

Methane digesters show some promise

Combustion projects more difficult to get approved than pipeline injectors

By Elizabeth Larson

Capital Press, Friday, June 6, 2008

Being out in front of the pack on advancements and technology can be great, but it can also be expensive and challenging.

That's what some dairymen pursuing the installation of methane digesters in the Central Valley have discovered.

Methane digesters aren't exactly new, but they've become a much-touted approach to dealing with greenhouse gases and air quality while, at the same time, offering a source of energy.

Air quality is an increasing concern, especially in the San Joaquin Valley. A recent American Lung Association "State of the Air" report listed Kern, Tulare, Fresno and Kings counties in the top 10 counties with the worst long-term particulate levels. Most of the area's counties also received an "F" grade for overall air quality.

Grants

John Fiscalini of Modesto-based Fiscalini Farms decided to take on his own digester project.

Fiscalini, who also has a successful farmstead cheese company at his dairy, won a \$500,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development grant in 2007 for the project, which is currently under construction. The digester should be operating by late summer.

But, said Fiscalini, "It's been a bit of a horror story."

Fiscalini said he thought the project was a sensible, long-term solution for generating income on electricity, targeting an upscale group of consumers interested in renewables and meeting environment requirements.

There also had been a push by air regulators to get dairies to do something about the methane coming off lagoons, he said.

However, Fiscalini said the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) has required so many new regulations that it's added six months to the project timeline, eaten up the \$500,000 grant and required him to come up with \$2 million out of his own pocket.

"I'm in too deep to quit," he said.

Ramon Norman, an air quality engineer with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said one of the hangups Fiscalini ran into was the requirement of "best available control technology" for dealing with digester emissions.

Before Jan. 1, 2004, when new regulations went into effect, most digesters had no emission controls, Norman explained.

Now, requirements are for nitrogen oxide emissions to be at or below nine parts per million, Norman said.

The best available control technology requirement is very stringent - the strictest in the country, said Norman. "Our air quality problems, in all honesty, are some of the worst in the nation."

Dave Warner, director of permit services for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said it's not the digesters themselves that concern the district, but rather the treatment of the gas.

In particular, the district looks favorably on digester projects that inject gas directly into a utility pipeline, a process that he said has virtually no emissions.

Upgrading standards

David Albers, a third-generation Fresno County dairyman and environmental attorney, said he had no issues dealing with regulators or the permit process regarding his digester project, which injects methane directly into a natural gas pipeline owned by a utility company. The utility, in turn, pays for the gas, Albers said.

"We are upgrading the raw biogas to pipeline-quality standards," he said, a process which has no pollution but, rather, gets rid of it.

It took less than 60 days for Albers' project to move through the air board's permitting process, and only 30 days to get the water board's approval. "I could not even begin to complain about the regulators here."

In Fiscalini's case, he's proposing to generate non-farm electricity using a combustion engine, because he's too far away from a pipeline. That, said Warner, requires the best available control technology requirement to control the engine's emissions.

Permit problems

Fiscalini was already in the process of purchasing an expensive engine from a Spanish company when he was told the engine might not fit the standards. That would require the installation of a giant catalytic converter which could turn out to be too expensive.

Warner said problems usually arise when digester builders purchase equipment before completing the permit process and then can't qualify for the necessary permits.

Meeting regulatory standards has been an issue for Joseph Gallo Dairy Farms of Atwater, which has two digesters, both using internal combustion engines as Fiscalini proposes to do.

Carl Morris, the company's general manager and chief operating officer, said the first digester went online in October 2004, the second in March 2006. Morris said the digesters generate electricity and the heat produces steam for the company's cheese plant.

The second digester has to operate under the stringent nine-parts-per-million guidelines, said Morris. "That's a much tighter limit, and that's the one we've had serious problems trying to achieve."

Warner said Gallo's is the only digester operating under a nine-parts-per-million permit.

The air district has found that facilities are having difficulty meeting the standards, said Warner, and they're now conducting an engineering study to see if the standards are even achievable.

Sitting on sidelines

Morris said Gallo has received a variance on its permit for the second digester, and is working with the air board to study the emissions standards. He said they have a timeline of a year to come up with some conclusions.

"Most of the digester proposals are sitting on the sidelines waiting for us to get through that process," said Warner.

Morris said the company has spent an incredible amount of money to try to achieve the standards. "That's really diminished the returns we were expecting."

Still, despite the fact that they've been on what Morris calls "the bleeding edge" of methane digester development, Gallo has another digester project on the drawing board, which will use methane to replace propane as boiler fuel.

Albers said digesters have proved to offer a good return on investment, so a year and a half ago he founded his startup company, BioEnergy Solutions.

He said he's had interest from California and beyond - particularly the big dairy states of Texas and Arizona. "I think we'll make some announcements about projects in those states within the next few months."

Norman said interest in digesters also appears to be increasing, especially as state greenhouse gas reduction requirements are being bolstered.

The district has permitted 13 digesters - five for combustion, eight for pipeline injection - with three more combustion permits and one permit for pipeline injection now going through the process, he said. There's also a proposal to compress methane to use it to fuel milk trucks, much like using natural gas to power vehicles.

"I think there's a lot of impetus for digesters," said Warner. "They're a significant greenhouse gas reduction technique."

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Air research data helps vindicate dairy cows

Bob Krauter

Capital Press, Friday, June 6, 2008

DAVIS - Research being conducted on the air emissions that come from dairies is helping to vindicate dairy cows as a major source of smog-forming gasses. Air quality research at the University of California-Davis and at California State University-Fresno is producing valuable data to help government regulators and dairy farmers better understand how to mitigate for emissions.

Leading the effort at UC-Davis is Dr. Frank Mitloehner, director of the Agricultural Air Quality Center. Since 2002, Mitloehner has investigated claims that cows are the major source of reactive organic gases that cause smog. "Four years ago, people thought dairy cows were the number-one emitter of smog-forming gasses, but I think most would now conclude that is not true," he said.

Using a row of large outdoor chambers on the UC-Davis campus as well as indoor chambers and an array of scientific monitoring equipment, Mitloehner's project examined the potency of the mixture of gasses that are emitted by dairy cows.

Some of the compounds on a per-molecule basis can produce a lot of smog and high reactivity, he said. Others have low reactivity and contribute very little to smog. Mitloehner studied gasses coming from manure lagoons, fresh manure that would be typical of free stall dairies, emissions from cows through enteric fermentation through their digestive process, and silage.

"What we have found over the years was first of all, what was thought to be the number one source of VOCs on dairies, which was the lagoons, we found that the lagoon is one of the minor sources, not the major source," Mitloehner said.

Mitloehner has concluded that the potency of various VOC emission sources, ranked from lowest to highest: stored waste in lagoons, fresh waste, cows, and fermented feed.

"Fermented feed is rich in VOCs because of the nature of what produces it - which is fermentation," Mitloehner said.

Typically, dairies cover silage piles to keep it anaerobic and the covering traps the gases inside. "That's good of course," said Mitloehner, but when feed is removed, emissions like ethanol and methanol can escape. He is currently involved in a silage study to better understand emissions coming from feed and what mitigation measures might be effective on them.

Dairy potency

Mitloehner has recently published data on the potency of emissions coming off dairies.

"What it showed was that the ozone-forming potential of these gas mixtures was very low. Even though there are gases that are released in high concentrations, like ethanol for example, even though there is a lot of it, it is not very potent," he said.

Mitloehner, who is an associate professor, explains it to his students by using an alcohol example.

"If you drink Bud Light versus vodka versus wine versus tequila, we all know there is a different effect with respect to getting a buzz from these different beverages," he said. "What we find on dairies is not a lot of tequila, not a lot of vodka, but we find a lot of Bud Light. There are a lot of gasses, but they are low in potency. That's important news."

Mitigating emissions

Mitloehner thinks changes in feed rations and manure management, adding additives to feed and using aerators and digesters could help mitigate for emissions.

Dr. Charles Krauter, coordinator of agricultural air quality projects at CSU-Fresno, is involved in a dairy-monitoring project that is funded by the California Air Resources Board with matching support from the CSU Agricultural Research Initiative. Krauter's project monitored commercial dairies over a period of two years to get a better idea of the variability related to different methods of operation as well as seasonal changes in emissions related to ozone precursors.

Using the results from Mitloehner's data about feed as a major source of VOCs, Krauter configured sampling and analytical systems to look at silage piles and feed rations. Krauter said field work will be completed this summer and results will be reported to air board officials at the end of the year.

"It does appear that the major emission of the VOC's that can produce ozone are alcohols related to feeding. I agree that there are probably a number of practical changes that can reduce those emissions," Krauter said in an e-mail statement. "I also agree that the contribution of dairies to the valley's ozone problem may be less than currently estimated because those alcohols that are the primary emission are much less reactive than other emissions from other sources."

Total VOC emissions from dairies may be high, said Krauter, but the specific gases that dairies emit are less likely to create as much ozone as other sources such as car and truck exhaust that emit much more reactive gases.

Data from the studies are important to state and federal regulators and to California's dairy industry. Dairy farmers are under intense scrutiny in the San Joaquin Valley to protect the quality

of air and water. Permits to expand existing dairies and to build new ones have been hamstrung by environmental regulations.

Welcome data

Sheraz Gill, an air quality engineer for the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#), welcomes the air study data.

"First, they help determine how much emissions are coming off of a certain facility and also where the emissions are coming from," Gill said. "By quantifying those emissions first and then applying control technologies and mitigation measures, we're going after the correct emission sources."

Paul Martin, director of environmental services for Western United Dairymen, said the data are not likely to appease environmental groups as they press for stricter rules on farmers, but they do help the industry.

Validate measures

"It is really important to us to be able to validate the control measures that we're going to put in. We've got to direct our mitigation and make our investments in the most effective manner possible," Martin said.

"From a regulatory standpoint, we want to make sure that the regulatory policy development is done on a sound scientific basis."

UC-Davis' Frank Mitloehner believes the studies have reshaped the debate about air emissions from dairies from solely looking at manure to considering dairies as a complex biological system. But he added that environmental groups are now focusing their efforts on air emissions that have the greatest risk to public health, such as emissions of methanol.

There is also the question of how dairies relate to climate change. Passage of California's landmark greenhouse gas law, AB32, two years ago has prompted regulators to look at the various business sectors to determine their carbon emissions.

Mitloehner said agricultural operations face a level of new scrutiny. "The question that large retailers like WalMart is asking is what is the carbon footprint of a gallon of milk? That could be a huge question because if WalMart says if you want to sell us a gallon of milk, we want to know what your carbon footprint is," Mitloehner said. "Obviously the dairy industry has no clue what their carbon footprint is, so this is not a discussion that will be over any time soon. It is just a moving target."

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Clean energy plant may boost oil recovery

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, June 9, 2008

Oil giant BP and Rio Tinto, one the world's largest mining companies, plan to spend nearly \$2 billion to build a clean energy plant in Kern County that will bury greenhouse gas emissions in nearby oilfields.

Initially planned to be built in Carson in Los Angeles County, the project is now being proposed near Taft, next door to Occidental Petroleum's Elk Hills oilfield.

The plant would create enough power to supply 150,000 homes using technology that converts coal and petroleum coke - know as synthetic coal - to hydrogen.

Petroleum coke from California refineries would be the plant's primary feedstock. The dirty, carbon-rich fuel is what's left after a barrel of crude has been refined into other products. Most is now sold to other countries where it's burned as fuel in furnaces with few pollution controls.

Up to 90 percent of the new plant's carbon dioxide would be captured and sold to Occidental, where it could be injected into the ground for enhanced oil recovery operations, according to Tiffany Rau, a spokeswoman for Hydrogen Energy, the joint-venture company formed by BP and Rio Tinto.

Once in the ground, the CO₂ stays there, meaning it will never enter the atmosphere.

"We see a sense of urgency here in terms of climate change," Rau said. "This project basically takes a fossil fuel and makes a clean product."

Climate change experts have identified such "carbon capture and storage" technologies as a key solution for reducing carbon output from major sources like power plants, cement factories and refineries. And with abundant oilfields, open space and the state's demand for cleaner energy sources, many see Kern County as poised to play a major role in these emerging projects.

"I think this is a story about opportunity," said Lorelei Oviatt, a Kern County Planning Department division chief. "We have the infrastructure and the space to do this. And finally we have people saying, 'Let's do it.'"

Hydrogen Energy's project is the second power plant proposed for Kern County that will capture and store carbon.

Last month, Rancho Cordova-based Clean Energy Systems proposed a smaller power plant about 20 miles north of Bakersfield. That project is partially funded with a \$65 million Department of Energy grant and will serve in the beginning as a test project to determine how well carbon is stored in certain geological formations.

After that, Clean Energy Systems plans to also sell its carbon dioxide to oilfields.

Hydrogen Energy's project near Taft is about five times bigger, however, and carries more investment. And so far, it's been hailed locally as a promising prospect for clean energy, new jobs and the environment.

"The economic impact is pretty amazing," said Kern Economic Development Corp. President Richard Chapman, who receives about a call a day from companies wanting to build alternative energy sources in Kern County.

Most never come to fruition but "the good thing is, this is BP and Rio Tinto and they're companies with pretty deep pockets," Chapman said. "Frankly, a lot of these green and renewable energy projects are going to have to be funded by the big players."

Hydrogen Energy's plant is expected to create at least 100 permanent jobs along with about 1,000 construction jobs over the three years the plant is built. Following an 18-month regulatory approval, the company hopes to begin construction in 2010.

A reliable supply of carbon dioxide for nearby oilfields is also a win for the oil supply and consumers, according to Joe Sparano, president of the Sacramento-based industry trade group Western States Petroleum Association.

Officials with Occidental Petroleum deferred comment on plans to buy CO₂ from the plant to Hydrogen Energy but Sparano said the oil producer is one of the most experienced at using CO₂ in oil recovery.

CO₂ injection has been used for decades along with steam to help coax stubborn deposits of thick oil from the ground that won't budge using normal recovery methods.

According to Sparano, while normal extraction methods will generally recover up to 30 percent of oil in a reservoir, the use of CO₂ can push production up to 50 percent or more.

But it's been an expensive option up to this point, he said.

"The irony of all this is, we used to buy food-grade carbon dioxide that would otherwise be used for carbonation of soft drinks," Sparano said.

The potential for storing CO₂ in California oilfields offers immense opportunities to stem climate change while boosting oil recovery, according to Sparano.

Citing Department of Energy statistics, Sparano estimates that California oilfields could store up to 1 billion tons of carbon dioxide, enough to meet the state's greenhouse gas reduction goals several times over.

That much CO₂ could potentially extract an additional 57 billion barrels "stranded" oil in California, more than double the current estimate of all recoverable U.S. crude oil, Sparano said.

Hydrogen Energy must still tackle a few hurdles before the project becomes a reality.

Regulatory approval from the California Energy is expected to get under way in coming months and should take about 18 months to complete.

Car reaches another milestone

Hydrogen car full speed ahead

By John Saiz

Patterson Irrigator, Friday, June 6, 2008

LIVERMORE - There's a Patterson man behind Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's record-setting hydrogen-fueled car.

Tim Ross helped design the system that sent a car about 650 miles on one tank of fuel in January 2007.

The design team's latest milestone happened in early 2008, when the car's setup succeeded in storing hydrogen for six days without losing any of it. Previous storage tanks would vent fuel in about three days.

Ross and other team members got a chance to show off the car at the lab Wednesday. The converted white Toyota Prius looks much like any other Prius on the road, except where there would be trunk space, there's instead a big, shiny metal apparatus for storing and delivering hydrogen.

One of the team's next goals is to shrink the fuel storage container.

"You want trunks for suitcases, not (hydrogen tanks,)" said Salvador Aceves, group leader for energy conservation and storage.

Ultimately, the innovators want to build a hydrogen car that could be mass-produced and sold to the public.

"Two or three years, best-case scenario," Ross said. "I don't see it more than 10 years out."

To do that, the lab is enlisting the help of private industry - or, it could be said, private industry is turning to the lab for a vehicle that will appeal to the fuel-conscious consumer.

Lab representatives wouldn't confirm which companies they had entered into partnerships with, but Aceves wore a BMW hat Wednesday with the words "Hydrogen 7" on the side.

Ross has been working on the hydrogen car for about 10 years. The lab originally bought the concept from a Southern California company that had been converting Priuses into hydrogen fuel cars that went about 80 miles on each tank.

Since then, the team has put an extensive amount of work into the vehicle.

"When we were (doing the distance test), I kept a sleeping bag in the office," Ross said.

Hydrogen is one of several emerging alternative fuels that have been in the spotlight lately, especially with escalating gasoline prices and concerns about carbon emissions.

"It took the fuel crisis to actually emerge it," Ross said.

Hydrogen is thought to be the most abundant element in the universe. The main byproduct of a hydrogen car is water.

However, there aren't too many convenient places to fill up on hydrogen, and just getting usable hydrogen fuel takes energy. So while people might use solar or wind energy to make hydrogen fuel, they also might end up burning coal or petroleum for the purpose, which would counteract the benefits of switching to non-carbon-producing fuels.

"There are clean ways to make hydrogen and dirty ways," Aceves said.

Still, the team is hopeful that as the technology develops, costs will fall and clean hydrogen production will become popular.

For the scientists seeing their ideas take shape, the process is exhilarating.

"We come up with ideas all the time," Aceves said. "Often, they turn out just to be crazy ideas. It's exciting to see that this might solve an actual problem."

Racetrack Supporters, Opponents Have Their Say

Valley Voice Newspaper, Monday, June 9, 2008

Tulare - Supporters of the Tulare Motor Sports Complex told the Planning Commission Monday the city has "a once-in-a-life time opportunity" to bolster the economic base of the community. Opponents, on the other hand, argued just as adamantly that "money is not everything."

The comments came at the second and final hearing the commission scheduled to gather comments about the draft environmental impact report the city is circulating on the 90,000-seat racetrack, retail, office and residential project, which Fresno developer Bud Long and investors want to build on 711 acres adjacent to the International Agri-Center.

Unlike the first hearing in which only opponents took the mike, commissioners heard this week from supporters and opponents in about equal numbers.

Tom Griesbach, a member of the Tulare Industrial Site Development Foundation, which is facilitating the land purchases for the developer, was the first speaker.

"The benefits of this project could very favorably affect tens of thousands of Tulareans in their quality of life and affect them very favorably," Griesbach said.

Noting opponents have called into question the qualifications of the analyst who reported the project would create 16,340 full-time jobs and \$1 billion in revenues, he said he would like to know what the credentials of this person are.

He also said he wanted the environmental impact report to address the diversity of jobs that would be created, the impact on Tulare's unemployment rate, on tourism, on the city budget and on poverty.

"I think we [the county] are at 37 percent poverty level and I wonder if the EIR could address any of the socioeconomic impacts this might have to decrease this poverty level," Griesbach said.

"Most of us here are not at the poverty level, but I think we have a responsibility to find this out."

Attorney Mike Lampe, who is representing project opponents, asked commissioners to look at the Appendix L, which is the Urban Decay Analysis and Economic Impact Report.

He said changes from earlier projections are not explained and also noted the report says the estimates regarding the annual number of visitors to the speedway and drag strip were provided by the developer.

"There's no empirical data to support this," Lampe said. "I suggest the community ask the developer for a little bit more meat on these bones."

Tulare resident Patty Rocha said the project will create jobs and opportunities for related businesses. "The additional bed tax and sales tax benefits to Tulare could be staggering," she said.

Gary Schulz, a member of the Tulare Industrial Site Development Foundation board and former general manager of the International Agri-Center, called the proposed project a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity.

He said he has seen projects like this in Las Vegas, Milwaukee and Kansas that have worked out well for those communities.

Describing himself as a "Tularean in training," Frank Rimkus, chief executive officer of the Southern California-based Galaxy Theatres, said he and his company support the project.

An informal survey of movie-goers in Monroe, Wash., and Las Vegas, where his company has theaters, showed racetracks in those communities are "positive, contributing factors" to the quality of life in those cities, Rimkus said.

One of the theaters is very close to a racetrack and "I can't tell you when someone's doing something on those tracks and when they're not," he said.

Several people speaking in opposition took issue with the talk about financial benefits.

Respiratory therapist Leslie Dokken, who said she also suffers from asthma, said air quality is the biggest issue facing the project, given the number of people here who suffer from respiratory disease.

Noting the environmental report estimates each visitor to the speedway track would spend \$590 per event, she said, "The project has put a price on my life. My life is worth only \$600."

Rachael Dysart, who spoke at the first hearing and lives near the project, said the EIR does not address the impact on homes. She also maintained the speedway and racetrack would be a drain on the city's fire and police departments, which she maintains are understaffed.

"I think the city council members need to take off their green-tinted glasses and realize money is not everything," she said.

The tax money generated by the project could "turn this all around" and provide increased public safety, argued Pete Eppinga, another Tulare resident who lives near the proposed site and supports the project.

Other supporters spoke of the need to give kids a place to go, especially to race their cars in a safe environment.

"There's a lot of illegal drag racing that goes on with our kids," Kevin Sisemore of Porterville said. "If you can save one kid's life by putting this racetrack in, isn't it worth it?"

Tony Nunes III, who runs his family's 30-year-old dairy near the proposed site, asked that the EIR authors speak with experts at the University of California, Davis, and elsewhere to find out the impact racetrack noise would have on cows.

Planning Director Mark Kielty told the audience written comments about the EIR must be delivered to the city by 5 p.m. June 20. Comments should be mailed to: City of Tulare Planning and Building Department, 411 East Kern Ave., or e-mailed to motorsportsEIR@ci.tulare.ca.us.

Richmond officials approve restrictions on Chevron refinery

The Associated Press

S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, June 7, 2008

RICHMOND, Calif. — Richmond officials have approved new restrictions on the amount and type of crude oil Chevron Corp. can process at its Bay Area refinery.

Richmond's Planning Commission voted 3-2 Friday for a "comprehensive crude cap" as part of Chevron's proposed expansion of its waterfront oil refinery. Commissioners will meet later this month to discuss details of the cap.

Environmental groups had called for the restrictions to stop Chevron from processing dirtier crude oil that could increase air pollution and harm the health of residents who live near the refinery.

Chevron officials say the modernization project will reduce pollution and won't increase greenhouse gas emissions.

If the commission's decision is appealed, the issue will go before the full Richmond City Council.

Schwarzenegger plans to borrow from smog, nail salon funds to ease deficit

By Judy Lin

Sacramento Bee, Sunday, June 8, 2008

Nail parlors and smoggy vehicles could get fewer inspections under a little-known borrowing plan proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, according to advocates opposed to his budget.

The governor's latest plan to close a \$15.2 billion budget gap in the state's \$101.8 billion general fund would dip into pots of money in "special funds" intended to further the state's regulatory and environmental cleanup efforts.

Schwarzenegger is promising to repay most of the \$574 million in special funds within three years, but consumer and environmental activists said they are wary of the promise, given the state's spotty repayment record when similar moves were made in the past.

"At some point it ceases to be a loan and it's just a raid," said Rosemary Shahan, president of Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety, a consumer vehicle protection group.

Among the special fund borrowing the governor has proposed:

- \$25 million from vehicle inspection fees to administer the Smog Check Program.
- \$40 million from smog abatement fees to repair or retire vehicles that have failed a biannual smog inspection.
- \$2 million from memorial license plate sales to train law enforcement and respond to public threats.
- \$10 million from fees and fines collected through card room regulation.
- \$10 million from industry fees to inspect salons, barber shops and nail spas.

Other shifts and borrowing would take money intended to protect habitat and prevent oil spills, like the one after the Cosco Busan ship struck the Bay Bridge on Nov. 7.

"If the money is taken away, we won't have funding when we need to protect our air, water and coastal wetlands," said Bill Magavern of the Sierra Club.

Administration officials said the governor is proposing to take reserves that would not hamper existing programs.

And it remains to be seen whether Democrats, who hold a majority in the Legislature, will go along with the proposed loans. While the Senate opposed the loans, the Assembly approved them. The two houses will have to reconcile their differences.

Assemblyman Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, said that given the state's fiscal challenges, his budget subcommittee on consumer affairs has reluctantly approved \$116.5 million in loans from funds over which it holds jurisdiction.

"I'm not thrilled about the idea of loaning special funds to the general fund," Arambula said. "I think we are faced with some very difficult circumstances, however."

Schwarzenegger's finance spokesman, H.D. Palmer, said most of the money will be repaid by the fiscal year 2011-12. Palmer said the administration has proposed to take only reserves, which he said would have no impact on the state's inspection efforts.

Shahan, the consumer vehicle advocate, said the state has already borrowed over \$100 million in the past five years from the High Polluter Repair or Removal Program and Vehicle Inspection and Repair Fund.

"Those still haven't been repaid," she said.

Shahan said the state collects about \$50 million annually from smog inspection fees. That money furnishes financial assistance – between \$1,000 and \$1,500 – to people to repair or retire vehicles that fail smog checks. The state retired about 16,000 vehicles in 2006-07.

"We should be retiring more of these vehicles," Shahan said.

Fred Jones, who represents the Professional Beauty Federation of California, said that by taking the special funds, the administration is stripping the state government's ability to protect consumers.

Jones said the state Board of Barbering and Cosmetology has just 18 inspectors overseeing 476,000 licensees, including barbers, cosmetologists, manicurists, aestheticians, electrologists and the places where they work. The extra cash, he said, could be used to bolster the state's inspection team.

Kristy Underwood, executive officer of the state Board of Barbering and Cosmetology, said the governor's proposed loans would not slow the board's inspection efforts. In fact, she said the board plans to add seven inspectors next year.

Still, the Legislature should reject the loans because they don't help address the state's underlying gap between revenues and spending, said Michael Cohen, an analyst in the Legislative Analyst's Office. Cohen said the move simply delays the problem, and the state would still be on the hook to pay interest.

\$5 gas? To some, it's not impossible

By David R. Baker, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, June 8, 2008

Californians are still learning to cope with \$4 gasoline. Will we soon have to deal with \$5?

In the two weeks since California's average price for regular gasoline passed \$4 per gallon, prices have jumped an astonishing 42 cents. Some cities have seen increases of five cents or more overnight, according to data from the AAA auto club.

San Francisco drivers now pay, on average, \$4.42 for a gallon of regular. In Oakland, the average is \$4.39. In San Jose, \$4.40.

Gas kept rising even as the price of crude oil - gasoline's raw material - fell from record highs early last week. There's usually a brief lag between a change in the price of oil and a change in the price of gas, so many petroleum industry analysts thought gas prices were finally about to reach their peak. The bubble in oil and gasoline prices, they said, was about to burst.

But in the last two trading days of the week, oil's price shot back up at a speed never seen before, climbing more than \$10 on Friday alone to set a new record of \$138.54 on the New York Mercantile Exchange. If oil keeps rising, so will gas.

Without a doubt, \$5 gas would pose yet another significant psychological milestone forcing Americans yet again to look for ways to scale back their consumption.

Still, most analysts don't think we'll see \$5 gas this summer. Americans have been so stunned by this decade's run-up in prices that they've finally started driving less, and the drop in demand for gasoline should keep prices from passing the \$5 milestone, analysts say.

But no one wants to sound too sure. Not after watching California's average gas price cross \$3, then \$3.50, then \$4 in just three years.

"Five dollars? I don't see it happening," said Denton Cinquegrana, who tracks West Coast gasoline markets for the Oil Price Information Service. "Demand is just so crappy right now. But I've been wrong before."

Even if it doesn't hit \$5 this year, it's possible in 2009 unless oil prices drop.

"Maybe not by the end of the year, but certainly within a year we'll get there," said Rod Diridon, head of the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University.

He worries how low-income families will cope.

The shock of \$4 gas has already forced many Americans to adjust, by trying mass transit or buying more fuel-efficient cars or working from home. But some of those options aren't available to people with low-wage jobs. If gas goes to \$5, those people may not be able to pay, Diridon said.

"There will be pressure on the average American and the wealthy American, but for the poor, that pressure will be strangulation," he said. "It won't be, 'Gee, this is expensive.' For them, they won't be able to afford the car."

Prices have already climbed high enough, and stayed there long enough, to force Americans to rethink their daily routines.

A recent survey of 43,000 people nationwide found that 12 percent had tried carpooling to cope with high gas prices, while an equal percentage had canceled vacations as a result. About 8 percent had started using public transportation.

The survey, conducted by the NPD Group market analysis company, also found consumers making far more fundamental changes. About 6 percent of respondents had purchased more fuel-efficient cars, 6 percent had switched to telecommuting and 5 percent were working closer to home.

"Those are things that people don't just wake up one day and decide to do," said David Portalatin, director of industry analysis for NPD. "But now we're three years into this increase, and that's long enough for people to start making changes."

Those changes have started cutting the amount of fuel America consumes. In the past four weeks, the country used 1.6 percent less gasoline than during the same period last year, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Gasoline sales in California have been falling for more than two years, although they appeared to jump almost 7 percent in February, according to the State Board of Equalization. The board, which tracks gas sales through tax receipts, blamed the apparent increase on an accounting fluke and the addition of an extra day in February for leap year.

The thrift of drivers, in turn, has kept gasoline prices from soaring even higher. Gas station owners paying higher wholesale costs for fuel have a hard time passing along the full increase to their customers if those customers are buying less each week.

Mark Mitchell, president of the Coast Oil fuel marketing company in San Jose, said retail gas prices would have to hit \$4.49 per gallon for an independent station owner in California to break even right now.

"These have been the toughest four months I've seen," Mitchell said.

Although prices have been rising across the country, they've climbed higher and faster in California than in most states.

California's average price for regular gasoline rose 50 cents in the last month, according to AAA. The national average increased 34 cents and has been hovering just below \$4 per gallon this week. California typically has the highest gasoline prices in the continental United States, the result of high taxes, limited refining capacity and California's use of unique gasoline blends designed to fight air pollution.

California has seen a 17-cent jump in its average gasoline price since Monday.

Susanne Garfield, a spokeswoman for the California Energy Commission, said maintenance work at several of the state's gasoline refineries in recent weeks forced the refiners to buy extra supplies on the wholesale "spot" market, where traders buy and sell gasoline in bulk. That pushed up the wholesale price.

"In this market, any little hiccup or bump is going to affect the spot market, and that will affect the retail price," Garfield said. "The market is very skittish. It is just all over the place."

Nevertheless, many people hold out hope that gas prices will soon fall.

Barring another serious run-up in crude oil, Mitchell at Coast Oil says California's gas prices will peak sometime in the coming weeks before starting a long slide through the summer. Gas prices often peak in May or June, at the start of the summer vacation driving season, and then slip.

"I think we'll be in the \$3.89 range, easy," Mitchell said, predicting that level would be reached in August or September. "Under \$4 is a no-brainer."

Letting gridlock loose on L.A.

When approving developments, local officials have sidestepped laws meant to limit the effects on traffic.

By Jeffrey L. Rabin and Dan Weikel
L.A. Times, Monday, June 9, 2008

When Santa Monica officials approved the massive Water Garden office complex, they predicted the project would generate thousands of good jobs and revive a once-tired industrial neighborhood.

They also predicted a lot of traffic.

Twenty years later, both predictions have come true. Just ask Aundraya Reliford.

Five days a week, Reliford, 32, rises at 5:45 a.m., drives 20 minutes to a train station seven miles from her home in Rialto, in San Bernardino County, and catches the 7:20 a.m. Metrolink to Los Angeles.

During the hour-and-20-minute ride, she reads, sleeps or stares out the window, watching miles of motorists stuck on the freeway. Then, she becomes one of them.

At Union Station, Reliford heads for a parking lot where she has left a second car. She ventures onto the freeways for the final 15-mile, hourlong journey to Santa Monica, where she manages library services for MTV Networks.

Elapsed time: two hours, 40 minutes -- on a good day.

In the afternoon, she does it all again, in reverse.

Her daily journey is "absolutely horrific," she says. "It's not the distance. It's the amount of congestion that makes it just about unbearable." Just getting to the 10 Freeway onramp from her office, in the entertainment-industry hub surrounding Water Garden, can take 20 minutes.

Many factors conspire to produce Southern California's traffic. The most consequential is the collective impact of millions of individual choices. In Reliford's case, her loathing of the commute is outweighed by her love for her home in Rialto, with its big backyard where her two young boys can play safely.

Those choices play out in a region that sprawled long before the freeways were built. The pattern of development in Southern California as far back as the era of the Pacific Electric Railway's Red Cars created a horizontal city, one in which people frequently settled far from where they worked.

But individual decision-making alone does not account for Southern California's massive traffic congestion. Actions by government at the state and local level also bear a big share of the blame.

Two decisions stand out:

* State and local officials have not expanded the region's highways and mass transit systems enough to keep up with population growth.

The population of the five-county Southern California region grew 22% from 1990 to 2006, and the total miles driven by motorists has increased about 42%. But the number of miles of highway in the region has increased by only 7.5%.

Since 2001, Govs. Gray Davis and Arnold Schwarzenegger, along with state legislators, repeatedly have diverted money from the state's taxes on gasoline to pay for non-transportation programs. Schwarzenegger plans to do so again in the budget for the coming year. Roughly \$5.8 billion in highway and mass-transit funds that were diverted during the state's repeated budget crises this decade have not yet been repaid.

While the region's highway capacity has lagged behind population growth, mass transit has not made up the difference. Los Angeles County for the last 25 years has put three-quarters of its voter-approved transportation money into rail and bus systems. Even with the investment of about \$7 billion, 85% of commuters still drive.

* At the same time, local officials repeatedly have sidestepped state laws that were supposed to require developers to lessen the traffic-snarling effects of projects.

For years, elected county and city officials across Southern California have put economic development and jobs ahead of mobility, approving major commercial and residential developments without requiring builders to pay enough for improvements needed to handle extra traffic.

All that development contributes to congestion that for the average motorist in L.A. and Orange counties adds up to almost two workweeks of delay each year, according to the Texas Transportation Institute, a think tank at Texas A&M University that compiles annual assessments of congestion nationwide. That's almost double what it was in the 1980s. In Ventura County, congestion-related delays each year consume roughly a workweek of the average motorist's life. The delay in the Inland Empire equals about six workdays. Traffic has eased slightly on some freeways recently, probably because of the poor economy and high gas prices, but it is only a matter of time before congestion returns in full force.

Water Garden, approved in 1988, provides a case study of how developments pass through loopholes in state laws. The project is a collection of well-landscaped office towers surrounding a man-made pond just north of the 10 Freeway, near Santa Monica's border with Los Angeles.

When Santa Monica officials were debating it, their environmental impact report warned that the development would worsen traffic along city streets and the freeway.

In response, the Santa Monica City Council required the developer to pay for improvements to streets and traffic signals. City officials knew that would not make up for the additional congestion. But they approved the project anyway, adopting a formal finding that the economic benefits outweighed traffic impacts.

Those economic benefits have been formidable. Water Garden has become a hub of one of the region's largest concentrations of entertainment-industry jobs, including Reliford's, which is in a building nearby.

The traffic impact has been formidable as well. For the last 10 years, traffic on the 10 Freeway near the interchange with the 405 has been heaviest heading west in the morning -- a reversal of the historic pattern -- as tens of thousands of commuters head to jobs in West Los Angeles and Santa Monica.

The California Environmental Quality Act, adopted in the 1970s, requires cities and counties to prepare an environmental impact report before approving a large development. Those voluminous documents are supposed to inform the public and guide land-use decisions. The law directs officials to find ways to limit the increases in traffic congestion, air pollution and other problems to an insignificant level.

But the law does not define "significant," leaving that up to local governments.

In Los Angeles County, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which makes that decision, has decreed that a project must increase traffic on a Los Angeles freeway by 2% before its impact is considered significant. That decision by a previous MTA board -- made up of the five county supervisors, the mayor of Los Angeles, three mayoral appointees and other local representatives -- means each new development can add hundreds of vehicle trips to an already jammed freeway.

The law provides another escape hatch. By adopting a "statement of overriding considerations," officials can give the green light to a project even if it will have significant environmental effects as long as they decide the economic benefits are worth it. Santa Monica used that legal provision when it approved the Water Garden.

More than a decade later, L.A. officials used the same legal provision to approve the 54-story hotel and condominium tower and adjoining shopping and entertainment complex now rising near the intersection of the 110 and 10 freeways.

L.A. Live and its 5,000-car parking garage will generate an estimated 48,000 vehicle trips a day in the South Park area, next to Staples Center, the Nokia Theatre and the Los Angeles Convention Center.

Seven years ago, Caltrans officials asked Los Angeles planners to require measures to reduce L.A. Live's effect on nearby freeways.

"Interstate 10 and 110 freeways and the ramps in this area are operating at or near capacity for the most part of the day," Stephen J. Buswell, an official at Caltrans' district headquarters in downtown L.A., wrote to city planners Feb. 23, 2001. The additional traffic would create an "unacceptable level of service," he warned.

In September 2001, the L.A. City Council voted 11 to 0 to approve the \$2.5-billion project, using a statement of overriding considerations. The city required the developer, Philip Anschutz, to pay for improvements to streets in the area and share the cost of widening a 110 Freeway offramp and onramp. He also is required to cover the cost of an electronic sign on the freeway to advise motorists of traffic conditions near L.A. Live and Staples Center.

Even with the improvements, L.A. Live will worsen already crowded conditions, Caltrans said.

Caltrans can go to court to challenge a local government's approval of a project. And in some parts of the state, the agency has done so, seeking to force local governments to be more aggressive with developers. In 2006, for example, Caltrans won a settlement in which the city of Fresno agreed to require a developer to pay a fee to offset the effect his project would have on highways.

But Caltrans has been far more accommodating in Southern California. The agency has sued only once over a development, and then only to challenge an Orange County developer's traffic study. Indeed, when Caltrans built its headquarters across from City Hall in downtown Los Angeles, it asked for a statement of overriding considerations to allow the project to go forward. L.A. officials gave the green light.

Local officials across the region -- in Orange, Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino counties -- have all taken advantage of the same legal process to approve traffic-worsening developments.

Such land-use decisions have compounded the problems created by the state's chronic shortage of money.

"There have been decades of under-investment in the state's highways," said Caltrans Director Will Kempton. "Not only are we not keeping pace with the need to expand the system, we are not taking care of the existing system."

State transportation spending began falling behind population growth in the early 1970s. But the gap began to widen even more after the collapse of the dot-com boom.

Davis and Schwarzenegger both used money from state transportation funds to help balance their budgets and avoid tax increases. They siphoned roughly \$8 billion from highway and mass-transit programs, bringing such projects to a near standstill. The money went to schools, medical care for the poor and elderly, prisons and other state programs.

Delay has proved costly. In recent years, construction costs have risen faster than inflation. Today, adding one carpool lane on the northbound 405 from the 10 Freeway to the 101 would cost about \$1 billion. That's \$100 million a mile.

The price of rebuilding 18 miles of the 710 Freeway and adding truck lanes would be at least \$6 billion. And a 12-mile tunnel through the Santa Ana Mountains to better link Riverside and Orange counties could cost \$8 billion or more.

Inflation and steady improvements in the fuel efficiency of new cars have made the state and federal gasoline tax less valuable as a source of revenue. Adjusted for inflation, state officials estimate that gas-tax money available for spending on highways was lower in 2006 than in 1994.

Looking for ways to boost spending without raising taxes, Schwarzenegger two years ago proposed the biggest transportation bond package in state history, a \$20-billion measure, aimed mostly at roads.

The bond measure is intended to jump-start spending on highway projects, but it does not

generate any new revenue to help pay for them. Instead, using bond funds simply means borrowing now and repaying later with interest. By the time the bonds are repaid, interest will have almost doubled the cost to an estimated \$38.9 billion. That will put further demands on the state's general fund. In its most recent annual report to the Legislature, the California Transportation Commission, which oversees spending the bond money, described "the dismal shape of basic state transportation funding."

"We can barely afford half of the state's major rehabilitation needs," commissioners said.

For Reliford and tens of thousands of commuters like her, that means there is little likelihood that the daily commute will shorten soon.

"There is no improvement in sight," Reliford said. "You know there isn't going to be anything any time soon. . . . At the rate things are going, there's certainly going to be a time when I have to pull out."

Neighbors file suit over Seventh-day Adventist camp

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Monday, June 9, 2008

WAWONA -- To renovate their beloved mountain camp, Seventh-day Adventists have faced a struggle that might test anyone's faith -- 15 years of planning to satisfy neighbors, the National Park Service and Mariposa County.

Now another battle looms -- some neighbors have filed suit.

The neighbors worry that the planned improvements will turn Camp Wawona into a sprawling resort that will attract a horde of tourists.

That not only would ruin the quiet, but pose a danger if anyone had to escape a fire down a narrow, one-lane road from the camp, they say.

The camp owners counter that this project is a remodeling job, not an expansion. The Clovis-based Central California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists say there would be no more visitors than in the past -- in fact there would be fewer.

"The last thing we want is a big resort," said conference president Jerry Page. "We want to get out into nature and commune with God." Welcome to a Wawona, a quiet, Mariposa County hamlet surrounded by Yosemite National Park. It's a mountain getaway that is far less tranquil than it might seem these days.

Wawona landowners cherish their pocket of paradise. Private land ownership here predates the park. About 300 cabins dot the landscape near the Merced River's scenic south fork, amid soaring ponderosa pines and incense cedars.

About 130 property owners live in the community year-round. They send their children to a small elementary school in the community.

Other owners live elsewhere and often rent their cabins to tourists.

Such an island of private land is not unusual in national parks.

Wilsonia is a private community within Kings Canyon National Park.

By all accounts, the 30-plus-acre Adventist camp, tucked into a far corner of Wawona, has peacefully co-existed with neighbors and landowners for 79 years.

It has been a religious retreat and a popular summer camp for children. The facility is open year-round. Church officials say 80 percent of the camp's use occurs in fall, winter and spring.

But opponents say they believe the camp is most intensely used during summer. They say the new buildings in the project would turn it into a year-round tourist attraction.

Opponents worry that snow and ice will clog the narrow road and imperil motorists in winter. Any big emergency would make it impossible, they say, to get rescue or fire crews into the area as people flee down the one-lane road.

They say that intense use of the camp year-round also would create more noise, more pollution and more of a burden on the waste-water system. This wouldn't be the same church camp after the work is completed, they say.

"All you'll have to do is call and make a reservation," said nearby cabin owner Diana Escola Watson, one of the residents who filed the lawsuit in Mariposa County Superior Court. "This camp is expanding into a resort, not just remodeling." Church officials reply that the opponents are simply wrong -- about most everything. Officials have never planned a resort. And the camp has been used year-round for many years, they say.

Adventists say visitor levels would be no higher than they have been at peak times in the past several years -- 338 in summer. And the county would limit the camp to lower numbers during fall, winter and spring.

For instance, only 230 guests would be allowed on winter weekends, and 150 during winter days. Those figures represent a rollback, not an expansion, church officials say.

"We will have the same number of beds," said spokeswoman Caron Oswald of the church's Central California Conference. "These days, church couples don't like to sleep eight or 10 in one room, as they did in the past. We need to build new lodges." The camp would still mainly be used by the church conference's 33,000 members, though other groups, such as the Boy Scouts and other church groups, use the camp. It also would continue as a summer camp for children with asthma, epilepsy and other problems.

The camp includes a swimming pool, archery range, a stable and amphitheaters. County records show there are several buildings dating back to 1938, though many were built in 1970.

Adventists say they were backed into this permit process in the 1980s when the county came up with a town plan for Wawona. A church camp is not allowed in Wawona, according to the plan. Adventists were grandfathered in for 50 years as a pre-existing use of the land.

But the arrangement means the church needs a conditional-use permit to update the camp. Updates in the buildings, plumbing and electricity are needed, or the camp could be shut down by 2030, church officials said.

In the early 1990s, the church began working on the permit with Mariposa County, the park service and the Wawona property-owners association.

To satisfy all the worries from the county, the park service and neighbors, the church agreed to 90 conditions, which is considered extensive in Mariposa County. Among them is a requirement to provide a lead car for buses to warn drivers about oncoming traffic and find a place for vehicles to safely pull out of the way.

Both the county and the park service now support the church's plan.

They say the Adventists have been uncommonly cooperative.

"The church has been a good neighbor," said planning official Linda Dahl of the park service. "This is not going to be Disney World." Indeed, the project even won approval from the Wawona property-owners association, though opponents say dissenting owners had been held up in bad weather on the day of the vote.

The Mariposa County Board of Supervisors last fall approved the project. But in December, the Citizens for the Protection and Preservation of Wawona, representing some neighbors, filed suit challenging an analysis of the project's effects on air, water, soil and neighbors -- the encompassing environmental study required of projects in California.

But the lawsuit alleges the Adventists are planning "a massive ... development scheme that would transform a small, quiet, rustic camp primarily used by children into a year-round destination resort." Now Wawona is divided, perhaps as never before, some landowners say.

"It's unfortunate that we have been polarized a little bit," said resident Ed Mee, who supports the camp project. "But I'm for private property rights, and the church camp has been a good neighbor. They want to update. What's wrong with that?" Opponents say they have no quarrel with fixing the facilities, continuing summer camps for children and allowing comparatively little use during colder months.

But the lawsuit says the renovation plans would increase the square footage of buildings from about 42,000 to more than 110,000, including a gymnasium that could hold as many as 450 people.

Construction could stretch over two decades, which also bothers opponents. In the plan, Adventists say they would build in phases, paying for improvements as they raise money for them.

Says opponent and property owner Paul Devereaux of Southern California: "My gut reaction is that this is an awfully big project." Adds year-round Wawona resident Pat Sischo: "How are you going to get emergency vehicles into the camp if you've got guests trying to get out? This is all about safety." Forest Drive runs a short distance from a main Yosemite route, Wawona Road, and into this section of Mariposa County, where it narrows to a winding, single lane, stretching about two miles to the camp.

The road does not have a history of major or fatal traffic accidents. Widening the road might seem a good solution, but that's not a popular idea in Wawona. No one wants to make these backwoods areas more accessible and inviting to the public.

But after the renovation, more cars would be driving into the camp to use it throughout the year, opponents claim.

"It's not like having busloads of children come into the camp," said Dave Sischo, Pat's husband. "The children stay at the camp, and that's no problem. But people in cars can travel all around Yosemite.

If people are at the camp year-round, we're going to have more traffic." Adventists disagree, saying many people already drive cars to the camp for their religious conferences, retreats and meetings. They say there has not been a problem.

The park service provides fire protection, but Adventists have their own fire truck. They also have crews who plow the road after snow storms, said Page, the church conference president.

Church officials said they will continue to do whatever they can to ease concerns of everyone involved. Some residents say they have no problem with the church's approach.

"The Seventh-day Adventist Church doesn't propose to do that much," said property owner Ralph Harder. "I'm not an advocate, but I have listened to this discussion for nine years. They're remodeling, not expanding. It's fine. The church doesn't deserve this kind of treatment." But property owner Watson, who is involved in the lawsuit, said a judge will have to decide if the church's project is legal.

"If they just want to fix what's broken, that would be OK with us," she said. "But this is a significant increase in size and usage."

Midwest copes with floods, East warned of heat

By JIM IRWIN

Washington Post, Monday, June 9, 2008

DETROIT -- Temperatures rose toward the triple digits along the East Coast on Monday as Midwesterners braced for more rain that could add to days of deadly floods.

Eight deaths were blamed on stormy weekend weather, most in the Midwest. Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle declared an emergency for 29 counties and President Bush late Sunday declared a major disaster in 29 Indiana counties. Iowa Gov. Chet Culver said nearly a third of his state's 99 counties need federal help.

Flooding was expected to be a continuing problem this week in the Midwest as rivers are swollen with the runoff from heavy weekend rainfall, topped by the 11 inches that fell Saturday in Indiana.

"This thing came on fast with such a radical deluge of water that people were describing going from a feeling of security to waist-deep water in a matter of 15 or 20 minutes," said Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels.

A new storm system was headed toward the Ohio Valley from the southern Plains on Monday. Oklahoma utilities reported nearly 5,000 customers blacked out and the National Weather Service said as much as 3 inches of rain could fall on already waterlogged Indiana late Monday.

While the Midwest fought to cope with flooding, the East was locked in a steam bath. Heat advisories were posted Monday from the Carolinas to Connecticut, with temperatures expected to hit 100 from Georgia to New York, the National Weather Service said.

"It's just crazy. ... It's really, really hot," said New York City street worker Jessica Pena as she swept a midtown Manhattan street at around 8:15 a.m. The temperature already was in the upper 80s.

About 17,000 customers in and around New York City were blacked out by thunderstorms that struck late Sunday and the rising demand for electricity Monday to run air conditioners, utilities said. A subway system power outage disrupted some morning rush hour service.

New York City opened 300 cooling centers Monday, said Office of Emergency Management spokesman Chris Gilbride. District of Columbia officials declared Monday and Tuesday Code Red days for poor [air quality](#).

Intense thunderstorms pounded the Midwest on Sunday, hitting Michigan with wind up to 80 mph and more than 5 inches of rain that knocked out electrical service to more than 515,000 homes and businesses, about half of whom were still blacked out Monday. Flood warnings were posted Monday for much of western Lower Michigan, the weather service said.

Indiana officials urged about 1,500 people to leave the towns of Elnora and Plainville, about 100 miles southwest of Indianapolis, because of flooding along the White River. In Morgan County, southwest of Indianapolis, about 150 residents were taken out of a flooded nursing home, and officials moved more than 250 patients and employees from Columbus Regional Hospital in southern Indiana.

In western Wisconsin, about 250 people were evacuated in nine counties, said Mike Goetzman, a spokesman for Wisconsin Emergency Management. Prison inmate crews helped fill sandbags Monday in Baraboo and Fall River in south-central Wisconsin, Goetzman said.

Officials warned that Wisconsin's Kickapoo River could crest 6 feet over flood stage sometime Monday, but some small towns had already become isolated islands.

"It ain't normal," said Monte Sheldon, 47. The weekend rain washed out part of his yard outside Viroqua, Wis., depositing his trees across a highway.

Rushing water in southeastern Minnesota washed out some roads and recently planted crops, and officials urged residents of the Winnebago Valley to evacuate. More than 60 people were taken to a shelter in Caledonia from a campground.

Downstream, the Winnebago River rose to a record 18.7 feet late Sunday at Mason City, Ohio. The surge burst a levee, shutting down the city's water treatment plant, and Mason City's nearly 30,000 residents were told not to drink the water or flush toilets. Mason City got more than 5 inches of rain Sunday, a record for the date.

The weekend death toll included six in Michigan, two of them newspaper deliverers for The Grand Rapids Press who drowned Sunday when rushing water washed out a road beneath their car. Indiana listed one dead and one man missing, and lightning killed one person in Connecticut.

As Temperature Ties Record, Residents Seek Relief

By Bill Brubaker, Megan Greenwell and Theresa Vargas
Washington Post, Sunday, June 8, 2008

Forecasters warned us that it was coming but the 98-degree reading at 1:12 p.m. yesterday at Reagan National Airport was still startling.

It tied a record set in 1999, and felt more like summertime in Marrakesh than Manassas, more like Khartoum than Kensington.

"Yeah, it's hot out here," lifeguard John Lawrence said at the Volta Park pool in Georgetown, which was filled earlier in the day to capacity with 110 swimmers. In a hallway, 20 wannabes waited for their chance to take a dip.

With temperatures forecast to be in the upper 90s again today and tomorrow, experts urged people to gulp lots of nonalcoholic drinks, stay indoors and not do anything crazy. Like go for a run on the Mall.

"For some reason, people like to do that when it's hot," said Richard Hitchens, a National Weather Service forecaster. "We're hoping people know they should act a little differently than they do normally. You know, we don't want to see any heatstrokes."

In the District yesterday morning, celebrities and thousands of area residents braved the heat to attend the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Thirty-two runners were treated for heat-related incidents, a D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services official said. Two were briefly hospitalized, including a pregnant woman.

Dozens of Southeast residents were without water or had little water pressure yesterday as a result of residents turning on about 25 fire hydrants in the area. D.C. Water and Sewer Authority spokeswoman Michele Quander-Collins said many residents on streets including Savannah, Martin Luther King Jr. and Alabama avenues were without water. Quander-Collins said some residents complained that as soon as WASA employees arrived to close a hydrant, neighbors would return and open it again. Deborah Boseman of the 900 block of Barnaby St. SE had been without water for almost six hours. "This doesn't make any sense," she said.

However, Quander-Collins said things appeared to improve as the evening went on, and it appeared possible that hydrants were being shut off.

Anticipating the possibility of hydrant problems again today, WASA officials wanted to remind the public that unauthorized hydrant use is unlawful, dangerous and damaging.

Today, smog is again expected to reach Code Orange levels, meaning the [air quality](#) will be unhealthy for older or very young people and those exercising strenuously, said the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. Tomorrow and Tuesday will be Code Red days: unhealthy air for everyone.

Crews struggled in the heat and humidity to restore power that had been out since Wednesday.

One of those whose power came back was Ron Huebner of western Loudoun County, whose lights blinked on at 3 p.m. He was also without water, because his well had an electric pump. "Three days," he said. "It seems like forever."

That, of course, was before new outages last night.

In some parts of the region, including the District and Fairfax and Prince George's counties, emergency cooling centers were opened for people who lacked air conditioning or just needed a break.

For many, though, the pool was the place to be.

In the District's Barry Farm neighborhood, pool manager Jay Brocks reported more swimmers than usual yesterday afternoon. "I'm seeing faces I don't usually see, because of the heat," he said. "And parents are thanking us for having a place where their kids can jump in and cool off."

Nearby, Trista Dunlap, a 38-year-old University of the District of Columbia student, was cooling off with her son Anthony Brooks Jr., 7.

"It's a gorgeous day," she said, seemingly unfazed by the 95-degree temperature. "It's a beautiful day to be right here in the nation's capital, east of the [Anacostia] River."

On the other side of the river, at the Open City Diner on Connecticut Avenue, normally popular outdoor tables sat empty while upwards of two-dozen people waited for tables inside.

Gail Kellerman, who was waiting for a table with her family, said a broken air-conditioning unit had forced her to abruptly cancel her son's birthday party.

"We were going to cook chocolate-chip pancakes at home and have friends over," Kellerman said. "But the air conditioning went out last night, and we can't get a repair until tomorrow, so it's breakfast here, then the pool, then a movie."

The birthday boy, 7-year-old Sam Kellerman, took the change of plans in stride. "Swimming is my favorite thing, and then I get to see 'Kung Fu Panda,'" he said. "So it's a good birthday."

Farmers also seemed undaunted.

At the Arlington Farmers Market, raspberries were threatening to turn mushy under the sun's glare. But John Mezza, 61, manning the booth for Wheatland Vegetable Farms in Loudoun, said he was more worried more about people picking vegetables at the farms. "It is soaking, soaking work," he said. "Once the sun hits you and you have that much moisture in the ground, it's like being in the sauna."

Mezza added that his wife, who had spent the day gardening, already had laid out his duties for when he got home.

"My instructions today are to make sure the air conditioner is in the window," he said.

Take the tug out of mowing

Lee Reich, The Associated Press

In the LA Daily News, Friday, June 6, 2008

Mowing the lawn no longer has to begin with a nervous tug on a starter cord or the smell of gasoline and oil.

This happy state of affairs is the result of a new generation of electric lawnmowers, perhaps the greatest innovation in lawn care since the invention of the lawnmower itself.

These new mowers are not like the electric lawnmowers that have been around since the early 1950s. Those had long electrical cords just threatening to be cut and tethering the machines to electrical outlets. Today's high performance, cordless electric mowers are powered by rechargeable batteries.

Easy starting - by merely flipping a switch or lever - is just one of the advantages of these gardener's friends. Electric mowers also are much quieter than their gasoline guzzling counterparts, so you can mow early on weekend mornings without bothering your neighbors.

Less noise isn't the only environmental benefit of cordless electric mowers. Keeping 30 million collective acres of lawn from coast to coast trim and neat each year currently consumes more than 500 million gallons of gasoline. One hour behind a gasoline powered mower spews the same amount of pollution into the air as your car does on a 350 mile drive.

Of course, some sort of fuel is needed to create the electricity for even these lawnmowers, but that fuel is, hopefully, less polluting.

Although you have to reach deeper into your pocket to pay for one of these mowers than for an equivalent gasoline-powered one, weigh this increased cost against never needing to pay for tuneups, gasoline or oil. Electricity for these mowers costs just a few dollars per year.

Consider, before buying a cordless electric mower, where it puts the cut grass and where you'd like it to go. Some mowers drop the grass in place, others spew it into a side or back-mounted bag, and still others do either. When set up to drop clippings in place, these mowers, like most other modern mowers, functions as a mulcher, thoroughly chewing up the clippings before spreading them evenly. The clippings quickly decompose, enriching the soil without contributing to thatch buildup.

Other features to consider are cutting width and horsepower equivalent. These two features are related, with the more powerful mowers being able to cut wider swaths. More horsepower costs more but gets the job done more quickly. Some cordless electric mowers are self-propelled. Also check out how easy it is to raise or lower the mower deck.

Different battery technologies are used by different manufacturers. You might want to glance through the owner's manual or inquire about battery needs before purchasing one of these lawnmowers. Some require that the lawnmower, or at least the battery, be stored at a frost-free location in winter. Some mowers must be constantly charged when not in use, except in winter in the case of some models.

The benefits of electric

Features to consider

And the big question is...

A question that immediately comes to most people's minds about cordless mowers is: How long you can mow before having to recharge? Generally, these mowers run for 45 to 90 minutes on a charge - long enough to cut one-half to one acre.

But these mowers are so easy to start after stopping, who cares? You mow a little, take a break, then restart with confidence by merely flipping a switch or lever.

Toyota develops new fuel cell hybrid

By YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, June 6, 2008

TOKYO — Toyota has developed a new fuel cell hybrid, a green car powered by hydrogen and electricity, that can travel more than twice the distance of its predecessor model without filling up, the automaker said Friday.

The improved model's maximum cruising range is 516 miles (830 kilometers) compared with 205 miles (330 kilometers) for Toyota's previous fuel cell model, the maker of the Camry sedan and Lexus luxury cars said in a statement.

The FCHV-adv model, which received Japanese government approval Tuesday, will be available for leasing in Japan later this year, Toyota Motor Corp. spokeswoman Kayo Doi said. Pricing and other details weren't available, and overseas plans were still undecided, she said.

Fuel cell vehicles produce no pollution by running on the power of the chemical reaction when hydrogen stored in a tank combines with oxygen in the air to produce water.

The FCHV-adv from the world's second biggest automaker also comes with an electric motor and works as a hybrid by switching between that motor and the hydrogen-powered fuel cell. Toyota's Prius hybrid switches between an electric motor and a standard gasoline engine.

Fuel efficiency in the FCHV-adv was improved 25 percent with better braking and other changes, Toyota said. The new fuel cell vehicle can also start and run in temperatures as low as minus 22

degrees Fahrenheit (minus 30 Celsius), it said. Getting a fuel cell to work well in cold weather is a technological challenge.

Major automakers around the world are working on fuel cells and other ecological vehicles, including electric cars and plug-in hybrids, which recharge from an electrical outlet. And consumer interest in alternative fuels is increasing amid soaring gas prices and worries about global warming.

Rival Honda Motor Co.'s revamped fuel cell vehicle for leasing in California is rolling off a Japanese factory floor later this month.

For 2010, U.S. automaker General Motors Corp. is planning a Chevrolet Volt plug-in electric vehicle, while Tokyo-based Nissan Motor Co. is planning electric vehicles for the U.S. and Japan.

Fuel cell vehicles are usually marketed through leasing arrangements since the technology is too expensive for most people to buy in an outright purchase.

Green scene a flash in the pan?

By Janis Mara - Staff Writer

Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, June 6, 2008

Interest in all things green has risen to a red-hot pitch recently with more and more people jumping on the sustainability bandwagon — so much so that now, environmentalist blogs and consumer advocacy groups are wondering if the trend has peaked.

Many point to former Vice President Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" film about global warming as the flashpoint that triggered much of this green wave. Online discussions of sustainability zoomed more than 50 percent in the last year, according to a blog survey by Nielsen Online, an Internet market research firm. And U.S. purchasing decisions based on products' environmental impact hit \$209 billion in 2005, according to the Pennsylvania-based Natural Marketing Institute.

"Being green is a fad now, much like 'ecotourism' is the most-abused word in the travel industry," a blogger who identifies himself as Bobby "Mixed Descent" D. posted in late April on Yelp!, the popular social networking and user review Web site.

"We've had environmental fads before," said Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at New York's Syracuse University and a popcult icon in his own right.

As an example, back in the 1970s, soaring oil and gas prices and concern for the environment sparked developments including Earth Day and government subsidies for alternative energy. But by the 1980s, when gas prices dropped and then-president Ronald Reagan cut the subsidies, interest in these issues plummeted.

If you follow the money, at least one financial indicator seems to suggest the trend has peaked. "We've passed the peaks of recent ethanol, European wind and solar thin film investing," said an article by the Cleantech Group, a San Francisco-based company that tracks the so-called clean tech sector. "Clean tech" refers to technologies — such as wind or solar energy — that reduce waste and energy consumption.

The company's data assert that "a wave in U.S. ethanol and European wind energy investment built since 2005 peaked in the third quarter of 2006 at \$1.52 billion, and has steadily declined since," the article said.

Could it be that the current interest in low-carbon emissions is soon to go the way of the low-carb diet? Is it just a craze, or a long-lasting change?

Many say it's both.

"I think this is a genuine, permanent shift in consumer behavior. I also think there's an element of faddism," said consumer psychologist Kit Yarrow.

"A lot of things start with a fervor and settle into a habit. We are in the fervor stage right now," said the San Francisco-based Golden Gate University professor.

As recently as a year ago, consumers, particularly young people, were in an optimistic spending mood, Yarrow said. But with today's weak economy, customers have no choice but to cut back. "Today, the consumer mood is very practical, and the environmental movement just dovetailed beautifully with that sentiment of practicality." The combination of conviction and necessity will combine to make new habits stick, she said.

Whether it's using a cloth bag for shopping, driving 55 miles an hour or "killing your Jimmy Choo handbag junkie habit," people will continue to conserve, Yarrow said.

"Right now, green is a political, environmental, economic and pop culture issue," said Thompson. "As a style, a fad, it is intersecting with all those other things. But I don't believe the political and economic elements will go away."

For example, Thompson cited the conclusion announced last year by scientists of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that greenhouse emissions must start dropping worldwide by 2015 to stave off global disaster.

The "fad" stage is a first step, he said.

"These changes in attitude are the precursor to changes that will be significant, and these will probably be legislation," the professor said.

Thompson likened the process to the progress of civil rights in America.

"In the 1960s, it was chic to be pro-integration and buy recordings by folk singers like Bob Dylan. Before we got the Civil Rights Act and legislation to integrate schools, it was necessary to create a critical mass of people that would support those actions.

"Making green stylish and fashionable may not solve the carbon-emission problem, but it may create a culture more amenable to the upcoming changes that will begin to solve carbon emissions," Thompson said.

"The environment is becoming more of a concern because of climate change. People feel threatened, so they take action. I wouldn't call it a fad at all," said Severin Borenstein, the head of UC Berkeley's Energy Institute.

"You don't have to be very green to start driving fuel-efficient cars when gas is close to \$4 a gallon."

Borenstein said certain changes sparked during past periods of environmental fervor, such as Earth Day, recycling and the National Park system, have endured and indeed become commonplace.

On the industry side of things, the chief executive of one of Oakland's biggest companies is banking on green to bring in the greenbacks. In November, household products company Clorox acquired natural cosmetics company Burt's Bees for nearly \$1 billion and then launched its own environmentally friendly product line, Green Works, in January.

"We don't see this trend in sustainability waning at any time. We think it is a cultural shift, and we intend to take advantage of it," Don Knauss told analysts in a May conference call.

Data from Jessica Hogue, research director of New York-based Nielsen Online, seems to support Knauss' conclusions.

Hogue captured data from 70 million blogs, searching for hundreds of terms related to sustainability. In the last quarter of 2006, "a couple of hundred thousand posts" were made about sustainability, she said. The number of posts was up 50 percent in the last quarter of 2007.

Preliminary data indicate that the number of posts increased more than 50 percent between 2007 and 2008, Hogue said.

"We've seen this migration away from big, catch-all terms like climate change. We see people talking about everyday personal behavior changes," Hogue said. "More mainstream consumers are trying to figure out what this means for their everyday lives. This has long-term implications."

Lise LaTorre of Oakland is an example. Not only does she use cloth bags for grocery shopping instead of plastic or paper bags that might end up in the landfill, she and her husband are limiting the size of their family. LaTorre is 7 months pregnant with what she describes as their only child.

"I hope green issues are not peaking," said Kimberly Kradel of Berkeley. "Maybe plateauing might be a better word. Plateauing is good, getting to a point of group understanding and acceptance and maintaining that level of interest until science and technology and grassroots efforts come up with the next step and then more forward again.

"I think 'An Inconvenient Truth' finally did what years, no decades, of environmental activism could not. It got peoples' attention and made environmentalism mainstream — rather than something on the fringe."

Senate defeat puts climate bill on tough road

By Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington bureau
Saturday, June 7, 2008

Washington -- The Senate debate over a climate change bill this week was supposed to be a warm-up for next year, when a new president who might back deep cuts in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions controls the White House. But, instead, the sharp clash, which ended in the measure's defeat Friday, showed just how difficult it will be for either President Barack Obama or President John McCain to enact a global warming law.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., a chief sponsor of the bill, put the best spin on the measure's demise, saying it offers the next president a political road map. "This will show them where they have allies," she said. "This will show them where they have problems."

Procedural vote

The bill, which would have cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by two-thirds by 2050, was pulled from the floor by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., Friday after the Senate failed to pass a procedural vote to limit amendments and move the bill forward. The vote was 48-36 - well short of the 60 votes needed to head off a filibuster.

But the bill's sponsors proclaimed it a victory that 54 senators signaled their support for advancing the measure. Six senators who missed the vote - including Obama, D-Ill., McCain, R-Ariz., Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., who is battling brain cancer - sent statements of support for debate on the bill.

"It may be a small step forward for mankind," said Joe Lieberman, independent-Conn., who has been pushing climate legislation for a decade, "but it's a giant step forward for the United States Senate."

Better showing than in 2005

The tally was a big jump over the 38 votes a similar climate bill received in 2005 - although supporters acknowledged that not all of the senators who voted yes Friday are ready to approve a climate bill without major changes.

Most Republicans opposed the measure, saying it would sharply limit their ability to offer amendments - some of which were aimed at toppling the bill.

"This bill deserved a full and honest debate, with amendments offered and voted upon," said Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., one of the bill's chief critics. "The American people did not deserve a political exercise geared toward election year politics."

Eight Republicans voted to limit amendments and proceed to debate. Two Democrats, Sens. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and Tim Johnson, D-S.D., voted no.

Supporters of the bill had been building toward this week's debate for months, assembling a coalition that included Fortune 500 CEOs, evangelical leaders, labor unions and environmental groups. Their major coup was landing Sen. John Warner, R-Va., the widely respected former Navy secretary, as a chief co-sponsor.

But when Senate leaders scheduled the climate debate months ago for the first week in June, they could hardly have known it would take place in the midst of an unprecedented run-up in gas prices.

Opponents of the bill seized on studies by government agencies and outside groups that suggested that the Climate Security Act, S3036, could raise gas prices as well as electricity bills for consumers.

GOP strategy in memo

A memo by Senate GOP leaders, obtained by Democrats, laid out their strategy to defeat the bill. "The goal is for a theme (example: Climate bill equals higher gas prices) each day, and the focus is much more on making political points than in amending the bill," the memo read in part. It added, "The bottom line is the GOP very much wants to have this fight."

Democrats blasted it as a cynical strategy, but it had an effect. For days, Senate Republicans took to the floor to claim the bill would wreak havoc on the economy. Rather than going straight to amendments, Republicans demanded 30 full hours of debate to pound home the theme.

Republicans also raised concerns over the bill's price tag - \$6.7 trillion through 2050 - as industry begins paying for the right to emit greenhouse gases. Even some Democrats questioned how that revenue would be distributed.

Still, supporters of the bill saw signs of progress. Unlike past years, there was almost no debate over climate change science, and most lawmakers agreed Congress should strive to cut emissions.

"The terms of the debate have shifted," said Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. "The Senate is now debating the best means - and the cost - of reducing emissions."

More Republican support

The bill has been gradually picking up Republican support. Sens. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., Norm Coleman, R-Minn., and both of Maine's GOP senators backed the bill. And several Republican senators who voted no Friday, including freshman Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, said they were open to a cap-and-trade system.

Just before the vote, Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., told Lieberman he would side with the bill's sponsors to advance the debate. "He said, 'I did it for my grandchildren'," Lieberman said.

But both sides agree the 492-page bill is going to take weeks of floor time to debate and amend. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said the Democratic leaders made the mistake of trying to jam debate into a week. "You can't rush the process," he said.

But the bill's sponsors also have to worry about holding on to support from Democrats. Ten Democratic senators, mostly from the Midwest and South, recently sent Reid and Boxer a letter warning, "We cannot support final passage of the (climate bill) in its current form."

Boxer said she is going to continue meeting with undecided senators of both parties next week to address their concerns. But she said it's also up to voters to pressure their lawmakers to act.

"Every senator who voted no will have to explain their reason," she said. "Everyone will be held accountable."

Running in Circles Over Carbon

By Matthew L. Wald

N.Y. Times, Sunday, June 8, 2008

WASHINGTON— Cutting carbon dioxide emissions is a fine idea, and a lot of companies would be proud to do it. But they would prefer to be second, if not third or fourth.

This is not a good way to get started in fighting global warming.

As efforts to pass a global warming bill collapsed in the Senate last week, companies that burn coal to make electricity were looking for a way to build a plant that would capture its emissions. There is a will and a way — several ways, in fact — to do just that.

Capturing carbon from these plants may become a lot more important soon. Emissions from coal-fired power plants already account for about 27 percent of American greenhouse emissions, but as prices for other fuels rise, along with power demand, utilities will burn more coal. And if cars someday run on batteries, a trend that \$4-a-gallon gasoline will accelerate, then the utilities will burn even more fuel to generate the electricity to recharge those batteries.

This could be good news, because controlling emissions from a few hundred power plants is easier than controlling them from tens of millions of house chimneys, or hundreds of millions of tailpipes. And in the laboratory, at least, there are three very promising systems for capturing carbon dioxide before pumping it underground.

But supplying electricity is not like most other businesses. Unlike the companies that make microchips, clothing for teenagers or snack foods, the companies that make electricity can see no advantage in going first. This is true for the traditionally regulated utilities that can charge everything to a captive class of customers (if regulators approve), and it is also true for the "merchant generators," who build power plants and sell their output on the open market.

"No one wants to go into the new world," said Armond Cohen, executive director of the Clean Air Task Force, a nonprofit group that favors stringent controls on power plant emissions. "We have very few takers because of the price premium."

By price premium, Mr. Cohen meant not only the costs of going first, with the high probability of mistakes that others can learn from, but the costs of the new technology itself. The problem is, the premium is of unknown size, which makes everyone in the industry especially wary.

The point was illustrated by a recent decision by the Virginia State Corporation Commission, which regulates utilities, to turn down an application by the Appalachian Power Company to build

a plant that would have captured 90 percent of its carbon and deposited it nearly two miles underground, at a well that it dug in 2003. The applicant's parent was American Electric Power, one of the nation's largest coal users, and perhaps the most technically able. But the company is a regulated utility and spends money only when it can be reimbursed.

The Virginia commission said that it was "neither reasonable nor prudent" for the company to build the plant, and the risks for ratepayers were too great, because costs were uncertain, perhaps double that of a standard coal plant. And in a Catch-22 that plagues the whole effort, the commission said A.E.P. should not build a commercial-scale plant because no one had demonstrated the technology on a commercial scale.

Thus an approach that makes collective sense — trying out technologies that could be helpful over the long term — is unattractive to individual participants.

That is not the only where-to-get-started problem. Another is that building a plant might make sense to a utility regulator, or to a company that builds power plants on speculation, if it generated pollution credits that the company could then sell to other polluters, for instance, or could help the plant meet emissions quotas. But there are, as yet, no credits to buy or sell and no quota to meet.

When Congress debates the idea, one of the drawbacks is that no one is sure where to set the caps on emissions, because no one is sure what the carbon regulation would cost. So there is no regulation, no plant built to meet the regulation, and thus no plant for lawmakers to look at to determine how strict a regulation to pass.

Carbon capture is not the only field in which nobody wants to go first; another is nuclear power. Builders in that industry also recognize that the first to build a next-generation reactor (the last one ordered that was actually built was in 1973) will pay a lot more than the builders who follow. But Congress has tried, at least, to solve that problem by offering generous loan guarantees and risk insurance for the first few reactors.

There was a plan to heavily subsidize a single capture-and-storage coal plant, but when the estimated construction price nearly doubled, to \$1.8 billion, the Energy Department dropped the plan.

And without full-scale tests, nobody knows what all this would cost.

"The estimates are accurate to within plus 20 percent to plus 100 percent," said John Rowe, the chief executive of Exelon, which burns coal and also operates nuclear reactors, and leans toward the latter for new projects. "These are very complicated projects, with a great deal of both science and engineering and of public acceptability tests that have simply not happened yet," he said. In contrast, he argued, nuclear is easier.

While others differ, or argue that solar or wind would be a better bet, the failure to get started does have a certain circularity to it. Companies will not run to build plants that sequester their carbon because Congress has not set a price for emitting the pollutant. Without the early plants, Congress has little clue how many tons the economy can afford to capture and sequester.

Gas prices beat out global warming

By H. Josef Hebert - Associated Press
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, June 6, 2008

WASHINGTON — Congress retreated Friday from the world's biggest environmental concern — global warming — in a fresh demonstration of what happens when nature and business collide, especially in an election year.

It was no contest.

A bill the Senate was debating would put a price on carbon emissions, targeting "greenhouse gases" that contribute to the warming that many scientists say could dramatically change the Earth.

Opponents wanted to talk about higher gasoline prices. And higher taxes.

That kind of talk spooks Washington.

Senate Democratic leaders couldn't overcome Republican opponents who managed to block the most serious effort in Congress to date to address the warming of the planet. The legislation called for cutting greenhouse gases by 71 percent from power plants, refineries and factories during the next 40 years.

The opponents first filibustered the bill, requiring supporters to get 60 votes, and at the same time attacked it on a gut issue making daily headlines: gasoline prices that have surged past \$4 a gallon in many parts of the country. The supporters of the bill fell a dozen votes short of breaking the filibuster with 48, including seven Republicans.

"At the beginning of the summer driving season (you) offer a bill that would send gas prices up another 53 cents a gallon for goodness sake," Republican leader Mitch McConnell needed the Democratic majority.

"This is a massive tax increase on the American people," proclaimed Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., who is among Congress' dwindling skeptics when it comes to global warming, having once called it all a hoax.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., one of three chief sponsors of the bill, disputed both assertions, saying the bill would provide tens of billions of dollars a year in tax breaks for people facing high energy costs and for other measures to ease the transition from oil, coal and other fossil fuels, which are the cause of impending changing climate.

She argued that people actually may end up paying less to fuel their cars because a price on carbon emissions would accelerate the push for more fuel efficient vehicles and alternative fuels.

While McConnell, Inhofe and other senators from states heavily dependent on coal and other fossil energy made no secret of wanting to kill the bill, they pressed for a longer debate, believing they had an issue that would resonate with voters worried about higher energy prices.

Seeing events unfold in the Senate, GOP leaders in the House sensed a useful issue as well. Republican Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio called on House Democrats to bring up climate legislation now. "It would be a great time to have that debate," declared Rep. Roy Blunt of Missouri, the No. 3 Republican, citing gas prices.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she didn't think climate legislation would be taken up this year, and suggested it would fare better next year anyway with a new president.

China Reports Declines in 3 Major Pollutants, Reversing Trend

By Keith Bradsher

N.Y. Times, Friday, June 6, 2008

HONG KONG — After rising steeply for many years, emissions of three important pollutants began to decline last year, China's Ministry of Environmental Protection announced Thursday as part of an annual report.

Total levels of pollution in China's lakes, rivers and coastal waters still rose, however, as more pollutants continued to flow into them, the ministry said. And the air in many Chinese cities remained severely polluted.

The ministry said that emissions of sulfur dioxide, mainly from coal-fired power plants and the primary cause of acid rain, declined 4.66 percent last year. The Chinese government has pursued a stringent program that requires power plants to cleanse most of the sulfur dioxide from their flue gases before they are released into the atmosphere. Environmentalists had expected the program to show success.

Emissions of organic pollutants into waterways, as measured by tests of chemical oxygen demand, declined by 3.14 percent last year, the ministry said. Industries reduced their discharges of solid waste into the air and water by 8.1 percent.

Ma Jun, a prominent environmentalist in Beijing, said that while the calculations may be accurate, the overall levels of pollutants are still far higher than the environment can tolerate, particularly in China's waters.

"We need to have the understanding this is just the turning point in pollution discharges, this isn't the turning point in the environment," he said.

The Chinese government is trying hard to convince the world that the severe air pollution in Beijing is improving and that it will not imperil the health of athletes in the Olympics there in August. Atmospheric scientists have questioned whether local governments in Beijing, Guangzhou and other big Chinese cities are placing air pollution sensors where pollution is below average.

The Environmental Ministry said the percentage of China's coastal waters rated at the worst possible level of pollution rose to 25.4 percent last year, from 24.3 percent a year earlier. Coastal waters in good condition dropped to 62.8 percent from 67.7 percent.

The proportion of Chinese cities with fairly good air quality was practically unchanged last year, while the number of extremely polluted cities declined.

Air quality tends to improve faster than water quality in China when pollution is reduced. Fresh air typically flows in from Siberia and Central Asia, while China's polluted air is wafted east across the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and Japan, with some pollution reaching the United States.

The pollutants identified in the report as showing improvement, particularly sulfur dioxide, tended to be those emitted by relatively few factories and power plants, many of them owned or controlled by the state. That makes it easier to limit pollution.

Air quality experts calculate that up to 90 percent of deaths from air pollution are caused by tiny particles of soot. The biggest contributors in cities are trucks. The ministry provided no figures on Thursday for emissions of such particles.

China Daily, the official English-language newspaper, separately reported that factories around Lake Tai, China's third largest body of fresh water, will now be subject to penalties five times what they had been for polluting, under rules adopted last year by Jiangsu Province and taking effect on Thursday. The lake had a severe outbreak of blue-green algae in May 2007 that was linked to pollution.

Industrial Nations Vow to Cut Oil Use

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the N.Y. Times, Monday, June 9, 2008

AOMORI, Japan (AP) — The world's leading economies and oil consumers are pledging greater investment in energy efficiency and green technologies to curtail petroleum use.

In a joint statement on Sunday, energy ministers from the Group of 8 countries, the United States, Japan, Russia, Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Canada, joined by China, India and South Korea, also urged oil producers to increase output, which has stalled at about 85 million barrels a day since 2005. They also called for cooperation between buyers and producers.

But with little prospect for a surge in production anytime soon, the focus of Sunday's meeting was on what wealthy nations should do to rein in consumption, while reducing carbon emissions blamed for global warming.

While the nations did not pledge specific amounts of money, they said they would set goals in line with International Energy Agency recommendations for a vast expansion of investment in renewable energies and energy efficiency.

The G-8 countries said they would begin 20 demonstration projects by 2010.

Japan to cut CO2 by 60-80 percent

By ERIC TALMADGE, Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Monday, June 9, 2008

Japan will cut its greenhouse gas emissions 60-80 percent by 2050 and can match or better European reduction levels over the next 12 years, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda announced Monday.

Fukuda, trying to establish Japan as a world leader in the field, also said his country will contribute \$1.2 billion to an international greenhouse gas reductions fund and will take a more supportive role in establishing an emissions trading market worldwide.

Fukuda, who will host a meeting of the leaders of the Group of Eight developed countries in Japan next month, said he hopes to use that summit to help create an international consensus about measures to deal with greenhouse gas reduction.

Japan, which Fukuda said is already a leader in the worldwide effort to reduce greenhouse gases, is willing to take difficult measures to set an example for others.

"All nations of the world, including our own, must participate in this effort to make it work," he said in a policy speech. "We can bolster Japan's standing in international society and strengthen our economy further by taking a leading role in the CO2 reduction revolution."

To show its resolve, Fukuda said Japan will reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by 60-80 percent by 2050 as part of what he has dubbed Japan's "Cool Earth Initiative." He also called on the nations of the world to strive to cut by half the global carbon dioxide output by 2050. G-8 summit leaders voiced support for that last year.

Fukuda acknowledged that is a tall order.

"This will involve extreme effort," he said.

Japan is struggling to meet obligations under the Kyoto global warming pact to cut emissions of greenhouse gases by 6 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

Fukuda said that although Japan's carbon dioxide emissions have been rising slightly in recent years, they are expected to peak soon. He said a reduction of 14 percent from current levels is possible by Japan over the next 12 years.

European nations support a U.N. scientific finding that emissions cuts of between 25 percent to 40 percent by 2020 are needed to stop global temperatures from rising so high they trigger widespread environmental damage.

Realistically, however, Fukuda said the EU nations are looking at a reduction of about 14 percent from current levels, a target he said Japan can match. The EU's higher numbers are based on reductions from 1990 levels - the baseline used in the Kyoto talks.

While saying a 14 percent reduction was possible, Fukuda stopped short of formally setting a 2020 target, saying he would do that later.

The United States, which has refused to set similar targets, considers such cuts beyond reach. Developing nations, meanwhile, are clamoring for commitments by rich countries before they discuss what poorer countries should do.

On the controversial topic of emissions trading, Fukuda said Japan will take a more supportive role in establishing rules and a framework that can be agreed upon internationally.

"It is important to create a market that is based on healthy, real demand, not on a money game," he said.

Emissions trading involves the setting of caps and credits on greenhouse gas production. Any company or nation emitting levels higher than those allotted would have to buy credits from those emitting lower levels.

Fukuda said Japan would use a broad range of strategies to reduce its emissions, including investment in new technologies, stiff construction standards to create energy efficient buildings, an array of tax incentives and a public awareness campaign.

[Fresno Bee column, Thursday, June 5, 2008:](#)

There's no mayoral fuss over the bus

By Bill McKewen

It's down to two in the race for mayor, it's up to \$4.37 a gallon for gas and, come November, I'm voting for the candidate who'll make the buses run on time.

I know it sounds simplistic, but quick and reliable mass transit might be Fresno's salvation.

So many of our problems are tied to transportation, I'm surprised it wasn't a bigger issue in the mayoral primary.

Want less air pollution?

Get people out of their cars and into buses.

Want a lively downtown?

Provide a cheap way for more residents to go there without worrying about parking.

Want to help the economy?

Build a bus system that carries people to work in 30 minutes or less.

Want to make Fresno more of a city and less of a suburb on steroids?

Then finally get serious about mass transit.

A year ago, most of you would've laughed in your Cheerios reading this.

But disappearing dollars are transformational. Forced to choose between filling their tank and filling their bellies, folks are willing to dump the pump.

The rub is, decades ago, Fresno -- like all but a handful of American cities -- fell in love with the car, sprawled and abandoned mass transit. Now, we're stuck with too few buses running too few routes taking far too long to take us where we want.

More people are riding Fresno Area Express, anyway, as gas and diesel prices soar. The system had 1.2 million passenger trips in April, a 22% hike over April 2007.

Imagine what ridership might be -- and how you'd benefit -- with a clean, safe and handy service blanketing Fresno and Clovis.

A key ingredient in building such a system is a mayor who makes mass transit a priority and teams with local, state and federal officials to obtain new transportation funding.

Right now, FAX is developing Bus Rapid Transit -- think light rail on rubber wheels -- for the heavily traveled Blackstone Avenue and Kings Canyon Boulevard corridors. Down the line, service could be expanded to Shaw, Cedar and Clovis avenues.

"With the mayor's leadership and cooperation with the City Council, we could have Bus Rapid Transit in two or three years," says John Downs, transit planner for the Council of Fresno County Governments.

I asked Downs what other steps would improve service. His answer: combining express routes between popular destinations and traditional service with stops every few blocks.

To pull that off, FAX needs more buses, drivers and money. But the payoffs for citizens, particularly those without cars or the means to pay for gas, would be huge. Downs predicts doubled ridership and commute times cut in half.

Henry T. Perea and Ashley Swearingin want to be mayor. Each is saying predictable things about keeping citizens safe, creating jobs and strengthening public schools.

What I want to hear over the next few months is how they'd acquire the money and political support to upgrade the bus system and speed Bus Rapid Transit into reality.

My calendar is open. We should meet on a bus.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Monday, June 9, 2008:](#)

Bush's environmental intransigence wastes taxpayers' money

When President Bush took office in 2001, it was clear his appointees would try to streamline environmental reviews that industry regards burdensome. The only question was whether the administration would follow legal means to advance this agenda or try to dodge the law.

The answer is now clear. Over the past eight years, the Bush administration has consistently failed in court when faced with legal claims it is violating the nation's major bedrock environmental statutes.

In case after case, federal judges have rejected administration attempts to increase logging in national forests, avoid protections for threatened wildlife and allow industries to sidestep the mandates of the Clean Air Act.

Bush's defenders say the administration is the victim of activist judges, but this claim doesn't stand up to close scrutiny. In Fresno, U.S. District Court Judge Oliver Wanger ordered a reduction in increased water pumping from the Delta because federal agencies hadn't adequately analyzed the impacts on the endangered Delta smelt.

No one can accuse Wanger -- an appointee of the first President Bush -- of being a tool of environmentalists. He has ruled in favor of irrigators in some landmark decisions.

It would also be a stretch to claim the U.S. Supreme Court is a robed hugger of trees. Yet the high court last year sided with California, and against the Bush administration, in determining that carbon dioxide is a pollutant that can be regulated under the Clean Air Act. That landmark decision sets the stage for California to implement a 2002 law regulating carbon dioxide emissions from vehicles, except that the Bush EPA is refusing to issue a waiver the state needs.

As Congress and news reports have documented, Bush appointees have been caught, time after time, altering the findings of mid-level biologists and other scientists. Time after time, judges have scolded Bush lawyers for novel interpretations of federal laws, filling their decisions with terms such as "foot-dragging" and "surprise switcheroo."

The saddest part of this legacy is the money wasted. Although no one has yet compiled a tally, federal taxpayers have probably spent tens of millions of dollars defending the administration's egregious decisions in court, and conservation groups also have invested huge sums in using the courts to enforce laws.

As a result, vast sums have gone to lawyers instead of on-the-ground efforts to clean up our air, protect vital habitats, restore forests and develop new sources of geothermal power and other alternative energies.

While environmentalists can take pride in their legal victories, they have little to celebrate. Nor does President Bush. It will take a new White House occupant to repair the damage, and he can't get there soon enough.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sat., June 7, 2008:](#)

Messing with high-speed rail

Union Pacific causes a flap with its huffing and puffing on right of way.

The Union Pacific Railroad raised a few eyebrows this week with a letter stating that it isn't interested in sharing its right of way with the state's proposed high-speed rail system. The railroad wants to preserve its right of way for future expansion of freight services, and raised "safety concerns."

Some high-speed rail proponents worry that Union Pacific's action could hurt efforts to pass a \$9.95 billion bond measure in November that would allow construction of the long-delayed system to begin.

There are several possible explanations for the railroad's move:

Union Pacific is positioning itself for negotiations on any future sale of right of way to the California High Speed Rail Authority.

Union Pacific, in the historically civic-minded nature of railroads in California, is genuinely concerned about the safety of rail passengers.

Union Pacific doesn't know what it's talking about.

The high-speed rail authority has never considered buying existing Union Pacific right of way. Instead, the proposed route would carry trains near the existing tracks in some areas -- not on them. High-speed rail requires dedicated tracks, with grade separations and barriers that keep the trains away from all other trains, as well as other vehicles and pedestrians.

A Union Pacific spokesman, quoted in the Los Angeles Times, cited a 2005 crash of a Metrolink train in Los Angeles that killed 11 people as an example of what could happen. That was a tragedy, to be sure, but to offer it as an example of safety concerns with high-speed rail is utterly bogus.

The 2005 crash was caused by a suicidal man who parked his vehicle on the tracks. That simply couldn't happen with high-speed rail. In fact, high-speed rail is probably the safest form of transportation ever invented.

In decades of running high-speed trains in Japan and France, for instance, there has never been a single fatality due to derailments or collisions.

Union Pacific is correct to preserve its ability to expand. Increased rail freight capacity is as important to California and the nation as building high-speed passenger lines. With the cost of diesel fuel soaring even higher than gasoline, and considering the tremendous pollution that diesel engines cause, we're all better off when freight moves by rail rather than by truck.

But Union Pacific's "safety concerns" might be more usefully focused on the dangers its trains and tracks pose in the neighborhoods they travel through, here in Fresno and elsewhere.

High-speed rail faces an uphill struggle. It is still widely misunderstood, even by many who like the idea. The fate of the bond measure in November is as crucial a decision for Californians as any they've faced in the state's history. Union Pacific -- and others -- do us no service when, through ignorance or baser motive, they seek to kill the high-speed dream.

[Modesto Bee, Guest Commentary, Saturday, June 7, 2008](#)

Soaring gas prices will boost conservation

By THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Spurred by soaring gasoline prices, America's car-buying habits have changed dramatically the last few months. This sudden development should help conserve energy and reduce pollution, two worthwhile goals.

It also could unfortunately lead to more auto industry layoffs, and everything possible should be done to help people displaced by these upheavals in the industry.

Tuesday, General Motors CEO Rick Wagoner Jr. said the country's largest carmaker over the next year would save \$1 billion by closing four North American plants that produce light trucks and SUVs. As part of this move, GM ought to try to transfer as many employees as possible to its other plants plus offer programs that could help workers find new jobs.

The nation's weak economy has helped reduce vehicle sales in the past year. But the high price of gasoline has pummeled domestic automakers' attempts to sell high-profit light trucks and SUVs.

Meanwhile, smaller vehicles are more attractive to Americans who want to reduce their energy bills.

For example, Ford announced Tuesday that truck sales were down 25 percent in May vs. May 2007, while car sales were up 5 percent compared to a year ago.

Sales of hybrid vehicles also are up, led by the Toyota Prius; some customers are waiting months for new Prius shipments to make it to showroom floors. Gasoline that costs nearly \$4 a gallon has had a tremendous impact on motorists.

"These prices are changing consumer behavior and changing it rapidly," Wagoner said. "We don't believe it's a spike or a temporary shift. We believe it is, by and large, permanent." This marks a

change from the thinking of some previous auto executives, who often said Americans would continue to buy larger, roomier vehicles for their comfort and safety features.

Now, GM, Ford and other automakers are responding by moving to produce smaller, fuel-efficient cars. This shift will help reduce demand for gasoline and curb harmful air emissions.

The long-term air-quality benefit isn't getting as much attention as gas savings, though, as motorists struggle to pay for fill-ups at stations across the country.

[Tracy Press Editorial, Friday, June 6, 2008](#)

The battle for the county's future is under way.

Land-use planners often ask people to imagine themselves in hot air balloons floating over their towns in the far-off future.

When you look down, what do you see? What do you want to see?

By 2050, San Joaquin County could have 1 million more people than it has now, and the San Joaquin Valley could double or triple in population, which leads us to ask: Where will double or triple the people live? Where will they work? How will they get from place to place? Will all the farmland be covered with houses? Will we become Los Angeles? Is that what we want?

Planners with the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint planning process, funded by a two-year state grant, are drawing up a "blueprint" for the entire region. So far, they have developed half a dozen principles for sustainable communities and four scenarios to show impacts from future growth.

Under the status-quo growth scenario of mostly single-family development and sprawl, housing choices would be limited, air quality would be poor, traffic congestion would be great, public transit use would be low, residential water and energy use would be high, and acres left for agriculture use would be few.

The other-end-of-the-spectrum scenario, representing major change, would result in high housing densities and reinvestment, with half of the home development in multi-family residences, 20 percent of its future growth in core urban areas and more acres available for agriculture and open space.

So where should we fall in the growth spectrum? That's exactly what the blueprint planners, working with San Joaquin Council of Governments, asked at a workshop this week in Tracy and will ask at others throughout the county throughout June.

Armed with answers, they hope to have a county draft by the end of the summer that will be incorporated with those from seven other counties to form a master plan for guiding growth and transportation planning for the next 40 years in the San Joaquin Valley.

This is a historic time in the region for us to build political clout, grab the state's attention and embrace efforts that impact broad issues like transportation, air quality and global warming. Cities can't do this on their own.

This is our opportunity to step back to redirect the course of sprawling growth and make sure we preserve farmland and open space, improve air quality and draft a transportation plan that unravels gridlock.

The blueprint project is a chance for regular people — and those who represent us — to speak out about the direction of our city and county and the future of the entire valley. Unfortunately, only a handful of longtime Tracy residents participated this week, along with some local developer representatives. No one from the City Council attended.

[Guest Commentary in LA Daily News, Sunday, June 8, 2008:](#)

Building a better power plant

By Daniel Weintraub

It turns out that producing electrical power without pollution is, well, rocket science. At least it helps to know something about how rocket engines work.

A Rancho Cordova company founded by a group of retired aerospace engineers has just received funding to build a small power plant that won't emit any of the gases that cause smog or are believed to lead to global warming.

The company - Clean Energy Systems - has been around for a while.

In about 15 years they've gone from being the equivalent of a bunch of engineers tinkering in the garage to the cusp of developing a technology that could change the face of electricity production. With California and just about every other place looking for reliable forms of clean power, the firm's research is opening the possibility of burning carbon-based fuels without the side effects that have given them a bad name.

The company plans to build a 50-megawatt plant in Kern County funded in part by \$65million from the U.S. Department of Energy.

The engineers drew inspiration for their technology from the space shuttle's propulsion system - and that huge orange tank that feeds hydrogen and oxygen into the craft's rocket engines.

"What's coming out of those three main engines is steam," says Keith Pronske, the firm's chief executive. "If you took that and hooked it up to turbines, two of those would meet the needs of the state of California." That's not practical for a lot of reasons, including the shuttle's massive scale and the fact that hydrogen is in relatively short supply.

But the idea of using pure oxygen rather than air in the power plant is at the center of the CES project. Air is 80percent nitrogen. When you combine it with a fuel source during combustion, you get nitrogen oxide. That's a primary ingredient in the smog that clouds the sky in every major city.

To avoid that outcome, the CES plant chills the air until the oxygen and nitrogen gases become liquids and can be separated before the combustion begins. The nitrogen is removed and the pure oxygen is combined with natural gas to produce a flame which, if not moderated, would reach temperatures of about 6,000 degrees. That's too hot to handle for just about anything except flying rockets, so the plant adds water to the mix.

"You can take natural gas and oxygen and add water and end up with some pressurized steam and carbon dioxide that you can then control the temperature of and drive turbines and operate power plants that don't have smokestacks on them" Pronske said.

But they still had a problem. Like conventional power plants, the CES project produces carbon dioxide, which is believed to contribute to global warming. So the company found a way to capture those gases and sequester them. The Kern County plant will bury the gas under 7,000 feet of rock about 20miles from Bakersfield.

That makes the plant - in the eyes of the California Energy Commission - an "ultraclean" operation that is essentially a zero-emission fossil fuel power plant.

Although the firm will now be moving forward with a good-sized federal grant, Pronske said the project's progress is hindered by government energy policies focused on alternatives to fossil fuels. Research on methods to make the burning of fossil fuels more efficient and cleaner has few fans in the environmental community because most activists and regulators are trying to shift the focus away from carbon-based energy. That orientation could slow the company's effort to make its technology commercially viable.

Jim Boyd, vice chairman of the California Energy Commission and a former air pollution regulator, is bullish on the zero-emission plant. While the project will use natural gas for fuel, Boyd says the same technology could eventually use methane produced by biomass or urban waste.

But Pronske, the company's CEO, says that in the meantime, utilities would be more likely to embrace his company's concept if they got credit from regulators for any zero-emission electricity they produce, not just that which comes from non-carbon sources such as solar, wind or geothermal.

"Let's have one out of 10 plants have some form of carbon capture," he said. "If you are going to build a new fossil fuel plant, at a minimum you should want to have some technology, some carbon capture required so you get the carbon out of there."

In other words, if the goal is zero emissions, government policy should encourage industry to reach that goal, rather than dictating how it's done. It is possible that incremental changes to existing technology could provide a quicker and more economical way to reduce pollution while we wait for the renewable alternatives to evolve.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., June 7, 2008:](#)

Benefits of quarries

With many rock quarries being proposed, I wanted to bring some attention to what many people forget -- a local quarry means local benefits.

We use aggregates to build our homes, our roads, our hospitals and our schools. Fresno County's aggregate supply is running low and we need the resources to maintain our roads, keep homes affordable and do other local construction.

Not having local aggregate means having to depend on vendors from other counties. That means more truck trips, meaning more air pollution, traffic congestion and wear and tear on our roads -- not to mention that our county wouldn't benefit from any of the revenue.

A local quarry could produce millions of tax dollars annually, which could better our services such as fire and police, funding to schools and overall improvement to roads like Highway 180. It will also create and secure jobs for locals. Because trucks will not have to travel as far to deliver supplies, there will be less air pollution and builders and contractors will also save.

It seems that we can meet our aggregate needs responsibly, locally and still enjoy the benefits.

Glenn L. Landers, Sanger

[Sacramento Bee, Letter to the Editor, Sunday, June 8, 2008](#)

Sacramento's awful air quality

Re "Foothills attempt to clear the air / A grass-roots group meets today with flatlanders over pollutants that waft uphill," June 4: I have been completely uninformed about how bad Sacramento's air quality is.

I was always very proud to be from California, where supposedly we have the cleanest gas, although it is more expensive than in other states, so it was a shock to discover that Sacramento has air quality that is worse than that of New York and Chicago, and apparently it has been this way for a long time.

Maybe it's time that cities are punished for receiving Fs on air quality, such as even more taxes on gas with the extra money going toward improving public transportation, since Sacramento obviously has not had enough motivation to make any significant improvements.

- Samantha Quon, Sacramento

[Tri-Valley Herald, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, June 4, 2008](#)

Global warming hoax

I read the May 22 article in the Times regarding the Bay Area imposition of "global-warming" fees.

Please take some time to read the summary report prepared by 31,072 scientists on the subject of global warming. These scientists started a petition project to demonstrate that the claim of

"settled science" and an overwhelming "consensus" in favor of the hypothesis of human-caused global warming and consequent climatological damage is wrong.

No such consensus or settled science exists. As indicated by the petition text and signatory list, a very large number of American scientists reject this hypothesis.

Publicists at the United Nations, Al Gore and their supporters frequently claim that only a few "skeptics" remain — skeptics who are still unconvinced about the existence of a catastrophic human-caused global warming emergency.

It is evident that 31,072 Americans with university degrees in science — including 9,021 PhDs, are not "a few." Moreover, from the clear and strong petition statement that they have signed, it is evident that these 31,072 American scientists are not "skeptics."

These scientists are instead convinced that the human-caused global warming hypothesis is without scientific validity and that government action on the basis of this hypothesis would unnecessarily and counterproductively damage both human prosperity and the natural environment of the Earth.

The actions of the Bay Area air board are counterproductive, especially given the state of our economy.

Visit the Web site www.petitionproject.org to review a copy of the summary report available in pdf, power point or html formats.

Also, it'd be nice if this newspaper would actually publish just one opposing viewpoint for some balance.

Michael Venezia

Danville