

Want to breathe easy? Then pay up

By Alex Breitler - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2007

FRESNO - You're invited once again to help solve the San Joaquin Valley's pollution problems -- not by driving less or pushing an electric lawn mower, but by opening up your pocketbook.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District might set up a fund to which individuals, organizations or businesses can contribute voluntarily.

The money could pay for incentives to replace dirty school buses and heavy-duty equipment or maybe build bike paths and improve public transportation, among other possibilities, officials said.

Valley air violates federal ozone standards, and the district has been criticized by environmental groups for delaying compliance until 2024. This is one way to speed things up, air quality specialist Lucinda Roth said.

"The quicker we get there, the better," Roth said. "We want to empower people to help us."

District watchdogs are lukewarm. "It may be a nice gesture," said Kathryn Phillips of Environmental Defense. "But I would hope the district would put in place some safeguards" to protect against conflicts of interest.

The concern is that corporations whose emissions are regulated by the district might make donations in an effort to gain favor.

"I guess this is an OK idea, but they need to make sure it doesn't blur the lines and that the public is aware of what's going on," said Sarah Sharpe of the advocacy group Coalition for Clean Air.

Roth said donations to the district would go straight to its financial officers, having no contact with those who make and enforce air quality rules.

Donors might be required to sign a statement acknowledging they will not gain any preferential treatment and that the money is strictly a donation, Roth said.

She said there is no specific goal for the amount of money to be raised. According to staff reports, the district used \$179 million for a range of incentive programs between 1992 and 2007, reducing pollution by tens of thousands of tons.

A similar community fund has been established in smoggy Southern California, Roth said.

The Valley air district is working to make sure donations would be tax-deductible before approving the fund. A proposal could go before the board of directors in early 2008, she said.

For more information about the San Joaquin Valley's ozone problems, visit www.valleyair.org.

Bad blast for Valley's air quality

By Seth Nidever
Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2007

Pollution from Fourth of July fireworks could derail the clean air status achieved by the San Joaquin Valley, air district sources said this morning.

A spike in so-called PM10 pollution from fireworks displays on July 4 went far beyond limits for the pollutant, which includes large particles like dust and soot as well as finer particles.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is trying to convince the EPA that the spike is an event beyond its control.

Under federal rules, the district is allowed to appeal exceedances under certain circumstances.

"The district is just taking the tack at this time that it's just a fireworks issue," said Steven Shaw, supervising air quality specialist.

The spike could jeopardize a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declaration last year that the SJVAPCD is in compliance with PM 10 regulations.

The designation has been touted by the district as a major accomplishment.

If the district's appeal is denied, it would likely mean new regulations, possibly including restrictions on fireworks, Shaw said.

The spike registered on July 4 was at a station in Bakersfield that measured pollution at six times the allowable level.

The permissible average for a 24-hour period is 150 micrograms of pollution per cubic meter of air.

The monitor in Bakersfield registered above 900 at one point, Shaw said, but dropped back below 150 in the early hours of July 5.

The spike was triggered by a sudden lack of wind at peak fireworks usage, Shaw said.

"The timing ... was unfortunate," he said.

Kings County Supervisor Tony Barba -- who also serves on the air district's board of directors -- said that fireworks pollution definitely happens, but he wasn't sure if EPA would allow the district to regulate fireworks.

"We haven't even talked about regulating fireworks (locally)," Barba said.

Shaw said the district is for the "first time" considering regulating fireworks as part of a draft plan to clean up small particle pollution.

Doctor in Fresno asthma study tapped for California air board

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

The Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2007

John Balmes, a medical doctor and University of California professor involved in a Fresno asthma study, has been named to the governing board of the California Air Resources Board, the state's air-quality watchdog.

Balmes joined University of California at San Francisco in 1986, and has focused on respiratory health effects of air pollution for 18 years. He is working with Dr. Ira Tager of the University of California at Berkeley on the "Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environment Study," known as FACES.

The researchers are examining the connection between air pollution and asthma. About 250 asthmatic children, ages 6 to 11, have been tracked for several years in the study. Results are expected in the next year.

Fresno County has the highest childhood asthma rate in California -- one of every three children is afflicted.

Balmes, 57, is a Democrat who holds membership in the American Thoracic Society. He also is a longtime volunteer with the American Lung Association. Balmes replaces Dr. Henry Gong, who died in August.

There are 11 members on the Air Resources Board, including two from the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case represents the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, and Dorene D'Adamo is from Stanislaus County. D'Adamo fills a seat designated for someone from the legal community.

The board is required to have a medical doctor appointed by the governor. Gov. Schwarzenegger last week named Balmes.

Balmes must be confirmed by the state Senate. Annual compensation is \$39,332.

Officials deny wrongdoing in Ceres Wal-Mart site work

By MICHELLE HATFIELD

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, December 26, 2007

CERES -- City officials said they did nothing wrong in allowing the demolition of abandoned structures and removal of vegetation on land undergoing an environmental review for a proposed Wal-Mart supercenter and other stores.

Staff members said they could have communicated better internally but that they did not break any environmental protection laws. City staff approved the demolition permit by Modesto Sand and Gravel.

The work has upset several residents who chalk it up to underhanded dealings by land developers and retail giant Wal-Mart. The Mitchell Ranch Shopping Center is planned for the northwest corner of Mitchell and Service roads.

Trees in the center of the plot were removed, and a handful of vacant farmhouses and outbuildings along Don Pedro Road were razed.

Consultants are about halfway through the Environmental Impact Report required by state law to study environmental impacts of development on land, including traffic, noise and [air quality](#). Barry Siebe, Ceres planning manager, said many studies were completed before the site work was done.

The six-page response, written mainly by Siebe, answers questions posed by residents.

The 26 acres at Service and Mitchell are owned by Mitchell Service LLC, according to a public records search by The Bee. The records state that Mitchell Service LLC is linked to Regency Realty Group, the company developing the site. Calls to Regency inquiring about the timing of the site work were not returned.

Touching the land before the environmental impact report is completed raises questions about the legitimacy of the study, residents said. It also makes some think the Mitchell Ranch and Wal-Mart projects are done deals.

The land is considered private property, so the city doesn't have control over what is done to it, but Siebe said staff and the landowners would discuss any other changes to the plot.

"The city would have liked to review (demolition) plans beforehand," Siebe said.

Fires, homeless on property

Siebe noted that the Police and Fire Departments have responded to the site several times in more than three years to calls of fires and homeless people camping in the abandoned outbuildings. Safety and liability issues might have motivated demolition of the structures by the landowner, Siebe said.

If Wal-Mart was not part of the equation, Siebe said, the demolition wouldn't have been an issue with residents.

In July, Wal-Mart announced plans to build a 208,000-square-foot supercenter at the location. A regular, 124,000-square-foot Wal-Mart two miles to the north at 1670 Mitchell Road would be renovated and remain open, according to Wal-Mart officials. Supercenters are larger and sell more groceries, including meat, fruit and vegetables. The closest supercenter to Ceres is in Stockton.

Plans for the 314,000-square-foot Mitchell Ranch shopping center include other stores, a fast food vendor and chain restaurants.

Burning wrapping paper creates toxins

Bay City News Service

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, Dec. 24, 2007

Bay Area Air Quality Management District Chair Mark Ross is urging people to refrain from burning wrapping paper.

Burning colored paper can create dioxins, "one of the most pernicious poisons on the planet," Ross said.

Although the foil wrapping paper is the most toxic when burned, burning any type of colored paper released dioxins and other harmful particulate matter pollution, which can be particularly dangerous to people with respiratory diseases.

Manteca targets ride sharing

City adding 500 park-and-ride lot spaces

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

Manteca Bulletin, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

The State of California back in the late 1990s decided a park-and-ride lot for commuters was needed to serve the Manteca area.

So as part of the widening of Highway 99 between the Highway 120 Bypass and Ripon to six lanes, the state paid to put in a lighted park-and-ride lot with more than 40 parking stalls on the southeast corner of the Austin Road and Highway 99 interchange.

At the most, three cars a day parked there. But then cars started to get vandalized, bottles smashed on the weekend and the lot turned into an impromptu track for young drivers to burn rubber, and conduct beer parties.

Eight years earlier Manteca, as part of the agreement to allow Mission Ridge Shopping Center anchored by Wal-Mart to build on South Main Street, required 50 spaces along the street to be set aside for commuter use.

When a survey was done by the San Joaquin Council of Governments this past summer, it was noted that commuters were using 100 spaces instead of just 50 on a daily basis at the Wal-Mart lot.

But a little over a mile away at the state's park-and-ride, no one was using it. The state has since closed and barricaded the Austin Road lot to reduce vandalism.

A study conducted by SJCOG indicates it will cost upwards of \$8.5 million over the next 10 years to just construct the 600 spaces that will be needed to handle ride sharing demands in the county. That figure is exclusive of and costs.

The same report notes that it is more cost effective to establish park-and-ride lots at shopping centers where capacity is designed for maximum demand on weekends or during the holiday shopping season. It also identifies churches that have parking lots that are rarely used during weekday hours.

Manteca has already taken a step toward avoiding costly taxpayer investment in free-standing park-and-ride lots.

The Big League Dreams complex has been identified for the purpose of using the 500-space parking lot at the city-owned complex for park-and-ride commuters.

The BLD parking has been designated for commuters' use when they share rides or take other transportation to work. It has gotten minimal use, though, due to it not being near bus routes as well as not being heavily advertised.

Both the San Joaquin Regional Transit District and Manteca Transit are studying changes in their bus routes to access the BLD complex for the purpose of using the 500-space parking lot for commuters.

The BLD site is ideal since there is minimal use of the sports complex on work days before 5 p.m. It also has a fairly high level of security and visibility.

The BLD lot with its 500 spaces will take care of Manteca's needs for the foreseeable future. The study has also identified the desirability of a park-and-ride lot in Central Manteca.

Ripon has a 75-space park-and-ride lot opening this year at Jack Tone Road at the major truck stops. Ripon plans to implement intercity transit from the lot to Modesto and Manteca.

The study indicated ideal locations for park-and-ride lots in Lathrop would be near the interchanges of Interstate 5 and Louise Avenue, Interstate 5 and Lathrop Road, and Interstate 5 and Interstate 205.

Blue Sky Bio-fuels Processes San Francisco Waste Grease Into Biodiesel for Bay Area School Buses

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

School buses in some San Francisco Bay Areas school districts will soon be running on fuel that was made from waste grease from nearby restaurants. Thanks to a partnership between Blue Sky Bio-fuels and the City of San Francisco's Greasecycle program the waste grease will no longer be dumped into the city's sewer system and instead it will be produced into a cleaner burning fuel that is better for the environment and local school children.

Blue Sky Bio-Fuels has been receiving waste grease from San Francisco's Greasecycle program just launched on November 21st. The Greasecycle program was developed in order to clean the sewers, MUNI buses and the air. Blue Sky Bio-fuels produced its first 1000 gallons of biodiesel in November using SF's waste grease. This month, Michael's Transportation in Vallejo, will be receiving its first delivery of biodiesel made from SF waste grease, for use in its fleet of 80 school buses. Michael's transportation services numerous school districts around the bay area including Oakland Unified School District.

"Our goal is to help California reduce its carbon footprint and become less dependent on foreign oil," said Patrick MacIntyre, president of Blue Sky Bio-fuels. "Our solution is a triple win proposition where cities have their waste grease turned into a renewable fuel for our youth to breathe cleaner air. We take a product, waste grease, that has been typically reconstituted for animal feed, makeup or shipped to Asia for heating oil and turn it into a cleaner burning fuel at a price that is competitive with diesel."

Blue Sky Bio-fuels, located in Oakland, CA, has designed and engineered a 20 million gallon per year facility. Blue Sky, the brainchild of brothers Patrick and Ralph MacIntyre, was the top biodiesel project funded in part by a grant from the California Air Resources Board.

"One of our first initiatives is to get biodiesel in as many school buses as we can in the San Francisco Bay Area," said MacIntyre. "Diesel fumes from the tailpipe and crankcase of our existing diesel school buses have been known to cause asthma and cancer in children. As long as we can keep it priced competitively for the school districts, biodiesel it is a better alternative."

Blue Sky Bio-Fuels also provides a solution to restaurant owners who currently have to pay to get rid of their used grease. Local restaurants sign up with Blue Sky's Grease collection service to pick up their grease for free. Blue Sky has created the Clean Air Partners Program for restaurants to be recognized for their contribution of their waste grease being turned into biodiesel for school buses.

About Blue Sky Bio-fuels

Blue Sky Bio-Fuels was founded by Patrick and Ralph MacIntyre, brothers with unique expertise in biodiesel production, industrial facility development, construction management and heavy-fleet operations. Blue Sky Bio- Fuels is a leading producer of biodiesel fuel through its newly constructed facility in Oakland, California. Blue Sky Bio-Fuels produces high quality biodiesel (ASTM D6751) from virgin feedstocks as well as inedible kitchen grease (IKG). The production facility is ideally situated along the transportation corridor in Oakland, CA just off Hwy 880, the main rail line and a few miles from the Port of Oakland. Blue Sky will initially serve the San Francisco Bay Area and the greater Northern California markets, where demand for biodiesel continues to accelerate at a rapid pace. Blue Sky is well-positioned to be the first large-scale operation to capitalize on fast- growing biodiesel demand in the SF Bay Area.

States join emissions battle

Governors plan to back California's bid to reverse EPA on greenhouse law.

By Dale Kasler

Sacramento Bee, Friday, Dec. 21, 2007

From Oregon to Maine, a multistate groundswell emerged on Thursday behind California's struggle to enforce its greenhouse gas emissions law.

One day after the Bush administration blocked the law, governors and other officials from at least eight states pledged to help California as it prepares to sue the administration.

"We're going to be out there on California's side," Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski said in an interview. "The only way we're going to get the national administration to move on this is to keep up the pressure."

Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire said the support of multiple governors, plus members of Congress, could create political pressure on the Bush administration to reconsider. "It's an overwhelming voice from the states," she said.

If the administration doesn't relent and the issue goes to court, the support of New Jersey, New York and others surely wouldn't hurt California's case. Moreover, a report in the Washington Post said the Bush administration ignored warnings from its own lawyers that California could prevail if the matter goes to court.

Nonetheless, legal experts said California faces a difficult challenge because courts usually give federal agencies considerable leeway. "The legal standard that the state is facing is not very favorable for California," said Ann Carlson, a professor of environmental law at UCLA.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rejected California's request for a waiver allowing the state to implement a law reducing emissions of greenhouse gases from new motor vehicles.

The EPA's rejection kills copycat rules that have been adopted by 12 other states and are under serious consideration by six others. Top officials from many of those states, representing both major political parties, were quick to condemn the EPA.

Vermont Gov. Jim Douglas, a Republican, said the EPA "is out of touch with the reality of climate change." New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine, a Democrat, called the decision "horrendous," while Maine Democratic Gov. John Baldacci called the administration "obstructionist." Officials in New York, Connecticut, Arizona and Pennsylvania made similar comments.

EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson said California's law was trumped by the new federal energy law - signed by President Bush on Wednesday - that requires automakers to increase fuel efficiency on new cars to 35 mpg by 2020. He said the federal law will achieve roughly the same global-warming results as California's and has the advantage of delivering a single national standard for all to follow.

But state officials said the California law is stronger. It requires the cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to be made by 2016, or four years sooner - a difference of millions of tons of greenhouse gases. California's law calls for even deeper cuts beyond 2016.

The federal law "seeks to reduce all states to the lowest common denominator, which is completely irresponsible and reprehensible," said Attorney General Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut.

"There's no question that we will challenge this early holiday gift to the automobile industry," he said in an interview.

The world's major automakers, saying the California law would mean economic disaster, tried and failed to have the law overturned by filing lawsuits in California and Vermont.

The California law, AB 1493, would require a 30 percent decline in greenhouse gas emissions on new vehicles by 2016. It is a significant component of a more broad-based law, AB 32, which requires substantial cuts in greenhouse gases in almost all sectors of California life.

California is the only state with the authority to establish its own clean-air rules, but only if it gets a waiver from the EPA. Once the EPA grants the waiver - as it has done more than 40 times in the past - other states can enact copycat rules.

Several states filed legal briefs on California's behalf in the Fresno and Vermont lawsuits, and supported California's waiver request by providing testimony to the EPA.

The states' support will likely help California somewhat when it sues the EPA. "It makes a difference if it's one entity or if it's half the country suing," said S. William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

But political clout alone won't determine the outcome of a court case. Holly Doremus, an environmental law expert at the University of California, Davis, said California must demonstrate "compelling and extraordinary" conditions. That's fairly easy to prove on localized pollution like smog, but harder when global climate change is involved, she said.

"I suspect that the EPA will try to argue that California is no different than the other states" with respect to the threat of climate change, said UCLA's Carlson. "On the other hand, 'compelling and extraordinary' doesn't necessarily mean different. It could just mean compelling - like that we're going to lose all of our water. It's a really novel legal question."

According to a story in Thursday's Washington Post, EPA lawyers warned their bosses they were on shaky legal ground if they rejected California's request.

In a PowerPoint presentation, the paper said, the lawyers wrote that if California sued, "EPA is likely to lose suit." If the waiver was granted and the automakers sued, "EPA is almost certain to win," the lawyers wrote.

Citing "serious questions about the integrity of the decision-making process," Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, chairman of the House Oversight Committee, announced an investigation into the matter and told the EPA to turn over all documents relating to the California request.

China Vows Fair Play in Its Global Search for Oil and Gas

By Edward Cody, Washington Post Foreign Service
Washington Post Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

BEIJING, Dec. 26 -- China pledged Wednesday that its worldwide search for oil and gas to power a booming economy will be carried out in a spirit of fair play and international cooperation so as not to disrupt sensitive international markets.

The promise came in a government white paper, one of a series Beijing has issued in recent years to present its case to the world. This one, outlining energy policies, was aimed in part at fears that China's growing thirst for imported oil will drive up prices and generate friction over its diplomatic efforts to secure access to petroleum-producing nations.

"China did not, does not and will not pose any threat to the world's energy security," the report declared.

The government also repeated its argument that China should not be forced to put a limit on greenhouse gas emissions at this stage of its economic development, as urged by environmental activists and some Western governments.

Heavily industrial nations such as the United States and those of Western Europe got their start without any such restrictions, it noted, and only now are finding them urgent. Moreover, the report pointed out, China's rise to become the world's second-largest greenhouse gas emitter after the United States is a recent phenomenon, preceded by years of low-level emissions.

Even now, with an economy growing at more than 10 percent a year, the 1.3 billion Chinese use only half the world's per-capita energy-use average for hydroelectric power and only one-fifteenth of the per-capita average for oil and natural gas, it said.

"China is a developing country in the primary stage of industrialization, and with low accumulative emissions," the report added, referring to its long-term average.

At the same time, the white paper put China on record as going all-out to develop renewable energy as a long-term solution to its greenhouse gas emissions and domestic pollution. The government plans to continue its emphasis on hydroelectric dams, it said, but also will push for more extensive use of solar energy, wind power and nuclear plants to generate electricity without burning coal.

"China gives top priority to developing renewable energy," the report promised.

China 18 months ago finished building the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric project, and has drawn up blueprints for more dams along the Yangtze River. Although environmentalists have applauded the clean electricity that results, they have warned that such huge construction projects are likely to have a harmful effect on the river's ecology.

Landslides along the cliffs that line the gorges already have intensified, and changes in the silt level have brought salt water farther inland where the Yangtze flows into the East China Sea near Shanghai.

China, which is the world's second-largest coal producer with 2.21 billion tons mined in 2006, will continue to use large amounts in the foreseeable future, the report said.

With reserves of 1,034.5 billion tons, or 13 percent of the world's known total in 2006, the country cannot afford to ignore this traditional energy source despite the pollution it produces. But at the same time, the report said, the government is gradually reducing the percentage of China's energy consumption that comes from coal.

Although the report detailed a long list of pollution controls imposed in recent years, including efforts to cap smokestacks with filtering devices, it acknowledged the seriousness of the problem in China's large cities, particularly Beijing. The pollution level remains acute, it said, mainly because the swiftly rising number of cars produce exhaust gases that mix with dust produced by coal still burned for heating systems. Officials have estimated that 1,000 new cars take to the streets of Beijing every day.

"If this situation continues, the economic environment will face even greater pressure," the report said.

Tech could reduce coal facilities' emissions

By Bobby Carmichael

USA TODAY, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

EDWARDSPORT, Ind. - From the top of a hill here in coal country, you can see distant swells of smoke curling up from coal-fired power plants along the flat horizon. Even here, in a town of only 348 residents, a small coal plant has operated off and on since World War II.

But that plant might soon be replaced by a new kind of coal plant, one that could signal a critical turning point in the future of coal and how the United States reconciles its conflicting energy and environmental needs.

Duke Energy (DUK), the Charlotte-based utility, is now awaiting an air permit from Indiana for a \$2 billion, 630-megawatt coal plant, large enough to power about 200,000 homes a year. Considered only average-size as traditional plants go, it would become the world's largest coal-fired power plant to use a new, cleaner technology called integrated gasification combined cycle, or IGCC.

"It's a technology that has the ability to take air pollution out of the debate over coal," says John Thompson, director of the Coal Transition Program at the Clean Air Task Force, a Boston-based environmental group that supports the plant. "The day that plant opens, the 500 or so coal plants in the U.S. are obsolete."

Unlike conventional coal-fired power plants, often called "pulverized" coal plants because they crush coal to a powder before burning it to make electricity, the Edwardsport plant would turn coal into a gas before burning it. "Gasification" makes removing pollutants easier.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, such gasification plants emit about 65% less mercury and 75% less sulfur dioxide than conventional plants, while nearly eliminating particulate matter, the fine particles linked to heart and lung disease.

But perhaps more important, coal-power experts say, the Edwardsport plant's gasification design would enable Duke to capture the plant's carbon-dioxide emissions, then inject them underground where they cannot affect the atmosphere, a process known as carbon capture and sequestration. Coal-fired power plants account for a third of U.S. CO₂ emissions, the primary gas blamed for global warming, about as much as every plane, train and automobile in the country combined. Yet, most energy experts say the nation can't meet its energy demand for decades, at least, without a lot of coal.

Deploying coal gasification technology at power plants such as Edwardsport could be a crucial first step toward solving that conflict, supporters say, because capturing CO₂ from conventional coal plants is likely to be prohibitively expensive.

"If those (pulverized coal) plants go ahead, it is extremely unlikely carbon will ever be captured from them," says Doug Cortez, who heads a clean energy consulting firm in California. But with gasification plants, it's more likely, he says.

Still, the Edwardsport plant and the widespread adoption of the cleaner coal gasification technology face opposition from unlikely bedfellows. Some environmentalists oppose any type of coal plant because, they say, coal is too harmful to the environment every step of the way, from the mines to the smokestacks. And utilities have generally avoided gasification, favoring conventional plants, because, they say, the cleaner technology is unreliable and too expensive.

Roberto Denis, senior vice president of Sierra Pacific Resources (SRP), a Nevada utility that has proposed a 1,500-megawatt conventional coal plant, says he's uncomfortable with the gasification technology and doubtful it can work as well as pulverized coal plants.

"We'll watch (the Edwardsport project) with great interest, but we don't have the luxury of working through the technology evolution," Denis says.

Is coal a necessary evil?

Howard Herzog, principal research engineer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Energy Initiative, says coal, which already generates 50% of the nation's electricity, is here to stay - like it or not.

"Coal is abundant and cheap, and we have increasing energy demand," he says "We can wish all we want, but people are going to do what it takes to keep the lights on. And that means coal."

Others, such as environmentalist John Blair, who lives about an hour south of Edwardsport and is fighting the plant, say more coal isn't inevitable. "The plant is not needed, because we have incredible (energy) efficiency potential in this state," Blair says. "That's cheaper than a new coal plant."

Even worse, says Bruce Nilles, who directs the Sierra Club's anti-coal campaign, is that investment in new coal plants - gasification or not - will drain resources from cleaner options. "No investor in their right mind will put money up for renewable energy, because there will be no market for it."

Only about 2% of U.S. electricity comes from non-hydropower renewables such as wind power. "The fact is, we don't have a good alternative to fossil fuels at this time," Herzog says. "People want the world the way they want it, but we have to look at the facts."

But James Hansen, NASA's chief climate scientist, says new conventional coal plants shouldn't be part of the energy picture. In October, he submitted testimony against a coal plant proposed in Marshalltown, Iowa, saying, "The only practical way to prevent CO₂ levels from going far into the dangerous range ... is to phase out the use of coal except at power plants where the CO₂ is captured and sequestered."

Thompson thinks the Edwardsport plant would help make that phase-out eventually possible, because the project could spur adoption of gasification power plants that enable CO₂ capture and sequestration.

Others disagree. An MIT study this year says research could make it more economical to capture carbon from pulverized coal plants and that it's too early to pick a single technology winner.

Is coal gasification ready?

Depends on who you ask. Only two small coal gasification power plants operate in the USA today: Tampa Electric's Polk Power Station in Polk County, Fla.; and the Wabash River Power Station in West Terre Haute, Ind., jointly owned by SG Solutions and Duke. Each has been running for more than 10 years.

Yet, including recent delays and cancellations, none of the 24 coal-fired power plants now under construction in 17 states is a gasification plant, according to an energy department report.

Utilities proposing conventional plants usually say gasification power plants can't be depended on to operate as consistently, or to generate as much electricity, as pulverized coal plants of the same size.

Frank Maisano, a spokesman for New York-based Sithe Global Power, which has proposed a 750-megawatt pulverized coal plant in southeastern Nevada, says the gasification technology is "frankly not really ready ... to meet demand where there is huge growth," because it hasn't been commercially proven. He estimates Sithe's proposed plant will be 10% to 15% more reliable: It will operate more

consistently because it won't have to work through the technical kinks that he says a new gasification plant would.

But the plant manager at the Wabash gasification plant, Richard Payonk, says coal gasification power plants are "absolutely" reliable and can be scaled up in size. "A lot of the critics of the (gasification) technology are using old data" about its reliability, he says.

An underlying concern is how much more a gasification plant costs to build and operate.

Cortez says recent studies show a coal gasification power plant would cost 10% to 20% more than a conventional plant. On a \$2 billion plant, say, that's an extra \$200 to \$400 million.

Maisano puts the cost premium even higher, at 30% to 40% for Sithe's Nevada plant.

Whatever the premium is, "there is a sticker shock," Cortez says. That scares utilities, particularly when many question whether coal gasification power plants can be as productive as the cheaper alternatives.

Plans for at least eight clean coal plants have been canceled, rejected or delayed by regulators this year. Rising construction costs, regulatory uncertainty and environmental opposition are all factors.

Supporters of coal gasification say the potential cost of regulations limiting CO₂ emissions from coal plants should be taken into account in comparing the costs of conventional and gasification coal-fired power plants. If it was, Cortez says, the coal gasification plants would be at least as cost competitive as their conventional rivals because they'd emit less CO₂ and have the ability to capture CO₂ at a much lower price.

Utilities continue to build conventional plants instead. That's why, Thompson says, it's paramount that federal and state policy use tax credits to close the price gap between conventional plants and the first few gasification power plants.

The Edwardsport plant wouldn't be possible without the \$460 million in local, state and federal tax credits it will receive, says Jim Stanley, president of Duke Energy Indiana. The federal 2005 Energy Policy Act authorized \$800 million in tax credits for coal gasification projects to promote clean coal; \$133.5 million was awarded to the Edwardsport project.

Both Tampa Electric and Mississippi Power (MPJ) got tax credits of the same size for coal gasification power plants. The Mississippi project is in the early stages of development. Tampa Electric canceled its project in November because the company couldn't forecast the costs associated with potential federal and state regulations on carbon-dioxide emissions.

Thompson says the most effective action the federal government could take to encourage the widespread adoption of coal gasification plants would be either to tax coal plants' CO₂ emissions or to institute a nationwide cap on them and lower it over time.

Such legislation would make it costly to emit CO₂, driving utilities to invest in gasification and carbon capture equipment to reduce emissions, he says.

Dan Lashof, climate director at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a New York-based environmental group, says carbon-constraining legislation is "inevitable" in the next five years. The bill sponsored by Sens. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., and John Warner, R-Va., includes a cap on CO₂ emissions that would be lowered over time. The bill has been approved by two committees and will now go to the Senate floor.

The EPA has declined to require new coal plants to use gasification, though the Clean Air Act requires they use the "best available" pollution controls. EPA spokeswoman Margot Perez-Sullivan says the agency views gasification technology as "an alternative design" of coal plants rather than a way to control pollution, so, legally, the agency cannot require it.

Thompson says that is the wrong interpretation. The Clean Air Act, he says, requires new, cleaner technologies, such as gasification, to be used as pollution controls when they become available.

Environmental groups have filed at least 25 court challenges to conventional coal plant proposals across the country, many charging the gasification should be required under the law.

Where to put the CO₂?

After coal is gasified and the CO₂ is captured, it still must go somewhere. The Department of Energy has estimated that North America has room underground to store 3.5 trillion tons of CO₂. In theory, the USA could store all its power plant emissions for centuries.

In fact, oil and gas companies have been injecting CO₂ into depleted oil fields without incident for decades. The CO₂ dislodges trapped oil and gas, increasing the fields' yield and profitability.

For example, since 2000, Dakota Gasification in Beulah, N.D., has been gasifying coal, capturing the CO₂ and pumping it to clients in Canada, where it is injected into oil fields.

But to make a significant dent in CO₂ emissions, the country will likely have to sequester the captured CO₂ in what are called saline formations, porous rock one to two miles under the Earth's surface.

The Energy Department, in partnership with universities, private companies and others, is spending about \$2 billion over 10 years to study carbon sequestration and build the world's first IGCC plant that captures and stores carbon.

But for now, saline storage hasn't been demonstrated on a large scale, and there is no regulatory framework for monitoring the CO₂ and determining who would be liable if something went wrong. The EPA is developing rules for the process.

Many consider large-scale carbon sequestration the only technological hurdle left in the entire process, and want to wait until it is proven. But Thompson says coal gasification power plants must get up and running now. "That is the most important starting point," he says. "The clock is ticking."

High winds, dust close Highway 58 east of Bakersfield

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

Highway 58 east of Bakersfield reopened Wednesday after blowing dust and high winds shut down the road for several hours.

Closures on Highway 58 originally started between Mojave and Exit 172, 15 miles west of Tehachapi, when visibility fell to zero, but the dust and high winds made their way to Bakersfield, according to the California Highway Patrol Web site. Westbound lanes were closed from Highway 395 to Tehachapi Summit.

The eastbound lanes of the highway reopened at 4:49 p.m. The westbound lanes reopened soon after.

Snow also shut down Highway 155 from Wofford Heights to Greenhorn Summit on Wednesday, according to a news release by the California Highway Patrol. Up to an inch of snow was expected to fall across the Kern County mountains Wednesday night, according to the National Weather Service. Light snow also fell on the Tehachapi Pass.

The cold weather was caused by cold and dry air mixing in with the winds in Kern County, said weather service meteorologist Steve Mendenhall.

A frost advisory was scheduled to go into effect at midnight Wednesday until this morning for the central and southern San Joaquin Valley, according to the weather service. The service advised people to take precautions to protect cold-sensitive plants and animals.

Highs are expected to be about 50 degrees and mostly sunny for Bakersfield today.

On Friday, snow is forecast for the Tehachapi Pass and rain for Bakersfield, according to Mendenhall.

For up-to-the-minute road closure information, call the Highway Patrol's help line, 1-800-427-ROAD.

Boeing And British Airways Finalize Contract For 787s

By Ritsuko Ando and Mike Elliott

NY Times, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

NEW YORK/LONDON (Reuters) - Boeing said on Thursday that British Airways finalized an order for 24 Boeing 787 Dreamliners, an order valued at \$4.4 billion at list prices.

British Airways also has options for 18 more 787 planes and purchase rights for an additional 10, Boeing said in a statement.

British Airways had announced last September its selection of the 787 as part of its long-haul fleet renewal.

"The 787 is a fantastic aircraft and will be a welcome addition to our fleet," BA Chief Executive Willie Walsh said in a statement. "It will provide major environmental improvements in terms of global emissions, local air quality and noise."

The Dreamliner breaks new ground with a fuselage made of light-weight carbon composite, and is due to enter service next year.

"With lower operating costs and the range to fly to all our destinations, it will give us more flexibility when planning our route network and we are confident that our customers will enjoy flying on the aircraft," Walsh added.

Shares in British Airways were down 0.6 percent at 313.25 pence at 8 a.m. EST.

State may see \$4 gasoline in '08

Expect gasoline prices to surge this spring, analysts say. Higher demand is one reason.

By Ronald D. White

Los Angeles Times, Thursday Dec. 27, 2007

Gasoline could average \$3.75 a gallon across the U.S. in a few months, pushing the price in California up and over the \$4 mark, energy analysts said Wednesday.

Several factors point toward a nightmarish spring for motorists, they said, including persistently strong crude oil costs and the fact that the traditional December drop in pump prices didn't materialize.

"If anyone expects gas to be less than a new record, they are not thinking," said Fadel Gheit, senior energy analyst for Oppenheimer & Co. "There is no question it will be much higher than last year."

Americans will start 2008 paying about 65 cents more a gallon than they did in January 2007, according to the forecasts, and by April could see self-serve regular selling for \$3.50 to \$3.75 a gallon.

In California -- where gas this year has fetched as much as 50 cents more than the national average -- \$4 a gallon "will no longer be considered a rogue number," said Tom Kloza, chief oil analyst for the Oil Price Information Service. "It will list for that much in a lot of places."

The Energy Department's weekly survey of service stations Monday found the average pump price was \$2.980 nationally and \$3.261 in California, a couple of pennies lower than a week earlier -- but much higher than the same period last year, when the number was \$2.341 across the U.S. and \$2.607 across the state.

"It's unprecedented having prices this high at the end of the year," said Marie Montgomery, a spokeswoman for the Automobile Club of Southern California.

Pump prices usually fall between Labor Day and the end of the year, in recent years dropping about 17% in California.

This year they did the reverse, gaining 17%.

Demand was one reason. MasterCard's weekly SpendingPulse report said the four-week average for gasoline purchases was 0.5% higher than a year earlier, boosted by shopping and vacation trips. Kloza of the Oil Price Information Service said Americans would burn about 2.5 million more gallons of gasoline this week than they did during the same week in 2006.

But the main culprit for high gas prices was the cost of crude oil, which on the futures market closed at \$95.97 a barrel Wednesday in New York.

The benchmark grade of U.S. crude averaged \$72 a barrel this year, the Energy Department said, up from \$60.23 last year, \$50.23 in 2005 and \$36.98 in 2004.

Next year, the agency said in its short-term energy outlook, the average could be \$85.

Both gasoline and diesel prices "are projected to average well over \$3 per gallon in 2008, with gasoline prices peaking at over \$3.40 per gallon next spring," the outlook said.

Gas costs more in California than nationally because the state requires a special blend to meet stiff air-quality standards and because the formula switches to a more costly summer blend before much of the rest of the nation.

Motorists found the New Year predictions infuriating.

"It's absurd, ridiculous," said Eric Mills, 40, a special-event coordinator for the entertainment industry, as he filled up his 1990 Honda Prelude with \$3.399-a-gallon gasoline at a downtown Los Angeles Shell station.

"Every year I hear about fuel cells and other promising alternative fuel possibilities -- and every year I'm still putting gasoline in my car."

Kloza said that nationally for the last 25 years, the difference in the price of gas from the winter low to the spring high has been about 59%.

"I don't think we will see a typical surge, and we don't have to," Kloza said. With an increase of just 30%, he said, "you're talking about 75 cents a gallon more from where they are now."

Cremation a hazard to the living?

One mortician says he'd rather get out of the business than be compelled to pull the teeth of the deceased.

By DeeDee Correll

Los Angeles Times, Wednesday Dec. 26, 2007

FORT COLLINS, COLO. -- Rick Allnutt has closed all but one section of his funeral home on the north end of town.

The chapel is dark and quiet, the reception hall bare. But in the bay out back, two side-by-side ovens rumble as the 1,650-degree heat blasts two corpses into bone and ash.

Allnutt has moved the rest of the business to another location and wants to move his crematory to a site near a cemetery in Larimer County, but he has reached a stalemate with health officials there. They are concerned about what they see as a potential health risk to the living -- mercury being released into the atmosphere from dental fillings of the cremated.

They want him to do something that may be unprecedented in this country: Install a filter on his crematory's smokestack or extract teeth of the deceased before cremation.

Allnutt refuses to do either, calling the first option too expensive and the second ghoulish.

"I'm not going to be the only one in the world who says I'll pull teeth from dead bodies," he said.

Across the United States, the issue is cropping up: Do mercury emissions from dental fillings of corpses incinerated in crematories pose a threat? And if so, how should it be handled?

In Colorado, it's something that health officials are only now examining, said Mark McMillan, manager of the Department of Public Health and Environment's mercury program.

"We're on the cusp of starting to understand it," he said.

The cremation industry, on the other hand, insists there's no evidence of danger and calls Allnutt's situation "a dangerous precedent."

At issue are amalgam dental fillings. Amalgam -- an alloy of mercury with another metal such as silver, copper or tin -- is commonly used to fill cavities.

When a body is burned, mercury from such fillings vaporizes. Once released into the atmosphere, mercury returns to Earth in rain or snow, ending up in lakes and other bodies of water where it can lead to elevated levels of mercury in fish. In humans, mercury damages the nervous system and can harm

childhood development. Power plants, especially those that burn coal, are by far the largest source of preventable mercury releases; Environmental Protection Agency regulations have been adopted to reduce those emissions.

As cremation continues to gain popularity in the United States, the issue may gain more traction.

According to the Cremation Assn. of North America, a 2005 survey found 46% of Americans planned to choose cremation, compared with 31% in 1990. Its use varies widely by region: In Nevada and Hawaii, two-thirds of bodies were cremated in 2005; in a number of Southern states, a tenth were.

The EPA does not regulate emissions from crematories, spokeswoman Margot Perez-Sullivan said. It estimates that about 600 pounds of mercury, less than 1% of all mercury emissions, come from crematories in the U.S. every year. (By contrast, the British government requires new crematories to install filters to cut mercury emissions, according to the British Broadcasting Corp. It estimates that fillings account for 16% of mercury emissions in the United Kingdom, where the cremation rate is greater than 70%.)

In recent years, several states have taken stabs at the issue.

In Minnesota, state Sen. John Marty repeatedly has sought -- and failed -- to pass a law requiring crematory operators to remove teeth or install filters.

He said crematories in Minnesota emit an estimated 68 pounds of mercury every year -- 3% to 5% of mercury emissions in the state. Though coal-fired power plants constitute the greatest problem, Marty said, "we have to go after every source. But it's not easy politically because people are really squeamish about talking about corpses."

In 2005 Maine lawmakers considered, but defeated, a similar bill.

Colorado does not regulate crematories' mercury emissions, which state health officials estimate at about 110 pounds per year.

[Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007:](#)

Mr. President: EPA means protecting environment

California cannot be allowed to lead the way on controlling greenhouse gas emissions because the federal government is already handling the problem.

That opening sentence was your cue to start laughing. Or crying.

The Bush administration's leadership on environmental issues hasn't merely been lacking, it has been shamefully derelict. For the EPA to not only derail the forward-thinking efforts of California and 16 others states is bad enough. For the EPA to spout such obvious fiction in its justification underscores the nature of the Alice-in-Wonderland fantasy world the present administration is living in -- or, more accurately, wants us to live in.

The EPA on Dec. 19 slapped down California's bid for first-in-the-nation greenhouse gas limits on cars, trucks and SUVs, rejecting California's request for a waiver that would have allowed those restrictions to go into effect.

"The Bush administration is moving forward with a clear national solution -- not a confusing patchwork of state rules," EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson told reporters after the decision was announced. Johnson said this *we assume with a straight face* during a telephone conference call.

Johnson was, of course, referring to the newly signed Energy Bill, which is, indeed, a step in the right direction -- an industry-friendly step that does not go nearly far enough or fast enough.

California Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols said Johnson's characterization of the states' collective effort as a "patchwork" of emissions standards was incorrect.

"There is a California greenhouse gas standard ... which 16 other states would adopt," she said, "whereas there is no federal greenhouse gas standard."

Even one of Johnson's EPA predecessors agrees. William K. Reilly, EPA administrator in the first Bush administration, said that although the energy bill "does indeed contain much that is commendable ... the nation does not yet have the national comprehensive climate protection policy that would render state initiatives unnecessary.

California has frequently charted the course the country has followed."

Johnson's own staff endorsed the California standards, but the EPA chief ignored their written findings. "California met every criteria ... on the merits," an EPA staffer told the *Los Angeles Times*. "... We told him that. All the briefings we have given him laid out the facts."

California's new tailpipe standards, adopted in 2004, would have forced automakers to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent in new cars and light trucks by 2016, with the cutbacks beginning in the 2009 model year. California -- which needed a federal waiver, under terms of the Clean Air Act, in order to implement the rules -- would also have regulated a broader array of greenhouse gases, including refrigerants from car air conditioners and emissions from alternative fuels, not merely gasoline.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger indicated the state would sue to overturn the decision. Hopefully, California will be joined in that effort by the 12 states -- New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Washington among them-- that have adopted the California emissions standards.

The governors of four other states -- including Florida, until a year ago served by the President's brother, Jeb Bush -- have said they plan to adopt the California standards, as well.

The population of all those states equals about half the people in the United States.

The EPA decision is further verification that the Bush administration adamantly objects to mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions, even after a succession of court decisions that affirm the right of states and the federal government to regulate greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide.

Although the Bush administration is limping its way through its final months in office, it's still not too late for it to show at least a reasonable level of commitment to a clean, environmentally safe America.

[Fresno Bee, Editorial, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007:](#)

Going up in smoke

An effort to get a pass for Fourth of July pollution calls attention to choices.

The Valley's air district is asking federal officials for a pass on a massive jump in air pollution on July 4 this year. The episode raises some larger questions about just how serious we are about cleaning our air.

The spike came in Bakersfield in the late evening, after the annual pyrotechnic celebrations of the nation's independence. Before the fireworks began, monitors recorded a mere 48 micrograms of particle pollution per cubic meter of air, well below the 150 micrograms regarded as the threshold average for healthy air over an entire day.

But after the fireworks began, the reading shot up as high as 943 micrograms. By 1 a.m., the level had fallen back to 138 micrograms.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can ignore those readings if it determines that they were caused by conditions or events beyond the control of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The EPA is considered likely to do so, and that may be reasonable -- although Valley residents should be watchful to ensure that such exceptions don't become commonplace.

The particulate pollution problem is serious. The tiny specks of soot, dirt and chemicals can lodge deep in human lungs, and are responsible for an array of illnesses, sometimes fatal.

But how likely are we to give up fireworks? Cities and counties up and down the Valley have permitted sales and use of fireworks for years, and there is a powerful constituency of churches, civic groups and

charitable entities that rely on those sales for funds. Is there a politician alive who can say "no" to the Boy Scouts?

But it is the sum of such choices that gave us our polluted air in the first place. We choose to use fireworks, we choose to use gas-powered lawn equipment, we choose to burn wood in fireplaces -- and above all, we choose to get in our vehicles and drive whenever and wherever we like. And we live with dirty air as a result of those choices.

Will we change our behavior? Can we? The answers to those questions will determine whether the air in the Valley is ever fit to breathe again, and the jury is most definitely still out.

[Sacramento Bee, Commentary, Monday, Dec. 24, 2007:](#)

Daniel Weintraub: Life is far better today than it was 10 years ago

By Daniel Weintraub

Crime

California's violent crime rate inched up by 1.2 percent in 2006, the first increase in more than 10 years. Murder was down 2.9 percent, rape was down 2.8 percent and assaults were down 3.6 percent, but robbery increased by nearly 11 percent, according to preliminary figures from the California Department of Justice.

The property crime rate resumed its long-term decline, dropping by 3.2 percent, after several years of small increases. Burglary was down 2.4 percent, motor vehicle theft declined by 6.7 percent, and larceny-theft involving more than \$400 increased by 0.1 percent. Arson was also up, by 2.1 percent.

The violent crime rate has decreased by 53 percent from its peak in 1992, and the property crime rate has dropped by 43 percent from its peak in 1989.

Air quality

The number of days on which California's air basins exceeded the federal limit for ozone declined in 2007 in every region of the state, according to the Air Resources Board.

In Sacramento, the number of bad air days declined from 42 to 16. [In the San Joaquin Valley, they declined from 86 to 65.](#) In the South Coast Air Basin around Los Angeles, the number of days exceeding the federal standard went down from 85 to 79. In San Diego they dropped from 14 to eight; in San Francisco from 12 to one and in Ventura from 17 to six.

Year-to-year comparisons are difficult when measuring air quality because weather conditions can contribute significantly to the number of days exceeding the standard. But in 1997, the state's major air basins had 290 officially smoggy days. In 2005, that total was 198, in 2006 it was 258, and this year it was 175.

Considering the challenges of absorbing a growing population, including many immigrants with little or no education, California is doing well. Despite adding 4 million people over the past decade, California today has fewer people in poverty and fewer people on public assistance than it did 10 years ago. But many challenges remain. The achievement gap in the schools between poor kids and those who are better off is a troubling harbinger for the future, and the softness in the job market might mean more problems in the year ahead.

Here's wishing you a happy and fulfilling 2008.

[Tracy Press Editorial, Monday, Dec. 24, 2007:](#)

Our Voice

Sugar plums are given to local groups, churches and agencies for putting food and toys in many Christmas stockings.

Since it's Christmas, we must check to see what Santa Claus has left in some of the stockings.

SUGAR PLUMS: To Brighter Christmas, Tracy Interfaith Ministries, Search and Rescue Dream Center and a long list of other local churches, youth and adult groups and nonprofits, for providing Christmas

cheer to nearly 1,000 impoverished and elderly Tracy-area residents. Their Christmas food and gift baskets were brimming because of the bountiful and generous donations from the rest of our community. In this trying time of a stagnant economy and home foreclosures, Tracy's safety net was secure, at least for the holidays. The biggest challenge will come less than a week away - the new year.

LUMP OF COAL: To Battleship Iowa Museum/Memorial Foundation officials whose mishandling of a bid has led U.S. Navy officials reject stationing the historic USS Iowa battleship as a floating museum at the Port of Stockton. The bid of the Battleship Iowa Museum/Memorial Foundation fell through when it didn't show support to house the ship at the port. Port officials had become soured by financial reports and by the foundation's political missteps. The Navy favored a competing bid to dock the ship at Mare Island in Vallejo.

SUGAR PLUMS: To San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas, for becoming chairman of the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board](#). Founded in 1991, the air district is charged with creating programs to improve the quality of air in the valley, which is low compared with the rest of the country. Ornellas brings a unique perspective to his position - he is a dairyman, and his cows are producers of unhealthy air.

SUGAR PLUMS: To President Bush, for discovering a way to rope in some of the 8,993 special-interest earmarks in the \$516 billion omnibus spending bill that Congress approved last week. Because most of these earmarks are part of an accompanying 500-page committee report from the House and Senate appropriation committees, the president has been told by White House lawyers that he can refuse to fund the individual government earmarks, although he has to give the money to the appropriate departments and agencies; they can use the money for whatever they wish. This is the best a president can do without a line-item veto that has been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

SUGAR PLUMS: To the city of Tracy and San Joaquin County public works department, for providing an after-Christmas recycling day so area residents can dump their Christmas trash. On Jan. 12, from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., at Boyd Service Center, Gate 1, 520 Tracy Blvd., people can drop off electronics, such as computers, televisions and batteries, as well as Styrofoam, cardboard and wrapping paper. However, bubble wrap, packing peanuts, foil, holographic wrapping and car batteries will not be accepted.

[Los Angeles Times, Commentary, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007:](#)

Retire the big yellow 'Twinkies'

By Erika Schickel

There are more than 24,000 school buses in California's fleet of belching, lung-corroding "Twinkies" (as kids call those old, yellow, rounded buses), but not one of them has ever stopped for one of my kids or any of the kids I know.

We have two issues here: an aged, smog-spewing fleet of school buses, and a city that is jammed with commuters. At 3 p.m. on any weekday in L.A., a lot of those commuters are moms shuttling kids.

Let's make city buses accommodate school kids. Maybe not elementary school students, but buses should be a reasonable option for middle-schoolers and up. Student bus fares -- now \$24 for a monthly pass on Metro buses -- should be free for low-income families and reduced to 25 cents a trip for other student-ID-wielding kids. Bus lines could be routed for school pickups

Since my daughter started riding the #7 Pico bus home from school, we have saved greatly on gas and time. Best of all, I no longer battle gridlock. But I am an anomaly. Your average Westside mom is hesitant to let her lambkin ride the big, bad city bus alone.

I get it. Crazy people also ride buses, and often the bus barrels right past my daughter's stop, in which case she calls me on her cellphone.

Couldn't we reassign L.A. Unified school bus drivers to school-heavy routes where their "Hey! Down in back!" people skills could be put to good use keeping kid-packed city buses safe and civilized.

Less pollution, less traffic and future generations growing up with a comfortable, working knowledge of public transportation -- let's make city buses into school buses too, and literally leave no child behind.

Erika Schickel is the author of "You're Not the Boss of Me: Adventures of a Modern Mom."

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007:](#)

Worst stuff in our air? Fear

The Bee continues to strike fear into the populace -- reporting that 460 people a year die from our dirty air -- when the truth is that there is nothing to be concerned about. We have more people and more cars than ever, but our air hasn't been better in 30 years. The reason we have "Spare the Air" days and "unhealthful" air days is that we keep changing the definition of clean.

Though the EPA claims air pollution kills tens of thousands each year, no study has shown a link between levels of particulate matter and disease and death.

Not only is it spurious to claim that our air actually causes death, it is just as wacky to think it causes asthma. Asthma cases have doubled in 25 years and environmentalists attribute that to dirty air. Let's see: air quality getting better (even The Bee got that right), but asthma getting ... worse? This does not compute.

The real reasons for this "crisis" is that newspapers love to scare us (Y2K). Government agencies need a reason to live, and success-hating environmentalists still seek the destruction of capitalism and a return to the stone age -- before fire was invented.

ERIC BJERKE, Riverbank

[Sacramento Bee, Letters to the Editor, Tuesday, Dec.25, 2007:](#)

They don't hate all of us

I've been at the United Nations climate conference in Bali, and what I saw made me proud to be a Californian.

I've gone to many international meetings over the past 30 years for my work in environmental policy. Disputes are common at such meetings, but rarely expressed at a personal level. In the past few years, however, I've had to deal with face-to-face anti-Americanism as never before, due mainly to the Bush administration's foreign policy, including on climate change.

In that light, my Bali experience was refreshing. My conference badge prominently displayed the name of my organization, the California Institute of Public Affairs. More than a few delegates saw "California" and immediately congratulated me on our state's pioneering measures to combat climate change.

At a well-attended California event late in the conference, state Air Resources Board Chairman Mary Nichols and other state officials briefed conference delegates on California's program. Nichols ably fielded questions, some of them unbelieving or even marginally hostile. "How will those who do not obey be punished?" one European reporter asked. Nichols patiently explained California's step-by-step, participatory regulatory process.

California has an important impact on U.S. and international climate change policy. Our state must continue to do so.

Ted Trzyna, Sacramento

The cleanest fossil fuel

Your Dec. 8 editorial "Fuel efficiency: President slams on the brakes" mischaracterizes the natural gas industry and its essential role in the nation's current debate about environmental and energy policy.

Your editorial claims that the natural gas industry is one of the largest producers of greenhouse gas emissions. Just the opposite is true. The natural gas industry provides heat, hot water, cooking and other essential services to more than 72 million homes and businesses throughout the United States. The natural gas used by these consumers accounts for less than 6 percent of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

Increased use of natural gas can help address several environmental concerns simultaneously, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, smog and acid rain. Natural gas, when generating electricity on an energy-equivalent basis, emits 45 percent less CO₂ than coal and 30 percent less CO₂ than oil, making it the cleanest fossil fuel source available.

Increasing natural gas use is a near-term solution for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving the nation's future energy outlook. For this reason, it is critical that readers have the most accurate facts about the nation's cleanest fossil fuel.

David N. Parker, Washington, D.C., President and CEO, American Gas Association

Bring back nuclear power

Re "Not so fast with nuclear power," letter, Dec. 15: Richard Nadeau's claim that nuclear power is still too costly and dangerous to be one solution to global warming is nonsense. Nuclear power is cheaper than that from natural gas or oil, and the increased earnings and safety records of utilities operating the 103 U.S. nuclear plants are evidence!

Coal is as cheap as nuclear if you do not count the health effects of mining and burning it. Coal ash emissions are toxic and more radioactive than emissions from a nuclear plant.

Anti-nuclear fanatics helped shut down nuclear power development in this country and forced us to burn coal. Thousands of lives are lost each year producing coal and other fossil fuels, and tens of thousands more from breathing the emissions.

France is more than 80 percent nuclear from U.S.-designed plants! Anti-nuclear "environmentalists" led the drive that shut down SMUD's Rancho Seco nuclear plant. Granted, SMUD was inexperienced and had problems. Plant accidents/incidents - none serious - were blown out of proportion by the media.

A concerned public voted the closure. That costs SMUD millions each year for additional fossil fuel, and will cost millions more each year in possible carbon-taxes for emissions that are several hundred times those of nuclear.

Paul Brady, Davis, Professor of Physics, Retired, UC Davis

[New York Times, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007:](#) **Energy Bill's Brilliance**

Kudos for providing balanced coverage of the energy bill ("As Ethanol Takes Its First Steps, Congress Proposes a Giant Leap," Business Day, Dec. 18).

The passage of the bill could shine a light on next-generation biofuels, as Congress sets a new standard that cellulose-based ethanol make up 21 billion gallons of the national fuel supply by 2022. This is a critical development, underscoring the importance of investing in the commercialization of the fuel, which can be produced from various biomass feedstock, like wood chips and even waste.

With skyrocketing investment in innovative technologies by private entities and the federal government under way, it's important to embrace the elements that an ideal cellulosic technology should exhibit: low production and retail costs, ability to draw on a wide variety of feedstock, ability to cut greenhouse gas emissions and other toxic pollutants and be high-performing.

This is a pivotal time to potentially revolutionize the country's future fueling needs.

-Doug Durante

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Dr. John Balmes, who has been involved with a Fresno asthma study, has been named to the governing board of the California Air Resources Board by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. If approved by California's Senate, Dr. Balmes will join the board in January. For more information, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Se integran médico a la Oficina de Recursos del Aire
Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2007

El gobernador Arnold Schwarzenegger nombró como nuevo miembro de la Oficina de Recursos del Aire de California a un médico que durante años ha estudiado el impacto de la contaminación entre residentes del Valle de San Joaquín en California.

El doctor, John Balmes, de la Universidad de California en San Francisco fue uno de los pioneros en estudios sobre el asma infantil como consecuencia de la contaminación en el Valle.

El nombramiento todavía está sujeto a aprobación del senado de California. De aprobarse, probablemente en enero, el doctor Balmes vigilará la calidad del aire en todo el estado.