

News Briefs

Future of wood-burning stoves

Tracy Press, Friday, August 8, 2008

The [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) will have a meeting at 6:30 p.m. Aug. 19 at the Council of Governments Board Room, 555 E. Weber Ave., in Stockton, to discuss proposals for burning wood in fireplaces.

Lab withdraws explosive plans

Tracy Press, Friday, August 8, 2008

The Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory has withdrawn its application for an air pollution permit that would have allowed it to increase the amount of explosives blown up at its test pads at Site 300.

The tests were part of counterterrorism research, said lab spokesman Gordon Yano, but they are no longer needed because other ways were developed over time to get data that would have been yielded by the tests. Details of the research are classified, Yano said.

In 2006, the lab received a permit to increase the amount of TNT explosives tested at Site 300 from 1,000 pounds to 8,000 pounds, including individual blasts as big as 350 pounds and containing some radioactive elements, such as tritium and depleted uranium.

The [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](#) issued a permit, but it caused a stir because it received little publicity. Tracy activist Bob Sarvey, as well as representatives of the nearby Tracy Hills development, appealed the permit. In March of 2007, the permit was rescinded and the Livermore lab was forced to apply once again.

And though the lab has pulled its application now, it could submit another application "if and when there is a need to undertake experiments using larger amounts of explosives," a press release states.

In the meantime, open-air explosions up to 100 pounds per day and less than 1,000 pounds per year will continue at Site 300.

Sarvey said he was happy the lab pulled its application.

Lodians being taken for a ride

Commuters flock to ACE to avoid gas prices

By Ben Marrone

Lodi News Sentinel, Monday, August 11, 2008

As gas prices rose sharply over the past year, so did the number of riders using the Altamont Commuter Express train to make the daily trek from the Central Valley to the Bay Area.

The Stockton-to-San Jose commuter train logged an unprecedented 18 percent jump in average daily passengers compared to last year, giving 80,422 weekday rides last month compared to 62,384 in July 2007.

During that same period, average gas prices in the Stockton area went from about \$3 per gallon to \$4.35 per gallon, according to [gasbuddy.com](#). Prices have since dropped to \$3.98 per gallon, according to the Web site.

The recent increase means that at least one in six current ACE riders started using the commuter rail within the past year.

Members of the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission, the government agency that oversees the ACE train said the increase in passengers was great news for the Valley.

"I'm glad to see more people taking the train, absolutely," said Lathrop Mayor Kristy Sayles, one of seven rail commissioners. "It takes more people off of (Interstate) 205 and off of our freeway system, and it helps reduce [air pollution](#)."

Sayles said it was obvious that the spike came from drivers who were feeling pinched by rising gas prices, and predicted that more riders would come on board if gas prices continue to rise.

"I think that this is in direct correlation to gas prices at the pump," Sayles said. "If you continue to see a significant increase (in gas prices), we'll continue to see this increase on the rail and transit systems." Rail Commissioner and Manteca City Councilman John Harris agreed that rising gas prices accounted for much of the train's newfound popularity, but also added that improved punctuality was giving the rail service a boost.

The ACE trains run on tracks owned by Union Pacific, and problems coordinating with the rail giant's cargo trains led to frequent delays during much of 2006 and 2007.

"Our on-time percentage has really gone up dramatically," Harris said. "It was down in the '70s and now it's up to 89 and 90 percent on-time."

The Altamont Commuter Express runs four round trips each day, leaving the Lathrop station between 4:38 and 9:48 a.m. That schedule has not changed since a late-morning route was added in August, 2006.

The Rail Commission voted in April 2007 to add space for a growing number of passengers by buying four more bi-level rail cars, which began to arrive last week.

ACE spokesman Thomas Reeves said the train has not yet reached full capacity on any routes, but adding the new cars will "make it a little more comfortable" for riders.

The ACE train has also added several amenities over the past year, including free wireless Internet access and classes on the train led by local college instructors.

And while fare revenue has been rising — \$4.3 million from July 2007 to June 2008, compared to \$3.9 million the year before — Reeves said that ACE is also feeling the squeeze from higher fuel costs.

Of the Rail Commission's \$16.2 million budget, \$1.8 million is expected to go toward fuel costs next year, compared with the \$1.35 million last year.

Reeves said the Rail Commission is also likely to enact a 3 percent fare increase that had been postponed last year due to the tough economic environment, but it would not take effect for several months.

The current fare for the two-hour ride from Lathrop to San Jose is \$19.25 for a round trip or \$278.50 for a monthly pass.

Kern's green energy boom: Firms grabbing land for wind, solar

BY Stacey Shepard

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, August 11, 2008

While the high price of crude has sent local oil companies into a pumping frenzy, Kern County has quietly experienced another energy boom - one that would make T. Boone Pickens proud.

Applications for utility-scale renewable energy projects have flooded into local permitting agencies the past two years, driven by state mandates and a scramble by companies for a piece of land in Kern's sunny and windy open terrain.

The trend has positioned Kern to become one of the state's major producers of clean energy.

"We're not moving away from oil, we're just diversifying our portfolio," said Kern Economic Development Corporation President Richard Chapman.

The Bureau of Land Management is currently processing two dozen applications for wind and solar projects in the eastern Kern desert. Meanwhile, the Kern County Planning Department has received applications for wind and solar as well as a biogas pipeline and sludge-to-energy plant.

What's more, some wind and solar developers are looking for workers. Local community colleges are jumping on board with programs to train them, a sign to industry observers that Kern is well poised to be a player in the new energy sector.

"If you have community colleges training folks, that's the barometer in a sense," said Ron Pernick, co-founder and managing director of Clean Edge Inc., a research and publishing firm that tracks the clean technology industry. "I'm seeing that throughout the country in places that have these burgeoning clean energy sectors. It's a critical component."

A MIGHTY WIND

Interest in wind energy has so far outpaced any other renewable energy projects.

At least 27 wind farms have been proposed in eastern Kern County.

The growth is due to several factors.

Kern's wind farms now generate 710 megawatts of wind energy, but that's expected to grow by an additional 4,500 megawatts in the next decade due to the ongoing construction of Southern California Edison's Tehachapi Transmission line project.

"We're very bullish on Kern County," said Mike Marelli, who oversees Southern California Edison's renewable energy procurement group. "We said this is a renewable rich area and we should build (a transmission line) out there."

Also, Kern got into the wind game early. Zoning and environmental concerns have been streamlined. Now, companies can build projects more quickly here than elsewhere in the state.

In addition, there is little community resistance to wind projects here, unlike areas such as the Antelope Valley, which has vast wind resources but has opposed wind energy development.

"We've had these since the '80s. We're used to them, our residents are used to them and we have the zoning in place so they don't impact residences or other property," said Lorelei Oviatt, a county planner who oversees renewable energy projects. "The center of wind in California is going to be Kern County."

SOLAR WILDCATTERS

While wind is now a mature industry in Kern, the business of converting sunlight to energy is in the early stages.

There are no utility-scale solar plants in Kern County yet, though dozens have been proposed in the Mojave Desert as part of a massive land grab that's taken place in recent years. In Kern, four projects are proposed for BLM land and two others are slated for private land in the desert.

The most promising so far is a solar thermal plant near California City proposed by Beacon Solar LLC that would supply electricity to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

eSolar, a solar start-up backed by Google, is also planning to build a solar thermal plant in southeast Kern to supply Southern California Edison, according to the utility company. When contacted, eSolar officials declined to comment on the project.

Several reasons have been given for solar's slow development until now. The industry says inconsistent government policies and tax credit programs have hindered companies' ability to secure financing.

Oviatt, however, points to the fact that solar companies are a different breed than wind. Many are start-ups that have no previous experience building solar plants. They're still developing their technology and new to the regulatory process.

She calls them the "wildcatters," the oil industry term for a speculative drilling operation.

"Many of these companies are people who have never done a project and it's a very new and exciting area," she said. "That was where wind was at in the 1980s."

IT'S A GAS

The surge in renewable power proposals is largely in response to new demand created by the state's Renewables Portfolio Standard, enacted in 2002. Under the mandate, renewables sources must comprise 20 percent of a utility's power mix by 2010. While the new market has created a boon for wind and prompted a speculative rush in the solar industry, local companies are also finding ways to capitalize.

BioEnergy Solutions, a Bakersfield-based company started by local attorney and dairyman David Albers, is selling natural gas from manure lagoons at dairies to Pacific Gas and Electric. The company's first system went online at Alber's Fresno County dairy in March. Plans are also underway for a project in Kern. The company has applied for permits to build a 10-mile pipeline to collect gas from several large dairies west of Shafter.

A local sludge composter also plans to sell PG&E electricity produced at a sludge-fueled power plant.

Liberty Compositing in Lost Hills, one of the state's largest sludge composter, has applied for permits to build the power plant where electricity would be made through the combustion of biogases given off when the sludge is heated.

New air pollution regulations are a primary reason for the Liberty's plans to move away from composting, but the new demand for renewable energy provided a boost for the project, said company president Patrick McCarthy.

"It's a more environmentally friendly method of handling the waste stream that has a prolonged life to it," McCarthy said. "It's not a flash in the pan. It generates a commodity in the form of renewable energy."

LOOKING FOR JOBS

Kern stands to benefit from the renewables push through jobs and new business growth, but that will largely depend on the extent to which the industry branches out locally.

Fiberset, a Mojave fiberglass shop, is about to get into the game.

Until now, Fiberset had primarily contracted with aerospace industry and has worked on several large projects with NASA to develop new flight technologies. But it recently landed a major contract, with a company it wouldn't name, to develop a next-generation wind turbine technology.

The company's foray into wind puts it in a good position for growth, said CEO and founder Marie Walker.

"It's a really exciting time," Walker said. "We feel like we did 24 years ago with NASA. Here we go again, we're on the ground floor of this emerging industry and we're going to hit the ground running."

With the average solar farm employing about 60 people, according to the Kern Economic Development Corporation's Chapman, solar and wind farms alone won't generate enough jobs and grow the local renewable economy.

"We need to do the research and development locally, and do the assembly locally," Chapman said. "If we just have it installed here, it doesn't help us."

Even so, the wind industry is already clamoring for employees. In response, Cerro Coso Community College will start offering courses this fall in wind turbine technology. The course is part of a larger program the college is developing to train technicians to work in the wind, solar, hydroelectric and geothermal industries.

Bakersfield College is also developing some new courses specific to wind and other renewable industries.

Rural agricultural burn ranges out of control

By DJ Becker

Madera Tribune, Saturday, August 9, 2008

A blowing ember from a controlled agricultural burn reportedly destroyed about 120 acres of pasture and grasslands on the Urrutia Ranch and Madera Irrigation District property along Avenue 12, west of Road 16, Thursday.

Lisa Anderson, Madera County battalion fire chief, said her investigation indicated the initial agricultural burn was permitted and allowable under agriculture burning provisions, but the fire was reportedly left unattended and no one saw the grass across the road begin to burn.

"It was a wind-driven fire, with northwest winds of about 5 to 10 miles per hour," she said. "No structures were threatened. But it is valuable range land for the people that run their cattle on the land."

Anderson said fighting summer grass fires taxes firefighters and local fire resources.

"It strains the whole valley," Anderson said. "I had to have other engines cover our stations. I was really grateful for the engines and personnel from Firebaugh."

Cattle were moved into an adjacent pasture area and no stock losses were reported.

Firefighters spent about five hours in 100-degree temperatures mopping up the burning remnants of the pasture fire, according to Anderson.

A representative from the Fresno/Madera Air Pollution Control District said the fire was under investigation, and that the originator of the fire could be cited for allowing the fire to escape the areas of the permitted burn.

Madera County fire engines 1,3, 19, support 19, water tender 1, and two engines from the City of Firebaugh assisted. No injuries were reported.

Residents raise stink over farm

Ammonia release from manure lagoon sparks plans for suit

By Reed Fujii

Stockton Record, Monday, August 4, 2008

FRENCH CAMP - A number of French Camp residents and an animal welfare group said last week they plan to take Olivera Egg Ranch to federal court over the release of ammonia from the farm.

Under federal law, the citizens' group must give a 60-day notice to the egg ranch and federal and state authorities about its intent to file suit. After the notice is delivered, the action should be filed in federal court in Sacramento.

In a news release, one such resident, Jeffrey Origer, a self-employed plumber, said he had to seal his home and use air filters to try to keep the noxious odor out. And because of the pollution, he said he and his wife "get sore throats all the time. Two to four times a year I've gone to Urgent Care for upper respiratory infections, and I can't breathe."

Peter Brandt, senior attorney with the Humane Society of the United States, which is joining the French Camp neighbors in the legal action, said the group intends to file suit under two U.S. laws concerning the release of [hazardous materials into the air](#).

"In a nutshell, the two federal laws require notice to government agencies whenever more than 100 pounds of ammonia is released. Our experts looked at this farm, and in their expert opinion, it can release up to 1,800 pounds of ammonia per day," he said.

Some of the neighbors live less than 400 feet from a 16-acre lagoon where manure and other waste from the ranch's 700,000 to 800,000 chickens are collected, Brandt added. "It's no surprise their lives are made miserable."

Edward Olivera, managing partner of the egg farm, said last week that he had just received a copy of the notice.

"I'm currently in the process of engaging legal representation to properly respond to these allegations," he said.

He also said he was surprised that he could face legal action over ammonia emissions.

In planning to build a new egg ranch in Lathrop, a project that drew objections from that community and the developer of an adjoining residential subdivision, Olivera said state clean-air officials told him they would not even require a permit if it held less than 500,000 birds.

That project, to be built in stages with up to 900,000 layers and to eventually replace the existing French Camp facility, is on hold.

The San Joaquin County Environmental Health Department has previously dealt with complaints about the egg ranch operation, primarily dealing with flies drawn to the manure and, to a lesser degree, odor control, said Robert McClellon, program coordinator.

Those have led to directions for improved manure management and some monitoring programs.

And while Environmental Health does not directly deal with the issue of ammonia emissions, McClellon said, what emanates from the Olivera ranch is much the same as one would find at dairies and other egg ranches in the county.

"Any time you have a confined animal situation, ... you're going to have ammonia emissions," he said.

The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed modifying its hazardous release rules to specifically exempt emissions from animal waste. Officials reason those regulations were intended to cover situations requiring an emergency response to protect lives and ensure proper cleanup.

"We cannot foresee a situation where the agency would take any future response action as a result of such notification of releases of hazardous substances from animal waste at farms, because in all instances, ... an emergency response (seems) unnecessary, impractical and unlikely," officials said in the Federal Register on Dec. 28.

Odor issues continue for rendering plant

By Wesley DeBerry

Modesto Bee, Monday, August 11, 2008

Local residents continue to have complaints about a Sacramento County rendering plant, a battle that is about a decade old.

The aroma from the plant's daily operation of recycling animal waste materials is a nuisance to some nearby residents, who have moved into new homes.

Rendering plant officials declined to comment. When the issue was first raised by developers in the early 1990s, they argued that the plant has the right to continue to operate because it was there first.

The Sacramento Rendering Co. has occupied its 11350 Kiefer Blvd. site since 1955, long before there were any housing developments in sight.

Anatolia residents Jared and Cari Ricci said they have noticed an unpleasant odor during the evening hours on average a couple of times a week.

"It's usually gone by the morning," Jared Ricci said.

Mather resident Nancy Sweet said the smell has lessened since she first moved to community in 2005. However, she said, a couple of times a week she will notice a foul smell.

Some residents have filed complaints with the [Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District](#), the agency that enforces state and federal air quality standards. The rendering company does have equipment to minimize odors, officials said.

They also said they don't expect the issue to go away anytime soon.

The plant has an oxidizer that is similar to an air purifier that heats up the fumes from plant production.

"A lot of those things that we think of as being odors are often times flammable," said Mark Loutzenhiser, program supervisor at the air quality district. "So if you burn them, you can break them down from whatever their formula was into carbon dioxide so you hopefully don't smell it."

The plant also has scrubbers, to help fight odors. The scrubbers are liquid-filled cylinders in which operational gas enters and is absorbed.

Paul Niemann of Kavala Ranch moved just down the road from the rendering plant one month ago. He said he hasn't smelled anything.

However, there were 165 recorded complaints in 2007 and 23 complaints so far this year, according to air quality records.

Loutzenhiser said the number of complaints from residents has put the plant "basically under a microscope." On average, a normal source is inspected once a year.

But the rendering company had 23 units inspected over 11 days in in 2007 and 19 units inspected so far in 2008 over eight days, according to air quality records.

Seven violations were recorded in 2007, according to air quality records. The plant has had no violations in 2008. A single malfunctioning pressure gauge can cause a violation, officials said.

"Even if they have a permit violation, it may not mean that the process wasn't working properly," said Christina Ragsdale, program coordinator for the air quality district.

Despite all the regulations, inspections and complaints, a foul odor radiated near Kiefer Boulevard by the plant on Thursday evening.

"People think, 'Why can't you stop it from smelling?' Well, it's complicated," Ragsdale said.

Vineyards court certification

“Sustainable’ fruit slated to hit the market in 2009

By Cecilia Parsons

Capital Press, Friday, August 8, 2008

Twelve Central Coast winegrape growers are currently participating in a pilot program to qualify for certification to verify that their crops are sustainably farmed.

If all goes well, wine made with "Certified Sustainable Grown" fruit will enter the marketplace in 2009.

The Central Coast Vineyard Team, a non-profit grower-group promoting sustainable wine-growing through agricultural research and education, rolled out the program this year. Jill Whitacre, program coordinator, said the certification was developed over four years to identify sustainable practices.

"We began with self assessment back in 1996, with our Positive Points System," said Whitacre. "The success of self-evaluation among farmers generated discussions of a third-party certification in 2000. After much consideration, a committee was formed in 2004 to develop the farming standards. Today, we celebrate new and exciting opportunities for wine growers to make a meaningful sustainability claim that is independently verified."

The committee and technical advisors developed a comprehensive set of standards, which were reviewed by more than 30 state, federal, environmental, social, agricultural, and university representatives.

Areas addressed include biodiversity, social equity, human resources, community involvement, energy efficiency, air quality, water quality and conservation and practices that reduce risk.

Once a grower completes these standards and provides significant documentation, an independent, third-party auditor reviews the information at the vineyard. Following the final end-season documentation, an independent advisory board, based on recommendation and reporting by the auditor, will grant certification.

Pilot vineyards range from 3 acres to 1,200 acres. Most are now in the auditing stage, and certification decisions are expected in late August.

Amy Freeman, vineyard manager for Sausalito Canyon, one of the pilot program participants, said their pursuit towards sustainability involved a flock of sheep borrowed from Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo. From leaf fall to bud break, a period of three to four months, the sheep grazed the vineyards, keeping down weeds and adding fertilizer to the soil.

Sausalito Canyon's 12 acres of vines include some of the oldest in the state, dating back to the 1880s, she said. The majority of the vines are also dry farmed. Freeman said the biggest challenge for her was the documentation and record keeping of sustainable practices in vineyard management.

Other participants in the pilot program include: Castoro Cellars of Templeton, D'Anbino Vineyards and Cellars of Paso Robles, Halter Ranch Vineyards of Paso Robles, Jackson Family Wine Estates, Laetitia Vineyard and Winery in Arroyo Grande Valley, Pacific Vineyard Company of San Luis Obispo, Pomar Junction Vineyard, Robert Hall Winery of Paso Robles, Paraiso Vineyards of Monterey County, Sausalito Canyon of upper Arroyo Grande Valley and Wolff Vineyards of San Luis Obispo.

The third party auditor is FJ "Chip" Sundstrom. He has been executive director of the California Crop Improvement Association at the University of California-Davis, and since 2004 has

managed his own consulting company providing organic and sustainability consulting and auditing services.

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Rain, rain: Beijing pollution washes away

By Tini Tran

Washington Post, Monday, August 11, 2008

BEIJING -- The downpour that washed out Olympic events in tennis, archery and rowing on Sunday also cleared up much of Beijing's dirty air.

On Monday, the city's air pollution levels dropped by more than half, registering a level of 38 _ falling within the World Health Organization's guidelines for healthy air. It was the first significant drop in the air pollution index since the beginning of August.

Heavy rains that drenched the city on Sunday continued into Monday with sporadic showers, replacing the recent hot and muggy patch of weather with cooler temperatures averaging 25 degrees Celsius (77 Fahrenheit), though humidity remained relatively high.

Beijing's notorious pollution has been a concern for Olympic organizers and U.S. athletes from the start. Chinese officials have taken drastic measures to curb the sources of pollutants, shutting down scores of factories, stopping constructions and removing 2 million vehicles from the road for a two-month period.

The effect has been far less than what China had hoped for. Since the measures began on July 20, Beijing has only seen a handful of days where the level of particulate matter _ tiny dust particles that are the worst pollutant _ was within the range of what the WHO considers healthy.

The Associated Press has been taking independent air samples from the Olympic Green, the primary sports thoroughfare, since mid-July. Readings on Monday showed a huge drop in particulate concentration from the day before, though levels remained three times higher than Beijing's official numbers.

Experts have said polluted air is unlikely to cause long-term damage to athletes' health, though it can exacerbate problems for those with asthma or allergies. The biggest concern has been whether performance could be hurt.

U.S. tennis player Sam Querrey said the air quality on Monday wasn't a factor in his match, but he said it could create issues for those playing both singles and doubles on the same day.

"I think the rain this last day and a half helped. But the first two days when we got here, I was struggling with the pollution, the heat, the humidity," Querrey said. "You could really feel it in your lungs when you started to breathe heavily."

Querrey said he has been struck by the visible smog that settled over the city for the past week.

"I did not think it was going to be like that. I have yet to see blue sky or sun. I thought maybe there was going to be a small smog layer in patches, but it's literally a haze," he said.

Other athletes said they have had no choice but to cope.

"We've managed to adapt to the situation from home to China," said Siboniso Cele of South Africa, who is competing in slalom canoe. "There is some pollution, but for me, everything about the environment, I just take it out. I don't want an excuse. I can't control the environment and the pollution. I haven't tried any different things (like a mask) because in the race you have to do the race without the mask."

Great Britain's field hockey captain, Ben Hawes, took it in stride, pointing out that the air quality affects everyone equally. "Both teams were breathing the same air. We were more concerned with the heat and humidity," he said.

That sentiment was echoed by tennis star Rafael Nadal of Spain, who was so soaked with sweat during his match Monday that he left a wet patch on the concrete during a tumble.

"The problem is the humidity, no?" he said. "The (truth), I didn't feel nothing (from) the pollution. That didn't affect ... me. The problem is the humidity. I had to change the shirt every 10 minutes."

Rain showers bring relief from heat but not haze

By Tini Tran

Washington Post, Sunday, August 10, 2008

BEIJING -- The rain came and the heat went, but the haze remained Sunday at the Beijing Olympics.

Temperatures averaged a cooler 26 degrees Celsius (79 degrees Fahrenheit) _ down from highs of 34C and 93F over the past two days _ and officials were hopeful the dirty-white blanket that has enveloped the city would give way to cleaner, clearer skies.

"I think the blue skies will come, especially after today's rain," said Wang Wei, executive vice president of the Beijing organizing committee. "I have my fingers crossed."

The rain was predicted to last over the next few days, and officials hoped that would wash away the pollutants that have been accumulating in the windless, muggy weather of recent days. The city's air monitors again showed moderate pollution, with an official index of 82 _ similar to the previous day, but calculated using the 24 hours before noon Sunday. Monday's figures are expected to show a decline.

An independent sampling conducted by The Associated Press around the Olympic Green, the main sports thoroughfare, showed an unusually high amount of particulate matter combined with very low visibility.

"Today is raining and tomorrow will have rain, too. That will help reduce the air pollution level. We believe the current air flow will be helpful in the dispersion of pollutants in the air," said Wang Jianjie, deputy director of the Beijing Meteorological Bureau.

China has been holding its breath over the pollution that shrouded Beijing and threatened to overshadow its Olympic debut. The city's pollution levels _ typically at least two to three times higher than what the World Health Organization recommends for healthy air _ has been the focus of concerns by games organizers and athletes alike.

Despite employing large-scale measures to improve air quality through factory closures and traffic restrictions, the impact has been far less than what Beijing had hoped for.

The problem is that half of the pollution over the city comes from neighboring provinces, said Kenneth Rahn, an atmospheric chemist and professor emeritus at the University of Rhode Island, who has done research on meteorological data in China.

"You can control Beijing as much as you like, but you're not going to see much of an effect," Rahn said.

The skies haven't been clear since last weekend. The city's location, in a basin ringed by mountains, has only exacerbated conditions. Scientists say only a major weather front _ bringing wind and rain _ can help sweep away pollution.

"They better pray to the Mongolian rain gods," Rahn said.

But while rain might help the air, it could mar China's long-awaited debut on the world stage.

Meteorological officials claimed Sunday that they had succeeded in warding off thundershowers from the opening ceremony by firing more than 1,000 "rain-dispersal" rockets in the largest operation of its kind in the country.

"On the day of opening ceremonies, we had rain clouds in the southwest and northwest. They were moving closer to the Bird's Nest, and there was a high probability of rain," said Wang

Jianjie, deputy director of the Beijing Meteorological Bureau. "Had we failed, we would surely have had precipitation."

China has been experimenting with weather modification for decades, using a technique known as cloud-seeding to induce rainfall, though international scientists say there has never been proof that such methods produce results.

A total of 1,110 rockets loaded with silver iodide were launched from the Beijing area and Hebei province, said Zhang Qiang, deputy director of Beijing's Artificial Weather Modification Office. The idea was to "seed" the clouds to induce rain before it reached the National Stadium, and Chinese officials said it worked.

Friday night was remarkably humid _ spectators were drenched with sweat as they watched in the stands _ but no rain marred the four-hour opening ceremony. Precipitation was reported in areas west and south of Beijing.

And Sunday's weather?

"Today's rain is natural," Wang said.

Hot, humid conditions take toll on Olympic cyclists

By Michelle Kaufman

Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Saturday, Aug. 9, 2008

BEIJING Heavy smog continued to shroud the Olympic host city as competition got underway Saturday, and there was concern road cyclists would struggle mightily in the oppressive conditions as they raced 152.2 miles through a picturesque course that began near Tiananmen Square, wound past several famous landmarks, climbed into the foothills, and finished at the Great Wall.

They were the first athletes to face an outdoor endurance test at these Games, and the assumption was that if the average fan had trouble breathing and staying hydrated in the Chinese capital, surely cyclists exerting themselves over the longest course in Olympic history would be miserable afterward.

The race ended with seven loops through the hilly Juyongguan Pass, a picture-perfect region that houses the tombs of 13 Ming Dynasty emperors. Riders complained of "extreme" heat and humidity. American George Hincapie said, "I can count on one hand the number of races I've started to sweat before the race starts." German rider Gerald Michael Ciolek, who failed to finish, compared it to riding at high elevation "because you feel short of air."

Juan Jose Haedo of Argentina, who also pulled out early, said: "It feels like you have hot cream all over your body. Once you go full-gas, you cannot breathe."

Only 90 of 143 cyclists who started the race finished the 6-hour event.

But cyclists downplayed anxiety over pollution, and suggestions the conditions were unsafe. Though the pollution index has hovered higher than the World Health Organization recommends, and a whitish veil hangs over the city, experts and Olympic officials have repeatedly insisted athletes are not in danger if they compete outdoors.

"I know it looks bad, but I don't think it's as bad as it looks," said Levi Leipheimer, the highest-finishing American in 11th place. "Maybe I'll be coughing a little bit later, but I honestly don't feel the pollution. It actually felt good once we got in the hills and it was overcast, or whatever you call this."

Cyclists are used to adapting to extreme weather. They race in the snow, rain, blazing sun, and fog.

"We're professional cyclists, so we go all over the world, endure all kinds of conditions, and we're all dealing with the same thing," said American rider Jason McCartney. "I've raced in some pretty nasty places. I've raced in South America and Central America, where there are old cars are

dripping oil on the road, potholes in the pavement, and dogs in the road. We're used to it. This course here was on brand new pavement and it was beautiful."

Most of the cyclists admitted they were worried about the air quality before the race, and that is why they chose to go slower at the start than they normally would have. Usually they go all out for the first 25 miles or so, but this time, all but a few hung back before making a push as they left the city into clearer air in the countryside.

Beijing organizers have taken drastic efforts to clean the polluted air in recent months, shutting down factories and ordering half of their 3.3 million cars off the road until the Olympics are over. Still, there hasn't been a blue sky here since last Tuesday and the smog seemed to thicken as the week wore on.

"As we raced through the city, we looked up at the sky and were like, 'What is that?'" said American cyclist David Zabrinski, who didn't finish the race. "In Utah they say this is a haze. It's best to give things a happy name. In Salt Lake City we have inversions in the winter. It irritates your throat a little, but the USOC put air cleaners in our rooms and that has really helped."

The worst thing about the haze, the Olympians said, was that it kept them from getting better views of the dramatic scenery. The course went under Chairman Mao's portrait at the entrance to the Forbidden City. It went past the Temple of Heaven, the Lama Temple, the Bird's Nest Stadium, the Water Cube aquatic center, the Winter Palace, and the Badaling section of the Great Wall.

Gold medalist Samuel Sanchez of Spain, who sprinted past Italy's Davide Rebellin down the stretch, had nothing but praise for the course. "It was spectacular," he said. "To pass from Beijing and Tiananmen Square and climb along the Great Wall. China is a country full of history, dreams and incredible beauty."

American Christian Vande Velde compared it to an amusement park, and said the course was "the most epic place I've ever ridden."

On the eve of the Games, Jacques Rogge, the head of the International Olympic Committee, praised the Chinese authorities for having done "everything that is feasible and humanly possible to address (the pollution), calling their efforts "extraordinary."

He said the athletes were "safe" to compete, that their health would not be compromised, and that if pollution levels got worse, events could be postponed. He also insisted the thick haze that has enveloped the area for days is not pollution, but rather "a fog based on the basis of humidity and heat."

Whatever it is, it made for heavy breathing at the finish line. Leipheimer said he recalls only one other race with conditions as stifling. "The 1996 Tour of China."

[Fresno Bee commentary, Sunday, August 10, 2008:](#)

VALLEY'S TOP 10: Ways the Valley can help China clean its air for the Olympics:

10. Send radio talk-show hosts to Beijing to convince them dirty air is liberal hoax.
9. Valley's unemployed construction workers can build a blue-sky dome over Beijing.
8. Send Fresno's pedi-cabs to lighten the rickshaw load.
7. Have Valley do-gooders hold air-quality focus groups, emptying Beijing because of boredom.
6. Dispatch Coach Pat Hill to Olympic Village to point out that Beijing's air is better than what his players breathe in Fresno.
5. Let Alan Autry tell Olympic athletes that activist judges have phoned up the case for Beijing's bad air.
4. Point out that asthma can help with population control.
3. Have gross-polluting car crushing party in Beijing.
2. Let China borrow electric lawn mowers from Valley air district.
1. Loan out Legislature's budget blowhards for use as human fans around Olympic venues.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Monday, August 11, 2008](#)

Blueprint addresses 'trifecta' of valley issues

California has struggled for decades 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, resulting in development leapfrogging its way out of town. Home dwellers end up commuting long distances to work, adding to [air pollution](#) and congestion and forcing the state to spend highway dollars to clean up the mess.

The sacred cow of the California Environmental Quality Act also distorts the picture. Opponents of affordable housing and infill projects have used CEQA to block various in-town developments. No wonder many builders choose to stay on the periphery.

State Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, has crafted an agreement that tackles these multiple dysfunctions. Senate Bill 375, two years in the making, 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.

This is at the heart of the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint movement under way in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties. Each strategy would be the product of multiple local meetings, and regions would have to include these strategies within regional transportation plans.

The Air Resources Board then would provide each region with targets for reducing emissions, and would determine if each region is on track to meet the targets. Regions wouldn't be required to meet the targets, but they'd have a strong incentive to do so. Those with effective blueprint-style plans would get a leg up in obtaining some of the \$5 billion in transportation funds the state disburses yearly.

Builders also would 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 housing plans required by the state. They'd also have to zone land for housing within three years.

SB 375 is complex and must undergo hearings and analysis 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 long have opposed regional planning but are looking at a future of \$5 gasoline, say they like the bill because it limits their risk of litigation. "We get more certainty in the process," said Ray Becker, chairman of the California Building Industry Association.

Many environmentalists also are enthusiastic. Tom Adams, president of the California League of Conservation Voters and a force in drafting this bill, said Steinberg had managed a "trifecta of the impossible" by dealing with the challenges of transportation, housing and climate change.

The Assembly now needs to examine the finer details. Barring surprises, they should send it to the Senate for concurrence, and then on to the governor's desk.

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Friday August 8, 2008:](#)

Don't tear up bike path

As an avid bicycle rider living in northwest Bakersfield, I was infuriated when I read about the recent court ruling that may result in a 1.4 mile portion of the Class 1 bike path being torn up so

that Morning Drive can be made into a dirt road. I read the story in *The Californian* and on BikeBakersfield's Web site, www.bikebakersfield.org.

I've never ridden on the affected section of the bike path yet, but want to soon. Bakersfield already needs more bicycle paths, and destroying this section would severely impact the bike path system we do have already.

I want to urge the city to fight this ruling and keep the bike path intact, as well as build more Class 1 bike paths around town. It would save them the cost of converting Morning Drive into a dirt road, as well as help improve our [air quality](#).

BRYAN JACKSON, Bakersfield

[LA Daily News, Letter to the Editor, Monday August 11, 2008, Re: "The Airbus A380: Runway Model":](#)

Airbust

The Los Angeles City Council has considered regulating the use of fireplaces and barbecues to enhance air quality. Citizens are asked to conserve water and shun plastic bags. Our children are disturbed by pictures of polar bears drowning due to melted polar ice. And now comes Airbus' new luxury plane, hailed as some glorious achievement in flight.

Never mind that this behemoth will spew more particulate and fuel exhaust into our air than any other craft currently used. Never mind that jet fuel has never been subjected to the same EPA requirements as gasoline.

No, forget about saving the planet; it is obvious that the rich care only about going out in style, and that LAX will be all too happy to accommodate them.

- PATRICK HUMERICK

North Hollywood