

Big West leak: Source proves elusive

Search complicated by past contamination

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, June 21, 2007

The source of an underground oil leak at the Big West of California refinery that has seeped to a water table 50 feet below the ground along Rosedale Highway remained a mystery as of Wednesday. Big West Oil Refinery on Rosedale Highway.

Refinery operators have examined and tested most of the underground pipelines in the area near the spill and found no leaks.

Today, the company will drill holes in the ground in an effort to locate the source and extent of the release, said Bill Chadick, Big West's health, safety and environmental director.

The accumulation of a substance thought to be crude was first noticed by Big West in a groundwater monitoring well about two weeks ago.

The company notified the state of the situation last week, reporting that 1,000 barrels of oil were believed to have been released from an underground source.

Local environmental health officials have said the leak is not a threat to public water supplies.

About 30 percent of the refinery's equipment has been shut down since Friday to examine pipelines, which were initially thought to be the source of the release.

The company conducted pressure tests on most of the lines near the contaminated well this week. It also excavated the lines, buried 6 feet underground, to physically examine them.

Refinery equipment taken offline during that time is expected to start up today when pressure tests conclude, Chadick said.

The refinery has been ordered to provide daily updates on the situation to the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Bert Van Voris, supervising engineer with the water quality control board, said Big West could potentially face fines for the release.

The board determines fines based on how quickly companies respond, the voluntary actions companies have taken and what kind of harm releases cause, he said.

"I think their response since last Friday has been very responsible but there was some concern ... that the response up to that point hadn't been rapid enough, that when they saw the initial signs they should have reacted earlier," he said.

The ground beneath the refinery has a history of contamination from previous operators.

A plume of diesel exists under about 70 percent of the refinery's more than 600 acres, Chadick said.

Former operators were also responsible for past spills of gasoline, MTBE and other forms of petroleum that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Those spills are being remediated but contamination still remains in the groundwater.

Remnants of that pollution is believed to have mixed with oil from the ongoing release at the facility. That's made it difficult for officials to identify with certainty what type of material is being leaked, adding to the difficulty of locating the source.

Van Voris said the groundwater beneath the refinery is relatively stable and no major pumping of water for public use takes place nearby.

"This refinery like most refineries in the country has had leaks and spills over its lifetime," Chadick said.

To avoid future problems, pipelines for the company's proposed expansion of the facility would be built above ground, he said.

EPA to propose tougher smog standards

By ERICA WERNER - Associated Press Writer
Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, June 20, 2007, 5:36 P.M.

WASHINGTON -- The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to propose new smog reductions nationwide on Thursday in its first recommendation in a decade on one of the nation's most pervasive air pollutants.

The standard for ground-level ozone - also called smog - established in 1997 was 80 parts per billion. The new proposal will be for 70-75 parts per billion, although the agency will accept comments on keeping the current standard, say local air officials and environmentalists who have gotten advance details on the proposal.

Parts per billion is a measure of molecules in the atmosphere.

Environmentalists viewed the proposal as mixed because EPA wouldn't go as far as its scientific advisory panel recommended, and also because the agency will accept comments on retaining the existing standard.

Business groups including the National Association of Manufacturers support keeping the current standard.

An EPA spokesman didn't immediately return calls for comment. The agency planned to unveil the proposal Thursday morning on a conference call with reporters.

Earlier this year, EPA's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee said the standard should be no higher than 70 parts per billion.

The agency will issue a final standard next March.

"EPA is acknowledging that the standard needs to be tightened, and for that we're grateful," said Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, who revealed details of the proposal.

"What is disappointing is the agency has only given a nod to the independent science advisers who unanimously said the standard should be much tighter ... and what is really troubling is that EPA taking comment on retaining the current standard."

Some scientists and environmentalists view the current standard as not adequately protective of public health.

However, the National Association of Manufacturers has been lobbying EPA, the White House and other Bush administration agencies to keep it in place, said Bryan Brendle, the group's director of energy and resources policy.

"We believe that a more stringent ozone standard would have a detrimental impact on the manufacturing economy with nominal if any health benefits," Brendle said. He noted that states are still implementing the current standard.

About 100 counties are out of attainment with the current standard, meaning states need to develop implementation plans to come into attainment or face loss of federal highway funds.

If EPA went down to 70 parts per billion, that would bring hundreds more counties out of attainment, officials said, which could result in requirements on industry to implement new controls. However, areas will have a number of years to come into attainment with the new standards.

Most counties out of attainment with the current standard are in California, Texas, the Atlanta area, the northeast, the midatlantic and the upper midwest.

EPA Announces Proposal for Stricter Ozone Standards Call for Tougher Rules Sets Up a Battle With Business, Industry Groups

By Marc Kaufman, Staff Writer
Washington Post, Thursday, June 21, 2007

The Environmental Protection Agency today proposed reducing allowable ozone air pollution by as much as 20 percent in coming decades, setting up a battle with business and industry groups who feel current standards are adequate.

EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson announced the proposed new ozone rules this morning, saying that existing federal standards do not adequately protect the public.

"Based on the current science, the standard today is not sufficient to protect the public health, and so I am proposing to toughen the standard," Johnson said.

The administrator also said, however, that the agency will formally take comments from business and industry groups, who strongly believe current standards should not be changed.

If finalized, the new rules would roughly triple the number of U.S. counties out of compliance with federal air pollution regulations, and business groups say meeting the new limits could cost tens of billions of dollars. Under the Clean Air Act, the EPA cannot take financial considerations into account when proposing safe pollution standards.

Johnson said he was allowing the comments even though he concluded the existing standard does not protect the public health. He said he made the decision because "I recognize that others don't agree with that, and I want to provide an opportunity for them to provide comments on which we can make an informed decision."

The agency will take comments as well from those who agree with an independent committee of scientists that advised the EPA to set an even stricter ozone standard than the one Johnson proposed today. As outlined by Johnson, the EPA has proposed that the allowable amount of ozone -- or smog-- in the air be reduced from 84 parts per billion to between 70 and 75 parts per billion. He said the proposed standard was recommended by scientists working at EPA.

The announcement triggered a 90 day public comment period, which will be followed by several public hearings. Johnson said the agency will make its final decision on March 12, 2008.

Even before the proposal was formally released, the inclusion of the possibility of keeping the current standard left advocates in the long and heated debate over ozone pollution alternately encouraged and worried. Business and industry groups are strongly opposed to any tightening of ozone standards, while

supporters of stricter standards note that the EPA's own science advisers voted unanimously in favor of lowering the allowable limits.

"The proposal to lower the ozone levels are a step in the right direction and would better protect the public," said Janice Nolen, vice president for national policy for the American Lung Association." But allowing continued comments about keeping the current level is an absolutely and seriously bad decision."

The association sued the EPA in 2003 over the agency's failure to do a periodic scientific review of ozone research, as required by the Clean Air Act.

Bryan Brendle, air quality policy director for the National Association of Manufacturers, had the opposite view, saying that lowering the allowable ozone levels would seriously harm the economy while providing little or no health benefit.

"We would adamantly oppose lowering the standard to the level being discussed and would work hard to keep it from happening," he said.

Johnson said that by law, he had to base his ozone standard proposal solely on science, with no regard for what the changes might cost. However, the EPA will also be putting together a "regulatory impact analysis" that will address that issue, and officials said it would be made public within several months.

Ozone, commonly known as smog, is a gas that forms in the air when hydrocarbons mix with nitrogen oxides at times of bright sunlight and elevated heat. The components of smog come from power plants, cars, trucks and trains, refineries, gas stations and other industrial sources.

Ozone is known to exacerbate and perhaps cause asthma, and can lead to shortness of breath, chest pains and lung inflammation. Recent research has suggested that it can shorten the lives of elderly people, children and those with other lung problems.

The ozone standard was lowered by the EPA in 1997, a decision that was strenuously opposed by business and industry groups.

The Clean Air Act requires a scientific review of the ozone standard every five years, and the American Lung Association and other advocacy groups sued the agency after that period had passed with no action. The two sides reached an agreement that resulted in the agency's commitment to produce a new review and proposal by midnight yesterday.

Under the agreement, the EPA called together its Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee to review recent studies on the health effects of ozone. The committee ultimately concluded unanimously that the current standard does not adequately protect public health. It urged lowering the allowable level to 60 to 70 parts per billion.

According to S. William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, 104 of the 639 counties currently monitored for ozone pollution are still not complying with the 1997 standards. Under the new EPA proposal, 398 counties would be in violation

Under the Clean Air Act, local officials in areas that exceed allowable air pollution levels are required to take steps to come into compliance or possibly lose federal funds. The Washington area has been a chronic violator of air pollution standards, and Nolen of the American Lung Association pointed out that heightened "code orange" pollution-level warnings have been necessary for the past two days.

According to the supporters of stricter standards, business and industry groups have gone to the White House in recent days to lobby against the EPA proposal. On its Web site, the National Association of Manufacturers said in a summary: "The NAM continues to educate key Administration officials about the

necessity of offering the current standard as a regulatory option on which to comment during the upcoming rulemaking. The cost of implementing a stricter standard could exceed \$100 billion."

By formally allowing comments on keeping the current ozone standards unchanged, the advocates said, the administration did what the business community asked for.

"EPA's smog proposal sends a mixed message," said Frank O'Donnell, president of the non-profit Clean Air Watch.

"The good news is that EPA agrees that current smog standards are too weak to protect people's health. Its proposal would be a step in the right direction, though weaker than the standards recommended by EPA's science advisers."

"But EPA is also inviting comments on keeping the existing standards. That's an outrageous idea, driven by politics instead of science. Why is EPA dithering? Evidence points to the secret hand of the White House."

John Kinsman, director of air quality programs at the Edison Electric Institute, said that EPA data shows that overall air pollution has been reduced over the last few decades. He said that other recent initiatives to reduce ground-based ozone are only now beginning, so smog levels will be decreasing even without new EPA standards.

"EPA is being prudent by soliciting comments on a range of potential ozone standards, including the possibility that the current standard be left in place," Kinsman said. "The agency needs to make sure that any additional requirements imposed on states and local communities -- many of which would be incurring the substantial economic burdens associated with failing the standard for the first time -- will produce real public health benefits."

Summertime -- and the air will get bad, officials say

By Merek Siu - Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, June 21, 2007

On the first day of summer, with temperatures heading higher, area air pollution and transportation officials are asking folks to "spare the air" and "dump the pump."

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District and Regional Transit today will start urging area commuters and residents to take small, simple steps to improve air quality.

As it gets hotter, air quality gets worse, and children and people with breathing problems such as asthma will be hit the hardest.

During summer months, "A ridge of high pressure clamps down over the Valley. It's like a lid on top of a bowl, and it traps pollution inside," said Lori Kobza, spokeswoman for the air quality agency. "The longer it lasts, the longer the pollution builds up."

A Transportation Fair today at the state Capitol -- from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. -- features exhibits from transit and air quality agencies, and biking and walking groups will promote National Dump the Pump Day.

One important step for daily commuters, emphasized by Regional Transit, is public transport, even if it's only one day every other week.

"If you're tired of rapidly rising gas prices, if you're tired of paying all the expenses of parking, and if you're tired of polluting the air, public transit is one (option) that we need to look at seriously," said Mike Wiley, RT's deputy general manager.

"Air pollution in Sacramento is getting up to be some of the worst in the country," said Anthony Wexler, director of the Air Quality Research Center at UC Davis.

This has not escaped Dorothy Edwards, 41, a tax specialist who said Wednesday that Sacramento's summer air quality makes her "want to head to San Francisco."

The clean-air message also resonates with Joe Glassier, 53. He's unemployed, but as he walked across a downtown Sacramento mall Wednesday, he said "because of pollution, global warming, and gas prices, I'm going to drive a heck of a lot less, use the lower wattage light bulbs and be more conscientious about the things I purchase."

"Spare the air" advisories are issued by the air quality district and published in The Bee. There is also an air-alert e-mail system and a Web site -- www.sparetheair.com <<http://www.sparetheair.com>>. Alerts go out when the air quality index reaches 127, when pollutants reach a level that can affect children, the sick and elderly.

"People sometimes feel that they can't do something -- 'I can't change my commute,' " Kobza said. "But maybe you can once a month, maybe you can once a week. After hours, when you're going to soccer practice, maybe you can pick up someone else's child."

The combustion that occurs in cars, charcoal lighter fluid for barbecues and gas lawnmowers produces oxides of nitrogen. Volatile organic compounds come from gas and even from growing plants. Carpooling, avoiding gas-powered yard tools and charcoal lighter fluid, and driving at the speed limit can help reduce emissions.

Even filling the gas tank after sundown reduces the amount of volatile organic compounds that escape into hot air and react with oxides of nitrogen to form damaging ozone. This reaction is powered by sunlight and is made faster by summer heat.

Ground-level ozone, not to be confused with the protective ozone layer in the atmosphere, acts like "sunburn for your lungs," said Kobza.

The Sacramento region does not meet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's health standards for ground-level ozone.

"It doesn't have to be changing your commute habits every day," Kobza said. "We encourage people to drive less and to think smart."

Free bus rides offered Thursday

Stockton Record, Wednesday, June 20, 2007

STOCKTON - The San Joaquin Regional Transit District will be offering free rides in observance of National Dump the Pump Day on Thursday.

But there is a catch: Riders on any Stockton Metro, Intercity or Hopper bus must proclaim to the driver they have "dumped the pump" in order to claim a free trip.

RTD's fleet includes several low emission diesel-electric hybrid buses.

Prop. 1B money touches off fights

Florez doesn't trust current air board to spend funds.

By E.J. Schultz and Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

In the Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Thursday, June 21, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- With key decisions looming on where to spend \$1 billion in air-quality bond money, the San Joaquin Valley is again locked in a battle with more populous -- and powerful -- coastal areas.

But an internal fight is complicating the Valley's lobbying efforts, threatening funding to replace heavy-duty diesel trucks -- a major source of smog-making gas in the region.

Sen. Dean Florez -- the region's most powerful legislator on air issues -- says money should only be spent in the Valley if the local air board agrees to significant reforms, including changing its membership. Florez has long said the local board is not aggressive enough in clearing the air.

"We have no interest in giving [money] to a board that wants to go slower and allow polluters to pollute a little more and a little longer," said Florez, a Shafter Democrat.

Other Valley lawmakers say the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is doing a fine job -- and that Florez is just playing politics.

Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, called Florez's approach irresponsible: "We should be fighting for as much bond money as we can get," she said.

At stake is \$1 billion in clean-air money in Proposition 1B, the \$19.9 billion transportation bond approved by voters in November.

As part of state budget talks, lawmakers are negotiating over how much should be spent next year -- probably between \$110 million and \$250 million. More importantly, legislators are negotiating guidelines that will dictate how the money is spent in the future.

The ballot measure calls for investing in pollution reductions along trade corridors. Coastal communities want to use the money to upgrade ports. Valley leaders say about \$360 million should go to replace pollution-spewing trucks that rumble through the region, including many on Interstate 5 and Highway 99, the state's two major north-south arteries.

Nearly half of the diesel truck traffic in the state's four major transportation corridors passes through the Valley, accounting for an estimated 11.6 million miles daily. By comparison, heavy-duty diesel trucks drive about 9.6 million miles daily in the South Coast Air Basin, said the California Air Resources Board.

"We should be getting a good piece of the money to modernize diesel fleets," said Peter Weber, a co-chairman of the Fresno-area Regional Jobs Initiative and civic leader.

Weber and others point out that the Valley last year had more federal smog violations than any other place in the country. Heavy-duty trucks account for nearly 40% of a key smog-making gas called oxides of nitrogen, or NOx, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It is by far the largest category of NOx emissions," said Tom Jordan, special projects administrator for the district.

The money could be used to begin replacing the area's dirtiest diesel trucks, which generally haul produce from farm fields.

But Florez does not trust the current air board to spend the money wisely.

He sides with environmentalists, who are especially peeved at the district's decision to delay a smog cleanup deadline until 2024, more than a decade beyond the initial deadline set by the federal government. The state last week approved the extension, and federal officials are expected follow suit.

Florez wants to link Prop. 1B funding to two bills that would enact major changes:

Senate Bill 240, by Florez, would allow the air board to increase fees on businesses and industries -- so-called stationary pollution sources -- and raise vehicle license fees. The proceeds would pay for anti-pollution programs.

Senate Bill 719, by Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden, would add two city appointees and two medical experts to the board, increasing membership to 15.

The measures are opposed by farm and business groups. County governments -- which now appoint 8 of the 11 members on the board -- are also opposed.

"We are a firm believer that the current board has made tremendous progress on air quality," said Ryan Jacobsen, executive director of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. "The data and information that's been gathered backs that up."

Local air district officials say they reduced each of the two building blocks of smog -- NOx and reactive organic gases -- by 40% between 1990 and 2005.

They say the district cleanup for dust and soot particles, called PM-10, was finished five years early, though environmentalists are arguing that monitors have shown federal violations in the last two years.

The air board is scheduled to take a formal position on both bills at a meeting today. Florez warned the board against opposing the bills, saying it would hurt the region's chances at getting the Prop. 1B money. "They're not reading the tea leaves in the California state Senate very well," he said. "It's kind of like they're playing a game of chicken with the Legislature -- and it's a very dangerous game."

Weber, who opposes linking Prop. 1B money to the two bills, said the showdown is hurting lobbying efforts. The region, he said, needs to speak with one voice.

"The Valley has to get past its propensity for lining up its firing squads in a circle," he said. "I don't think the folks in Los Angeles or San Francisco are trying to hold each other hostage over their internal political differences."

Fast-food drive-thrus still banned in San Luis Obispo

In the S.F. Chronicle, Bakersfield Californian and other papers, Thursday, June 21, 2007

San Luis Obispo, Calif. (AP) -- The quarter-century ban on drive-thru windows will continue in San Luis Obispo.

The City Council refused to consider changing the law prohibiting fast food restaurant drive-thrus.

When enacted in 1982, the ban was aimed at littering and air pollution from vehicles idling in the drive-thru lanes.

But Keith Handley, owner of two McDonald's restaurants in the city, told the council Tuesday night that the original intent of the drive-thru ban was erroneously conceived.

Handley said research now shows that stopping and starting cars uses more fuel than leaving them running for up to six minutes.

Council members Paul Brown, Andrew Carter and Christine Mulholland told Handley they couldn't support changing the rules.

Brown said the issue was not just about pollution, but getting people out of their cars to enjoy the city.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Thursday, June 21, 2007:](#)

Solar panels save money, air

We recently installed solar panels on our home and we are now generating electricity during the day. We generate and feed power back to the grid during the day when electricity is expensive and use power from the grid at night when electricity is cheap.

We installed the system because the power company told us to. They didn't call or send a letter instructing us to do this, but they did send a very clear signal last year when they raised rates to a level that made the solar system economically feasible.

In addition to the benefits of controlling our power bills, I was surprised to find that we are helping to reduce some of the greenhouse gases that contribute to air pollution here in Bakersfield.

Estimates provided by the company that installed our solar system show that we will reduce carbon dioxide, or CO₂ emissions, by more than 6,000 pounds per year and nitrogen oxides, or NO_x emissions, by about 6 pounds per year. Both carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides are pollutants that come from auto exhaust among other sources.

My wife and I both use our cars for work so we hope that the reduced greenhouse gases somehow balance the pollution we produce during our daily driving.

Reducing emissions wasn't the main goal of installing the solar system. We really wanted to get control of our energy bills. After completing the requisite energy audit provided by PG&E, we found that we had already implemented the main energy-saving measures, such as replacing our light bulbs with energy-efficient fluorescent bulbs and keeping our air temperature at 82 degrees during the summer.

We also replaced our old pool pump with an energy-efficient model that will save up to 80 percent of the electricity of the old model. We have other energy-saving measures in mind. We're going to replace the electric clothes dryer with a gas model and we are going to replace the old refrigerator in the garage with a model specifically designed for garage use.

I know we're not alone in our move to solar. I've noticed several other houses in my neighborhood with new panels on the roof.

It feels good to know that we are helping to reduce air pollution, but nothing feels better than watching that electric meter spin backward.

James Francisco lives in Bakersfield and is the district trainer for a pharmaceutical sales company. He is a member of the Opinion section's Sounding Board.

[O.C. Register commentary, Tuesday, June 19, 2007](#)

China Wakes Up to Cost of Ethanol

U.S. corn land produces only 50 gallons worth of gasoline per acre per year

By DENNIS T. AVERY, Author, Former U.S. State Department Senior Policy Analyst

China has just banned further expansion of its corn ethanol industry, after a radical 43 percent increase in pork prices over the past year. Xu Dingming of the Chinese National Energy Leading Group told a recent seminar that "Food-based ethanol fuel will not be the direction for China." The Chinese turnabout comes as President Bush is cheerleading for a massive corn-ethanol expansion, supposedly to help the U.S. achieve "energy independence."

Unfortunately, U.S. corn land produces only 50 gallons worth of gasoline per acre per year - against an annual gasoline demand of 135 billion gallons. New U.S. ethanol plants coming online could take 30 percent of next year's U.S. corn harvest for automobile fuel - an unprecedented diversion of the world's scarce crop- land. Supplying the Bush goal of 35 billion gallons of ethanol per year would currently force

farmers to clear more than 200 million acres of Midwest forest to supply even 10 percent of our gasoline demand from corn ethanol.

Even without ethanol demand, farmers would need to triple existing crop yields over the next 40 years. Population growth is likely to produce a peak human population of 8 billion to 9 billion. Economic growth will raise the number of affluent consumers from today's 1.5 billion to 7 billion - accompanied by soaring demand for meat, milk, eggs and pet food.

World corn prices are already nearly double last year's level, and wheat prices are up 10 percent. Mexican consumers are in the streets, protesting a 60 percent increase in tortilla prices. Midwest economist Tom Elam says current oil prices will support corn at \$4.50 per bushel. A serious drought or crop disease could drive corn to \$6 per bushel.

Why did the environmental movement, which is pledged to defend the wildlands, silently approve Bush's corn ethanol diversion and risk a massive forest loss? I would guess it's because the world is currently building or planning more than 40 new nuclear power plants. The Greens didn't wage their 30-year campaign against fossil fuels just to produce a shift to nuclear; they want dramatic reductions in humanity's use of technology.

The Kyoto Protocol demands we eliminate at least 80 percent of the world's current energy sources. Solar power and windmills have proven woefully inadequate to supply our base energy needs. There is currently no cost-effective way to produce ethanol from cellulose sources such as wood chips or switchgrass.

Brazilian sugar cane is three times more efficient at converting sunlight to transport fuel, mainly because corn-growing takes more diesel fuel, more fossil-fueled fertilizer, and lots of natural gas to heat the conversion process. But even ethanol from sugar cane is more expensive than gasoline with oil at \$65 a barrel.

The deeper reality is that fossil fuels probably aren't to blame for our global warming. Roman histories and modern studies of ice cores, seabed sediments and fossil pollen all agree that the world has a moderate, natural 1,500-year climate cycle. That cycle explains most, or all, of the planet's warming since 1850. There is no evidence that human-emitted CO₂ has significantly increased global temperatures. We will probably have a moderate warming for the next several hundred years whether we burn fossil fuels or not. Then we will have centuries of colder weather.

Let's keep our trees. Let's forget the Kyoto Protocol. Instead, let's get rid of the trade barriers that prevent American farmers from selling their corn and meat to the increasingly affluent consumers in densely populated Asian countries. Then both our farmers and our urban consumers can move sustainably forward into the 21st century.

[Sacramento Bee editorial, Thursday, June 21, 2007](#)

Editorial notebook: Transitarian and proud

Today is Dump the Pump Day, a national invitation to commuters to park their cars and discover the value of using transit. Sacramento Regional Transit is even offering "I Dumped the Pump" buttons to bus riders today. Certainly worth the \$2 price of admission. (In the central city, you can hop on for \$1.)

Back in February, I parked my Dodge Caravan, which on a good day gets less than 20 mpg in freeway driving, and purchased a monthly RT pass. I haven't driven to work since.

The American Public Transit Association estimates that using public transit saves 1.4 billion gallons of gasoline a year. When I drove to work I would fill the Caravan with gas at least once a week. In today's \$3-plus per gallon world, that's \$200 a month. Compare that with the \$85 monthly RT pass.

But beyond the economics, there's a social responsibility, a responsibility to the planet. Keeping that car parked reduces smog-producing pollutants and lessens my contribution to the causes of global warming.

In my newfound enthusiasm for transit, I've even created a word to describe people like myself who volunteer to leave their cars at home: transitarian. (Not to be confused with the Spanish third-person plural of transitar in the conditional.)

Life as a transitarian has been an entertaining adventure. As Richard Brautigan wrote in his short story, "The Old Bus": "There is a certain happiness sighted when your bus comes along. It is of course a small specialized form of happiness and will never be a great thing."

Local transportation agencies and others who seek to "reduce, re-use and recycle our national resources" will be hosting a transportation fair at the Capitol from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. today.

Save the planet. Be a transitarian.

-- John Hughes

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Wednesday, June 20, 2007](#)

Stop building insanity

I don't understand why we complain about our air quality but keep ripping out orchards to put in housing and shopping centers. One, the trees clean the air; and two, there is a glut of houses.

Will all the building stop now that there is the highest number of foreclosures in the nation? Probably not, because contractors' money speaks louder than common sense and what people want.

People who have older homes can't sell them because builders make it so easy to get into new homes. There is a problem with the rapid building of these huge homes and shopping centers.

Gayle Peterson, Modesto