

Cal-AIR-fornia

Feel lucky? Go ahead and take a deep breath

By David Watts Barton - Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, August 1, 2007

They say fish don't notice the water they're swimming in. But we humans don't have the same ignorance-is-bliss option when it comes to the air we swim in every minute of our lives.

Drive down from the foothills or back from the Bay Area, and that dense blanket of smog that hangs in our air is undeniable. And it's never more apparent than during the hot days of summer, when inversions keep the pollution close to the ground, where we breathe it.

It's summer, and while there's fun in the air, there's a whole lotta other stuff, too. Autos spew exhaust; tractors kick up huge clouds of dust that can travel for miles; farmers burn orchard and vineyard waste; campers build campfires; cabin dwellers in the mountains burn wood in fireplaces. You may have noticed that one fireplace in a small mountain valley can fill the place with smoke.

Lately, air quality in our area has been the subject of considerable conflict -- and the byproduct of tragedy. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his staff went head-to-head with members of the state Air Resources Board over what some said was the administration's meddling with the board's work; the people who lobby for the fireplace industry are up in arms about a proposed "no-burn days" rule by the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District; and folks in South Lake Tahoe got a distressing taste of bad air during the disastrous Angora fire.

David Carle has been looking at the three major elements that affect life in California: air, fire and water. He started with "Introduction to Water in California" in 2004 and will publish "Introduction to Fire in California" in 2008.

But these days, he's talking about his second book, "Introduction to Air in California" (University of California Press, \$16.95, 244 pages), which was published in 2006 and just came out in paperback. In it, he explains what air is, how it moves, and the specific features and problems in each of the 15 "air basins" that comprise California.

Carle, a former California State Parks ranger (including at the Auburn State Recreation Area and the State Indian Museum in Sacramento), also taught biology at Cerro Coso Community College in Mammoth Lakes. These days, he's a full-time writer, and he took time to talk about his books from his home in Lee Vining, on the eastern slope of the Sierra, not far from Mono Lake.

As we spoke last month, Carle noted a fire growing on the horizon about 15 miles from his home. At one point in the conversation, he had to excuse himself to get up to close his windows, as the wind had carried the smoke far enough for him to smell it. Which brought up the subject of smoke, where air and fire meet.

"Smoke is not healthy to breathe, in general," Carle says. "The big issue with smoke is particulates, which are particles that are so small that our usual defenses, the cilia in our noses and the mucus in our throats, don't catch it. It lodges in the lungs, and our bodies haven't developed a mechanism for expelling it."

As demonstrated by the Angora fire, Carle's three subjects -- air, fire and water -- are intricately connected.

"Wind is a factor in most of the big fires in California," he says. "The southern California chaparral fires fundamentally coincide with the Santa Ana winds, and the Oakland hills fire coincided with the Diablo winds, blowing from the Central Valley out toward the ocean."

Smoke and the particulates from agriculture and other human activity are becoming even more of a problem than the photochemical smog that came into the popular consciousness in the 1950s and '60s, and which has been somewhat mitigated by reducing auto emissions.

"We've been fighting photochemical smog for a long time, so there's been a lot of improvement," he says. "But the biggest issue now is that the real big health culprit is this particulate issue."

"Too many people are dying young of respiratory diseases," he says. "And it's not just emphysema and asthma, but there have been incidents of heart attacks provoked by extreme air pollution spikes."

State air not OK with Kern

Two-thirds of county say air's 'a big problem'

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2007

A majority of Kern County residents, with the exception of a few holdouts, rated air pollution as a major local issue in a statewide survey on the environment published last week.

Two-thirds of the 200 people from Kern County interviewed for the poll said air pollution is "a big problem" and nearly the same amount felt it posed a serious health threat.

Fifty-five percent reported that at least one person in their immediate family had asthma or other respiratory problems.

But despite Kern's consistent designation by the American Lung Association as one of the top three polluted cities in the country, 15 percent of locals still think air quality is not a problem locally.

Still, the fact that most people consider dirty air to be a big concern is progress, said Sharon Borradori, a spokeswoman for the Bakersfield office of the American Lung Association.

"It's taken a long time for people to understand the air is harmful," Borradori said, attributing the change in attitude to years of public education and a shift away from pollution being viewed as a "liberal" issue.

The poll also showed that:

- Kern County residents are more likely than the rest of the state to drive an SUV. Thirty-two percent of Kern residents reported owning or leasing an SUV compared to 22 percent statewide.
- Nearly two-thirds of locals believe air quality has gotten worse in the past 10 years. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the agency charged with cleaning up the valley's air, has said air quality has consistently improved in that time, though progress on smog has not been as great in the past three years.
- Nearly 70 percent surveyed admitted they didn't know enough about the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to say whether the agency was doing a good job.

The poll was conducted by San Francisco-based Public Policy Institute of California and included 2,500 adults throughout the state, almost half of whom live in the San Joaquin Valley.

Chemical fire leaves mess for Stockdale Highway plant

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2007

A chemical fire started at around 1 a.m. Wednesday at the Hondo Chemical plant on Stockdale Highway west of Bakersfield.

Sulfur, which ignites easily, caught fire on a machine used to make large pieces of sulfur smaller, according to Kern County fire Capt. Doug Johnston. No one was hurt. The fire at the plant at 20807 Stockdale Highway was under control by 4 a.m., Johnston said.

The cause of the fire isn't suspicious, and so fire investigators won't be investigating the cause, Johnston said. The company said they'd like to work with firefighters to make the process safer, according to Johnston.

The fire "kinda made a big, stinky mess," Johnston said, and the burning sulfur, like other combustibles, released pollutants into the air, Johnston said.

Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said they sent an inspector to the fire Wednesday.

The fire didn't release any chemicals that are hazardous to the public, Turner said. They received no complaints from the public.

She said Hondo Chemical believed the fire started through spontaneous combustion. Calls to the company were not returned immediately Wednesday afternoon.

The fire was not related to another fire on the property in February 2006, in which chemicals used at a biodiesel plant burned, Johnston said.

EPA: Toledo Area Meets the Health Standard for Smog

PR Newswire, News Fuze

Contra Costa Times, Thursday, August 2, 2007

CHICAGO, Aug. 1 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 5 announced today it has approved the state of Ohio's request to redesignate Lucas and Wood counties in the Toledo area to attainment of the national health-based eight-hour outdoor air quality standard for ozone (smog). EPA said complete, quality-assured, outdoor air monitoring data for 2004, 2005 and 2006 meet the standard.

"Toledo area residents are enjoying healthier air because of the work Ohio has done to improve air quality," said EPA Regional Administrator Mary A. Gade. "Better air quality also means an improved business climate in these counties."

The Agency also approved the state plan to continue to meet the eight-hour health-based ozone standard through 2020 and the motor vehicle emissions budgets included in the plan.

EPA's action will soon be published in the Federal Register. The designation becomes effective upon publication.

Ground-level ozone is commonly referred to as smog. Smog is formed when a mixture of pollutants react on warm, sunny days. The pollutants are released from cars, factories and a wide variety of other sources. Smog can cause respiratory problems, including coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath and chest pain.

[Fresno Bee Commentary, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2007:](#)

MARK BALDASSARE: Valley residents want a breath of fresh air

The San Joaquin Valley has recently been at the center of a political storm with state and regional officials clashing over plans to reduce air pollution. While most policymakers agree on the need for much cleaner air, they disagree over how and when it will be possible to meet this goal. Meanwhile, San Joaquin Valley residents are unequivocal in expressing a sense of urgency about air pollution, and politically united in their desire to enact policies that will improve the quality of the air they breathe.

When the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) Statewide Survey interviewed 1,001 adults in the San Joaquin Valley recently, it found a grim mood when it comes to air quality. More Valley residents name air pollution as the state's top environmental issue than any other high-profile topic such as global warming, drought, forest fires and energy.

Nearly half say the state government is not doing enough to tackle environmental issues, while only 10% complain that the state government is doing too much. A bare 50% of residents in the eight-county region that voted heavily for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last year now say they approve of the job the governor is doing in handling environmental issues.

Today, the Valley distinguishes itself in an unflattering way in the PPIC Statewide Survey. Compared to other areas of California -- including Los Angeles and the Inland Empire, which are notorious for their low standing in U.S. air quality rankings -- Valley residents are much more likely to worry about regional air pollution and its effects.

When asked about the region they live in, two in three reported that the air quality is worse than it was 10 years ago, while just 12% think it has improved in the past decade. Eight in 10 say that air pollution is a

problem, with 56% describing it as a "big problem." Just 11% of Valley residents say they are "very satisfied" with the air quality in their region, while 55% say they are dissatisfied.

Even closer to home, nearly three in four believe air pollution in the region is a very serious (35%) or a somewhat serious (37%) threat to them and their family's health. Moreover, half say that they or family members currently suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems.

Importantly, within the Valley region, perceptions of the effect of air pollution vary dramatically. For example, those in the Fresno-to-Bakersfield area express even more unhappiness about their air quality than those living in the San Joaquin Valley communities that are farther to the north.

The severity of the air pollution problems expressed by Valley residents today has an important political repercussion in that it leads residents to throw their support toward more government intervention. While residents have a unique political and economic profile compared to the rest of the state, their policy preferences mirror those of all Californians when it comes to a desire to increase government efforts to improve the environment. And though Democrats and Republicans in the Valley disagree on many political issues, such as taxes and spending, there is a considerable amount of bipartisan consensus about the types of government policies needed to improve air quality in the region.

Some of these public opinion trends may seem surprising for one of the more conservative and less affluent regions of the state, until we factor in the degree of concern about air pollution.

For instance, seven in 10 Valley residents want to see tougher air pollution standards on commercial and industrial activities. A similar proportion call for tougher air pollution standards on the vehicles that transport goods, and about half want to see tougher air pollution standards placed on agriculture and farm activities.

Moreover, public support for tougher air pollution regulations on commerce, industry, goods movement, farms and agriculture does not waver much when residents are reminded that such policies could lead to higher costs for businesses to operate.

Valley residents list a multitude of factors when asked what contributes the most to the problem of poor air quality -- personal and commercial vehicles, industry and agriculture, growth and development, and even weather and pollution from outside the region. Such varied explanations point to the need for state and regional bodies to work together to reduce the mobile and stationary sources of air pollution they oversee.

While weighing their next policy move, state and local officials should recognize that Valley residents are growing impatient with their progress to date -- and are looking for decisive actions to protect their own health and improve the region's economic vitality.

Mark Baldassare is president of the Public Policy Institute of California, where he holds the Arjay and Frances Fearing Miller Chair and directs the PPIC Statewide Survey.