

Healthy Air program moving into the valley

Alerts abandoned in favor of taking charge

By KEN CARLSON

Modesto Bee, Saturday, July 5, 2008

On summer days when smog shrouded the Northern San Joaquin Valley, air quality officials released "Spare the Air" alerts to urge individuals and businesses to take measures to reduce the pollution.

Spare the Air is no more. It has been replaced by the Healthy Air Living program in the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Instead of just reacting to bad air days, the new program urges people to do things year-round to clean the air.

The program kicks off Sunday with Healthy Air Living Week in the San Joaquin Valley air basin, with activities planned from Stockton to Bakersfield to showcase what people can do to reduce air pollution.

The district is sponsoring the Modesto Nuts game Sunday night at John Thurman Field. The main event in Modesto will be a bicycle commute on McHenry Avenue between 7 and 9 a.m. Wednesday. People riding their bikes to work can first gather at the Fun Sport Bikes store in McHenry Village shopping center for refreshments and to enter a drawing. They will then ride downtown on McHenry with a police escort.

Also Wednesday, a conference will be held at the University of California at Merced, focusing on the development of electric cars, fuel cells and other clean energy technology.

Air district officials say they nixed Spare the Air because the program focused on one-day pollution episodes and didn't produce the permanent changes in behavior needed to improve air quality.

"It helped to clean the air, but not enough to make a permanent impact," said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the air district in Modesto. "We want people to realize air pollution is not just a summertime problem. It's an issue throughout the year."

The district is asking people to try suggestions next week that can clean the air, save money, reduce gasoline bills and improve health.

To sweeten the deal, businesses and faith-based organizations that sign a pledge to try clean-air measures can enter their employees or members in a drawing for a new Toyota Prius. Individuals also can sign the pledge cards or enter the drawing by test-driving a hybrid or high-mileage vehicle at a San Joaquin Valley dealership. The deadline for entering is July 31; the winner will be drawn on Aug. 21.

The eight counties in the air basin and 37 cities have issued proclamations recognizing the Healthy Air Living Week and vowing to do their part.

The district is giving businesses more than 30 suggestions for reducing pollution, such as letting employees work 10-hour days four days a week to reduce trips to work, linking employees with car pooling or van pooling, using solar energy or offering telecommuting options.

Some ideas for individuals include switching to electric lawn mowers, not using charcoal barbecues or walking their child to school.

Churches can make a pledge to discuss environmental stewardship during a service or use energy-saving lights in their buildings. Parishioners can take alternative transportation to church.

The district says it also wants to hear about clean-air champions -- an individual, company or organization that makes air quality a priority.

Packets containing the pledge cards, clean-air champion nomination forms and resource booklets have been sent to some of the district's Spare the Air business partners. The materials can be obtained at healthyairliving.com as well.

"There are businesses that are afraid of making long-term commitments to do these things," said Seyed Sadredin, air district executive director. "The idea is, let's try it for a week and see if it works for your business."

Sadredin finds that some businesses are concerned about the legal strings attached to telecommuting or van pooling using vehicles owned by employees. Certain labor laws come into play with telecommuting, so companies are advised to do a safety inspection at the employee's home to ensure it has adequate wiring and ergonomic furniture.

Other legal concerns are addressed in resource booklets the district is giving businesses.

Companies can reduce pollution in other ways.

For example, they might consider moving operations that pollute the air to the early mornings or evenings, so they are not adding to peak-hour pollution.

One of the goals of the Healthy Air Living program is to increase the average vehicle occupancy in the region to 1.4 people per vehicle in five years. Officials believe the current occupancy rate in the region mirrors the statewide average of 1.1 per vehicle.

Although the Spare the Air program is defunct, the district still issues alerts to the public when the air is bad and supports a program to raise colored flags at schools to signify the air quality. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is kicking off Healthy Air Living Week. Events will be held in Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties to highlight ways to reduce air pollution.

- SUNDAY: The air district sponsors the 6:05 p.m. Modesto Nuts-Visalia Oaks game at John Thurman Field. People can win a Healthy Air Living T-shirt and enter the drawing for a Toyota Prius.
- WEDNESDAY: Modesto Bike to Work Day. Residents are invited to ride their bikes to work, and from 7 to 9 a.m., stop at Fun Sport Bikes in the McHenry Village shopping center for snacks. Enter a drawing for a men's mountain bike or women's comfort, then ride downtown with police escort.
- WEDNESDAY: The California Emerging Clean Energy Technology Forum, University of California at Merced, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. The forum, involving the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the state Air Resources Board and regional air districts will focus on development of clean-air technology, such as hybrid and electric vehicles, fuel cells and more. For information, go to www.epa.gov/region09/air/cecat
- JULY 13: The district sponsors the 6:05 p.m. Stockton Ports-San Jose Giants game at Stockton Ballpark. Win a Healthy Air Living T-shirt and enter drawing for a Toyota Prius.
- Go to www.healthyairliving.com to download pledge cards and obtain information about what you can do to reduce air pollution. Contact the air district's Modesto office at 557-6400.

Governor activates emergency plan as air quality falls

By Niesha Lofing

Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Monday, July 7, 2008

Air quality in the Sacramento region has plummeted again because of smoke from wildfires burning in Northern California.

The poor air quality prompted Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to activate the state's plan for excessive heat emergencies this morning.

Schwarzenegger directed the Office of Emergency Services, the Department of Public Health and other state agencies to implement activities such as opening cooling centers at state facilities and contacting licensed care facilities, hospitals and others that serve seniors and special needs populations, states a news release from the governor's office.

The State Operations Center, which has been managing the state's wildfire response 24 hours a day, will add staff from other state agencies to monitor the heat wave and respond to heat-related issues.

For a list of open cooling centers and heat illness prevention tips, go to www.oes.ca.gov.

Schwarzenegger and public health officials are urging all Californians in areas where extreme heat conditions exist to prepare for the hot weather and use caution when participating in activities. Residents in smoky areas are encouraged to stay inside and limit physical activity, the release states.

"I urge all Californians to take proper health precautions as the temperatures rise into the 90s and 100s across the state - drink plenty of water and check on your neighbors who may be more vulnerable," Schwarzenegger said in a written statement.

Today's Spare the Air advisory was the first such designation declared this year, according to the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District's Web site.

Smoke coupled with increasing ozone levels are to blame for the "very unhealthy" air quality, the Web site states.

The worst levels of particulate matter - small particles that carry the highest potential for causing health problems - have been documented near Colfax and Auburn.

The air quality index today is expected to reach 210, exceeding the highest of the index's four levels. An air quality index of 150 to 200 is considered unhealthy for everybody, according to district information.

Residents are advised to remove themselves from areas where they see or smell smoke, or to go indoors.

Light winds forecast for the region also are contributing to the poor air quality.

A light north wind about 5 to 10 mph will be blowing in much of the region today, said Holly Osborne, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

The breeze will push more smoke into the valley, especially in the eastern areas, Osborne said. The Weather service anticipates smoky skies for the entire week.

"There's a ridge of high pressure building over us that kind of puts a lid on it," Osborne said. "(The smoke) flows down into the valley and sort of gets trapped."

But there might be a slight silver lining: The smoke could help lower temperatures.

The latest Weather Service forecast predicts high temperatures in the Sacramento area to reach 104 degrees today and 107 degrees Tuesday and Wednesday.

Forecasters can't be sure whether the smoke will buffer high temperatures, as it did two weeks ago, but it might help, Osborne said.

"That's the tricky part of the forecast," Osborne said. "During the day, it blocks some of the sun, so our highs can be cooler. But overnight, it sort of serves as a blanket and gets trapped in, so our nightly temperatures are higher than we normally see."

Given the area's unhealthy air, people are advised to limit outdoor activities and prolonged exposure to the smoke, especially people with respiratory conditions, older adults and young children, a special weather statement on the Weather Service Web site states.

Studies have found that short-term exposure to particulate matter can aggravate lung disease, causing asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, increase a person's susceptibility to respiratory infections and cause heart attacks and arrhythmia in people with heart disease, the air district's Web site states.

Healthy people also may experience irritated eyes, nose and throat, coughing, chest tightness and shortness of breath.

Long-term effects include decreased lung function, aggravated asthma, irregular heartbeat and chronic respiratory disease in children, the Web site states.

Cities stalling bill that would change state growth rules

Modesto Bee, Monday, July 7, 2008

If California's population were to remain static, its fight to slash greenhouse gases and vehicle pollution would be much easier.

But that's not going to happen. The state is expected to add 7 million to 11 million people by 2025.

Where those people live, and how much they drive each day for work and errands, could determine whether the state meets its environmental goals or sees them go up in smoke.

For the second year in a row, state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, is trying to pass legislation that would marry the state's climate crusade with smarter guidance on future growth. Senate Bill 375 has gone through months of negotiations and changes. It is nearly ready for the governor's signature.

SB 375, which has passed the Senate, recognizes the forces driving spread-out development. Cheap farmland and access to state highway funds prompt developers to build on the distant periphery of cities. People who move there end up commuting long distances, adding to vehicle emissions and freeway congestion, which the state then must try to correct.

At the same time, developers trying to build housing within cities often face lawsuits under the California Environmental Quality Act. Such litigation, or the threat of it, tips the scales further in favor of leapfrog subdivisions and strip malls.

To alter this pattern, Steinberg's bill would require each metropolitan region to adopt a "sustainable community strategy" to limit emissions of greenhouse gases. The Air Resources Board then would provide each region with targets for reducing emissions.

Regions that sought to reduce overall vehicle trips then would have an easier time obtaining funds from the California Transportation Commission.

As a further incentive, the bill would provide developers with exemptions from the California Environmental Quality Act if they build projects consistent with these regional blueprints.

This deal includes a win for nearly everyone. Progressive developers would get relief from CEQA. Local governments could spend more of their limited transportation funds on existing neighborhoods. Environmentalists would get a hedge on vehicle emissions, with less development pressure on open space and farmland.

Partly because of the way he has crafted SB 375, Steinberg has managed to assemble a delicate coalition that includes many builders, the League of Conservation Voters and leaders of the California State Association of Counties. He's on the verge of passing one of this year's most important pieces of legislation, except for a major holdout -- the League of California Cities.

Last year, the group complained that SB 375 was moving too quickly. So Steinberg held the bill in the Assembly. Despite months of talks and concessions by Steinberg, municipal leaders haven't budged much from their 2007 position, which suggests they are stalling for time.

As some mayors should be aware, cities would benefit greatly from a state law that encourages developers to build in-town housing instead of the same old sprawl. Steinberg has tried to play nice with the league. But the time for niceties is over.

SB 375 needs to pass out of the Assembly and go to the governor's desk.

How did the Valley light up the night?

By Jim Guy

The Fresno Bee, Saturday, July 5, 2008

Starbursts and window-rattling aerial bombs lit up the skies across the Valley as thousands turned out for Fourth of July pyrotechnic extravaganzas.

Shows were planned from Shaver Lake to Coalinga and Madera to Porterville, but two of the biggest were at Chukchansi Stadium in downtown Fresno and Buchanan High School in Clovis.

Fresno Grizzlies officials had prepared for more than 13,000 people to attend their display, which kicked off at the end of the Grizzlies' game. Officials at the Buchanan Show put the tally at more than 8,000.

A few other facts:

200 feet

The diameter of some rocket explosions.

1,000 feet

The height some rockets reach.

10

The factor by which particulate matter can increase in the air after the fireworks go off.

1,000

People expected to buy \$5 standing-room-only tickets at Chukchansi Park.

\$10 to \$12

The amount most attendees spend on food and drinks at Chukchansi.

375

Mortar shells prepared for the Chukchansi show.

\$35,000

The cost of putting on the Buchanan show.

900

Mortar shells readied at Buchanan.

Today declared a Spare the Air Day in Bay Area

Bay City News Service

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, July 7, 2008

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has declared today a Spare the Air day because of a forecast of unhealthy air quality in the region.

It marks the fifth official Spare the Air day of the season, not including the June 19 Spare the Air free transit day, said air district spokeswoman Lisa Fasano. There will not be any free transit today.

Air district officials are encouraging Bay Area residents to drive less and cut down on pollution. Also, while warning them of the adverse effects of unhealthy air quality.

"We are asking Bay Area residents to help reduce air pollution," Air District Executive Officer Jack Broadbent said in a statement. "Automobile exhaust is our number one source of air pollution, so limiting driving on Spare the Air days can help reduce area smog."

Motor exhaust, industrial emissions, gasoline vapors and household chemicals contain volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides that when combined with oxygen in the heat and sunlight can form smog, according to the air district.

Officials are also warning residents that vigorous outdoor exercise should only be done in the early morning hours when ozone concentrations are lower.

Smoke fills Sacramento Valley yet again

By Todd Milbourn

Modesto Bee, Monday, July 7, 2008

The cloud of smoke hanging over the Sacramento region grew even thicker Sunday. And the air is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Forecasters predict the hottest days of the year will arrive this week, with temperatures climbing to 105, 106, maybe even 107.

Combine that with calm winds and the 330 fires still raging across California, and forecasters say we won't be breathing a sigh of relief anytime soon – just more and more smoke.

"Looks like we're in the smoke through Friday," said Karl Swanberg, a forecaster for the National Weather Service's Sacramento office. "We haven't seen the worst of it."

And it was pretty bad Sunday, with a gray-brown haze shrouding landmarks from the Capitol dome to the Auburn courthouse in a dreamlike aura. Sports leagues canceled games. Air quality officials urged people – particularly those with respiratory troubles – to stay indoors.

The air was especially bad in the Sierra foothills, where steep, winding canyons trap the air during the day. Normally, the air blows out at night, but warmer nighttime temperatures are causing the smoke to linger, Swanberg said.

Despite the choking air, families remained determined to enjoy the last of the holiday weekend.

Young and old alike splashed around with beach balls and cast fishing lines into the American River at a popular spot under the Foresthill Bridge near Auburn.

Thirty miles away, firefighters continued to battle the cause of the smoke – the American River complex of fires that so far have burned 8,438 acres and destroyed one building. By Sunday, U.S. Forest Service officials said the fires were 20 percent contained.

Melissa Spackman said she and her husband, Jason, left home in Rocklin early Sunday morning under a clear sky. But the sky grew darker the farther they traveled along I-80 toward the river spot.

"We were driving up here and I was like, 'Honey, are we driving into the fire?' " said Spackman, taking a break from helping 4-year-old Paris cast a line into the slow-moving river.

Spackman said the family would likely cut their outing short because her oldest son, 11-year-old Austin, has allergies and the mother didn't want to risk them getting any worse.

Down the river, Janetta Shunk said smoke from wildfires is a fact of life in Northern California and everyone should just accept it.

Shunk came up from Sacramento with her husband and two kids, ages 7 and 5. She said the smoke was irritating, but it didn't dampen a day of swimming and skipping rocks.

"Such is life," she said.

The smoke hasn't deterred too many outdoor enthusiasts – at least not yet, said Guy Cables, co-owner of Sierra Outdoor Center in Auburn. Kayak rentals have been brisk, he said, although a pair of mountain bikers did cut their ride short Sunday because of the air.

"I think it's overblown," Cables said of the air problems. "I go for a run every morning, and so long as you're in good shape, it doesn't really affect you."

Some people have to be outside whether they choose to be or not.

Zach Frese had the unfortunate job Sunday of standing along Lincoln Way in Auburn and waving a sign advertising an auction of foreclosed homes. From his corner, he said he could see the occasional bomber flying overhead to fight the blazes.

Frese, 21, smokes cigarettes to help pass the time. But he said the acrid residue from forest fires is something special. It makes your eyes burn, he said.

Frese said he's been sitting out in the smoke for two days now watching it grow darker and heavier.

"I wised up today and brought a jug of water and stool to sit on," Frese said as a pair of trucks rounded the corner, adding puffs of exhaust to the unhealthy mix. "But it's definitely getting worse."

A greener July Fourth?

Bernadette Tansey, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Friday, July 4, 2008

All of us are looking forward to the annual July Fourth fireworks, with their glittering starbursts of red, blue and green.

But chemists are actually trying to make our annual fireworks extravaganzas much greener. A big fireworks show can release poisonous chemicals over land and water, they say, with effects on people and wildlife that have not been fully evaluated.

"Fireworks, though spectacular and entertaining, are a source of concern because of environmental pollution," concluded two university scientists in Germany, Georg Steinhauser and Thomas Klapotke, in a recent review of efforts to produce less-toxic pyrotechnics. People who raise concerns about toxics in fireworks, however, risk being branded as fanatical killjoys - even in environmentally conscious California. Bruce Reznik, executive director of San Diego Coastkeeper, said the group was treated like it was "stealing Christmas and apple pie" when it

pressed state agencies to assess the environmental impact of year-round fireworks shows at the popular SeaWorld San Diego theme park.

"We took a lot of heat," Reznik said. A similar furor arose when the California Coastal Commission barred Gualala from holding a July Fourth fireworks display this year at a site where the noise might frighten seabirds away from their nests. Fireworks are fiercely defended as symbols of every innocent cause for celebration, from romance to national pride.

"You all are the nanny state," said Julie Heckman, executive director of the American Pyrotechnics Association, a trade group for fireworks businesses. "How much more can we impose on our freedoms?"

However, no less patriotic an institution than the U.S. military is seeking more eco-friendly pyrotechnics. The same environmental concerns are common to both fireworks and military equipment such as signaling flares and airborne weapons. Defense agencies are financing research by scientists, including Steinhauser and Klapotke in Munich and explosives experts at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Among the concerns is the cumulative contamination of military testing grounds and training sites.

New green industry

As the science advances, a fledgling green pyrotechnics industry has also sprung up to serve big entertainment businesses such as Disneyland Park in Anaheim, where neighbors' complaints about smoke from frequent fireworks shows prompted the Walt Disney Co. to redesign its displays. So far, the market for the expensive new technology is confined to big show-business concerns that put on indoor concerts or wrestling matches where air quality is particularly important, said Darren Naud, a former Los Alamos lab explosives expert who co-founded a company called DMD Systems to serve Disney and other clients.

Naud said the greener fireworks won't achieve a broader consumer market unless regulators tighten restrictions. "If the regulations are not there, people will continue to buy the cheaper stuff," he said.

What worries chemists about conventional fireworks are three compounds. Flaming combustible elements give off smoky gases and fine particles that might penetrate the lungs. Metals such as barium and strontium add colors to the glittering flames. A third ingredient, perchlorate, promotes burning and supplies chlorine to heighten color. Perchlorate seeps readily through groundwater and is linked to malfunctions of the thyroid and birth defects.

'Nominal contamination'

Exploding this mixture of chemicals together may yield new compounds carrying health risks, including dioxins and other powerful cancer-causing substances, Steinhauser and Klapotke said in their February review article in the scientific journal *Angewandte Chemie*. Poisonous barium compounds can affect the heart and lungs, they said. But few studies have looked at whether the fallout from fireworks leaves harmful concentrations of toxics.

The trade group for fireworks businesses, the American Pyrotechnics Association, maintains that audiences attending the local July Fourth fireworks show have nothing to worry about. "Most communities have a few shows maybe once a year," said Heckman, adding that most fireworks ingredients are consumed in the explosion and quickly dissipate. "The level of contamination is going to be nonexistent, or nominal."

Steinhauser and Klapotke found studies suggesting that fireworks ingredients can cause human health impacts when people undergo intense exposure. One paper noted an increase in asthma

during the Indian Diwali festival of lights, and others reported diseases of the lungs, kidneys and other organs among overseas fireworks manufacturing workers.

The vast majority of fireworks used in the United States are imported from China. Many U.S. regulatory agencies oversee the fireworks industry, but they focus on making sure the products can be shipped without exploding and used without blowing off any fingers. In recent years, however, health and environmental concerns have surfaced in California where fireworks are intensively used or were manufactured.

In 2002, the city of Rialto (San Bernardino County) and nearby towns shut down 22 wells contaminated by groundwater plumes of perchlorate spreading from two sites where fireworks and other products had been manufactured decades ago.

Monitoring at SeaWorld

In December, the San Diego Regional Water Quality Board required SeaWorld to monitor levels of perchlorate and 40 other components of fireworks in Mission Bay, the aquatic inlet where SeaWorld can hold 150 fireworks shows a year. That permit requirement - the first in the nation - was a victory for San Diego Coastkeeper, which had urged state agencies for years to evaluate the environmental impact of repeated pyrotechnic displays.

"We're not saying nobody should have fireworks," said Reznik. "We're saying let's look at them and see if there's any impact, and if there is maybe they can be changed and be more environmentally friendly."

So far, no danger signs of fireworks-related pollution have turned up in monitoring tests of San Francisco Bay, said Dyan Whyte, assistant executive officer at the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board.

"If it doesn't look like a problem, we don't need to be out there ruining people's Fourth of July," she said. But the water agency will evaluate SeaWorld's studies, and keep an eye on the issue, she said. "This may be one that we need to take a closer look at, at some point."

Los Alamos expansion plan worries neighbors Nearby agricultural valley wary of greater plutonium production

Deborah Baker, Associated Press
In the S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, July 6, 2008

Dixon, N.M. -- The market at the heart of this little village is stuffed with locally grown produce. Fat, red radishes - just hours from the field - are so tempting they practically fly out of the display basket next to the cash register.

Nourished by a small river that empties into the nearby Rio Grande, the narrow valley is dotted with farms, orchards and vineyards.

"Almost everybody grows a garden," said Sheri Kotowski, sitting one breezy spring afternoon under an old apple tree behind the market.

Small wonder, then, that Kotowski and others in this canyon southwest of Taos keep a wary eye on their big, mesa-top neighbor, Los Alamos National Laboratory.

They're fretting these days about a U.S. Department of Energy proposal to have the nuclear weapons lab increase its production of plutonium pits, the core of nuclear warheads, from a few each year to as many as 80.

It's part of a restructuring plan for the eight sites in the nation's nuclear weapons complex that DOE says is aimed at making the complex smaller, more secure and less expensive.

"We need to consolidate, and make it more of a 21st century national security enterprise," said John Broehm, a spokesman for DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration. Los Alamos, the only place where pits are manufactured, produced 11 pits last year and will produce six this year, according to the administration.

Under the restructuring proposal preferred by DOE - one of several it offered for public comment this year - the nuclear operations footprint at Los Alamos would be shrunk by almost half. Plutonium and other nuclear materials would be consolidated from a half-dozen sites on the sprawling lab property to two sites with more modern facilities.

Joe Martz, project director with the lab's nuclear weapons program, says that would mean a dramatic improvement in safety and security.

"We are still working with many of these materials in World War II vintage buildings," Martz said.

The movement of material would be reduced, as would the number of areas that have to be secured, he said.

And even 80 pits a year is just a fraction of what was produced at Rocky Flats, the Colorado plant that was the federal government's main pit production facility until it was shut in 1989, Martz said.

"There are some that worry we will become a pit factory. Nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

But there has been a barrage of objections - philosophical, political, environmental, fiscal - to the proposal some critics call "the bombplex."

Kotowski and others contend the plan should be shelved because the DOE hasn't done an adequate analysis of the possible effects on farm land.

The lab "is located within the food basket of northern New Mexico," said the New Mexico Acequia Association, which told DOE it is concerned about potential radioactive contamination of land and water and the proposal's impact on water use. Acequias are the irrigation ditches that feed farmland.

Some 40 miles northeast and downwind of Los Alamos, the Embudo Valley was reminded after the huge Cerro Grande fire of 2000 just how close a neighbor the lab is. The fire rained ash on the area and cloaked it in smoke.

A citizens' group, in conjunction with the state Environment Department, began monitoring air and sampling soil and produce for radionuclides, in an effort to determine exposure levels in the area.

Of concern thus far are exceptionally high levels of strontium, cesium and plutonium at a site high in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains above the valley, at the top of the watershed.

The lab says that's to be expected, because global fallout brought to earth by rain and snow gets concentrated at such high elevations - in this case, 11,415 feet. The Environment Department suggests it also could represent either routine or accidental releases from Los Alamos over decades.

In any event, said Kotowski, "If you have contamination at the top of the mountain, you can't expect it to stay at the top of the mountain." The Embudo Valley Environmental Monitoring Group plans more testing below the site this summer.

Kotowski and other critics say a comprehensive regional environmental health assessment is needed before DOE considers expanding the lab's operations.

And the state Environment Department says cleanup of the lab's 60-year "legacy of pollution" - not expanded pit production - should be the DOE's priority.

"They want to expand, but they haven't cleaned up the other stuff," said Craig Quanchello, the governor of Picuris Pueblo, a small Indian tribe in the valley. "We all live here. We're traditional. We're not going anywhere. We're the ones who have to live with however they damage Mother Earth."

Opponents say the pit plan is premature, since the nation's "nuclear posture" is due to be reviewed again in 2009 under a new administration.

And they dispute the need for new pits, saying the United States already has thousands that would be good for decades.

The nuclear administration plans to decide by the end of the year which restructuring plan to pursue.

"If we don't start acting now to transform the complex, it'll get far too expensive to maintain," Broehm said. "We need to act now to start the process."

Utah's state employees will try a 4-day workweek

Mike Stark, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Friday, July 4, 2008

Salt Lake City -- Starting next month for Utah state employees, it will be "TGIT" - "Thank God It's Thursday."

In a yearlong experiment intended to reduce the state's energy costs and commuters' gasoline expenses, Utah is about to become the first state to switch to a four-day workweek for thousands of government employees.

They will put in 10-hour days, Monday through Thursday, and have Fridays off, freeing them to golf, shop, spend time with their children or do anything else that strikes their fancy. They will get paid the same as before.

"One of the jokes is that one of the biggest benefits will be for golf courses," said Ryan Walker, 49, an information technology director.

He said he is looking forward to tackling items on his long-neglected "honey-do" list (as in: "Honey, do this," and "Honey, do that"), camping, and traveling more around the state.

The order issued by Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman will affect about 17,000 of 24,000 executive-branch employees. It will not cover state police officers, prison guards or employees of the courts or Utah's public universities. Also, state-run liquor stores will stay open Fridays.

The compressed workweek in Utah - whose motto is "Industry" and whose official symbol is the beehive, representing thrift and perseverance - could prove inconvenient to those who need to use state services and find certain offices closed Fridays.

Also, some parents may have to rearrange child care to accommodate the longer hours, and bus and commuter train schedules might have to be adjusted.

But many are excited about the idea.

"I'm thrilled," said Rose Kenworthy, 58, an executive secretary at the Utah Department of Environmental Quality. "Now I can do anything I want. I can have lunch with my friends, spend time with my grandchildren or just chill out."

Sheldon Wood, 48, who writes property tax software, plans on using his three-day weekends to go into the mountains to hike and bike with his wife, also a state employee.

Turning off the lights, the heat and the air conditioning on Fridays in 1,000 of 3,000 government buildings will save about \$3 million a year out of a state budget of \$11 billion, according to the governor's spokeswoman, Lisa Roskelley. The state also will save on gasoline used by official vehicles, but authorities have not figured out how much.

The Department of Environmental Quality estimated employees in six buildings alone will save themselves more than \$300,000 spent on gas to commute to work.

The four-day workweek also could be good for the environment.

"We feel like we can reduce the CO₂ or the ozone by around over 3,000 metric tons, as well as have an impact on our air pollution," said Kim Hood, executive director of the Department of Administrative Services.

State officials will evaluate the program after a year and decide whether to extend it.

Because of the downturn in the economy and \$4-a-gallon gasoline, many states are looking at cost-saving measures, including expanded telecommuting, compressed workweeks and more flexible schedules.

"Everyone's going to keep a close eye on it and see what happens in Utah and whether they can demonstrate employee effectiveness and the energy savings, too," said Leslie Scott, executive director of the National Association of State Personnel Executives, based in Lexington, Ky.

Many Utah state offices will extend their hours and stay open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. so people can use government services before or after work. And residents are being encouraged to use the Internet for hundreds of ordinary services, such as automobile registration renewals.

Drivers Feeling Shunned by D.C.

City Less Welcoming to Suburban Cars

By Eric M. Weiss

Washington Post, Sunday, July 6, 2008

The District is escalating what some suburban commuters are calling its war against workers who drive into the city.

The city has changed parts of Constitution Avenue NE from a reversible commuter artery back to a quiet side street and is considering removing the reversible lane on 16th Street NW, a key commuting route from Montgomery County.

Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's administration also is studying closing the section of the Interstate 395 tunnel that connects with New York Avenue NW, expanding the use of speed cameras and increasing parking fees and enforcement. Fees for encroaching on a crosswalk would increase from \$50 to \$500 under a pedestrian safety proposal.

The District is moving toward becoming "the most anti-car city in the country," said John Townsend, a spokesman for AAA Mid-Atlantic. "They see commuters as the enemy."

City officials say that the moves are part of a policy of putting the needs of its residents and businesses before those of suburban commuters and that they are trying to create a walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented metropolis.

Like New York, London, Stockholm and Portland, Ore., District officials said, the city is reclaiming its streets for the people who live there. With billions of dollars invested in the Metro system, there are plenty of ways for commuters to get into the city without bringing exhaust-spewing vehicles with them, officials said.

The city's population practically doubles on workdays because of the influx of federal and other workers. And about 15 million visitors a year come to the city, almost 75 percent by auto, according to AAA.

"This is not about being anti-car, but increasing vehicles into the District is not a sustainable strategy for the city," said Emeka C. Moneme, director of the District Department of Transportation. "We want to encourage transit use, biking and walking."

Improving pedestrian safety is a priority for the city. The District has higher pedestrian death rates than New York, Boston, Seattle, Chicago and Los Angeles, with 2.7 deaths per 100,000 people, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Pedestrian injuries rose from 586 in 2000 to 725 in 2006. District officials said the city's broad avenues create wide expanses of asphalt that make it difficult or intimidating for pedestrians to cross.

But some commuters contend that the District is striking back, trying to make life miserable for people who drive into the city because the courts and Congress have not allowed the city to levy a commuter tax. About 305,800 vehicles come into the city every weekday, according to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

"Is it to raise money or discourage drivers altogether?" commuter Bobby Wehauser of Fort Washington said as he was waiting for his sport-utility vehicle at a downtown garage last week.

Auto commuters have long suspected that the city's speed and red-light cameras, along with its famously aggressive ticketing policies, have more to do with filling city coffers than with safety. The city's new parking meters, for example, can be programmed to charge escalating rates.

Moneme said the city will continue -- and increase -- the use of market pricing when it comes to allocating such scarce resources as on-street parking.

"Putting the real price of driving out there allows people to make better decisions," Moneme said, not a subsidized rate of \$1 an hour.

Part of the city's new pedestrian plan would eliminate the reversible middle lane on 16th Street NW through Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights, pedestrian-heavy sections of the city. The city wants to turn the lane into a landscaped island that would serve as a refuge for pedestrians trying to cross the street. The city has other reversible lanes -- designed to help commuters get in and out of the city quickly -- on Connecticut Avenue NW, Independence Avenue SE, Pennsylvania Avenue SE and Canal Road NW and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway.

The city has asked federal officials to consider closing the northern end of the I-395 tunnel to eliminate access to New York Avenue and Third Street NW. The tunnel runs under the Mall and is popular with Maryland commuters taking New York Avenue to Route 50 or the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. The tunnel is popular with Virginia commuters because I-395 links up with the 14th Street bridge across the Potomac River and to Route 1, I-95 and the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia.

Moneme said city officials suspect that a significant number of commuters are using the tunnel as an alternative to the Capital Beltway and clogging New York Avenue in the process. He said the study is just to look at the "what-ifs" of closing the exit.

The new parking meters, which are being installed across the city, are designed to encourage parking space turnover by charging closer to the market rate for parking downtown and near some of the city's amenities. Around the new Nationals Park, for example, meters are programmed to charge up to \$40 for four hours. The new meters take Visa and MasterCard.

The move away from accommodating auto commuters has been going on for years, accelerating under Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and his transportation director, Dan Tangherlini. Tangherlini is city administrator under Fenty (D). And the direction of city policy has near unanimous support among D.C. Council members.

One of the first things council member Tommy Wells (D-Ward 6) did after he took office was to get the city to eliminate the rule that turned part of Constitution Avenue NE into a one-way commuter route in the mornings. The one-way rule benefited Marylanders coming from Kenilworth Avenue and I-295, but it turned the street into a mini-highway every morning.

"Having one-ways creates the expectations among drivers that they are being expedited through the city," Wells said. And that means higher speeds and less-safe streets, he said.

"Trying to improve the quality of life in the city means decreasing the things that diminish quality of life, such as a high level of traffic," Wells said. Next on his agenda are one-way streets in Capitol Hill favored by commuters, including 17th and 19th streets NE.

Ronald F. Kirby, transportation director for COG, sees the moves in the context of the city's becoming more confident, more vibrant.

"It's explicit policy: They want more people living downtown," Kirby said. "And frankly, that's what we're trying to do regionally."

Suburban officials are largely sympathetic to the District's goals. After all, they are trying similar strategies to encourage transit use and reduce through-traffic. They are also trying to make their streets safer for pedestrians. Arlington County, for instance, has increased fines for motorists who do not yield to pedestrians in a crosswalk to \$500, and in Fairfax County, fines for failing to yield have been increased at designated intersections.

But the District is the home of the federal government, and District officials must accommodate the thousands of federal employees who need to get in and out of downtown everyday. The Department of Commerce isn't going anywhere.

"You'd like me to lambaste the District, but we're all in the same boat," said Montgomery County Council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large). "I am sympathetic to some of these initiatives. But the challenge is finding the right balance. Not everyone can ride Metro or walk to work."

She placed blame for the problem, in part, on the federal government, which offers many of its employees free parking in the city.

In addition to the pedestrian safety and quality-of-life issues for city residents, Floreen said, it is in the entire region's interest to reduce air pollution and the number of single-occupant vehicles on its crowded roads.

U.S. Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.) said the city should be careful not to chase people away. Like the District, Old Town Alexandria would be a nicer place without all the cars, he said. But there is an economic component to be considered, he said, and people in cars represent customers for restaurants and shops.

"Because of the limitations of our rail and bus system, there are an awful lot of suburbanites who don't have access but are willing to spend lots of money in the District," Moran said. "They are dependent on suburban spending for their tax base."

He added: "D.C. could wind up as an island isolating themselves with these policies. Don't pray too hard for fear that all your prayers will be answered."

Where the Car Is King, Tysons Faces a Dilemma Urban Planners Take Aim at Free Parking

By Amy Gardner

Washington Post, Saturday, July 5, 2008

Think there's no such thing as too much parking? Take a look at Tysons Corner, where there's more parking than jobs, more parking than office space, more parking than in downtown Washington.

That must change, said advocates and politicians seeking to transform Virginia's largest business hub from suburb to city. Reducing parking, charging for parking and finding new uses for the acres of parking that separate Tysons' buildings and the people inside is at the heart of plans to remake the area into a dense, urban, walkable, livable and attractive downtown.

"Who wants parking spaces to be the hallmark of a development?" said Clark Tyler, chairman of a Fairfax County-appointed task force preparing a Tysons redevelopment plan for later this year. "Tysons today is a shambles because its office buildings are surrounded by parking and clogged arteries."

Taking a new approach to parking, by building less and charging more, is a central tenet of the new urbanism that has gripped planners and developers in suburbs and cities across the country.

The planners said that parking, especially free parking, encourages people to drive. Cars allow for development sprawl, highway congestion and air pollution. The parking lots coat the ground with impervious asphalt that sends dirty runoff into rivers and streams. And, the planners said, parking is often ugly and creates spaces that discourage walking or the use of a transit system.

"If there's a free parking space, you're irrational if you don't drive," said Cheryl Cort, policy director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, based in Washington.

Reducing the supply of parking is one way to change people's habits and patterns of development, Cort and others said. Other crucial pieces include a grid of streets, a mix of uses, and transit, which is why Tysons boosters have been pushing so hard for a Metrorail extension through the area. A decision about a rail extension, which would stretch to Dulles International Airport and into Loudoun County, is expected from federal regulators this year.

If more people ride Metro, fewer people will drive, which means less traffic, pollution and runoff. It also means less demand for parking. That, in turn, opens up a world of development possibilities: narrow streets with sidewalk cafes; intimate storefronts; tall office and condominium towers where workers and residents can walk to lunch, to a dry cleaners or to a Metro station.

It would be vastly different from the Tysons of today, where virtually every destination has its own parking area, and where nearly every trip is taken in a car, even to the lunch spot a block away.

"It's almost impossible to walk here," said Bill Richbourg, 62, a mortgage banker from Potomac who works at the eastern edge of Tysons, near McLean, and who drove into the central district on a recent weekday to have lunch at the Silver Diner. "Nobody could get here any other way."

The Silver Diner is within a block of Leesburg Pike's concentration of office buildings and directly across International Drive from Tysons Corner Center, one of the country's most successful shopping malls. Yet each of these places is surrounded by an apron of parking, suburban-style hedgerows and wide, car-friendly traffic lanes. Not a pedestrian was in sight as Richbourg crossed the parking lot toward the restaurant's front door.

Tysons' dependence on the automobile, and a place to park it, is dramatic when compared with other areas. With about 120,000 jobs, Tysons features nearly half again as many parking spots in structures, underground and in surface lots. That's more parking, 40 million square feet, than office space, 28 million square feet. Tysons boasts more spaces, 167,000, than downtown Washington, 50,000, which has more than twice as many jobs.

"This place built up from a gas station," said Reid Thompson, 37, a real estate agent with Long & Foster Real Estate in Tysons who grew up in nearby Great Falls. "You drove your tractor here, at

least my grandparents did. The parking and the driving is a mindset. People in Northern Virginia are drivers."

Tysons is so paved over, in fact, that 50 percent of two watersheds within its boundaries, Pimmit Run and Scotts Run, are covered with asphalt. According to a Fairfax storm water management report, when 10 percent of a watershed is covered by paving, the health of a stream is affected. Paving that covers more than 25 percent of a watershed can "severely degrade" waterways, the report said.

Tysons Corner's love affair with parking is driven partly by its status as one of the most successful shopping destinations in the country. Aerial photographs of the district, or a glance from the balcony of the Tower Club, show vast oceans of cars, with the widest surrounding Tysons Corner Center and its competitor to the north, Tysons Galleria.

Yet private developers, including the big retailers, are ready to do with less parking. They welcome the chance to spend less money building parking structures, which can cost as much as \$40,000 per parking space.

Macerich Corp., the owner of Tysons Corner Center, has received preliminary approval for a major redevelopment of its property that will include offices, condominiums, at least one hotel -- and a lower ratio of parking than the mall has. Among the details of the development is "shared parking" for offices, hotels and retail. Rather than provide one set of parking that empties out by day and another that empties out by night, the company will build less parking that will be in use round-the-clock.

Other approaches that Fairfax will consider include metered street parking, facilities for bicycles and distributing information about how to join car-sharing services such as Zipcar.

The market is also ready for a new approach, many said. Young professionals are eager to work in urban centers where they can shop and dine as well. The success of the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor in Arlington County, where 80,000 people work and where traffic has only marginally increased through the development boom of the last decade, provides the evidence, officials said. Developers built offices and residences with less parking -- and the people came.

"The market quickly figured out that you didn't need as much parking," said Arlington board member Chris Zimmerman (D).

Still, there will be challenges. Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, lamented the decision by state and local officials to build the Metrorail extension aboveground through Tysons, which will limit the area's potential to be pretty and accessible on foot.

County planners may also be an impediment, Schwartz said, noting that the county increased its parking requirements recently for some developments.

Another challenge, Tyler said, is what to do with existing structures. One idea is to build housing on top of them, but that will require a market that can bear the cost of such expensive construction, a reality that could be years, even decades, away.

Ultimately, Schwartz and other advocates said, parking should not be free -- because it is not free. The cost in highway construction, pollution and lost productivity while stuck in traffic should be considered, he said. And drivers should pay a price for choosing to drive or be denied the privilege, he said.

"The idea that every car needs a parking place for every separate place that car goes is what has caused this spread-out landscape," Schwartz said. "Tysons is in transition. It can't realize the opportunity to create a great place when there's a giant parking lot wherever you look."

Cities Near Beijing Close Factories to Improve Air for Olympics

By Jim Yardley

N.Y. Times, Monday, July 7, 2008

BEIJING — With Beijing struggling to clear polluted skies before the Olympics in August, the nearby industrial port of Tianjin has ordered 40 factories to suspend some operations for two months as part of a broader effort to improve air quality during the Games, state news media reported.

The planned shutdowns in Tianjin, about 70 miles east of Beijing, are one piece of a regional plan that is expected to result in temporary factory closings or slowdowns across a large swath of northern China during the Games. Few details are known about which factories might close or when, so the announcement in Tianjin offers a window into one piece of the plan.

Beijing's air quality remains a major concern for the Games as the city continues to struggle with pollution, despite a \$20 billion government cleanup campaign. Beijing is also a victim of its neighborhood: pollution blows in from surrounding regions that are dotted with coal mines, coal-fired power plants, steel mills, cement factories and other clusters of heavy industry.

The Olympics' opening ceremony is Aug. 8, and meteorologists have said officials must begin closing factories a few weeks beforehand to make a difference.

The shutdowns in Tianjin will be from July 25 to Sept. 30, concluding after the end of the Paralympics in Beijing, according to Xinhua, the state-run news agency. Tianjin is a host city for the Olympic soccer competition, and work at 26 construction sites near the city's Olympic stadium will be suspended.

In addition, the city of Tangshan, one of China's busiest steel centers, about 90 miles from Beijing, is ordering 267 businesses to suspend operations by Tuesday, according to Reuters. Of those, 66 small steel mills, coking operations, cement factories and small power generators will be closed, Reuters reported. The companies will be able to reopen at an unspecified date after undergoing an environmental review.

In recent days, rainfall in Beijing has been unusually high. When it has not rained, the skies have been clotted with haze. The city will begin alternate-day driving restrictions on July 20 to ease traffic and reduce pollution. By then, experts say, announcements of more temporary factory shutdowns are expected elsewhere in the region.

Sunday also brought good news: the first truly blue skies in Beijing in many days.

One Month to Go - Beijing Prepares to Deliver

By REUTERS

In the N.Y. Times, Monday, July 7, 2008

BEIJING (Reuters) - With a month remaining until the opening ceremony of one of the most scrutinized Olympic Games in history, the time has come for Beijing to deliver on seven years of promises and billions of dollars spent.

On July 13, 2001, the state news agency Xinhua hailed the decision to award the Olympic Games to Beijing as being a "milestone in China's rising international status and a historical event in the great renaissance of the Chinese nation."

Six months ago, preparations were going to plan with gleaming new venues and infrastructure almost completely in place for the August 8-24 Games.

But violent unrest in Tibet in March followed by global anti-Chinese protests have marred Beijing's final countdown to the Games. Moreover, the threat of terrorism and pollution have presented the Communist authorities with new challenges.

However, with the 31 venues completed and the army of migrant workers putting the finishing touches to a \$40 billion upgrade of the city's once-creaking infrastructure, organizers are upbeat.

"We are fully prepared for the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games," organizing committee (BOCOG) vice president Jiang Xiaoyu said last week. "We are going to use the last 36 days to further perfect the arrangements."

China's rulers wanted to use the Games to promote internal stability and show off a confident, increasingly influential economic power to the rest of the world.

After the public relations disaster of the March 14 Tibet riots and the protest-disrupted international leg of the Olympic torch relay, some have questioned whether China's leaders care anymore about external opinion.

"China wants the Olympics to be applauded by the international community and at the same time instill a sense of pride in the Chinese people," said Jiang Qisheng of the China chapter of International PEN, an association founded to defend freedom of expression.

"But stability is more important. International applause is ranked only second. If forced to choose, China would rather have stability."

The May 12 Sichuan earthquake and the genuine outpouring of emotion over the death of nearly 70,000 people altered some perceptions of China, turning the award of the Olympics "from obscene accolade to worthy reward" in the words of British commentator Simon Jenkins.

TERRORISM CONCERN

But visa restrictions for visitors, plans to rid Beijing of petitioners, the homeless and migrant workers as well as the tight control of the media on "sensitive" legs of the domestic torch relay point to obsessive stage-management.

China says it views terrorism as the biggest threat to the Games and a 100,000-strong anti-terrorism force is already on alert.

Rights groups say Beijing is using the threat of terrorism to suppress internal dissent, especially in the restive far-Western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, which is home to more than 8 million Muslim Uighurs.

"We are worried that there will be an even more wide-scale crackdown on the Uighur people, especially over the next month," said Dilxat Raxit, spokesman for the exiled World Uyghur Congress.

"China is using the final opportunity the Olympics presents to portray Uighurs to the international community as terrorists. We have always opposed China holding the Olympics. We are the biggest victims of it, even more so than the Tibetans."

Free Tibet is asking British athletes to express support for its cause by making a "T for Tibet" sign during the Games, it said in a statement on Monday.

American, Dutch and Australian athletes have already indicated their intention to express their concerns about human rights during the Games.

ALGAE STENCH

The stench of the algae in the city of Qingdao, which will host the Olympic sailing events, has been a vivid reminder that environmental concerns still dog the Games.

Of more pressing concern to most athletes is the air quality in the capital and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has said some endurance events might be rescheduled if the pollution presents a health risk.

The surrounding provinces of Hebei and Tianjin ordered factory closures this month and four others are also involved in the effort to keep the Beijing skies clear.

Beijing has spent more than 120 billion yuan on environmental improvements over the last decade and its own contingency plans will come into force mainly from July 20.

China's athletes have continued to prepare for the Games away from the prying eyes of the media.

Life bans for two Olympic hopefuls caught doping this year -- swimmer Ouyang Kunpeng and wrestler Luo Meng -- have left them in no doubt that the authorities do not want to lose face at their own party with any positive tests.

[Stockton Record Editorial, Monday, July 7, 2008](#)

Healing our air

How we live and work can make a difference, Valley agency says

Today marks the beginning of Healthy Air Living Week, just as a smoky haze rolls back into the Valley.

Eight days ago, after a week of air filled with smoke and soot, the skies over the Central Valley started to clear. Finally.

Valley residents choked and wheezed through days of sky-graying, sun-blocking, smoke-filled air, the result of hundreds and hundreds of wildfires across the north state. Many of those fires continue to burn.

A low-pressure system brought marine air into the Valley and, along with it, enough wind to disperse the smoke and clean the air - until the Delta breeze stalled and the heat and smoke returned. The whole episode serves to remind us that despite all the things residents do to reduce air pollution, some things are simply beyond our control. Mother Nature - and the fires that fill our skies with smoke were caused mostly by lightning - sometimes is simply going to have her way.

Still, that doesn't mean we give up. And that's the point the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is trying to drive home with its Healthy Air Living Week.

District officials are using the week to point out the many things Valley residents can do to help keep this area from turning into the next Los Angeles of Inland Empire.

They're urging telecommuting and staggered work hours and compressed workweeks (four, 10-hour days, for example) and ride sharing and mass transit (even bicycles and walking to work). If you're looking for a new car, consider a hybrid, they say.

The idea is to get more of us off the road - cars are the No. 1 cause of air pollution - and thinking about alternatives, alternatives to how we work and certainly how we get to work.

Small things add up. Most of them don't take much effort, just a bit of forethought.

To learn more

For tips on how you can reduce air pollution, visit the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Web site at www.valleyair.org.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, July 6, 2008:](#)

A high-speed future for California

Rail proposal is antidote for rising gas prices, dirty air, stagnant economy.

High-speed rail won the pole position on the November ballot -- it was named Proposition 1 when the secretary of state assigned numbers to the 11 initiatives voters will consider. That's no guarantee of victory, but the momentum is clearly building.

The proposal to build an 800-mile system of 200-mph trains linking Southern and Northern California, by way of the Valley, has made a great deal of sense throughout its two-decade gestation. Proposition 1, the \$9.95 billion bond measure, is the necessary first step.

High-speed rail will be an engine of economic development that we badly need in this state, creating tens of thousands of jobs in both its construction and its operation.

It will have a dramatic impact on our environment, removing thousands of cars from California's highways. Less congestion will make the remaining vehicles more efficient for those that remain on the road.

Conservative estimates suggest millions of barrels of oil could be saved annually, and as much as 22 billion pounds of carbon dioxide kept out of the atmosphere.

The rail system would also reduce the need for many short- and medium-haul airline flights, which pollute the atmosphere at an astonishing rate.

Now, with gasoline at \$4.50 a gallon and rising, high-speed rail is no longer just a good idea. It's imperative.

Enthusiasm for passenger rail travel is growing rapidly in California and the nation. Ridership on Amtrak is increasing, even with the shortcomings of the underfunded system. In fiscal year 2007, 25 million passengers traveled on Amtrak trains, a record that is sure to be surpassed when this year's numbers are tallied. Locally, ridership on Amtrak's San Joaquin line rose 21.2% in May, compared with May 2007.

Congress is getting on board. Next year's transportation bill could include as much as \$60 billion for high-speed rail projects. Because California is well ahead of the rest of the nation, it's reasonable to expect a good share of that money would be added to the funds from the bond measure -- if it passes in November.

The numbers all add up on high-speed rail. It's much more efficient than driving or flying. It's a job producer. It will help clean the air. It will connect the Valley to the rest of the state in a way that's never been done before. It's more comfortable and less stressful than dealing with crowded airports or congested highways.

There are broader themes to the high-speed rail debate. Opponents of the proposal seem to believe that the price of gasoline will be coming back down soon. It may dip some, but never to the comfortable levels of past decades.

Airlines are in crisis. Fares and other charges are going through the roof, and that's not going to get any better. In addition to all its environmental advantages, high-speed rail offers a cheaper alternative to air travel, with less hassle.

Opponents of high-speed rail act as if the alternative to high-speed rail and its cost is to do nothing. That's absurd, as absurd as the notion that we just need to build more freeways and expand airports, and keep burning all that cheap fuel. Not only would that make air quality problems worse in the state, it would be much more expensive than building high-speed rail -- and it wouldn't work.

California needs to focus on the 21st century, not dwell on the solutions of the past. What once served us well is no longer sufficient. Advocates of high-speed rail -- people who believe in California's future -- have a selling job to do with voters. Let's get it started.

[Lodi News Sentinel Editorial, Friday, July 4, 2008](#)

Environmental news is not all bad

Big cats, bald eagles and wild turkeys make a comeback

Sometimes it's not enough to just stop and smell the roses.

Sometimes it's important to remember that roses — like ducks, bald eagles and clean air — flourish because human beings care for them.

Even salmon and butterflies, whose recent population declines have made headlines, are not endangered species.

Not long ago our friend and colleague Pete Ottesen, The Record's outdoors columnist, reminded us that not all environmental news is bad news. When the state bans commercial fishing for salmon or the Audobon Society reports a dip in the numbers of butterflies, we look for causes like global warming.

This misunderstood environmental bogeyman, as threatening as it is to our way of life, gets blamed for way more than it should.

Ottesen, an avid hunter with an affinity for science and conservation, notes that the nosedive in the salmon population can be explained by a lack of "up-welling" in the Pacific Ocean — a weatherinduced cyclical phenomenon that happens regularly. The salmon die off and then bounce back.

Kathy Schick, a Delta and UOP science instructor who directs the Audobon Society's local butterfly count, attributes the decline of butterflies last year not to global warming, but an unusually heavy winter frost and a dry spring. These things happen.

A graph of annual population declines and surges of most species in nature looks like a roller coaster.

But those who want to see beyond the scare tactics should stand back from the statistical confusion and observe the good that people do.

When we figured out that the insecticide DDT was a toxin that remained in nature for decades — that it was decimating the bald eagle and many other birds — it was outlawed. That happened in 1972, when there were fewer than 500 nesting pairs south of the Canadian border.

In 2007, over 10,000 pairs were observed and America's national bird was taken off the list of threatened species.

The early '70s was really the beginning of the modern environmental movement. And for all the disruption caused by regulations and governmental interference — to say nothing of the harm caused by rising populations of mosquitoes — it's useful to recall what's been accomplished.

An article by Environmental Science and Technology online magazine notes that passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 led to the building of \$100 billion worth of sewage treatment plants. Also in 1972, Canada and the U.S. created the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. The changes in the Great Lakes are dramatic. The infamous Cuyahoga River, which was so polluted it caught fire

in 1969, is much improved today. And the area around the once "dead" Lake Erie is seeing increases in bald eagles and great blue herons.

The Clean Air Act of 1970 has vastly improved the air in the Los Angeles Basin, the industrial Midwest and elsewhere. Those old enough to have traveled to L.A. in the '50s and '60s will recall their burning eyes and the city's smoggy skyline. With the right conditions today, the breathtaking San Gabriel Mountains can be seen from downtown.

Ottesen points to the local practice of flooding agricultural land in the Delta during the winter. It has had a magnificent impact on the population of ducks, geese, cranes and other species.

Further south, the Central Valley Improvement Act of 1992 has helped restore the white-faced Ibis and Sandhill Crane. Before 1992, said Ottesen, there were no breeding pairs of Sandhills in the area west of Merced; today there about 2,600.

Wild turkeys are "romping all over the Mokelumne and Cosumnes river courses," said Ottesen. And hunting restrictions have helped mountain lion populations increase to where the big cats now scare the wits out of Southern California suburban dwellers.

But none of this is an accident of nature.

It is the work of people, often using the tool of government, to make improvements often when hope seemed lost.

Sometimes, if you stop to look for it, environmental news is good news.