

Wind brings health hazard to Kern

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

Gusty winds were expected to kick up dust throughout the San Joaquin Valley Wednesday night, which could cause health problems for some residents.

There's potential for high levels of localized particulate matter due to the winds, according to the health warning from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"The stagnant conditions quickly came to an end this afternoon, as a cold front brought gusty winds and blowing dust to the San Joaquin Valley," said Valley Air District meteorologist Gary Arcemont in the warning Wednesday.

Exposure to dust and other particle pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, increase risk of respiratory infections and cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis.

People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality when dust is present.

Older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion in affected areas, the health warning said. Everyone else should reduce prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion.

The air quality forecast for the valley portion of Kern County Wednesday night is "unhealthy," meaning everyone may begin to experience health effects from poor air quality. Thursday's air quality will be "unhealthy for sensitive groups."

Blowing dust prompts Valley health warning

By Luis Hernandez

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

Gusty winds are expected to kick up dust throughout the Valley into the evening, prompting the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health warning.

Valley Air District inspectors have reported blowing dust in the Valley air basin. Residents in areas with blowing dust are advised to use caution.

Exposure to dust and other particle pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis and increase risk of respiratory infections, officials said.

Those with heart and lung diseases should follow medical advice to deal with episodes of unhealthy air quality when dust is present, officials said. Older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion in the affected areas.

Company looks to turn manure into power

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

Cow manure produced in the rural area south of Hanford could be worth its weight in renewable energy.

Using anaerobic digesting machines, a Delaware-based company wants to turn dairy waste into methane-rich biogas, a renewable substitute for natural gas, and then sell it to a utility company.

Microgy, a subsidiary of Environmental Power Corp., eyes a location near Kansas Avenue and Highway 43 to build its manure digestion operation. The facility will use manure from three surrounding dairies in the area as well as three others in Fresno and Merced counties.

"Kings County represents a significant opportunity for us because there's a vibrant, successful dairy industry in the county," said Jeff Dasovich, senior vice president and regional manager of Microgy.

On Tuesday, the firm received a big boost as the Kings County Board of Supervisors approved the issuance of tax-exempt bonds worth up to \$55 million through a statewide authority for the project.

Officials say the county won't be liable for the costs of the revenue bonds.

The company operates four other digesters in the United States, three in Wisconsin and one in Texas.

The Kings County facility would process 13,000-cows' worth of manure. The company says the plant would produce enough biogas to meet the energy needs of 60,000 homes.

A dairy cow produces about 30 pounds of liquid and 65 pounds of solid waste daily. Dairy farms flush manure out of free stalls into lagoons, where waste is allowed to naturally decompose.

Microgy's plan is to come in between the free stalls and the lagoons and collect and treat the manure with bacteria inside an oxygen-free tank to capture the methane-rich gas through this process, which the company says was developed in Europe.

The facility will be hooked onto an existing gas pipeline. The company has a 10-year biogas purchase agreement with PG&E. The solids and liquids that come out of the process will be returned to the contracted dairy farms.

Company officials tout the project's potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions -- a sensitive issue in the region with the poorest air quality in the country -- as well as to help the state meet its renewable energy goal.

In a typical open-air dairy lagoon, methane and other air pollutants like ammonia and volatile organic compounds are released into the air, contributing to smog and global warming. Dairy manure also poses a risk to ground water, as salts and nitrates can seep into the water table or be washed into rivers by heavy rain.

The project received praise from a few supervisors.

"It's important for the future and the sustainability of the dairy industry," said Supervisor Tony Oliveira, who is a dairyman himself. "So I'm a big supporter of it."

Supervisor Tony Barba, who sits on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board, called the project a "real winner" for Kings County.

"This is something that puts us ahead," Barba said.

"This is a cost we have to bear so future residents are going to be able to breathe," Barba said about the bond issuance.

But Supervisor Joe Neves, a skeptic of the technology, called Microgy's project an untested leap forward.

"I don't believe in the technology," said Neves, who cast the sole no vote on the bond issue Tuesday.

In today's dairies, the cows are well-tuned machines that are fed and grown to produce a high output of milk. Unlike human waste, cow manure is unfit for bacterial cultivation because the cow waste -- after food is so efficiently digested -- doesn't hold much byproducts, Neves said.

"Today's cows are so efficient, not much energy is left in the manure to digest," he said. "The rules of biology aren't in favor of this technology working successfully. The more efficient we made the cows, the more milk they produce. But the gas production spirals down."

Neves says the technology might work better if the cow manure is blended with human waste or manufacturing wastewater.

Neves says Joe Gallo Farms in Merced, for example, makes its large methane digester system viable by mixing creamery waste streams with the manure, making it easier for bacteria to grow.

"If you want to put money into this, you ought to do it with a wastewater treatment plant," Neves said.

The project is still in the permitting process. Approval from the Kings County Planning Agency is in. The environmental and air permits are currently out for public comments. A water permit's up for approval on March 13, Dasovich said.

If everything goes well, the methane digester should begin operating by early 2009, Dasovich said.

Rural areas target of Blueprint project

The economic challenges facing farmers and small towns is now the focus.

By Cathy Locke

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

A regional land-use planning project that has focused on reducing urban sprawl and traffic congestion in the Sacramento metropolitan area is now zooming in on small towns and rural communities.

Mike McKeever, executive director of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, said the agency will take a closer look at the "rural-urban connection" as an outgrowth of its Blueprint project.

McKeever discussed the new effort during a presentation last week to the El Dorado County Transportation Commission.

The Blueprint project involved elected officials, community leaders and residents throughout the six-county Sacramento region in workshops to consider future land-use patterns. That led to SACOG's adoption in 2004 of a preferred scenario that emphasized more compact development and transportation alternatives.

As the regional agency charged with distributing state and federal transportation funds, SACOG has used the Blueprint to develop the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, which projects transportation and road improvements needed through 2035. The final plan will be presented to the SACOG board for adoption this month.

SACOG is made up of Sacramento, El Dorado, Placer, Yolo, Sutter and Yuba counties, and 22 cities.

"It's fair to say the Blueprint ... really focused on urban patterns," McKeever said. "It didn't focus on the rural economy as much."

But SACOG represents more small jurisdictions than large ones, he said, and the economic challenges facing farmers, vintners, small businesses and small cities differ from those in larger urban areas.

"Part of the whole strategy is to make sure that rural areas thrive and experience prosperity," McKeever said.

SACOG officials seek to learn the needs of rural areas so the regional organization can serve as an advocate, he said.

El Dorado County did not participate in the Blueprint workshops held in 2003 and 2004 because it was still developing its general plan. But McKeever said the SACOG staff members worked with the county to make sure El Dorado's long-term land-use plan was reflected in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

The focus is on developing an employment base that will allow the county to balance jobs and housing, he said.

Reducing commute traffic would help reduce [automobile-related air pollution](#), a key consideration in the transportation plan.

"[Air quality](#) regulations are getting tighter," McKeever told the commission.

SACOG is "sweating bullets," he said, to come up with a Metropolitan Transportation Plan that can meet federal air quality standards.

Because of changes in federal requirements, the Sacramento metropolitan region doesn't anticipate being able to attain those standards until 2018.

In addition, McKeever said, cities and counties will be affected by new state initiatives to reduce greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney, who represents the county on the Transportation Commission, said he was concerned how analyses of greenhouse gas emissions in the environmental review process would affect transportation projects.

"I'd like not to see some of the real important projects get held up," he said.

McKeever said SACOG officials were pleased that the draft Metropolitan Transportation Plan did not trigger a letter from the state attorney general's office regarding carbon emissions.

Other agencies have received letters warning them to consider how long-term land-use and transportation plans would affect climate change.

SACOG views that as acceptance by the attorney general "that we are doing a good job," McKeever said.

Ranchers explore green alternatives

Cattlemen work reduce ecological footprint

By Garance Burke, Associated Press

SF Chronicle, Tri-Valley Herald and Modesto Bee, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

CATHEYS VALLEY - Seth Nitschke spent his early 20s working at the country's biggest feed lots before he returned home to start a business raising beef cattle fed on the grasses of the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Nitschke, 31, who makes his living herding heifers through pastures near Yosemite National Park, would never call himself an environmental activist, though he's planting saplings to protect nearby streams and runs a light herd to let his pastures breathe.

Unlike some of his conservative counterparts in traditional livestock production, he and a new crop of cattlemen are quietly working to minimize their industry's ecological footprint, and are forging unlikely alliances with environmental groups.

"Look at this grass. If I don't take care of it, that's my livelihood," Nitschke said, kneeling as he examined foxtail shoots popping up near a grove of black oaks. "We dress differently than the eco-folks, we probably vote differently, but in the end there's a lot of ways in which our core values are really close."

Throughout the West, cattlemen and environmentalists have locked horns over grazing practices for decades.

But increasingly, ranchers are buying into the idea that they have a role to play in protecting open space, be it through preserving private wildlands or promoting sustainable grazing techniques that help endangered species flourish.

Near Florida's Lake Okeechobee, the World Wildlife Fund has recruited a group of ranchers to build ditches on their lands to improve wetlands habitat for threatened and endangered birds like the wood stork and crested caracara.

In Wyoming, the Audobon Society is trying to convince oil and gas companies to pay ranchers to maintain sage brush expanses key to the survival of the native, chicken-sized sage grouse. Ecologists fear without the ranchers, gas exploration could do away with the bird's habitat.

In California, 75 ranching organizations, environmental groups and state and federal agencies have signed onto a common strategy to enhance the state's rangelands while protecting its ecosystems.

"This new generation of ranchers knows they have to work on the environmental part of it to survive," said Neil McDougald, a rancher at the University of California Cooperative Extension office in Madera County. "I'll guarantee you the guys driving cows today have a better environmental conscience than the ranchers who were riding around holding up stagecoaches."

Still, a history of bad blood between those who live off the land and those who seek to protect it hasn't made coalition-building easy.

Recent research from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization shows that the world's large-scale livestock operations are causing environmental problems ranging from land degradation and [air and water pollution](#) to loss of biodiversity.

In the last two centuries, foraging has contributed to both the erosion of arid Western rangelands and watershed contamination, said Mel George, a range ecologist at the University of California, Davis.

The environmental movement has hit back by filing lawsuits seeking to ban cattlemen from running their herds on public lands.

Last year, 37.5 million calves were born to U.S. beef producers - the smallest herd since 1951 - a decline the National Cattlemen's Beef Association in part attributes to land loss.

Research and government programs highlighting how grazing can benefit the environment have helped make partners out of livestock producers and their adversaries, George said.

The USDA's Grasslands Reserve Program, which works to preserve rangeland through conservation easements and rental agreements, has kept 712,000 acres nationwide from being developed.

The California Cattlemen's Association, The Nature Conservancy and other groups are jointly lobbying to get more money for the program included in the 2008 Farm Bill, said the association's vice president Matt Byrne.

Other popular programs reimburse ranchers when they build fences to keep cows away from sensitive pasturelands or erect water tanks so cows don't foul up creeks, said Sara Schmidt, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's assistant chief for the West.

"When a problem hits closest to home is when people are most willing to sit down at the table and start working through the challenges," Schmidt said. "There's a lot of new energy for this among established ranchers, and particularly among the younger people."

Such efforts not only protect the working landscape, Nitschke says, but are a marketing tool with the eco-friendly customers who seek out his grass-fed filet mignons.

Kelly Mulville, a consultant to cattle owners in Colorado and New Mexico, says environmental stewardship can work in tandem with the profit motive: if ranchers protect their grass, they can feed more livestock.

"We may end up using the same tools that are destroying our environment to repair it," Mulville said. "Still, it's going to take a lot more than beef to save the world."

Clean-air plan gains favor

By Mike Lee, Union-Tribune Staff Writer
San Diego Union-Tribune Thurs., Feb. 14, 2008

The Unified Port of San Diego has made its boldest moves yet to cut air pollution from ships, trucks and other machines, but its plan lacks several elements that supporters said are critical to success.

In the first public review of the port's Clean Air Program, the agency's governing board this week blessed the development of four leading options to trim air pollutants. They are: connecting ships to dockside power, replacing or retrofitting old trucks, taking similar measures for cargo-handling equipment and trying to persuade captains to slow their ships as they approach the port.

"This is crucial, not only for old town National City, but for Barrio Logan and every other community that is affected by the emissions that come from diesel (engines)," said Robert "Dukie" Valderrama, who represents National City on the board of commissioners.

Several aspects of the Clean Air Program remain fuzzy. The price tag would certainly be in the millions of dollars, but exactly how much is unknown. Also lacking are details about who would pay, how long the strategies would take to establish and how much cleaner the air would become as a result.

In addition, there's no consensus about which measures the port would mandate and which ones it would leave as voluntary.

"We basically support the port's plan . . . but we're disappointed that stronger, more enforceable measures were not given more serious consideration," said Kathleen Sullivan, an air quality expert at the American Lung Association office in San Diego.

Some port leaders said they were concerned that issuing mandates would generate lawsuits and slow improvements. But Commissioner Laurie Black said the port won't get big results without being aggressive.

"I don't trust voluntary (measures)," she said. "There isn't enough teeth. We have to make this happen."

Many basic questions about the plan will be answered in coming months - now that the port commission is onboard, said Michelle White, a senior environmental scientist for the port. She said other ports are working toward similar goals because of various regulations, but that San Diego is the first in California to establish a clean air program on its own.

San Diego port officials are trying to get ahead of state and federal laws, partly to take advantage of state incentives for early actions.

Port officials are focusing their strategy on the biggest source of emissions - oceangoing vessels. By installing giant electrical outlets at the dock, port officials would allow ships to plug in and turn off their diesel engines instead of idling them for hours at a time.

Port officials concede that they have "limited tools" to force changes onboard international vessels. Slowing ships as they near the coast could lower emissions, but it's unclear how a speed-reduction program would be enforced.

The most pressing piece of the port's program is replacing high-polluting diesel trucks or retrofitting them with filters that trap diesel particles. If the agency moves fast enough, it could use grants to defray some of the costs.

Nationwide, ports have come under increasing scrutiny for diesel emissions and other types of air pollution, which were largely overlooked until recent years. The biggest concerns have been at the biggest ports, such as Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The clampdown on port pollution could improve air quality significantly in neighborhoods closest to the industrial operations. Congress will consider forcing some vessels to use cleaner fuel and cleaner engines during a hearing today.

"It's taken a long time to address these problems, but we truly believe that the ports are willing to clean up the air and deploy the cleanest trucks and technologies to make it happen," said Rupal Patel, campaign director at Communities for Clean Ports, a nonprofit environmental justice group in Los Angeles.

EPA Pressured to Cut Ship Pollution

By RITA BEAMISH, The Associated Press

Washington Post and Contra Costa Times, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

Diesel pollution spewed from the world's largest ships is increasing in U.S. ports and coastal areas even as regulators rein in car and truck emissions.

Some members of Congress and local regulators are demanding that the Bush administration quickly curtail the ship pollutants to protect health instead of waiting for other countries to agree to take action.

The Environmental Protection Agency decided to hold off on its own rules for oceangoing vessels while trying to push its standards through the U.N. International Maritime Organization. After that body acts, EPA plans to issue its regulations next year.

That's too long, some lawmakers and environmental advocates say. Legislation pending in Congress would require that the EPA act on its own to keep the growing shipping industry from eroding gains made in reducing diesel emissions from vehicles.

"The legislation is needed because marine vessels are the largest uncontrolled source of air pollution in many areas of the country, causing at least 2,000 to 5,000 premature deaths every year across the country," said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a Southern California air regulatory board.

His remarks were in testimony prepared for a hearing Thursday before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. The Associated Press obtained an advance copy of his testimony.

The large ocean vessels "will soon be the last bastion of dirty diesel engines," now that EPA is concluding pollution-reduction rules for locomotives and smaller ships like tugboats, Richard Kassel, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in prepared testimony.

At seaports across the country, the massive ship engines burn diesel that is 1,800 times dirtier than the U.S. norm for trucks.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., the committee chairwoman, said international action could help, but is taking too long.

"We can't afford to give special interests more opportunities to weaken the rules, and children with asthma can't afford to wait," she said Wednesday.

Maritime diesel emissions cause an estimated 60,000 premature deaths a year worldwide, according to a peer-reviewed study by James Corbett, a freight transportation expert at the University of Delaware.

EPA proposes that the global body adopt steep reductions in hazardous diesel emissions, similar to the congressional proposal. Whatever the outcome, the U.S. agency ultimately will regulate as it sees fit to protect U.S. seaports, said Margo Oge, director of EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality.

Oge and Don O'Hare, vice president of the World Shipping Council, an Washington-based industry group, both said the international body made good progress last week with a subcommittee recommendation on one kind of emission reduction. It would apply just to new ships, not the 50,000 older ships currently in service.

O'Hare's group supports EPA's proposals for a global, rather than unilateral, standard.

Congress pushes for faster cuts in large ship pollution

By Rita Beamish, Associated Press

in the Sacramento Bee, Modesto Bee and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

OAKLAND - The Bush administration is pressuring the worldwide shipping industry to reduce diesel pollution from huge cargo carriers entering U.S. seaports, but it's not moving aggressively enough for environmentalists and some members of Congress who represent areas with major harbors.

U.S. regulators are negotiating with the United Nations' International Maritime Organization to crack down on the large ships that threaten to erode anti-pollution gains already made under mandates for cars and trucks to produce less pollution. But the Britain-based maritime organization, which represents 167 countries, has moved slowly - even as ship traffic rises steadily.

The Environmental Protection Agency, after court challenges by environmental groups, agreed to regulate unhealthy ship emissions by last April but now is waiting until 2009, after the maritime group sets standards.

If the EPA deems the upcoming international standards inadequate, it will impose its own rules on ships that sail along American coastlines and dock at U.S. seaports, said Margo Oge, director of EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality.

"It has been the least regulated source to date," Oge said.

Some members of Congress want the EPA to act quickly on its own, and some shippers are voluntarily moving to cleaner-burning fuels. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee was expected today to question U.S. government and industry officials.

International negotiations eventually could cut ship pollution, Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., chairwoman of the Senate committee said Wednesday. But that process "still has a long way to go," she said. "We can't afford to give special interests more opportunities to weaken the rules, and children with asthma can't afford to wait."

Boxer has introduced legislation that would force the EPA to move quickly to set new pollution rules.

Pollution levels at ports like Oakland and Los Angeles and Long Beach prompted California last year to require large ships to burn cleaner fuel in their auxiliary engines when nearing California shores.

Worldwide, ships' emissions of soot, sulfur oxides and nitrogen oxides are blamed for 60,000 deaths annually, according to a report last year by the scientific journal Environmental Science & Technology. In Southern California alone, the toll is about 700 deaths each year, said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a regional air-pollution regulatory agency.

"We think the EPA could move quickly if it has the desire to do so," Wallerstein said. "There's no excuse for them having delayed action so long."

The enormous cargo ships, carrying the world's clothing, toys, cars and other consumer goods, burn a diesel that is 1,800 times dirtier than the norm for heavy-duty U.S. trucks. Emissions are causing health concerns at major seaports from New York and New Jersey to Houston and Seattle. The largest ships entering the busiest harbors can produce the smog-forming emissions of 350,000 new cars, according to calculations by Friends of the Earth, a national environmental organization.

The EPA director, Oge, said the maritime organization made progress last week when a subcommittee recommended tightening nitrogen oxide standards for new ship engines starting in 2011, with 80 percent reduction by 2016. But the new-ship standard wouldn't affect 50,000 ships already cruising the seas. The IMO also failed to settle on the contentious issue of reducing sulfur content in the fuel.

Under current turnover rates among shipping fleets, it would take more than 20 years to replace all the old ships with new ones that meet the proposed environmental standards, said James Corbett, a freight transportation expert at the University of Delaware. The entire fleet would not meet the recommended 80-percent reduction target until 2036, Corbett said.

The World Shipping Council, representing most of the world's cargo carriers, supports the EPA's proposals but wants an international standard rather than U.S.-specific rules.

The EPA said that by 2030, oceangoing ship engines will be responsible for more than one-third of the nitrogen oxides produced by all vehicles and ships, along with 46 percent of the lung-damaging airborne particles and 95 percent of sulfur oxide. The EPA wants the maritime organization to require ships within 200 miles of shore to switch to cleaner fuel with sulfur reduced from 27,000 parts per million to 1,000 parts per million.

Deal cuts cost of green vehicles

Los Angeles Times, Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008

Supervisors approved a discount program for county employees Tuesday that shaves the price off fuel-efficient vehicles.

Officials say the move is an effort to encourage the nearly 100,000 county workers and their immediate families to buy more environmentally friendly forms of transportation.

The program, which so far is valid only at El Monte-based Longo Toyota, will place a price cap on all hybrid vehicles sold at the dealership. The base price for a Toyota Prius, which the dealership sells for \$23,184, would be lowered to \$21,746, for example.

Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke also asked county staff to study the possibility of extending discounts to retired employees, as well as those who contract with the county.

Mexico's leader visits state Capitol

Calderon touts legal immigration but says he wants his citizens at home

By Edwin Garcia, Medianews Sacramento Bureau

Contra Costa Times, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- Mexican President Felipe Calderon pleaded Wednesday for California to recognize that immigration should be "legal, safe and organized," yet he also sought to convince state lawmakers that his government does not encourage its residents to migrate to the United States.

"While my government is committed to protecting the rights of all Mexicans, including those living beyond our borders, we are taking great efforts," he said, "to ensure that in the future no Mexican needs to leave our country to find job opportunities elsewhere.

"I am a president who is not glad to see Mexicans migrating to the United States."

Calderon's comments to a joint session of the Legislature came in the middle of a nearly weeklong tour of several cities from coast to coast -- his first visit to the United States -- where he has highlighted the need for immigration reform and scheduled meetings with groups of Mexican nationals in places such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Sonoma.

While careful not to mention the word "illegal" or "undocumented" in his 19-minute address, which he delivered in English, Calderon has long been a staunch supporter of several failed efforts in Congress to legalize the status of millions of immigrants who either overstayed their visas or sneaked across the border.

In many ways, Calderon's speech was similar to the address that former President Vicente Fox delivered to the Legislature in May 2006. Both leaders said that their administrations were profoundly improving the Mexican economy in a way that would curb future immigration.

Though some legislators may dispute that statement, particularly Republicans who have failed at numerous attempts to pass laws to discourage illegal immigration, they restrained from publicly protesting Calderon's speech. During Fox's visit, several Republicans either skipped the speech or wore buttons with the words "No mas," referring to policies they say encourage illegal immigration.

Assemblyman John Benoit, R-Riverside, called the speech "cordial" and "optimistic," and thinks that Calderon, in the second year of a six-year term, will make strides at reducing illegal immigration.

"I think he meant it when he said he doesn't want to see those people leaving," said Benoit, who has proposed legislation to pressure the federal government to compensate California for the cost of incarcerating illegal immigrants.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, who along with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger invited Calderon to Sacramento, was upbeat after the speech.

"President Calderon demonstrated today he's got the right approach to solving illegal immigration by working to improve economic conditions in Mexico," Nunez said in a statement. "That's why he's working on improving the pension system, and it's why he's working on making sure he keeps inflation down."

Early in his address, Calderon reminded legislators of the common roots, history and economy that bind Mexico and California, a relationship, he said, that benefits both sides.

Quoting from a study by the Council of Economic Advisers, who report to President Bush, Calderon said that immigrant workers do not displace American workers and contribute more in taxes than they receive in public services.

"I know that immigration is a controversial issue today in this great nation," he said. "But I strongly believe that Mexican and Mexican-American workers are a large reason for the dynamic economy in California."

Calderon, a former government energy official who attended graduate school at Harvard, invited the senators and Assembly members to work with his administration to find long-lasting solutions to immigration.

"We are at a historical turning point," he said. "Future generations will judge us by the decisions we take today. Did we work together to provide organized and humane migration, or did we continue to allow hundreds to die each year?"

While Mexican citizens receive more than \$23 billion a year sent by family members abroad -- mostly from the United States -- Calderon tried to dispel the notion that Mexico encourages migration to fuel its economy.

Migration, he said, separates thousands of families and "carries off the best among us: our bravest, our youngest and our strongest people."

He said his administration is "working really hard" to create conditions that can lead to well-paid jobs in Mexico.

Calderon and first lady Margarita Zavala arrived in Sacramento on Tuesday night after visiting Boston, New York and Chicago.

The president met privately with the Latino Legislative Caucus, Nunez, Republican and Democratic legislative leaders and Schwarzenegger.

In another meeting, Cabinet officials from the governments of Mexico and California signed a memorandum of understanding to formalize a working relationship on such environmental issues as air quality monitoring.

"I'm so fond of you because you believe very strongly in building the economy but at the same time protecting the environment," Schwarzenegger told Calderon during the signing ceremony in the Cabinet Room.

Schwarzenegger, who visited Mexico on a trade mission in November 2006, weeks before Calderon took office, told Calderon that he looked forward to another trade mission, though a date has not been established.

The leaders attended a luncheon in the president's honor, and then Calderon shuttled to Sonoma County to visit Robledo Family Winery, whose founder is a former migrant worker from the president's home state, Michoacan.

With the rolling hills and rows of grapevines as a backdrop, Calderon said he would like to work with Schwarzenegger and the federal government to establish a program for immigrant workers.

Speaking in Spanish to a group of Mexican migrant workers and winemakers gathered for the event, Calderon said, "We came to be here with you to defend thousands of families of Mexican workers that are here because of a natural phenomenon that compliments the economy of the U.S. and the economy of Mexico. If we want to seek prosperity for our cities, we have to have this prosperity together."

Robledo said it was rewarding to have the work of Mexicans recognized by Calderon.

"I feel very happy and proud," Robledo said, also speaking in Spanish. "This is a historic day to have the president see us here."

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008:](#)

Sunny idea has real promise

Fresno may soon establish itself as a leader in solar energy production. No fewer than three candidates for mayor of that San Joaquin Valley city have laid out separate, tentative plans to encourage or compel builders to include solar energy panels on new homes.

The most recent is Fresno City Councilman Mike Dages, who wants to make solar panels a requirement for new construction. That will be a tough pill for builders to swallow, given the cost (\$20,000 or more) and the depressed state of the real estate market.

Dages believes builders can pass the costs on to buyers, who will eventually recoup their outlay in energy savings. He wants his solar-panel ordinance to apply to all new construction, including commercial and industrial.

Two likely mayoral rivals, fellow councilman Henry T. Perea and newcomer Jim Boswell, have suggested similar plans in campaign literature. Perea said he welcomed Dages' willingness to push for solar, as did Boswell -- but Boswell said his solar initiative would cost homeowners a fraction of what Dages' plan would run them.

The details may vary and the timing may be a challenge, but the Fresno mayoral candidates are on to something: The Central Valley is an ideal place to aggressively pursue solar-power innovation.

- With between 280 and 305 sunny days per year, the Central Valley is as logical a place for solar power as anywhere.

- [The Central Valley, Bakersfield in particular, has some of the nation's worst air.](#) Solar power helps address that problem.
- The solar power industry is a potential jobs machine. Chronically high unemployment rates make the valley an ideal host.
- Housing prices are typically much lower in the valley than elsewhere in California, making this region better suited to absorb the initial higher costs associated with solar panels.

This would be a tough time to foist such an ordinance on the building industry, however. We'll leave Fresno to sort that out.

In the meantime, Bakersfield-area officials would be well advised to keep a close eye on the progress of Fresno's solar power efforts. With an energy-industry tradition unmatched elsewhere in California, Kern County should not be conceding leadership to its neighbor to the north -- or anyone else.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008:](#)

We need a new model for urban development

As gas prices soar and climate change rushes in, many strive to make their tank of gas stretch as far as possible. But Fresno was designed as a car community, unlike San Francisco and Davis, where a bike is suitable transportation.

The closest grocery store may be a few miles from any given residential neighborhood, and now, living in the aftermath, there is not much in the way of changing what is already existing because it is so costly and wasteful.

But, instead, we could embrace the given models (San Francisco and Davis) and begin to build walking and biking communities, with housing above stores.

And even if we are wrong about global climate change, what did we do? As Starbucks cups often say, we have only given our children cleaner air, more fuel-efficient cars and a better future. And is that really such a bad thing?

Elizabeth Dayton, Fresno