

Rosedale refinery leaks small amount of ammonia

Some nearby residents report hearing evacuation alarm

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

The Big West of California refinery leaked a small amount of ammonia just after midnight Saturday that sounded an evacuation alarm that was heard by residents in some nearby neighborhoods.

Emergency crews responded around 12:15 a.m. Sunday and the leak was contained quickly, Big West officials said. No one was injured.

The leak was caused by a faulty valve on a large ammonia storage tank. Fumes set off a nearby alarm system that included a voice recording urging people to evacuate.

The alarm was meant to alert refinery personnel but was also heard by an off-duty Bakersfield police lieutenant at his home near Truxtun Avenue extension and Coffee Road. The lieutenant contacted the police department, according to Sgt. Greg Terry.

Refinery officials said Monday they notified authorities on their own when the alarm went off. However, officials with the Kern County Environmental Health Services Department, which responds to chemical spills, said they were contacted by police dispatchers.

Environmental Health Services Director Matt Constantine said the department is investigating the cause of the leak and will look into whether Big West reported the incident to authorities in a timely manner. Big West is required to notify environmental health of any spills immediately, but Constantine's staff learned of it from police dispatchers, he said.

Constantine also expressed concern about the refinery evacuation alarm being heard by neighboring residents. The alarm was meant for on-site staff only but could confuse residents who might think they're being ordered to evacuate.

"It may present a concern if a person off-site heard it and it wasn't meant for them," Constantine said.

The refinery has come under recent scrutiny by the department for several gas releases that made some residents sick and for not properly reporting those incidents. Big West has also become a community focal point after announcing plans last year to expand and build new units that will require the use of more dangerous chemicals.

Refinery Health, Safety and Environment director Bill Chadick did not know Monday the quantity of ammonia released but said the emergency alarm system responded well before the leak reached a dangerous level.

"We have alarms in the ammonia area that are set to go off whenever they get even the slightest whiff of ammonia," Chadick said. "The alarm went off and that's exactly what it's supposed to do."

Ammonia diluted with water is a typical household cleaner, but anhydrous ammonia - which contains no water - can be hazardous in the event of a sizable leak. Because the chemical has an extremely low boiling point, it can instantly vaporize, forming a cloud that can travel downwind. Exposure results in severe chemical burns.

Anhydrous ammonia is commonly used in the industry and small leaks have occasionally occurred in Kern County, according to Environmental Health Services.

Financing for Padre Hotel isn't a sure thing

By Vanessa Gregory, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

The new owners of downtown's landmark Padre Hotel are hurriedly trying to secure a \$16 million construction loan after San Joaquin Bank declined to finance the building's renovation.

"No one's lending for anything right now," owner Brett Miller said.

The project is still on track to open as a 112-room boutique hotel by March next year, said Miller, a partner in the San Diego development team that bought the nearly empty building two months ago for \$4 million.

The developers have a letter of commitment from another bank, but the financing isn't yet a sure thing, Miller said. They expect to know if the loan is theirs within 30 days.

It's a financing saga highlighting how the subprime-lending crisis has tied up all types of credit - not just home loans.

Timing is working against the developers, even though their business plan is fundamentally sound, San Joaquin Bank President and CEO Bart Hill said.

A refurbished Padre should be a hit in a city where hotel occupancy rates are high, he said.

And he loves the developers' concept of taking an abandoned landmark in Bakersfield's core and turning it into a luxury hotel.

But "the whole (banking) industry is just recoiling," Hill said.

The Padre's former owner, Pacifica Enterprises LLC, failed in its attempt to revive the Padre.

Their plans, which included transforming the building into condos, were mired by [an asbestos removal controversy](#) and other delays.

Miller remains confident his plans for Bakersfield's iconic Padre will succeed.

And much of downtown seems to be rooting for him.

"I've got two buildings next to them," said Klarke Garl, who owns the New Yorker apartment building and Nile Theater downtown.

"I'd love to see them succeed."

Carbon dioxide increases in 2007

By H. Josef Hebert , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

WASHINGTON — The Energy Department reports that carbon dioxide emissions increased by 1.6 percent last year with most coming from residential and commercial energy use. Emissions from transportation and industrial sources were essentially flat, compared to 2006.

The increases came from a greater demand for heating and cooling because of weather. Carbon dioxide, the leading greenhouse gas linked to global warming, declined in 2006, also because of weather-related circumstances.

Meanwhile, Senate Democrats are proposing \$800 billion in tax reductions over more than three decades to help pay energy costs under a revised global warming bill. The proposal is aimed at blunting Republican criticism that the climate legislation is too costly and will harm average Americans. The legislation, scheduled for debate on the Senate floor next month, would cut greenhouse gas pollution by 71 percent by 2050.

EPA climate rule at least a year away

By H. Josef Hebert , Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

WASHINGTON — A decision on whether carbon dioxide endangers public health as a greenhouse gas will probably be made by the next administration, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency said Monday.

EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson said "as a practical matter" he would not expect the complex regulation to be completed in less than a year, leaving a final rule to his successor.

Johnson has been criticized by congressional Democrats and environmentalists for not moving fast enough to decide the pivotal climate issue.

All three presidential candidates - Democratic Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham and GOP Sen. John McCain - have said climate change needs to be addressed and have called for mandatory measures to curtail greenhouse gases, mainly carbon dioxide.

The Supreme Court more than a year ago concluded carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels was a pollutant because it is a major source of global warming and directed the EPA to decide if it endangered public health and welfare. If so, the court said, it must be regulated.

"Carbon dioxide is a pollutant. I accept that," said Johnson at a meeting with reporters Monday at Platt's Energy Podium, an energy information provider operated by the McGraw-Hill Cos.

But Johnson said the carbon dioxide issue is so complex and far-reaching that formal, thorough rulemaking is needed. He promised a preliminary notice for a preliminary set of options by June 21, an early step toward a final rule.

After the session, Johnson noted that major EPA regulations often take several years to complete.

Last month, 18 states and various environmental groups asked the U.S. Court of Appeals to require the EPA to make a decision on carbon dioxide within 60 days. Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley called the EPA's pace of action "a shameful dereliction of duty."

On another matter, Johnson indicated that he was not prepared to provide all the documents sought by a House committee investigating White House involvement in recent EPA decision on a new health standard for smog.

Johnson said he has provided thousands of pages of documents to the Oversight and Government Reform Committee on the EPA's decision in March to toughen the federal health standard for smog, though it did not go as far as many health experts had said is needed.

Some "sensitive" communications that were part of the deliberative process need to remain confidential, said Johnson, to promote candid discussions. These include communications with the White House, he said.

White House Role Cited in EPA Reversal on Emissions

By Juliet Eilperin

Washington Post, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen L. Johnson favored giving California some authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks last year before he consulted with the White House and reversed course, congressional investigators said yesterday.

The five-month probe by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee drew upon more than 27,000 pages of internal EPA documents and interviews with eight key agency officials, and it provides the most detailed look yet at the administration's mid-December decision.

California sought permission to implement rules aimed at cutting its vehicles' greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent between 2009 and 2016. A total of 18 states -- representing 45 percent of the nation's auto market -- have either adopted or pledged to implement California's proposed tailpipe emissions rules, but the administration's refusal to grant a waiver under the Clean Air Act has blocked the rules from taking effect.

According to the agency's documents and depositions by staff members, EPA officials unanimously endorsed granting California the waiver, and Johnson initially agreed. EPA Associate Deputy Administrator Jason Burnett testified under oath that Johnson "was very interested in a full grant of the waiver" in August and September of 2007 and later thought a partial grant of the waiver "was the best course of action."

Burnett told the panel he thought Johnson had told White House officials that he supported a partial waiver and said there was "White House input into the rationale" for the Dec. 19 letter announcing EPA's complete denial of the waiver.

Committee Chairman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), who will hold a hearing on the matter today, said the probe showed that President Bush had crossed a line. "The president has broad authority, but he is not above the law," Waxman said.

But EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said the committee's report is "nothing new," because Johnson has consistently maintained that he considered various opinions when deciding how to rule.

"Administrator Johnson was presented with and reviewed a wide range of options and made his decision based on the facts and the law," Shradar wrote in an e-mail. "At the end of the day it was the Administrator's decision alone, and he stands by the decision."

The committee's revelations could provide fodder for the administration's critics, who are trying to obtain the waiver through legal and legislative means. More than a dozen states and a coalition of environmental groups are seeking to overturn the waiver denial in federal court, and congressional Democrats are pushing a bill that would reverse the decision through legislation. The [Senate Environment and Public Works Committee](#) will vote on the bill Wednesday.

Mary D. Nichols, who chairs the California Air Resources Board, said in a statement: "While EPA fiddles and we burn, consumers are being denied the right to purchase cars that are cleaner and save money at the pump."

David Doniger, policy director at the climate center of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group, said his organization and other plaintiffs in the lawsuit will include the committee's findings in a brief they will submit to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit.

"Seeing what really happened is going to help a court understand just how illegitimate and political EPA's decision really was," Doniger said.

It remains unclear how exactly senior Bush officials intervened in the decision. Burnett said he was instructed not to answer questions about the White House's involvement, and the White House maintains that Johnson was not influenced by his talks with White House officials.

"As Administrator Johnson said in his statement, he made an independent decision and his decision was based on the facts and the law," said Kristen Hellmer, spokeswoman for the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

Johnson did not comment on the House probe yesterday, but he told reporters at a meeting at Platts Energy Podium, a McGraw-Hill-sponsored presentation for reporters on energy issues, that "as a practical matter" it will be up to the next administration to determine whether carbon dioxide endangers public health because of its contribution to global warming.

"Carbon dioxide is a pollutant. I accept that," Johnson said.

Report: EPA head reversed stand on greenhouse gas

By Erica Werner , Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

WASHINGTON — The head of the Environmental Protection Agency initially supported giving California and other states full or partial permission to limit tailpipe emissions - but reversed himself after hearing from the White House, a report said Monday.

The report by the Democratic staff of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee cites interviews and depositions with high-level EPA officials. It amounts to the first solid evidence of the political interference alleged by Democrats and environmentalists since Administrator Stephen Johnson denied California's waiver request in December.

Johnson's decision also blocked more than a dozen other states that wanted to follow California's lead and regulate greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks. It was applauded by the auto industry and supported by the White House, which has opposed mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emissions.

Johnson, a 27-year career veteran of the EPA, frequently has denied that his decisions are being directed by the White House. "I am the decision maker," Johnson said Monday, meeting with reporters at the Platt's Energy Podium newsmaker session, before the California waiver report surfaced.

A White House spokeswoman denied interference.

Johnson "made an independent decision," said Kristen Hellmer, spokeswoman for the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

That's not what staff of the Oversight Committee, chaired by Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., concluded after hearing from eight EPA officials and reviewing over 27,000 pages of EPA documents, some obtained under subpoena.

Perhaps the strongest evidence came from EPA Associate Deputy Administrator Jason Burnett, a political appointee.

Deposed under oath, Burnett told committee staff that Johnson "was very interested in a full grant of the waiver" in August and September of 2007 and later thought a partial grant - allowing the waiver for two or three years - "was the best course of action."

Johnson's position changed after Johnson communicated with the White House, Burnett said.

Burnett also said there was White House input into the December letter to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announcing the waiver denial, and into the formal decision document released in February.

The committee was stymied in its attempts to discover the extent and rationale for the White House's involvement.

Burnett refused to answer questions about whom Johnson talked to and when, saying EPA told him not to.

Also, the EPA continues to withhold documentation of contacts with the White House, the report said. The White House Counsel's office told committee investigators the EPA has 32 documents showing telephone calls or meetings involving at least one high-ranking EPA official and at least one assistant to the president or the president. The Counsel's office described these documents as "indicative of deliberations at the very highest level of government."

"It appears that the White House played a significant role in the reversal of the EPA position," the report concludes.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar dismissed the report as "nothing new."

Johnson "made his decision based on the facts and the law," Shradar said. He did not respond when asked if it was true Johnson initially supported the waiver.

Rep. Tom Davis of Virginia, top Republican on the Oversight Committee, asserted that if the decision had gone the other way, there would be no complaints of presidential meddling.

"Yes, the White House was involved," Davis said in a statement. "Just as President Clinton's White House was involved in 107 agency rule-makings. ... The majority's problem is not with the process; it's with the outcome."

The committee also found, as has been previously reported, that career EPA staff was unanimously in favor of granting the California waiver and believed that a denial would not stand up in court. The report detailed previously unreported attempts by political appointees to soft-pedal EPA staff conclusions supporting the waiver in presentations to Johnson, or to avoid committing them to paper.

An internal EPA e-mail said Bob Meyers, the principal deputy assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation, was "not happy" that a staff conclusion that California met the waiver criteria was included in a briefing to Johnson last summer. Meyers' chief of staff suggested staff should "permanently delete the offending language and not have it arise again."

Because California began regulating air emissions before the federal government it has unique authority under the Clean Air Act to institute its own air rules if it gets a federal waiver. Other states can then follow California's rules or the federal ones. No waiver request had previously been fully denied.

California's law would have forced automakers to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent in new cars and light trucks by 2016, beginning with the 2009 model year. Thirteen other states already have adopted the standards - Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington.

Johnson justified denying the waiver by arguing that California is not alone in suffering the effects of global warming and therefore doesn't have a compelling need for its own greenhouse gas standards. A new federal fuel efficiency law is a better approach, he said, though California officials argue their law is tougher and faster-acting.

The EPA has been sued by California, other states and environmental groups over the decision, and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., has introduced legislation to overturn it. Boxer plans to bring her bill to a vote Wednesday in the Environment and Public Works Committee she chairs.

EPA chief backed state's tough emissions rules

By Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington bureau
S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Washington - -- Environmental Protection Agency chief Stephen Johnson originally backed California's effort to set the nation's toughest vehicle emissions limits, but he dropped his support under pressure from the White House, according to a new congressional report.

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, said the new details - revealed in sworn testimony from top EPA officials - showed that the White House "played a decisive role in the rejection of the California motor vehicle standards" in December.

A spokesman for the EPA said Johnson stands by his decision and called the report "distraction-oriented political tactics."

Waxman, a critic of the EPA's decision to deny California's request for a waiver from federal rules to implement stricter emissions standards for cars and trucks, used his subpoena power to get key documents leading up to Johnson's Dec. 19 decision. He also got senior officials to go on the record about the EPA chief's deliberations.

EPA Associate Deputy Administrator Jason Burnett told the committee in a deposition that Johnson "was very interested in a full grant" of California's waiver in August and September of last year. Later in autumn, Burnett said, the EPA administrator came to believe that a partial grant of the waiver "was the best course of action."

A partial grant would have allowed the state to implement its rules for several years, starting with 2009 model years.

The committee staff then pressed Burnett on whether the White House had communicated its views about California's request to Johnson.

"I believe the answer is yes," he replied. But Burnett said he'd been instructed by EPA not to answer further questions about the White House's role.

Asked if Johnson had changed his view after his discussions with the White House, Burnett said, "He ultimately decided to deny the waiver."

The testimony by Burnett is the first evidence that Johnson changed his mind about the waiver decision and suggests that White House influence might have played a part.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar, in an e-mail response, said Burnett could not have known his boss' views. "I am sure there are a number of opinions as to what the administrator was thinking throughout the long process," he said, "but the only one that matters was the administrator's final decision that stands today."

Environmentalists and California officials said the new revelation shows that politics, rather than science and law, drove the decision.

"Clearly the Bush administration at the highest levels killed the California waiver," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who as chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee has pursued her own investigation of EPA's waiver decision.

The White House has told Waxman's committee it has 32 documents that detail phone calls and meetings between senior White House and EPA officials but will not release them, citing executive privilege. Both Waxman and Boxer repeated their demand Monday that the White House turn over the records.

The administration has long opposed efforts by California and at least 16 other states to set more-stringent vehicle emissions standards to fight global warming. Johnson's decision thrilled the auto industry, which had been seeking to block California's rules in the courts. California and other states have sued the EPA over the December decision.

The decision has high stakes: New federal fuel economy rules, cited by Johnson when he made his decision, would require cars and trucks to get 35 miles per gallon by 2020. But the rules California proposed are much tougher - requiring 44 miles per gallon by 2020, which state officials say would cut greenhouse gases 74 percent more than federal law.

Waxman's report Monday contained other details: It had been revealed earlier that Johnson overruled his own legal and technical staff in denying California's waiver request, but the new report showed the depth of the EPA staff's opposition.

During a Sept. 21 meeting, Johnson pulled his staff into a room and polled them on what he should do. Not a single staffer opposed the waiver, several EPA officials who attended the meeting told the committee.

The staffers agreed that California had met the "compelling and extraordinary conditions" required by the Clean Air Act to grant a waiver. Karl Simon, who heads the unit within the Office of Transportation and Air Quality that handles waivers, said he told Johnson at an Oct. 31 meeting that if EPA denied the state's request, "I think the odds are we will lose" in court.

Several EPA veterans told the committee they were stunned by Johnson's decision because everything in the record supported the state's case.

"Yes, I was surprised," said Rob Brenner, director of Policy Analysis and Review for the agency. "... The analyses that had been put together seemed to point towards either a full or a partial waiver.

"It was difficult to see how (Johnson) arrived at that decision, given the information that had been provided and the consensus among the staff," said Maureen Delaney, a program analyst in the EPA's Office of Air and Radiation. "... It seemed like a difficult place to get to."

EPA's California ruling swayed by White House Head of agency first backed state's authority, then reversed his course

By Frank Davies, MediaNews

LA Daily News, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

WASHINGTON - The head of the Environmental Protection Agency, after meeting with White House officials, reversed his earlier position and denied California's authority to enforce its own controls on tailpipe emissions in December, a U.S. House investigative committee found Monday.

In the fall of 2007, EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson was prepared to follow the unanimous recommendation of his professional staff and grant, at least in part, the state's bid to enact landmark controls designed to cut global-warming pollution from new vehicles by almost 30 percent by 2016.

Jason Burnett, a Johnson deputy, told the House Oversight Committee in a deposition Thursday that Johnson was "very interested" in granting California a full or partial waiver from the Clean Air Act. But after Johnson talked with White House officials, "he ultimately decided to deny the waiver" and used "White House input" in his rationale, Burnett said.

The battle over the California emissions standards - which 13 other states are ready to adopt - has become a major environmental showdown. California has sued in federal court to reverse the EPA decision, and on Wednesday the Senate Environment Committee will consider a bill by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., to allow the states to enact their own standard.

All three presidential candidates - Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republican John McCain - have said they would grant the waiver.

The auto industry has vigorously fought the California standards, and auto executives from Ford and Chrysler met with Vice President Dick Cheney in October to make their case.

The House committee, chaired by Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., obtained 27,000 pages of documents from the EPA, some through a subpoena, and interviewed eight EPA officials. The EPA refused to turn over documents about communications with the White House, and Burnett said he was told by lawyers not to discuss Johnson's meetings with White House officials or to disclose which officials he spoke to.

Waxman's staff, citing Burnett's deposition and other interviews, concluded that "the White House played a decisive role in the rejection of the California motor vehicle standards."

A spokesman for the EPA, Jonathan Shrader, said Monday that Johnson made his decision "based on the facts and the law."

"I'm sure there are a number of opinions as to what the administrator was thinking throughout the long process, but the only one that matters was the final decision that stands now," Shrader said. He added that Johnson reviewed "a wide range of options" before making a decision.

Massive Fla. wildfire spreads smoke across state

The Associated Press

USA Today, Tuesday, May 20, 2008

South Florida residents were warned to stay indoors and a state prison and federal detention center were evacuated Monday as smoke from a massive wildfire in Everglades National Park billowed their way.

No structures were in danger, though officials said the fire was burning in the only known habitat for the endangered Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow.

The 36,000-acre blaze was about 30% contained. The smoke was blowing to the northeast, said U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Nina Barrow. Smoke and fog advisories were issued for Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Glades counties.

Moderate to "unhealthy" air quality conditions were expected throughout the week, according to the Miami-Dade County Department of Environmental Resource Management.

Meanwhile, Everglades Correctional Institution and the Krome Detention Center were being evacuated as a precaution due to the nearby fires. The fire is approximately ten miles from Everglades, which evacuated 1,753 inmates. Krome is federal immigration lockup that holds about 600 inmates. The inmates were being taken to other facilities.

Seven helicopters and two tankers were performing water drops Monday to stop the fire from reaching Krome Avenue and Tamiami Trail, Barrow said.

Firefighters have been battling 88 active fires that have burned 44,000 acres from Brevard County, on the state's Atlantic coast, south to Miami-Dade County.

Six fires that had burned about 12,500 acres and destroyed a number of homes in Brevard County were about 75% contained, said Florida Division of Forestry spokesman Todd Schroeder. The causes of the blazes remained under investigation.

Officials also were concerned that rain in the forecast Monday could worsen conditions on Lake Okeechobee after five wildfires burned over 25,000 acres in the dry lake bed.

Firefighters have not been trying to contain the fires because no homes were threatened, said U.S. Division of Forestry spokeswoman Melissa Yunas said.

But any rain could bring lightning and high winds that could help the blazes spread across the exposed lake bottom.

"The vegetation is already dry enough," Yunas said.

Manteca Bulletin commentary, Friday, May 16, 2008:

Hybrids looking good as gas prices climb

It took \$4 a gallon gas but now I'm driving a 'hot' car once again

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

It's great.

It hasn't been since the days I drove a 1980 Datsun 280ZX with T-top, three coats of lacquer over graphite body paint, plush gray leather seats, a \$1,500 stereo system - hey that was a lot of bucks back then - that I've had so many people come up and check out my wheels.

What am I driving?

A 2006 Ford Escape hybrid.

I have complete strangers - seven in the past month or so - stop me as I'm getting in or out of my car and quiz me about the hybrid.

Their questions?

- What kind of mileage do you get? Since I constantly monitor it - it's an obsession with most hybrid owners especially due to displays built into the dashboard panels - I average 32.6 miles combined driving. But when I'm in Manteca, Modesto and Stockton and do a lot of stop and go without turning the engine off and on, I average between 35 and 37 miles per gallon but I also don't do jack rabbit starts and drive like you're supposed to. On the freeway, I get about 33.7 driving 55 mph but I've got to be honest. I do push 65 mph often which drops it down to the 31 mpg plus range.
- How long have you driven the car? Going on 29 months and 27,000 miles.
- Aren't you worried about the technology being so new? No, it is actually old technology made economically feasible by computer chips.
- What about the batteries, any concerns? I'll tell you what my warranty says. They are covered for 100 percent replacement for either 100,000 or seven years - which ever comes first. I asked and was told at the time I bought the car that the replacement battery is \$7,000.
- That's a lot of money. What if the battery goes after 100,000 miles? Yes it is, but as a mechanic trained in hybrids told me there is a kit you can buy that allows them to disconnect it. Then what you have is a car with 100,000 or so miles on the odometer where the gas engine has maybe 30,000 or so miles. In a nutshell, you have a four-cylinder car that still has a lot of engine life.
- Four cylinder, then its not a lot of power? I'm not towing stuff and I'm not Speed Racer. The best way to explain it is that I test drove a V6 gas Escape to compare it. And it is true - there is very little difference in horsepower between the 4 cylinder hybrid and the V6 when it comes to practical driving.
- Why did you buy it? It wasn't because of the reduced gas mileage. It was because of the reduction in [air pollution](#). I was lectured left and right by people who said I was foolish because the extra I paid - it was about \$5,000 more than an Escape gas four-cylinder at the time - that gas would have to hit \$4 a gallon before it started making sense and that would never happen any time soon. And to tell you how focused I was on the air quality issue and the fact it was one of the quietest and smoothest rides I've ever had in an SUV I bought it the second week of December in 2005. If I had waited another three weeks I would have gotten a \$3,000 federal tax credit.

How do you like it? Best vehicle I've ever owned. It is well-built, has plenty of room for everything

I need to do, parks like a breeze, is easy on gas and the air and is a comfortable ride. The only thing that would get me out of the Escape hybrid is a hybrid electric they're talking about coming out with in a few years.

Hybrid electric? My understanding that in addition to the regenerative batteries it would have batteries that charge overnight on a plug-in. The charge would give you a 70 mile range operating in conjunction with the regenerative battery without ever having the gas engine switch on. It would be great. More than 95 percent of the year I definitely drive under 70 miles in a day. I could go months without ever using the gas engine. But when I head to Death Valley, Yosemite or up to Sacramento I'd have the range.

Anything else you like about the hybrid? It sounds kind of nuts but it has made me a better driver and its because of the display on the dashboard that constantly monitors your driving efficiency at the moment plus it constantly computes your accumulative fuel efficiency. As a result, I accelerate evenly, don't have a heavy foot on the gas, I brake easier, and I rarely top the speed limit in town as I like the idea of the gas engine not coming on for as long as possible.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Tuesday, May 20, 2008:](#)

County's health report card grim

Living in Kern County can be hazardous to your health. That's one way to look at the findings in a new report on public health from the Great Valley Center.

Central Valley residents don't have the doctors and medical specialists, per capita, found elsewhere in California, and they are more likely to die of diabetes and heart attacks. They suffer more often from assorted poverty- and pollution-related illnesses than the rest of the state, and are immunized from illness and disease less often. And Kern County is among the worst of the worst in several areas.

Researchers used about two dozen health care indicators, including health insurance coverage, childhood asthma rates and birth weight data to arrive at the conclusions in "The State of the Great Central Valley: Public Health and Access to Care."

Among the findings:

Kern is third-worst in the 19-county Central Valley in infant mortality rate, with 7.1 deaths per 1,000 births, based on 2004 figures -- and faring poorer in that area than three years earlier. It is tied for worst for low birth-weight babies, second-worst for flu-immunization rates, second-worst for chlamydia rates, and fourth-worst in childhood asthma rates.

Kern is worst among the San Joaquin Valley's eight counties in three-year cancer death rates, and dead last -- by a shockingly wide margin-- in age-adjusted death rates for coronary heart disease.

The study links those health statistics to high rates of poverty, tendency to smoke and binge drinking as compared to the rest of the state.

It's not all bad news.

Some valleywide trends, such as smoking, immunizations and heart disease are slightly improved from past years. But virtually all lag behind other regions of the state.

What can we do about it? David Hosley, president of the Great Valley Center, said the findings should make Central Valley residents more cognizant of lifestyle choices and how they can impact health.

"People in the Central Valley are making unhealthy choices," Hosley told the *Sacramento Bee*. "We're not eating well, we don't get enough exercise, we are choosing to use alcohol or drugs to excess."

But laying the problem at the feet of individuals fails to take broader issues into account. Local governments must work harder to create access to open space, build walkable neighborhoods and retail areas, and reject development plans that fail to account for those and other considerations, such as public transportation.

Healthy living affects almost everything: workplace productivity, success in school, health-care rates, and the ability of a city to attract productive new residents.

With the Central Valley population forecast set at 131 percent growth over the next 40 years, the time to enact positive changes -- some of them quite difficult -- is upon us.

[Letters to the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, May 20, 2008:](#)

Readers debate merits of Big West's expansion

Community over profit

My organization and I have a profound problem with organizations that place financial gain ahead of an unnecessary increases in health and safety risks for ourselves, families, children and community.

People and organizations that opposed an increase in large dairies in our area, dumping L.A. sludge on local fields, pornography vendors in our neighborhoods, etc., should be outraged by Big West's plan to include a hydrofluoric acid unit, modified or not, in the refinery's expansion plans.

Arguments can be made for mitigation devices, training and procedures, but nothing is as effective as substituting a safer alternative that eliminates the hazard. Two safer alternatives include a solid acid catalyst and sulfuric acid.

If the alkylation catalyst is changed to a safer choice, the union supports the expansion. It will mean increased job stability for our members, the opportunity to increase our membership through the hiring of new maintenance personnel and skilled plant operators, and will help the local economy on a long-term basis.

On a long-term basis, we will be assured of an increased and more stable "clean fuel" diesel and gasoline supply. In the short term it will mean many jobs in constructing the facility. This will be a huge financial benefit to the community. But it should only be considered without increasing the risk to our health and safety.

As proposed, the project must be denied. The extreme increase in the risk to the health and safety of the workers, the community and those driving by, especially on Rosedale Highway, would be for the sake of economics.

Edward F. Huhn, United Steelworkers Local 219, Bakersfield

Expansion to benefit region

Donald Hall's recent Community Voices article about the Big West Clean Fuels Project on May 3 contains a lot of misinformation. I am an engineer who retired from Big West last year. I am very familiar with the project and the proposed technology to be used. HF Alkylation is the preferred technology throughout the United States.

The Big West unit will employ the "best available technology" in their design.

The safeguards include: a special paint that changes color if there is any HF present; continuous HF detectors throughout the unit; video cameras inside the unit to monitor for any leaks; a massive water deluge system (6,000 gallons per minute) to knock down any vapors that may arise; rapid dump system to send all the acid inventory to a neutralizing system within minutes; and remote operated valves to isolate any equipment that develops a leak. The use of modified HF means the volatility of the acid is reduced by 80 percent.

The picture painted by the opponents of the project is a scenario where all of the above safeguards fail at the same time there is an incident.

My son works at the refinery now and has volunteered to work in the new units when they're built. I support his decision and know he'll be safe.

I feel the Clean Fuels Project is good for the county and well worth the mitigated risks associated with the HF unit.

Mark Boone, Bakersfield

Traffic, air concerns linger

Various prominent citizens recently wrote a letter touting Big West's expansion as creating 1.2 million gallons per day of gasoline and diesel, providing 100 permanent jobs, 1,200 construction jobs, 1,000 new trees and adding to Kern's tax base. Almost a winning deal.

Our elected politicians need to require Big West do something about the increased traffic their expansion will cause to a badly overloaded section of Rosedale Highway.

If crude and product movement depends entirely on tank trucks, each and every day 175 tankers will haul product from the refinery and 200 tankers will haul crude oil into the refinery. Thus, Rosedale commuters will compete with an additional 750 tankers for sparse lane space.

Kern County's impact fees must consider how far the 750 daily truck trips will travel on our roads.

If its additional crude comes from the westside, 400 tanker trips will travel 20,000 miles per day, spewing particulates from 5,000 gallons of fuel into our very polluted air.

To minimize unhealthy increases to Bakersfield's particulate load, our Air Pollution Control District must require all tankers servicing Big West employ the best available pollution containment technology.

Construction will increase daily vehicle traffic on Rosedale by over 2,400 vehicles (1,200 men in and out) and by 200 after construction. Kern County's traffic impact fees must account for all increased traffic, then apply appropriate fees to improve Rosedale Highway for all commuters -- not just a stoplight to benefit Big West.

Air quality and traffic concerns should always overrule politicians' irrational obsession for new jobs and increased taxes.

Jon Crawford, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, May 20, 2008:](#)

Status quo is no good

The recent "State of the Air" report coupled with our air district's passage of a fatally flawed particulate matter (PM) 2.5 plan highlight our dire air pollution crisis.

Despite oft-lauded improvements, the Fresno-Madera area ranked third-worst in the nation for short-term particle pollution; clearly we are a long way from healthy, breathable air for all. Rather than take the steps necessary to clean up this mess, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is pointing its finger at the state, relying on a regulation that will not help us attain health standards until 2017 at the earliest.

That is simply too long to wait.

In order to move forward, we need bold actions and courageous leaders who are willing to think outside the box. On May 22, the California Air Resources Board will review our PM 2.5 plan. We breathers must send a message that a "status quo" plan is not acceptable, that we know more can and must be done, that we support bold steps toward clean air for all. For information about the CARB hearing, please visit www.arb.ca.gov/board/board.htm.

*Catherine Garoupa, Community organizer
Central Valley Air Quality Coalition*

Madera Coalition for Community Justice