

Smog: A \$2 million idea that hasn't caught on

By Mark Grossi, Fresnobee.com, Monday, March 16, 2009

About two years ago, the air district decided to track chronic-polluter vehicles through state records and offer the owners money to get the cars off the road.

Backed by \$2 million in funding, it seemed like a winning innovation. Except, it hasn't worked.

Officials have sent invitations to the owners of more than 4,000 cars, and only 41 vehicles have been taken off the road. The incentive is \$1,000 to get the polluting vehicles crushed. Or, the owner can get \$5,000 toward the purchase of a clean-running vehicle.

This week, the district board will hear a proposal to spend nearly \$100,000 to promote the program and help people better understand the mission.

The board meeting will be at 9 a.m. at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., the Fresno headquarters of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Clean school buses nothing to sniff at

LAUSD: Alternative fuel to be dispensed at new fuel depot

By Sue Doyle, Staff Writer

In the L.A. Daily News, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

SUN VALLEY - As part of a plan to replace diesel-belching school buses with a fleet of cleaner cousins, Los Angeles public school officials Monday unveiled their second alternative-fuel station.

The Sherman Way depot dispenses compressed natural gas to 40 new school buses that are already transporting San Fernando Valley students. The new vehicles are slowly replacing the Los Angeles Unified School District's fleet of 1,300 diesel buses.

Sixty more of these low-emission buses are expected to soon zip students across Valley streets as the district pursues millions of dollars in state grants to shrink its carbon footprint. The district is also snapping up hundreds of vehicles operating on clean fuels like propane and biodiesel.

Julie Korenstein, an LAUSD board member, recalled a time when people who talked about cleaner-fueled school buses drew snickers and were labeled tree huggers. But, she said, times have changed.

"And now the whole world are tree huggers," Korenstein said as she introduced the new station. "We are way ahead of other transportation systems."

The 40 buses were bought through a \$6 million state grant, administered by the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Seeking 420 additional alternative-fuel buses, the district has applied for \$90 million in grants through Prop 1B, the \$20 billion transportation bond voters approved in 2006. Money from the \$7 billion Measure Q and the \$3.9 billion Measure Y are also paying for the new buses.

For each clean-fuel bus purchased with the grants, an older diesel-run bus must be pulled out of circulation and crushed, said Enrique Boull't, LAUSD transportation branch director. "That's the whole intent," Boull't said.

The district has already used compressed natural gas on 132 buses serving the South Bay since 2001. It now has 172 buses using compressed natural gas.

Also, some 100 school buses in the district use ultra-low emission gasoline; 93 use biodiesel; and plans have been approved to buy 90 buses this summer that run on propane, Boull't said.

Compressed natural gas-operated vehicles reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 21 percent compared to regular gasoline or diesel, said Leo Thomason, executive director of the Natural Gas Institute, a Las Vegas-based education and consultation company.

Thomason said the natural gas doesn't emit particles into the air that create smog-like haze, which contributes to respiratory and cardiovascular health problems.

"Children can smell the exhaust fumes on regular diesel-powered school buses," Thomason said. "But on compressed natural gas, there's nothing to smell. And it's substantially cleaner."

Thomason said that 85 percent of the natural fuel is produced in the United States, with the rest coming from Canada.

More than 130,000 vehicles on U.S. roads use compressed natural gas and nationwide there are about 767 compressed-natural-gas stations. The nation's first compressed natural gas-powered public bus hit the streets in L.A. in 1996. Today nearly 98 percent of Metro's fleet, about 2,500 buses, operate on compressed natural gas.

\$8 billion could help revive travel by train

By Marilyn Adams

USA TODAY, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

Americans started falling out of love with trains 50 years ago, when thrilling silver airliners left locomotives far behind.

Now, President Obama and leaders in more than 30 states say it's time to embrace trains again — but newer, faster ones that can transport passengers past gridlocked airports and highways on electrified railroads at up to 200 mph.

They're betting billions of federal and state dollars that high-speed railroads can someday move travelers between major U.S. cities within two or three hours just as they do in Western Europe and Japan. And along the way, they argue, such systems can ease travel congestion, reduce the nation's dependence on oil, cut pollution and create jobs.

"For so long, Americans have viewed the automobile and the airplane as our transportation vehicles," says Anne Canby, a former transportation secretary for Delaware and train advocate. "Until now, rail hasn't been a major player in the discussion."

Driving the new-found interest in trains is \$8 billion that was tucked into the president's economic stimulus legislation signed last month.

The Department of Transportation is to distribute the money to embryonic high-speed rail projects around the country and to Amtrak, the national passenger rail service, to develop high-speed technology.

The government isn't wasting time. By next month, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood is required to issue a strategic plan detailing how DOT will use the \$8 billion. By June, his department is required to tell states how to apply for grants.

Eleven proposed high-speed rail corridors on the West Coast, Texas, the Great Lakes states, the Southeast, Florida and the Northeast will be vying for a piece of the stimulus money.

Competition "is going to be pretty severe," Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle says.

Doyle just returned from Spain, where he rode that country's high-speed Talgo system linking its capital, Madrid, to other major Spanish cities.

Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Indiana and Ohio are pitching a high-speed rail network linking Chicago to big cities in those states, including Milwaukee, Minneapolis/St. Paul, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Cincinnati and Detroit — trips that could be made within a couple of hours.

"People in this country don't appreciate what modern rail travel is," says Doyle, referring to the 180 mph Talgo system. "It is as smooth as riding in an airplane without any turbulence."

He says the Midwestern states don't envision a true high-speed system immediately. The first priority is making upgrades that would allow trains between Chicago and Milwaukee, for example, to travel at least 80 mph.

Designing, engineering, construction, operation and maintenance of new rail systems could create many U.S. jobs, rail advocates say.

"This would create a completely new industry here," says Rod Diridon, a member of California's High-Speed Rail Authority.

Diridon says his system is a leading candidate for funding because it would be a true high-speed train, and the state already has won environmental approvals. California voters approved issuing \$10 billion in bonds to help pay for the system.

California's proposed express from San Francisco to Los Angeles would take about 2½ hours at 220 mph. "It would be faster downtown to downtown than flying," Diridon says.

As large as it sounds, \$8 billion wouldn't begin to design and construct a true high-speed system in which rails are dedicated to high-speed trains. The California system alone would cost about \$50 billion to complete.

"I see this as us making a down payment," says Mark Yachmetz, a top official at the Federal Railroad Administration. "It's the beginning of the renaissance of rail in this country."

Ultimately, so-called trip time — the travel time door-to-door vs. an auto or plane — will be the standard by which rail proposals will be judged.

Amtrak's recent track record gives hope to high-speed rail enthusiasts. The railroad carried a record 10.9 million passengers along the densely populated Northeast corridor last year. It has become a serious competitor of airlines there because the major cities — including Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington — are relatively close together.

Last year, Amtrak data show it accounted for 63% of the combined air and rail passenger traffic between Washington, D.C., and New York City compared with 50% four years earlier. Between New York and Boston, Amtrak's share of the traffic was 49% last year vs. 39% in 2004.

Many riders in the Northeast chose Amtrak's electrified Acela — the closest thing to a high-speed train in the USA. It makes few stops and runs at speeds up to about 135 mph.

Acela has shown, "We can do high-speed rail and reduce the trip time enough to make rail competitive with air," Amtrak CEO Joe Boardman says.

8 Dems oppose quick debate on global warming bill

By Andrew Taylor - Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Monday, March 16, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Eight Senate Democrats are opposing speedy action on President Barack Obama's bill to combat global warming, complicating prospects for the legislation and creating problems for their party's leaders.

The eight Democrats disapprove of using the annual budget debate to pass Obama's "cap and trade" bill to fight greenhouse gas emissions, a measure that divides lawmakers, environmentalists and businesses. The lawmakers' opposition makes it more difficult for Democratic leaders to move the bill without a threat of a Republican filibuster.

The budget debate is the only way to circumvent Senate rules that allow a unified GOP to stop a bill through filibusters.

"Enactment of a cap-and-trade regime is likely to influence nearly every feature of the U.S. economy," wrote the Democratic senators, mostly moderates. They were joined by 25 Republicans. "Legislation so far-reaching should be fully vetted and given appropriate time for debate."

It takes 60 votes to overcome a filibuster in the Senate, but Democrats and allied independents currently control 58 seats.

Under a cap and trade system, the government would auction off permits to emit greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide. The auctions would raise almost \$650 billion over the next decade, with the cost passed on to consumers as higher energy prices.

The cap and trade proposal is highly controversial, especially in heavily industrialized states and regions where people get their electricity from coal-fired power plants. Obama's promise to use most of the revenue to award \$400 tax credits to most workers hasn't quelled the controversy since the increases in utility bills could easily exceed the amount of the tax cut.

The Democrats who signed the letter, addressed to the chairman and top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, were: Robert Byrd, W.Va.; Blanche Lincoln, Ark.; Mary Landrieu, La.; Carl Levin, Mich.; Evan Bayh, Ind.; Ben Nelson, Neb.; Bob Casey Jr., Pa.; and Mark Pryor, Ark.

The 25 Republicans were led by Sen. Mike Johanns of Nebraska.

Fast-track budget rules were used to enact President George W. Bush's tax cuts and two major budget bills during the Clinton administration, including a 1993 measure that failed to win a single GOP vote.

The House and Senate Budget committees are slated to vote on the budget resolution next week, with Senate debate scheduled for the week of March 30.

There also has been speculation that the expedited rules could be used to pass a health care overhaul bill, but senior Senate Democrats such as Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., oppose the idea, saying health reform must be enacted on a bipartisan basis.

The White House is open to the idea of using the fast-track rules for both global warming and health care.

"We would prefer not to start there, but we're not taking anything off the table at this point," White House budget chief Peter Orszag said last week.

Hybrid car sales go from 60 to 0 at breakneck speed

The gas-electric vehicles are piling up on dealers' lots as anxiety over gasoline prices evaporates. But more hybrid models are on the way.

By Ken Bensinger

L.A. Times, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

The Ford and Honda hybrids due out this month are among dozens planned for the coming years as automakers try to meet new fuel-efficiency standards and please politicians overseeing the industry's multibillion-dollar bailout.

Unfortunately for the automakers, hybrids are a tough sell these days.

Americans have cut back on buying vehicles of all types as the economy continues its slide. But the slowdown has been particularly brutal for hybrids, which use electricity and gasoline as power sources. They were the industry's darling just last summer, but sales have collapsed as consumers refuse to pay a premium for a fuel-efficient vehicle now that the average price of a gallon of gasoline nationally has slipped below \$2.

"When gas prices came down, the priority of buying a hybrid fell off quite quickly," said Wes Brown, a partner at Los Angeles-based market research firm Iceology. "Yet even as consumer interest declined, the manufacturers have continued to pump them out."

Last month, only 15,144 hybrids sold nationwide, down almost two-thirds from April, when the segment's sales peaked and gas averaged \$3.57 a gallon. That's far larger than the drop in industry sales for the period and scarcely a better showing than January, when hybrid sales were at their lowest since early 2005.

In July, U.S. Toyota dealers didn't have enough Prius models in stock to last two days, and many were charging thousands of dollars above sticker price for the few they had.

Today there are about 80 days' worth on hand, and dealers are working much harder -- even with the help of \$500 factory rebates -- to move the egg-shaped gas-savers off lots from Santa Monica to Miami.

This month, Honda is offering \$2,000 in cash, financing and leasing incentives to buyers of the formerly sold-out Civic hybrid, while a dealer in northern Michigan is dangling \$6,000 cash back to those willing to buy a hulking Chevy Tahoe hybrid.

Yet automakers believe they have little choice but to make more hybrids. Though car buyers are losing interest, politicians are pushing them as key to reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil and limiting the global-warming gases that cars emit into the atmosphere.

In January, President Obama called on the industry to "thrive by building the cars of tomorrow" and prepare for federal and state regulations that could push average fuel economy above 40 miles per gallon by 2020.

"The automakers are in the situation of needing to pacify politicians that are in the position to bail them out with expensive fuel-efficient cars," said Rebecca Lindland, auto analyst with IHS Global Insight. "But shouldn't it be more about satisfying the needs of the American consumer?"

Dubbed the Prius-fighter because of its similar looks and performance, the new Honda Insight hybrid is set to arrive on dealer lots in the next few weeks. Next year, the Japanese automaker will make a sporty hybrid coupe. Hyundai and Audi will deliver their first hybrids in 2010, and Toyota has a redesigned Prius and a new Lexus hybrid coming this spring. Toyota said Friday that it would make a subcompact hybrid priced below \$20,000 in 2011.

The biggest push is coming from Detroit. Ford plans to follow its new 41-mile-per-gallon Fusion and Mercury Milan hybrids with a battery-powered van in 2010 and a "family" of hybrids by 2012. And last month, in their request to the Obama administration for \$21.6 billion in additional bailout cash, both General Motors and Chrysler announced a hybrid onslaught.

Chrysler promised eight new hybrids or electric vehicles by 2015, and GM, which already sells eight hybrids, said 26 of the 33 cars it sells in 2015 won't run on gas alone, including the Chevrolet Volt, a plug-in hybrid due out next year.

The hybrid flood marks a lasting commitment to a powertrain technology that currently represents only about 2% of U.S. vehicle sales and, by most accounts, is deeply unprofitable.

Toyota said last year that it was finally making money on the Prius after nearly a decade producing it, but executives at other automakers acknowledge that they lose money on every hybrid sold. "If we were making money on the Civic hybrid, we weren't making a lot," Honda spokesman Chris Martin said.

That may help explain why fewer than 2 of every 100 Chevy Malibus sold last month had the hybrid powertrain and why Ford priced its new hybrid Fusion, which dealers expect to start receiving this month, \$8,000 above the gasoline-only version.

Ford expects to produce about 20,000 Fusion and Milan hybrids this year, or about 1% of its total production.

"It's a tough time to bring out almost any product right now," said George Pipas, the company's chief sales analyst. "But getting hybrids out right now is as much about image as anything else."

In November, months before Honda even announced the price of its new Insight, Jim Johnson of Eagan, Minn., plunked down a \$500 deposit for one.

"I asked to be on the waiting list, and the salesman said he didn't have one," said Johnson, who works in investments. "So I said, 'OK, I want you to start a waiting list.' "

As evident on the streets of cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, hybrids have an almost cult-like following, but getting the masses to buy them with any consistency is another matter. In their zeal to meet what seemed an insatiable appetite for hybrids in the middle of last year, carmakers may have gone too far, said IHS Global Insight's Lindland.

At the end of June, AutoNation, the country's largest chain of new-car dealerships, had only a two-day supply of Honda Civic hybrids and a 14-day supply of the non-hybrid Civic. By year's

end, the picture had flipped, with AutoNation holding 107 days' worth of regular Civics, compared with 148 days' stock of the hybrid version.

In December, Toyota terminated plans to build the Prius in a \$1.3-billion plant it had built in Mississippi, and Chrysler closed its only hybrid-producing factory.

"The price of gasoline dictates what people buy," AutoNation Chief Executive Mike Jackson said. "Gas fell to \$2, and now my lots are filled up with fuel-efficient cars that aren't moving."

Consumers who do buy these days tend to focus more on present-day arithmetic than long-term commodity speculation.

Three weeks ago, Jerome Haig, a lawyer in Torrance, put down a \$500 deposit on a Fusion hybrid, even though he hasn't even test-driven one because they have yet to hit lots. "I do like the idea of getting a hybrid," Haig said.

But he concedes that he might not have considered the car had it not been for a \$3,400 tax credit on Ford hybrids and a deduction on new-car sales tax. The latter was part of the \$787-billion federal stimulus package. "The tax advantages are a pretty big incentive."

A sales-tax deduction does little to move vehicles like the \$74,085 Cadillac Escalade hybrid or the Lexus LS600h, which starts at \$105,885. Neither gets better than 21 mpg, and buyers pay a premium over similar gasoline-only vehicles that would take decades to equal in fuel savings even if gas hit \$5 a gallon. So far this year, only 415 of the pair have sold nationwide.

Still, some consumers see the depressed hybrid market as a buying opportunity.

Chad Gallagher, a lawyer in Berkeley, took advantage of a Presidents Day promotion, plus a healthy measure of dealer desperation, to buy a fully loaded Prius last month for \$5,000 under sticker price.

"We got the touring package, leather seats, navigation, Bluetooth, everything," Gallagher said.

"I think they were just happy to sell the thing."

Environmentalists to sue EPA over pollution

By Susan Montoya Bryan, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—An environmental group is accusing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of not safeguarding public health in the West by failing to limit the transmission of air pollution across state lines.

The federal agency requires states to have plans aimed at addressing the interstate transport of ozone pollution and fine particles, but WildEarth Guardians said New Mexico and several other states do not have plans.

Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth Guardians' climate and energy program director, said his group will sue the agency if it fails to enforce the interstate transport requirements of the Clean Air Act.

"It's been an issue that has kind of been cast aside. It's not really important to the EPA," Nichols said. "... We're hopeful the EPA, now having this notice of intent to sue in front of them, will be a little more strict when it comes to dealing with the states on this issue."

The EPA issued a statement Monday saying it received the group's notice and would respond accordingly following a review.

WildEarth Guardians' concerns stem from a 2005 EPA finding that all 50 states had to adopt clean air plans to protect downwind states from ozone pollution and particles such as those found in smoke and haze.

EPA gave states a deadline of 2007, but Nichols said California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Oregon are still without plans.

"We just want to see clean air. We just want to see this problem dealt with," he said. "We're not just trying to make bureaucrats do unnecessary work here."

New Mexico turned in its plan in 2007 but the EPA has yet to approve it, said Jim Norton, head of the state Environment Department's Environmental Protection Division.

"I don't know why they haven't dealt with it yet. It might not be at the top of their list, but we did our part," Norton said.

Norton said the issue of interstate transport of air pollution isn't a problem for New Mexico like it is in other states.

But WildEarth Guardians argues that pollution problems in the West are on the rise. The group says Denver, Phoenix, Los Angeles and other cities have violated clean air standards limiting ozone, and the problem is popping up in rural areas such as the Four Corners region—where New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona and Utah meet.

The region is home to two coal-fired power plants and the San Juan Basin, one of the largest natural gas fields in the nation.

Scott Tipton, a Republican lawmaker from Colorado, recently asked state officials to help reduce pollution in the region. He said excessive emissions have traveled across state lines, clogging the air and damaging the health of southwestern Colorado residents.

WildEarth Guardians in December petitioned EPA to force New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming to revise their air quality regulations to strengthen ozone safeguards by 2013.

The group wants the agency to create a regional interstate commission to assess the degree of ozone pollution transport and strategies to combat the problem. The EPA has said it would review the petition.

According to WildEarth Guardians, all or portions of the 16 states are expected to exceed ozone pollution limits by 2018.

Fruit tree planters roll into OC — in veggie-powered buses

By Pat Brennan, environment editor
O.C. Register, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

Here's something you don't see every day: a caravan of vegetable-oil buses, chugging into the school parking lot and filled with volunteers carrying life-sized puppets, shovels and a variety of fruit trees for planting right there in the school yard.

The 2009 Fruit Tree Tour is on the road again, bringing its message about the perils of climate change to school children around the state. It's the sixth year of the tour, with two stops this week in Orange County.

"We've got the whole storyline explaining global warming," said Michael Flynn, an organizer with the Bay Area group. "It's a really fun way of getting kids engaged in their own communities. That's the vision."

The first OC stop, on Monday, was at Anneliese's School in Laguna Beach. The program starts with a time-travel play put on by the Fruit Tree volunteers — this is where the life-sized puppets come in — in an "eco hip-hop" style.

"A dorky professor takes a time machine back to 2009, to tell students across California what is happening in the future and how they need to make some big changes to avoid the future he came from," Flynn said. In the professor's time, "there weren't that many trees, the air wasn't clean enough to breathe, and clean drinking-water was really hard to come by."

After the play, it's on to the main event: planting up to 25 fruit trees, playing drums and writing rhymes about changes they hope to see in their communities.

"The trees are planted right on school grounds — apples, pears, nectarines, figs, oranges, persimmons — in such a way that students can harvest fruit off the trees all through the school season," Flynn said.

The next stop, on Tuesday, will be at Beatty Elementary School in Buena Park.

"The purpose is to inspire youth across California to develop a relationship with the earth, and to take care of the environment by actions in their own neighborhoods," Flynn said.

Colo officials vow to fight Four Corners pollution

By Steven K. Paulson, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

DENVER—Colorado's governor and attorney general pledged Monday to work to reduce air pollution in the Four Corners region after a state lawmaker asked for help resolving a decades-old dispute over emissions from a power plant on American Indian land.

Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter and Republican Attorney General John Suthers told the federal Environmental Protection Agency that ozone problems in San Juan County, N.M., could be mitigated with pollution controls at the plant on the Navajo Reservation.

A spokesman for one of the plant's owners said the facility already is in compliance with regulations regarding ozone levels and the environment.

Colorado state Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Cortez, asked state officials for help last week, saying pollution has crossed into southwestern Colorado, causing health problems.

Tipton said a mustard-colored cloud shrouds parts of the area and said that's unacceptable.

"Just as New Mexico would not accept toxic pollutants to be dumped by Colorado into the Rio Grande River, neither should Colorado allow avoidable pollutants to flow into our state from New Mexico," Tipton said.

Ritter urged the EPA to reconsider its decision to permit the proposed Desert Rock power plant in northwestern New Mexico, and also asked the EPA to require the installation of emissions controls at the existing Four Corners Power Plant located nearby.

"It is past time that we cleaned up the Four Corners Power Plant, one of the largest sources of air pollution in the country, so that we can reduce ozone, people can breath easier, and we can improve our western vistas towards what they used to be and should be," Ritter said.

Jim McDonald, a spokesman for Arizona Public Service, one of the owners of the plant, said Monday the Four Corners Power Plant is in compliance with all state and federal environmental laws and regulations.

"We take stewardship of the environment very seriously," he said. "And we put tremendous amounts of money into keeping the plant as clean as we possibly can."

McDonald said visibility problems at coal-fired plants usually come from sulfur dioxide, and the Four Corners facility has voluntarily reduced sulfur emissions by 65 percent since 2004. It also has initiated discussions with the EPA regarding nitrogen oxide controls, he said.

McDonald also noted that the Four Corners facility is not the only coal-fired plant in the region, and the 1,800-megawatt San Juan Generating Station, 15 miles west of Farmington, N.M., is closer to Colorado.

"You can't talk about (emissions) without talking about San Juan," McDonald said.

Tipton responded that his concerns are not limited to the Four Corners plant.

"It's that grouping of plants that are in that area," Tipton said. "Our contention is that the EPA standards there are arbitrary at best."

A spokesman for the San Juan plant could not immediately be reached for comment Monday night.

Suthers said if the EPA designates northwestern New Mexico as a "non-attainment area" because of high ozone levels, it would be unfair to southwestern Colorado as well.

Designation as a non-attainment area can bring stricter rules and other sanctions.

The 2,000-megawatt Four Corners Power Plant is about 25 miles west of Farmington, N.M.

Colorado officials have expressed disappointment that the EPA decided to approve the proposed 1,500-megawatt, coal-fired Desert Rock Energy Facility on Navajo land about 30 miles southwest of Farmington.

In the letter to Carol Rushin, acting regional administrator for the EPA, Colorado officials said Desert Rock would be a significant new source of pollutants.

Last year, an ozone monitor at New Mexico's Navajo Lake recorded ozone levels above federal standards. New Mexico officials say the reading was in error.

China: Importers need to share blame for emissions

By Dina Cappiello - Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Monday, March 16, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Countries buying Chinese goods should be held responsible for the heat-trapping gases released during manufacturing in China, one of its top officials said Monday.

The argument could place an even greater burden on the U.S. for reducing pollution blamed for global warming.

Li Gao, China's chief climate negotiator, said that any fair international agreement to curb the gases blamed for global warming would not require China to reduce emissions caused by goods manufactured there to meet demand elsewhere.

China has surpassed the U.S. as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. But 15 to 25 percent of its emissions are generated by manufacturing goods for export, Li said.

"As one of the developing countries, we are at the low end of the production line for the global economy. We produce products and these products are consumed by other countries. ... This share of emissions should be taken by the consumers, but not the producers," Li said during a briefing at the Capitol's visitor center.

Li directs the climate change department at the National Development and Reform Commission and was in Washington, along with negotiators from other countries, to meet with Obama administration officials. President Barack Obama has indicated a willingness to enter into a global agreement to reduce greenhouse gases.

But China's stance could be one of the stumbling blocks facing the U.S., China's largest trading partner, when negotiations to broker a new international treaty begin in Copenhagen in December. Li said China was not alone in thinking that emissions generated by the production of exports should be dealt with by importing countries.

Li also criticized proposals by the U.S. to place carbon tariffs on goods imported from countries that do not limit the gases blamed for global warming. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are considering it as they draft legislation to control global warming pollution to ensure that U.S. goods can compete with cheaper imports from countries without regulation.

"If developed countries set a barrier in the name of climate change for trade, I think it is a disaster," Li said.

Neither China nor the U.S. ratified the last agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012.

China has long insisted that developed nations bear the main responsibility for cutting emissions. As president, George W. Bush refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol because he said developing nations like India and China should not be exempt.

Negotiators from other governments at the Monday briefing, including the European Union and Japan, said that they would not support China's proposal to unload a portion of its greenhouse gas emissions on importers.

"I think the issue here is we take full responsibility and we ... regulate all the emissions that come from our territory," said Artur Runge-Metzger, who heads the climate change strategy and international negotiations unit at the European Commission. Runge-Metzger said that if China's approach were adopted, it would require allowing other countries to have jurisdiction and legislative powers to control emissions outside their borders.

Li was joined by Vice Chairman Xie Zhenhua of the National Development and Reform Commission in his visit to Washington.

Xie met with U.S. climate envoy Todd Stern at the State Department on Monday. The talks in Copenhagen were among the topics discussed, said State Department spokesman Robert Wood.

"There's a willingness, particularly on the Chinese side, to really engage on the subject of climate change, and we welcome that," Wood said.

U.S., China worlds apart on climate change curbs

By Renee Schoof - McClatchy Newspapers
Modesto Bee, Monday, March 16, 2009

WASHINGTON -- China's top climate negotiator's visit to Washington Monday sent a fresh signal that the two countries, which account for about half the world's greenhouse gas emissions, have a long way to go to reach a common agreement on how to cut emissions to prevent serious climate change.

China wants to become a "low-carbon society," but can't say when that will be achieved. And it doesn't want to be held accountable for emissions it produces to make goods for export, said Li Gao, the director of China's climate change office.

Li described China's actions and plans on climate while the head of China's negotiating team met with his American counterpart at the State Department. The meeting was part of the preparations for global negotiations on an agreement to reduce emissions in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December.

China plays a big role as the world steps up efforts to hold back global warming.

With 1.3 billion people and a large industrial base, China is the world's biggest source of heat-trapping gases from coal, oil and gas, just ahead of the U.S.

Many members of Congress say they will only support mandatory emissions limits at home if China acts too. And other countries are looking to see what the U.S. will do to cut emissions before they make commitments of their own toward an international agreement due in December.

China shouldn't have to take responsibility for the 15 percent to 25 percent of its emissions that result from making products for the rest of the world, said Li, the director of the Department of Climate Change in China's National Development and Reform Commission. He spoke at a briefing sponsored by the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a nonpartisan research organization.

"For many developing countries, not only China, we produce the products for the consumers, especially in developed countries," Li said. He argued it wouldn't be fair to hold China accountable because "we are on the lower end of the economic chain of the global economy."

Li also said it would be a "disaster" - and possibly the start of a trade war - for the U.S. to impose tariffs on imports from China or other countries that didn't have mandatory emissions controls. He said the tariffs would be unfair and a violation of trade rules.

Action by China will be critical for any chance for a global solution to global warming. The 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change outlined the dangers of letting temperature rise beyond 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Many reports in the past two years find the effects of warming are happening faster than predicted.

Last week, international scientists meeting in Copenhagen for a conference on climate change told world leaders recent observations confirmed "the worst-case IPCC scenario trajectories (or even worse) are being realized."

The report added many changes, such as average global temperature and changes in the ocean, were "already moving beyond the patterns of natural variability within which our society and economy have developed and thrived" and that "there is a significant risk that many of the trends will accelerate, leading to an increasing risk of abrupt or irreversible climate shifts."

President Barack Obama has said the U.S. would follow scientific advice on the climate and would reap benefits - including new jobs - from a shift to cleaner energy.

Li said China saw shifting away from fossil fuels was in its own long-term interest, "but I cannot tell you what time we can achieve it, because there's not a format in the world," he said. "I think if developed countries can give us an example, if the global economy can structure to a low-carbon type, that will be helpful for the developing countries to learn the experience and follow the trend."

China's plans call for it to reduce energy intensity - the amount of energy needed for each unit of gross domestic product - and to increase renewable energy to 15 percent of total energy supply by 2020. China also intends to expand the use of biogas in rural areas, plant more trees and expand research in clean energy.

The Chinese delegation was in Washington to talk about China's climate policies and its negotiating position for international climate talks, but not to try to reach any agreement with the U.S., Li said.

"We think that climate change is a global challenge," he said, and that it had to be addressed within the United Nations climate framework. Those negotiations are meant to reach an agreement in December, though some experts predict 2010 is more likely.

State Department spokesman Robert Wood said the meeting was "a beginning, and we'll see where it leads." He added the Chinese were willing "to really engage on the subject of climate change, and we welcome that."

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Tuesday, March 17, 2009:](#)

'Congestion pricing' unclogs roads, clears the air

By Kathryn Phillips and David Festa

Imagine commuting to downtown San Francisco in half the time it now takes you to do it. That may seem far-fetched now because the Bay Area is the second-most congested metropolitan region in the nation.

Transportation consistently tops the charts of Bay Area Council surveys as one of the most pressing problems in the region. We all pay the price through unhealthy air, wasted time and gridlock's added cost to doing business.

However, we can transform San Francisco's transportation system to meet the challenges of a growing population in the 21st century just as other international cities are doing. The big question is how do we pay for the necessary investments?

Bay Area transportation officials plan to use \$490 million in stimulus money for transportation projects, including cable car improvements, new SamTrans buses and BART maintenance. That's a start.

There's another way to transform San Francisco's transportation system that is self-reliant and sustainable. London, Singapore and Stockholm have cut traffic in their urban centers and along heavily used corridors by employing a self-funding system that helps pay for innovative transit choices and faster travel. The system also reduces congestion, air and global warming pollution by charging a vehicle toll during rush hours. It's called congestion pricing.

London used congestion pricing to raise hundreds of millions of dollars and invested this new revenue in new buses to deliver immediate benefits to affected commuters. Bus ridership rose dramatically, and bicycling also increased. Initial public skepticism turned into support. Seventy-eight percent of people who drive cars into the congestion pricing area are satisfied with the system.

Stockholm initiated a trial period of congestion pricing for its central city in 2006. Before the trial, only 31 percent of residents favored the congestion charge. Two months after the trial, voters passed a referendum to reinstate the charge.

The San Francisco County Transportation Authority deserves applause for taking a hard look at whether congestion pricing could help here. San Francisco is one of the world's great innovation capitals and has become a world-class city by adopting new ideas.

The authority's study is expected to be released this spring. Yet, even before the research is done, the local Chamber of Commerce and other lobbies are fighting against the idea before the facts are in. It is ironic that some businesses that have benefited from past innovations now want San Francisco to consider only the most conventional ideas and smother innovation.

In June, the Environmental Defense Fund commissioned a public opinion research firm to survey Bay Area residents on the congestion pricing system the city was studying. When poll respondents were told about the benefits congestion pricing had delivered elsewhere and could bring to San Francisco - not just the costs, as a recent chamber poll did - more than half supported the pricing plan. Check out the poll summary on our Web site: www.edf.org.

Bay Area residents, and especially San Franciscans, said they were willing to try the program if it would bring more funding for transit, reduce rush-hour traffic and cut air and global warming pollution. The devil is in the details, but if the transportation authority proposes a system that does those things, public support will follow.

San Francisco is going to be an even greater place because we'll be able to get around easily and affordably. Why take financing options off the table simply because we've not done something that way before? If that was San Francisco's typical mindset, we'd still be rowing boats across the Golden Gate.

Kathryn Phillips is director of the California Transportation and Air Initiative at Environmental Defense Fund. EDF is a national nonprofit environmental organization. Its California headquarters has been based in the Bay Area for more than 37 years. David Festa is vice president for West Coast operations at Environmental Defense Fund and former director of policy and strategic planning at the U.S. Department of Commerce.

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Tuesday, March 17, 2009:](#)

Retail column: Will people buy 'green'?

By Courtenay Edelhart, Kern Business staff columnist

Earth Day will be here in just a few weeks. Is it smart to stock up on green inventory to capitalize on the annual tribute to all things environmental?

Maybe. Maybe not.

On the one hand, President Barack Obama made investment in green technology a key component of his campaign rhetoric, and just shepherded through an economic stimulus package that spends heavily in this area.

So green is on consumers' minds like never before.

At the same time, we're in a recession.

I pay for curbside recycling. I regularly return to stunned cashiers the plastic bags they foist upon me for one item I can easily carry.

But since the economic downturn began, I have wavered in my commitment. Those recycled content paper towels cost more than regular ones. At some point, I have to choose between Mother Earth and another single mom.

Me.

The fact of the matter is, consumers like to think they are environmentalists, but when times get tough, how green are they, really? More than you might think, said Sasha Windes, co-owner of Fresh & Green, a specialty store that carries only eco-friendly products.

Toxin-free pillows and bedding might cost a little more than their conventional counterparts, but factoring in the medical cost of allergies and asthma from excessive exposure to chemicals, you save money in the long run, Windes insists.

Windes and business partner Jennifer Jordan launched a virtual store online in November 2007, and opened their physical store in northwest Bakersfield last June.

"We're completely off the beaten path and hard to find, but people drive in from as far away as Frazier Park and Pine Mountain because they're educated about the issues and they really care," Windes said.

But Cone's Health Foods & Vitamins in southwest Bakersfield carries "very little" in the way of green consumer goods, said co-owner Trulaine Woken.

That's not for lack of awareness. When her store recently relocated to the Town and Country shopping center, Woken paid extra for green construction touches such as counters made from recycled glass, and paint free of solvent emissions.

But that was on her dime. She's not asking customers to fork over extra bucks for, say, green cleaning products.

"I'm just not sure people would pay for it, especially with Trader Joe's so close. They can sell those types of things a lot cheaper because of their size and purchase power," Woken said.

Ditto at Fresh & Easy, a grocery store chain that focuses on organic food, health food and gourmet products.

"A lot of our environmental initiatives are built into the store itself," said spokesman Brendan Wonnacott. "And it's reflected in our business practices, like reusable crates and things like that.

"But we're a small store, only 10,000 square feet, so there's not a lot of room for that kind of merchandise."

Makes sense. Still, I wonder if there's a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy going on in smoggy Bakersfield. Are there so few green products to buy that nobody around here buys them?

Perhaps I'll splurge on those recycled paper towels after all.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, March 17, 2009:](#)

Pollution's reach

Editor: Adding additional smog to our already overburdened environment is not a fair or reasonable tradeoff.

If Wal-Mart's distribution center decided to locate somewhere else in the Valley, the pollution created by a project of this size would still have consequences for Merced.

Air pollution does not recognize man-made boundaries. Not only should Wal-Mart not be encouraged to further add to our community's problems, but existing businesses, farms and individuals should practice powering-down and using less for the sake of us all.

We're all in this together. We shouldn't be forced to choose between jobs or our health and that of our children.

Audrey Alorro, Merced

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses new jobs created by California's green industry. California has launched a new preparation program for students who seek a short term degree in technology that protects the environment. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Crean empleo para jóvenes, con industria verde en California

Manuel Ocaño, Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, March 17, 2009

California lanzó un nuevo programa de preparación de estudiantes para que asuman a corto plazo puestos en trabajos tecnológicos que protegen el medio ambiente. El programa, denominado "cuerpos verdes" es una estrategia de la administración del gobernador, Arnold Schwarzenegger y la iniciativa privada en California para impulsar la industria tecnológica y crear nuevos empleos. "Los cuerpos verdes ayudarán a jóvenes de escasos recursos a capacitarse mientras creamos una fuerza laboral para una tecnología limpia y una economía verde", dijo el gobernador Schwarzenegger al presentar el proyecto. El plan invertirá inicialmente 20 millones de dólares en capacitar a jóvenes de ente 16 y 24 años de edad.