

Fires Don't Deter Tourists

By Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY

Thursday, July 31, 2008

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — Rafael Rios looked out over a valley between massive granite walls. A gray-black haze lies in the air, obscuring the spectacular view of sharp rocks, shooting pines and a river running beneath.

"*Qué lástima*," what a shame, says Rios, 42, traveling from Madrid.

Like a lot of tourists venturing to one of the nation's most famous parks, he was undeterred by the fires that have charred 50 square miles of dry brush and oak woodlands since Friday.

As Rios was sightseeing, fire crews took advantage of a nighttime rise in humidity Tuesday night and made "a lot of progress," against the fire said Mike Mohler, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. The fire was 40% contained, he said, but "we still have a long road to go."

A forecast of warm, dry weather won't help firefighters put out the fire but expected light winds won't make things worse, said meteorologist Cindy Bean at the National Weather Service's San Joaquin Valley office.

'I trust these firefighters'

Rios and fellow traveler Concepcion Perez, 41, knew they'd face smoke, but people at the hotel told them they'd be safe.

Sometimes the sky has the fresh-burned smells of a campfire. Other times, it is acrid and pungent.

Residents gather for a nightly meeting to hear updates. Many of those who have been evacuated are bunking with neighbors or sleeping in tent cabins or trucks just outside.

"You can't help but appreciate the effort they're putting out," says Carl Vanderkarr of the fire crews. The retired park service worker has lived in the area for 60 years.

Dayna Jackson, 52, a budget officer for the National Parks Service, checks on her house every night. "I ... look at my house every night from across the canyon," she says. "I look and see if I still have a house."

So far, so good. When she was evacuated, she had time to grab what she could: two dogs, two cats, two teen daughters.

"I figure the rest of it's just stuff," she says.

For now, she and her daughters are sleeping in a tent trailer parked in front of a friend's home.

"I trust these firefighters," she says. "They're going to save my home. They told me they would. It's impressive. I've never seen so much firefighting equipment."

Ann Roberts, 41, who works for the park service adds that knowing you live in a fire zone and experiencing a fire are two different things.

"It's not the same," she says. "People take it seriously that we live in fire country."

Tom and Alejandra Elan, marketing executives from Belmont, near San Francisco, had wanted to come to Yosemite, but it had been sold out. On Saturday, they went online: A camping reservation was suddenly available.

When they were packing Sunday, they learned why: A neighbor told them that the valley was on fire.

Dry fuels, steep terrain

While some canceled trips to the majestic valley, many took the fire in stride.

The Elans decided to come with their two young sons, taking it a day at a time.

"When we got here on Sunday at 4 p.m., it was horrible," says Tom Elan, 42. "We couldn't see from one side of the valley to the other. We thought that we'd leave in the morning."

It cleared up in the morning.

Glen Beeby, a firefighter from Northern California, sat by the side of the road, backed against a hillside, making sure the fire doesn't cross the Merced River.

About 3,700 firefighters are battling the blaze with the help of 15 helicopters and 10 air tankers.

"There's a lot of dry fuels out there — steep terrain," he said, as helicopters swooped down into the river to draw water to dump on the blaze.

Residents, many of whom have been evacuated or told to be ready to do so, were hoping that the often-mercurial valley winds didn't shift.

When Douglas Shaw saw the Telegraph Fire's 100-foot flames on the back ridge behind the hotel/youth hostel he owns, he had the same thoughts as most living in the hills next to Yosemite.

"This scared me because I knew it could take it all away in a second," he says.

"It's a living earth," he says. "It's terrifying to go through this. But in the end you think, 'I'm on a good spiritual level now.'" he laughs

Plans for hydrogen plant move forward

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, July 31, 2008

Hydrogen Energy International LLC, the joint venture between BP and Rio Tinto, announced Wednesday that it will begin the regulatory approval process for a clean energy plant near Taft that will capture and store carbon dioxide emissions in nearby oilfields.

The power plant, expected to cost \$2 billion to build, would create electricity using technology that converts petroleum coke and coal to hydrogen. Up to 90 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions produced would be sold to Occidental Petroleum's nearby Elk Hills oilfield, where it could be injected into the ground for enhanced oil recovery operations.

"Occidental sees both environmental and production benefits from the use of CO2 for enhanced oil recovery and in the underground sequestering of the CO2 as a way to control greenhouse gas emissions," Occidental Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Ray R. Irani said in a news release.

The plant's primary feedstock would be petroleum coke from California refineries. The "bottom of the barrel" fuel is now commonly sold to other parts of the world where it's burned in furnaces that

allow large amounts of air pollution and carbon dioxide to enter the air. It could also burn coal as a back-up fuel source.

The company plans to file an application with the California Energy Commission today. The approval process usually takes 18 months and plant construction is expected to begin in 2010.

Patterson man recognized for hospital recycling

By John Saiz, Patterson Irrigator
Wed., July 30, 2008

There's a Patterson man behind the national attention St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton has been receiving.

John Kendle, the director of operations and support services at St. Joseph's, has been heading the hospital's recycling program for about three years. Each of those years, the hospital has earned a spot in the Environmental Leadership Circle, the highest honor awarded by Practice Greenhealth.

"It's kind of made us famous," Kendle said. "Put us on the map."

Practice Greenhealth is a nonprofit national networking organization for environmentally conscious health care institutions. Its primary goal is to create and encourage eco-friendly practices and products to be used in hospitals and other health-related businesses.

St. Joseph's, Stockton's largest private employer, has managed to reduce the amount of waste it sends to the landfill by about 30 percent. When Kendle took over the program the hospital had been sending 78 percent of its waste to a landfill.

"We're up to almost 7,000 pounds of paper a week that we recycle," Kendle said.

The program he's been managing has been at the forefront of a movement insiders are calling a "green tsunami."

"He's a leader and a champion in recycling," said Stan Cahill, Practice Greenhealth's senior director of membership.

Kendle never expected to be a leader or a champion of the green hospital movement. In fact, he initially resisted joining the program. However, the tenacity of a woman who works at the hospital finally convinced him to give it a shot, he said.

"Now, I'm running around the home looking for things to recycle," Kendle said. "I found it's rewarding."

That commitment has led the hospital to again be recognized in Practice Greenhealth's Environmental Leadership Circle.

To be considered for this honor, a facility must virtually eliminate its use of mercury, recycle at least 25 percent of its waste, enact other pollution prevention programs and be an environmental leader in its community. The facility must also complete an annual report to maintain its spot in the circle.

According to Practice Greenhealth's Web site, 27 health care facilities are currently in the Environmental Leadership Circle. St. Joseph's is one of just three in California, joining Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz and first-time inductee Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City.

Kendle has also received kudos from numerous government agencies, including the office of

Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced. His pride and enthusiasm shine when he explains the programs he's implemented.

"Imagine if every medical facility did half of what we did," Kendle said. "I think it's the wave of the future."

One of the most successful programs has been a needle disposal system. Perhaps unexpectedly, the program is also cheaper.

"So many companies and vendors are coming up with new products that do save money — why wouldn't you do it?" Kendle said.

The "sharps" disposal program allows hospital workers to properly dispose of used needles without using a new container each time. Now, the containers are re-used, saving the hospital about \$5,000 annually and reducing the amount of trash shipped to a landfill.

"It's easier to do than ever before," Kendle said.

Getting employees to change their habits can be difficult, but Kendle said if the new programs are explained well, people are usually happy to do their part.

"They just come out of the woodwork and say 'Thank you,'" Kendle said. "For the most part, people want to do the right thing, but they don't know what it is."

It's not just employees that are turning to Kendle. Administrators from other hospitals are asking him for advice as they implement recycling programs.

"There's a lot more people with commitment and passion," Kendle said.

Kendle's plans for the future are to continue to drop the amount of waste the hospital sends to the landfill. The goal is to be down to 50 percent in the next three years.

"I find it very rewarding that I, John Kendle, have been able to make a difference," he said.

NOTE: St. Joseph's Medical Center is a Healthy Air Living partner of the Valley Air District.

EPA revokes permit for Calpine plant

By Eric Kurhi -The Daily Review

Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, July 31, 2008

Poor public outreach regarding Calpine's proposed Russell City Energy Center in Hayward caused a procedural short circuit on Tuesday when a federal agency ruled that Calpine must revisit the planning process for the power plant to make sure all concerned parties are included.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency revoked a necessary pollution-related permit for the facility, saying the Bay Area Air Quality Management District did not go to adequate lengths to let the public in on the process.

"The (air district) fell conspicuously short of its general outreach obligations," stated the ruling. One such obligation is compiling a list of parties interested in the project and keeping them abreast of developments.

Those parties include the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and Chabot College, both of which joined Hayward resident Rob Simpson — who filed the appeal with the EPA — in stating they felt blindsided by the project's approval last September.

They asked that the case be reopened but were denied in November.

"They need to fix that part of the system," Simpson said. "The system is broken if (Calpine) can go and get licensed without going through the proper public input."

Greg Wheatland, attorney for San Jose-based Calpine, called it a "procedural defect."

"The problem was noticing public hearings," he said. "It was defects in the permitting process but not in the permit itself."

While Simpson says properly studying pollution models would take a year of monitoring, Wheatland said Calpine hopes to be back on track to begin construction in as little as five months.

"If the permit decision is favorable, which we expect it will be, we're anxious to go forward," he said.

Calpine was given a two-year construction extension by the California Energy Commission at its business meeting Wednesday morning in Sacramento. The old license was due to expire in September, but according to Wheatland, the project has been delayed by "litigation popping up unexpectedly," referring to Simpson's appeal.

Simpson said that in addition to air pollution issues, other aspects of the project were never adequately addressed, such as the effect that a proposed 600-megawatt gas turbine facility near the shoreline would have on endangered species in neighboring marshlands.

While that and other issues unrelated to air quality are not affected by the particular permit revoked by the ruling, the EPA suggested other agencies may get involved.

"In order to promote administrative efficiency and prevent unnecessary expense of legal resources, the board considers it advisable to alert potential parties of several issues raised," it stated.

Those include challenges to the plant's conformity with the Endangered Species, Clean Water, Migratory Bird Treaty and Coastal Zone Management acts.

More than a dozen people spoke at Wednesday morning's meeting, but commissioners said much of their testimony was irrelevant to the topic at hand: the two-year construction extension.

"They want to open the siting case and go back to issues that were already debated during licensing," said Energy Commissioner James Boyd. "I want to be deferential to the public and hear everyone out, but I ask for caution. The time for appealing the case has long since lapsed."

Simpson maintained that if one aspect of Russell City is invalid, the whole project is put into question.

"The process is supposed to be resting on approval of that air permit," he said. "They're not supposed to build these things without an air permit, and they no longer have one."

But Kevin Bell, counsel for the commission, said that's not accurate.

"If they don't get permitted, the license the CEC granted will expire and it won't get built," he said. "If they do get it, they should be allowed to go ahead with construction."

The proposed law would require businesses with 20 or more employees to establish a program to promote the use of transit by its workforce. Participation by employees would be voluntary.

Businesses would have to select one of three options. Two of them would place a financial burden on the employer, and one is considered cost-neutral or, in the best-case scenario, a money-saver for businesses.

The two choices that come with an added cost:

-- Offering workers free transit passes or vanpool reimbursement;

-- Providing door-to-door shuttle service on vans or buses.

A third option would allow businesses to tap into an established federal program in which employees can set up pretax commuter accounts to pay for travel on train, bus or ferries or by vanpool. The accounts could not pay for parking under the San Francisco proposal.

The benefit of the pretax program is that employees would save what amounts to 40 percent on their commute costs. A San Francisco Municipal Railway FastPass, for example, would cost a participant \$27 instead of \$45. Employers, meanwhile, would save 9 percent on the participating employees' payroll taxes.

Plan afoot to get S.F. workers out of cars

Business' obligation: Firms would have to provide transit passes or shuttle service or help employees set up pretax accounts

By Rachel Gordon, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, July 31, 2008

Businesses with more than 20 employees working in San Francisco would be required to help their workers ditch their cars and commute to work on transit or in vanpools under a proposal being considered by city officials.

The goal of the plan, which would be the first in the nation, is to cut greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality by getting more people out of polluting cars.

Vehicle emissions account for 50 percent of the air pollution in San Francisco, so "getting more people onto public transit is critical," said Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, chief sponsor of the legislation.

The plan is the latest attempt by San Francisco officials to impose a mandate on businesses. The city has required paid sick leave, health care benefits and a minimum wage that is one of the nation's highest.

In this case, city officials say encouraging commuters to use public transit would reduce health threats caused by auto emissions, such as asthma and other respiratory diseases, and reduce congestion on the city's roadways caused by solo drivers. The idea dovetails with the city's "Transit First" policy that makes it City Hall's business to discourage the use of the private automobile.

But unlike the past mandates on the private sector, this one has not run into major opposition from business leaders because of the potential economic benefit to them.

Boosters of the federal program say that even when administrative costs are factored in, employers can come out ahead financially. That's the chief reason the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and other business groups have not opposed the plan.

"We have problems with all the employer mandates imposed by City Hall, but this is something we can live with," said Jim Lazarus, the chamber's senior vice president of policy, who supports the push to get people out of their cars.

City officials said they have heard privately from some national businesses that the local mandate would be difficult to enact because their payroll systems would have to be adjusted. But no one voiced objections during a public hearing at City Hall on Wednesday in which the Board of

Supervisors' budget committee gave unanimous approval to the proposed law. Passage at the full board is expected.

City officials said they plan a major outreach program once the plan is adopted and will give businesses sufficient time to comply. Those that don't would be subject to fines of up to \$500 a year.

While an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 employees in San Francisco already take advantage of the federal pretax commuter program, tens of thousands more could tap into it, said Jared Blumenfeld, who runs the San Francisco Department of the Environment.

Mirkarimi said the hammer of a city requirement is the needed tool to compel participation.

"It's a modest action that could have a huge impact," he said.

The Department of the Environment, which helped craft the legislation, would administer the program.

Rudy Miguel, a Daly City resident who works behind the counter at a Starbucks in San Francisco, said he'd welcome the help in paying for his commute via bus or BART. He now spends about \$98 a month on transportation.

Kari Bedgood, who works for the small health club chain Club One, already participates in the federal commuter program, having about \$100 a month in pretax wages deducted from her paycheck to reduce the cost of her commute between Foster City and San Francisco.

What employers would have to do

Proposed legislation in San Francisco would require employers with 20 or more people on the payroll to participate in a program to encourage transit use. Employees who work at least 10 hours a month in San Francisco would be eligible for the benefit. Employee participation would be voluntary. Employers would get to choose from three options:

Pay for some fares

Pay for workers' transit fares on the San Francisco Municipal Railway, BART, Caltrain, Golden Gate Transit or other mass transit system. Vanpool expenses also would be eligible for reimbursement.

Pretax wages for passes

Set up a deduction program under existing federal guidelines, which would allow employees to use up to \$110 a month in pretax wages to purchase transit passes or vanpool rides. The program provides financial incentives. Employers would save 9 percent on payroll taxes. Employees would save 40 percent on their transit costs.

Company shuttle service

Offer workers a free shuttle service on company-funded buses or van between home and place of business.

"Getting more people onto public transit is critical."

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi *chief sponsor of the legislation*

"We have problems with all the employer mandates imposed by City Hall, but this is something we can live with."

Jim Lazarus *San Francisco Chamber of Commerce*

States, environmentalists take aim at EPA

By Renee Schoof - McClatchy Newspapers

Tri-Valley Herald and Modesto Bee, Thursday, July 31, 2008

WASHINGTON — California, New York City, three other states and a coalition of environmental groups plan to file notice today that they'll sue the Environmental Protection Agency to push it to regulate pollution from ocean ships and aircraft that's causing global warming.

Under the Clean Air Act, a U.S. district court can compel the EPA to take action to protect the public's welfare if the agency delays doing so for an unreasonably long time. The law requires that a notice of intent to sue be filed 180 days in advance, the step that the groups are taking now.

The timing means that any suit would be filed after President Bush leaves office. The groups concluded that they couldn't guess what the next administration would do and should be ready to sue if necessary, said Jackie Savitz of Oceana, a group that's devoted to protecting the world's oceans.

"It's basically what we have to do to maintain our progress going forward to get ships and aircraft regulated," she said.

The environmental legal-rights group Earthjustice, acting on behalf of Oceana, Friends of the Earth and the Center for Biological Diversity, planned to send the notice as a letter to the EPA. California, Connecticut, New Jersey, Oregon, New York City, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the California Air Resources Board and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection planned to file similar notices.

Aircraft and ships are a large and growing source of carbon dioxide, the main heat-trapping gas that's causing the Earth's average temperature to increase.

The environmental groups filed petitions late last year asking the EPA to determine whether greenhouse gases from aircraft and ships endanger public health and welfare, and if they do, to regulate them as federal law requires.

The EPA issued a notice this month about future rule-making calling for a comment period. Bush opposes mandatory controls on emissions.

"When we filed the petition, the EPA didn't respond. . . . (Then) they came out with a 500-page document that does everything but make a rule," Savitz said. The comment period, she said, "basically guarantees they won't have to do anything in their lifetime."

The environmental groups reported that aircraft produce 12 percent of the carbon dioxide emitted by all forms of American transportation. They also emit nitrogen oxides, which add to ozone — another greenhouse gas — and water vapor, which forms contrails — which are associated with increased cirrus cloud cover, another warming factor.

Oceana, in a new report about shipping and global warming, says the world's ocean-going vessels release nearly 3 percent of global carbon dioxide.

Oceana reported that ships could reduce those emissions by 23 percent by traveling 10 percent more slowly.

The slower speed would mean a 23 percent fuel savings as well, it said.

51% of Californians back offshore drilling

Jane Kay, environmental writer
S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, July 31, 2008

San Francisco -- A majority of Californians favor more oil drilling off the coast, according to a statewide survey released Wednesday, for the first time since oil prices spiked nearly three decades ago.

The support by 51 percent of residents polled this month by the Public Policy Institute of California represents a shift caused by renewed Republican advocacy for drilling as well as motorists' reaction to soaring pump prices, according to the pollster.

With high oil prices and calls from President Bush and Republican presidential aspirant Sen. John McCain to open coastal waters to domestic production, support for drilling has jumped, particularly among Republicans, the poll says. Support increases with age and is slightly higher among men than women.

But as the price of oil hovers around \$120 per barrel, double the cost a year ago, support for drilling has increased even among Democrats and independents, says the survey of 2,504 adult residents polled across the state July 8-22.

At the same time, more than half of the Californians surveyed believe that the effects of global warming have already begun and pose a serious threat to the state's economy and quality of life.

Those surveyed overwhelmingly support state requirements to reduce greenhouse gases by increasing the use of renewable energy from solar and wind sources and requiring carmakers, refineries and utilities to initiate tougher controls on emissions.

Californians once again pick air pollution as the most important environmental problem. And more Latinos and blacks - and residents of the Central Valley and Los Angeles - view it as a "very serious" threat.

Across the state, people strongly favor tough air pollution standards on agriculture and industry as well as for diesel engines in trucks, buses and cargo ships.

In answer to an open-ended question about the state's most important environmental problem, after air pollution, people listed gas prices, energy and oil drilling, global warming and the loss of forests and wildfires. For the first time, worry over gas prices took a jump, from 1 percent last year to 12 percent this year.

"Over the course of the last year, at a time when we've seen support rising for offshore oil drilling, we've also seen a fairly dramatic increase in the Californians who say gasoline prices have caused financial hardship," said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California.

More support among GOP

But the biggest single factor in the change in attitude to drilling, he said, is "much more political support among Republican voters for offshore oil drilling than there was a year ago. The Republicans are hearing both from the president and the presidential nominee, who are making the case that drilling is good for economic and national security."

Republicans account for the greatest jump in support of offshore oil drilling, with 77 percent in favor, compared with 60 percent in the same poll last year. Democrats increased support to 35 percent in favor from 29 percent last year. Independents shifted to 44 percent in support compared with 33 percent in favor last year.

Some suggested that respondents would have answered differently if they had more information.

"The appropriate question is if you knew you could get more energy from efficiency and clean technologies such as solar, wind and geothermal, would you rather do that or drill along our

pristine coast and risk harming a multibillion-dollar tourism, fishing and recreation economy," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. She supports a congressional moratorium on exploration off the shores of coastal states.

On Tuesday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was joined by governors of Oregon and Washington in asking for an extension of the moratorium. The governors of Maine, New Jersey and Maryland also want an extension.

But oil industry representatives say letters and calls for more domestic drilling are coming into Congress as Bush and other Republicans push for a vote on the moratorium and support legislation that would allow states to choose whether to develop oil resources.

Some oil producers say they aren't surprised at the shift in attitudes of California residents, considering national polls that show a much higher support of opening up coastal waters to new drilling. A Field Poll released July 17 found that 51 percent opposed offshore drilling, down from the 56 percent that opposed it the last time the pollsters asked the question, three years ago.

"America's current energy challenge is having a profound effect on the daily lives of families all across the country, and that is part of what is changing the public perception," said Nicole Daigle, director of public affairs for the Independent Petroleum Association of America, which represents 5,000 independent oil and gas companies that produce onshore and offshore oil.

'Worse in the future'

As for offshore development, Daigle said, "It's not going to happen over night. But if we don't get started, it'll be worse for the country in the future."

The public's appetite for offshore drilling waned after the 1969 blowout and oil spill at a Unocal platform off the coast of Santa Barbara blackened Southern California beaches and killed wildlife.

But according to a 2003 University of California Energy Institute paper comparing the cost of a gallon of gasoline against the California public's support for offshore oil and gas drilling, that mood shifted as gasoline prices fluctuated.

"If you look back at a series of polls conducted by Field and others dating back to 1977, what you see is that support rises and falls with the price of gas," said Eric Smith, a professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara and author of the paper.

Today's support for drilling hasn't been so high since the early 80s, when oil prices were high, according to past Field polls.

Energy Department information shows that it could take a decade or more to affect gas prices, yet the link between support for drilling and fuel costs remains, Smith said.

"From the survey data that I see, a lot of people are confused about how quickly the impact of offshore oil drilling would affect gas prices. Sen. McCain has been saying it's a solution to the crisis. But the crisis is today. Offshore oil drilling would have an impact in perhaps a decade. It's wishful thinking."

Poll: Majority in state favors offshore oil drilling

LA Daily News, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

A majority of Californians now favor more oil drilling off the coast - the first time in the past five years of a statewide poll that such a move has gained majority support, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

Prompting the change of heart, in part, are soaring gas prices that more than 70 percent of poll respondents said are causing financial hardships for them and their families, according to the survey released late Wednesday.

This is the first time since 2003, when the PPIC first posed the question, that more Californians - 51 percent - favor offshore drilling than oppose it.

And as the national debate intensifies over how to respond to rising energy costs in a lagging economy, Californians report that they are changing their behavior.

The survey found that the number of workers who drive to work alone has dropped 11 points in five years - from 73 percent in 2003 to 62 percent this year.

Meanwhile, nearly 70 percent in the survey said they are cutting back significantly on their driving, and nearly 75 percent are considering buying a more-fuel-efficient car.

And about 76 percent said increases in gasoline prices have caused financial hardship in their households.

Despite the pain at the pump, half of poll respondents said they are concerned that global warming is a threat to California. And 80 percent said they believe steps should be taken immediately to curb the problem.

Tough economic times have not diminished the importance of environmental issues for Californians," said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of PPIC.

"At the same time, Californians are living with the financial hardship of higher gas prices, and they're changing their behavior.

"They're driving less, which is an environmental win because [auto emissions](#) increase global warming. The issue for the state's leaders is to transform Californians' values and their day-to-day economic challenges into a policy that moves the state forward."

The survey of 2,500 Californians was conducted earlier this month and is the eighth in a series about Californians and the environment.

Costs, concerns push schools to use eco-friendly elements

By Ledyard King, Gannett News Service, USA Today
July 31, 2008

WASHINGTON — Waterless urinals. Geothermal cooling systems. Photovoltaic solar panels.

The space shuttle? Try your child's school.

Classrooms are slowly going green, prodded by rising energy bills, public health concerns and a general desire to adopt eco-friendly principles. Green schools cost a little more to build — generally 1% to 2% extra — than conventional schools but promise payback through lower utility bills and, some studies suggest, better student achievement.

"A school district that might have been thinking 'I can't afford to build a green school' is now saying 'I can't afford not to'," said Rachel Gutter, schools sector manager for the U.S. Green Building Council which certifies school construction projects based on environmental criteria.

Several states, including Hawaii, Florida and New Jersey, now require that new school buildings be more energy efficient, reduce their water usage and recycle more. In June, the U.S. House of Representatives sent a bill to the Senate requiring schools built with federal money to incorporate green elements.

Nearly 100 public and private schools nationwide have been certified by the U.S. Green Building Council since 2000 and another 800 are seeking certification.

Ohio has been a leader in the green school movement, Gutter said. Using money received through a legal settlement with tobacco companies, they are planning to build 250 green schools over the next two years. The state expects to save \$1.4 billion in energy costs over the next 40 years thanks to the program.

It goes beyond simply imbuing a sense of environmental responsibility, green advocates say. Some of the elements can help improve schooling.

Studies in 1999 and 2003 by the Heschong Mahone Group, a California consulting firm that promotes energy-efficient design, found that children generally fared better on math and reading tests in schools where natural light was more prevalent because it improved student focus and achievement. "Daylighting," as it's called, is encouraged because it cuts down on energy bills by reducing the need for artificial lighting.

"Most of the time we don't even turn on the lights in my classroom because there's so much light from the windows," said Lily Kamali, 11, a fifth-grader who attends Great Seneca Creek Elementary School in Germantown, Md. The school was the first in Maryland certified by the green council.

With large windows a prominent feature in most classrooms, daylighting is a central feature at Fossil Ridge High School, which opened four years ago in Fort Collins, Colo. That's not just because it's one of several green elements, such as low-flow faucets and wind power usage, aimed at saving money.

School officials say it also helps student performance. Fossil Ridge Principal Dierdre Cook said there is no hard data to suggest daylighting is a reason the school, which draws from upper-income neighborhoods, scores among the best in Colorado. Still, she added, the airy layout of the campus and its emphasis on clean air contributes to an academically enriching experience.

"It's just a happy building. It gives you a sense of well-being," she said. "The better you feel about where you are, the better you're going to perform."

Not everyone is enamored with the idea of going green.

Federal lawmakers who opposed a green provision in a school funding bill that passed the House in June don't like what they view as Congress meddling in a local issue.

"The problem with America's public education system isn't that it's failed to build a sufficient number of green schools," said Rep. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., the GOP's second-in-command among House members.

"The problem is it's failed to empower our communities, parents and teachers with the tools and authority they need to provide the quality educational experience our children need, expect and deserve."

Much of the focus has been on construction. But teachers, parents and children at those schools say it's easier to imbue pupils with a sense of environmental responsibility in buildings that promote those principles.

At Summerfield Elementary, a Neptune, N.J., school recognized for its green design, students go on nature walks, plant flowers and engage in recycling projects.

"I do find that whatever they learn at school comes home with them," said Loretta Eichenour, Summerfield PTO president and mother of two girls who attend the school. "They're more environmentally conscious and that makes everyone more environmentally conscious."

That's the way many students feel at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, where a renovated middle school includes photovoltaic solar panels on the roof to save energy, a wetland to enable the reuse of wastewater for the school's toilets, and plenty of recycled building materials.

"It makes you look at everything in a new way," said Chitti Raju, 14, an eighth-grader at Sidwell. "You're used to seeing all these renewable and sustainable materials (at school) and you go to your house and you don't see any of this and you're like, 'Hey Mom, we can put in different light bulbs that do this.' It really makes you think about these things."

China Announces More Pollution Controls

By Jim Yardley

N.Y. Times, Thursday, July 31, 2008

BEIJING — China's environmental regulators on Thursday unveiled stricter emergency pollution controls for the Olympic Games that would shutter more factories and expand traffic restrictions if air quality failed to meet approved standards once the competition begins on Aug. 8.

The measures, posted on the Web site of the State Environmental Protection Administration, would only be invoked during the Games in the case of "extremely unfavorable weather conditions" — for example, hot, humid air without winds to disperse pollution.

The plan would broaden existing temporary restrictions in Beijing and also include the nearby municipality of Tianjin as well as surrounding Hebei Province. In all, the new measures would encompass a region of more than 91 million people.

Pollution has been a persistent concern for the Games, even as Chinese officials have promised to deliver clean air by imposing restrictions on cars and factories. Those measures began on July 1, when more than 300,000 high-polluting vehicles were barred from the roads in Beijing.

Then on July 20, the city instituted alternate-day driving restrictions in which motorists were limited to driving on either odd or even days, depending on the last number on their license plate. (Anyone with a plate ending in an odd number can drive on an odd numbered day.)

The traffic restrictions have removed roughly 2 million vehicles from city streets. In addition, many factories in Beijing and outlying areas reduced production while most major construction sites were closed.

But the expected radiant, blue skies have yet to appear. For four consecutive days, Beijing's grey, stifling skies failed to meet China's national air quality standards, which are more lenient than those in the United States. The situation has improved in recent days as colder air and rainfall has washed out some of the pollution, even as the skies remain mostly milky or gray.

"I'm optimistic," said Zhu Tong, a Peking University professor who is an air quality advisor for the Olympics. "If it keeps raining like this, it would be great."

Mr. Zhu added: "If I were an athlete, I would not be concerned."

Earlier this week, China's state media warned that more restrictions were possible and cautioned that one proposal called for removing 90 percent of all vehicles off the roads in Beijing. The plan

unveiled Thursday is not so severe; it maintains the odd-even restrictions but adds a new prohibition that bans driving on days that match the last number on a motorist's license plate. (Anyone with a plate ending in 9 could not drive on Aug. 9 or Aug. 19, while other motorists with odd-numbered plates could still do so.) This would remove another 10 percent of all vehicles off the streets.

The plan would also suspend production at 105 more factories in Beijing and at another 56 coal-fired power plants, chemical plants and other industries in nearby Tianjin. In Tianjin, a municipality with more than 11 million people, motorists also would be subjected to the odd-even restrictions.

Meanwhile, in Hebei Province, motorists in major cities would face odd-even driving restrictions in the daytime and early evening. The province would also suspend or reduce operations at another 61 factories.

The additional factory shutdowns may be an important step. Many smaller factories that use solvents generate volatile organic compounds, commonly referred to as VOCs, which can contribute to ozone and smoggy skies.

"For Beijing city, a key variable for determining smog levels is VOCs," said Deborah Seligsohn, China climate program director for the World Resource Institute. "If you cut the car levels without cutting VOCs, you can end up with the problem they've faced in the last week. Cutting over 200 factories sounds like the right move." The leaden skies have hovered over Beijing as the initial wave of an expected 20,000 foreign journalists has begun to descend on the city. They have responded by sending out photographs or television footage of the Forbidden City or the new Olympic Village shrouded in gray. Environmental officials have argued that pollution levels have actually dropped by 20 percent in July and tried to counter the photographic images by arguing that much of the gray is not pollution but just weather.

"Pictures cannot reflect reality," contended Du Shaozhong, the deputy director of the Beijing environmental bureau, in comments in a report from the official Xinhua News Agency posted on the state environmental agency's Web site. "They are not accurate. I really urge you not to use photos to base your assessment of air quality."

[Fresno Bee commentary, Thursday, July 31, 2008:](#)

DEBBIE S. MILLER: Ten reasons high oil prices are good for you

On a hot summer day, my 22-year-old daughter paused from reading the local paper. She proclaimed that rising oil prices were good for America. How so? I asked.

1. Pointing out that obesity has become a national epidemic, she, a full-time nursing student, noted that people are driving less, and getting more exercise by walking and riding bikes.
2. High gas prices and the slump in SUV sales have prompted automakers to produce more hybrids and develop all-electric cars. That's better for consumers in the long run and it helps the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
3. Another good reason, she said, is that finally renewable energy is getting a chance. People are investing in wind and solar. Clean energy is the way to go for our future. As much as Americans grimace when they fill up their cars, we should recognize the silver lining of the pocketbook pain. My daughter and I discussed seven other benefits.
4. People are increasingly carpooling, using mass transit, and batching their drive-around errands together. This ultimately will give people more time in their lives to do other activities. Who really enjoys bumper-to-bumper freeway driving?

5. Some states are considering four-day workweeks, such as Utah recently enacted for its government employees. This would take millions of commuter cars off the road. Who dislikes three-day weekends?
6. Drivers are speeding less, no pedal to the metal through the intersections. That not only saves gas; it also saves lives. In the first five months of this year, deaths from car crashes dropped 9 percent from last year.
7. As we gradually wean ourselves from fossil fuels, this means fewer oil spills, less air pollution, and less harm to the environment.
8. By developing and distributing clean energy, such as solar, wind, geothermal, tidal, biomass and synthetic fuels, we help the environment by offering clean, non-toxic energy to consumers.
9. As petroleum becomes a fossil fuel of the past, we eliminate the prospect of war over oil, and our nation truly becomes more energy secure. Good news: Based on 2008 projections by the Energy Information Administration, the United States is on track to import 100 billion barrels less oil through 2050, due to greater efficiency, conservation, and alternative energy. This equates to 10 times as much oil than what is projected to be recovered from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
10. We don't need to drill for oil in sensitive areas, such as the extraordinary Arctic Refuge, because we have better energy choices. Should we rip open America's greatest wildlife refuge so the oil companies can make another billion in profits for a few months' supply of oil? Choices, ingenuity and change are part of any civilization. The Stone Age didn't end because we ran out of stones. The horse and buggy days didn't end because we ran out of horses. The Fossil Fuel Age will likely end because of our innovation, advancement of more efficient technology, development of clean energy sources and America's can-do spirit through leadership.

My daughter and I vote for clean energy sooner versus later because it's a win-win vision for America. With strong leaders and collective integrity, the United States can position itself as it did when President Kennedy vowed to land a man on the moon in just 10 years.

Our country can, and should, become the world leader in renewable energy.

Our country can, and should, be the first to mass-produce all-electric cars, just as we were the first to walk on the moon.

Our new president should lead us in that direction.

Debbie S. Miller is a writer for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, July 31, 2008:](#)

What about pets?

Has the air quality gone to the dogs? Recently, I decided to ride a bike to work because of gas prices and air quality. I learned it's not the large particles but small particles in the air that could kill us. I already have health issues, so I continue to drive my car.

Is the air any better for our pets? When my 12-year-old boxer started coughing, I took her to the veterinarian. X-rays and blood tests confirmed a lung infection. We started her on antibiotics and cough medication to help her sleep better at night. After the third bottle of antibiotics and no improvement, we decided at 12 years, we would just keep her comfortable until she gave signs of suffering, and it would be time to put her down.

Before leaving the vet, I was advised to keep her indoors, as the air quality in the Valley was not good for her. I grew up in the Valley and had outside animals. They lived to old age and died of old age. Has the air quality really gone to the dogs?

Dixie Iler, Clovis

[Letters to the Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, July 31, 2008:](#)

Letter: Two simple questions

Desperation and hopelessness can lead us down some strange paths, as shown in the Sun-Star's July 26 editorial endorsement of the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center.

We are all well aware of the crises facing Merced residents as we hover near the top of national foreclosure, unemployment and air pollution rankings.

We have another crisis in Merced, one we can control: A crisis in democracy.

The Stop Wal-Mart Action Team works to empower Merced residents to speak out about this massive project's impact on our lives. The health and quality of life of our children and our children's children must not be sacrificed for the promise of jobs and the guaranteed benefit to Wal-Mart's profits.

We ask two simple questions:

Will the distribution center benefit us more than it harms us?

We think not. One study, otherwise favorable to Wal-Mart, said that at best, 38 percent of employees at a Missouri Wal-Mart distribution center lived within 50 miles of the facility. Wal-Mart, whose founders are worth a combined \$70 billion, refuses to guarantee that even half of these jobs will go to Merced residents. A proactive City Council could instead lead the Valley in creating green collar jobs: Good-paying blue-collar jobs in environmentally friendly industries such as solar installation.

How much more asthma, lung damage and early death is the City Council willing to accept as collateral damage from the distribution center?

We know living and attending school within 1,500 feet of roads busy with trucks means a higher risk of asthma and permanent lung damage, especially in our children and elders. Hundreds of southeast Merced residents oppose the distribution center for this reason alone.

We deserve better.

Kyle Stockard, Merced

High-speed future

As chairman of the Merced County High-Speed Rail Committee for more than eight years, I want to clarify some comments that have appeared in the Sun-Star and other media.

While the model used by the state HSR Authority is not perfect, it has taken input from citizens throughout California. For a project of this size to be successful it must follow three goals presented by the rail authority.

First, trains need to get from point A to point B in the quickest, most efficient manner. Bypassing large areas of the Valley and building only on rural land will encourage loss of agricultural land, more automobile commuters, pollution and urban sprawl.

A careful reading of the environmental impact report shows that there will be multiple trains running simultaneously. The authority has purposed most trains will be going nonstop between the Bay Area and Southern California, but others will be used to transport people shorter distances and making more frequent stops along the route.

Second, high-speed rail service needs to have connectivity so rural areas can make a more seamless move to the higher density metropolitan areas.

Third, if we build like the French, shouldn't we theoretically only have the train stop in San Jose and Los Angeles, since this would be the fastest route thereby eliminating stops in San Francisco, Redwood City and the entire Valley.

Fortunately, the authority in its wisdom realized that this goal would not be practical, since it would only encourage even more people to commute in their automobiles even greater distances causing additional air pollution, traffic, urban sprawl and reduce the region's quality of life.

Having these routes built in the Valley's urban areas will preserve important agricultural land and save sensitive wetlands.

Incidentally, our committee and the authority realized the potential of utilizing the former Castle Air Force Base as a maintenance and construction facility. The former air base provides existing infrastructure, the third largest runway in the state, vacant B-52 airplane hangars and an existing rail spur.

This will dramatically reduce costs to the state to build and house a construction project of this scope.

Lee R. Boese, Jr., Merced