

Spare the Air warnings no more

San Joaquin district updates emissions program

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, March 11, 2008

TRACY - The Spare the Air Day warnings that are frequently issued by the San Joaquin Air District during the summer months will cease under a new program.

This week, district officials launched Healthy Air Living, designed to offer "tools for every segment of the Valley's population to make better lifestyle choices that will improve air quality."

The initiative focuses on providing businesses, municipalities and members of the public with strategies that will reduce environmental emissions.

"This is the broadest, most comprehensive initiative the district has ever undertaken," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director. "We envision Healthy Air Living becoming an exciting part of the Valley's fabric of life and the way we live and do business."

In addition to information about reducing emissions, incentives such as a chance to win an electric lawn mower and hybrid car will also be part of the program.

The summer Spare the Air warnings that encouraged Valley residents to stay inside on unhealthy days are being replaced with daily air quality updates.

"We have been slowly transitioning away from these episodic announcements of a need to spare the air in favor of daily information," said Jamie Holt, district communications specialist. "By letting people know what the air quality is on any given day, they can make choices that are best for their individual health."

Hold added that daily air quality updates can be found on the district web site at <http://www.valleyair.org>.

She also noted that, "although Spare the Air will cease to exist per se, we will wrap components of this signature program into Healthy Air Living."

For more information, contact the Air District at 209-557-6400.

Environmentalists to sue EPA over ruling that valley air is clean

By GARANCE BURKE, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee, Sac. Bee, Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle & other papers Tues., March 11, 2008

FRESNO, Calif. - Environmentalists vowed to sue the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Monday after the agency found that air quality in the San Joaquin Valley met federal standards for airborne dust, smoke and soot.

On Friday, the agency ruled the region's air was no longer plagued with excessive levels of PM-10 pollution, tiny airborne particles that are linked to asthma, bronchitis and heart problems.

Monitors throughout the valley showed pollution levels hadn't violated requirements under the federal Clean Air Act over a three-year period, the agency said.

But environmental groups - including three chapters of the Sierra Club and a group of physicians in the valley - say the EPA's data shows that federal pollution standards were surpassed nine times from 2003 to 2006.

"They're saying, 'The air is clean, we wash our hands and whatever the valley's dust problems are now will be the reality from here on out,'" said Paul Cort, an attorney with Earthjustice, an Oakland-based law group that plans to file suit in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. "We believe that if you look out your window in Bakersfield you can see that the problem has not been solved."

Officials in EPA's Region 9 in San Francisco said Monday the temporary spikes environmentalists decried were excluded from the records because the monitors were registering dust kicked up by high winds and construction, the EPA said.

"We all know that the San Joaquin Valley has air pollution problems that need to be dealt with," said Kerry Drake, an associate director in the air division in EPA's Region 9. "It appears to us that this standard has been met. There's no going backward, and there's plenty more work to be done."

Pollutants from tailpipes, smokestacks and livestock waste all contribute to smog in the valley, which is one of the nation's dirtiest air basins.

The valley still exceeds federal standards for ozone and fine particle pollution.

Waxman wants EPA correspondence with White House on Calif waiver

By ERICA WERNER, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee and S.F Chronicle, Tuesday, March 11, 2008

WASHINGTON - A House committee chairman accused the EPA Monday of withholding hundreds of communications between EPA, the White House and the Justice Department over EPA's refusal to let California regulate greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., threatened in a letter to EPA "to require production of the documents" if they weren't turned over.

Waxman already has issued one subpoena to the Environmental Protection Agency over the California waiver denial and aides said more were possible. Waxman chairs the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said, "We respect the committee's oversight responsibility and continue to work with their staff in response to these requests. The administrator has been transparent during this process and no amount of review will change his decision on the waiver."

At least 16 other states were also blocked from implementing the emissions reductions sought by California when EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson denied California the required federal waiver last December.

Johnson's decision was applauded by the auto industry, and critics contended it was political, not based on science. Johnson has denied that, but has refused to say whether he was advised against the waiver by the White House, which has adamantly opposed mandatory controls on greenhouse gases.

In response to investigations by Waxman and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., internal EPA documents about the decision have slowly been emerging.

They have shown that top career staff at the agency strongly advised Johnson to grant the waiver, arguing that California had made the case for needing its own tailpipe emissions law because of its unique problems with pollution, water supply, sea rise and other issues. California's law would have forced automakers to cut emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases by 30 percent in new cars and light trucks by 2016.

But so far Boxer and Waxman have been unable to get their hands on substantive communications between the White House and EPA over the waiver.

Noting that EPA has already missed a series of deadlines, Waxman gave the agency until close of business Wednesday to say when the documents would be produced.

"If no acceptable voluntary schedule is established, I anticipate taking steps to require production of the documents," Waxman said, adding that EPA staff has indicated that there are "hundreds of documents" being withheld involving EPA, the White House and the Department of Justice.

Johnson has defended his decision to deny the California waiver by saying the problem of global warming is not limited to California, so California doesn't meet the Clean Air Act criteria allowing it to implement its own pollution reduction controls. He's said a better approach is Congress' new law raising fuel efficiency standards, while California officials contend their law is stronger and would act faster.

Tulare County Residents Express Concerns about Yokohl Valley Project

By Dave Adalian

Valley Voice Mon. March 10, 2008

Eager Tulare County residents got their first chance to comment on the possible environmental impacts of Yokohl Valley Ranch Company's plans to build a 10,000-home city on 56.7 square miles of grassland in the foothills south of Lake Kaweah and east of Exeter.

Despite a meeting time of 3 on a Monday afternoon in the tiny Exeter Senior Center, before the doors were opened, dozens of people had lined up to review plans for the enormous project and dictate any comments to a stenographer, a process that left some attendees dissatisfied.

"How do you have a meeting if you can't sit down and look someone in the eye?" one of the first citizens to approach the comments desk asked event organizers.

"This is the format the county selected," said Charlotte Kirkwood, project manager San Francisco-based consulting firm URS, which is overseeing project scoping.

The more than 100 citizens who attended the meeting were presented with an open-house style review of the project's parameters, a video presentation and an opportunity to discuss the project with staff of the county's Resource Management Agency before voicing their concerns or presenting them in written form. Copies of the 46-page "Yokohl Ranch Project Notice of Preparation and Scoping Meeting" were also available. That document can be reviewed online at the county's website, www.co.tulare.ca.us.

Those who did not attend the meeting have until 5 p.m. March 14 to send their comments to RMA division manager David Bryant's office, 5961 S. Mooney Blvd. in Visalia, fax them to him at 730-2653 or e-mail them to dpbryant@co.tulare.ca.us.

The new community, if approved by county supervisors, would include construction of 10,000 residential units on 9,500 acres spread throughout the more than 36,000 acres the ranch encompasses. The three-phase project, which would be carried out over 20 to 30 years, would also include 550,000 square feet of commercial construction, as well as schools, golf courses, healthcare facilities, parks and a reservoir. Plans call for widening State Route 198, Spruce Avenue, Rocky Hill Drive and Yokohl Valley Road, as well as construction of new roads into the area, connecting the ranch directly with SR198 at Horse Creek Drive near Three Rivers.

Water for the new city would come from Lake Kaweah, and plans call for construction of a canal and pipeline.

The RMA is hoping to receive comments on any negative effects residents feel the project will have on aesthetics, air and water quality, noise, traffic density or any of more than a dozen areas of concern.

"We're hoping to get lots of comments," said Kirkwood. "We're hearing lots of good things."

Commentary on the project received before the March 14 deadline will be incorporated into the project's Environmental Impact Report or EIR, a document that will be assembled by San Diego-based consulting firm PBS&J over the next 12 to 18 months. Once the EIR is compiled, the county is required to hold a series of public hearings to again gauge citizens' response.

"We anticipate the EIR will be two feet high," Kirkwood said. "The county decision is years away. People don't need to worry things are happening right away."

Despite such reassurances, county residents seem to be very concerned about the project and the impact it will have.

"Clearly, they're getting ahead of themselves by trying to scope a project without an adequate project description," said former Visalia City Council member Greg Kirkpatrick, who attended the meeting to express his concerns about the project as well as to gather the names of others who oppose it in anticipation of forming a citizens committee to fight the plan. "They haven't identified their water source; there's no parcel map."

Sandy Blankenship, executive director of the Exeter Chamber of Commerce, took a wait-and-see attitude: "People are curious, trying to figure out what the plan is," she said. "We [the chamber] have not taken a position."

Others had a more emotional reaction to the plan.

"Since I first heard of the development, I've been scared," said Chase Arevalo, one of a trio of Visalia students who came to the meeting to "protest" the plan.

"Everywhere you look you see development. Once you go over Rocky Hill, it's beautiful. Next time I go out there I may see bulldozers."

Connie Fry, also of Visalia, had many concerns about the project, including who would foot the bill for expansion of roads leading into the area.

"I'm wondering if [the Yokohl Ranch Company] is going to pay for the road over Rocky Hill and four lanes added to 198," she said. "I'm very concerned with the air quality. Instead of Yokohl Valley they might as well call it Asthma Valley."

Lois Rogers, a resident of Mehrten Valley near Lemon Cove, worried the new roads for the Yokohl Valley project will continue to prevent maintenance of roads in her area.

"Is the county going to build these roads before they repair ours?" she asked. "We've been there for 19 years, and they've never touched them."

Woodlake rancher Del Strange was concerned the information presented Monday was an inadequate basis for effective commentary by the public, saying the lack could mean long delays and may force several redrafts of the EIR. He was also concerned the data wasn't available in condensed form for later review.

"I don't have a photographic memory," he said while presenting his initial comment to county staff. "You haven't provided enough information for comments."

Strange, who was a longtime opponent of Kaweah River Rock's plan to build an open-pit gravel mine near Woodlake because of its possible negative effects on water supplies, also has similar concerns connected with the Yokohl project.

"The water in the Kaweah Basin is called for, and we're deficient," he said. "Fifty percent of the water in the Valley has to be brought in."

Recent legal decisions requiring diversion of water for protection of fish spawning will further deplete reserves, he added, and that combined with inadequate supplies could spell disaster in the next drought cycle, he fears.

Visalia Planning Commissioner Terese Lane, who said the Yokohl plan was "fraught with peril on many levels" and had "the potential for disastrous results because of increasing infrastructure, just the sheer volume of traffic," also saw the information presented at Monday's meeting as insufficient.

"I don't see this as a valid input forum for a project of this scope," she said, adding that the plan was "egregious in its excess."

Ken Woodrow, a tribal representative of the Esham Valley Band of Indians, which represents the local Wuksachi, Michahai and Wukchumni peoples, said dozens of Native American sites are

included in the project area, prompting concerns those artifacts and human remains be well treated should the project advance.

"We need to be out there whenever they move dirt. It needs to be the most likely descendents," he said, adding that Yokohl Ranch Company has acknowledged oversight is needed, but have yet to agree tribal representatives should be the ones conducting it. "They said, 'Great idea. When the EIR comes out we'll have an archeological firm out there.'"

For Jeff Stein, co-chair of Tulare County Citizens for Responsible Growth (tccrg.org), his main objection was directed at the county's handling of the planning process.

"One of the things we're complaining about is they're putting the cart before the horse," he said. "Why are they allowing this massive project in the middle of the General Plan Update process?"

Sarah Graber, TCCRG's executive director, said the group is also concerned the EIR will not include hard numbers on the project's impact.

"The main thing we're asking is the EIR be quantified," she said. "How many more tons of CO2? How much more traffic?"

Representatives of the project did not attend Monday's meeting.

MLB gives green light to recycling efforts

By Jorge L. Ortiz, USA TODAY
Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Your next beer at the ballpark may be served in a container with the look and feel of a plastic cup but instead made of biodegradable corn starch.

Using corn starch cups, increasing recycling and installing solar panels and possibly wind turbines at ballparks are among the measures teams will consider as part of a major league-wide effort to reduce baseball's carbon footprint.

MLB will announce Tuesday a partnership with the Natural Resources Defense Council to bolster teams' commitment to implementing environmentally sensitive practices.

The project, called the Team Greening Program, provides team-by-team advice on all operational aspects, from concessions to scouts' means of transportation. Teams will get information on how to address consumption issues related to [air quality](#), chemicals, waste, water, recycling, travel and office products.

John McHale, MLB's executive vice president of administration, said the program is meant to serve as a guideline, not a mandate.

"It's an effort to elevate the consciousness of all clubs to the very good work being done in many individual cases," McHale said. "Not everything is going to be suitable for every club, but every club is going to be interested in something."

Their interests will vary depending on location, which is why baseball didn't establish a uniform policy for all teams, said Allen Hershkowitz, senior scientist of the NRDC.

Most teams already had some kind of environmentally conscious policy in place before this initiative, with West Coast clubs such as the San Francisco Giants, Oakland A's and Seattle Mariners at the forefront of the movement.

Last season the Mariners began a composting project for their food waste and it helped increase their rate of recycling by diverting 100 tons of waste, VP of ballpark operations Scott Jenkins said. The program pays for itself and even saves a bit of money by reducing the team's landfill fees.

But even those in Rust Belt cities have grown increasingly aware of energy conservation issues.

The Pittsburgh Pirates are launching a campaign today called "Let's go Bucs, let's go green," aimed at encouraging fans to recycle at PNC Park, where some 760,000 bottles and cans were

discarded with the trash last year. Bob Nutting, an outdoors enthusiast who took over as team owner in January 2007, was aghast at that notion.

"Since the Pirates are such a visible organization, we really want to take our leadership role and build awareness of environmental responsibility throughout the region," he said.

The Cleveland Indians have recycled since Jacobs Field opened in 1994 and now are focusing on renewable energy. They installed 42 solar panels last year - enough to power the 400 TV monitors at the ballpark, now known as Progressive Field - and they're exploring the possibility of installing wind turbines.

"If we can install those things, we've been told you may be able to actually sell back to the electric company," said Brad Mohr, Indians assistant director of ballpark operations. "For a ballpark to do that, that's unbelievable with the amount of energy we consume here."

Hydrogen fuel cell vehicle development still in the slow lane

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, March 11, 2008

When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger launched the state's Hydrogen Highway in 2004, he said Californians were about to invent the future.

We're still working on it.

Boosted by \$1.2 billion in federal money over the past five years, automakers have been making strides with hydrogen fuel cells. Building filling stations for those vehicles, however, is another matter - what a top Bush administration transportation official refers to as the equivalent of a moon shot.

So on Monday, about 40 automotive and air quality experts from around the country sat down at the California Fuel Cell Partnership headquarters in West Sacramento to brainstorm how to foster a national hydrogen-fueling network. The partnership is a collaboration of 32 organizations, including automakers, government agencies and energy and oil companies. It was created in 1999, and the West Sacramento headquarters opened in November 2000.

"The research is largely complete. What we need to do is focus on the infrastructure piece," said Paul Brubaker, who heads the Research and Innovative Technology Administration for the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Hydrogen is attractive as an auto fuel because it promises both the pump-and-go convenience of gasoline and no emissions of either greenhouse gases or smog-forming pollutants.

In a fuel-cell vehicle, hydrogen combines with oxygen, yielding a current that drives an electric motor. The tailpipe spews nothing but water vapor and heat.

"Zero-carbon" hydrogen can be made by splitting water molecules using electricity generated from renewable sources, such as wind turbines and solar panels. But because that process currently is quite expensive, most hydrogen gas is instead produced from natural gas through a process that does release greenhouse gases.

As the fuel-cell prototypes zipping quietly around the West Sacramento streets Monday showed, hydrogen vehicles are well on their way to being ready for the street.

"The performance of hydrogen fuel cell cars is not that much of a concern. They have enough get-up-and-go for most drivers," said Len Brewster, a Detroit-based auto industry analyst. "The problem is going to be setting up the infrastructure to keep these cars fueled and running."

Absent a network of filling stations, automakers say, they won't be able to scale up production of fuel-cell vehicles to the levels needed to drive costs down.

Existing prototypes are either one-of-a-kind or manufactured in small lots, making them extremely expensive. Several companies estimate that competitively priced fuel-cell models could be ready for the market by 2017 - but again, only if customers have a way to fill up.

Federal energy officials and auto industry analysts have estimated that it would cost \$10 billion to \$15 billion to establish a refueling infrastructure in the nation's top 100 major metropolitan areas. Other estimates, which include costs of building large-scale hydrogen production, distribution and storage systems, are much higher.

California's Hydrogen Highway is meant as a first step to a network of hydrogen filling stations. After Schwarzenegger made hydrogen fuel a centerpiece of his environmental agenda in his first year in office, regulators drew up a plan that called for the state to spend as much as \$11 million annually on vehicle incentives and cost-sharing grants to yield a network of 100 hydrogen filling stations by 2010.

As of January, however, only 24 hydrogen filling stations were operating around the state, according to Fuel Cell Partnership data.

Gennet Paaue, spokeswoman for the California Air Resources Board, which is administering the Hydrogen Highway program, said her agency expects to fund 10 more stations through 2010. She said delays in fuel-cell technology advances and limited numbers of vehicles on the road have slowed the program. Somewhat more than 200 hydrogen-powered vehicles now travel California.

"We're not going to open stations if there aren't vehicles to fill," Paaue said.

Two filling stations operate in the Sacramento region - one at the fuel cell partnership headquarters, and another at the University of California, Davis. The Sacramento Municipal Utility District plans next month to open a third, which will produce hydrogen gas using electricity generated by on-site solar panels.

During a discussion Monday afternoon with Brubaker, participants offered up a variety of suggestions on how to move forward. Most called for increased federal funding for research, fuel-cell fleets and filling stations - and patience.

"People need to understand that this is a matter of decades. Several decades," said Joan Ogden, co-director of the Hydrogen Pathways Program at UC Davis.

Passenger cars could well turn out to be a poor application of fuel-cell technology, said Dan Kammen, who directs the Renewable and Appropriate Energy Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley.

Kammen said hydrogen might at first be practical only for, say, locomotives and ships, which fill their huge tanks at centralized depots, not thousands of neighborhood stations.

Official promises clean air for Games

By TINI TRAN, Associated Press Writer

Sacramento, Modesto & Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star & others Tues., March 11, 2008

BEIJING - Beijing will meet its pledge to have clean air for the Summer Olympics, an environmental official said Tuesday, downplaying worries the city's notorious smog will overshadow the Games.

State Environmental Protection Administration Vice Minister Zhang Lijun said measures to cut pollution in Beijing and surrounding areas are being intensified to ensure the city's air is up to the required standards.

Zhang's claim came a day after world marathon record holder Haile Gebrselassie of Ethiopia said he would almost certainly skip the long-distance running event in Beijing because of the city's poor air quality.

Considered the world's best distance runner, the 34-year-old Gebrselassie - who has asthma - fears his health could be damaged by running through the streets of the Chinese capital. He said he would make a final decision in May.

China's double-digit economic growth has come with a surge in heavily polluting industries such as manufacturing and energy. The country is home to 16 of the world's 20 most heavily polluted cities.

"After we have implemented all the measures, there is no problem for Beijing to meet the standards. We can deliver on our commitment," Zhang said at a news conference held on the sidelines of the annual session of the National People's Congress, the country's legislature.

The measures include requiring Beijing and Tianjin cities and Hebei province to temporarily suspend emissions from some of their most heavily polluting plants, which include cement, steel and coke factories.

The provinces of Shanxi and Shandong, along with the huge Inner Mongolia region, will also be required to restrict their coal-fired emissions, Zhang said.

Zhang said he expects that "by June, we will complete all tasks necessary" to ensure the city will have the required clear air.

To satisfy commitments made in 2001 in its Olympic bid, Beijing will be required to show that it meets international standards on four major pollutants - sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, inhalable particles and chemical oxygen demand, a measure of water pollution.

Regular monitoring of air quality has shown the city has already met the standard for three of the four measures. Only inhalable particles remains below the acceptable level, Zhang said.

Concerns about the capital's pollution level have dominated preparations by international athletes for the games. Several countries have decided to station their athletes outside China - in some cases in Japan or Korea - for training.

Darryl Seibel, a spokesman for the United States Olympics Committee, said none of the 600 U.S. athletes competing in the Games is planning to withdraw because of the air quality. However, some U.S. athletes have chosen to do their training outside of China - for instance, the powerful U.S. swim team will train in Singapore.

Australian cemetery going green

Modesto Bee & NY Times Tuesday, March 11, 2008

ADELAIDE, Australia - An Australian cemetery will plant a tree for each burial or cremation it conducts to offset carbon emissions, its chief executive said Monday.

The decision by Adelaide's Centennial Park in South Australia follows a study on the environmental impacts of cremations and burials.

"We want to add some benefit to the community," chief executive Bryan Elliott said. "Our aim is to be carbon neutral within the next six months."

The cemetery's study found that cremation produced less carbon emissions in the long run because of the ongoing upkeep of the burial site. A cremation at the cemetery generates about 353 pounds of carbon dioxide, compared to 86 pounds of a burial, the study showed.

"However, when the long-term environmental footprint is considered, burials at Centennial Park have a 10 per cent greater impact than cremations," Elliott said. "Burial is a more labor and resource intensive process."

The research showed that planting at least one tree for each service would offset Centennial Park's carbon footprint.

Elliott said the cemetery would commission a reforestation organization to plant the trees where they would be most useful.

[Fresno Bee Editorial, Tuesday, March 11, 2008](#)

GOP is MIA on key air effort

State's Republicans in Congress take wrong side on EPA ruling.

A bipartisan coalition is forming in Congress to support California's efforts to overturn Bush administration opposition to the state's aggressive greenhouse gas initiative. Notably absent from the bipartisan coalition are most of California's Republican members of Congress.

Sadly, that's not surprising.

You might expect that the state's GOP representatives would support the Republican governor who pushed for tougher greenhouse gas standards than the feds contemplate. You might expect Republican lawmakers to support an effort to defend states' rights. You might expect Republican members of Congress to back an effort that has strong bipartisan support among the state's voters, both Democrats and Republicans.

You would be wrong.

Most of the state's Republican representatives in Washington are hewing to the Bush administration line that we need a single national standard for greenhouse gases, rather than a whole raft of individual state standards.

"I don't support California thinking that it can act alone effectively," said Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista.

Rep. George Radanovich of Mariposa added, "I think we've got to be all in this together as a country rather than Balkanizing it."

It's a perfectly specious argument. Under the terms of the Clean Air Act, there would be just two standards: California's and the weaker federal rules. And at least 18 states -- with about half the nation's population -- have adopted or contemplate adopting California's rules, as they are allowed to do under the Clean Air Act.

California, alone among the states, is allowed to create stricter standards than the federal government because it was already regulating air pollution when the Clean Air Act was passed in 1967. But it must get a waiver from the Environmental Protection Agency to do so.

The state adopted its emissions rule in 2002, and requested the waiver in 2005, after regulations to enforce the act had been finalized. But in December, EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson denied the waiver -- the first such blanket denial ever issued.

Almost immediately evidence surfaced that Johnson acted in direct contradiction to the advice he was given by his own agency's scientific and legal advisers. Further evidence arose linking Bush administration lobbying efforts on behalf of the auto industry with Johnson's decision.

That outraged some California lawmakers -- not to mention citizens -- and the state sued the feds over the waiver denial. Some of California's representatives in Washington began legislative efforts to overturn the EPA decision. The lawsuit has been joined by many other states, and a bipartisan effort began in Congress to the same end.

Missing in action are California's GOP lawmakers, with only two exceptions to this point: Reps. David Dreier of San Dimas and Rep. Mary Bono Mack of Palm Springs.

"This was a favor that the EPA did for people in California who want to make a living," said Rep. Devin Nunes of Visalia.

No, it wasn't. It was a decision that auto industry profits are more important than the health of the people of California. And representatives elected by those people who don't get that ought to be ashamed of themselves.

[Tri-Valley Herald Editorial, Tuesday, March 11, 2008](#)

Lower fares are best way to spare air

A BAY AREA air pollution board public outreach committee has concluded that it's time to curb free rides on Spare the Air days.

The committee is recommending to the two partners in this free-ride venture, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, that free transit rides should be scaled back to two smoggy days this summer due to dwindling federal funding.

In fact, the commission says we should look at the bigger picture, one member of the board saying "it's Spare the Earth," the focus being a campaign on global warming. Attacking the threat of global warming makes more sense, but what this really says is Spare the Air free rides have not been a good sell.

While we don't see this as a white flag on Spare the Air free ride days, it's clear that some officials agree with what we've said in the past, that this venture is ultimately a waste of funds.

Perhaps fewer cars were on the highways during these days, but it was also clear that summer travel is usually down in the Bay Area with vacations and school break.

Transit ridership rose, but who was really taking advantage? Tourists and kids, groups generally not on our highways daily.

Yet, even a scaled-down model of Spare the Air will cost agencies \$5.2 million. Thankfully, another \$1.5 million will go toward incentives, messages and measures to reduce global-warming gasses. That's a better way to go.

If transit officials are serious about cutting car traffic in the Bay Area, they need to take the bold step of dropping fares. If they're willing to blow millions on free rides, why not scrap the free rides, keep the funds in the general budget and lower the overall cost to daily commuters, especially with spiraling gas costs?

What an opportunity. For instance, make it cheaper to take BART from, say, Pleasant Hill to Dublin or Pleasanton than to spend nearly \$4 a gallon in gas.

Even if gas reaches \$4 a gallon, it's still cheaper to go by car than to pay the \$10 round-trip fee on BART. If BART lowers fares, commuters may have second thoughts, and agencies could make more money in the long run.

Spare the Air free rides are now reduced to a two-day Band-Aid. It's time to stop this silly promotion of public transit and help clean the air with aggressive, reasonable solutions.

[Los Angeles Times, Commentary, Monday, March 10, 2008:](#)

Railroad's 'green' claim is way off track

A firm that wants to expand port service has proved a poor neighbor elsewhere.

By Angelo Logan

Matthew K. Rose, head honcho of one of the nation's biggest railways, made the rounds recently touting a plan to city power brokers for a new "green" rail yard near the port. It'll have clean trucks, he said. Electric cranes. Natural-gas locomotives.

His company, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, already operates a huge rail yard in Los Angeles County. It's called Hobart Yard, and it's in my neighborhood, the City of Commerce. And if the harbor commissioners and port officials want to see how committed BNSF is to green operations, they should come by and take a look.

The Hobart Yard is BNSF's largest intermodal rail yard, each year loading 1.5 million containers onto trains that deliver goods east of the Rockies. It has at least one other distinction: It creates the highest cancer risk of any intermodal rail yard in the state. A study released last year by the Air Resources Board found that residents in my neighborhood are 70% to 140% more likely to

contract cancer from diesel soot than people in the rest of Los Angeles. The study didn't even look at asthma or other lung disease.

Before the Port of Los Angeles even considers approving the proposed new Southern California International Gateway -- adding yet more train and truck traffic to the region -- BNSF should clean up the deadly diesel pollution at Hobart and its other local rail yards.

"Communities matter," claims BNSF's public relations material. And yet the residents of my community have pleaded with the railway for years to clean up its yard. Instead, we get aging locomotives idling for hours on end, engulfing nearby homes with dangerous diesel exhaust. And when the South Coast Air Quality Management District issued regulations to limit locomotive idling two years ago, BNSF and its rail counterparts promptly took the AQMD to court to get out of the new rules.

While BNSF has promised a state-of-the-art facility near the ports, Hobart and its neighboring yards have been expanded with minimal consideration given to the use of green machinery. Recently, members of my environmental justice group noticed construction underway at a BNSF yard in nearby Bell. Not only did the railway neglect to notify the community of the expansion, it also had no plan to address the additional deadly diesel pollution this operation would produce. To top it off, BNSF has no environmental review process in place, as required by the California Environmental Quality Act. That would have required public input and an assessment of alternatives and ways to mitigate harm from the expansion.

Despite all this, the port officials appear to be swallowing BNSF's green claims that the new yard will indeed be green and won't harm local residents. It'll do "tremendously beneficial things in terms of the environment," Los Angeles Harbor Commission President S. David Freeman told *The Times* last month.

BNSF argues that no one need worry about the huge new 300-acre facility it wants to build directly across the street from homes, schools and day-care centers in west Long Beach. But west Long Beach is worried. More than 400 residents turned out for the first set of port hearings in October 2005 to express staunch opposition.

Rail yards are undeniably needed to move goods from our busy ports to the rest of the country. But the pollution and the cancer risk in Commerce have taught us too well that they should not be located where people live and children play.

Angelo Logan is director of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Mar. 11, 2008:](#)

Just facts? For shame!

Editor: Shame on the Sun-Star for printing facts about Riverside Motorsports Park. Apparently, Scott Reisdorfer, in his recent letter, feels the facts are merely bits of gossip. I guess that is one way to deny that the Sun-Star has won awards for reporting the facts that have emerged since John Condren brought his flim-flam game to Merced. Mr. Reisdorfer apparently has selectively forgotten that the Sun-Star originally endorsed RMP. He claims that all of us who oppose RMP really are members of the "ALL AMERICAN GOSSIP PARADE."

He goes on to say, "I can list at least 20 more stories of importance requiring some headline attention in this town/county that have 200 percent more bearing on the daily lives of Merced County citizens than Riverside could ever hope to be, period."

After reading it three times, what I can glean from Mr. Reisdorfer's convoluted phrasing is that he feels RMP is a minor concern for those of us who live up here and will have to deal with noise and air pollution, and severe traffic problems. He lives in Fresno and can choose to subject himself to the exciting vroom vroom vroom of the races. Those of us who will have our quality of life severely impacted will have to relinquish our serenity so he can enjoy a boiling hot afternoon in the scorching summer sun. I'm sorry, but I feel this is a very legitimate concern for the citizens of Merced County.

He says, "You all know squat." We do know RMP can't pay its bills. We also knew all along that the facts about RMP were adjusted according to the audience. We do know that Altamont Raceway is in trouble. We do know that John Condren still won't reveal his source for financial backing. We definitely know that owning shares in RMP is worthless.

Mr. Reisdorfer closes his letter with a challenge to "Call me when you've become the true description of a citizen." Guess what, we answered your call a long time ago. The Sun-Star heard it. A judge heard it. And let's hope the county supervisors hear it for the second time.

A proud member of the "ALL AMERICAN GOSSIP PARADE."

Ron Loewe, Atwater