

Farming Less Pollution

Conservation Tillage Catching on in Tulare County

By Rick Elkins

Valley Voice Newspaper, Monday, August 4, 2008

A relatively new farming practice in Tulare County is cutting down on dust and diesel pollution, while at the same time shaving fuel costs for farmers.

Conservation tillage, a method of cultivating crops to reduce soil erosion, is being practiced more and more as the price of fuel goes up and dust control grows more important.

In conservation tillage, crops are grown with minimal cultivation of the soil. When the amount of tillage is reduced, the stubble or plant residues remain on top of the soil rather than being plowed or disked into the soil. The new crop is planted into the stubble or small strips of tilled soil. Weeds are controlled with cover crops or herbicides rather than by cultivation.

Sustainable Conservation, a non-profit organization working with the private sector to promote clean air and water projects, is working with UC Davis on efforts to utilize conservation tillage. The practice reduces soil loss through water erosion because more crop residue is left on the soil surface and soil drainage, organic matter and moisture content are improved. Conservation tillage also reduces air pollution (dust and diesel emissions), sequesters carbon (inhibiting global warming), improves water quality and creates wildlife habitat.

"Tulare County is one of the leading counties picking up on conservation tillage. It's got some extra boost because of the cost of diesel," said Ladi Asgill, a conservation tillage project manager with Sustainable Conservation.

Ben Curti, a Waukena-area farmer and dairyman, said it greatly reduces the number of times a tractor has to be used to plant a new crop.

"Basically, you're going over it twice instead of six or seven times," said Curti. "That's four times you don't have a tractor out there."

Tony Souza, a Tulare area dairyman, said that not disking the old field greatly reduces dust. Curti said a tractor very often may go over a field more than five times before the next crop is planted.

Souza and Curti both said that when the practice was first introduced in the area a few years ago it was not as effective as it is today. That method, call no-till, did not disk the soil at all. "It was like planting in concrete," said Souza.

Today, they use a practice call split-till that tills a strip – about six inches wide – then the seed is planted in that tilled area. "You work a strip and plant in that strip," said Souza, adding the strip-till machinery does six or seven functions at one time, including the planting. More and more, you will see fields that are not plowed with rows of corn emerging. That is a strip-till field.

Most farmers are using strip-till to plant silage after a wheat crop. The wheat crop is harvested and the stalks cut down, then the farmer irrigates, then follows that up with the split-till planting. Approved herbicides are then used to control weeds as the new crop grows.

"We use Roundup-resistant plants. It's the only way you can use no-till," said Souza.

"Conservation tillage uses half as many tractors to cultivate a field as conventional tillage, translating to lower fuel consumption and labor costs, decreased material inputs and less maintenance spending. In total, savings have been estimated between \$40 and \$75 per acre per year, a large savings compared to input cost and crop value," reports Sustainable Conservation, which is studying the practice in the Valley in conjunction with UC Davis and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Reduced tillage practices in crops such as corn, soybeans, cotton, sorghum and cereal grains were introduced over 50 years ago to conserve soil and water. While conservation tillage is

widely used throughout the Midwest, comprising more than half of the crop acreage in the U.S., less than 1% of California row crops use this method.

"I think it is catching on (in the Valley). It's really gotten a big boost with the high cost of fuel. They (farmers) realize you can maintain your yields and reduce the amount of dust. It approves the relationship with the residents," said Asgill.

He said yields are about the same and some growers are finding they have to rip (deep disk) every few years. But improvement in equipment has enabled more growers to begin the practice.

Souza said so far he has not been able to use less water. Asgill said that is still being studied, but they have found "the longer you have conservation tillage, the more organic material builds and the better it holds water. People doing it over four years start to see a difference."

Pollution Credits

Curti said farmers should get pollution credits for using the strip-till method. He said they are cutting down on PM10 in the air, as well as PM25, both big environmental issues.

"If you are doing anything like this, why shouldn't you get credit? These are things to mitigate air pollution," said Curti, adding they are penalized for practices that do cause pollution, so why not get credit for reducing pollution?

"It's one of those green practices – you're saving fuel and it's good for air quality," said Tulare County Agricultural Commissioner Gary Kunkel.

Asgill said there is both a payment available to farmers who practice conservation tillage and pollution credits available from the Air Board for the practice.

"NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) has a program that provides payments to farmers who are willing to try conservation tillage. They get paid per acre," he said. "There is a pollution credit program. It does exist, but it is not utilized too much," he added.

San Francisco considers fee for drivers entering downtown

By Denis Cuff, Contra Costa Times

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, August 4, 2008

Adolfo Cabral lived and worked much of his life in San Francisco until housing prices forced him a decade ago to move across the Bay to western Berkeley. He's not happy San Francisco is considering a plan to charge him — and thousands of other commuters — a fee to drive into the city's most congested downtown areas during rush hours.

"San Francisco's housing prices chased me out of town," said Cabral, who drives in a car pool to a job in the financial district. "Now, they want to tax me for driving back in. I don't like the idea of government sticking their hands in our pockets every time they need a solution to a problem caused by poor planning."

To fight gridlock, smog and global-warming gases, San Francisco is considering becoming the first city in the nation to impose congestion-management fees during rush hour to drive into and possibly out of the busiest downtown areas.

Fees from \$1 to \$4 are being examined in an 18-month study of congestion pricing by the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, an agency governed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The money would be invested in public transit and other congestion-reducing measures.

"We're trying to manage a scarce resource, our roads," said Tilly Chang, the transportation authority's deputy director for planning. "There are power and gas rates that also put a premium price on use during peak demand. Why not roads, too?"

Congestion fees for drivers have reduced rush-hour traffic in London; Rome; Stockholm, Sweden; and Singapore by 20 percent to 30 percent, according to an authority report.

The authority held four public meetings on the plan in the past 10 days in San Francisco, Oakland and San Rafael.

Initial recommendations are due in the fall, with a decision expected next year by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Under one option, the city would hire FasTrak to electronically collect fees in a four-square-mile area with the Financial District, Civic Center and South of Market neighborhood. Those without FasTrak would be identified by a license plate photograph and billed.

Under another option, fees would be collected from drivers entering the city during rush hour.

The fees would be in addition to bridge tolls.

Planners have yet to pin down details of the plan, including whether the fees would be collected for driving into and out of pay zones in both morning and afternoon rush hours.

Also to be determined is whether car pooling vehicles, motorcycles or low-income drivers would be exempt.

Chang said authority managers believe people living within fee zones should get some exemption, but not a free ride.

The millions of dollars in annual money from the fees could be spent to expanded public transit and possibly make it easier to walk and ride a bicycle.

The notion of paying to add parking spaces at filled BART lots at suburban stations is also "on the table for discussion," Chang said.

Skeptics of the plan question if it is fair, workable and effective.

Some question if it's right to charge fees on a public road.

"(A road) was supposedly for the benefit of all," George Coleman of Danville wrote in an e-mail.

He suggests the fee proposal amounts to selling off a public resource without a public vote.

In a workshop on the plan last week in Oakland, Ipeleng Kgositsile of Oakland said she is concerned the fee could put a burden on low-income residents.

Transit officials say they are considering a discount for low-income people, who account for about 5 percent of the trips in and out of downtown during rush hour.

Mark McComb, a Piedmont accountant who commutes by motorcycle into downtown, said it would be unfair if any congestion fees did not exempt motorcycles.

"They should be encouraging people to use motorcycles to reduce congestion and pollution," McComb said.

Transportation Authority officials said San Francisco's downtown has some of the worst traffic in the Bay Area with traffic limping along at 10 mph or less on many streets.

More than half the trips in and out of downtown are in private motor vehicles, transit planners said.

Some San Francisco business leaders worry that the congestion fees will hurt local business, discouraging people from traveling into San Francisco.

"We feel drawing an arbitrary line around part of the San Francisco to charge a fee doesn't make sense," said Jim Lazarus, a vice president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce.

If fees are to be charged, it makes more sense to charge congestion fees on major bridges rather than single out one part of one city, he said.

State Assemblyman Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord, said he's convinced that congestion pricing is eventually going to catch on in major cities.

"It's more of a question of when, not if it will happen," said DeSaulnier, chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee. "Having said that, I think it's too early to do it in San Francisco."

5 states threaten to sue EPA to get emission rules

By Samantha Young, Associated Press
USA TODAY, Monday, August 4, 2008

SACRAMENTO, California — Five states intend to sue the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency if it does not act soon to [reduce pollution](#) from ships, aircraft and off-road vehicles.

In a letter that California Attorney General Jerry Brown was to send Thursday to the EPA, the five states and New York City accuse the Bush administration of ignoring their requests to set restrictions.

"It's a necessary pressure to get the job done," Brown said Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press. "The issue of reducing our energy dependence and greenhouse gas emissions is so challenging and so important that we have to follow this judicial pathway."

The threatened lawsuit comes as California is challenging the EPA in federal court over its decision last year to prohibit the state from imposing its own emission standards on vehicles.

Brown's letter announces the group's intent to sue, a procedural step required six months before filing a lawsuit. Connecticut, New Jersey, Oregon, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and New York City will join California in the lawsuit, according to a copy of the letter obtained by the AP.

A coalition of environmental groups says it too is considering legal action against the EPA and will send a notice of that intent on Thursday.

Both letters demand the EPA respond within 180 days, although the authors acknowledge that the timeframe extends to the next administration, which might view such regulations more favorably.

"The EPA should have been regulating these emissions a long time ago, and it's just been sitting around," said Martin Wagner, an attorney at Earthjustice, a nonprofit public interest law firm.

Domestic and international flights account for 3% of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. Tractors, snowmobiles, riding lawn mowers and off-road vehicles produced about 220 million tons of carbon dioxide in 2007, roughly the same amount as 40 millions cars, according to the petitions.

DEJA VU: California will sue EPA to allow state to curb emissions

Emissions from cargo and cruise ships account for 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

"There's only five countries that release more carbon annually than the global shipping fleet," said Jacqueline Savitz, a marine scientist at Oceana, an ocean conservation group. "The idea of not regulating the shipping fleet is like not regulating Japan."

The U.S., China, Russia, India and Japan are the world's five largest producers of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

The states want the EPA to require airlines to use more fuel-efficient aircraft, use cleaner fuels or build lighter, more aerodynamic airplanes. They say marine vessels also could use cleaner-

burning fuels, travel at slower speeds and plug into land-based energy sources when docked at port.

Off-road vehicles could be required to comply with anti-idling standards, be equipped with automatic engine shut-off systems and be built with lighter materials. Older engines would be replaced and hybrid technology could be used in new models.

California and environmental groups filed petitions in October asking the EPA to determine whether greenhouse gas emissions from marine vessels endanger public health and welfare. They were joined by the other states in December seeking a similar review for domestic and foreign aircraft.

In January, they also asked the EPA to consider regulating emissions from off-road vehicles.

In each case, the petitions argued that the federal government has an obligation to regulate greenhouse gas emissions as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said the agency responded to the petitions when it released a document on July 11 asking the public to comment on whether it should regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

In that document, however, the agency said the Clean Air Act is "ill-suited" for dealing with climate change.

"We believe we've been responsive," Shradar said. "The first step in any regulation is an open comment period."

The attorneys general for the five states and the environmentalists say the EPA's actions were insufficient.

"It's pathetic and evasive," Brown said. "While it does indicate many important facts, it in no way comes to a conclusion that significant action needs to be taken now."

The U.S. Supreme Court last year ruled that the EPA has the authority to regulate carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases linked to climate change. The agency is not required to do so, however, if it can show that carbon dioxide emissions are not a danger to public health and welfare.

In December, the EPA blocked California and at least 16 other states from regulating greenhouse gas emissions from new cars and trucks. EPA administrator Stephen Johnson has said California's proposed emissions limits were not needed because Congress passed energy legislation raising fuel-economy standards that achieve similar results.

California officials say the national fuel standards are not as stringent and appealed the decision in state and federal courts.

Bracing for possibly one of the worst fire seasons

By Jason Kandel

LA Daily News, Monday, August 4, 2008

Already weary from battling wicked wildfires across Northern California this summer, firefighters now are gearing up for what could be one of the worst fire seasons in Southern California history.

They are marshaling last-minute drills, scrutinizing tactical plans, studying fire weather and clearing parched hillsides of fire-fueling brush.

Over the weekend, nearly 70 Los Angeles city firefighters also drilled at the Kittridge tanks in the West Valley area, bracing for the worst as they stock stations with extra supplies, prep helicopters and trucks and coordinate mutual aid responses.

Hands-on practice with county counterparts includes energy-sapping exercises laying and hooking up heavy hoses, walking rugged hillsides, replenishing water in helicopter tankers and deploying life-saving fire shelters.

"It's going to be a terrible year," said Los Angeles Fire Department Battalion Chief John Duca, a commander at Fire Station 84 in Woodland Hills who has jurisdiction over the West Valley area.

"The fuel moisture is very low, dry. The fuel moisture was as dry in June as it typically would be in August or September. That means we have fuel that's ready to burn.

"We're making sure that our people are ready. I think we're ready. Only time will tell."

Since June 21, more than 12,000 firefighters across California - assisted by agencies from around the world - have been battling nearly 2,100 brush fires from near the Northern California border to Santa Barbara County.

By last week, most of the fires were fully contained after charring more than 1 million acres, claiming the lives of two firefighters and destroying 179 homes, 173 outbuildings, and one commercial building, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The fires were so bad that smoke darkened skies as far away as Idaho and Montana and prompted Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency in 12 counties.

President Bush declared a state of emergency, bringing in national firefighting personnel and equipment to help battle the blazes.

Now, with nearly 30 fires still blazing statewide, firefighters from Southern California are returning home, preparing to battle any local fires as hot weather and dry conditions intensify.

Just late last month, 25 acres burned in Griffith Park, forcing thousands to evacuate the Los Angeles Zoo and threatening a California condor breeding center.

About 200 firefighters, some of whom were already at the park doing drills, quickly contained the blaze where just a year ago 1,200 acres also had burned.

Now, stations across Los Angeles are adding extra equipment - everything from brush belts and safety gear to canteens and fire shelters.

Crews are also stocking up on gallon jugs of a fire retardant known as "Barricade," adding extra hoses to trucks, and outfitting backpacks with extra nozzles and fittings.

Supervisors are reviewing a grid system of maps, landing zones for helicopters, escape routes and deployment zones.

"The command in the city is extremely well laid out," said Ron Myers, a Los Angeles Fire Department spokesman. "We can literally function with L.A. County, CalFire, virtually any agency in Southern California with a full understanding of how the incident command system works. ...

"It's a very well-choreographed blitz."

Throughout the year, crews with weed wackers, machetes and buzz saws have cut swaths of dense brush from around homes in the foothills. And teams of 12 to 15 firefighters now are on brush patrol, enforcing 200-foot buffer zones around homes surrounded by brush in areas considered at high risk for fires.

The city also contracts with 18 landscaping companies to perform clearance throughout the year.

Luis Cadiz, owner of Avalon Landscape Inc. in Sherman Oaks, had a team out last week cutting weeds and brush around eight homes in Coldwater Canyon Park in Studio City.

"Now because of the dryness and the large percentage of homes that abut these parklands and hillsides we're doing it almost year-round," Cadiz said.

"We were doing work in January and that was for the 2007-2008 program."

Burbank Fire Department Chief Tracy Pansini coordinates mutual-aid responses for Area C - encompassing 126 square miles of the Verdugo Mountains above Glendale and the Los Angeles National Forest from La Crescenta to Monrovia.

"We're always geared up," he said. "We're geared up every day. We staff for the worst-case scenario."

Inspectors check on properties, citing and reinspecting and citing again if owners are not in compliance with the law.

"Brush clearance is the most proactive thing we can do," Duca said. "Creating that 200 feet of clearance around a structure is what we have proven helps save a structure in a brush fire."

Firefighters are also reviewing wind patterns, terrain and how fire behaves in valleys and ridges - particularly since the area saw very little moisture in June that would have replenished dried-out vegetation.

But the work comes even as hundreds of Los Angeles city and county firefighters are trying to recuperate from coping with the fires up north that have blazed since June.

"You get exhausted," Duca said. "We're forcing our people to work. We don't have extra bodies to work overtime. We've been very fortunate in the past few years we haven't had any significant fires in the city."

"But we're going to have a whole bunch of tired firefighters who may not be able to perform at 100 percent."

The Los Angeles County Fire Department - which has jurisdiction over Malibu, Santa Clarita, Lancaster, Palmdale and elsewhere around the county - has recently compiled a list of facilities where command posts and camps could be staged during a big fire.

They updated a list that includes capacities of schools and the Pomona Fairgrounds, and targets large parks like the Sierra Pelona Park in Palmdale, where last year the agency set up camp to fight fire.

"You don't want to be, on the day of the incident, trying to figure out where to report to," said John Todd, chief of the Los Angeles County Forestry Division, which coordinates brush clearance, vegetation management programs and studies fire behavior.

Todd said vegetation moisture levels are getting low this year, and even though the L.A. area saw average rainfall last year of about 14 inches, it was spread out over several months that spurred growth of grasses - a fuel that ignites quickly.

"The fine fuels serve as a kind of wick to light the heavier, denser chaparral," Todd said. "A good rain year can also make us vulnerable because then all that grass that grew is now bone-dry and is ready for that car to go by and backfire and spit an ember out on it."

"One ember on the grass and now the fire is off and running with an afternoon breeze on it."

That combined with the traditional onset of the fall Santa Ana winds - and a drop in humidity - and you have a recipe for a big fire, Todd said.

"We're preparing for the worst," Todd said. "We're looking at a challenging fire season. Our resources are already stretched thin. We're looking at a dangerous season."

China will start to monitor new pollutants

Associated Press

Washington Post and Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, August 4, 2008

BEIJING -- China will begin monitoring additional air pollutants after the Olympic Games, a state news agency reported.

The two pollutants, ozone and small particulate matter known as PM2.5, are not included in current air quality reports. The Ministry of Environmental Protection was making technical preparations to monitor the two pollutants, Xinhua News Agency said late Sunday.

"We should be able to start regular monitoring of ozone and PM2.5 next year, which would lead to measures to deal with them," Fan Yuansheng, director general of the department of pollution control at the Ministry of Environmental Protection, was quoted as saying.

The Environment Ministry releases an air pollution rating each day for Beijing, called an Air Pollution Index, but this does not include ozone and tiny particulate matter.

The ultra-fine dust particles, at 2.5 micrometers, are considered especially harmful to health because they are small enough to penetrate the lungs and create respiratory problems. Ozone, a colorless gas, can also cause respiratory problems.

The host city's polluted air has been one of the biggest worries for Olympic organizers and prompted drastic measures earlier this month that included pulling half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads, halting most construction and closing some factories in the capital and surrounding provinces.

"These measures have been effective so far," Fan said.

Fan said measures to reduce pollution in Beijing for the games would stay in force afterward. For example, government cars will be kept off the road for one day each week, according to their license plate numbers, he said.

Whether Beijing's efforts actually result in clear skies for the games remains to be seen. Since the factory closures and traffic restrictions kicked in on July 20, Beijing's air pollution levels have gone up and down, though the general trend is decreasing.

Last Friday marked the clearest change visually, with the persistent haze giving way to clear skies and the lowest recorded air pollution levels.

Weather officials said Sunday the forecast for this Friday's Olympic opening ceremony may include overcast skies or rain. The heavy haze that had cleared up over the weekend returned on Monday, blanketing the city in thick white layers.

2008 Summer Olympics: Beijing air quality dips as gov't takes steps to cut pollutants

USA TODAY, Monday, August 04, 2008

Mother Nature isn't cooperating with China's efforts to clean up the air in Beijing before the Summer Olympics.

The [air pollution index](#) hit 69 today, up from 44 yesterday. On the bright side, it's still below 100. That's the bright line that officials want to avoid in the coming weeks. (We should note that the Associated Press says WHO's air-quality guidelines are much stricter than those of the Chinese government.)

"If there are unfavorable weather conditions, and the air quality is forecast to not meet the standards in the following 48 hours, the command center would suggest the contingency plans be initiated," officials say in a statement quoted by AP.

These contingency plans suggest the Ministry of Environmental Protection is planning for the worst: Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei Province will expand their current curbs on cars and factories, should meteorological departments foresee an unfavorable air quality induced by "extreme unfavorable weather conditions" in the coming two days, a report on the website of China's Ministry of Environmental Protection said.

Under such circumstances, Beijing would shut down 105 more electric, furniture, building material and chemical plants, halt all construction work, and pull more vehicles off the road.

Chosen route jeopardizes high-speed rail support

Environmentalists favored Altamont over Pacheco

By E.J. Schultz, Bee Capitol bureau

In the Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Sunday, August 3, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- California bullet train enthusiasts risk losing support from key environmental groups because of a dispute over the train's route. Unless resolved soon, the conflict could pose problems for a high-speed rail bond measure on the November ballot.

The Sierra Club and Planning and Conservation League have not yet taken a position on Proposition 1, which would authorize \$9.9 billion in state borrowing to jump-start the 800-mile rail.

But the environmentalists still are seething over the selection of relatively undeveloped Pacheco Pass as the route to connect the Central Valley to the Bay Area. They favor the more urban Altamont Pass to the north because they say it would induce less sprawl.

The Planning and Conservation League likes the rail concept but "has continued to be quite concerned about the whole planning effort," said Gary Patton, the league's lead lawyer.

The initiative aims to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion by connecting San Francisco to Los Angeles with low-emission trains that would zoom through the valley at speeds of more than 200 mph.

With high gas prices, the timing is right to bring the question before voters, said Mark DiCamillo, director of the Field Poll. But if environmentalists actively oppose Proposition 1, some voters might be turned off.

"They speak to a certain constituency who might otherwise support the initiative," DiCamillo said.

A recent Field Poll showed Proposition 1 leading 56 percent to 30 percent, with 14 percent undecided. The initiative requires a simple majority to pass.

Merced would be valley's last stop

The High Speed Rail Authority board chose the Pacheco route last month, culminating years of spirited debate. This means that, at least in the first phase of construction, the last stop in the San Joaquin Valley would be in Merced.

Environmentalists would rather see trains run farther north in the valley before heading west so that more populated cities are served.

They like the Altamont route because it would bring trains closer to Modesto, Dublin, Pleasanton and Livermore in the first phase.

By contrast, the Pacheco route, roughly following Highway 152, is in a less populated area. Environmentalists worry that a planned station in Gilroy would induce sprawl in surrounding rural areas.

Sacramento is not scheduled for a stop until later phases. But once built, the trip from Sacramento to San Francisco would take longer using the Pacheco route, one hour and 47 minutes, instead of Altamont, which would take a little over one hour, environmentalists said in a letter to the authority.

The Altamont route would "make the high-speed rail system much more effective in carrying more people and relieving congestion," said Bill Magavern, a lobbyist with the Sierra Club.

On the other hand, crossing over in Altamont makes for longer trips from Southern California to San Jose.

Altamont has other problems, said Mehdi Morshed, the rail authority's executive director.

A bridge would have to be built across the San Francisco Bay, he said. Also, communities along the Altamont corridor, such as Livermore and Pleasanton, have concerns about high-speed trains passing through town, he said.

"How are we going to build the trains through the cities when the cities say 'we don't want you?' " Morshed said.

A potential compromise would use some of the \$9.9 billion bond to enhance regional rail service in the Altamont corridor that could also accommodate high-speed trains running at slower speeds. But legislation to make the ballot measure more flexible is stalled in the state Senate because of a partisan fight over how to beef up project oversight.

An Assembly committee is scheduled Monday to take up a bill by state Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, to delay the bond measure until 2010; lawmakers already have pushed off the bond measure twice, in 2004 and 2006.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are considering filing a lawsuit to demand that the rail authority re-examine the environmental consequences of each route. "They've really not treated our concerns in the way we think legally they are required to," Patton said.

Bond set to raise a third of the cost

With environmentalists still undecided, the Proposition 1 campaign is shaping up to be a duel between a coalition of engineering companies, which supports the measure, and the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, which blasts the project as a "political boondoggle" that might never get built.

The bond would raise about a third of the project's cost.

Supporters are counting on government and private companies to pay for the rest, but have not gotten firm commitments.

Rail supporters say corporations won't step up until the state commits.

"It's very difficult for them to work with their business models and not know at the end of the day if they're going to get to build it," said Jo Linda Thompson, a lobbyist for the Association for California High Speed Trains.

Association members include companies that engineer big transportation projects, such as LTK Engineering Services and Parsons Brinckerhoff. The group has donated \$24,000 to the "yes" campaign, which has nearly \$80,000 on hand.

Opponents have yet to raise money, said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis association. That could change if airlines weigh in.

Southwest Airlines, which serves some of the markets targeted for bullet train service, "could never support the use of public money to subsidize" high-speed rail, said company spokeswoman Marilee McInnis.

But "we don't have any current plans to engage in lobbying efforts on this issue."

Union Pacific Railroad, which is in a dispute with the rail authority over land, also plans to stay out of the Proposition 1 campaign, said company spokeswoman Zoe Richmond.

The railroad has refused to share its right-of-way on portions of the route because it wants to preserve the option to build its own tracks on the land.

"We don't have anything against the high-speed rail project," Richmond said. "Our concern is putting it on our right-of-way."

Sorghum taking root as a source for ethanol

By Rick Neale

USA TODAY, Monday, August 4, 2008

FELLSMERE, Fla. — The race is on to build Florida's first sweet sorghum ethanol plant.

And Ray Coniglio hopes a 10-acre test patch of waving plants here will cultivate construction of such a facility in central Florida's Brevard County.

"You can see how they're growing. They're shooting right up," says Coniglio, president of Global Renewable Energy's ethanol division, walking with hands outstretched between rows of waving sweet sorghum. "You come out here every three days, and you can see the difference."

GRE planted this test crop April 5, and scientific testing is underway. If sugar content and tonnage per acre prove sufficient, the company hopes to grow 10,000 acres of sweet sorghum and build an ethanol distillery.

"Is it economical? That's a key question, and we're trying to prove that," says Ben Scheffres, GRE's chief chemical engineer. "There's a lot of university data. But we'd like to get practical data with a commercial planter and commercial fertilization, like we'd see in the real world."

GRE will continue crop testing through the end of the year, Coniglio says, then possibly design the ethanol plant next year.

Ethanol demand

There are no sweet sorghum ethanol plants in the U.S., though there are 10 grain sorghum ethanol plants, according to the National Sweet Sorghum Producers and Processors Association. Sweet sorghum has more sugar, and so higher energy content.

It is primarily grown in the Southeast as livestock feed. To convert sweet sorghum into biofuel, stalks are harvested and crushed, extracting juice. This liquid is distilled into ethanol.

GRE's project is one of several aimed at developing sorghum ethanol plants in Florida and Louisiana.

In Florida, ethanol demand is on the rise. On June 25, Gov. Charlie Crist signed an energy bill that requires all gasoline sold in Florida to contain 10% ethanol by the end of 2010.

U.S. EnviroFuels received a \$7 million grant in January from the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to develop a \$47 million sweet sorghum ethanol plant in Venus, Fla. That facility may produce 20 million gallons of biofuel per year.

In north Florida, Renergie received a \$1.5 million grant in February from the Department of Environmental Protection to develop 10 plants.

Each plant would produce 5 million gallons of ethanol per year. The Gainesville company also wants to build sweet sorghum ethanol plants in Louisiana.

Environmental fears

Not everyone is convinced, however. Joy Towles Ezell, chairman of the Environmental Alliance of North Florida, says ethanol made with feedstock is a boondoggle that could waste water and increase fertilizer pollution.

"The reason that it's so popular right now is because of these huge government subsidies that they're offering. That's why everybody's jumping on the bandwagon," Ezell says. "And I think it'll take about five years — and a lot of tax dollars — before people realize that it wasn't such a great idea."

Roughly 130 miles north of the GRE test crop, DeGrande BioFuels proposed to build a sweet sorghum ethanol plant and grow up to 13,000 acres of sweet sorghum to supply it.

Bill Nason, DeGrande BioFuels' chief technology officer, says sweet sorghum is better-suited for Florida's climate than corn.

"It requires approximately one-third of the water for irrigation and requires about one-third of the fertilizer. It survives very well in very hot, tropical, subtropical conditions," Nason told the Palm Coast City Council in May.

It recovers well from droughts when they end, he said. "It's one of the very hardy crops."

But city officials greeted the overture lukewarmly, asking about odors, safety and water usage. In an interview last week, Nason said the proposed plant location no longer is viable.

Why? After harvest, sweet sorghum sugars start breaking down within about 24 hours, he said — forcing a swift processing timeframe.

"You need your (production) plant as close to the fields as possible," Nason says. "It doesn't make a lot of sense to burn a lot of fuel to make fuel."

Palm Coast Mayor Jon Netts said he balked at conceptual plant drawings that depicted a 70-foot smokestack. DeGrande BioFuels proposed to burn its leftover biomass at an on-site electrical plant to generate power.

"Personally, I am skeptical about ethanol as a long-term solution," Netts says. "Once you build an ethanol fermentation plant here, if ethanol proves not to be the panacea we're looking for, what do you do with this plant?"

"You can't really convert it into a library," he says.

Slowpoke, no-gas electric car - check it out

By Michael Taylor, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Monday, August 4, 2008

Hybrids are all the rage these days and for good reason, given that their drivers can eke out maybe 50 miles per gallon. Plug-in hybrids, when they come on line in a couple of years, will be able to go about 100 miles on a gallon of gas.

So how about a car that uses no gas and is cheaper than a Toyota Prius?

It does exist, but the catch is that it's all-electric - so it pokes along at a leisurely 25 mph, tops.

Historically, electric cars have been odd-looking things that scooted around for a while and then died away. Their latest incarnation came in 1990, when the California Air Resources Board told the automakers that by 2003, 10 percent of their new cars sold in the state had to be emissions-free.

General Motors, Ford, Honda, Toyota, Chrysler and Nissan all cobbled up electric cars and leased them to the public to comply with the regulations, then sued the state. The Air Resources Board eventually backed down, and the carmakers recalled most of the vehicles and destroyed some of them, leading to public outcries and a popular documentary called "Who Killed the Electric Car?"

Now, there's a new foray into the electric-car field - "neighborhood electric vehicle," or as it's sometimes more accurately called, the "low-speed vehicle." More of these cars are showing up in the Bay Area, particularly in such green-car-friendly climes as Berkeley.

There, in a supreme case of automotive irony, a year-old outfit called Green Motors is selling all-electric Zenn cars out of a showroom on San Pablo Avenue that once housed a Cadillac dealership.

Zenn (it stands for Zero Emission, No Noise) is a Canadian product that looks like a cartoonist's vision of a downsized automobile. It costs about \$16,000 and comes only in silver, blue or, natch, green.

Green Motors has sold 36 cars since December. Nationwide, Zenn sold 250 cars in 2007 and nearly equaled that total in just the first quarter of this year, said company spokesman Isaac Cronin.

The Zenn car is a two-seat hatchback that is roughly the same height and width as a Mini-Cooper, but is 20 inches shorter. Its real beauty, in this age of soaring gas prices, is that it is cheap to run. It costs about 3 cents a mile to operate a Zenn car, whereas gasoline costs alone, according to AAA, are close to 10 cents a mile for an average car.

An electric car operates very simply: An electric motor drives the wheels. There is no transmission and no need for gasoline or oil.

The Zenn car has a range of 30 to 50 miles, the company says. A full charge takes about eight hours.

Green Motors got its start in the spring of 2007, when Marc Korchin, who had been an executive with small companies, had an epiphany.

He had just bought an electric car, and everywhere he and his fiancée went, "people wanted to know about it," Korchin said. The attention got so frenzied that they eventually stuck informational flyers on the side of the car when they parked it and let people take one, kind of an Electric Car FAQ on paper.

Korchin "began to see a business opportunity," he said recently in his Zenn showroom, as he watched potential customers scrutinize a bright blue Zenn coupe, with a yellow extension cord sticking out of its flank. Korchin also banished his gas-eating car to occasional freeway duty and started driving his electric for most of his needs.

Some of his customers have done likewise. Eric Foss, 36, who lives in Alameda, bought a Zenn after he saw one on the street - "a car pulled up, this adorable little car that said 'electric' on the doors, and I pretty much fell in love with it that instant," he said.

Foss says his daily round-trip commute to his job as office manager for the nonprofit Action Alliance for Children in Oakland is about 10 miles. He says his monthly electric bill has gone up "about \$10" since he started plugging in his Zenn for its nightly recharge.

A visit to Green Motors' showroom starkly illustrates the evolution that Americans are going through in the world of driving cars - a shift from decades of gas-guzzlers to the new world order of alternate automotive energy.

Korchin leases a small portion of the old Caddy dealership's service area, largely to give working room to fellow electric-car professional Daniel Sherwood, who does a land-office business converting Toyota Priuses to plug-in hybrids with the installation of an extra battery pack.

The unused portion of the service area - a long dark section of the huge service bay - is closed off. The concrete floor that used to hold rows of hydraulic lifts is now a field of rubble, and the lifts are long gone. Just like the cars that used to be on them.

On the other hand, those big, heavy old Cadillacs were substantial enough to weather collisions that might well have totaled smaller cars.

With the neighborhood electrics, it's a different story. While nearly every vehicle sold in the United States must adhere to myriad safety and emissions standards, the neighborhood electrics, because they are restricted by law to roads where the limit is 35 mph or less, don't have to have such safety aids as air bags and electronic stability control.

All a neighborhood electric car needs, basically, are headlights, brake lights, rearview mirrors, reflectors, seat belts and windshields. It doesn't even need doors, although the Zenn does have those.

"Our concern is that (these cars) don't have to meet the safety standards that regular vehicles do," said Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, which regularly crashes new cars to see how their occupants would fare in the real world. "These vehicles wouldn't even be a match for a small car like a Honda Civic, let alone the pickups and SUVs that are out there."

Rader said that "if these vehicles caught on in any numbers, we'd have to do some crash tests. They never really did catch on, but now, with gas prices the way they are, they've bubbled up to the surface."

Foss, however, says he doesn't feel particularly threatened while driving his Zenn around the East Bay.

"I'm going 25 mph," he said. "If I'm in an accident, unless it's somebody purposely plowing through me, I don't feel there's a danger. An accident is more severe at higher speeds."

In US, gas prices mean more riders, fewer buses

By Ivan Moreno

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, August 4

DENVER - High gas prices almost killed the lifeline to the city for a group of mountain commuters.

Park County bus riders recently had to plead with city officials to keep their route running, arguing that a daily 80-mile car trip would hurt riders financially.

"For many of our mountain commuters, it is the only form of transportation that these people have," said Pam Beckhorn, who leads a group dedicated to preserving the route along Highway 285.

Like their counterparts across the country, cash-strapped Colorado officials face a paradox: People are using public transportation more than ever, but higher fuel costs _ and lower sales tax revenues _ are forcing municipalities to trim routes.

According to a May survey by the American Public Transportation Association, about one in five of the nation's transit agencies have cut service over the past year. They include Cleveland; Corpus Christi, Texas; and San Diego, which has seen one of the largest increases in bus ridership in the country.

The cutbacks come at a time of increasing interest in public buses and trains: The transportation association says people took 2.6 billion trips on public transportation nationwide in the first three months of 2008 _ almost 88 million more than last year.

The highest ridership increases came in light rail and commuter rail. In light rail, Baltimore, Minneapolis, St. Louis and San Francisco all saw double-digit percentage increases over the first quarter of 2007.

Double-digit percentage increases for commuter rail were posted in Oakland, Calif.; Harrisburg, Pa.; and Philadelphia, among others. Seattle's increase was almost 28 percent, APTA said.

Bonnie Arnold, with the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, said the commuter rail system there saw a 46.7 percent more passengers in June than in June 2007.

"It's just been mind-boggling," she said.

Transit authorities are feeling the pinch of higher gas prices on both the expenditure and revenue sides of their budgets. They're paying more to fuel their buses and trains. At the same time, they're taking in fewer sales tax dollars _ an income source for many transit agencies _ because people are spending more at the pump and less on other items.

The Denver-area's transit system, which serves eight counties with a population of about 2.6 million, is on pace to carry 100 million passengers this year, a record in its 35-year history, said spokesman Scott Reed.

But the system will be about \$6 million over budget this year on fuel. It budgeted for \$2.62 per gallon but is paying \$3.20, Reed said.

Fuel costs also make building materials needed to expand infrastructure more expensive, said Clarence W. Marsella, general manager and CEO of the Regional Transportation District.

"Everything that we do is being undermined by the fuel crisis," Marsella said. "It's really diabolical. The tentacles are everywhere."

Anticipating rising fuel costs, the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority cut 5 percent of its bus lines in December. The district's fuel spending will surpass \$20 million this year, compared to \$12 million in 2007, said a spokesman.

One option being considered is adding a fuel surcharge to fares. If approved, any changes would be implemented in early October, the spokesman said.

In Corpus Christi, the Regional Transportation Authority is running fewer buses, said spokeswoman Kristi Pena. In New York City, there is talk of subway and bus fare hikes.

The San Diego Metropolitan Transit System has reduced service, raised fares and laid off workers, said spokesman Rob Schupp. High fuel costs account for about \$2 million of its \$6.5 million deficit.

Denver's system is bracing for \$5-a-gallon diesel prices in 2009. So the district has to cut or reduce service on its underperforming routes. That led to lobbying for the endangered route along Highway 285 during a recent meeting of the Regional Transportation District.

"You would put a lot of people out of work if you took their bus away from them," said engineer Martin Wirth, one of about 40 people at the meeting fighting to save the route.

Group members wore and gave board members T-shirts that read, "Go Green. Ride The Drive." They pleaded with the board to give them a chance to increase ridership.

In the end, the board voted to keep Route U, despite its \$375,000 yearly cost. Supporters posed on a stairway for a celebratory picture.

"We are the little mouse that roared," Beckhorn said.

Is it a paradigm shift?

Daily News, Friday, August 3, 2008

Is the Los Angeles area - and the rest of California - experiencing a major realignment of thinking on the issues of energy and the environment? That may be the case if trends tracked by a new statewide survey continue.

The headlines that followed the release of last week's survey by the Public Policy Institute of California focused on how a slim majority of Californians now favor offshore oil drilling. This is the first time that has happened since the institute began asking the question. Now 51 percent favor offshore oil drilling, compared to 45 percent opposed.

The change of heart comes as gasoline prices have shot up in recent months.

But a closer look at the survey results indicates that the Los Angeles area's elected leaders probably won't change course and begin pushing for drilling right away. In the L.A. area, survey respondents split almost dead even on offshore drilling, with 48 percent favoring and 47 percent opposed to coastal drilling.

What's more, local opposition to even small onshore drilling projects can be fierce, as occurred in Hermosa Beach in the Macpherson Oil case, which is now in the court system.

Of course, the survey demonstrates that rapidly rising gas prices do have the ability to force us to rethink our views on a number of subjects. Neither gas prices nor oil drilling even registered on a year 2000 poll of Californians about environmental issues. Today they are among the top three concerns, behind air pollution.

Despite the financial squeeze high gas prices are causing in the L.A. area, this part of California remains the most concerned about global warming. Among the PPIC poll respondents in the L.A. area, 58 percent said global warming posed a serious threat to the state's future. Moreover, L.A. area residents are more likely than those in other areas to say state and local governments are not doing enough to solve the problem.

The survey also offers some encouraging news that people are making efforts to change their commuting habits to better match their views about energy and environmental issues. In the L.A. area, 58 percent of residents report that they drive alone to work, compared to 62 percent statewide. Since 2003, when 73 percent of those surveyed said they drove alone to work, the trend has been toward more carpooling and public transit. The L.A. area now has the highest rate of public transit use in California, at 11 percent, and younger workers seem more inclined to seek alternatives to the automobile.

These shifts in attitudes are all healthy. They show a certain resolve to address current concerns about energy and global warming. And we agree with Dan Walters' point in today's Comment page column that it's hypocritical for Californians to expect other parts of the world and the nation to take on the environmental risks of oil production while California keeps much of its offshore oil deposits off limits to drilling.

The state needs to work harder on charting a path toward more energy security and independence.

Antiquated refineries fail to produce in Mexico

By Kevin G. Hall

Modesto Bee, Sunday, August 3, 2008

MINATITLÁN, Mexico – Pungent smoke billows from aging petrochemical plants here. Foul-smelling bluish water gathers in pools outside the walls. Fading paint announces the creaky Lázaro Cárdenas refinery, a perfect metaphor for one of the world's biggest and most antiquated state oil companies.

Petroleos Mexicanos employs more than 147,000 people and has long operated as a state within a state, with its own hospitals, pensions and integrated business operations.

But Pemex has historically overinvested in a bloated work force and underinvested in new or expanded refineries and sophisticated oil exploration and production. That's evident in the rust, smog and environmental contamination here in the state of Veracruz and farther east in the state of Tabasco.

A big reason for the decrepit state of affairs is that much of the national oil company's earnings go directly to the Mexican treasury.

Given the sorry shape of Pemex, President Felipe Calderón in April proposed a controversial energy overhaul that would give it more control over its budget and allow private foreign firms to search for deep-water oil and to build and run refineries.

Now the nation is in knots over whether and how to modernize the 70-year-old company and find new sources of oil before Mexico's easy-to-extract oil goes dry.

Mexico is already a net importer of gasoline – most coming from the United States – as it's unable to refine enough oil to meet its demands. Within a decade, Mexico could compete with the United States for ever-scarcer barrels of imported oil.

Oil production in Mexico – until recently the second-largest oil exporter to the United States, after Canada – is falling precipitously because output at the Cantarell offshore oil field is declining faster than expected.

In fact, Pemex officials last week reeled back their output projections for the second time this year; they now say that Mexico will produce 2.8 million barrels per day this year, not the 3.1 million first forecast.

It falls to Carlos Morales Gil, director of exploration and production, to turn things around. But in an interview on the 41st floor of Pemex's towering Mexico City headquarters, he warned, half jokingly, that it could take a century to tap Mexico's vast but unproven oil reserves.

Morales doesn't have that much time, nor much room to maneuver.

Restrictive rules govern contracting, and little of what Pemex earns can be reinvested. About 40 percent of federal spending in Mexico comes from oil earnings.

In Morales' best guess, there are 30 billion barrels of yet-unfound oil under the deep waters in Mexico's portion of the Gulf of Mexico. U.S. companies have drilled hundreds of test wells in the U.S. deep waters, but Pemex has drilled just four to date in Mexico's deep gulf waters.

That's where Mexico's wrenching national debate over Pemex begins.

Ever since President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the oil industry in 1938 and kicked out Standard Oil, which much later became Exxon Mobil, Mexicans have equated Pemex with national sovereignty. Allowing foreigners to extract oil in Mexico, even if on behalf of Pemex, is simply anathema.

Two deep-water teams operate for Pemex now, and three more will arrive in 2010. With five operators, Mexico's annual deep-water drill rate will grow to about 12 or 13 wells, still woefully insufficient.

"I need to drill in deep waters about 1,500 wells in order to find these 30 billion barrels I mentioned, because not all will become producers," Morales said.

If the overhaul doesn't progress and he must drill at current rates, "it implies it will take me 100 years to discover all the hydrocarbons that are there. Meanwhile, nobody benefits from them."

It's not just oil that troubles Mexico. Pemex hasn't built a new refinery since 1979. As the country's economy and middle class grew, the six surviving Pemex refineries couldn't keep up with the demand for gasoline.

Mexico imported 360,700 barrels per day of gasoline in March. The energy ministry projects imports of nearly 500,000 barrels per day within seven years.

Calderón's proposal would allow Pemex to contract with private companies to build and operate refineries. The left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution strongly opposes this idea, warning that big U.S. multinationals such as Halliburton soon would establish influence over Pemex.

Mexicans still celebrate the date of the expropriation decree on March 18; it's feted in song, and even the professional baseball park in Minatitlán is called the 18th of March Stadium.

"Petroleum allowed during many years, during 40 or 50 years, for Mexico to grow economically, to industrialize. It impacted both employment and regional development," said Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, 74, son of the legendary president and a national center-left leader in his own right.

Cárdenas supports giving Pemex greater control over its budget but doesn't want to see his father's act undone by allowing Pemex to contract with foreign companies. Such contracts now are largely limited to technical advice.

"I think nationalization is a fact that happened 70 years ago, and was a positive. It benefited the country, and I think there isn't a single reason that carries weight to break these productive chains of Pemex," he said.

Pemex leaders think otherwise.

Today oil fetches record high prices, yet Pemex's output falls because production at Cantarell – a complex of four big oil deposits along Campeche Sound – has dropped from about 2 million barrels per day in 2005 to 1.5 million last year. Exports to the United States have fallen from 1.81 million barrels per day to 1.68 million over the same period.

Pemex enjoys one advantage over most competitors: low operating costs. Its current lift cost – the per-barrel cost of extraction – is about \$4.20, among the lowest in the world. Morales estimated his deep-water extraction cost at around \$17 per barrel and \$10 a barrel for complicated onshore oil fields such as Chincotepec.

Both compare favorably to the \$75 cost for an average new marginal barrel of oil elsewhere in the world.

A giant question mark in the proposed foreign-contracting plan is what it holds for labor, which isn't addressed directly. If Pemex were given greater autonomy, could it reduce its bloated work force?

"These legal initiatives have nothing to do with unions," Cárdenas said, making it clear that he considers the issue off-limits.

Workers warn that they'll fight downsizing.

"The energy reform should not harm the (labor) agreements. If it does, it won't fly," warned José Manuel Sánchez Urrita, a 24-year veteran of the Lázaro Cárdenas refinery in Minatitlán and a member of the powerful oil workers union.

Pollution curbs turn Beijing into urban laboratory

By Tini Tran

Washington Post and Modesto Bee, Sunday, August 3, 2008

BEIJING -- Like everything else done for the Olympics, China's quest to clear up notoriously polluted skies in time for opening ceremonies this week has been marked by gargantuan effort.

In what scientists are calling the single largest attempt ever made to improve air quality, scores of heavily polluting factories were shut down and some 2 million vehicles were pulled off roads across Beijing and a huge swath of northern China — an area roughly the size of Alaska. During the weekend, the hazy skies finally gave way to swirling blue.

Beijing's massive experiment with controlling pollution is offering international researchers a one-of-a-kind chance to study the large-scale effort in a uniquely urban laboratory.

"It has never been done before. I doubt it will be repeated. This is it. We've got a golden opportunity to fast-forward our research," said Veerabhadran Ramanathan, an atmospheric scientist from the University of California, San Diego, who is part of a multinational research project to track Beijing's pollution during and after the Olympics using unmanned drones, satellite data and ground-level readings.

He is one of dozens of scientists from around the world who are gathering in and around China to conduct experiments ranging from monitoring how pollution travels across continents to sampling particulate pollution over time to testing the impact of dirty air on cardiovascular functions.

Ramanathan said he first learned about China's plans to restrict cars and shut down factories last year from reading a newspaper article. As a scientist who studies pollution clouds over Asia, known as atmospheric brown clouds, he was thrilled to hear that China planned to cut back on pollution in a major way; in essence, conducting large-scale experiments he could observe.

"I immediately jumped off my seat. I thought, this is what I've been waiting for. I said, 'Thank God for the Olympics.' For me, this is 10 times better than winning the lottery," he said.

The Associated Press has been compiling its own pollution data since mid-July, recording snapshot readings of Beijing's worst pollutant — tiny dust particles known as particulate matter 10 using a commercially available handheld monitoring device.

With China's polluted air ending up over Korea or landing in California, the data being collected now may have larger ramifications beyond these games. If China's efforts can be shown to have had a major impact, then other countries could consider taking similar actions.

Whether its current efforts actually result in clear skies for the Summer Games remains to be seen. Since the factory closures and traffic restrictions kicked in on July 20, Beijing's air pollution levels have gone up and down, though the general trend is decreasing.

What is increasingly clear is how much of a role meteorological conditions play in cutting down pollution.

"If Mother Nature cooperates, I expect there would be an impact. But it all depends on the wind directions," Veerabhadran said.

In the past two weeks, four days failed to meet the national air quality standard, with pollution levels classified as unhealthy for sensitive groups. On those days, the capital was cloaked in sweltering temperatures and a thick, grayish haze that reduced skyscrapers to ghostly outlines.

But strong winds and rainfall in the last week helped scatter much of the smog, giving Beijing residents a rare spate of sunshine and blue sky over the weekend. The air pollution index showed a decrease in pollutants, dropping to a level considered healthy by the World Health Organization.

The pollution levels are similar to findings that the Associated Press collected. Last Friday marked the clearest change visually, with the persistent haze giving way to clear skies and the lowest recorded air pollution levels. The AP's data showed that Beijing had lower levels of particulate matter than New York City on that day.

From a researcher's point of view, China's attempts to ensure blue skies for the Olympics are of huge scientific interest, said Staci Simonich, an associate professor of chemistry and toxicology at Oregon State University.

"It's a giant science experiment on air pollution. As far as I know, it's the biggest case where a city that had air quality problems took strong measures to improve air quality. They've taken it very seriously. It's exciting from a science standpoint," said Simonich, who is collaborating with Peking University professors to take samples of particulate matter.

Though Los Angeles and Atlanta both took measures to improve their air quality when they hosted the Olympics, neither city has had the same obstacles as the Chinese capital. "They didn't have to go to quite the extremes that Beijing has. Beijing has had to come a long way further than L.A. or Atlanta," she said.

If it can be proven that China's efforts made a major impact, then other countries may consider taking similar environmental actions, she said.

"It's not just about China. It's about megacities across the world. What's learned here can perhaps be applied to other cities," Simonich said.

Other scientists chose to focus on the health impact of the dirty air, a huge concern that was raised earlier by Olympic athletes. Several countries, including the U.S., has already said they will provide their athletes with an air mask that they have the option of using.

Qinghua Sun, an assistant professor at Ohio State University's College of Public Health, is working with two Chinese universities to collect data on the mechanics of how air pollution affects human health, especially cardiovascular diseases.

Sun, who will be conducting experiments on both mice and humans, said he is looking specifically at the impact of ultrafine particles, known as PM 2.5., on diabetic patients since preliminary data has shown that there is a clear link between cardiovascular disease and PM 2.5

"Hopefully, with our data, China can see the need to take a dramatic policy strategy to continue the good policies they conducted during the Games," he said.

EPA approves air permit for Navajo power plant

By Felicia Fonseca, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Friday, August 1, 2008

Albuquerque, N.M. (AP) --Both environmentalists who have been fighting a proposed coal-fired power plant on the Navajo Nation and supporters of the project expected it: an air permit for the plant.

On Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency signed off on the permit for the Desert Rock Energy Project, which the agency says will set a new standard for coal-fired plants in the United States.

Navajos hailed the EPA's decision as necessary to improve conditions on their vast reservation, while environmentalists proclaimed it "a sad day" and prepared to appeal.

The EPA had filed a consent decree in June, agreeing to act on the permit that sets limits for emissions covered under the federal Clean Air Act as part of the settlement of a lawsuit that the developers of the \$3 billion project filed against the agency.

The Navajo Nation's Dine Power Authority and Houston-based Sithe Global Power are partnering to build the 1,500-megawatt plant near Farmington in northwestern New Mexico. The air permit was considered a major hurdle before construction could begin. An environmental impact statement also needs approval.

Navajo President Joe Shirley Jr. said the benefits of Desert Rock, which include \$50 million in annual revenues to the tribe and thousands of jobs, outweigh the environmental concerns.

Navajos, who regard the earth as their mother and the sky as their father, are "doing the best we can to do our part to take care of the environment," Shirley said.

"At the same time, we know that the deities want us to take care of ourselves, to stand on our own two feet, as individuals, as families, as a community, as a nation," he said in an interview Thursday. "And that's certainly what Desert Rock is about."

Gov. Bill Richardson and New Mexico Environment Secretary Ron Curry planned an immediate appeal of the EPA's decision, claiming the agency violated the Clean Air Act in issuing the permit.

"EPA is bending to the will of corporate, financial and misguided political interests that will pollute New Mexico's skies," Richardson said in a statement. "EPA's decision ignores its obligations to protect the health of residents and the environment in New Mexico and the region. We will not allow this ill-advised decision to stand."

Dailan Long of Dine Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment called the decision irresponsible and inappropriate.

"It is a devastating blow to tribal members who continually suffer from the large coal complex encroaching upon our land," he said in a statement.

The Navajo Nation, which stretches into New Mexico, Utah and Arizona, is rich with natural gas, uranium and low-sulfur coal. Tribal officials say the reservation's coal can be mined for the next 200 years.

On Thursday, President Bush said coal should be part of the solution to reduce dependence on foreign oil and that he would use his last six months in office to push new energy plans that include electricity from coal.

Without global warming emission controls, Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., said it is reckless to approve Desert Rock.

"This one massive plant will negate the emissions reductions being implemented by the northeastern states in the first mandatory regional program to cut global warming pollution," said

Waxman, chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. "The administration's shameful decision rewards polluters, flouts the Clean Air Act and fails the American people."

EPA officials contend their approval process was thorough and involved comprehensive analyses that will ensure that pollution levels safeguard public health and the environment.

A review of the more than 1,000 comments on the permit led to additional monitoring requirements for organic compounds, lead, sulfuric acid, hydrogen fluoride and visible emissions, said Colleen McKaughan, a Southwest region deputy air division director for the EPA. The EPA also lowered limits for nitrogen oxide, a precursor for ozone, she said.

McKaughan said those who commented on the air permit and the consent decree can appeal the EPA's decision to the agency's Environmental Appeals Board, which has the final say on all administrative decisions. The EPA received nearly 100 submissions on the consent decree.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses environmental organizations are worried about the high levels of pollution in Los Angeles. Studies show that people living by major freeways and railroads suffer most from air pollution. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Preocupa el alto nivel de contaminación en Los Ángeles

Carlos Quintanilla

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, August 4, 2008

Organizaciones ambientalistas del sur de California expresaron nuevamente su preocupación por los altos niveles de contaminación que se registran en algunas áreas de la ciudad. Roxana Guzmán es activista y miembro de la organización, "Por un Aire Limpio", y aquí explica sobre quiénes son los más perjudicados por la contaminación: "Los más afectados son las personas que están más cercanas a las yardas ferrocarrileras y a las autopistas que cargan más contenedores, más camiones de carga". Recientes estudios han señalado también al puerto de Los Ángeles, como una verdadera fuente de contaminación en la ciudad.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Latinos have higher awareness of pollution and its impact on health issues.](#)

Los latinos, con la mayor conciencia del impacto de la contaminación en salud

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Thursday, July 31, 2008

Los latinos son el grupo étnico de California que más relaciona la contaminación del aire con sus efectos nocivos sobre la salud humana, de acuerdo con una nueva encuesta que divulgó hoy el Instituto de Política Pública de California.

La consulta dice que el 70 por ciento de los latinos considera que la contaminación es una amenaza a la salud. Menos de la mitad, el 33 por ciento de los anglosajones comparte esta opinión.

Visto desde otra perspectiva, el 23 por ciento de los angloamericanos opina que respira aire limpio en California. Solo el once por ciento de los latinos piensa así.

La encuesta se llevó a cabo este mes entre dos mil 500 residentes.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses restrictions on new thermoelectric plants in California until it is proven that they will not have any impact on human health.](#)

Restringen nuevas plantas termoeléctricas en California

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino
Radio Bilingüe, Thursday, July 31, 2008

Una Corte Federal prohibió a la Administración de Calidad del Aire de la zona Costa Sur de California, la región que corresponde a Los Ángeles, autorizar la construcción de varias plantas termoeléctricas hasta que se demuestre que no tendrán impacto en la salud humana.

En respuesta a una demanda de tres organizaciones nacionales ambientalistas, la corte determinó que es preferible que la administración regional busque fuentes de energía alternativa renovable para cubrir la demanda de electricidad.

La región con por lo menos sies millones de personas tiene le aire más contaminado en Estados Unidos, según datos oficiales.

[Fresno Bee columnist, Sunday, Aug. 3, 2008:](#)

Swearengin arrives for a FAX ride prepared

By Bill McKuen

Ashley Swearengin showed up a couple of minutes early at the Manchester FAX station and handed me a copy of her plan to improve mass transit in Fresno.

She was there because two months ago I publicly asked the mayoral finalists to ride a bus with me and pitch their ideas for upgrading service.

Henry T. Perea answered the challenge first, but I had to postpone our ride because of a family illness. Frankly, Perea's eagerness didn't surprise me. During the primary, he promised to expand bus routes into all neighborhoods and implement much-talked-about-but-yet-unseen Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT.

I had other reasons for asking the candidates to take the bus -- seeing how they handled themselves in a truly public setting and whether they've actually ridden FAX in the past 10 years.

Trust me, it's easy to detect someone faking FAX familiarity. A dead giveaway: "You mean I have to change buses when I get downtown?"

Swearengin passed the test, smartly bringing dollar bills for her fares and mingling comfortably with the riders. In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised at how well she hung out with regular people. Her husband, Paul, makes his living yakking about sports on the radio, for heaven's sakes.

We rode south on Blackstone Avenue to the Courthouse Park station, transferred to a bus taking us to southeast Fresno and then boarded another bus for our return to Manchester. We were accompanied by Ken Hamm, the city's transportation director, at Swearengin's invitation.

Living up to her reputation as a go-getting multitasker, Swearengin used the down time between my questions to ask Hamm about BRT, which dedicates express buses on high-traffic routes. She also asked about something called Personal Rapid Transit -- futuristic pod cars on guideways running every 30 seconds or so in a concentrated area.

Hamm was quite helpful -- you would've been, too, knowing that in a few months Swearengin might be the mayor.

Swearengin said that she has been riding the bus lately to check out the service, so I asked her to grade FAX.

"I've had a solid B experience for what I've needed," said the Regional Jobs Initiative director and mother of two young children. "The buses are on time, they're air-conditioned and the drivers are courteous, helpful even.

"But for anyone wanting to go from a two-car to a one-car family, I'd say it's a C-minus, maybe even a D."

The hang-up is that the buses aren't convenient enough for folks to park their cars. And that's a problem in Fresno, which has some of the nation's most unhealthy air.

So, what's Swearingin's plan to beef up FAX?

For starters, she wants buses on existing routes to be on time, clean and safe. She would like increased service into neighborhoods where people depend on the bus and more express service to the colleges, regional malls and downtown. She said that bus drivers and riders deserve a bigger voice in route selection "because they are the ones in the buses every day."

Swearingin is on the BRT bandwagon, calling for the first routes -- Kings Canyon Boulevard and Blackstone Avenue -- to be running in two years. Such a system would cut commute times on those routes nearly in half and double ridership, according to FAX officials. Swearingin also said that building BRT ridership "will pave the way for light rail in Fresno."

In fact, Swearingin talked at length about light rail, saying that it or something similar must be part of a "bold, long-range transit plan" and that the Planning Department must preserve light-rail right-of-way.

Now, the big question: How would she pay for this new and improved transit system? Promising is easy, delivering is difficult.

Swearingin said she would pursue state and federal dollars to supplement Measure C, the county's transportation sales tax. The key, she said, is coming up with a "compelling plan" that attracts new funding.

Taking a poke at Perea, the City Council member, Swearingin said: "This is something that I have experience at. It's a job for an executive leader. People who approach it in a political way aren't going to be as effective."

Because I love a good scrap as much as an on-time bus, I can't wait to hear what Perea says about mass transit -- and Swearingin.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Sat., Aug. 2, 2008:](#)

Bus rapid transit may suit Fresno

By Lee Brand

As a young boy growing up in Fresno, I looked forward to taking trips to downtown Fresno. Our only transportation was the bus. In the early 1960s, downtown was the hub of culture and commerce, with all of the movie theaters and major retailers. Unfortunately, most of these venues disappeared into history as the downtown started a slow decline in the late 1960s.

Our bus system was once a major transportation mode for many people in Fresno. Urban sprawl and our dependence on automobiles have relegated our buses to a mandated public-transportation system for the poor. Many empty buses with colorful advertising move across our city on a daily basis. Unfortunately, these buses follow an antiquated grid system.

With gas now approaching \$5 a gallon, ridership has shown a small increase. We are not, however, even close to our potential. Our bus transportation system known as FAX (Fresno Area

Express) could be a viable alternative for all of us to use. Some critics say we should be exploring light rail mass transit. Cost is the major problem. With an estimated cost of about \$50 million a mile, light rail is very expensive.

Measure C money would not put a dent into the overall cost of a citywide light-rail grid. Fresno does not qualify for federal grant assistance for light rail.

Lacking a central business district like San Francisco has made public transportation planning much more problematic. There are solutions. The 2025 General Plan identifies activity centers (for example, downtown, River Park, California State University, Fresno) and linking people between these centers. In a few months, a Transportation System Management study will examine trip-generation origins and destinations in Fresno. This software modeling will also serve as a foundation for a revised FAX grid system that more closely conforms to driving patterns in Fresno.

Currently, most people in Fresno, particularly North Fresno, do not see our FAX transportation system as an alternative mode of transportation. Rising fuel prices, the development of a revised FAX transportation grid and new technologies in bus transit can dramatically increase ridership on FAX.

The bus fleet has more than half of its vehicles converted to a more fuel-efficient compressed natural gas. These buses also emit considerably less pollutants than older buses. Getting thousands of Fresno citizens to use the bus transportation system would have a profound impact on improving our air quality.

One of the new technologies in mass transit is "bus rapid transit" (BRT). It is currently being successfully used in cities like Las Vegas and Los Angeles. BRT uses longer buses capable of carrying up to 85 passengers. They have a lower profile design that will make it easier and faster to load and unload passengers. Fares are paid at attractive, new stations.

The key to getting more people to ride on buses is moving people faster. BRT is designed to operate on dedicated (e.g. diamond lane) corridors. The buses use technology that can alter traffic-light timing as they approach intersections and have automated scheduling and dispatch systems. BRT is usually used on fixed routes with fewer stops. The BRT concept would dramatically reduce travel times, provide more direct routes between destination points and be a palatable alternative to automobiles. BRT has been described as "light rail on wheels."

Park-and-ride centers could effectively tie into a restructured FAX transportation grid linking activity centers. Model urban developments like the planned Southeast Growth Area will utilize integrated transportation modes and park-and-ride centers. You could walk, take a bike or your car for a short ride to a park-and-ride center and take a bus from there.

The success of a new FAX grid system and new technology like BRT will require a major marketing effort to convince people to ride public transportation. We are all creatures of habit, and changing our daily routines will not be easy. The private sector can encourage employees to use mass transit and also help raise revenues through plans that can include naming rights to new stations. We have the resources to fund a basic level BRT system within two years, operating routes on Kings Canyon Road and Blackstone Avenue. In future years, BRT routes can be incrementally expanded.

The global energy crisis is the catalyst that is dramatically changing the transportation paradigm in America. In Fresno, we study everything to death. The complex problems that we face will require bold, innovative policies and action to meet future challenges.

Lee Brand is the council member-elect to represent District 6 on the Fresno City Council. He is a former member of the Planning Commission.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Sunday, Aug. 3, 2008:](#)

T. Boone sees us as real easy pickin's

By Anthony Rubenstein

Texas oil billionaire T. Boone Pickens is pushing a national campaign to make the U.S. "energy independent" through wind power and vehicles that run on natural gas. His blitz of TV ads featuring his own down-home voice has picked up a lot of admiring news coverage. To date, Pickens has yet to explain whose dime will pay for this.

Well, Californians can clarify exactly whose dime it will be: Ours.

Along with being the country's biggest wind-power developer, Pickens owns Clean Energy Fuels Corp., a natural gas fueling station company that is the sole backer of Proposition 10 on California's November ballot.

This measure would authorize the sale of \$5 billion in general fund bonds to provide alternative energy rebates and incentives -- but by the time the principal and the interest is paid off, it would squander at least \$9.8 billion in taxpayer money on Pickens' self-serving natural gas agenda.

The initiative deceptively reads like it's supporting all alternative-fuel vehicles and renewable energy sources. But a closer read finds a laundry list of cash grabs -- from \$200 million for a liquefied natural gas terminal to \$2.5 billion for rebates of up to \$50,000 for each natural gas vehicle.

Much of the measure's billions could benefit Pickens' company to the exclusion of almost all other clean-vehicle fuels and technology.

Engines that run on compressed natural gas have a place in pollution reduction, especially for heavy trucks and public buses. But natural gas is a nonrenewable fossil fuel that we import from foreign sources, and it is no better (and in some cases worse) when it comes to emissions and fuel efficiency compared with the best hybrid cars or the new ultra-clean diesel engines.

Most insidiously, Proposition 10's lavish rebates for natural gas-powered cars and trucks could crowd out superior technologies from taking root in California, the largest transportation market in the United States.

Even worse, private trucking and delivery companies could buy 5,000 natural gas trucks, collect California taxpayer-funded rebates of \$200 million or more and immediately send those fleets out of state.

There's nothing in Proposition 10 to prevent that. It's like asking California voters to finance a new bridge with taxpayer dollars, without mentioning that the bridge could be in Ohio.

Pickens is selling Proposition 10 to green-minded, high-gas-price-paying Californians under the official name of "The California Renewable Energy and Clean Alternative Fuel Act." If the name rings a bell, that's because it's intentionally similar to the "California Clean Alternative Energy Act" of 2006, also known as Proposition 87. Proposition 87's rebates and incentives would have been funded by fees on the oil industry for petroleum extracted in California, not by taxpayers.

Proposition 87 lost after the oil industry spent more than \$100 million campaigning against it. I was the founder and chairman of Californians for Clean Energy, the force behind Proposition 87, and am disgusted that Pickens' lawyers and natural gas sales team have lifted Proposition 87's language and twisted it into such a deceptive, counterproductive initiative.

Pickens' raid on California's general fund comes while Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature are racking their brains trying to make state ends meet. The payments over the 30-year life of the Pickens bonds would deprive Californians of at least \$325 million a year to fund schools, fight wildfires and keep emergency rooms open.

Yet in the paragraph of Proposition 10 titled "Accountability," there isn't a word about requiring proof that the billions of dollars spent would result in one less ounce of petroleum used or one fewer wisp of greenhouse gases emitted in California.

I've met Pickens, and I'll vouch for his patriotic intentions to get the U.S. off foreign oil -- but not for funding his interests on the sly with billions of dollars from California's taxpayers. In fact, I would prefer to believe that he's being ill-served by his lawyers and political consultants, because it's clear that the shortcomings of Proposition 10 could ultimately hurt his energy independence message.

Given that Pickens can also play rough -- he was a funder of the "Swift boat" campaign in the 2004 presidential election -- it'll take guts to challenge him. California's governor, attorney general and treasurer should be the first to say no, because there's certainly a case against a \$5-billion bond that results in almost no lasting infrastructure, could siphon taxpayer money out of state and would distort the clean-vehicle market. The makers of hybrid and biofuel vehicles, and California teachers, hospitals and firefighters, who would be on the losing end of Proposition 10, should also think hard about what Pickens' plan would do to them.

[Fresno Bee commentaries, Sunday, Aug. 3, 2008:](#)

Power from nuclear sources is not eco-friendly enough

By Wayne Madsen

WASHINGTON -- America's twin crises of sky-rocketing energy costs and catastrophic climate change effects shouldn't be a convenient excuse to push nuclear power as a viable replacement for coal, oil and natural gas power-generating plants.

The nuclear disaster at the Soviet Union's Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 and the near-disaster at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 are reasons enough to strike nuclear power from the list of acceptable non-fossil and carbon energy sources.

The nuclear power industry has done little to nothing to improve the safety records of their plants. Just recently, Vermont's Yankee nuclear power plant, owned by Entergy, experienced a cooling problem that forced it to shut down 50% of its power production.

That shutdown came after repeated safety violations by the plant and a lack of adequate safety inspections.

The same scenario has played out across the country due to the infiltration of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission by nuclear industry boosters and lawyers who have spiked and censored nuclear safety reports by the NRC's technical staff to favor the profits of the nuclear power plant operators over public safety interests.

In 2002, a hole due to corrosion developed in the reactor lid of the Davis-Besse nuclear plant in northwestern Ohio. The plant's operator, FirstEnergy Corp., and the NRC agreed that the reactor lid could have blown open in 60 days had the hole not been discovered.

The near-catastrophe at the Davis-Besse reactor could have rivaled that of Three Mile Island and the impact on Cleveland and other northern Ohio cities and towns could have been disastrous.

The poor nuclear safety record of America's nuclear power plant operators, especially during the laissez-faire regulatory holiday of the Bush administration, has not stopped GOP presumptive presidential candidate John McCain from waving the nuclear flag.

In 2004, the Palo Verde nuclear plant, 50 miles west of Phoenix, saw two of three units shut down due to radiation leaks from aging equipment. The NRC saw fit to approve continued operation of the faltering plant. In addition, radioactive water was found to have leaked into ground water around Palo Verde. Similar leaks into the water supply have been discovered at the Braidwood nuclear power plant near Chicago.

The Union of Concerned Scientists' call for a major investigation of such leaks was ignored.

Nuclear power generation also generates nuclear waste.

Currently, there are 55,000 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel in storage depots around the country awaiting transport through America's cities and small towns to a storage facility in Yucca Mountain in Nevada -- despite the opposition of an overwhelming majority of Nevadans.

Nuclear power proponents argue that nuclear energy is a renewable energy source like solar, wind, bio-fuels and hydrogen.

However, nuclear energy is neither renewable nor "green." From the uranium mining, processing, conversion and reprocessing phases, as well as spent nuclear fuel disposal, the impact on the environment in the event of an accident can last for hundreds of thousands of years.

The safety of the people of Vermont, northern Ohio, Arizona, Chicago and other parts of the country should not be negotiable by the nuclear power industry lobbyists who roam the halls of Congress.

Germany has nixed the future development of its nuclear power industry and a recent uranium leak into the water supply from a nuclear power plant near Avignon in southern France has all of Europe rethinking nuclear power.

Our Congress should follow the lead of Germany and permanently ban new nuclear power plant construction.

Wayne Madsen is a contributing writer to the progressive Online Journal.

Nuclear energy must replace natural gas in power plants

By Mark J. Perry

FLINT, Mich. -- If ever there were a question about the need for nuclear power, it has certainly been dispelled now with the rising cost of fossil fuels.

The high price of oil, natural gas and coal should be a wake-up call to all regions of the country that the era of boundless use of cheap fossil fuels is over -- and that nuclear power will need to play a larger role in supplying electricity to homes, business and industry.

Although natural gas is now the fuel of choice in electricity generation, its price has quadrupled in recent years and supplies are extremely tight. Not too long ago, the expectation of rising imports of liquefied natural gas led many to conclude that more abundant gas supplies and greater use of alternative fuels would end the long run of soaring gas costs.

But the pause in increased gas costs proved temporary.

Natural gas prices are once again rising rapidly -- 93% since last August. Major industries that require large amounts of gas for space heating and as a feedstock in making consumer products are once again in crisis.

So now is the time to point out that one-quarter of the gas supply is wasted on electricity generation. Since 1990, virtually all of the new electric-power capacity in the country has used natural gas, and that has driven up the price of natural gas.

Natural gas is a finite and dwindling commodity. North American production has been at a plateau in recent years. Canada has told the United States not to expect additional shipments of natural gas, because it now requires a larger share of its gas reserves to meet its own domestic needs.

Another thing: Congress has yet to lift the ban on drilling for oil and natural gas along 85% of the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf as well as the Alaskan wilderness.

The surge in gas prices is also being fed by increased global competition for LNG. Today, an LNG tanker pulling into port in Japan or Spain can get almost \$20 per million BTUs -- far higher than the U.S. price.

Most Americans probably don't realize the effect all of this is having on some key industries. In the chemical industry, a big natural gas user, more than 118,000 American jobs have been lost since 2000.

For U.S. manufacturing overall, about 3 million jobs have been lost in that time due in large part to energy costs. Particularly in the fertilizer and chemical industries, plants are shutting down and reopening abroad to take advantage of lower natural gas prices overseas.

Today there are about 120 major chemical plants -- each costing more than \$1 billion -- being built around the world, but not one in the United States.

The economic problems with natural gas buttress the case for switching to nuclear energy for electricity production. Seventeen companies are preparing license applications to build and operate 31 new reactors.

John McCain wants 45 new reactors by 2030, followed by another wave of plants.

Although Barack Obama says nuclear energy is "not a panacea" for U.S. energy problems, he says nuclear is worth investigating for further development. A number of governors have called for expanded use of nuclear energy -- most notably California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Florida Gov. Charlie Crist.

This support for nuclear energy is a hopeful sign, because the problems it has encountered have never been technological; they have been primarily political and institutional.

The United States pioneered the development of nuclear energy, and had the first major nuclear program. Most other leading industrial countries have continued developing their nuclear programs since the last nuclear plant order in the United States -- primarily using U.S. technology.

Today we have the means -- and more important, an urgent need -- to bring that technology back home.

Mark J. Perry is a professor of finance and economics at the Flint campus of the University of Michigan.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Monday, August 4, 2008:](#)
Small farms' future important to valley

Some farmers in the Southern San Joaquin Valley gathered last week to discuss the future of small farms.

Among the questions they discussed: Can smaller, labor-intensive farm operations take advantage of modern -- and constantly evolving -- technology to survive in a difficult environment?

For the sake of agriculture in the valley, we hope the answer is yes.

The Small Farm Conservation Day was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service; Hmong American Community; Lao Family Community Inc. of Fresno; and Cherta Farms, the Del Rey farm that hosted the event.

Small farms have always been a crucial part of the valley's ag industry.

High-value crops such as specialty fruits and vegetables may supply an increasing portion of the ag wealth of the valley in the years ahead, but they require more effort and greater care in the application of resources -- particularly water, as supplies are stretched thinner and thinner.

And farmers must contend with increasing demands that their operations do less to foul the valley's air.

Farmers have been tasked with a number of new restrictions on their operations in recent years as part of the clean-air effort. Past practices such as open-field burning of ag waste are prohibited, and farmers are obliged to reduce the amount of dust their activities raise into the atmosphere.

Technology may provide many of the answers, if machines can be built that, for instance, reduce the need for multiple passes across a field. That will cut fuel costs and reduce dust.

But many small farms can't afford expensive new machinery, and that has to be addressed. One answer that emerged last week was sharing equipment through cooperatives.

State and federal air quality funds might be appropriate to help. The Bush administration's stimulus package also included changes that give tax breaks to farmers who invest in machinery now.

Farming has never been an easy way to make a living. Market forces shift; politics are complex; consumers are fickle -- and there's always the weather.

If the early trend toward fresh, locally grown produce continues to rise, small farms will be increasingly important.

That argues for finding ways to make it possible for small farms to prosper, both for the sake of the families that rely on them for a livelihood and for the needs of consumers.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, Aug. 3, 2008:](#)

Challenge, not prophesy

Victor Davis Hanson states that Al Gore "prophesied" all our electrical needs in 10 years would be from renewable resources [column July 27]. Fact check: Former Vice President Gore didn't prophesy, he challenged, while invoking JFK's moon landing challenge.

Dr. Hanson also trots out the old "Gore is a hypocrite" accusation for jetting to conferences and riding in SUVs. My guess is that if Mr. Gore did the whole Ed Begley Jr. thing, he would be

dismissed as a kook by the same people who dismiss him now as a hypocrite. The important thing is the dismissal.

Since global warming was first brought to light by environmentalists (who are mostly liberal), conservatives opposed it for strategic reasons (the other side can't be allowed unchallenged traction, and donations will be forthcoming from those with opposite interests).

After years of dismissing global warming as an anti-technology plot by radical environmentalists, denial is no longer a viable strategy. But Gore must still be kept down (he may yet have political ambitions). So,

Dr. Hanson paints him as a "self-absorbed," "self-righteous" 1960s protester offering few solutions.

JFK didn't tell us how to get to the moon. Rather, he challenged the best in the nation to make it happen.

Don Smith, Fresno