

Valley wood-burning bans rise; deaths fall

Smokeless nights are shown to save premature deaths each year

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Fresno Bee, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008

There may be a little less holiday warmth this season as San Joaquin Valley air authorities step up wood-burning bans in fireplaces, but the smokeless nights are saving lives.

The wood-burning bans are preventing at least 50 premature deaths each year in the Fresno-Clovis area and about 30 annually in Bakersfield, a new study suggests.

The study was completed last month by David Lighthall, who is the health and science adviser for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Lighthall did the research while working as a scientist for the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at California State University, Fresno.

His work bolsters a district board decision in October to tighten the wood-burning rule, resulting in more no-burn days. Air officials have halted burning on 22 days in Fresno County for November and December. The county had only six for the entire season last year.

Lighthall said the stricter rule is justified.

"Our findings provide the district as well as the public with scientific assurance that substantial future improvements in public health will result," he said.

The value of the lives saved is more than \$500 million annually, the study shows. Millions more in health-care costs have been averted.

Burning bans were once a serious public-relations problem for the district, but the public seems more accepting of the action than it was in 2003 when the rule was passed. The rule was required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as part of a lawsuit settlement.

Mounting research shows the microscopic soot from wood burning is among the biggest air-pollution threats to the public. The specks, known as PM-2.5, can evade body defenses, lodge in the lungs, trigger many illnesses and result in premature death.

A 2007 article called "Woodsmoke Health Effects: A Review" in the scientific journal *Inhalation Toxicology* described the danger:

"The sentiment that wood smoke, being a natural substance, must be benign to humans is still sometimes heard. It is now well-established, however, that wood-burning stoves and fireplaces as well as wildland and agricultural fires emit significant quantities of known health-damaging pollutants."

More than 800 Valley residents die prematurely each year due to PM-2.5 pollution from many sources. The biggest contribution comes from the combination of vehicle exhaust and dairy ammonia -- a speck called ammonium nitrate.

But fireplaces focus PM-2.5 where many people live.

"For densely settled urban neighborhoods, the concentration levels and number of individuals at risk is magnified," the Lighthall study says.

To determine the impact of the air district's burning bans, Lighthall studied PM-2.5 exposures in three years before the rule was passed.

He found that 54 fewer people would have died in the Fresno-Clovis area if the burning bans had been called in 2001 and 2003.

Sixty-three fewer people would have died in 2002.

Air activists say they support the district's action in October to tighten the rule. The reduction in sooty air seems dramatic compared with last year, they said.

By the end of December last year, the district had stopped wood burning a total of 24 times for the eight counties.

This year, the no-burn order has been issued 130 times among the eight counties in the same time period.

"I think residents understand what the district is doing with this rule," said Liza Bolaños, coordinator for the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, a nonprofit group representing public health and environmental organizations. "It's a unique opportunity to protect the people who live here."

What's cost of breathing Central Valley's dirty air? \$5.2 billion

Estimate stirs emotions and confusion

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

The more than 800 people who died prematurely this year from breathing dirty San Joaquin Valley air are worth \$6.63 million each, economists say.

Relatives don't collect a dime, but society is willing to pay someone this price. Confused? You're not alone.

The figure -- which surfaced in a report last month -- is commonly misunderstood. People sometimes think it means missed wages, a payout from some global life insurance policy or health expenditures.

After hearing the amount, a government wonk privately suggested cleaning up the Valley's air and using the savings to balance the state's budget. The grand total for more than 800 lost lives is \$5.2 billion.

But this is no pile of cash.

It's a statistic -- the amount of money that society would be willing to spend on preventing premature death due to bad air, economists say. Government agencies routinely use such estimates to establish new safety regulations.

Such a price tag stirs emotions. To some people, it sounds too high. To respiratory therapist Kevin Hamilton, a health advocate in air-quality issues, the number seems low.

"How do you place a value on my wife?" he asked. "How do you represent hope and dreams? It doesn't sound like there's nearly enough value built into it."

The value is based on decades of studies that set value on human life for decision-making agencies, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation.

A central factor in the value: the amount of extra money industries are willing to pay for more risky jobs. Another part of the equation is how much less money people would accept to get a safe job.

For years, these statistical values on human life have been used in cost analyses of new federal cleanup or safety rules.

"It's just like any other risk in society," said economist Jane V. Hall of California State University, Fullerton. "When we choose to pay for widening a bridge, for instance, we do it based on reducing the risk. We do it to protect human life. We need to know the statistical value of a life."

Hall, fellow economist Victor Brajer from Cal State Fullerton and Frederick Lurmann at Sonoma Technology used such a statistic in a report they released last month on the benefits of meeting federal standards in the Valley and the South Coast Air Basin.

The death and dollar figures are staggering, by most accounts. There are 3,800 premature deaths each year in the Valley and the South Coast Air Basin, which have the worst air pollution in the nation.

Using established studies from the California Air Resources Board, the economists determined the air-related deaths occur about 14 years sooner than they should.

The annual value of those early deaths is \$24 billion, economists said. That hefty value should help influence decisions on rules and investments in air cleanup, they said.

For instance, the number helps justify a \$5.5 billion cost for cleaning up on-road diesel truck and bus fleets in California. Diesel trucks and buses are among the biggest sources of toxic diesel particles and ozone-forming oxides of nitrogen.

But don't get the idea that the value of life could be the basis of a lucrative lawsuit.

The \$6.63 million doesn't apply to the life of one individual, such as your uncle or your best friend. Economist Katie Winder, a professor at the University of California at Merced, said the value is not customarily part of lawsuits or other legal proceedings.

Said Winder, "The statistical value-of-life estimates don't take into account variation between individuals in terms of education, productivity, age and other factors."

Adding to the complexity and the confusion, the value does not remain the same for various federal agencies as they consider new safety regulations.

When the Department of Transportation changed child-restraint rules for motorists a few years ago, the cost of each life saved was pegged at between \$1.5 million and \$4.9 million, based on studies of what society would pay to protect the children.

At the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, members of the public have incorrectly used the value as a health expense. Officials worry about the misunderstanding, saying the money is not real.

There are estimates of actual health costs and related spending included in the study from Hall, Brajer and Lurmann. But the estimates amount to a small fraction of the total cost of dirty air cited in the study.

Of the more than \$6 billion in annual Valley cost for bad air, less than 15% applies to health expenditures and days missed for school and work.

But Hall said in the research that the value of life is real money. Industries are willing to pay more for dangerous jobs. People are willing to take less money for safer jobs.

For instance, a steel mill might pay \$700 extra per year for a job with more risk. For a safer job, people would have to accept less money. That difference represents a way society values life.

"That is real money," she said. "It shows how much money people would sacrifice for a safer job."

Fireplace ban saving Valley lives, study finds

Savings in health care and other costs add up to about \$500 million a year

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008

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New year will usher in new laws, local fees

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

Tulare County's drivers will be asked to pay a little more to register their cars beginning Thursday.

They have the county's dirty air to blame.

An additional \$6 will be added to registration costs as a way to increase revenues for pollution control. The fees will be collected throughout the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

It's all part of the new laws and fees that will be ushered in at the stroke of midnight Dec. 31.

Outgoing 34th District Assemblyman Bill Maze is the sponsor of what will be one of the most far-reaching new traffic laws scheduled to go into effect next year. Maze's law — signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger earlier this year — is being billed as a zero-tolerance law for repeat drunken drivers.

It prohibits anyone convicted of driving under the influence from operating a vehicle with a blood-alcohol level of 0.01 percent or more while on probation for the offense.

The law requires the driver to submit to a Breathalyzer test to determine the presence of alcohol. Drivers who refuse a test or whose blood alcohol is 0.01 or greater, will have their license suspended and their vehicle impounded. The normal blood-alcohol limit for other drivers is 0.08 percent.

Maze's bill isn't the only one to become a law with wide-reaching effects. A newly signed ban on texting while driving also will go into effect at the start of the year.

That law was signed in the aftermath of this year's Metrolink train crash in Southern California that killed 25 people and injured 135. The Associated Press reported an investigation indicated the train's engineer

may have been sending a text message and failed to notice a signal just before the commuter train crashed head-on into another train.

The new law makes it an infraction to write, send or read text-based communication on an electronic wireless communications device, including a cell phone, while driving a motor vehicle.

Other major changes involve:

- Alcohol-related reckless driving — Requires those convicted of alcohol-related reckless driving for a second time to participate in a licensed DUI program for at least nine months. Probation may be revoked for failing to complete the program.
- Spilling cargo loads — Eases restrictions on cargo loads of straw or hay to allow individual pieces that do not pose threats to life or property to escape from bales of straw or hay that are being transported by a vehicle upon a highway. The bales have to be loaded and secured according to federal regulations.
- Assault on highway workers — Increases penalties for assaults and battery against California Department of Transportation workers engaged in their duties.

New year, new laws

By Gregory J. Wilcox, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008

California businesses will catch something of a break in 2009.

Ten federal and state laws that take effect Jan. 1 won't be much of a financial burden on them, according to the California Chamber of Commerce.

But one, the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, is cause for concern, said Marc Burgat, the chamber's vice president of government relations. The bill's implementation plan was recently passed and some regulations go into effect next year.

However, Burgat said the chamber hasn't been able to estimate a financial impact.

"I think what's most important to businesses is ... the ability to budget those changes over time, and I think the way it was drafted doesn't allow us to do that," he said of the implementation plan.

The goal of AB 32 is to reduce pollution in California by 20 percent by 2020, said Stanley Young, a spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

And only a few regulations will be implemented next year, with the "lion's share" being developed over the next few years and implemented in 2012, Young said.

The costs to businesses also will be addressed.

"We will deal with the economic implication of each regulation as we develop it," Young said.

Burgat said the state's financial crisis made 2008 an interesting year for businesses, legislation-wise.

"I think that because of the (state) budget situation, there were fewer bills that would have a major impact on businesses," he said.

Here is a look at some of the new laws.

Family and Medical Leave Act -- This pertains to families with active military personal. Companies with 50 or more employees must give workers who qualify 12 weeks of FMLA leave for short-notice deployment, attendance at official military events or activities, arranging or providing child care, attending school or day-care meetings, handling financial and legal matters, and rest and recuperation visits when the soldier is on leave.

Cell-phone use -- Since July 1, drivers have been required to use a hands-free device while talking on a cell phone and driving.

But, unbelievably, they could still drive and type. Starting Jan. 1, however, text messaging and driving will be illegal. You can't read or write now while cruising streets and highways.

Temporary employees -- Wages for employees of temporary-services employers shall be paid weekly or daily if an employee is assigned to a client on a day-to-day basis or to a client engaged in a trade dispute. It does not apply to employees who are assigned to a client for more than 90 consecutive calendar days unless the employer pays the employee weekly.

Minimum pay for exempt computer professionals -- This allows computer professionals to be paid a monthly or annual salary. Before this change, computer professionals had to earn a minimum hourly rate, set by the Division of Labor Statistics and Research annually.

Exemption for physicians paid on hourly basis -- Licensed physicians or surgeons who are primarily engaged in performing duties for which licensure is required are exempt from overtime if they are paid at least the minimum hourly rate set annually by the state.

Passport cards for identification -- The departments of State and Homeland Security have begun issuing "passport cards" that can be used as a "List A" document to verify employment in accordance with the I-9 form.

Political speech -- These guidelines from the National Labor Relations Board concern employee participation in political activities. On-duty political advocacy for or against a specific issue, related to a specifically identified employment concern, is subject to restrictions imposed by lawful and neutrally applied work rules.

And leaving or stopping work to engage in political advocacy related to a specifically identified employment concern can also be subject to restrictions imposed by the employer.

Nutritional information for chain restaurants -- This law requires chain restaurants with 20 or more facilities in California to post nutritional information. It includes the total number of calories, grams of carbohydrates and saturated fat, and the number of milligrams of sodium.

Study shows Hurley Elementary may have greatest exposure to industrial pollution among Visalia schools

BY DAVID CASTELLON

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Dec. 27, 2008

In her native Kentucky, surrounded by coal mines, oil refineries and steel mills, Melanie Kearnan endured the effects of industrial pollution.

In west Visalia, where she now lives next to Hurley Elementary School, Kearnan no longer has the asthma problems she suffered in Kentucky. Her four children — three of whom attend Hurley — have no breathing problems, either.

So it's no surprise that research into what's in the air at Hurley and other schools in Tulare County is generating little concern in the Kearnan household.

Others around the country have reason to worry. Earlier this month, USA TODAY released findings showing lists of particulates that may be in the air around thousands of schools. The newspaper used a computer program developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It incorporated statistics — a toxic release inventory, or TRI — that major industries are required to provide, showing what chemicals and particulates they emit into the air.

Each of the 128,000 schools included in USA TODAY's research was ranked in terms of exposure to particulates. Lower numbers indicate higher exposures.

No Tulare County schools were listed in the highest exposure range. But Hurley's ranking — 62,468 — means it may have the greatest exposure to industrial pollution among Visalia schools.

Missing from the model

The EPA computer model is far from detailed. While it does say Hurley students may be exposed to glycol ethers, xylene, manganese and manganese compounds and nitric acid — any of which can cause significant health problems after high or prolonged exposure — it does not say how much of any of those chemicals may be in the air.

The computer model also fails to factor in:

- Detailed local wind and weather patterns that, in the real world, determine where industrial air emissions go.
- Emissions from traffic or smaller companies that don't have to report their TRIs, including gas stations.

So why do the study at all?

Because it could lead to further, more detailed study, said Dave Warner, director of permit services for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Computer models are no substitute for air-sample analysis, he said.

"In real life," Warner said, "you can have drastically different results."

That's what happened when the Times-Delta, working with USA TODAY, placed a portable air sensor near Hurley Elementary, one of 95 schools in 30 states where USA TODAY conducted its own tests. Those sensors were sent to the University of Maryland's School of Public Health.

What technicians found in the Hurley samples were measurable amounts of two other particulates not listed in the EPA's computer model: carbon tetrachloride, 0.64 grams per cubic meter; and benzene, 0.5 grams per cubic meter. Benzene, commonly found in the air, is emitted by vehicle exhaust, gas stations and the burning of coal and oil.

Carbon tetrachloride is used, though rarely, to make refrigerants and chlorofluorocarbon propellants, according to the EPA. It also can be used as a dry-cleaning agent, a solvent for rubber cement and an ingredient in some soaps and insecticides. It was phased out in the 1980s but still is commonly found in the air, Warner said.

VUSD's role

Susan Cox, director of risk management for the Visalia Unified School District, said that after reading a USA TODAY article on air around schools, she contacted the EPA to find out whether officials should be concerned about the air at Hurley or other district schools.

"They have identified that no school in Visalia has any significant risk," Cox said.

But researchers who oversaw the USA TODAY air studies determined the particulate levels outside Hurley were significant. Statistically, they said, one additional person per 100,000 in the local population could face the risk of cancer.

In some schools in other parts of the country, the sensor data showed that one in 10,000 could face cancer risks.

So whose data is correct?

What the USA TODAY and the EPA found prompted officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to launch their own effort to develop a clearer picture of what's in the air Valley children are breathing at school. While they followed the EPA approach — a computer model based on 2005 TRI reports provided by various industries — the district refined the method by including data on air flow over Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Kern, Kings, Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties.

In addition, the new computer model also is trying to determine concentrations of chemicals and particulates in the air.

Though the research may not be complete until late January, Warner said, the program has come up with some important findings.

"We actually came up with theoretical cancer risks — chronic and acute health risks — and for none of the schools [in the Valley] were there any significant risks," he said.

At Hurley, the district's computer model indicates only a 4-in-1 billion chance of an extra person developing cancer from the air there, Warner said. And among all Tulare County schools, the risks range from 2- to 4.6-in-1 billion.

What particulates may be floating over Hurley and the other schools, and their possible concentrations, still is being calculated, Warner said. But computer models — even the more comprehensive ones — may not show a true picture of what Valley school children are breathing. Actual air testing — which takes time, staff and money — is needed, Warner said.

Based on what she's learned from the EPA and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, Cox said Visalia Unified officials have not asked for a more detailed air study at local schools

Alisa Gubler, a neighbor of Kearnan's whose five children attended Hurley — less than a block from her home — said the air quality there hasn't been a concern to her. But now she wants to know more.

"It would be nice to run some tests that are a little more accurate," she said. "And I guess the schools are a good place to start."

Kearnan, on the other hand, said resources and money would be better applied elsewhere during a statewide budget crunch.

"I don't see a real problem," she said.

Kingsburg animal feed plant at center of conflicting studies on widespread pollution

Results show pollutants across large swath of region; local officials say findings are rough

BY BRETT WILKISON

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Dec. 27, 2008

Among the 18 or so storage silos and array of pipelines and chutes occupying part of an industrial block on Clarkson Drive just east of Highway 99 in Kingsburg, there is no real smokestack of which to speak.

In fact, little about the industrial plant owned by Nutrius LLC to produce animal feed and nutrient supplements suggests that it could be spewing toxins into the air across the south Central Valley.

But a recent study of air quality at schools across the country indicates that the Nutrius plant may be doing just that while another, follow-up study by local air quality regulators says it's not.

The initial study, by USA TODAY — a Gannett-owned newspaper like the Visalia Times-Delta — showed that metal compounds put out by the Nutrius plant during its manufacturing process may be circulating in the air around 155 of 180 Tulare County schools, and could make the air at several Kingsburg schools among the worst-polluted in the nation.

At least that's what a computer model says.

USA TODAY used a computer program developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to identify a half-dozen local industrial facilities and a similar number of pollutants as likely sources of air pollution over Tulare County schools.

Similar computer models were run for schools across the nation.

Nutrius' emissions by far were the most widespread, according to the local model. They consisted of three metal compounds: manganese, copper and zinc. All are nutrients added in the production of animal feed and supplements.

Those toxins would be expected in the air over a wide swath of Tulare County, from Traver to Tipton, including Visalia, Tulare, Porterville, Woodlake, Orosi, Dinuba, Exeter, Lindsay and Strathmore, according to the computer model.

Areas in Fresno, Kings and Kern counties also could be affected. Three Kingsburg schools, including Lincoln Elementary School just across the street from the plant, were ranked among the top 1,000, or worst 2 percent, in a ranking of 128,000 included in the newspaper's study.

But local air quality regulators said they were surprised by those findings.

Nutrius has received annual permits from air regulators since the late 1980s, records show. The plant has never shown up in studies of the Central Valley's top air polluters, which besides vehicles are typically oil refineries and heavy manufacturing facilities, regulators said.

"We've never seen anything like this from a feed plant before," said Rick McVaigh, deputy air pollution control officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Nevertheless, local regulators cautioned against raising alarm bells about Nutrius or Valley air in general based on the study.

The EPA's computer model — which included no actual testing of air around schools — is used to identify potential toxic hotspots around the nation and provides only rough estimates of what may be in the air, agency officials said. It's not a determination of what Nutrius actually emits or what school children and the public are breathing, officials added.

"There are potential pitfalls in drawing any real strong conclusions from [the model]," McVaigh said.

Officials: Follow-up survey shows 'no significant risk'

A follow-up survey now being undertaken by the Valley air district uses more specific site and weather information. It has so far showed "no significant risk" to human health from air pollution at Tulare County and Kingsburg schools, regulators said.

That includes pollution from Nutrius, with industrial emissions that barely measure on a scale of local air-related health risks, they said.

For example, Central Valley residents generally have a 500-in-1 million chance of contracting cancer from air pollution. In the air district's modeling, Nutrius' emissions work out to a 2-to-4.6-in-1 billion chance of cancer, district officials said.

"That is essentially zero," McVaigh said.

Officials said they suspect the EPA's model for Nutrius' emissions may have been based on inaccurate or overly conservative estimates of the metal compounds the plant emits.

The company's most recent emissions report, from 2005, the year used in the model, listed 500 pounds each of manganese, copper and zinc compounds. The same totals were reported for most years stretching back to 1988.

Those numbers, however, are computer-selected medians within a range reported by the company to the EPA, so the actual number could be much less, according to federal and Valley air district officials.

Also, "sometimes companies report what they used in their production process rather than the fraction that gets into the air," McVaigh added.

McVaigh said air district officials will meet with Nutrius managers within the next several weeks to go over its emissions calculations.

"We want to make sure those are real numbers," he said. "We would suspect they would be lower, but if they're higher we want to find out."

Nutrius officials declined to be interviewed for this story. But plant manager Rich Leendertsen said the company was cooperating with the air district's investigation.

"The company is not aware of any environmental issue with toxic chemicals," he said.

Study raises concerns for some

Still, some air-quality advocates say the USA TODAY study should raise some concerns about one particular pollutant.

Manganese, often associated with steel manufacturing, has been shown to be a debilitating neurotoxin when inhaled at high concentrations. Among factory workers and welders the effects have been shown to lead to a disease called manganism, which has symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease.

Increased awareness about the risks of manganese exposure have led to recent campaigns against industrial facilities from Berkeley to the Midwest. Several schools ranked by USA TODAY among the top 50 for their polluted air had manganese emissions on their lists.

While concentrations in those areas may be several thousand times greater than anything in Tulare County, advocates say the study still raises a red flag about local air quality.

"You're not going to see kids walking around with shaky hands," said Ruth Breech, program director for the Bay Area-based Global Community Monitor, a nonprofit that works with communities to improve air quality. "But it is serious," she said, adding that an increased likelihood of learning disabilities could be one possible result.

"We don't know what level [of manganese emissions] is safe.," she said.

Agreement on need for a closer look

Air district officials said they track emissions on more than 700 pollutants, manganese among them. Manganese tracking back to a feed plant was a new issue locally, they said.

"In the four years I've been on the board, we've never had an issue like this brought before us," said Steve Worthley, a Tulare County supervisor and a member of the air district's board of directors.

Regulators emphasized, however, that all local studies show that manganese emissions in the area — including some from Nutrius — are nowhere near the risk thresholds set by the federal and state governments.

"With the levels of exposure we've seen so far, we wouldn't expect this to be a problem," McVaigh said. "But we're still investigating."

County and school officials were likewise cautious about drawing any conclusions from the study, while adding that they supported taking a closer look at the potential effects of Valley air pollution on school children.

"We all want clean air," said Dr. Karen Haight, public health officer for Tulare County's Health and Human Services agency. "To say specifically what might be the problem with manganese, I can't say right now."

"If this issue affects Tulare County, we are committed to supporting efforts to maintain the healthiest environment for Tulare County students," added Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Jim Vidak.

Additional Facts

SEARCH USA TODAY'S NATIONWIDE FINDINGS ONLINE

To read all the stories in USA TODAY series, "The Smokestack Effect: Toxic Air and America's Schools," go online to <http://content.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/smokestack/index>. The site also allows you to look up schools by names, cities and counties to see how they ranked among 128,000 U.S. schools based on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Risk Screening Environmental Indicators database.

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Earlier this year, USA TODAY launched a special report looking at air pollution at 128,000 public and private schools across the country.

The newspaper used an Environmental Protection Agency computer program that tracked industrial emissions from more than 20,000 industrial and government facilities.

While the model developed with the program lists various chemicals and particulates that may be around the schools, it isn't necessarily accurate, as the program uses 2005 pollution data provided by

businesses, nor does the program factor in detailed, local wind patterns that would determine where and how far pollutants travel.

In addition, USA TODAY worked with researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland School of Public Health to conduct on-the-ground monitoring of air quality near 95 public and private schools in 30 states, including Hurley Elementary School in Visalia and Kirk Elementary School in Fresno.

As part of the project, the Times-Delta placed chemical monitoring devices within 100 yards of Hurley and Kirk, and similar devices were placed near the other schools.

The USA TODAY monitoring lasted only four to seven days, so the findings may not reflect the schools' long-term air quality, as wind direction can significantly affect the concentrations of pollutants on any given day.

Ask TBC: Why can restaurants violate a no-burn day and I can't?

The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Dec. 28 2008

Q: If you drive through Bakersfield you'll see all these restaurants using big barbecue pits and burning wood all day long. On no-burn days, why are they apparently exempt from wood-burning restrictions? — Tom Allesch

A: Under the air district's no-burn rule, "cookstoves" are exempt.

The exemption applies to restaurants and residential grills and barbecues, according to Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"Outdoor burning for cooking is exempt," Turner said. "You can barbecue on a no-burn day."

That doesn't mean you can pop popcorn in your fireplace on a no-burn day and claim the cooking device exemption. That idea has been put forth in a recent radio commercial for a local firewood company as a way to get around the no-burn rule, Turner said.

But it won't get you out of a violation if you're caught by air district inspectors.

Tracy First has ties to Save Mart

Written by Eric Firpo

Tracy Press, Friday, Dec. 26, 2008

A couple of local Wal-Mart critics were recruited to join or speak on behalf of Tracy First by some people with ties to Save Mart. Tracy First has twice sued the city to foil big-box grocers.

A group that sued Tracy to keep a big-box retailer from getting bigger seems to be a loose affiliation of Wal-Mart opponents who appear to have been recruited by people with ties to Save Mart.

But any sort of membership list for Tracy First is a closely guarded secret because some members fear retaliation, says the group's attorney, Steve Herum of Herum and Crabtree in Stockton.

While dozens of people criticized Wal-Mart as a predator that will drive local merchants out of business, Tracy First is a lightning rod for Wal-Mart's army of fans because it has twice sued the city.

Tracy First filed a lawsuit against Tracy on Nov. 21 over a City Council vote earlier that month that allows Wal-Mart to add about 82,000 square feet of space to its 126,000-square-foot Grant Line Road store. Roughly 33,000 square feet will be devoted to a grocery store.

Council members voted to support Wal-Mart in part because they wanted to promote competition and because many who shop locally believe they'll save money.

But the lawsuit says the city failed to properly study what a bigger store will mean for traffic and air pollution in Tracy, among other environmental, social and economic effects. The group filed a similar lawsuit against Tracy in April 2007 over its approval of a WinCo grocery store near Wal-Mart. The city won that case, which has been appealed.

In the WinCo lawsuit, Tracy First successfully fought an effort to hand over the names of people who are in Tracy First, as the judge thought it would violate the First Amendment right of free association. The city is appealing that part of the ruling.

The most recent effort to get Tracy First to name names came from Councilman Steve Abercrombie, who penned a commentary in Saturday's Tracy Press.

"If these people are going to continue to file suit against the city, then people would like to know who they are," he wrote.

In City Council meetings this year at which Wal-Mart was debated, several people spoke on behalf of Tracy First.

At a July meeting, Greta Yerian of Tracy complained that a bigger Wal-Mart would add traffic to already clogged roads.

Yerian, who makes Greta's Sesame Soy Marinade, which Save Mart has sold for 20 years, said she was asked to speak by Mike Bacchetti, who manages the meat department at the West 11th Street Save Mart.

"I'm not a part of the group, though," she said. "I think a lot of people were confused about that. I just spoke on their behalf, and that was that."

Bacchetti said there are six or seven people in Tracy who are part of Tracy First. He thinks that once WinCo is built and Wal-Mart is expanded, "it's going to close down a couple of stores. Money's just being shifted from one side to another."

Marvin Rothschild, a Tracy First member who agreed to put his name on the Wal-Mart lawsuit, was asked to speak at a council meeting by Jim Watt, who Bacchetti said is in real estate but used to work for Save Mart and Safeway.

In July, Rothschild criticized Wal-Mart because he said the company pays low wages and because he didn't want "the big-box feel anymore," according to minutes of the meeting.

Rothschild is one of the many Wal-Mart critics who believe its grocery store will leave a trail of urban decay in other shopping centers around town, which is one of the reasons he willingly joined the group.

Watt and Scott Stegeman of Sebastopol, who was part of Citizens Against Wal-Mart in Santa Rosa, also spoke on behalf of Tracy First.

Herum said others in the group "are intimidated in taking on their city. They don't want to be up front about the potential for harassment they may face."

Firewood sales drop dramatically as Spare the Air law takes hold

By Ken McLaughlin, Mercury News

In the Contra Costa Times, Friday, Dec. 26, 2008

A new law that bans burning wood in fireplaces, stoves and outdoor pits during Spare the Air alerts is dramatically chopping into firewood sales.

As critics continue to attack the law as unjust and even un-American, local businesses that sell firewood say sales have plummeted about 75 percent since the law took effect in November. And businesses that sell wood stoves say the law has accelerated a consumer trend toward burning natural gas rather than wood.

"My business is easily down by three-quarters, and so is everybody else's," said Tony Miller, owner of Tony's Oak and Hardwood in San Jose. "There's something spiritual about burning logs in a fireplace. It feels good. It's primal. To put a damper on something like this is disheartening. It's not right."

Officials at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the American Lung Association, however, say the new law is just the right medicine for people who suffer from asthma and other respiratory illnesses. They say soot from wood smoke makes up a third of particle pollution during the Bay Area's winters and has for too long been thought of as benign.

"People are now recognizing that the smoke coming out of their chimneys is the other second-hand smoke," said Lisa Fasano, spokeswoman for the district. "It burns for a lot longer than a cigarette, and it's unfiltered."

The district's board of directors approved the law last summer. While it was O.K. to burn wood on Christmas Day, the rule applies on about 20 fall and winter days when district meteorologists decide that weather conditions make burning wood too unhealthy. The Spare the Air alerts are most often issued on chilly days when the air is still and pollution is trapped close to the ground.

Every time an alert is issued, teams of smoke inspectors are dispatched throughout the Bay Area. First-time violators are sent warning letters; 90 letters went out following the first five alerts. Fines for subsequent violations top out at several thousands of dollars.

Critics say the new law is government run amok.

Miller, the firewood seller, said he is particularly offended by the air district's complaint line, which allows people to report on neighbors. "That smacks of Marxism," he said.

Also upset is John Spina, owner of Oaktree Woodyard in San Jose, who said his firewood business is, like Miller's, down two-thirds from last year.

He said the district should exempt EPA-certified stoves and fireplace inserts. "You don't ban cars because they cause pollution," he said. "You put catalytic converters on them, and that doesn't take a right away."

Kevin McAndrews, manager of California Window & Fireplace Outlet in Campbell, said he's seen wood stove sales drop 40 percent in the last two to three years. And the new law, he said, has caused sales to plunge even more.

"I still get the diehard wood people," he said, but noted that natural gas stoves and fireplaces now account for about 85 percent of sales.

Vince Noack, a retired contractor from Santa Clara, said: "I think this damn law is absolutely criminal. It's going to put hundreds of firewood people out of business at a time when the economy is already falling apart."

As a young man in the U.S. Army, Noack said, he landed on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day and helped liberate two Nazi death camps. "And now I can't even light my fireplace when I want," Noack, 86, said with a sigh.

Galen Mitrzyk, a Palo Alto resident, said he agrees with Noack. "This man put his life on the line fighting fascism," said Mitrzyk, 53. "He has a right to burn a fire."

Mitrzyk, who once worked in marketing for Hewlett-Packard, has been battling the air district, arguing that the new law is unconstitutional because fire is a key part of pagan rituals.

Mitrzyk, a neo-pagan pantheist, performs a fire-gazing ritual in his backyard in which he builds a small fire in a chiminea, a freestanding fireplace. He said the day he performs the ritual is based in part on the full moon, and if the lunar calendar happens to conflict with a Spare the Air alert he's going to start the fire whether the district likes it or not.

Tom Foley, of Livermore, however, couldn't be more delighted with the law. Foley, 50, said he was forced to move from Redwood City, his home for four decades, because his neighbor had his fireplace going around the clock. He said his dog died from lung cancer and he developed asthma and a weak immune system.

"People can burn as much as they want, but maybe they should vent the smoke into their own homes," he said facetiously.

Chimney sweeps, too, are seeing a drop in business.

"A lot of my customers tell me they're not burning this year and that they didn't get their wood," said Nick Miloslavich, owner of New World Chimney in San Jose. "My business is down by a third, and customers tell me the new law is confusing."

Virginia Gabbard, 84, of Mountain View, said she has stopped using her fireplace altogether because she finds the law so perplexing.

She said she misses the wood heat because it does wonders for her rheumatoid arthritis and her 89-year-old husband's constant cough. "But I'm so worried about getting a big fine," said Gabbard, a retired electronics assembly supervisor.

Fasano, the air district spokeswoman, said district employees recently went door to door in Campbell and three other Bay Area cities to explain the new law. And the overwhelming majority of residents, she said, were understanding — and polite.

"Nobody," she said, "threw a shoe at us."

Change in the air

This fall and winter is the first time it's been illegal to burn wood in fireplaces, wood stoves and outdoor pits on certain days. Here's how the new law works:

- Each morning, meteorologists at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District decide whether to issue a Winter Spare the Air alert beginning at noon that day. If an alert is issued, it lasts until noon the next day. But there's a chance that meteorologists could extend the alert a day.
- The alerts are issued during the months of November, December, January and February. All nine Bay Area counties are affected by the new law: Santa Clara, Alameda, San Mateo, San Francisco, Marin, Contra Costa, Napa, southwestern Solano and southern Sonoma. Not affected are Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties, which are in a different air quality district.
- To enforce the law, four to six two-member teams of smoke inspectors patrol Bay Area neighborhoods, looking for chimney smoke. First-time violators are sent warning letters. Fines for subsequent violations range from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on the seriousness of the violation.
- The law exempts people who use a wood stove as their only source of heat, as well as those who can prove they have a non-working furnace.
- The district's Web site is www.sparetheair.org

TVA to test water wells, air purity near ash slide

By KRISTIN M. HALL, The Associated Press

In the LA Daily News and Hanford Sentinel, Sunday, Dec. 28, and Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

KINGSTON, Tenn. - The CEO and president of the nation's largest public utility vowed to clean up a community encased in sludge after a major coal ash spill, where many residents fear toxic elements could seep into their drinking water.

Sandy Dickman, whose land remains covered by several feet of gray muck, said he doesn't think he'll be drinking the water. And he dreaded what might happen after the mire dries out and could become airborne, despite the utility's promise to test air quality and local wells.

"It will look like a blizzard in the Arctic," said Dickman, who moved to the area in 1975 and said he always suspected such a flood could happen. Tennessee Valley Authority head Tom Kilgore fielded questions from more than 200 residents at a meeting Sunday -- people like Dickman, worried about everything from property values to livestock that could ingest contaminated water or grass.

Some carried anti-coal industry signs, including one that said "Clean Coal is a myth."

Officials at the utility have said the water is safe to drink after a neighborhood flooded Dec. 22 with more than a billion gallons of water and fly ash, a byproduct of burning coal. The spill coated 300 acres after a dike burst at a retention pond used to store the ash at TVA's Kingston Fossil Plant, about 35 miles west of Knoxville. Some also was dumped into the Emory River.

"This is not a time when TVA holds its head high. I'm here to say we are going to clean it up and we are going to clean it up right," Kilgore said. He said TVA would pay for the water and air tests, but could not say how long cleanup would take.

The Environmental Protection Agency also said in a press release Sunday that people should be safe unless they drink untreated river water. The EPA found elevated levels of arsenic in some surface water, but said the poison was not detected in samples taken near the intake for the Kingston Water Treatment Plant, which supplies drinking water.

The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation has also said elevated contaminant levels were found in water samples in the immediate area of the spill, but not around the plant's intake.

Three homes were destroyed and 42 property owners had damage of some kind, according to Roane County emergency management officials.

Crystell Flinn's home was among those destroyed by the ash slide, her belongings swept away only three days before Christmas. Now, she and her family are living in a hotel paid for by TVA. Kilgore said the utility was providing for the short-term needs of three families, but Flinn said there is nothing to return to.

"It looks like a tsunami," Flinn said. "It's not like they can scoop it up and scrape it off."

Kilgore was asked again Sunday what caused the dike to fail. He said TVA is still investigating, but utility officials have said cold weather and above-normal rains were contributing factors.

The Southern Alliance for Clean Energy said Saturday that authorities should more strongly warn residents that muck from the spill could pose health risks.

Knoxville-based TVA supplies electricity to Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia.

Climate Change May Boost Contact With Pollutants

Washington Post, Friday, December 26, 2008

FRIDAY, Dec. 26 (HealthDay News) -- Global climate change may lead to a rise in health problems due to increased exposure to harmful air pollutants, suggest researchers who reviewed studies projecting the impact of climate change on air quality.

The review authors also concluded that reducing greenhouse gas emissions could help reduce the harmful effects of climate change.

The review looked at how climate change will affect ground-level ozone, a known pulmonary irritant that affects the respiratory mucous membranes, other lung tissues, and respiratory function. Exposure to elevated levels of ozone is associated with increased hospital admissions for asthma, allergic rhinitis, pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and other respiratory diseases.

"Projections suggest that climate change will increase concentrations of tropospheric ozone, at least in high-income countries, when precursor emissions are held constant, which would increase morbidity and mortality," wrote review authors Kristie L. Ebi and Glenn McGregor. "The potential impact of climate change on ozone concentrations have not been projected for low-income countries, many of which currently have significantly higher ozone exposures."

The authors said further research is needed to better project the health impacts caused by changing concentrations of ozone caused by climate change. They said areas of uncertainty include the projected degree of future climate change, the impact of future emissions and their pathways, potential changing weather patterns, severity of episodes of poor air quality, and changes in population vulnerability.

The review findings were published in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*. According to journal editor-in-chief Hugh A. Tilson: "As we reduce vehicle-based emissions of pollutants, urban concentrations of ozone will also be reduced, thereby positively protecting the health of humans for generations to come."

In 2000, urban air pollution caused 800,000 deaths and resulted in 7.9 million disability-adjusted life-years lost due to respiratory problems, lung disease and cancer, according to the World Health Organization.

More information

The World Health Organization has more about climate change and health.

SOURCE: Environmental Health Perspectives, news release, December 2008

Burning Coal at Home Is Making a Comeback

By TOM ZELLER Jr. and STEFAN MILKOWSKI
N.Y Times, Friday, Dec. 26, 2008

SUGARLOAF, Pa. — Kyle Buck heaved open the door of a makeshift bin abutting his suburban ranch house. Staring at a two-ton pile of coal that was delivered by truck a few weeks ago, Mr. Buck worried aloud that it would not be enough to last the winter.

"I think I'm going through it faster than I thought I would," he said.

Aptly, perhaps, for an era of hard times, coal is making a comeback as a home heating fuel.

Problematic in some ways and difficult to handle, coal is nonetheless a cheap, plentiful, mined-in-America source of heat. And with the cost of heating oil and natural gas increasingly prone to spikes, some homeowners in the Northeast, pockets of the Midwest and even Alaska are deciding coal is worth the trouble.

Burning coal at home was once commonplace, of course, but the practice had been declining for decades. Coal consumption for residential use hit a low of 258,000 tons in 2006 — then started to rise.

It jumped 9 percent in 2007, according to the Energy Information Administration, and 10 percent more in the first eight months of 2008.

Online coal forums are buzzing with activity, as residential coal enthusiasts trade tips and advice for buying and tending to coal heaters. And manufacturers and dealers of coal-burning stoves say they have been deluged with orders — many placed when the price of heating oil jumped last summer — that they are struggling to fill.

"Back in the 1980s, we sold hundreds a year," said Rich Kauffman, the sales manager at E.F.M. Automatic Heat in Emmaus, Pa., one of the oldest makers of coal-fired furnaces and boilers in the United States, in a nod to the uptick in coal sales that followed the oil crises of the 1970s.

"But that dwindled to nothing in the early 1990s — down to as many as 10 a year," he said. "It picked up about a year ago, when we moved about 60 units, and then this year we've already sold 200."

Dean Lehman, the plant manager for Hitzer Inc., a family-owned business in Berne, Ind., that makes smaller, indoor coal stoves, said his stoves were on back order until March. And Jeffery Gliem, the director of operations at the Reading Stove Company and its parent, Reading Anthracite, in Pottsville, Pa., which supplies coal and stoves to 15 states in the Northeast and Midwest, said the uptick in interest was the largest he had seen in 30 years.

"In your typical year you might have five, six, seven thousand stoves being sold," Mr. Gliem said. "This year it was probably double that."

The coal trend is consistent with steep increases in other forms of supplementary heating that people can use to save money — most of them less messy than coal. Home Depot reports that it has sold more than 80,000 tons of pellet fuel, a sort of compressed sawdust, for the season to date. That is an increase of 137 percent compared with the same period last year, said Jean Niemi, a company spokeswoman.

Coal may never make economic sense in areas far from where it is mined. But in places within reasonable delivery range, the price tends to be stable, compared with heating oil or natural gas. Prices for natural gas more than tripled in recent years before plunging in the last few months amid the downturn.

Coals vary in quality, but on average, a ton of coal contains about as much potential heat as 146 gallons of heating oil or 20,000 cubic feet of natural gas, according to the Energy Information Administration. A ton of anthracite, a particularly high grade of coal, can cost as little as \$120 near mines in Pennsylvania.

The equivalent amount of heating oil would cost roughly \$380, based on the most recent prices in the state — and over \$470 using prices from December 2007. An equivalent amount of natural gas would cost about \$480 at current prices.

Mr. Buck said he could buy coal for \$165 a ton. On a blustery afternoon recently, he was still studying the manual for his \$2,300 Alaska Channing stoker, which gave off an intense heat in the den. An automated hopper in the back slowly dispensed fine anthracite coal chips into the stove's belly, and every couple of days, Mr. Buck emptied the ash. He said he hoped the stove would cut his oil consumption in half.

"Now, somewhere, you've got to take into account the convenience of turning up your thermostat, versus having two tons of coal to shovel and the hopper and ashes to deal with," Mr. Buck said. But if the \$330 worth of coal in his makeshift bin "heats the house for the winter," he added, "you can't beat it."

Wesley Ridlington, a homeowner in Fairbanks, Alaska, bought an outdoor coal furnace for \$13,000 in March and uses it as his main source for heat and hot water.

On a recent evening, as the temperature hovered around 23 below zero, Mr. Ridlington worked to free up the rotating burning plate inside the furnace, which he figured was jammed by a pebble. He did not seem to mind the glitch, or, for that matter, loading the furnace twice a week and emptying the ash pan every night. "It takes a little bit of time," he said, "but for the savings, it's worth it."

Mr. Ridlington said he was typically burning 1,500 gallons of oil each winter to heat his 3,300-square-foot home. At last year's prices, that would have cost about \$7,000, he said. This winter, he expects to burn nine tons of coal at a cost of about \$1,400.

"The initial cost was expensive," he said. "But in three to five years, it'll be paid for, even with prices going down. And if fuel goes back up again, it'll be even more savings."

Rob Richards, who owns a business in Fairbanks that sells spas, pool tables, and now outdoor coal furnaces, said that when oil prices were higher, he could promise fuel cost savings of more than 75 percent and a payback of 18 months for an outdoor coal furnace. With oil prices down again, orders for furnaces have dropped off, and the savings are closer to 50 percent with a few years' time to recoup the cost, he said.

"Still, you're looking at a quick payback," Mr. Richards added.

Coal was a dominant source of heat for American homes for much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Americans were still burning more than 50 million tons for heating in 1950, according to the federal statistics.

But coal, primarily used today in power plants and steelmaking, has not been used for heating on a large scale for decades. Cleaner and more easily distributed forms of heating fuel — including natural gas, electricity and oil — displaced coal, and residential use dropped precipitously, to 2.8 million tons by 1975, and then to less than 500,000 tons by 2000.

Even with the recovery of the last couple of years, residential use of coal in the United States, at less than 300,000 tons today and representing a fraction of 1 percent of all coal use, is "not even a blip on the screen," said Carol Raulston, a spokeswoman for the National Mining Association.

Still, even amid the steep decline, small upticks similar to the current one have appeared from time to time, and residential use of coal never entirely went away.

In Homer, Alaska, fall storms wash crude coal onto the beach from underwater deposits. In the mountains of eastern Kentucky or the hills of central Pennsylvania, residents can simply dig it out of the ground.

"As long as people have been mining coal up there," said John Hiatt of Kentucky's Office of Mine Safety and Licensing, "people have burned coal in their houses."

Government data suggest that about 131,000 households use coal as their primary source of heat, with perhaps 80,000 more using it as a secondary source. Those numbers are small enough that issues relating to pollution and greenhouse gas emissions have remained largely off the radar.

Burning coal does throw fine particles into the air that can pose problems for some people, similar to the problems involved in burning wood — though wood stoves and fireplace inserts are increasingly subject to regulation to cut down on pollutants.

“Coal stoves don’t have that,” said James E. Houck, the president of Omni Environmental Services, a firm in Portland, Ore., that tests air quality. “And there’s no regulatory pressure for them to have it.”

In some localities where residential coal burning is becoming a factor, that might be changing. In Fairbanks, air quality experts suspect the increase in coal burning — along with increased wood burning — is contributing to concentrations of fine particles well above federal limits.

“We see it as a real health hazard to Fairbanks,” said Jim Conner, the Fairbanks North Star Borough’s air quality specialist.

Concerns like these have not deterred companies marketing coal. Back East, the Blaschak Coal Corporation, a midsize supplier of anthracite in Mahanoy City, Pa., still emblazons company trucks and baseball caps with images of Santa Claus lugging a sack of coal.

“Everybody’s looking at wherever they can to save money,” said Daniel Blaschak, a co-owner of the company. “ ’Cause guess what? We no longer have disposable income. We are up to our necks in debt. And there’s very few things we can’t live without, but heat is one of them.”

Once world's smoggiest, Mexico City cuts pollution

Associated Press

San Diego Union-Tribune, Friday, Dec. 26, 2008

MEXICO CITY — Gabriela Escalante stalks the rumbling streets alongside newspaper, peanut and candy vendors, wading deep into traffic at red lights across town.

Her eyes are fixed on tailpipes.

A member of Mexico City’s “ecoguarda,” or environmental police, she and some 50 colleagues are on the lookout for white clouds of toxic exhaust, stopping hundreds of offending motorists each day, issuing \$100 fines and confiscating license plates — a small but urgent army fighting the capital’s infamous air pollution.

“We detect, we detain and we fine,” said Escalante, 27. “This is the air we all breathe.”

Not long ago, air in this throbbing capital was so bad that cyclists wore surgical masks. Birds fell dead in mid-flight, and children used brown crayons to draw the sky. Ozone exceeded safe levels on 97 percent of days in the year.

But the metropolis ranked the world’s most polluted by a 1992 U.N. report has since slashed some of its worst emissions by more than three-quarters and has become a model for improving urban air quality.

Capitals such as Beijing, Cairo, New Delhi and Lima are now more contaminated, according to the World Bank, while air in at least 30 other cities contains more toxic particles, including Barcelona and Prague.

When Latin American leaders met here last month to discuss the environment, many looked to Mexico as an example of progress, said Sergio Jellinek, a World Bank spokesman who attended the forum.

Still, a nagging cloud of ozone has been harder to reduce — a sign of the secondary air pollution problems that cities can expect even after cutting their most visible contaminants.

With the onset of winter, the worst time of year for pollution, Mexico City has said it plans to spend \$3 billion by 2012 to expand public transit and further slash emissions.

“There has been a large improvement, and it’s important to show it could be done,” said Mario Molina, a Nobel Prize-winning Mexican chemist now advising President-elect Barack Obama’s transition team on environmental issues. “But there’s still a long way to go to get really satisfactory air.”

Ringed by volcanoes and nearly a half-mile higher than Denver, the city’s geography and population make it a “perfect factory” for pollution, said Adrian Fernandez, head of the National Institute of Ecology, Mexico’s version of the EPA.

In thin air at over 7,300 feet, fuel burns less efficiently, releasing more unused particles. Breathing deeper to fill their lungs, people inhale more toxins.

High-altitude sunshine speeds the chemical reactions that transform emissions into a lethal stew of smog. That brown cloud blankets the city, lowering temperatures cool and trapping pollutants on the ground.

“What you have is a casserole dish with a lid on top,” said Armando Retama, a chemist at the city's Environment Department.

Mexico City and its sprawling suburbs swelled from 3 million people in 1950 to more than 20 million today, making it the world's second-biggest urban area after Tokyo. Economic growth kept pace, boosting energy consumption and flooding the roads with more than 4 million vehicles.

Traffic is so clogged that average speeds have dipped to 13 mph, the Environment Department says. Even with today's cleaner cars, experts agree that 70 to 80 percent of emissions are vehicle-related.

The fumes inspired the novelist Carlos Fuentes to rename his toxic capital “Makesicko City” – and it does make people sick.

Studies show the air irritates the eyes, nose and throat and worsens asthma, allergies, colds, coughs, bronchitis and the flu, while increasing infant deaths and overall mortality. Long-term exposure was found to impair one's sense of smell and to decrease the size and strength of children's lungs.

Mexico has been fighting the haze for decades, passing its first anti-pollution bill in 1971, a year after the U.S. formed the EPA. But enforcement lagged – until the record smog of the early 1990s.

Learning from Los Angeles' air cleanup, Mexico got to work changing technology and laws. Unleaded gasoline was introduced, catalytic converters were required on new cars, a major refinery was closed and power plants were pushed to switch from oil to natural gas. Factories moved away, decentralizing some of the clog.

The city began emissions tests in 1989 in a landmark program that banned old and failing cars from the road one day a week. Emulated in Beijing, Bogota, Seoul, Santiago, Sao Paulo and elsewhere, Mexico's program now idles at least 320,000 cars a week.

In their first democratic vote for mayor, residents in 1997 elected the green-friendly Democratic Revolution Party, which has since dominated city politics. The capital now vows to slash greenhouse gases 12 percent by 2020 and champions public transit, which accounts for 82.5 percent of trips taken each day.

Data from the city's 36 air-quality monitoring stations show lead levels down 95 percent since 1990, while sulfur dioxide has fallen 86 percent, carbon monoxide 74 percent, and peak ozone levels 57 percent since 1991.

Still, when chemist Retama pulls a filter from an air collector at a rooftop station, the fine screen is covered with a gray film.

“This is what people are breathing into their lungs,” he said.

Mexico's federal government still subsidizes gasoline, even as its sagging state oil monopoly delays introducing ultra-low-sulfur fuel. Most trucks and buses are exempt from emissions tests, and a flood of dirty used cars is set to cross the border from the U.S. when NAFTA restrictions expire in January.

Peak ozone levels still exceed the recommended limit on more than half the days in the year.

On the streets, drivers pulled over for polluting often plead poverty, saying they can't afford to fix their cars.

But in a dusty trailer at ecoguarda headquarters, where shelves bulge with 30,000 confiscated license plates, sympathy is short.

“Anyone who has a car should be responsible for keeping it in good condition,” said Alejandro Lopez Carrillo, former head of the unit, who himself is banned from driving his over-the-hill 1998 Lincoln on Fridays.

"I want to have a better world, with better air for our families and futures."

Mexico City crackdown has led to less pollution

By Theresa Bradley

San Diego Union-Tribune, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008

MEXICO CITY — Gabriela Escalante stalks the rumbling streets alongside newspaper, peanut and candy vendors, wading deep into traffic at red lights across town.

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Not long ago, air in this throbbing capital was so bad that cyclists wore surgical masks. Birds fell dead in flight, and children used brown crayons to draw the sky. Ozone exceeded safe levels 97 percent of the year.

But the metropolis ranked the world's most polluted by a 1992 U.N. report has since slashed some of its worst emissions by more than three-quarters and has become a model for improving urban air quality.

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"There has been a large improvement," said Mario Molina, a Nobel Prize-winning Mexican chemist now advising President-elect Barack Obama's transition team on environmental issues. "But there's still a long way to go to get really satisfactory air," said Molina, who is on the faculty at the University of California San Diego.

Ringed by volcanoes and nearly a half-mile higher than Denver, Mexico City's geography and population make it a "perfect factory" for pollution, said Adrián Fernández, head of the National Institute of Ecology, Mexico's version of the EPA.

In thin air at over 7,300 feet, fuel burns less efficiently, releasing more unused particles. Traffic is so clogged that average speeds have dipped to 13 mph, the Environment Ministry says. Even with today's cleaner cars, experts say 70 percent to 80 percent of emissions are vehicle-related.

[Tracy Press Commentary, Friday, Dec. 26, 2008:](#)

Supervisor offers 5th District assessment

Written by Leroy Ornellas

Leroy Ornellas takes a look back at 2008 and takes a glance into the county's plans for 2009.

My first point of order is to thank the citizens of San Joaquin County's 5th supervisorial district for re-electing me to serve another term as your county supervisor. I appreciate your trust and confidence and will serve with that in mind.

This election cycle has been historic indeed, and "change" was the order of the day. Change we shall have, but along with that comes some very challenging times.

Budget

Federal, state, local and school district budgets are being strained, calling for difficult decisions that may lead to reduced services, layoffs, postponed projects and even tax or fee hikes.

Fortunately, we at the county have established a substantial reserve fund and are confident we will weather this economic storm. However, the state's budget woes and reductions in property tax revenue could impact county services and projects.

I am happy to report that our fiscal situation at San Joaquin County Hospital continues to improve.

Crime

As I mentioned last year, the board of supervisors made permanent a task force I assembled to address illegal dumping.

This task force has been working on a Web site to help streamline the reporting process and offer information to the public about this issue. I hope you will visit www.sigov.org/illegaldumping/default.htm and learn how you can help us combat this ugly problem.

This year we increased the budgets for both the sheriff and district attorney so that they could add the resources necessary to address current crime trends.

Jail overcrowding continues to be an issue. Sheriff Steve Moore has successfully advocated for state funds to expand the jail and has been conditionally awarded \$80 million. We should know early next year when the state will release the funds and when the project can proceed.

Veterans

Care for our military veterans continues to be a high priority for the county.

On Jan. 30, 2009, we will have our second Homeless Veterans Stand Down. Last year we had more than 300 participants and volunteers who served 149 veterans. Veterans receive everything from medical and dental services to housing, employment and legal services at this event. For more information about the Stand Down, please visit www.sigov.org/homelessveterans/stand_down.htm or call my office at 468-3114.

In 2004, I testified before a panel at the Livermore VA Facility as part of the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services process enacted by then-VA Secretary Tony Principi. As a result of that process, the VA announced it would locate an Ambulatory Care Center and Community Care Center in the Central Valley.

In 2005, the board of supervisors directed county staff to submit a proposal to locate the facilities at the San Joaquin General Hospital grounds. We recently met with VA representatives and their consultants to review our proposal and learned that a location will be selected early next year.

Meanwhile, the VA is seeking approval to expand our clinic, which opened in 2006, by 10,000 square feet to meet increased demand and to add services, such as pharmacy and radiology.

Airport

After a several-month search, we recently named a new airport director. I look forward to working with her to get things moving again at the Stockton Metropolitan Airport.

Allegiant Air continues to serve us with weekly flights to and from Las Vegas. We also received an FAA grant to be used to help us attract additional airline service.

If you are going to Vegas, please use Stockton, because to attract more service we must demonstrate that we have the passengers to fill flights.

Air quality

I have just finished my tenure as chair of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Board. During my tenure, the district continued to implement programs that make the air cleaner for all residents of the San Joaquin Valley.

The air district worked hard to secure significant increases in state and federal funding, which are being used to implement our programs in quest of cleaner valley air.

We also adopted tough regulations to meet federal mandates. The district recognized how difficult and costly these changes would be for Central Valley businesses and worked closely with all stakeholders to minimize the cost to the extent possible.

The district realizes that to continue improving air quality, we will need greater participation by the general public. So in 2008, we launched a major public outreach campaign known as the Healthy Air Living Initiative. To learn more, visit www.valleyair.org.

I am out of allotted space. As always, it is an honor serving the citizens of the south county and San Joaquin Valley.

Leroy Ornellas is a native of Tracy and is starting his second full term as supervisor for San Joaquin County's 5th District. He is a third-generation farmer and dairyman.

[Fresno Bee commentaries, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008:](#)

TWO VIEWS: It's our duty to help poor nations clean air emissions

By A. James Barnes

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- The United States and other highly developed nations should provide financial and technological assistance to China and other developing countries to help their use of clean and sustainable energy technologies.

Ideally, such assistance would be structured as part of an agreement where all the major developed and developing countries agree to cap and then reduce their emission of greenhouse gases. But, we should not delay such assistance pending a comprehensive global agreement; it is in our national economic interest as well as our national security interest to provide it -- and we have a moral imperative to do so as well.

As the Council on Foreign Relations notes, "Unchecked climate change is poised to have wide-ranging and potentially disastrous effects over time on human welfare, sensitive ecosystems and international security." We should take reasonable measures within our control to address this prospect, even if at times it may allow others a "free ride."

Forty percent of the carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere came from the United States and Western Europe -- and will remain there for 100 years. Last year China is thought to have overtaken the United States as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases -- but the Chinese still emit about one-fourth as much carbon per person as the typical American.

Life on Earth as we know it cannot be sustained if going forward the rest of the world even approaches our emission levels.

We need a technological revolution to avert the dangers of long-term global warming. Our resources and R&D capabilities are crucial to creating that revolution. We should involve the developing world in demonstration projects -- and the development of cost-effective options will speed their acceptance and utilization of such technologies, and their willingness to agree to limits those technologies will make possible.

The U.S. faces the prospect of having to invest billions of dollars to adapt to the climate change that will take place. It can be more cost effective to help other countries avoid contributing to the buildup of greenhouse gases that will occur if they use dirty, inefficient or unsustainable technologies.

As the old saw goes -- "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure." And, increasing the global demand for low-carbon technologies that we develop can boost jobs in this country.

Our vulnerability to global climate change pales in comparison with those faced in the equatorial regions and the southern hemisphere.

Extreme weather events, such as floods, cyclones and droughts, along with sea level rise, have the potential to create sustained human tragedy and political instability. We inevitably will have to step forward to deal with the humanitarian and national security aspects of such impacts.

We should take reasonable steps now to try to avoid or minimize the risks of such events -- or to reduce their severity -- rather than waiting to cope with the human tragedies after they occur.

The United States is the most prosperous country in the world. We generate far more carbon per person than most. That carbon will remain in the atmosphere for many years and its effects will be very disproportionately felt in other countries.

Yet, in recent years we have taken the position that we don't want to reduce our carbon footprint because it might impose unacceptable costs and restraints on our economy.

How can we in good conscience ask poorer countries to restrain their hopes for economic development and to avoid coming up to our per capita levels of carbon emission -- and not be willing to help?

That is morally indefensible.

As the old Indian saying goes -- the Earth is not inherited from our fathers but is borrowed from our children. We should act responsibly to pass a viable Earth on to all the children of the world.

James Barnes is professor of law and professor of public and environmental affairs at Indiana University.

TWO VIEWS: Subsidizing developing nations to reduce greenhouse gas is delusional

By Andrew P. Morriss

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- China wants wealthier nations to pay a fixed percentage of their gross domestic product to help developing countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions, with a suggested contribution of a mere 1% for a total of \$300 billion a year.

China also wants to create an international mechanism to transfer technology to developing nations to reduce emissions. Both are bad ideas.

China's proposals put the cart before the horse. Getting poor people to stop emitting greenhouse gases means getting them to stop being poor. Studies consistently show that interest in protecting the environment rises as people get richer -- making the single most important step to improve the environment helping developing countries stop being poor.

For example, the largest source of air pollution in sub-Saharan Africa is the indoor burning of dung and other organic fuels. Household bio-gas digesters can free people from indoor air pollution and reduce greenhouse gas emissions for as little as \$50 per family.

Solving pollution problems in developing countries means we must first free local entrepreneurs from the choking hand of corruption, bureaucracy and mercantilist economic regulations that keep them poor.

Transferring \$300 billion to developing countries would have the opposite effect because government-based foreign aid harms those countries that receive it.

Kenyan economist James Shikwati has shown how such aid fuels corrupt governments, hollows out the local economy, and weakens local markets. New York University economist William Easterly has comprehensively detailed the flaws in the top-down aid model.

Moreover, a \$300 billion transfer to developing countries would put money in the pockets of the likes of Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov. These thugs, whose regimes daily commit human rights violations on a vast scale, would share in the bonanza. The idea that they would actually spend the money on reducing pollution is ludicrous.

It is true that Europe, Japan and the U.S. industrialized at a time when people didn't know about the ill-effects of pollution. Today's developed countries did pump out a lot of pollution, including greenhouse gases.

However, once the developed world discovered the scope of the pollution problem, we cleaned up our industries' emissions.

China's argument sounds fair, since it looks like we were able to emit all we wanted while poorer countries will be stuck with abatement costs. But this argument rests on the assumption that developing countries can only afford 1920s-style power plants or trucks unless they get the \$300 billion.

Power plants and heavy duty trucks do cost more to build today than 50 or 100 years ago, but they cost more because modern ones are better, not just cleaner. Indeed, modern technology produces fewer greenhouse gases than older technology mostly because it is more efficient.

As a result, while developing countries are going to have to build more expensive power plants, factories and trucks than did the U.S. or European countries during our industrialization, those new ones will be more efficient than the ones we built, as well as cleaner.

If we are serious about addressing global pollution issues, we need to first get serious about removing obstacles to economic development that will create demand for a clean environment in the developing world. Turning \$300 billion over to despots and bureaucrats would take us in exactly the wrong direction.

Andrew P. Morriss is H. Ross & Helen Workman professor of law and business and professor at the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

'Green' jobs can help us rebuild Valley economy

By Tim O'Connor and Paul McLain-Lugowski

According to the Employment Development Department, the unemployment rate in the San Joaquin Valley reached 11.1% for the month of October, compared to a rate of 8.2% for California and 6.5% for the rest of the country.

With this stifled growth of industry, business and job development in our region, Valley residents must find innovative solutions that promise a greater economic future, and government representatives must respond with bold and creative solutions that promote and reward them.

This month, the next major step toward stimulating economic opportunity, job growth and lasting stability is evidenced by the state Air Resources Board's vote to adopt a climate change scoping plan under AB 32.

The answer for the Valley is simple: The scoping plan must promote green-collar job development, sustainable agriculture, air quality protection and progressive environmental and economic initiatives.

The air board has proposed a mix of regulations that will change the way that energy is produced and used in the state, shifting our economy toward a greener, more sustainable path.

Both the supply and demand of green jobs in the Valley will grow as the state mandates increasing renewable electricity, more energy efficient buildings and better natural resource management.

According to a recent report commissioned by the American Solar Energy Society, 8.5 million jobs currently exist in renewable and energy efficiency industries throughout the country, with the number increasing to 40 million jobs by 2030. Further, in jobs involving water conservation and sustainable agriculture, workers can earn a good wage while improving local natural resources.

Nowhere else in the state is the untapped potential of a greener economy more evident or needed than in the Valley. As the agricultural backbone of California, careers in the green-collar work force can blossom quickly and provide a stable framework for rural communities.

Further, with more sunny days than other parts of the state, California's solar power industry has a great new home. The air quality and economic improvements green jobs can offer are long overdue here.

By working in conjunction with local, regional and national organizations to build a coalition in support of the green-collar economy, cities in the Valley can partner to get our local economy back on its feet.

State lawmakers are currently crafting alternative-energy priorities, such as requiring a third of the state's energy to be produced from renewable resources.

Just last month, elected officials, community leaders and environmental activists came together for the green-collar job forum Greening San Joaquin at the University of the Pacific. The forum outlined steps that must be taken to facilitate green-collar job growth and highlighted many green-collar job resources in the region:

Expand and fund highly effective existing green-jobs training programs such as those being operated by YouthBuild and Conservation Corps. These programs prepare young adults, including many who are disenfranchised, for entry into new and demanding green occupations, or apprenticeships offering credentials in trades related to the green economy. Pacific Gas & Electric Power Pathways also offers job training and youth development programs focused on green-collar job growth.

Enter a green job education program at a local community college. Fresno City College provides training in HVAC and industrial electronics, and also has Green Job Apprenticeship Programs. San Joaquin Delta College presents a multitude of trainings and also offers Green Job Apprenticeship Programs.

Tap into government-sponsored green-jobs placement assistance. The California Employment Development Department offers a searchable database of more than 10,000 approved training programs throughout California. The California Employment Development Department's Youth Employment Opportunity Program offers special services to young adults ages 15 to 21, including peer advising, referrals to supportive services, workshops, job referrals and placement assistance.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps offers free education, job training and paid apprenticeship programs for multiple career types -- including jobs in the energy, construction, automotive and transportation sectors, to people ages 16 to 24.

We must move forward to green the Valley's environment and economic future. To accomplish this, we must not only create local opportunities for our residents to access green jobs, we should remind our leaders of the tremendous need and opportunity in the Valley.

If we can accomplish this, the Valley will be better equipped to remain economically competitive for decades to come.

Tim O'Conner is an attorney and a climate change policy analyst for the Environmental Defense Fund. He is also the co-author of the Green Jobs Guidebook. Paul McLain-Lugowski serves as the president of California YouthBuild Coalition.

[Letter to the Sacramento Bee, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008:](#)

Avoid environmental short cuts

Public works projects can help stimulate the economy and build a sustainable future or they can take us backward with more cars, more pollution, more global warming. State and national leaders are looking for ways to provide jobs repairing our infrastructure. But as they prepare "shovel-ready" investments in roads and infrastructure, they must ensure that those projects serve the future economy and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The governor's proposal to exempt \$1.2 billion worth of highway projects from environmental review is a step back. He should not set aside environmental safeguards in the name of a quick fix.

California is proof that economic growth and environmental quality go hand and hand, as the governor has often said.

California has billions of dollars of projects that have already completed environmental reviews to provide roads, transit, clean energy and clean drinking water. True economic stimulus can improve our air, earth, and water while providing the jobs our citizens deserve. The governor and Legislature should use public dollars for investments in a new energy economy and green infrastructure that help us solve our economic and environmental problems – not make them worse in a boom-and-bust cycle.

Ann Notthoff, Sacramento

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses California will begin to classify pollution of new vehicles starting in January. Decals that state the level of air pollution emitted will be placed on new vehicles. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Comenzará California a clasificar contaminación de nuevos autos el primero de enero

Manuel Ocaño

Noticier Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

El estado de California comenzará a clasificar este primero de enero con calcomanías adecuadas las cantidades de contaminación del aire que produce cada nuevo vehículo a la venta.

Mediante un programa de la Agencia federal de Protección Ambiental y la Oficina de Recursos del Aire de California, cada automóvil que se venda en el estado tendrá información a la vista sobre las cantidades de contaminación que produce, de la misma forma que las distribuidoras informarán sobre rendimiento, o promedio de millas por galón de gasolina.

La clasificación va del uno para los vehículos más contaminantes de todos, al diez, como los más amigables con el ambiente. Hasta ahora algunos autos asiáticos, híbridos tienen la mayor calificación, que es de nueve puntos.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses moved by the high levels of asthma, New York will begin to monitor their air quality.

Movida por el alto índice del asma, Nueva York monitorea la calidad del aire

Marco Vinicio González

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

Con casi la quinta parte de los niños que habitan en la ciudad de Nueva York padeciendo asma, el Departamento de Salud echa a andar un proyecto para monitorear la contaminación del aire en vecindarios con el mayor tráfico vehicular y la mayor concentración de edificios con hornos y calderas activas, consideradas como las principales fuentes de contaminación.

Los monitores, que serán instalados en 15 postes del alambrado eléctrico en cada uno de los cinco condados de la ciudad, no emiten radiaciones ni químicos, ni tampoco graban imágenes o toman fotografías, para respetar la privacidad de los habitantes, declararon las autoridades del ramo a la prensa local de Nueva York.

Una de las principales preocupaciones de Thomas Matte, director del sector de Investigación Ambiental del Departamento de Salud, y quien dirige dicho proyecto, es el asma; la ciudad estima que uno de cada ocho habitantes mayores de 18 años de edad ha sido diagnosticado con esta enfermedad, y tan sólo el año pasado hubo siete mil hospitalizaciones por esta causa, reporta el Departamento de Salud.

Este nuevo sistema de monitoreo se suma a otro sistema de medición de la calidad del aire que se efectúa diariamente en la ciudad, informó la prensa.