the findings of its scientists.

But Drew Shindell, a researcher from NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, testified that press releases about climate change research were "delayed, altered and watered down." Rick Piltz, a former employee in the federal Climate Change Science Program office, said he resigned in 2005 after objecting to efforts by industry groups and White House officials to weaken or delete language in official reports on global warming.

The Union of Concerned Scientists, an advocacy group, released a survey of 279 climate scientists in which nearly half said they'd been asked to delete references to "global warming" or "climate change" from their research.

California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, held her first hearing Tuesday, a session for all senators to discuss their proposed solutions to global warming. Boxer used the hearing to gauge support among her colleagues for action on climate change.

By the end of the hearing -- after nearly one-quarter of the Senate testified -- Boxer declared there was enough support from Republicans and Democrats to push a bill this year.

"The debate over whether there is global warming, for the vast majority of us, is over," Boxer said. "We are now moving forward with solutions to the problem."

The hearing room was crowded with reporters eager to see several top presidential candidates present their plans to combat climate change.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., touted his bill that would cut greenhouse gases by 2 percent a year, reducing emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. In a shot at some fellow Republicans and the White House, McCain complained that policymakers were slow to act even as the evidence of the effects of warming piled up.

"I don't think any time is too late," McCain said, "but I do believe if we don't act fairly soon, we may have reached a tipping point where we may not be able to reverse this trend."

Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., who is a co-sponsor of McCain's bill, complained that the administration's refusal to lead on climate change has undermined efforts worldwide to reduce emissions.

"We were laggards on this issue," Obama said. "That has been giving excuses to some of the rapidly developing nations, like China and India, to say, 'If the United States with all its wealth and its enormous energy consumption is unwilling to do this, why would we who are still trying to feed our people want to invest in dealing with this problem?'"

Opponents of the legislation claimed some lawmakers were using the issue to propel their campaigns. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., suggested that former Vice President Al Gore hopes to ride the issue to the White House. Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho -- with a nod to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., who sat nearby -- said the rush to legislate was fueled by presidential ambitions.

Craig also warned that carbon limits could hurt the economy and the lifestyle that Americans currently enjoy.

"We're 25 percent of the world's economy today, and, under today's technologies, if you are 25 percent of the world's economy, you are going to be the largest emitter" of greenhouse gases, Craig said. "We have the lifestyle to prove it, and all of us live that lifestyle, and none of us want to deny it to our citizens."

As he left the room, Clinton responded sharply.

"I'm sorry that Sen. Craig is leaving the room, because I wanted to certainly express my very strong support for maintaining America's lifestyle," she said. "As I recall, on my many trips to California -- which has kept electricity use (low) for 30 years -- the lifestyle is pretty good."

Clinton added that the chief executives of 10 major companies who last week called for action on climate change, "so far as I know, are not running for political office" and "see this as a problem whose time has come."

The debate encapsulated the fault lines in the Senate that will make it tricky to pass any bill.

Conservatives such as Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., are likely to oppose strict limits on emissions, arguing that they would raise energy costs for consumers. "Carbon caps will hit hardest on those with the least ability to pay. Do we really want that?" he said.

But there's growing support from other Republicans for action. Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee is pushing a bill to cut emissions from power plants. Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine and Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire also support legislative action. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, testified that her state is already seeing the impacts of warming, from the melting ice pack in the Arctic Ocean to effects on marine mammals.

"From an Alaska perspective, in my opinion there is no question that something is going on, something demonstrable," said Murkowski, who urged Congress to fund new energy technologies to fight warming.

Boxer needs 60 votes to overcome a potential filibuster and get any bill passed, so she'll start first with what she called "low-hanging fruit" -- a measure to improve energy efficiency in federal buildings that is backed by the White House -- before moving on to carbon emission caps.

"We have the feeling that there is critical mass here to be very serious about this -- at long last," she said.

Study Links Bad Air, Bad Hearts

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007

BOSTON (AP) -- The fine grit in polluted air boosts the risk of heart disease in older women much more powerfully than scientists realized, a big federally funded study has found, raising questions of whether U.S. environmental standards are strict enough.

The Environmental Protection Agency tightened its daily limit for these tiny specks, known as fine particulates, in September. But it left the average annual limit untouched, allowing a concentration of 15 millionths of a gram for every cubic meter of air.

In this study of 65,893 women, the average exposure was 13 units, with two-thirds of the subjects falling under the national standard. But every increase of 10 units, starting at 0, lifted the risk of fatal cardiovascular disease by about 75 percent. That is several times higher than in a study by the American Cancer Society.

"There was a lot of evidence previously suggesting that the long-term standard should be lower, and this is adding one more study to that evidence," said Douglas Dockery, a pollution specialist at the Harvard School of Public Health.

He wrote an accompanying editorial for the study, which was published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine. The University of Washington-based researchers worked from data collected for the Women's Health Initiative, a well-respected research project that previously showed the heart dangers of hormone supplements.

It has long been known that particulates can contribute to lung and heart disease, with women perhaps more susceptible than men to heart problems, perhaps because of their smaller blood vessels and other biological differences.

But the degree of risk for older women was less clear. This study started with women who had gone through menopause and were 50 to 79 years old.

Unlike earlier studies, it looked not just at deaths, but also at heart attacks, coronary disease, strokes and clogged arteries. These problems were 24 percent more likely with every 10-unit rise in particles. Almost 3 percent of the women suffered some kind of cardiovascular problem.

The risk varied along with the varying levels of these particles in different neighborhoods within the same city.

In their calculations, the researchers tried to adjust for lower income and other health problems that have been blamed for the higher rates of disease in past studies.

"I think the major contribution is answering the critics of the prior studies," said the paper's senior researcher, Dr. Joel Kaufman of the University of Washington. "The effect seems large and important and should be taken seriously."

States and other groups demanding a lower annual standard sued the EPA last year, accusing it of disregarding the advice of its own scientists. Some agency scientists are also pushing for tighter rules on ozone, the chemical that creates smog and contributes to asthma and lung disease.

The EPA is scheduled to take another look at its standard for particulate matter and complete it by 2001.

"It's too soon to say how much weight any single study will have, but this study will be considered as part of this continuous process," said EPA spokesman John Millett.

Dr. Len Horovitz of Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, who was familiar with the findings, said they could create "a bit of a firestorm" for the future review.

The tiny bits of grit are believed to reach deep into the lungs to spur inflammation that promotes heart attack and stroke. They are so small that it would take about 30 to equal the thickness of a human hair.

These particles -- made of dust, soot and various chemicals -- come from burning fuel in cars, factories, and power plants. While individual particles are too small to see, they can be observed collectively as urban haze.

Bush outlines ambitious biofuel goals

Capital Press Weekly, Friday, Jan. 26, 2007

While reaction to his support of ethanol production and reducing America's dependency on foreign oil was generally positive, some words of caution are emerging about some of the goals George W. Bush outlined in his State of the Union speech Jan. 23.

Bob Krauter, California editor of the Capital Press, reported that Matt Schmitt, a managing partner in Calgren Renewable Fuels, a company building an ethanol plant, welcomed news of Bush's commitment but worried that the proposed mandate may be too ambitious.

Bush's goals require 35 billion gallons of renewable and alternative fuels in 2017 - nearly five times the current target.

"I think ethanol has a saturation point of 15 billion gallons," Schmitt said. "The rest would come from biodiesel, which means 15- to 20-billion gallons of biodiesel, which I think will be a tough call to have as much biodiesel as ethanol."

According to the Des Moines Register in Iowa, another Californian who expressed concern is Tad Patzek, an engineer at the University of California at Berkeley. The newspaper called him a "leading critic of the ethanol industry" and reported him saying "the nation will never produce the amount of fuel Bush wants because of technology issues, land availability and other obstacles."

The article added that Patzek stressed, "Our politicians need to start talking about cutting energy use by a factor of two" instead of increasing the supply of fuel.

In several of the states that have seen great growth in their ethanol industries, Bush's comments were welcomed. Ethanol leaders admitted the goal was ambitious, but appeared confident that production will be expanded and needs will be met.

One of the questions is what will fuel the country: Will corn continue to be the main product used in ethanol? The goal outlined for ethanol by Bush would mean producing seven times the amount of ethanol distilled from corn last year, and agriculture has already been buzzing about what ethanol is doing to corn prices.

Corn prices have doubled in the last 13 months, reaching a 10-year high, and farmers who depend on corn to feed livestock have been worried as their profit margins have shrunk and supplies become harder to find.

It's not just America that is affected by higher corn prices. Last week, according to Associated Press, Mexico President Felipe Calderon signed an accord with businesses "to curb soaring tortilla prices and protect Mexico's poor from speculative sellers and a surge in the cost of corn driven by the U.S. ethanol industry."

The story went on to say, "The corn tortilla is the basic staple of the Mexican diet and is especially crucial for the poor.

"The accord limits tortilla prices to 8.50 pesos (78 cents) per kilogram and threatens to use existing laws to achieve prison sentences of up to 10 years for company officials found hoarding corn. Some stores have been selling tortillas for as much as 10 pesos (91 cents) per kilogram."

While corn prices rose here in the U.S., it was tortilla prices that soared in Mexico.

"Tortilla prices rose by 14 percent in 2006, more than three times the inflation rate, and they have continued to surge in the first weeks of 2007. The rise is partly due to U.S. ethanol plants gobbling corn supplies and pushing prices as high as \$3.40 a bushel, the highest in more than a decade."

The U.S. ethanol industry cannot accept all the blame for what is happening with Mexico's tortilla prices and how it affects the poor families there, since unethical Mexicans are also taking advantage of those who can least afford large increases in the price of their staple food.

But the U.S. should be aware that the world continues to watch closely the direction the president wants the ethanol industry to grow, the impact it will have on agriculture directly and indirectly, and if the country can even meet the ambitious goals he has set.

Hydrogen on O.C.'s horizon

Santa Ana opens its first hydrogen refueling station Thursday, becoming one of five sites in Southern California that will service fleets of city vehicles

By PAT BRENNAN

The Orange County Register Friday, Jan. 27, 2006

SANTA ANA - First a technician attached a cable to the hydrogen car's tailpipe to prevent sparks. Then he snapped a thin, pressurized hose into place where the gasoline-pump nozzle would normally go. A switch was flicked, cameras clicked, and Santa Ana became the latest way station on California's "hydrogen highway."

The city opened its first hydrogen refueling station Thursday, one of five in Southern California that will service fleets of city vehicles that run on compressed hydrogen gas.

The cars emit almost no pollution - only a tiny amount of nitrogen oxides - and the five-city program, sponsored by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, is meant to encourage the development of a hydrogen-powered economy.

"Hydrogen is now a real possibility," said David Freeman, president of the Port of Los Angeles.

But despite the gradual spread of hydrogen refueling stations around California - this is the state's 18th, and the second in Orange County - experts say we have a long way to go before hydrogen pushes gasoline aside.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has popularized the notion of a "hydrogen highway" stretching across the state, a broad network of refueling stations. And there are now clusters of such stations in Northern and Southern California.

The problem is getting cars on the road that could make use of them.

Santa Ana's fleet of five new Toyota Priuses relies on the same internal-combustion engines found in conventional cars, only with hydrogen in the tank instead of gasoline.

Such cars could sharply reduce air pollution, assuming pollution is controlled during the fuel-production process as well. Right now, hydrogen fuel is created typically with natural gas or electricity, although demonstration solar-powered or wind-powered systems have been developed.

Carmakers also have created prototypes of hydrogen fuel-cell cars. Instead of using internal-combustion engines, these run on electricity generated when hydrogen is mixed with oxygen, producing an electrochemical reaction.

They produce no pollution at all.

But neither type of hydrogen car is available yet to consumers. Carmakers have so far shown little interest in mass-producing internal-combustion hydrogen cars, and their fuel-cell versions would be far too expensive to place on the market.

None of that muted the enthusiasm of the public officials, regulators and technology company representatives who came to watch Santa Ana's hydrogen fleet gas up Thursday.

Mayor Miguel Pulido took reporters on a spin around the block in one of the cars. He said he would let officials in other cities drive Santa Ana's cars for days or weeks at a time to get a feel for what he hopes will be the hydrogen future.

"You've got to start somewhere," he said. "This is a good place to start."

Utah's Mountains, Valleys Under a 'Soup'

By Ed White, The Associated Press

Washington Post, NY Times, SF Chronicle and other papers, Tuesday & Wednesday, Jan. 30 & 31, 2007

SALT LAKE CITY -- Utah's world-class mountain peaks have been barely visible at times from the floor of the Salt Lake valley. A winter storm that won't quit? No, it's nasty pollution that just won't blow away.

Northern Utah's valleys have been smothered by an "inversion," a blanket of warm air that keeps cold air close to the ground and traps everything: car exhaust, factory emissions, even hard-to-see particles from furnaces or a cozy fireplace.

Together they form a cloudy shroud that has been described as soup, gunk, smog, and a few other titles that can't be printed.

Salt Lake and Davis counties, home to more than 1 million people, have been under a "red" alert for 16 days in January, which means the unhealthy air should be avoided by the elderly or anyone with respiratory problems. Some schools have kept kids off the playground.

Inversions aren't new to Utah, but this one is "wide, deep and dramatic," said Bob Dalley of the state Division of Air Quality, whose daily Web updates are must-reads.

Mike Atwell, 47, of Bozeman, Mont., in town for an outdoor-industry convention at the Salt Palace, looked east toward the barely visible Wasatch Mountains, site of the 2002 Winter Olympics, and shook his head.

"It's a huge bummer. It's not what you see -- it's what you can't see. You feel robbed," he said. "Mountains are why we live in the West. I feel like I'm in a foggy daze."

Another convention visitor, Beth Brewster, 36, of Seattle, said: "You expect it in Los Angeles, not Salt Lake City."

Alicia Reichert, 19, typically spends her lunch break skating at an outdoor rink at the downtown Gallivan Center.

"I cough a lot more than I usually do," she said, pausing after a set of tricky spins. "It seems harder and harder to come out here."

Some relief finally may come this week. The remedy is simple: a stiff wind or storm, no matter the direction, to send the stuff elsewhere.

"Just get here," Dalley said.

Salt Lake City, elevation 4,300 feet, is in a bowl surrounded by mountains like much of northern Utah.

The pollution-trapping inversions can stretch 80 miles north to Cache County and 40 miles south to Utah County. Under a red advisory, wood burning is prohibited, and motorists are encouraged to park their cars and choose another way to get around.

There were only three red days posted for Salt Lake and Davis counties last winter, compared to 25 this season, through Tuesday.

The threshold for a red day is lower this year, but the "criteria really are not significantly different," Dalley said.

In the Midwest and East, extreme cold commonly keeps school kids off the playground at recess. In Salt Lake City, however, principals go online to check air quality.

Parkview Elementary's 500 students were inside all last week.

"They get stir-crazy and restless," said the principal's secretary, Colleen McKnight. "On the other hand, you let them run outside and breathe the air and they start coughing.

"I've taken calls from two children with respiratory infections. I'm not sure if it's connected to the inversion, but I'm sure it doesn't help," she said.

Ron W. Smith, a 61-year-old accountant from Sandy, said he's been inside using a treadmill and rowing machine, exercise that is no match for his strenuous 25-mile bicycle rides.

"When it's this yucky, I can feel it in my lungs," he said. "I haven't been outdoors in January. I'm going through withdrawal."

Patent Backlog Spurs Demand for Examiners

By Stephen Barr

Washington Post, Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2007

Got a degree in engineering, chemistry or physics and looking for work? The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office is hiring.

The patent office plans to hire 1,200 examiners for each of the next five years. The average starting salary is about \$62,000, and electrical engineers and computer engineers may qualify for an \$8,800 signing bonus because the PTO has a hard time recruiting in those fields.

The hiring binge is being driven by corporations around the world that pour money into research and development and seek patents in the United States to protect their intellectual property rights, said *John J. Doll*, the commissioner of patents.

In recent months, the PTO has been swamped with patent applications, for such things as computer software, cellphones and interactive videos, and could face a backlog of 800,000 cases before year's end, Doll said.

Like many other parts of the government, PTO is in competition with the private sector to hire college graduates and others with degrees in engineering and science. Finding workers with specialized skills is especially important for many federal agencies because projections show that 40 percent of the current federal workforce will retire by 2015.

As part of its employment package, PTO pays retention bonuses to keep electrical and computer engineers from going to the private sector. It also picks up the cost of law school courses for examiners who want to improve their credentials with a law degree. Careers as examiners can lead to salaries of about \$100,000 a year.

PTO also tries to be a family-friendly employer, giving some leeway to examiners on when they start their work each day -- as long as they meet certain productivity goals, based on their experience and the difficulty of their caseload.

"You have to work hard; it's a difficult job, but if you work hard, you can do the job in 40 hours a week," Doll said.

As part of its recruitment effort, PTO is holding a job fair at its Alexandria headquarters on Friday and Saturday. Agency employees will greet potential job applicants in the Madison Building Auditorium from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. More job fairs will be held later in the year.

People interested in this week's job fair are encouraged to register on the agency's Web site (<http://www.usptocareers.gov/jobfair>) because registration guarantees an interview with a patent examiner. People who attend without registering will be offered interviews on a first-come, first-served basis.

The deadline to register for an interview is Wednesday, Doll said.

"We have an examiner sit down and explain what the job is," he said. "We don't want someone coming in without knowing what the job is -- we make sure they understand at a grass-roots level what they are going to be doing, what it takes to get hired and get promoted."

Calling All Managers

Give it a try:

The General Services Administration announced yesterday it will allow federal supervisors, managers and executives to work for free from one of GSA's telework centers in hopes that trial runs might build enthusiasm for telecommuting.

GSA operates 14 telework centers that provide workstations equipped with computers, telephones, printers, copiers and other equipment. The centers are outside the Beltway in Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia. Agencies pay \$25 to \$49 per day to reserve a workstation.

Federal data shows that only 19 percent of eligible federal workers can be considered telecommuters, and managerial resistance is seen as the reason for what some officials consider a relatively low participation rate.

A recent survey sponsored by the Telework Exchange and the Federal Managers Association showed that concern over employee productivity and lack of control over employee activities makes it difficult for federal managers to support telecommuting.

The GSA offer, which is a response to that survey, runs through Sept. 30 -- "a no-risk, no-cost offer to federal managers to try out teleworking," said *Kevin Messner*, an associate administrator at GSA.

Bush administration officials and members of Congress, including Rep. *Frank R. Wolf* (R-Va.), have exhorted federal agencies to permit more employees to work from home or from a telework center at least one day a week as a way to cut down on traffic congestion and reduce [air pollution](#) in the Washington region.

Federal managers interested in trying out telework should contact a telework center director to make arrangements. A list of centers can be found on the GSA Web site (<http://www.gsa.gov>) or GSA's Interagency Telework Site (<http://www.telework.gov>).

[Fresno Bee editorial, Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007:](#)

Don't hold your breath

Air district wants to buy more time to achieve clean air goal.

The Valley's air district has proposed dropping into the worst category for non-attainment of clean air standards. That would take some pressure off the Valley, since the district has decided that we can't meet the existing deadline of 2012. It may be inevitable, but it still smacks of surrender.

Moving from the current "serious" category to extreme would put the Valley in uncomfortable company. Los Angeles is the only region in the worst-offender ranks now. But it would extend the deadline, and finesse some stiff penalties from the federal government - principally the threat to freeze some \$2 billion in highway funds.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's 700-page plan is the result of months of study, workshops and public hearings. It outlines a proposal to reduce smog-forming nitrogen oxide emissions by 75% by 2023. It will take \$3 billion to meet that goal, the district estimates.

"Even if money were no object - if we bought everyone a new car, a new truck, a new engine - it is still physically impossible to get the pollution reductions we need by 2012," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "What we're proposing is the fastest possible way to do it."

Perhaps. But we might get the job done a lot faster with more cooperation from state and federal agencies - particularly the feds. Vehicles are responsible for about 80% for the smog-forming emissions that plague us. And the Valley air district - indeed, local government at all levels - is powerless to do a thing about it. Control of so-called "mobiles sources" rests with Sacramento and Washington.

So why aren't they doing more?

There are a number of reasons, including the historic neglect the Valley has suffered at the hands of state and federal governments. But there is also a big problem at the federal level: The intransigence of the Bush administration and its agencies when it comes to environmental concerns.

Fuel efficiency standards for cars sold in America haven't changed in 20 years, and we shouldn't be holding our collective breath waiting for that to change. Lip service in the recent State of the Union speech notwithstanding, President Bush has shown no inkling of a desire to do anything that big polluters don't want.

The state, under Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, has also dragged its feet, most recently in the governor's efforts to put a spike through the heart of the proposed high-speed rail system, which would aid mightily in getting vehicles - and their foul emissions - off the Valley's highways (as well as offering a tremendous economic boost to the Valley and the entire state). Instead, the governor wants to build more highways - a 1950s solution to a 21st century problem.

And all of us living here are part of the problem too - perhaps the biggest part. We can't break our addiction to our cars and the air-killing fuel they burn.

So, yes, perhaps this slide into extreme non-attainment is inevitable - because we didn't do enough to stop it, in Washington, in Sacramento or here at home. Meanwhile, if the air district has its way, a child born in the Valley today will graduate from high school before he has a chance to breathe clean air.