

The Downturn: Bidders from around the world crowd Yolo construction-equipment auction

By Jim Downing

Modesto Bee, Thursday, August 7, 2008

The global economy rumbled through rural Yolo County on Wednesday as bidders from six continents snapped up California's dump trucks and front-loaders at the Ritchie Bros. auction house near Dunnigan.

With new home construction down more than 50 percent from last year, contractors and equipment brokers across the state are unloading idle machines that not long ago were moving earth for subdivisions and shopping centers.

Bargain-hunters from around the world were combing the more than 900 items displayed in the Ritchie Bros. lot along Interstate 5 on Wednesday. They revved engines from the cabs of bulldozers and kicked the 8-foot-tall tires on earth scrapers the size of small houses.

By 4 p.m., the list of winning bidders included buyers from 37 states and 25 foreign countries.

While British Columbia-based Ritchie Bros. offers bidding via the Internet from anywhere in the world, some buyers traveled to Dunnigan from as far away as Asia and Africa.

Ermiyas Beraki, who runs a construction firm in Ethiopia, picked up a loader for \$10,500 – a great price, he said, hurrying off to bid on a 25-ton dump truck.

Nazmi Arslan, who wore sleek brown loafers amid a crowd mostly in boots, was looking to buy bulldozers and graders for his family's equipment business in central Turkey.

Construction isn't exactly booming back home, Arslan said, but he's always looking for a deal. A good buy could make up for his travel costs and more than cover the \$30,000 or so it would cost to deliver a purchase to Turkey.

Even 100-ton machines sold in less than a minute on the auction stage. Five "bid catchers" scanned the crowd for offers, while Ritchie Bros. staff watched for Internet bids.

At one point, the crowd in Dunnigan sat and waited as two bidders in Egypt chased a mammoth front-loader. A woman in pigtails and a hard hat idled the machine on the stage.

An auction house profits every time an item changes hands, so Ritchie Bros. does best during times of tumult.

"Whether the economy is up or down, our business works," said Stephen Branch, marketing director for Ritchie Bros. The company is the world's largest industrial auctioneer.

Ritchie Bros. scheduled four sales for the Dunnigan site this year, Branch said. But after one of the region's big equipment brokers announced it would be liquidating its stock, the company was happy to add a fifth auction. Ritchie Bros. makes a commission of as much as 15 percent on each transaction. By day's end, Wednesday's sales totaled more than \$22 million.

With abundant supply and relatively weak demand in California, the going rate for some machines has dropped by half, said equipment brokers at the auction. Many in the business say prices also are being depressed by new state air-quality regulations, which will make the polluting engines in many old machines obsolete starting in 2010.

For some California buyers, the auction was a bet on the construction industry's recovery.

Tony Harris, who runs an earth-moving and gravel company in Riverside, was inspecting a scraper that sells for \$1 million new. He figured the used model on the Ritchie Bros. lot might go

for as little as \$100,000. Even if the machine has to sit idle occasionally as the economic downturn plays out, Harris said, buying now at the bottom of the market could put him in a good position when work – and the price of equipment – picks up again.

Contract cuts make it tougher to smog cars, make copies

John Hill, Bee Capitol Bureau
Sacramento Bee, Thursday, August 7, 2008

The provision of the governor's executive order suspending contracts is being felt in some obscure corners of state government.

Consider the special smog testing program at 30 community colleges up and down the state. Vehicle owners are referred to the special smog centers if, for instance, they failed at a regular station and can't find the part that would reduce their emissions. Or they may have spent the statutory limit of \$450 on repairs to pass the smog test, said Department of Consumer Affairs spokesman Russ Heimerich.

The Foundation for California Community Colleges has a contract to provide 60 workers for the "referee" program - half at the smog centers, the other half at a Sacramento call center. But the workers were sent home when Schwarzenegger signed his executive order. The 3,000 vehicle owners referred to the smog centers each month now must wait for a budget to get their smog waivers, Heimerich said. Luckily, the Department of Motor Vehicles has granted extensions so the owners won't run afoul of vehicle registration law.

In response to the executive order, the Department of Consumer Affairs suspended its contracts for copier and printer repair, Fed-Ex, and Westlaw legal research. For now, workers whose copiers break have to hunt for one elsewhere, and use the regular mail, Heimerich said. The department's lawyers, who advise 21 consumer boards and 14 bureaus, may have to head to the nearest law library to do research.

"It's an inconvenience," Heimerich said. " But that's the way it's going to have to be until the contract is no longer suspended."

The Department of Public Health suspended contracts, many of them with the University of California, for various surveys and studies, including one on heart disease and stroke prevention and another on the economic toll of second-hand smoking.

"This is all important work," said spokeswoman Suanne Buggy. "What we had to look at what was critical" to exempt from the executive order.

Schools move to eject cars from campuses

By Gwen Purdom
USA TODAY, Thursday, August 07, 2008

High schools and colleges are steering students away from cars to save money on gas, save the environment and promote physical fitness.

This fall, Ripon College in Ripon, Wis., is offering freshmen free mountain bikes, helmets and locks in exchange for a promise not to bring a car to campus. The \$300-per-student cost is funded by private donations.

The college's president, David Joyce, says the project was meant to avoid building a parking garage, but its side effects are beneficial: [less pollution](#), more exercise and savings on gas.

The timing was right, Joyce says: "We were either extremely brilliant or extremely lucky."

About 60% of the school's 300 incoming students have signed up.

"Today's teenagers deserve a lot of credit. They're socially aware, they're environmentally conscious," says Mike Martin, executive director of the National Association of Pupil Transportation. "When the price of gasoline takes effect, they're smart."

On other campuses:

- At Auburn University in Auburn, Ala., a bike maintenance shop in the new student union and a bike-sharing program kicks off this fall.

High gas prices have helped the school meet its goal of increasing bike ridership to 12% of students and staff two years ahead of schedule.

- Other bike-loan programs will start or expand this year at colleges in Georgia, Illinois, Maine and Pennsylvania.

- More bike racks, new speed limit signs and a parent carpooling system are among the changes being considered at Hanover Park High School in East Hanover, N.J., to reduce car traffic and to improve students' safety.

- Howards Grove High School in Howards Grove, Wis., is using a federal grant to create a walking and biking path to the campus, currently accessible only by car or bus. The \$100,000 project is scheduled to be done by fall 2009.

- Graduate students at State University of New York-Albany proposed a 5K (3.1-mile) biking and walking path around campus as a class project. The first phase, one-third of a mile, was completed in June.

- Faculty and students at three high schools in Marin County, Calif., are working with their local Safe Routes to Schools program to improve intersections, designate walk-or-bike-to-school days and use bikes as transportation for field trips.

The National Center for Safe Routes to School gets state and federal funding for kindergarten through eighth grade. A bill sponsored by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., would fund high school programs. High schools' wider attendance boundaries, students' reduced physical activity and their desire to be self-reliant make funding necessary, he says.

"We have over 100 million bikes that are sitting around in garages and basements and back porches," Blumenauer says. "When people start to use them, it can be transformational."

Olympics smog watch: Beijing air quality described as 'fairly good'

USA TODAY, Thursday, August 07, 2008

China says the air quality was "fairly good" today in Beijing.

BBC News says tests show the level of pollutants was still high on the eve of the Summer Olympics.

"It put levels of particulate matter (PM10) at 191 micrograms per cubic meter," the broadcaster reports, citing its own tests. "This far exceeds the WHO target of 50 micrograms/cubic meter, and also exceeds the WHO target for developing countries of 150 micrograms/cubic meter."

Oregon State University professor Staci Simonich, shown above, tells USA TODAY that her research suggests the air is cleaner today than it was last year.

A World Health Organization official tells AFP that permanent residents, not temporary visitors, are the ones who are endangered by the smog in the Chinese capital.

"There is an air pollution problem in Beijing," Hans Troedsson tells the wire service. "However, we are missing the point by having so much attention on the short-term exposure while the long-term exposure is really ignored -- that is where we have a problem."

Jacques Rogge, head of the International Olympic Committee, echoed his hosts when he told reporters that there's "absolutely no danger" to athletes who are competing in events that last less than an hour.

"The fog you see is based on humidity and heat. It does not mean that this fog is the same as pollution," he say, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Beijing air quality affected by weather and terrain

USA TODAY, Thursday, August 07, 2008

In researching this graphic, I spoke with David Streets (Argonne National Laboratory), lead author on "Air quality during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games." He says that the situation in Beijing is not unlike the situation in Los Angeles in 1984. The difference being that L.A.'s proximity to the Pacific Ocean, given the right weather conditions, does allow for an influx of clean marine air to help dissipate pollutants during bad air events. Beijing, when stagnant air episodes occur, has to hope for wind or rain to cleanse the atmosphere.

Not all the pollution that affects Beijing comes from sources within Beijing – that is why efforts to control emissions in the city by halting construction, reducing cars on the roads and limiting industrial emissions will have limited impact. Neighboring industrial cities such as Tianjin are also planning to limit emissions during The Games in an effort to help Beijing air quality. Some have already been enacted, and Streets says that the Chinese have "more tricks up their sleeve" if air quality takes a turn for the worse during The Games.

The Chinese government is reporting air quality daily from Beijing and other cities. The BBC is using a hand-held detector to monitor PM10 levels outside the BBC office in Beijing each afternoon.

Some athletes have expressed concern for their health in light of Beijing's questionable air quality, with some members of the U.S. cycling squad arriving in Beijing wearing face masks.

Air pollution shrouds Beijing on eve of Olympics

By Trini Tran, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, August 7, 2008

BEIJING, China (AP) --The wall of gray haze around the National Stadium and across the city cut visibility down to a mile. On the eve of opening ceremonies, Beijing's polluted air took center stage Thursday as the most visibly pressing problem for Olympic organizers who had promised to clean up the Chinese capital.

Despite China's enormous attempts to improve the air quality in the run-up to the Summer Games, the stubbornly thick haze that covered the city illustrated how difficult and elusive a target clear skies can be.

In the end, it will come down to the wild card of weather: rain and wind.

"I hoped that the measures could have more effect than they had in the last week," said Zhu Tong, an associate professor at Peking University's College of Environmental Science and Engineering who has been advising the government on pollution issues.

"Unfortunately, we had meteorological conditions that weren't good for clearing up the sky. So the stagnant air in Beijing has helped pollutants accumulate. I really hope in the next couple weeks, we'll have conditions that will help us clear up the sky."

The forecast for Friday, the official opening ceremony for the games, was overcast skies with a slight chance of showers in the afternoon, China's meteorological agency said. But relief may come by the weekend, with a prediction of moderate rain that could help wash out pollutants.

On Thursday, Beijing's air pollution index was recorded at 96, which came close to exceeding the national level for acceptable air. Levels between 51-100 are considered moderate pollution, and anything over 100 is harmful to sensitive groups, including children and the elderly.

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.

The independent spot checks collected from the Olympic Green, the main sports thoroughfare, showed that, even though there are dramatic ups and downs, PM 10 concentrations were often much higher than what the World Health Organization considers healthy. On Friday, AP readings showed a PM 10 concentration of 373 micrograms per cubic meter — far above the WHO guidelines for healthy air of 50 micrograms per cubic meter.

The notoriously dirty air in this megacity of 17 million has been a leading concern since Beijing won the bid for the Olympics in 2001. China has poured 140 billion yuan — \$20 billion — into "greening" the city, including doubling the number of subway lines, retrofitting factories with cleaner technology and building urban parks. But environmental efforts have often been outpaced by constant construction and increased traffic.

To help ensure clean air for the Olympics, Beijing officials imposed drastic measures in mid-July, including pulling half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads, halting most construction and closing dozens of factories.

Environmental officials say the measures are having an impact, noting a 20 percent drop in major pollutants in July, compared with the same time last year. However, it's clear the sweeping measures have failed to guarantee the crystalline skies China hoped to showcase. Instead, the past three weeks have been marked by extremes — going from pea soup haze to swirling blue skies, often after strong winds or a downpour.

Athletes participating in the Aug. 8-24 games have raised concerns from the start about the impact of the city's pollution on their health and their performance, with many choosing to train outside of Beijing.

Those concerns were again highlighted when four members of the U.S. cycling team wore face masks as they walked off the airplane when they arrived this week. They later apologized.

International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge praised China on Thursday for doing everything "feasible and humanly possible" to combat air pollution, and said conditions will be safe for athletes to compete.

Rogge reiterated that outdoor endurance events, such as the marathon, could be postponed or rescheduled if smog levels are too high. The IOC will monitor the air quality on an hourly basis at 21 reporting stations and receive 72-hour weather forecasts. Heat and humidity could also be a factor during the games.

Despite the concerns by athletes, there is little evidence that they or other short-term visitors would suffer long-term health damage because of pollution levels in Beijing, said Hans Troedsson, the head of the World Health Organization in China.

Instead, the group facing the biggest risks from pollution are the city's residents, he said. Long-term exposure to air pollution means increased chances of developing asthma, respiratory disease and heart disease, he said.

"We have to remember that it's not short-term exposure that's of concern, it's the long-term," he said. "For us, it's important to see how these (environmental) efforts are sustained."

If China remains committed to continuing these measures in the long-run, the result could be "a public health legacy after the Olympics," he said.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial Thurs., Aug. 7, 2008](#)

Our View: Gas prices drive bus rides

Merced County should use momentum to improve mass transit options Valley-wide.

Ridership on Merced County buses is up, thanks mostly to high gas prices.

The number of riders across the Merced County Transit System increased nearly 10 percent in the last fiscal year, according to county officials. The Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System also reached record ridership levels this year.

It's a good start.

Merced County should use this momentum to really push mass transit options, both inside and outside county borders.

County officials should consider expanding operating hours and boosting both the number of buses and bus routes.

But let's really get creative and pursue other mass transit options.

Local incentives -- special parking places, perhaps -- could be offered to encourage carpooling.

What about local rail options? It may not make much sense now for a light-rail system in our area, but Merced's population growth may one day warrant such a solution.

Now's the time to start planning. Bus and train options should also be expanded regionally.

YARTS, which shuttles passengers between Merced, Mariposa and Yosemite National Park, is a good example of a regional solution that could be expanded to include other Valley cities.

How about starting with our neighbor counties? Surely there must be local demand for transportation service beyond Amtrak to the cities of Modesto, Turlock and Madera.

The county should be applauded for improvements made in recent years to the bus system. It's one of the reasons assistant transportation manager Larnold Jones credits to the increased ridership.

But with gas prices well over \$4 a gallon, simple economics may be forcing Merced residents out of their cars and onto The Bus. A monthly adult pass is just \$45, which is a bargain considering it costs about the same for a single fill-up at a gas station.

Increased bus ridership may be one of the rare good results to come out of the current gas crisis.

More riders using mass transit presumably means fewer cars on the roads that will ultimately help improve air quality in Merced and the Valley.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008:](#)

JOHN DUNLAP: Proposition 10 provides an energy boost

In November, Californians will have the opportunity to make a timely investment in clean and renewable technology that will help clean our air, fight climate change and stabilize the Golden State's economy by reducing our dependence upon foreign oil.

Proposition 10, the California Renewable Energy and Clean Alternative Fuels Act, will invest \$5 billion in California's emerging renewable energy and clean fuels sectors at a time when Californians recognize the need to reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

Proposition 10 will provide critically needed funds to invest in clean and renewable energy on four fronts: increasing our portfolio of renewable energy for electricity generation using solar and wind power; replace old, polluting trucks with new trucks powered by clean fuels, provide consumer rebates for high-efficiency or clean alternative- fuel vehicles, and provide research and development funds to stimulate California's growing renewable-energy sector.

Specifically, this bond will allow consumers to qualify for rebates when they purchase or lease high-fuel-efficiency vehicles capable of achieving more than 45 miles per gallon or vehicles using clean, low-carbon fuel, when they are driven here in California.

At a time when gasoline and diesel prices are soaring and California families are feeling the effects of a slowing economy, forging a transition to cleaner, cheaper and domestic alternative clean fuels is essential.

Not only will this save hard-working families money each month on their vehicle-fuel bills, but it also will go a long way toward cleaning up our air and improving our health and future -- especially for our children.

This measure will provide rebates for owners of California-operated big-rig trucks who convert their polluting vehicles to cleaner hybrid or natural- gas engines.

Converting a big-rig truck can cost upward of \$200,000, and more than 60% of California's truck fleet is operated by independent, small-business truck drivers who are unable to afford this conversion on their own. Cleaning up California's trucking industry fleet will help to make the state's goods movement industry more green and lift our economy.

Proposition 10 provides \$875 million in research, development and education to speed the development of low-carbon fuels, noncarbon fuels, clean alternative vehicles that include battery electric vehicles and renewable energy generation like wind and solar.

California can and should lead the green technology movement, and this investment will empower our best and brightest to move forward at an accelerated rate. This will lead to a boom in our economy similar to what emerged from both Silicon Valley and the bio-tech industries. This

will happen only if we aggressively invest in research and development in these key areas of our state's energy and transportation economy.

It is also important to note that Proposition 10 will not raise taxes or fees, create any new bureaucracy or new government entities. This bond will help the state reach goals established by AB 32, California's landmark climate change/greenhouse-gas reduction law.

It is time for all of us to become active players in the fight against our addiction to foreign oil.

If we don't take action now by passing Proposition 10, our national leadership will likely take us down the same long-trodden path of even greater reliance on carbon-based fuels and increased off-shore oil drilling, while we continue to spend more than \$700 billion to import oil from foreign nations.

Remember, crisis can push policy one of two ways: to a solutions-oriented response like Proposition 10 or toward a nonresponse, deferring to the status quo.

Proposition 10 offers a chance for all of us to solve this problem before it is too late.

John Dunlap of Auburn is past chairman of the California Air Resources Board.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008](#)

On transportation woes The planning void

It seems almost inconceivable that the California Air Resources Board would fail to make land-use decisions a central part of the state's plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

But as the board prepares for Friday's public workshop in Santa Clara on its "scoping plan" to carry out Assembly Bill 32 - the landmark global-warming legislation - it proposes a reduction of a scant 2 million metric tons of emissions through better land-use decisions. Incredibly, that would be less than the air board plans to achieve from encouraging proper tire inflation.

California can and must do better. Transportation accounts for about 30 percent of greenhouse gases.

Anyone who has studied Bay Area traffic patterns would recognize the effect of land-use decisions on congestion - and its corresponding level of pollution. New housing developments are built with the expectations of long commutes. Too many have been built far from employment centers and in suburbs where public transportation is insufficient or nonexistent.

Fortunately, the Air Resources Board may be about to get strong guidance from the Legislature. State Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, has done a remarkable behind-the-scenes job of building support for legislation (SB375) that would require the impact on greenhouse gas emissions to be included in regional housing and transportation plans. It also would provide regulatory relief for residential and mixed-use projects that optimize available public transit.

Steinberg worked with local governments and home builders to assuage their initial concerns on a bill that was originally promoted by environmentalists.

"I do think that everyone recognized that the status quo was not sustainable when it comes to land use, air quality and all the related issues," Steinberg said of the coalition that joined him at a news conference in Sacramento Wednesday.

If California is going to get serious about fighting global warming, it must confront the fact that its land-use patterns have been dooming us to long commutes and dependence on the automobile

for simple daily tasks. Passage of SB375 would represent a significant step toward identifying and addressing a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008:](#)

Can state growth management live in peace with local control?

For decades, California has struggled with how to marry its environmental values with its transportation needs, while honoring the traditions of local control and building adequate housing. Until now, it's been failure on nearly every front.

Sprawl has been the name of the game, largely because builders find it easier and cheaper to build on the periphery of cities. Home dwellers end up commuting long distances, adding to air pollution and congestion, and forcing the state to spend highway dollars trying to clean up the mess.

The California Environment Quality Act, a sacred cow in the state, also distorts the picture. Opponents of affordable housing and infill projects often have used CEQA to block infill developments. No wonder most builders have chosen to stay on the periphery.

Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, has crafted an agreement that tackles these multiple dysfunctions. Senate Bill 375 has received endorsements from an unlikely coalition that includes environmental groups, builders, local government leaders and others.

Some are calling it the state's most significant land-use bill since passage of the California Coastal Act in 1976. Under the legislation, each metropolitan region would have to adopt a "sustainable community strategy" to encourage compact development, transit and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

Each strategy would be the product of local meetings, and regions would have to include these strategies within their regional transportation plans. The Air Resources Board would then provide each region with targets for reducing emissions and determine if each region was on track to meet those targets.

Regions wouldn't be required to meet these targets, but they'd have a strong incentive to do so. Those areas with effective Blueprint-style plans would get a leg up in obtaining \$5 billion in transportation funds the state disperses yearly.

Builders in these regions would also get relief from certain CEQA reviews if they built projects consistent with the strategies. In addition, cities would get extra time -- eight years instead of five -- to update their housing plans that are required by state law. They'd also have to zone land for housing within three years.

SB 375 is complex, and it still must undergo hearings in the Assembly. From the looks of it, however, incoming Senate leader Steinberg has managed a breakthrough on managing the state's growth that doesn't impinge on local control.

Builders, who oppose regional planning but are looking at a future of \$5 gasoline, say they like the bill because it limits their risk of litigation. Many environmentalists are also enthusiastic.

The Legislature will now need to examine the finer details. Barring any surprises, the bill should pass the Senate and go to the governor's desk.

[Tri-Valley Herald, Commentary, Thursday, August 7, 2008](#)

Beijing is just blowing hot air

By Ann Killion - MediaNews columnist

BEIJING — China's Controversy of the Day on Wednesday was the fallout over U.S. athletes who wore breathing masks when they disembarked from their airplane.

Well, that and the enormous "Tibet Will Be Free" banner unfurled near the Bird's Nest's stadium. But that controversial item was quickly confiscated, the protesters were apprehended and most Chinese will never know the incident happened. Situation controlled.

But the Olympic hosts are finding it a tad more difficult to control the air quality. The Chinese are learning you can't dictate to Mother Nature.

And, to be honest, Mama N. seems to be a little peeved.

I spent Wednesday walking around the Forbidden City, witnessing all the excitement and trappings of the Olympics. I just missed the torch relay, which this time didn't require the protection of Gavin Newsom. Locals were out before dawn in hopes of seeing such historic sights as Yao Ming holding the torch aloft below the portrait of the other most famous Chinese icon, Chairman Mao. The public was proud. The volunteers were plentiful and helpful. The city was ready.

But as I stood at the Gate of Heavenly Purity, I was inhaling impurity. I couldn't see from one end of China's ancient complex to the other. My eyes and lungs were burning. The air was so dense that it felt as though you could grab a chunk of it with your hands.

And the air isn't the only thing being laid on thick in Beijing.

The official response to China's biggest Olympic problem has bordered on the absurd.

The chairman of the International Olympic Committee's medical commission, Arne Ljungqvist, called the yellowish-gray haze "the mist in the air." A Chinese environmental official said the air quality wasn't dirty, just similar to steam from a bathtub. And IOC president Jaques Rogge dismissed concerns, saying that "the magic of the games" would solve everything.

About the only person who seems to be willing to tell the truth about the air quality was marathon record-holder Haile Gebreselassie, who withdrew from the world's premier marathon because of his concerns about air quality.

"I do not want to kill myself in Beijing," he said last spring.

These games have become so politicized that any criticism is point of tension. The American track cyclists who disembarked wearing breathing masks — a ridiculous action because were in an air-conditioned terminal — were forced to issue a carefully scripted apology.

"The wearing of protective masks upon our arrival into Beijing was strictly a precautionary measure we as athletes chose to take and was in no way meant to serve as an environmental or political statement," the statement said. "Our decision was not intended to insult (the Beijing organizing committee) or countless others who have put forth a tremendous amount of effort to improve the air quality."

But is dirty air a political issue? If so, are my lungs political dissidents?

Smog and heat are often an Olympic concern, as the Chicago 2016 contingent should know. They were issues in Atlanta in 1996, Athens in 2004 and most notably in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. But I lived in L.A. in the early 1980s, and the air quality was never as bad as what I experienced Wednesday.

Yet we're told not to believe our eyes or lungs.

"There may be bad visibility," Chinese environmental official Du Shaozhong said. "It's like when taking a bath in the bathroom. It doesn't mean there is pollution."

The Chinese government is used to saying black is white, dirty is clean, and having people buy it. But that's not going to work in this case, with thousands of guests descending on the city.

This isn't a political issue: A global effort to reduce pollution shouldn't be controversial. This isn't America vs. China — because we have little moral high ground to stand on when it comes to emissions control. This is a health issue for the athletes who are asked to give their all yet hear their sporting officials dabble in obfuscation and double talk.

It's hard to tell which is murkier: the air or the official response.