

Lifestyle changes key to air plan

New Valley campaign wants everyone to make a shift to lower ozone

Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

In the Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star, San Diego Union-Tribune and other papers, Monday, June 16, 2008 and

Officials tap church groups on air pollution

Mark Grossi - Fresno Bee

In the Tri-Valley Herald and Contra Costa Times, Sunday, June 15, 2008

FRESNO - Air officials are appearing at city council sessions and meeting with businesses all over the Valley to pass the word: It's time for car pools, four-day work weeks and maybe even prayer to fight ozone.

Officials are talking to church groups, hoping that ministers will sermonize about avoiding activities that create pollution.

"We're going to need help from everyone," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district is pitching its new Healthy Air Living campaign this month as Valley temperatures rise and ozone begins to spike in one of the nation's worst air basins.

The campaign replaces the Spare the Air program, which officials say has run its course.

Air officials say the public's help is a key to clearing up ozone before a 2024 federal cleanup deadline.

Since 2005, an encouraging trend has emerged with violations decreasing in the early stages of the smog season. A breezy May and early June continued that trend this year -- there were only eight violations through June 12. In contrast, there were nearly two dozen violations by mid-June 2003.

The region had a whopping 134 bad ozone days that year -- worst in the nation, far beyond Los Angeles and Houston. But favorable weather and ozone-fighting rules cut the total to just 65 last year. It still was second-worst in the country behind Los Angeles, but the total was the lowest on record for the Valley.

To build on the improvement, the public needs to be more involved, officials say. The district can't order evening lawn mowing or four-day work weeks, but it will push such measures in all 58 Valley cities and eight counties, from Stockton to Bakersfield.

The district also plans a media blitz with full-page newspaper advertisements and messages on television and radio. The focal point is the week of July 7 to 13, usually one of the worst air-quality weeks of the year.

Businesses, cities and individuals will be asked to make at least one major change in their behavior, beginning that week.

For instance, businesses could organize lunch deliveries so employees don't drive their cars during the noon hour. Some businesses might allow employees to work from home.

Cities might offer free bus rides or parking for carpoolers. Cities also might be persuaded to contract only with companies that use air-friendly equipment and techniques.

Maybe cities will wait until sunset to mow park lawns so the exhaust won't create ozone. Such pollution does not form in the dark.

This approach differs from the Spare the Air program, in which the district asked people to back off driving and other pollution-making activities only on the worst ozone days. That program is gone because officials think people are tuning out on the message. Now, the district wants lifestyle changes.

"We have a very difficult problem with ozone in our Valley," Sadredin said.

The Valley may be the best ozone incubator in the country. The recipe: sunlight, heat, almost no wind, oxides of nitrogen from such sources as vehicles and volatile organic compounds from the fumes of gasoline or paint.

With surrounding mountains and long stretches of stagnant, hot weather, it takes far less pollution to create a federal violation here than almost anywhere else in the country, experts say.

"Sometimes we get a lot of wind and that disperses the ozone," said Shawn Ferreria, district senior air specialist. "But if you have fires -- as we did this week in Madera County -- they can dump a lot of ozone precursors into the air."

In other words, fires produce the building blocks of ozone -- oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds. Summer fires sometimes play a big role in pushing the ozone beyond the health threshold.

The consequences can be dramatic anytime ozone exceeds the health threshold, medical experts say. Ozone can trigger lung problems, such as asthma attacks. Research this year linked ozone with premature death.

Air officials say the biggest reductions in ozone-making pollution over the next several years must come from state diesel truck rules. But officials say violations will drop if the public gets serious about even one major lifestyle change -- such as carpooling.

For daily Valley job commutes, there are about 1.1 people in each car, the district estimates. Officials say that if the average rises to 1.5, ozone violations will drop 10 percent to 20 percent.

Valley to get a break from triple-digit heat this week

By Denny Boyles / The Fresno Bee
Sunday, June 15, 2008

Fresno's high temperature flirted with the 100-degree mark on Saturday, but marine air moved in and started a cooling trend that will last most of next week.

Fresno's high of 103 on Friday matched the previous highest temperature so far this year, and meteorologists had expected a second day of scorching heat, said National Weather Service meteorologist Kevin Durfee, but the official high Saturday was just 99.

"The high may have jumped over 100 between measurements, but we didn't record it anywhere," Durfee said. "Now we're going to see steadily cooler temperatures as the on-shore flow strengthens."

Durfee said today's forecast high will be 97, with an overnight low of about 68. Monday, expect a high of 96.

High temperatures are expected to drop a few degrees each day before bottoming out Thursday at about 86.

Even without triple-digit highs, the heat on Saturday was enough to send many residents to area lakes and rivers.

Authorities were reminding people to be careful after five people were thrown into the swift-moving Kings River east of Sanger on Saturday when their raft became snagged on a tree and broke, a Fresno County sheriff's spokesman said.

Two of the rafters made it safely out of the water by themselves, while the other three were rescued by two members of the sheriff's boat patrol, Lt. Mike Lancaster said.

Deputy Carlos Rodriguez and reserve deputy Preston Little were patrolling the river near Goodfellow Avenue when they were alerted to the rafters in the water shortly after 10:30 a.m. and went to their aid, Lancaster said.

With the arrival of high temperatures, Lancaster said, deputies Saturday noticed a lot of people looking to cool off in the county's rivers and lakes.

"And with Sunday being Father's Day, we'll probably see many more families celebrating out in those areas through the weekend," he said.

Air quality experts also were urging caution. The Father's Day forecast called for unhealthy air in Fresno and Tulare counties.

The air in Madera and Kings counties was expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups, especially those with heart or lung conditions.

Honda rolls out new zero-emission car

By TOMOKO A. HOSAKA, Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Monday, June 15, 2008

TAKANEZAWA, Japan - Honda's new zero-emission, hydrogen fuel cell car rolled off a Japanese production line Monday and is headed to Southern California, where Hollywood is already abuzz over the latest splash in green motoring.

The FCX Clarity, which runs on hydrogen and electricity, emits only water and none of the noxious fumes believed to induce global warming. It is also two times more energy efficient than a gas-electric hybrid and three times that of a standard gasoline-powered car, the company says.

Japan's third biggest automaker expects to lease out a "few dozen" units this year and about 200 units within three years. In California, a three-year lease will run \$600 a month, which includes maintenance and collision coverage.

Among the first customers are actress Jamie Lee Curtis and filmmaker husband Christopher Guest, actress Laura Harris, film producer Ron Yerxa, as well as businessmen Jon Spallino and Jim Salomon.

"It's so smooth," said Harris, who played villainess Marie Warner on the hit TV show "24" and was flown over by Honda for the ceremony. "It's like a future machine, but it's not."

The FCX Clarity is an improvement of its previous-generation fuel cell vehicle, the FCX, introduced in 2005.

A breakthrough in the design of the fuel cell stack, which is the unit that powers the car's motor, allowed engineers to lighten the body, expand the interior and increase efficiency, Honda said.

The fuel cell draws on energy synthesized through a chemical reaction between hydrogen gas and oxygen in the air, and a lithium-ion battery pack provides supplemental power. The FCX Clarity has a range of about 270-miles per tank with hydrogen consumption equivalent to 74 miles per gallon, according to the carmaker.

The 3,600-pound vehicle can reach speeds up to 100 miles per hour.

John Mendel, executive vice president of America Honda Motor Co., said at a morning ceremony it was "an especially significant day for American Honda as we plant firm footsteps toward the mainstreaming of fuel cell cars."

The biggest obstacles standing in the way of wider adoption of fuel cell vehicles are cost and the dearth of hydrogen fuel stations. For the Clarity's release in California, Honda said it received 50,000 applications through its website but could only consider those living near stations in Torrance, Santa Monica and Irvine.

Initially, however, the Clarity will go only to a chosen few starting July and then launch in Japan this fall.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has called for a statewide network of hydrogen stations, but progress has been slow.

The state has also recently relaxed a mandate for the number of zero-emission cars it aims to have on roads. By 2014, automakers must now sell 7,500 electric and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, a reduction of 70 percent.

Spallino, who currently drives Honda's older FCX and was also flown in for the ceremony, said he will use the Clarity to drive to and from work and for destinations within the Los Angeles area. The small number of hydrogen fuel stations is the "single limiting factor" for fuel cell vehicles, he said.

"It's more comfortable, and it handles well," said Spallino of Redondo Beach. "It's got everything. You're not sacrificing anything except range."

The world's major automakers have been making heavy investments in fuel cells and other alternative fuel vehicles amid climbing oil prices and concerns about climate change.

Although Honda Motor Co. was the first Japanese automaker to launch a gas-electric hybrid vehicle in the U.S. in 1999, it has been outpaced by the dominance of Toyota's popular Prius.

Toyota announced in May that it has sold more than 1 million Prius hybrids, while both the Honda Insight and the hybrid Accord have been discontinued due to poor sales.

Honda also plans to launch a gas-electric hybrid-only model, as well as hybrid versions of the Civic, the sporty CR-Z and Fit subcompact.

Toyota has announced that it would launch a plug-in hybrid with next-generation lithium-ion batteries by 2010 and a hydrogen fuel cell vehicle later in Japan later this year.

U.S. carmaker General Motors Corp. plans to introduce a Chevrolet Volt plug-in electric vehicle in 2010. It also introduced a test-fleet of hydrogen fuel cell Equinox SUVs.

Honda has no plans for a plug-in electric vehicle. President Takeo Fukui said he does not believe current battery technology is good enough to develop a feasible car.

The company has not revealed how much each car costs to make, and it is unclear when, or if, the car will be available for mass-market sales. Takeo has set a target for 2018, but meeting that goal will depend on whether Honda can significantly lower development and assembly costs as well as market reaction to fuel cells.

Utility finds foes to renewable energy line plan

By ELLIOT SPAGAT, AP Business Writer
in the Modesto Bee, Sunday, June 15, 2008

SAN DIEGO - It seems like an idea any environmentalist would embrace: Build one of the world's largest solar power operations in the Southern California desert and surround it with plants that run on wind and underground heat.

Yet San Diego Gas & Electric Co. and its potential partners face fierce opposition because the plan also calls for a 150-mile, high-voltage transmission line that would cut through pristine parkland to reach the nation's eighth-largest city.

The showdown over how to get renewable energy to consumers will likely play out elsewhere around the country as well, as state regulators require electric utilities to rely less on coal and natural gas to fire their plants - the biggest source of carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S.

Providers of renewable power covet cheap land and abundant sunshine and wind in places like west Texas, Montana, Wyoming and California's Mojave Desert and Imperial Valley. But utility executives say no one will build plants without power lines to connect those remote spots to big cities.

"This is a classic chicken and the egg," said Mike Niggli, chief operating officer of Sempra Energy's utilities business, which includes SDG&E. "No one can develop a project if they can't send (the electricity) anywhere. You need transmission."

SDG&E's \$1.5-billion power line would cut 23 miles through the middle of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a spot known for its hiking trails, wildflowers, palm groves, cacti and spectacular mountain views.

"This transmission line will cross through some of the most scenic areas of San Diego," said David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity. "It would just ruin it with giant, metal industrial power lines."

Environmentalists are pushing for renewable power to be generated closer to heavily populated areas, rather than brought in from distant sites. They point to Southern California Edison's ambitious plan for solar panels on Los Angeles-area rooftops as an example of a better approach.

Utilities say the roof panels will help but won't produce nearly enough power to satisfy state requirements.

The California Public Utilities Commission is scheduled to vote as soon as August on SDG&E's proposed Sunrise Powerlink, which would carry enough power for about 750,000 homes - or more than half of the utility's customers.

Regulators in 29 states and the District of Columbia are forcing utilities to boost the use of renewable energy to run electric plants.

California has been among the most aggressive, with the state's three investor-owned utilities required to get 20 percent of power from renewables by the end of 2010.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to reach 33 percent by 2020.

SDG&E, with 1.4 million customers, is California's laggard, getting just 6 percent of its power from renewables. PG&E Corp.'s Pacific Gas and Electric, with 5.1 million customers, gets 12 percent. Edison International's Southern California Edison, with 4.8 million customers, gets 16 percent.

Nationwide, utilities get only 2 percent of electricity from renewables, said Jone-Linn Wang, managing director of the global power group at Cambridge Energy Research Associates.

Edison hopes to draw more on solar and wind power by building a transmission line from the Mojave Desert to the Los Angeles area.

"It's a trade-off," said Stuart Hemphill, Edison's vice president for renewable and alternative power. "Clean energy perhaps requires building infrastructure in potentially sensitive areas. There's no way around it."

New finding links pollution to childhood allergies

REUTERS

In the San Diego Union-Tribune, Saturday, June 14, 2008

LONDON - German researchers say they have found some of the strongest evidence yet linking traffic pollution to childhood allergies.

The risk of developing asthma, hay fever, eczema or other allergies is about 50 percent higher for children living 50 metres (yards) from a busy road than for those living 1,000 metres away, they said in a study released on Friday. Previous research has linked pollution to allergies, but to date observational studies in the field have been inconsistent, said Joachim Heinrich, an epidemiologist at the Helmholtz Research Centre for Environment and Health in Munich.

'We consistently found strong associations between the distance to the nearest main road and the allergic disease outcomes,' Heinrich, who led the study, wrote in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine.

The study followed 3,000 healthy children from all over Munich for six years from birth to determine rates of allergy-related diseases and exposure to traffic pollution.

The researchers mapped each residential address and the distance to busy roads, then developed a model to calculate exposure to pollution at birth and age two, three and six.

A busy road was considered one used by 10,000 cars each day.

'We developed a model to predict air pollution concentration at one point in a metropolitan area,' Heinrich said in a telephone interview.

This allowed the researchers to monitor more than one site as well as follow a large group of children over a long period of time, things many other studies did not do, Heinrich said.

The researchers will continue monitoring the children over the next few years to determine whether moving to a less-polluted area can reverse any of the traffic pollution-related problems, he added.

Smoke's risky in Butte County

Modesto Bee, Sunday, June 15, 2008

Air quality officials and Butte County's public health officer have issued an Air Quality Advisory, warning county residents and others in the region to minimize their exposure to smoke generated by the Humboldt fire near Paradise.

Butte County Air Quality Management District and Butte County Department of Public Health officials said it is particularly important for people with asthma or other respiratory diseases or heart conditions to monitor their health. They urged people with serious heart or respiratory disease to consider leaving the area.

The agencies offered these tips for minimizing the effects of smoke from the fire:

- Stay indoors with windows and doors closed; run air-conditioner on "recirculate" setting. Do not run swamp coolers or whole-house fans. People sensitive to the heat should use fans for cooling or consider leaving the area.
- Minimize or stop outdoor activities, especially exercise, during smoky conditions.
- People in a high-risk group or those who cannot find adequate shelter from the smoke outside may need to move to an emergency shelter.
- Masks that filter out 95 percent of particles measuring 0.3 micrometers in diameter or larger (N95 or R95 masks) can be effective if properly fitted to the wearer's face. These can be found at hardware stores. HEPA filter masks are recommended.

Mild weather aids Northern California firefighting

By JULIET WILLIAMS

Washington Post, Sunday, June 15, 2008

SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- Milder-than-expected weather on Saturday gave fire crews hope that they could rein in a series of Northern California wildfires that have destroyed dozens of homes and forced thousands of residents to evacuate.

Thousands of people stayed away from their homes in the Butte County town of Paradise, but some were allowed to return Saturday to assess damage. At least 74 homes were destroyed and another 20 were damaged in the Paradise area, about 90 miles north of Sacramento.

The priority for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection shifted to assessing damage from the blaze that scorched about 36 square miles, said Cal Fire spokesman Joshpae White. The blaze was 45 percent contained after a blustery couple of days, and White said crews expected to have it controlled by Monday.

"With the cooler temperatures and the lack of winds we were able to make the fire burn on our terms," White said Saturday. "It's mellowed out considerably."

Five firefighters suffered minor injuries battling the blaze.

About 9,000 residents had fled the area at the fire's peak Friday. Officials did not know how many had returned home Saturday.

More than a quarter of Paradise residents are over 65. Many had to be moved in buses because they don't drive, while those who were bedridden or in wheelchairs were moved in vans or ambulances.

"We have a significant number of elderly people in wheelchairs at the shelters," Pamela Hospers, Butte County public authority manager, told The Sacramento Bee. "It's very confusing, very frustrating when you have to change and leave everything you know."

One elderly woman died after suffering a heart attack while being evacuated.

In recent days, high temperatures, steady wind and tinder-dry vegetation contributed to wildfires around the state.

In Santa Cruz County, firefighters got a handle on a wildfire that has charred one square mile and burned at least 10 homes in the Bonny Doon community. An evacuation order remained in effect for some areas where firefighters were still trying to stifle a blaze that was 75 percent contained.

The causes of all the California blazes remain under investigation.

In southern New Mexico, fire teams were trying Saturday night to keep a wildfire burning on federal and military land from destroying historic structures in Soledad Canyon including an old sanitarium.

"We've had no lightning. It has to be man-caused," Bureau of Land Management Fire Management Officer Steve Bumgarner said of the 400-acre fire first spotted late Saturday afternoon.

In southeastern Colorado, about 290 firefighters battled a wildfire that had spread over 65 square miles in and around a military training site. Aided by calming wind, the firefighters were able to get the fire 10 percent contained, fire management team spokesman Steve Segin said.

"They've got a lot of work ahead of them," Segin said.

The fire started in the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site but spread to surrounding federal, state and private land after two straight days of strong wind. It was threatening eight ranch homes.

In eastern North Carolina, areas north of a fire around the Pocosin Lakes Wildlife Refuge were under the most severe air pollution warning the state has ever issued. The warning includes the cities of Edenton and Elizabeth City.

The fire has charred more than 64 square miles and was only 40 percent contained. Fire spokesman Dean McAlister said firefighters expect it will continue to smolder until the area gets enough rain to soak the peat soil.

A wildfire in the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, which straddles Virginia and North Carolina, prompted a smoke advisory Saturday for much of the Norfolk, Va., area.

The fire, which started Monday, has burned almost 2.25 square miles and wiped out parts of a project to restore Atlantic white cedar trees.

Associated Press writers Jordan Robertson in San Jose, Tom Verdin in Sacramento, Jason Dearen in San Francisco and Martha Waggoner in Raleigh, N.C., contributed to this report.

High winds stoke fires across Northern California

By DON THOMPSON

Capital Press Ag Weekly, Saturday, June 14, 2008

PARADISE, Calif. (AP) -- High wind on Saturday continued to stoke fires across Northern California that had destroyed dozens of homes and forced thousands of residents to flee.

At least 66 homes had been destroyed with 17 others damaged in the Butte County town of Paradise, about 90 miles north of Sacramento. The fire had contributed to at least one death - an elderly woman who suffered a heart attack while evacuating.

Only 35 percent of the fire was contained Saturday, and it had charred more than 36 square miles. Five firefighters suffered minor injuries.

That blaze was just one of a series vexing firefighters across Northern California. A wildfire in Monterey County continued to chew through the Los Padres National Forest, and flames in the Santa Cruz County kept hundreds of residents away from their mountain homes.

In recent days, high temperatures, steady wind and tinder-dry vegetation have contributed to destructive blazes around the state.

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Single day of free transit rides set for Thursday

By Denis Cuff

Tri-Valley Herald and Contra Costa Times, Saturday, June 14, 2008

Bay Area residents will be able to ride public transit for free Thursday - likely the last day of a free ride program that is running out of money and political support after four years.

Fares will be waived Thursday for passengers boarding BART, trains and ferries before noon. Bus rides will be free all day.

This is the first time the free rides have been announced well in advance. In the past, officials offered the free rides on smoggy Spare the Air Days, which are declared less than 24 hours in advance when pollution experts forecast unhealthy air the next day.

With money for the service running out, the region's air pollution board and transportation commission decided to announce the free rides weeks in advance to give people more time to consider their options for leaving their cars at home to reduce global warming and perhaps make the change permanent.

"The new model is to spare the air every day," said John Goodwin, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which controls the flow of state and federal transit dollars in the nine Bay Area counties.

The commission and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District have jointly funded and managed the free ride days.

For those who need help planning, officials suggest going to the 511.org Web site or calling 511 for information about routes and schedules.

BART spokesman Linton Johnson said the train system is ready to handle the extra riders Thursday even though it already can be tough to find seats on some rush hour trains. "It may be a little more crowded than ordinary," he said, "but we don't anticipate problems."

The air district and transportation commission have teamed up to sponsor free transit days since 2004 in what has been the largest free ride program of its kind on America.

But it costs nearly \$2 million to reimburse transit operators for lost fares on each free ride day, and the lion's share of that money comes from a dried-up funding pot in the federal Congestion Mitigation And Air Quality Improvement Program.

Thursday is likely to be the last day of the free rides because of the money shortage and the growing feeling that funds are more effectively spent on year-round measures to reduce carbon dioxide and other global-warming gases, said Jerry Hill, a San Mateo County supervisor who is chairman of the air district board

"I think the program was a success in drawing attention to public transit as a way to reduce air pollution," Hill said. "But I don't think we can afford to continue it."

Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman and a member of the air district board, also said he doesn't expect free rides coming back, except perhaps on a more selective basis, such as occasional free ride days on

BART. "The program got people's attention," Ross said, "but we just can't afford to offer everyone free rides."

Lawmaker threatens contempt vote for EPA chief

By ERICA WERNER, Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, Friday, June 13, 2008, and San Francisco Chronicle, Saturday, June 14, 2008

WASHINGTON - A House committee chairman on Friday threatened to hold the head of the EPA and a White House budget official in contempt of Congress for not handing over documents about new smog requirements and a decision blocking California greenhouse gas limits.

Democratic Rep. Henry Waxman of California, chairman of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, said he'd hold a vote in his committee next week on a contempt resolution, if he doesn't get the information he wants.

He made the threat in letters to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson and Susan Dudley, administrator for information and regulatory affairs at the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Waxman and others have complained about evidence that the White House intervened with the Environmental Protection Agency to produce more industry-friendly outcomes on both the smog and greenhouse gas issues. Waxman has issued a series of subpoenas to learn more, but weeks have passed and neither EPA nor the Office of Management and Budget has fully complied. Waxman said Friday he'd waited long enough.

"I regret that your failure to produce responsive documents has created this impasse, but Congress has a constitutional duty to conduct oversight of the executive branch," he wrote to both officials.

"Therefore, unless the documents are provided to the committee or a valid assertion of executive privilege is made, the committee will meet on June 20 to consider a resolution holding you in contempt," Waxman wrote.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said his agency has turned over tens of thousands of documents to Waxman "and there has been no wrongdoing uncovered."

"The committee seems to be on a political hunt that will leave them wanting yet again," Shradar said in a statement.

OMB spokeswoman Jane K. Lee called Waxman's move "unfortunate" and said the office that Dudley heads "has gone to great lengths to cooperate with the committee, providing voluminous documents on an expedited basis (more than 7,500 pages)."

Johnson has consistently maintained that he was the one who made the final decisions on the smog rule and the California greenhouse gas waiver.

The EPA in March issued tougher health standards for ozone, commonly known as smog, but they weren't as tough as recommended by an EPA science advisory board and many health experts.

The EPA also did not go as far as the science panel had recommended in setting a separate standard to protect the environment from smog. EPA and White House officials have acknowledged that a tougher standard had been opposed by the Office of Management and Budget and the issue was settled after President Bush intervened directly on behalf of the White House staff only hours before the rule was announced.

On the California greenhouse gas issue, Waxman's committee staff produced a report last month concluding from interviews with high-level EPA officials that Johnson initially supported giving California full or partial permission to limit tailpipe emissions - but reversed himself after hearing from the White House.

More than a dozen other states were also blocked from implementing the tailpipe emission limits after Johnson rejected California's request for a required federal waiver in December.

City's plans could cushion budget shortfall

As sales decrease and cost of fuel rises, Visalia officials say reserve funds could be used as last resort

BY GERALD CARROLL

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, June 16, 2008

Visalia is preparing for budgetary shortfalls in the coming year, but advance preparation and a sizable emergency fund will cushion the blow, city officials say.

In a tentative proposal released Friday, Visalia's financial department will propose a fiscal 2008-09 budget of about \$160 million — \$2 million less than in fiscal year 2007-08, said Eric Frost, Visalia's director of administrative services.

"Sales are down in cars and building materials [in Visalia]," Frost said. That means less sales-tax growth than in preceding years — which means fewer dollars to fund city services.

High fuel prices — gasoline has topped \$4 a gallon in the Visalia area over the last month and continues to rise — have contributed to not only fewer vehicle sales, but sales of smaller, more fuel-efficient, cheaper cars, said Steve Salomon, Visalia's city manager.

"Instead of \$600 sales tax on each car, that's now more like \$300," Salomon said.

Skyrocketing fuel costs have also more than doubled Visalia's fuel bill — from \$800,000 in 2006-07 to more than \$2 million in 2007-08, records show.

It could have been worse, Salomon said, had it not been the city's current conversion of city vehicles — particularly transit buses — [from high-cost diesel to lower-cost and less-polluting compressed natural gas](#).

The sale of building materials, which normally generate millions of dollars in sales-tax revenue locally, are also down considerably, Frost said — mainly because of an overall residential building slowdown over the past 18 months.

"It's not certain how long [the housing slump] will last," Frost said. Through the first half of 2007, local residential builders have delayed construction of new, already-approved subdivisions because of a lack of customers.

However, the good news is that Visalia's emergency reserve fund — currently \$8.7 million — could well remain intact through fiscal year 2008-09, city calculations show.

"The worst-case scenario has that fund going down about \$500,000 this year," Salomon said. The problem, though, is that once such a decline starts it is difficult to reverse in successive budget years, Frost said.

"We never want that [emergency] fund to decline," Frost said.

Ongoing concerns

Fortunately, Visalia acted quickly to build major projects such as the \$8.2 million first phase of Visalia Riverway Sports Park — and the \$5.2 million second phase now under construction — before the onset of financial belt-tightening that looms ahead.

Yet another factor is the state of California's dubious budget questions — including a current \$15 billion deficit that might cut funding to Visalia by as much as \$1 million or more during fiscal year 2008-09, Salomon said.

"We're figuring in at least a \$1 million shortfall from the state," Salomon said, "and maybe more. We just don't know yet."

Budget discussions are scheduled for tonight's 7 p.m. Visalia City Council meeting and will continue on June 23, where a final vote might be taken then or on June 30.

A budget for fiscal year 2008-09 has to be approved before July 1, Salomon said.

Health Highlights: June 14, 2008

EPA's Proposed Lead Standards May Not Be Adequate: Experts

Washington Post, Saturday, June 14, 2008

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's proposed new standards for lead air pollution may not be adequate to protect public health, according to some experts who attended a public meeting in Baltimore.

The meeting is one of a series being held by the EPA to gather input on its proposal to reduce the current standard of 1.5 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air to between 0.10 micrograms and 0.30 micrograms per cubic meter of air.

The standard should be set below 0.10 micrograms, Frank O'Donnell, president of the nonprofit group Clean Air Watch, told the EPA panel on Thursday, The Baltimore Sun reported.

"Lead is a very toxic pollutant that steals IQ points from children," O'Donnell said.

"We're pleased the EPA is tightening the standards, but they should be set at the higher level," said Gary Ewart, director of government relations for the American Thoracic Society, the Sun reported.

The EPA will accept written comments on the proposed standards until July 21 and is expected to adopt the new standards on Sept. 15, the newspaper said.

Making City Buses Run Cleaner Yields a Big Bonus: Fewer Trips to the Gas Pump

By William Neuman

N.Y. Times, Sat., June 14, 2008

When you buy 55 million gallons of diesel fuel a year to power some 5,000 buses, even small improvements in fuel efficiency can make a big difference.

For several years, the Metropolitan Transit Authority has been on a mission to cut the amount of pollution coming from its buses, buying ones with hybrid engines and switching to a cleaner type of diesel fuel. As part of that drive to cut emissions, it has also pushed to get more mileage out of every gallon of diesel fuel. And now with the price of fuel soaring, the authority is reaping an additional benefit from that greater efficiency.

"All this was done for emissions, and fuel economy came along with it," said Gary A. LaBouff, the director of research and development for the department of buses at New York City Transit. "We didn't anticipate \$4 a gallon diesel."

The authority is in the midst of a financial crisis, with declining tax revenues pinching its budget from one side and increased fuel costs from the other. In April alone, the authority spent \$8.7 million more than it had budgeted for fuel (including for diesel locomotives), which was 56 percent above the budgeted amount.

That puts a premium on fuel efficiency.

One of the ways the authority hopes to improve its fuel efficiency is through a new type of lithium-ion battery for its hybrid buses.

The 824 hybrid buses currently on the road power their electric motors with batteries similar to traditional acid and lead car batteries. Those batteries weigh a lot and require more maintenance than officials had anticipated when they first began deploying large numbers of the hybrids about four years ago.

The new lithium-ion batteries, which were not available at the time, are similar to the batteries in rechargeable drills and other hand tools. They have been installed on four buses that have been on the road as part of a test program since January.

Earlier this week, at the Manhattanville bus depot on 133rd Street, mechanics removed a metal cover on the top of bus No. 6401 to reveal a large container that the mechanics call a battery tub. Inside were more than 2,000 paper-wrapped batteries about the size of a typical C battery, stacked up in neat rows.

"It's like a whole bunch of flashlight batteries put together," Mr. LaBouff said.

While they might evoke jokes about the Energizer Bunny, the lithium cells work better than the older acid and lead batteries. They charge faster, Mr. LaBouff said, deliver more power and, it is hoped, will last longer and require less maintenance. The authority has ordered 850 new hybrid buses. The first ones, scheduled to arrive this summer, will have the old-style batteries, but by next year they will begin arriving with the lithium-ion cells.

Mr. LaBouff said that a tub of lithium-ion batteries was lighter than a tub of the old acid and lead batteries and would shave about 3,000 pounds from the weight of a 16-ton hybrid bus. That promises a significant boost in fuel efficiency, since a lighter vehicle gets more mileage from a gallon of fuel.

The authority's old-fashioned diesel buses get about 2.5 miles per gallon, Mr. LaBouff said. The current fleet of 825 hybrid buses gets 3.2 miles per gallon (the buses thrive on stop-and-go traffic, since the braking action charges the batteries). The authority expects the lithium-ion hybrids to get about 3.5 miles per gallon.

The lithium-ion batteries cost more than their predecessors, but the authority hopes to come out ahead. It estimates that fewer hours spent on maintenance and better gas mileage will result in \$50,000 in savings per bus over their 12-year life span.

Another initiative that could eke a little more distance out of each gallon of fuel is under way in Brooklyn, where sharp-eyed passengers may notice that many buses now have green caps on the tire valves.

The green valve caps indicate that the tires have been filled with pure nitrogen, a gas that is a component of air. Special compressors at several bus depots extract nitrogen from the air and store it in tanks to be pumped into the tires.

Studies have shown that nitrogen is better for tires than plain air, according to Stephen Martini, the assistant chief officer of maintenance for the department of buses. Nitrogen leaks from the tires at a slower rate, meaning they have to be filled less often. And the pressure in nitrogen-filled tires is more likely to remain constant despite fluctuations in temperature. Normally, the pressure in air-filled tires rises as they heat up and falls as they cool.

Maintaining an optimum pressure should increase the life of tires by about 10 percent, which is a primary goal of the program, Mr. Martini said. But it should also mean a small improvement in fuel mileage.

Mr. LaBouff said there were other initiatives under way that could contribute small tweaks to the bus fleet's fuel efficiency. They include an adjustment to lower the acceleration rate on hybrid buses and a change in the buses' software to make the engine run more economically. He said the authority had also begun using a fuel additive devised to improve engine efficiency.

For all that, Mr. LaBouff said he did not have an estimate of how much money the fuel efficiency gains were saving the authority, especially with the cost of fuel still on the rise.

"The trouble is," Mr. LaBouff said, with a bitter laugh, "the dollar savings is getting better every day."

All Biofuels Are Not The Same

By Vinod Khosla

Washington Post, Monday, June 16, 2008

Last month the Wall Street Journal accused me of advocating subsidies for food-based ethanol. I ought to "take a vow of embarrassed silence," it said, for claiming that ethanol's contribution to the food crisis is "overblown." The Journal's claims would be laughable if the stakes were not so high.

Cellulosic biofuels offer a chance to have an environmentally meaningful impact on petroleum use while benefiting farmers, entrepreneurs and consumers. I have many investments in biofuels companies. Some say I believe in biofuels because I have invested in them. The truth is that I invest in biofuels because I believe they can help our environment, economy and national security.

Just as the word "drug" can refer to aspirin or cocaine, "biofuel" refers to a variety of products that vary dramatically in their environmental impact and effects on food prices. For instance, biodiesel from food oils such as soybean or palm oil has traditionally created environmental negatives. But corn ethanol has

been a stepping stone to cellulosic ethanol, a preferred alternative that is likely to achieve unsubsidized market competitiveness with oil within a few years.

We face an energy crisis, an environmental crisis and a terrorism crisis all related to oil. High-cost options to reduce consumption, such as hybrid and electric cars, sound good but are unlikely to materially reduce carbon emissions. To have a meaningful impact, at least half of the next billion cars manufactured on this planet must be low-carbon. The only cost-effective option (measured in cost per ton of carbon emissions avoided or grams of carbon emissions per mile driven) likely to achieve broad market acceptance in the next 20 years is cellulosic-fuel cars.

Unfortunately, biofuels are the target of interested parties' paid campaigns. The Grocery Manufacturers Association, for example, is waging a multimillion-dollar campaign against ethanol; the American Petroleum Institute is more concerned about food prices than oil prices. Slogans about how much corn and water are required to produce a gallon of ethanol are repeated frequently. In fact, a 16-ounce steak takes about the same amount of corn and more water. Should we ban steaks, too? Similarly, hybrid cars are hyped, but we seldom hear that they reduce carbon emissions about as much as corn ethanol, and at a cost that is substantially higher than flex-fuel cars.

Congress has required oil refiners and fuel blenders to use up to 36 billion gallons of renewable fuels produced in America annually. Critics fault this renewable fuels standard, but reducing it could be disastrous for energy security and the environment. It would be smarter to build into the standard flexibility related to the price and availability of cellulosic fuels. Sufficient biomass exists as waste from forestry operations alone to meet the cellulosic fuels mandate (21 billion gallons) in the 2007 energy bill. All 36 billion gallons could be produced, at prices approaching \$1 per gallon, within 10 years, if we include agricultural crop waste, municipal organic waste and sewage. By adding winter cover crops to about half of the land used for agriculture, land that sits idle during winter, we could replace most of our gasoline imports. By some agronomists' estimates, winter cover crops could produce 450 million tons of biomass a year within 10 years and more than 750 million tons by 2030. That by itself would be enough to replace much of our imported gas -- without an additional acre of land being used for biofuels production.

Rising food prices are of course a concern, but principally blaming ethanol production is illogical. "On the international level . . . only 3 percent of the more than 40 percent increase we have seen in world food prices this year is due to the increased demand on corn for ethanol," Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer said last month. Oil prices affect the U.S. consumer price index for food two to three times as much as corn prices, the global analysis firm LECG has found. If biofuels were taken off the market, Merrill Lynch estimates, oil prices would climb 15 percent, putting further upward pressure on food prices.

For the urban poor, rising food prices are disastrous, but for the developing world's rural poor (about 67 percent of those who live on less than a dollar a day), food price increases can boost incomes as subsistence farms become more economic. That's why developing countries such as India and Brazil have pressed to reduce Western food subsidies and increase food prices -- so their farmers can generate income. Cellulosic biofuels, because of biomass's potential for raising rural incomes, may be among the most valuable poverty alleviation tools we have for Africa.

The environmental effect of corn and cellulosic ethanol also depends on their source. If ethanol is produced on lands that displace food production into rain forests, its environmental effect will be negative. But continuing to burn coal and oil would be bad, too. A better option lies in national and international policies that create incentives for countries such as Brazil and Malaysia to preserve their rain forests through carbon credits while banning biofuels (and maybe all agricultural exports) from countries that do not meet rain forest deforestation reduction targets. Meanwhile, cellulosic ethanol production can reduce carbon emissions 75 percent while producing ethanol at a lower cost than corn ethanol and gasoline. To incentivize production of biofuels that are environmentally beneficial, I have suggested a carbon, land, [air quality](#) and water (CLAW) impact rating for all biofuels, much like the LEED environmental rating for homes.

If corn ethanol had not paved the way, and our renewable fuels standards did not exist, I would be far less inclined to invest in cellulosic ethanol. But if we reduce renewable fuel mandates, as some suggest, we are likely to reduce investment in next-generation cellulosic fuels instead of focusing on improving the

quality of biofuels and reducing our oil dependence. As one of the larger investors in cellulosic and waste-based biofuels research, I should know.

All biofuels are not equal. Done right, cellulosic biofuels offer a scalable and economic way to reduce petroleum use and have a meaningful impact on the environment while benefiting farmers, entrepreneurs and consumers.

Looking behind the Iron Curtain

By Wendy E. Arevalo

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, June 16, 2008

Near an oil field in Baku, Azerbaijan, underground pipes jut from the side of a crater and spew chemical by-products into an oily lake. The pipes hiss as they shoot out liquid. A light mist engulfs photographer Bruce Haley and causes his camera to malfunction. In the last 10 years, the Lemoore native and former combat photographer has been focusing on industrial landscapes and people in post-communist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Azerbaijan is just one of the former communist countries that Haley has spent time photographing.

Many of the places he visited had been ruined by years of industrial pollution. One example is the town of Copsa Mica, in Transylvania, Romania. In the 1990s it was labeled the most polluted place in Europe.

A carbon black factory operated in Copsa Mica from 1936 to 1993. While under the rule of Nicolai Ceausescu, the factory operated with nearly zero environmental restrictions. Carbon black dust, which can be carcinogenic, permeated the village for nearly 60 years, leaving soot on everything in the area. The stain from decades of deposits is still visible, although the factory has been shut down for 15 years.

"It coated everything in the town," said Haley, who visited the site in 2002. "It's not a joke, the sheep were black, the grass was black. It was an ecological disaster."

Haley's photos from Copsa Mica and other Eastern European locales have been hung at galleries worldwide, including the Ansel Adams Gallery and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. In fact, the Tokyo show was part of a traveling exhibition that toured all of Japan.

His photographs have been displayed in books, magazines and newspapers worldwide as well.

When Fresno Art Museum Curator Jacqueline Pilar saw Haley's environmental landscape photos, she thought they would coincide well with the other landscape art exhibits currently on display at the Fresno Art Museum.

"I was working with the concept of the landscape and working with the thought that environmental issues are such an important issue in our time. What his work reflects is how man has destroyed our landscape with industry that has contaminated the earth," said Pilar.

Accompanying Haley's landscape photos are seven photos of the Roma, or gypsies of Eastern Europe. Haley spent two years documenting the poorest Roma, who lived in the bleakest corners of Romania.

He found some settlements where families lived in tents of plastic sheeting, or on the edges of garbage dumps.

When he would enter a gypsy camp, he brought a translator and kept his camera hidden in his bag, until he gained trust.

One of his most popular photos he took during this time was of a young Roma mother and her child. Haley said he was immediately drawn to the mother, who stood out because of her light eyes.

"I think what people take away from a lot of my work is that there is a sense of beauty amongst the tragic," said Haley. "There's an individuality to the people, where I don't want them to be a stereotype of the poor. I want them to be individuals, to show their strength, their resilience. I hope I've done them, as individuals, justice."

Haley's exhibit, "Environmental Apocalypse," contains 30 black and white panoramic photos of Eastern European landscapes and people. They can be viewed in the Duncan Gallery of the Fresno Art Museum

through Sunday, Aug. 17. Haley will be attending an artist's reception from 5 to 7 p.m. today at the Fresno Art Museum.

Dr. G's TIPS

Washington Post, Sunday, June 15, 2008

Action Alert

Metro said the fax and e-mail alerts indicating that last Monday would be a Code Red day for air quality obscured the box containing the "Red" designation. But given that the alert program triggers free bus rides in the suburbs, the transit authority displayed a distinct lack of curiosity.

Nobody, it appears, made a timely call to the source of the alerts to check on their intent. As a result, many suburban Metrobus passengers paid for early Monday rides that should have been free.

Although the message was obscured, it was still "our responsibility to have called and found out what was in that box," Metro General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. said Thursday. "We failed to do this." The Metro staff met with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments staff on Wednesday to make sure this doesn't happen again, he said.

Alert Action

On the other hand, quick thinking by several Metro employees might have prevented serious injuries on the Orange Line. A supervisor who happened to be aboard a train pulling out of Rosslyn on Monday afternoon noticed that there was something wrong with the ride and contacted the operator, who stopped the train. Turned out the third car had derailed.

On Wednesday afternoon, an operator spotted a bend in the rails, probably caused by the heat. If it hadn't been for the alert operator, that train, too, could have derailed.

Silver Spring Turn

Barry Gross of Silver Spring wrote in last year to suggest placing a green arrow allowing right turns at Spring Street and Colesville Road. That, he said, would relieve a chronic commuter bottleneck. The many drivers turning right onto Colesville had only a 15-second green, Gross said.

The Maryland State Highway Administration had the same idea, and although it took a while to complete the project, Gross said last week that he is pleased with the results: The right turn signal "is now working extremely well, eliminating a constant traffic backup headache."

Virginia's Hybrid Exemption

As July approaches, commuters are asking if the supposedly temporary exemption that allows hybrid vehicles to use carpool lanes has been extended.

Yes, the Virginia General Assembly approved a one-year extension to July 2009. Drivers who don't meet the requirements for the High Occupancy Vehicle lanes can continue to clog up lanes meant for carpoolers without making a significant contribution to air quality during the commute.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Commentary, Saturday, June 14, 2008:](#)

The intricacies of fire management in the Sierra

I had the privilege recently of attending a fascinating local conference about the past, present, and future of wildland fire management in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

The immediate justification for the meeting was the 40th anniversary of the initiation of the modern fire management program at the parks, but the event also looked forward in many important ways.

To the uninitiated, fire management in the southern Sierra may seem like nothing more than preventing fires in the range's forests and brushlands. In reality, the challenge is far more complex than mere fire suppression.

Inescapably, our mountain environments are flammable. The Sierra's vegetation, which never stops growing, can be seen not just as scenic greenery but also as fuel. And there is lots of it.

Both nature and humanity add ignitions to this volatile situation. Nature provides summer lightening storms. We humans light fires in hundreds of different ways, most of them accidental.

The Sierra will burn, history teaches us, and the question is not if, but rather when, and how?

Until 1968, the National Park Service pursued a policy of attempting to suppress all fires. Sometimes this worked; sometimes it didn't. And to the degree that it did work, fire suppression simply led to the accumulation of yet more fuel waiting to burn.

In the early 1960s, inspired by questions about giant sequoia ecology, the Service began a series of experiments that studied the effects of allowing fire to resume its natural role. The effort, carried out by a team of professors from San Jose State led by Dr. Richard Hartesveldt, soon demonstrated that fire played a major role in keeping Sierran forests healthy.

Hartesveldt's work led ultimately to a new and different kind of fire management program. Beginning in 1968, the Park Service began managing fire as a necessary forest process rather than just as a threat to be prevented at all cost.

This new approach, which continues to this day, led to a more complex world in which some fires were suppressed while others were allowed to burn under managed conditions. The Service even began a program of igniting fires under carefully controlled conditions, an effort that came to be known as "prescribed fire."

Four decades later, a room full of scientists and on-the-ground fire managers sat down recently to consider how well these programs have worked. Over two days, several conclusions became apparent.

The early fire experiments at Sequoia and Kings Canyon have proven highly influential. Today, similar programs exist in conifer forests all over the western United States. All, in a way, are children of the early work done in our southern Sierra national parks.

A second conclusion is that there can be no doubt that Sequoia's approach to fire has produced many benefits. Decades of monitoring document that managed fire reduces fuel, lessens the potential for catastrophic wildfire, and enhances biological diversity.

Over the decades, it has also become apparent that maintaining enough fire in the Sierra to gain broad, landscape level protection for forests is very difficult. Many constraints limit the ability of forest managers to use fire productively. [The most critical these days relate to the San Joaquin Valley's severe air quality problems.](#)

[Managed fires may be good for forests, but they can worsen our region's already troubled air if not managed very carefully.](#)

Now, additional problems are coming into focus. Foremost among these are the impacts of our warming and drying climate.

Fire season in the local mountains now begins two weeks earlier and runs several weeks longer into the fall than it did a generation ago. As a result, the potential for big and destructive fires continues to intensify.

Wildland fires, big and small, also release significant amounts of atmospheric carbon, an increasing social concern.

Managing the Sierra's inevitable fires will not get easier in coming decades. Suppression of all fires won't protect our forests, but using fire productively is going to get ever more difficult. Our scientists and fire managers have their work cut out for them.

Three Rivers resident William Tweed writes about the natural world of Tulare County. His column, copyrighted and printed by permission, appears every other week in Living.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, June 16, 2008:](#)

'Speed this thing along'

In response to Clay K. Comer [June 10] and other recent letters regarding traffic signal synchronization, a few thoughts: First, congratulations to the city of Fresno on the synchronization of Herndon Avenue. On Herndon alone, Fresno motorists are producing 120,000 pounds less carbon dioxide and are saving more than \$25,000 in fuel costs, every day.

Second, I eagerly await synchronization of other important corridors such as Shaw, Cedar, Palm, Friant, Nees, Clovis, Jensen and Kings Canyon and the completion of Shepherd and Willow avenues, particularly the use of eminent domain at Willow and Nees.

Third, regarding my reputed "failure" on synchronization, the failure was in educating the masses and in garnering political support, specifically the mayor, on budgeting and the air district on regional relevance. The mayor did eventually budget a portion of the program and \$5 gasoline appears to have the attention of the public.

However, the air district continues reluctance in addressing traffic movement and efficiency. Yes, Virginia, mobile source pollution exists and it comes from cars. Now where are your traffic experts? To everyone else, synchronization is slowly becoming reality. Voice support for our public works and maybe, just maybe, we can speed this thing along.

John Ennis, Fresno

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses proposition to eliminate conservation programs to level California's deficit. Valley Air District seeks collaboration from valley residents to participate in Healthy Air Living, a new program focused in reducing ozone. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Proponen eliminar programas de conservación para nivelar el déficit de California

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, June 16, 2008

Autoridades ambientales del Valle de San Joaquín en California iniciaron una nueva campaña de acercamiento a la población en busca de ayuda para reducir la contaminación del aire.

La oficina Distrital de Control de la Contaminación del Aire en el referido valle conformó que visita iglesias, supermercados, reuniones de empresarios y asociaciones comunitarias para solicitar colaboración de los residentes.

La campaña se llama, Vida con Aire Saludable, y se enfoca principalmente en reducir el ozono en el medio ambiente.

El Valle de San Joaquín es la segunda región más contaminada en el país, después de Los Ángeles.