

Global warming fuels hotter Western fires

By Tom Knudson / The Sacramento Bee
In the Fresno Bee, Monday, Dec. 1, 2008

Wildfire has marched across the West for centuries. But no longer are major conflagrations fueled simply by heavy brush and timber. Now climate change is stoking the flames higher and hotter, too.

This view, common among firefighters, is reflected in new studies that tie changing patterns of heat and moisture in the western United States to an unprecedented rash of costly and destructive wildfires.

Among other things, researchers have found the frequency of wildfire increased fourfold -- and the terrain burned expanded sixfold -- as summers grew longer and hotter over the past two decades.

"When I started fighting fire, the normal fire season was from the beginning of June to the end of September," said Pete Duncan, a fuels management officer for the Plumas National Forest, northeast of Sacramento. "Now we are bringing crews on in the middle of April and they are working into November and December. And we're seeing fires now burning in areas that normally we wouldn't consider a high-intensity burn situation."

Numbers bear this out: The fire season now stretches 78 days longer than it did during the 1970s and '80s. And, on average, large fires burn for more than a month, compared with just a week a generation ago.

Scientists also have discovered that in many places nothing signals a bad fire year like a short winter and an early snowmelt. Overall, 72% of the land scorched across the West from 1987 to 2003 burned in early snowmelt years.

Across the Sierra, satellite imagery shows that today's wildfires are far more destructive than fires of the past, leaving larger portions of the burned landscape looking like nuclear blast zones. That fire intensity, in turn, is threatening water quality, wildlife habitat, rural and resort communities and firefighters' lives.

As the climate warms, the ability of the region's iconic mixed-conifer forests ecosystem to regenerate from these destructive fires is compromised.

"We're getting into a place where we are almost having a perfect storm" for wildfire, said Jay Miller, a U.S. Forest Service researcher and lead author of a recent paper published in the scientific journal *Ecosystems* linking climate change to the more severe fires in the Sierra. "We have increased fuels, but this changing climate is adding an additional stress on the whole situation. When things get bad, things will get much worse."

Future could be bleaker

That future may already have arrived. This year, the fire season got off to an early June start in the north and only recently came to a close. Statewide, 1.4 million acres burned in 2008, just shy of last year's 1.5 million acres, the highest total in at least four decades.

Duncan points to the recent Panther fire on the Klamath National Forest near the Oregon border as an example of a fire in today's drier climate and longer fire season.

"It made an eight-mile run one afternoon, in late October. It burned through an area of fairly high-elevation old-growth timber and at very high severity," Duncan said. "I was kind of amazed that something would have burned to that scale. To make a 40,000-acre run in an afternoon is significant for any time of year -- but particularly for that time of year."

The Moonlight fire, which burned across the Plumas National Forest and timber industry land north of Quincy in September 2007, was one of the most environmentally destructive in recent memory.

Vast stands of trees exploded into flame like matchsticks, including forest set aside to protect spotted owls. Smoke spread across Northern California and drifted as far south as Bakersfield. In all, six of 10 acres were burned so badly that in many places, few living trees remain. The global climate suffered, too. In the two weeks it took to control the fire, it pumped an estimated 5 million tons of carbon dioxide into the air, equivalent to the annual emissions of 970,000 vehicles or one coal-fired power plant.

The Moonlight fire even incinerated the soil, leaving mountain slopes barren and prone to erosion. With no natural seed source across wide swaths of terrain, the future of the mixed-conifer forest is in doubt; many fear it could morph into brush, stands of deciduous oak, even desert.

"I don't envision sand dunes like the Sahara," said Mike Yost, a retired forestry professor from Taylorsville. "But I can envision places where there aren't going to be forests again in many human lifetimes and in some places, maybe never."

Today, in fact, the region is the focus of the largest federal reforestation effort in Sierra Nevada history. Over the next two years, 3.4 million seedlings will be planted across 37 square miles -- but climate change is sowing uncertainty about that, too.

"You will always be left wondering: Is the tree I am planting today going to be able to survive the climate of the future?" said Mike Landram, reforestation manager for the Forest Service in California. "That will be a lingering question."

Walking is a challenge

One thing Landram doesn't want is a forest like the one that burned, an incendiary thicket of pine, fir, cedar and oak that had grown unnaturally dense during a century of fire suppression.

Such crowded stands are common in the Sierra, and walking through them can be a challenge. Where John Muir once strolled through parklike groves of 50 to 60 large stately conifers per acre, hikers today find shadowy tangles of sun-starved trees, some no wider than a fence post, at densities of more than 350 trees per acre. The forest floor -- littered with dead limbs, logs and spiky branches -- resembles a giant game of Pick-Up Sticks.

While such conditions are a major reason fires burn so hot, they are not the only variable. Strong winds, steep terrain and low humidity all push flames into a frenzy as well. Now there is another brick in the oven: the changing climate.

One of the first to make the link was Anthony Westerling, an assistant professor at the University of California at Merced whose 2006 paper in *Science* magazine found fires grow more unruly in years when the mountain snowpack melts early.

"An early spring means you're going to have a longer fire season [and] drier vegetation," Westerling said at a conference in Sacramento this year. "On the other hand, when it's a late spring, you never get a big fire year."

Last year's Moonlight fire fits the pattern. The snow melted early in 2007. Precipitation was well below average, and the fuel moisture content of the forest was at or near historic lows by the end of August.

"When we moved here in 1980, the snow stayed around through August," said Shirley Kossow, who lives along Indian Creek near Genesee with her husband, Mike. "In the 1990s, it was gone by the Fourth of July. Now it doesn't make it to the end of May."

Natural regeneration tough

After the Moonlight fire, satellite imagery showed the fire had burned 102 square miles, making it the largest blow-up in Plumas County history. But they also revealed something more troubling: 62% of the overall fire burned at high severity, a term scientists use to describe a stand-destroying fire.

Historically, fires in Sierra mixed-conifer forests skipped lightly across the landscape. They singed some areas, scorched others, but most of the forest remained healthy. Only 5% to 10% burned at high severity, said Hugh Safford, regional ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service who works in Davis.

Now, that number is climbing, up from 17% two decades ago to 28% for the period from 1997 to 2006. In 2007, it soared to 60%.

"Last year was the most severe fire year we've seen since the beginning of Landsat [satellite] imagery" in 1984, Safford said. "It was astounding. Things burned really, really hot."

Safford is one of the authors of the paper in *Ecosystems* that ties more high-severity fire to climatic changes, including less-snowy springs and rising summer nighttime temperatures. Last month, he tromped around the blackened aftermath of the 2007 Angora Fire at Lake Tahoe, which burned at 52% high severity and destroyed 254 homes.

"There were large areas where every needle got burned right off those trees," he said. "There isn't anything to cover the soil when the rainy season hits."

Increasingly, people are at risk, too.

"Look at the subdivisions in the Angora drainage," Safford said. "Fire wasn't on anybody's minds when they built those homes. It wasn't even a consideration because we put everything out. And now, with climate getting warmer and the forest becoming denser, I think we're at a position where it's really becoming a critical problem."

Makeup of forests changing

With fires burning hotter and temperatures rising, though, there is no guarantee conifer forests will remain evergreen.

Already, parts of the northern Sierra that once grew pine now sprout more grass and deciduous black oak -- a possible early warning sign of climate change. In some places, whitethorn, manzanita and other native brush species -- which bounce back rapidly after a fire and shade out sun-loving pines -- are expanding over large swaths of terrain.

Malcolm North, a research scientist with the Forest Service's Sierra Nevada Research Center, said the Moonlight fire's intensity created "seed source" problems.

"When you have the nearest live trees a mile, two, even three miles from the center of the burn area, it's unlikely that you are going to get seed back in there," North said.

Solving that problem will take human assistance, said Landram, the Forest Service reforestation manager. Next spring, crews hired by the Forest Service will fan out across the rugged terrain, planting 1.7 million trees across 12,000 acres. In 2010, they will do it again, all by hand. Every speck of brush near each seedling will be scraped away, again by hand, because herbicides are not allowed in the forest.

Playing catch-up with climate change could prove risky. "If you end up with a couple of dry years -- which is probably going to happen more commonly with climate change -- you could lose 80% to 90% of your stock," North said.

Successful or not, he feels the region will remain wooded, probably with a different mix of conifers -- in particular more white fir, incense cedar and other species that can more readily grow up beneath the heavy shade of brush fields.

Climate, however, will make the final call.

"There are so many different factors at play," North said. "It's very difficult to predict what plant and forest communities are going to look like in the future.

"To quote 'Star Trek,' we are going where no man has gone before -- where no plant community has gone before."

Beijing claims early victory over air pollution

By HENRY SANDERSON, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee, Tri-Valley Herald, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Monday, December 1, 2008

BEIJING — Beijing said Monday it has already reached its target number of 256 "blue-sky days" this year, with the help of ambitious environmental measures the city imposed to cut emissions for the Olympic Games.

China's notoriously polluted capital of 17 million reached the clean-air day target on Sunday, 31 days ahead of schedule, Beijing's Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau said.

"The quality of our city's air has shown constant improvement over the last 10 years," Du Shaozhong, deputy director of the bureau, said in a statement.

Beijing had only 100 blue-sky days in 1998, when it introduced a clean-air campaign and began investing more than \$15 billion to improve air quality, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The long-term measures as well as more drastic efforts taken ahead of the Olympic Games in August helped reach the goal, the bureau said.

Beijing pulled half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads, halted most construction and closed some factories in the capital and surrounding provinces ahead of the games.

The Olympics proved that controlling emissions is the main way to reduce pollution, the bureau said. Car emissions, Beijing's main source of pollution, were reduced by 60 percent from a year earlier because of the measures, it said.

So far this year levels of inhalable particulate matter - tiny dust particles that are among the worst pollutants - were reduced by 16 percent from a year earlier, and other pollutants such as carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide showed reductions of more than 20 percent, the bureau said.

China's daily air pollution index, which ranges from 1 to 500, uses a standard calculation derived from levels of major pollutants. A reading below 50 is considered good, and 51 to 100 is moderate. Below 100 is considered a "blue-sky day."

Only 56 days have measured "good" so far this year, the bureau said. But environmentalists say a blue-sky day is still more polluted than what is considered healthy by the World Health Organization.

Steven Andrews, an independent environmental consultant based in Washington, said Beijing's claims of improved air quality are not reliable because the city has moved monitoring stations to less-polluted areas and has varied the way it has measured pollutants since 1998.

"They've measured different things during that time period and it has a huge impact on the number of days that meet the national standard," Andrews said in a telephone interview.

Such inconsistencies mean that the increase in the number of blue-sky days may be due to the change of monitoring locations, rather than a reduction in overall pollution levels, he said.

Houston sees record-low days of dangerous smog

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Monday, December 1, 2008

HOUSTON—The former smog capital of the U.S. is steadily getting cleaner.

For the third consecutive year, the Houston area has seen a drop in days with harmful levels of smog brought by the heavy industry, weather and traffic-choked highways around the nation's fourth-largest city.

Houston had a record-low 16 days that exceeded federal health-based standards for ground-level ozone in the latest smog season, according to Texas Commission on Environmental Quality data.

Not long ago, such days occurred more than 60 times a year.

"No one thought that we would see this for Houston," said Neil Carman, air quality program director for the Sierra Club's Lone Star chapter. "It's remarkable."

The cleaner air is being attributed to tighter pollution controls, enhanced regulations and more favorable weather this ozone season, the Houston Chronicle reported Monday. Some credit high fuel prices keeping more cars off the road, though there is no data to support the theory.

Days of bad ozone are down 74 percent since 1999, when Houston wrested the smog title from Los Angeles for the first time. The crown has since returned to California.

But despite the improvements, Houston isn't breathing completely easy just yet.

David Schanbacher, TCEQ's chief engineer, described the progress of the past two years as "profound" but unlikely to continue at the same rate.

Houston could also find itself out of compliance more often once the Environmental Protection Agency fully implements a set of tougher ozone standards.

The EPA determined in March that the existing standard of 84 molecules of ozone out of every billion molecules of air was no longer considered safe. Under the new limit of 75 parts per billion, Houston had 23 additional days of unhealthy ozone levels this year.

Houston has a 2019 deadline to meet the 84 ppb standard. The new limit of 75 ppb has deadlines between 2013 and 2030, depending on the severity of an area's problem.

Ozone is formed when emissions from tailpipes and smokestacks mix with sunlight. The toxic, colorless gas can damage the lungs, cause headaches and nausea and aggravate asthma.

Some environmentalists worry that Houston will be too quick to pat itself on the back for its clean-air accomplishments when more needs to be done to fight smog.

"We're still a long way from 85 (ppb standard), and miles away from 75," said Matthew Tejada, executive director of the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention.

Airports in a dogfight over jet noise

By Jerry Berrios, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News, Monday, December 1, 2008

In this tale of two airports, it's the worst of times.

A raging noise battle between Burbank's national Bob Hope Airport and the general aviation Van Nuys Airport is getting, well, louder. And residents at both ends of the Valley are losing sleep over it.

While the complex air battle has gone on for months and might ultimately have to be decided by federal aviation officials, it essentially boils down to this:

Burbank eventually wants to send 32 flights a day to Van Nuys to ease congestion. Van Nuys officials don't want any of Burbank's air traffic, but they want to divert their noisiest aircraft to Burbank and other airports.

Getting the two airports to play nicely in the control tower isn't likely to happen anytime soon. And residents would like both to stop squabbling and adopt a simple solution.

"Both airports should not be operating at night except for emergencies. Both airports are surrounded by heavily populated areas," said Gerald Silver, president of Homeowners of Encino.

"That's the fix... We want the whole Valley quiet (at night)."

Oddly enough, both airports are willing to impose nighttime curfews on all but emergency flights. But permission from the Federal Aviation Administration to impose the curfews is hard to come by and could take months or even years.

Meanwhile, the two airports are in a heated fight over protecting their runways from the other's unwanted aircraft.

Today is the deadline to take written public comment on Van Nuys Airport's Noisier Aircraft Phaseout Project. Under the plan, the airport would divert the loudest planes to LAX and airports in Burbank, Camarillo, Chino and Lancaster over seven years.

The plan, originally expected to begin this year, would start by diverting the noisiest aircraft first and eventually include less noisy, but still loud, aircraft in three subsequent phases ending in 2016.

"We are all just trying to balance the needs of the aviation community and the neighboring communities," said Diana Sanchez, a spokeswoman for Van Nuys Airport.

The problem, Burbank officials say, is that a majority, if not all, of the flights diverted from Van Nuys would wind up in Burbank simply because it is the closest airport to Van Nuys. Van Nuys estimates it would send about 192 flights a year - fewer than one a day - to Burbank, but Burbank officials expect to get many more flights under the plan.

Last month, officials from the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport Authority, which runs the Bob Hope Airport, went on record opposing Van Nuys Airport's phase-out plan.

"It's not fair if you are going to send all those noisier jets over here," said Victor Gill, spokesman for the authority.

Van Nuys officials contend their plan ultimately needs approval only from the Los Angeles World Airports, which runs Van Nuys Airport, and the Los Angeles City Council. But Burbank airport officials say the plan must go all the way to the FAA. They characterize Van Nuys Airport's phase-out plan as an attempt to skirt the federal government.

Officials at Van Nuys Airport and LAWA are equally opposed to Burbank's plan.

Burbank's initiative would formally ban all flights - commercial, private and cargo - after 10 p.m. and before 7 a.m., Gill said. Military, law enforcement and medical emergency flights would be exempted, as well as any aircraft needing an emergency landing.

If Burbank gets its nighttime curfew from the FAA, air traffic would move to other airports. Van Nuys would inherit 32 additional flights a day - 16 during the day and 16 at night, Gill said.

Burbank currently restricts arrivals and departures of privately owned "stage 2" aircraft such as Boeing 727 s and early Gulfstreams and Learjets between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., Gill said.

Commercial airlines comply with a voluntary curfew established in the mid-1970 s to avoid scheduling flights during the overnight period and it has nearly a 100 percent compliance rate, he said.

Gill said Van Nuys would get newer generations of privately owned planes which are quieter - and the impact would not be significant.

LAWA officials disagree.

"A restriction at (Burbank) that diverts operations to other ... airports represents a shifting of the noise impact - not a reduction in the noise impact," LAWA Executive Director Gina Marie Lindsay wrote in a May 29 letter.

Lindsay said Burbank's plan overestimates its benefits, ignores its "critical role" in the regional air transportation system and doesn't analyze noise or air quality impacts at other airports.

Van Nuys residents say the Burbank plan is unfair, noting the proposed 192 aircraft Van Nuys would send to Burbank each year is nothing compared to the thousands of extra smaller aircraft flights Van Nuys would get each year.

"There is a total inequity in that," said Donald Schultz, a Van Nuys resident.

Schultz agrees with having curfews at both airports but wants to make sure that planes aren't diverted from one to the other.

The Van Nuys Airport has a powerful ally in L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who opposed Burbank's curfew efforts earlier this year. Although L.A. City Councilman Tony Cardenas sponsored a measure to oppose Burbank's curfew, the council has not acted on it.

Like Schultz, other residents who live with airport noise would like a good night's sleep.

Pat Kater, chairman of the Encino Neighborhood Council's airport committee, said the group supports Burbank's curfew as long as those same restrictions would apply to the Van Nuys Airport.

"If Burbank gets that curfew and Van Nuys doesn't, those private aircraft would be landing at Van Nuys," Kater said. "That would increase the traffic tremendously."

Even when it opposed Van Nuys's phase-out plan, the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport Authority extended an olive branch of sorts to Van Nuys. The authority offered to support a nighttime curfew at Van Nuys, if it mirrored the one Bob Hope is proposing.

"We would be taking care of all Valley residents in a uniform way," Gill said.

One problem with that is that Burbank is ahead of Van Nuys in the FAA application process and each airport has to apply individually to the government agency for a curfew.

Review period extended for airport jet center expansion

By Karen Holzmeister, The Daily Review

L.A. Daily News, Saturday, November 29, 2008

OAKLAND — When San Leandro speaks, the Port of Oakland and Oakland International Airport listen.

The Business Jet Center, a tenant on airport property owned by the port, has applied to build four new buildings with seven new hangars on Earhart Road between Swan Way and Langley Street.

The expansion will increase the number of executive jets taking off and landing at or near the airport's north field, including over San Leandro's air space.

So, on Nov. 7, the San Leandro City Council's Airport Committee asked port officials to allow the public more time to review a study assessing the impact of the construction project.

The port agreed last week, and extended the comment period on the study to Dec. 22.

Nov. 21 was the original deadline for individuals, groups and government agencies to comment on the study.

San Leandro Councilwoman Joyce Starosciak, who chairs the airport committee, said Tuesday that the city "closely watches" any airport expansion.

The Business Jet Center's expansion would increase the number of jet flights in the San Leandro flight path, Starosciak said.

The new construction will add hangar space for up to 22 corporate jets, which carry between four and 19 passengers.

The study said the jets could add up to 88 "operations" a week — 44 takeoffs and 44 landings — for an additional 4,576 takeoffs and landings a year at the airport.

San Leandro is not necessarily going to oppose construction, she said, but would monitor the future impact of expansion along with other aviation issues.

San Leandro has representatives on airport advisory committees, which most often review airport noise issues.

Residents in San Leandro neighborhoods west of Interstate 880 — under the flight path and closest to the airport — have voiced concerns about increased air pollution as a result of fuel emissions from planes, trucks and cars.

For more information on the Business Jet Center expansion, visit www.portofoakland.com/enviro.htm.

Get your fireplace ready for winter

Marinell James, Special to The Chronicle
S.F. Chronicle, Saturday, November 29, 2008

The thought of a toasty fire in the hearth kindles images of romantic nesting and lower heating bills. But don't strike a match until you've made sure your fireplace and chimney are clean and in good working order.

Thirty-six percent of home-heating fires start in the chimney, said Lorraine Carli, vice president of public affairs for the National Fire Protection Association. Two-thirds of such accidents could have been prevented if the chimney had been clean.

A dirty chimney is dangerous because of creosote buildup, a byproduct of wood burning. When you use your fireplace, the oily creosote becomes flammable and can ignite when sparks fly up the chimney.

To keep your family warm and safe this winter, follow these fireplace tips:

-- Inspect it and clean it. This is not a DIY project, cautions Royal Edwards, technical director of the Chimney Safety Institute of America. He recommends hiring an institute-certified chimney sweep to examine and clean your chimney system before the start of the heating season.

The sweep will open the damper, check the flue and look for obstructions, like animal or bird nests. If possible, the sweep may also go up on the roof to check the upper part of the chimney and make sure it has a spark arrestor, a cage-like device that keeps sparks from flying out onto the roof. After inspection, the sweep will perform a thorough cleaning.

Modern sweeps are nothing like Burt, the quaint chimney cleaner from "Mary Poppins." Technology has helped transform the business. The London Chimney Service of Mill Valley, for example, performs "chim-scans" by running a camera up the chimney to look for interior cracks, fissures and other structural problems.

To find a certified sweep, contact the institute (www.csia.org) or the Golden State Chimney Sweep Guild (cachimneysweepsguild.org). In addition to institute certification, a qualified sweep should have a contractor's license and a city license, said Michael Dempsey, president of the guild. Be sure to get current references and speak with other customers before hiring a sweep.

-- Go for the right kind of burn. Soft woods such as pine and fir tend to spark excessively, creating a potential fire hazard. Choose hardwoods instead, such as oak and cherry. To minimize polluting smoke, make sure the wood is seasoned (dry). Freshly trimmed tree branches, for example, won't be ready to burn until next winter.

For a cleaner burn, consider switching to natural gas. On Nov. 18, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District started giving out \$200 rebates to residents who purchase gas-heat stoves or install a gas insert in their fireplaces (gas log sets do not qualify under the rebate program).

-- Make small fires. Don't pile logs too high; they could roll out onto the floor. To prevent sparks from flying onto the rug, use fireplace screens or doors.

-- Never leave children unattended - even for a minute - in the same room as a fire.

-- Remove ashes properly. Wait until coals are cool, then shovel them into a metal container with a lid (available at hardware stores). Store the bucket outside on a noncombustible surface. You can put

cold ashes in your compost (green) bin or spread them around your plants to give them a nitrogen boost.

Don't burn on Spare the Air days

Winter weather patterns can put a lid on the Bay Area, trapping fine particulate matter that creates air pollution. Wood smoke generates about a third of this type of pollution, which can aggravate asthma and other respiratory disorders.

When air quality reaches unhealthy levels, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District issues a Spare the Air alert.

A new regulation adopted by the district last summer makes it illegal to burn wood in a fireplace, woodstove or outdoor fire pit when an alert is in effect.

"If it's a no-burn day because weather conditions are such that we have no winds and cold, dry temperatures, people should not burn wood and should use alternative forms of heat," said Lisa Fasano, communications director for the district.

She added that when a Spare the Air alert is issued, it may be in effect for several days. Residents should avoid burning until the alert is lifted.

To find out if it's a Spare the Air day

-- Call (877) 466-2876.

-- Check online at www.sparetheair.org.

-- Subscribe to AirAlert to automatically receive Spare the Air advisories and air pollution forecasts via e-mail, cell phone or pager. Register at airalert.sparetheair.org.

-- If you don't have Internet access, call (800) 430-1515 to sign up for automatic phone alerts. When a winter Spare the Air alert is issued, you'll get a call on your home or cell phone.

- M.J.

What never to burn

To avoid releasing harmful chemicals, never burn plywood, particleboard, painted or varnished wood, treated wood (like that used for decks), trash, plastic, wrapping paper or flammable liquids.

Sources: Bay Area Air Quality Management District; Chimney Safety Institute of America

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Sacramento could get boost from green economy

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Sunday, November 30, 2008

For Sacramento, the light at the end of the economic tunnel may be green.

The largest solar-panel factory on the continent is taking shape in McClellan Park. Economic development officials say more than half the companies checking out the region are in clean-tech. And state government is rolling out the nation's most ambitious energy-efficiency and renewable power programs, making it a huge potential ally — and customer — for the green economy.

"We think the environment is perfect," said Cheryl Beninga, managing director of American River Ventures, a \$100 million private-equity fund in Roseville.

Barack Obama's election win has added to the excitement. During the presidential campaign, Obama pledged to spend \$150 billion over 10 years to create 5 million green jobs, and green-tech investment looks to be one of the pillars of the economic stimulus package he's been promoting over the last week.

Green technologies reach from solar cells and biofuels to ultra-efficient lights and vehicles and more. The sector is an appealing engine for growth because it promises to generate a wide range of jobs — from manufacturing and construction to engineering and finance — while reducing pollution, trimming waste and cutting fossil fuel consumption.

Sacramento already has a promising foothold in several green industries. But the region has missed opportunities in tech booms past — from software to biotech — and there's reason to be skeptical this time, too.

The capital area's green business sector is still small, employing perhaps 1,500 people. Local sources of venture capital are scarce. And it's tough to grow a business of any kind in today's economic climate.

Still, many say Sacramento is holding an ace: state government.

Through regulations, incentives and purchasing decisions, the state will define the market for green technology in a way it hasn't in previous tech booms, said Andrew Hargadon, a former Apple product designer who's now a professor of business and head of the renowned Energy Efficiency Center at the University of California, Davis.

"The reality of the marketplace is that most energy consumption is driven by public sector policies and customers," he said.

"Fundamentally, startups in the energy sector are facing a completely different environment than startups in Silicon Valley have faced over the last 30 to 40 years."

In addition, the state's giant employee-pension funds, headquartered in Sacramento, are already key green investors.

Those central roles for state government should make the capital area attractive to both entrepreneurs looking to start companies and established firms in expansion mode.

Bob Burris, deputy director of the Sacramento Area Commerce & Trade Organization, said he has recently been swamped with inquiries from German, Spanish and Dutch solar-power companies looking to open shop in the area.

"A lot of the influence in the industry comes from the Sacramento region," said Brian Lynch, spokesman for Germany's Schott Solar, a major solar-panel maker, which runs its U.S. sales and marketing operations out of Roseville.

The Sacramento Municipal Utility District built one of the world's first large-scale solar power plants in 1984 on the site of its now-mothballed Rancho Seco nuclear power plant. Today, California is by far the largest market in the nation for solar power, with the industry growing at 35 percent a year since 2005, according to a recent state report. New federal tax incentives for both businesses and homes appear likely to fuel even faster growth.

Proximity to the Capitol was one reason Hayward-based startup OptiSolar Inc. decided earlier this year to develop its mammoth solar-panel factory here, said company spokesman Alan Bernheimer. A \$20 million tax incentive from Sacramento County and the availability of nearly 1 million square feet of industrial space also helped.

OptiSolar already has about 200 people working at the site and plans eventually to employ as many as 1,000. The company is transforming aging Air Force warehouses into high-tech assembly lines. Bundles of electrical conduits and stainless-steel pipes snake through the building, and air-conditioning units the size of tractor-trailers loom on the roof.

Even before OptiSolar arrived, the solar power sector was the Sacramento region's biggest green employer, according to a list of firms compiled by the Sacramento Area Regional Technology Alliance. The tally doesn't include the recycling industry based in the Power Inn Road area.

The local solar industry ranges from startups working on next-generation solar panel and solar-water-heater technology to publicly traded manufacturers and installers, plus more than a dozen small and midsized contractors.

Looking ahead, some of the region's best prospects for new green businesses may be in energy-efficiency technology, a relatively untapped market.

The state is a policy leader here, too. But just as important, said venture-fund director Beninga, it's likely to be a big early customer as the sector develops.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has required that state buildings use 20 percent less energy by 2015 than they did five years ago, and the state's university systems have agreed to the same target.

Deputy State Architect Roy McBrayer said the state mandate has already meant contracts for engineering firms that do what's called "retro-commissioning" – rejiggering a building's controls to cut power demand for heating, cooling and lighting, typically by more than 10 percent.

To get deeper cuts, McBrayer said, the state is trying out a number of new technologies developed at UC Davis, from stairwell lights that dim when nobody's around to superefficient LED bulbs that fit in fluorescent-tube fixtures.

A big state contract for one of those devices could launch a new company, said Hargadon, the business professor. But government can also be a difficult customer to serve. Purchasing decisions, for instance, tend to be slow, even when the state isn't in a budget crisis.

"That can kill early stage companies," Hargadon said.

Indeed, what's likely the region's most successful new energy-efficiency technology firm, Folsom-based SynapSense Corp., relies on government sales for only a small slice of its business, said Chief Executive Peter Van Deventer.

Using technology developed at UC Davis, SynapSense makes systems that cut the power used by data centers, which now account for about \$5 billion in electricity bills annually nationwide. A SynapSense installation pays for itself in one to two years, a bargain that has allowed the company to keep growing, recession or not.

"We were worried that the downturn would freeze all budgets," said Van Deventer, a former executive at Intel's Folsom campus. "But we've been pleasantly surprised."

It's early yet to say how the green economy will take shape, and what role Sacramento will play.

State efforts to foster a green work force are beginning to take shape, with a first round of training grants scheduled for next year.

In green manufacturing, California faces competition from other regions of the country that have cheaper land and lower taxes. The state would do well to offer stronger incentives for green businesses to develop here, said Carla Din, Western regional director of the Apollo Alliance, a broad coalition advocating a shift to clean energy sources.

"It's not going to happen on its own," she said.

The leadership of cities and counties will also be important to local green-business growth, said venture capitalist Beninga. In addition to offering tax incentives and the like, she said, municipal governments can set policies that create demand for new green technologies, generating markets for new companies. Pension funds can be key investors. The idea, she said, is to launch a growth cycle that will draw more funding and generate still more innovation and jobs.

Heavy Traffic Can Be Heartbreaking

By Karen Pallarito

Washington Post, Sunday, November 30, 2008

SUNDAY, Nov. 30 (HealthDay News) -- The decline in highway traffic that was brought on by last summer's spike in gas prices may be a boon to heart health.

That's because automobile emissions are among a long list of risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

"There's a very coherent and consistent body of data that links particulate air pollution with cardiovascular disease and premature death," said Dr. Ted Schettler, science director of the Science and Environmental Health Network, an environmental and public health advocacy group.

Among the latest evidence: a German study published recently in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*, which found that people who live near heavy traffic are more likely to develop atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, which can boost the risk of heart disease.

Atherosclerosis is a progressive disease that begins with damage to the lining of the arteries. Over time, the arteries accumulate plaque, a combination of fat, cholesterol, calcium and other substances. This causes the arteries to become rigid and narrow, impeding the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the heart and other parts of the body. This can lead to a heart attack, stroke or even death, according to the U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

In 2004, the American Heart Association issued its first official statement on air pollution and cardiovascular disease. In reviewing the scientific evidence, an expert panel concluded that short-term exposure to elevated particulate matter, which includes motor vehicle emissions, "significantly contributes to increased acute cardiovascular mortality, particularly in certain at-risk subsets of the population."

The panel further noted that prolonged exposure to elevated levels of air pollution reduced overall life expectancy "on the order of a few years."

To assess the impact of long-term residential traffic exposure on the heart, Dr. Barbara Hoffmann, head of the unit of environmental epidemiology at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and colleagues used "electron-beam computed tomography" to measure calcium build-up in the arteries.

Compared with people who lived more than 200 meters, or 642 feet, from major traffic, the risk of coronary artery calcification was 63 percent higher for people living within 50 meters (160 feet) of heavy traffic, and 34 percent higher for those who were between 51 meters and 100 meters (164 to 328 feet) away. The risk was 8 percent higher for those living 100 meters to 200 meters (328 to 642 feet) away.

Hoffmann compares the damage wrought by traffic fumes to the effects of aging. "Living within 100 meters of a major road compared to people living further away amounts to a similar difference in coronary calcification as six months of aging," she said.

Her team is currently examining all study participants again to determine whether those living close to heavy traffic have suffered a greater increase in coronary calcification during the past five years.

So what can individuals do, short of moving away from heavily traveled roads, to stave off cardiovascular disease?

The best thing is focus on modifiable factors, such as keeping blood pressure and diabetes in check, lowering cholesterol, increasing physical activity and quitting smoking, Hoffmann said.

Reducing air pollution is a larger challenge.

In big U.S. cities, state and local agencies are required to report the Air Quality Index -- a measure of how pristine or polluted the air is -- each day, says AirNow, a federal government Web site on air quality. Depending on the level of concern, people with heart or lung disease, older adults and children may be advised to remain indoors

"That's just a Band-Aid on a public health problem," Schettler said. "Do we want people who have early cardiovascular disease to have to avoid breathing air outside, or do we want to clean up the air?"

More information

For more on the heart-health effects of air pollution, visit the American Heart Association.

SOURCES: Barbara Hoffmann, M.D., M.P.H., head, unit of environmental epidemiology, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany; Ted Schettler, M.D., M.P.H., science director, Science and Environmental Health Network, Ann Arbor, Mich.; Aug. 13, 2008, news release, U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.; July 17, 2007, *Circulation*; U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, Bethesda, Md.; American Heart Association, Dallas

Burning restrictions ordered for Thanksgiving

By Chris Bowman

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, November 27, 2008

As weather would have it, this Thanksgiving is a "no-burn day" in Sacramento County.

That means the burning of wood, fake logs, pellets or, for that matter, petrified fruitcakes, is prohibited under penalty of law – \$50 for the first offense.

What's more, it's a Stage 2 no-burn day. That means Environmental Protection Agency-certified, low-polluting fireplace inserts and wood stoves are no exception. The limits apply November through February on days when weather conditions are expected to make chimney smoke a public health nuisance.

Today is forecast to be one of those days. A mass of warm air will settle atop cooler air, creating a thermal barrier that will trap smoke close to the ground. There will be little or no wind to disperse smoke.

Breathing heavy wood smoke irritates healthy airways and makes breathing more difficult for asthmatics and others with respiratory ailments. The tiniest particles are of greatest health concern. They can slip past the body's defenses, lodge deep in the lungs and possibly pass into the bloodstream to invade and weaken the heart.

"We understand that some people are unhappy and want to use their fireplace during the holiday," said Jamie Arno, a spokeswoman with the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, which began regulating fireplace smoke a year ago.

"However, the weather conditions will result in unhealthy air settling into neighborhoods. And the mission of the air district is to protect public health."

Surely, though, the chimney police will be off duty on Thanksgiving Day, right?

"Actually our inspectors will be in the field enforcing the law," Arno said.

How many? "I won't answer that question, just like law enforcement won't tell you how many (officers will be deployed) or where they will be."

Surely wood smoke curling from homes aglow with holiday warmth won't summon an air pollution officer to the door, right?

Correct, Arno said.

"We do not set foot on private property. They will take a picture of it, note the address and send your notice of penalty in the mail."

Climate change remains a top priority

Zachary Coile, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, Nov. 30, 2008

Skeptics believed that the fiscal crisis would force Obama to put his plans to address global warming on the back burner. But in a videotaped speech to a climate summit co-hosted by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger this month, Obama said, "Now is the time to confront this challenge once and for all. Delay is no longer an option."

State officials hope that Obama will reverse a Bush administration decision and approve efforts by California and 16 other states to require automakers to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by 2016. Obama has said he supports California's position, but he'll face pressure from U.S. automakers, who claim that the rules could further harm their chances of survival.

His first big task will be to pick the next Environmental Protection Agency administrator, who will face a series of key decisions on climate change. California Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols is seen as a top contender, along with New Jersey's Commissioner for Environmental Protection Lisa Jackson and Pennsylvania's Environmental Protection Secretary Kathleen McGinty, who chaired President Bill Clinton's White House Council on Environmental Quality.

Obama could take some key first steps by executive order, for example, requiring an analysis of whether new federal projects would impact global warming. He told ABC's Barbara Walters last week that he plans to take steps to "green" the White House to show the public it's not difficult to make their homes more energy efficient.

He could also make a statement in his first budget proposal in February by including projections on revenues raised from a future cap and trade system that requires industry to buy credits to emit greenhouse gases. Bush made a similar move in his 2001 budget by assuming revenues from drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Obama could also include in his budget a plan to revoke tax breaks for oil companies and extend tax credits for wind and solar power.

Environmentalists are pressing Obama to order the EPA to begin regulating greenhouse gases under authority established by a Supreme Court ruling last year. California Sen. Barbara Boxer, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, plans to push legislation to direct the EPA to set up a cap and trade program, which could add pressure on lawmakers to act on climate change legislation.

[Sacramento Bee, Letter to the Editor, Monday, December 1, 2008](#)

Avoid wood fires, spare the air

Re "Clean air too costly? Not by a long shot" (Editorial, Nov. 14): I am asking everyone in the Sacramento area (Auburn, Rocklin, Grass Valley, Davis, etc.) not to burn this season. Although the fire in the fireplace may be cozy, and burning leaves and other debris convenient, it is killing us.

According to sparetheair.com, our fall and winter air pollution is caused primarily by residential wood burning. This is totally unnecessary. If the wood was purchased, a fire in the fireplace does not save money on heating. It is an inefficient, archaic, dirty way to heat a home.

Look outside. The haze is smoke. If you can see the air and smell the smoke, it is unhealthy, especially for children, the elderly and the many asthmatics in our community. So this holiday season, please give all our lungs a break and skip the fire. This is an easy way that we can all make a positive difference in our environment and the lives of those who live here. All of us who must breathe will thank you.

– Diana Kelly, Rocklin

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Friday, November 28, 2008](#)

Many reasons to expand solar energy

There are many reasons that the Modesto Irrigation District's decisions to continue with gas and natural gas are wrong -- not just financial. There are also asthma rates, air quality outlooks and the costs to our economy of wasteful energy use, not to mention our import-export deficit.

Solar is a cure on many levels. We need incentives, like letting residents sell back excess watts, which is not currently available. Solar incentives need to be given to ratepayers, not addresses, doing the accounting in billing, not at the meter. The incentive should be to put solar on marginal land, not on shaded roofs. We like our trees, and conservation should never be traded off. These changes should be made to state law, so please write the governor at <http://gov.ca.gov/interact> and the California Public Utility Commission at www.cpuc.ca.gov.

But MID's flat two-tier system and lack of time-of-use rates are also disincentives. Progressively tiered rates and TOU rates are well documented incentives. We need both implemented as soon as possible. MID, quit buying renewable energy outside the county and wean us off the use of polluting, costly hydrocarbons.

STEVE HAY, Modesto

[Sacramento Bee, Letters to the Editor, Friday, November 28, 2008](#)

Letters: Air quality, fish hatcheries, Sac State, suburbs, etc.

No excuse for inaction on pollution

Re "Clean air too costly? Not by a long shot" (Editorial, Nov. 14): Now that Californians have been informed that we have the dirtiest air in the country, there is absolutely no excuse for inaction. We must act immediately to save our state, and the changes must start with the Los Angeles basin and the San Joaquin Valley, the two areas in California with the dirtiest air.

Requiring fuel-efficient tires and aerodynamic devices that lower greenhouse-gas emissions is an excellent first step. To understand the impact of this one action, think for a moment about the number of trucks transporting food and supplies on California's roadways each day. Now you can begin to see the savings in terms of our air and our lungs. Add to that the savings of 3,860 lives typically lost prematurely due to severely polluted air.

Opponents of these changes point out that they will cost \$5.5 billion over a 15-year period. What they don't mention is that these costs are more than offset by the projected \$48 billion to \$68 billion in savings (mostly in health care) over that same time period.

If Californians want cleaner air, we must take action now. Otherwise, we'll be trying to fix the problem later while hooked up to our oxygen tanks.

– Kelly Kirkwood, Yuba City

Cost of cleaning up diesel

More than 1.2 million diesel engines in operation in California are responsible for producing approximately 40 percent of the state's nitrogen oxide emissions, and the emissions are causing severe health problems. Although it will cost billions to greatly reduce these emissions, it will greatly improve the health of many Californians.

The state receives a lot of its goods by truck, not only from local suppliers but also from out-of-state suppliers. Enforcing tougher standards on heavy-duty diesel trucks will contribute to our state's budget problems, and it will make it tougher for independent truckers to stay in business.

If we lose independent truckers and state trucking companies, it may become hard to find out-of-state truckers willing to equip their vehicles with the required emission-reducing devices. And that could lead to a great increase in the price of goods in California.

With the way our economy is today, people are lucky to have a job. They may not be so lucky after the emission requirement takes place. Even though health care is important, having a job and paying for the health care is most important.

– Erin Mackey, Olivehurst

Clean air will pay for itself

To think that money is the reason why we are having issues in helping resolve clean-air problems is absolutely beyond my belief. Having clean air in some of the cities with the dirtiest air would eventually pay for itself in the long run.

Yes, it will be expensive for the state of California to require truck owners to install exhaust filters on their rigs and long-haul truckers to equip their vehicles with fuel-efficient tires, but what else do we have to lose? The entire state would eventually see positive connections, with the end result of cleaner air. The Los Angeles basin and the San Joaquin Valley are an amazing starting point. We are living on planet Earth, not the other way around. We need to think of how wonderful it is that we are the ones who change the Earth.

Political leaders continue to ignore the overwhelming scientific research of what is happening to our planet. It's a shame to think that there are so many possibilities out there but that we are just not taking advantage of them.

– L. Segura, Yuba City

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Friday, November 28, 2008](#)

Loose Lips: Time to light a fire under Arnold

Now's a great time to buy

After Barack Obama was elected president, some news agencies reported gun sales spiked. It seemed to suggest that those who cling to their guns wanted a few more on hand in case ... well, just in case.

Until now, Lips has kept Benchwatch 2008 "below the fold" -- newspaper-speak for stories that don't rise to a top-of-the-page placement.

No more, readers.

For Thanksgiving, we're gonna roast a big turkey. No, not the Detroit automakers. Those jet-setters do it to themselves. Governor Arnold is back in the mildly warm seat.

Not a day passes without Lips wondering when he'll finally send a legal-beagle in a black robe to Merced County. We want to see the wheels of justice increase their speed from one revolution per minute to one-and-a-half.

Just Wednesday, Calee-for-ee-uh's fearless leader announced 22 appointments, which included filling a couple of spots on the high-interest Recreational Trails Committee and appointing one of his top campaign donors to the Los Angeles Col-is-see-um Commission.

Not one was for the vacant judge position in Merced County Superior Court.

Lips knows there are plenty of other pressing issues. We've heard the governor is running low on cigars and that the Capitol's printers are running low on red ink.

But can't Arnold grab some attorney -- for goodness' sakes -- and send him or her here? If something doesn't give, Lips will have no choice but to file a lawsuit and grab a number to go before a judge.

Or perhaps it's that we're heading toward a financial Armageddon.

Lips has another theory. With foreclosed homes becoming drug dens or homes for the homeless, we've heard that real estate agents are looking into packing heat.

Agent Andy Krotik, who wears about a dozen hats, is looking to add a holster to his wardrobe. During a TV interview, he told viewers that the danger of walking into a house in the middle of nowhere has made him want to carry a sidearm.

It seems real estate agents are trying to figure out how best to say, "What can I do to get you out of this house today?"

The long and winding road

Councilman and Beatles Project ax-man Jim Sanders told Lips that he's been trying to justify his loss to Supervisor-elect Hub Walsh. Even though everyone who cast a ballot has already forgot about Election Day, Sanders is still ruminating.

Two ways he's boosting himself: One, he may have lost to Walsh by 2,239 votes, but he beat the write-in candidates by more than 5,000 votes. Of course, no one remembers second place.

Two, Sanders has helped take one commuter off Highway 99, improving the air quality by that much. Had Walsh lost, he'd still be cruising down to Madera County.

Maybe this is more evidence of a clean-air movement blowing across Merced.

[L.A. Daily News Editorial, Friday, November 28, 2008:](#)

Back in traffic: Low gas prices lead more to drive

WITH the cost of just about everything rising, it's a relief to find that gas prices are lower than many of us even remember paying. Less than \$2 a gallon in many places!

But cheaper gas has consequences other than just a few extra bucks to pay for groceries - namely worse traffic and air quality.

A funny thing happened as gas prices approached \$5 a gallon this summer: Commuters' comments changed from the unprintable to the unbelievable. Commutes tended to be shorter and freeways less congested as commuters garaged their Hummers and switched to mass transit in record numbers. People were actually thinking good thoughts about Caltrans.

But as gas prices dipped to levels that many of us never thought we'd see again, commuters are taking to the freeways again.

For the Orange Line, the bus that runs between North Hollywood and Woodland Hills, this has meant a dip in ridership. In October, there were 2,559 fewer commuters than the month before. Overall, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority saw 4 percent fewer bus riders, or 30,000 during an average weekday, from September to October.

Fewer riders means more people in their cars, and thus, on the freeway in front of you, and more cars polluting the air.

But the news isn't all bad. Despite declines in ridership in October, the number of Metro bus, subway and light-rail boardings are up between 4 percent and 9 percent over October 2007, leading us to believe that not everyone is going back to their car.

Better news yet is the decline in motor vehicle deaths. Last year, 41,059 people were killed on the nation's roads. Experts are predicting that this year's toll will be about 37,000, the lowest in four decades. In June alone, U.S. motorists drove 12.2 billion fewer miles than a year ago.

Urban policy experts, and some newspaper columnists, were hoping that \$4 gas prices would continue, for a lot of reasons. The use of mass transit, for one. The impetus for automakers to produce fuel-efficient vehicles, for another - with the difference in price between \$2 and \$4 gas going for road repair, mass transit and pollution control.

The shame of it is that as gas prices rise again - and they surely will - that money will wind up in the pockets of oil companies and Middle Eastern sheiks instead of being invested in road repair, mass transit and pollution control.

If there is a bright spot for the economy in this familiar tale of seesaw gas prices, it's that consumers have more money in their pockets this holiday season. A little bit more, but maybe enough for modest spending that benefits local business - but doesn't require credit.

But is that worth the familiar slog down the 405?

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, Nov. 20, 2008:](#)

High-speed rail and jobs

Obama, Congress should make rail part of any stimulus package.

President-elect Barack Obama and congressional leaders will be putting together a stimulus package heavy on public works as a means to pull the nation out of the current economic crisis. We urge them to keep high-speed rail in those plans.

Californians took a giant step forward with the passage of Proposition 1A on Nov. 4, authorizing \$9 billion to start construction of an 800-mile high-speed system for the state. But the high-speed rail proposal always depended on substantial federal funding, as well as investment from the private sector.

There's good news on the federal funding front. Sens. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., and Arlen Specter, R-Pa., introduced a bill on Nov. 19 aimed at helping California and states along the East Coast build such systems. It would include \$10 billion over 10 years to fund improvements in the Northeast and California. It's not enough to pay for the entire federal share of California's anticipated costs, but it's a great start.

The bill is sponsored by several other senators from both parties, reflecting the growing congressional consensus in favor of building high-speed rail systems in the U.S., and for improving passenger rail and transit of all sorts.

"At a time when our economy desperately needs a jump start, we need an effective national investment that puts Americans back to work," Kerry said. "A first-rate rail system would protect our environment, save families time and money, reduce our dependency on foreign oil and help get our economy moving again."

Correct on all counts.

Kerry and Specter aren't the only members of Congress who get it. Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who has been a mainstay in the struggle for high-speed rail since his days in the state Assembly two decades ago, has the system high on his agenda for the new year.

"With the new president-elect, it's going to create an opportunity for federal support for high-speed rail," Costa told McClatchy's Washington Bureau.

The high-speed rail lines in California won't be up and running for another 10 years, by which time -- we hope -- the current recession will just be a bad and fading memory. But federal funding now could be crucial to accelerating the design and engineering work that must take place before any tracks are actually laid down.

That means jobs and economic activity, which is just the prescription for what ails California and the nation right now.

Obama's desires will be crucial, of course. But there's plenty of reason to believe he understands the virtues of high-speed rail, especially in the pump-priming public works sense.

While campaigning in Michigan, candidate Obama asked last September, "Why aren't we building high-speed rail in America ... putting people back to work, saving on energy? Why aren't we doing that?"

Good question then. Even better question now that candidate Obama has become President-elect Obama.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Poland, a country dependent on carbon, hosts climate change conference. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Polonia, un país dependiente del carbón, acoge reunión sobre el clima

Nacho Temiño

La Opinión, Monday, December 01, 2008

VARSOVIA, Polonia (EFE).- La conferencia de Naciones Unidas (ONU) para el cambio climático, una reunión fundamental para alcanzar un texto que sustituya al Protocolo de Kioto, comienza esta semana en Polonia, uno de los países más dependientes del carbón y entre los veinte estados que más CO2 emiten a la atmósfera.

"Somos optimistas y esperamos que gracias a esta conferencia cambie la política energética de nuestro país y se reduzca el uso del carbón: Esta es la responsabilidad del gobierno polaco como organizador de la asamblea", señaló Magdalena Zowsik, responsable de energías de Greenpeace en Polonia.

No es ninguna exageración hablar de dependencia del carbón en el caso de Polonia, pues el 93 por ciento de su energía se obtiene de este mineral, el combustible más contaminante y el mayor emisor de gases de efecto invernadero, asociado con el desarrollo industrial del siglo XIX y engranaje fundamental de la actual economía polaca.

Este desenfrenado "amor" por el carbón, una pasión que comparte con Australia, China y Sudáfrica, sitúa al país centroeuropeo entre los veinte estados que producen más dióxido de carbono, a pesar de contar con una población que no llega a los cuarenta millones de habitantes y una industria que no destaca por un excesivo desarrollo.

"Nuestros gobernantes nunca se han preocupado por el medio ambiente", lamenta Zowsik, que recuerda que el Ejecutivo polaco ha autorizado este año la apertura de una nueva mina de carbón a cielo abierto en los límites del parque natural del Milenio, en el oeste del país, lo que para los ecologistas tendrá funestas consecuencias en la flora, la fauna y los habitantes de la zona.

Además, Polonia lidera a un grupo de países del Este de Europa que piden modificaciones en el acuerdo europeo de lucha contra el cambio climático, al considerar que éste puede frenar su crecimiento económico en un momento de crisis financiera global e incrementar su dependencia energética de la vecina Rusia, desde la que ya llega la inmensa mayoría del gas y del petróleo consumido.

El polémico plan europeo pretende recortar las emisiones de CO2 hasta reducir los niveles a los existentes en el año 1990, lo que afectará especialmente a los sectores energéticos fuertemente dependientes de los carbón.

Para Grzegorz Wisniewski, director del Instituto de Energías Renovables (IEO), los políticos han de concienciarse de que "producir electricidad empleando energías renovables será menos costoso que a través del carbón y, además, permitirá a Polonia beneficiarse de la venta de sus cuotas de CO2 no utilizadas, energías verdes, biofuel y tecnología".

Por el contrario, otros expertos sostienen que el país todavía no está preparado para dar el salto a las energías renovables, ya que por ahora sería imposible satisfacer la demanda que genera su rápido ascenso económico.

La realidad es que Polonia cuenta con cien veces menos aerogeneradores que la vecina Alemania, a pesar de tener condiciones geográficas similares, y el gobierno polaco estudia desarrollar una central nuclear conjuntamente con Lituania, dentro de una estrategia energética a largo plazo.

De esta forma, los delegados de los más de 190 países que estarán presentes en Poznan tendrán que trabajar para superar el CO2 de las centrales de carbón polacas y, lo más importante, la temible crisis financiera, que amenaza con recortar la asignación de recursos para luchar contra el cambio climático.

En Poznan tendrá que consensuarse la hoja de ruta final antes de la conferencia de Copenhague del próximo año, el encuentro definitivo del que debería salir un plan efectivo que sustituya al Protocolo de Kioto y sirva para reducir la emisión de dióxido de carbono y luchar contra el calentamiento global.

Mientras, desde Naciones Unidas se llama al optimismo y el secretario general de la Convención Marco de la ONU para el Cambio Climático (UNFCCC), Yvo de Boer, asegura que la crisis

económica es una oportunidad para que los países se esfuercen más en la lucha contra el cambio climático.