

Pollution threatens power project

Valley's lack of a plan to clean the air may delay San Joaquin plant.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, January 13, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley's murky air could foul the future of a \$550 million power plant that would supply one-third of Central California's electricity needs.

The California Energy Commission's staff, concerned about adding more pollution to the Valley's air, won't recommend licensing the power plant near San Joaquin in west Fresno County.

A state spokesman says Valley and federal officials need to settle a dispute over air pollution reduction before the Energy Commission staff will recommend the project.

The clash highlights the rising profile of air quality issues in the Valley, which ranks among the three dirtiest air basins in the country. The Valley already faces federal deadlines and possibly a delay in billions of federal road-building dollars over missed cleanup deadlines.

Now, at a time when a swiftly growing Central California needs more electricity, the issue has spilled into a crucial arena affecting expansion.

"We can't recommend [approval] at this time," said commission spokesman Chris Davis. "Air quality is at the heart of it."

The firm proposing the new natural gas-fired power plant, Calpine Corp., does not believe the recommendation will stop the project. Officials are optimistic that things soon will work out after discussions last week with federal regulators.

But federal regulators say they haven't decided yet if they buy Calpine's arguments, and the state Energy Commission staff won't budge until there is a green light over air concerns from the federal government.

What's the holdup? It's all about the common practice of buying rights to pollute -- emission reduction credits. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency isn't sure all of the Valley's credits are valid.

The credits come from industry pollution reduction through cleaner technology, phasing out older equipment or other means. For instance, when an oil field business in Kern County installs new equipment and reduces several tons of pollution, the business receives a certain number of emission reduction credits. The credits can be sold to new or expanding businesses.

This tool is used throughout the country as a way to continue economic growth without exceeding a limit on air pollution. But the tool also helps clean the air because not every ton of reduction can be sold.

Large, new power plants must buy such credits to offset hundreds of tons of ozone-creating pollutants produced by even the cleanest natural gas plants.

Ozone, a corrosive gas that forms on warm, sunny days, is the main ingredient in smog. Over the past four years, the Valley violated the eight-hour or long-term ozone health standard more often than any other place in the country.

That's why the credits are in the spotlight.

Some Valley credits date back to the late 1970s, and they haven't been accounted for as part of a pollution reduction plan, said Matt Haber, senior energy adviser for EPA. Without a full accounting, federal officials worry about reintroducing pollution into the Valley's air.

According to the Clean Air Act, the accounting should be in an ozone cleanup plan, which has been a work in progress for years at the Valley district.

"We don't have a problem with Calpine's project -- there could be many ways to make it work," said Haber. "But we've been clear about what we want from the [San Joaquin] Valley Air Pollution Control District. Unless the district takes action on a plan, the old credits aren't usable."

The Valley's ozone cleanup plan could be months or years away from being completed, depending on a decision coming up this year. The district board must decide if it will volunteer for EPA's worst category of ozone offenders, which would give the Valley a few years to complete an acceptable plan.

If the district doesn't volunteer for the move, it will have to meet a series of deadlines starting in the next few months.

Either way, local officials say they have accounted for emissions credits in a rate-of-progress plan, another tool that demonstrates annual reductions in pollutants but is not as comprehensive as the ozone cleanup plan. The district approved a rate-of-progress plan in December.

The federal government's position amounts to an unwarranted sanction against the Valley, said Sayed Sadredin, director of permit services.

"They're basically saying you can't use these credits until you have an approved plan," said Sadredin. "That's not a sanction called for in law. It's their interpretation of the law."

EPA's position will affect about half of the credits in the Valley, Sadredin said. The Valley has banked about 7,300 tons of credits for ozone-making gases. The credits are currently selling for about \$30,000 apiece.

Calpine purchased 600 tons of credits, but not all would be used for the San Joaquin power plant, project manager Mike Argentine said. He said he is confident the credits will pass muster with EPA, but he did not elaborate on how old the credits were.

Argentine said the proposed 1,060-megawatt plant would be capable of supplying 1 million homes, and it would help the Fresno area. Behind the San Francisco Bay Area, Central California is considered the second most vulnerable area in the state for electricity shortages, he said.

"We think we'll work through these issues," Argentine said. "We're hopeful we'll start the construction phase this spring."

To burn or not to burn

New proposals will affect how families use their fireplaces.

By Kathy Barberich, The Fresno Bee, January 11, 2003

Rules proposed to limit fireplace wood burning to help clear the air have central San Joaquin Valley homeowners, builders, politicians and rule-makers scrambling for answers in an ever-thickening haze of questions and confusion.

The discussion began when the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced its intent to impose restrictions by early next year that will change the way some Valley residents heat their homes. If the district does not take action by February 2004, it could lead to EPA sanctions that would include fees on new or expanding businesses and a freeze on federal road-building funds.

Discussion heated up this week when the Fresno City Council took the first steps toward an ordinance banning wood-burning fireplaces in new homes beginning as early as March.

The district will conduct public meetings next month to discuss its proposals that would affect wood-burners who use 351,222 fireplaces and 47,289 woodstoves from San Joaquin County to Kern County. Dates and places of the meetings will be announced in the media, on the Web site www.valleyair.org and to people who call the district's offices (230-6000 in Fresno).

At issue is under what conditions homeowners would be allowed to burn wood; whether homeowners will have to spend a lot of money to be in compliance with new rules; and who will enforce those rules.

To help us all understand what the proposals are, what they are not and how they'll affect us, The Bee spoke to Charlie Goldberg, education specialist for the air pollution district; Alan Goto of Pacific Gas & Electric Co.; Rockie Bogenschutz, owner of Central Distributing in Fresno, who sells fireplaces; Forrest Stephanian, owner of Forrest Firewood Company in Clovis; and John Crouch of the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association in Sacramento.

Since the regulations are not finalized, some of the answers to our questions may change in the next few weeks.

They'll be reported in The Bee, at fresnobee.com and on the air district's Web site, www.valleyair.org.

Question: Are all wood-burning fireplaces and stoves being banned?

Goldberg: "No. There will be no wood-burning fireplaces or stoves allowed in new homes unless the home is the only dwelling on an acre or more of land. Those homes with existing units will have burning restrictions."

Exempted, he adds, are homes where wood burning is the only heat source, areas where natural and propane gas service is not available and residences above 3,000 feet elevation."

What are the burning restrictions?

Goldberg: On Level 1 (Air Quality Index 150-170) pollution days, only people with EPA-approved wood-burning fireplace inserts or wood stoves will be allowed to burn. On Level 2 (Air Quality Index above 170) days, no one will be allowed to burn, except those to whom any of the three exemptions apply.

How many days a year are we talking about?

Goldberg: "Data has shown that there are about 20 days a year when this condition applies. Currently on these days, we ask people not to burn. When new regulations go into effect, it will be mandatory. If we can control burning on these days, Level 1 and Level 2, we can make a real difference on the most polluted nights."

The Air Quality Index is based on air sampling throughout the Valley and on weather conditions. Index forecasts are included in newspapers, on radio and TV and are available online at www.valleyair.org or by calling 800-766-4463.

Says Goldberg, "Currently the information isn't known until about 2 p.m. We're hoping that, by next year, we can make the information available to the public a day earlier."

How will enforcement work?

Goldberg: "There will probably be an 800-number that people can call to report someone they think is burning on a non-burning day. We can contact that person by mail and give him a chance to respond. If he is out of compliance, he will probably get a warning. If it happens again, there could be some kind of citation. All of the details have not been worked out. Enforcement of the ban on wood-burning fireplaces in new, high-density construction will be done by the building inspectors."

Will people with old wood-burning inserts and stoves have to discard them before selling a house? And what about an open-hearth fireplace?

Goldberg: Homeowners won't have to do anything if they have an open-hearth fireplace. That's the kind of fireplace in most homes without an insert.

Non-approved wood-burning inserts and wood stoves built before the Environmental Protection Agency established standards will have to be dismantled. The old burners can emit up to 42 grams of particulates -- microscopic bits of soot, ash, dust, smoke and liquid -- per hour, while the EPA-approved units produce 4 grams or less per hour, 3 grams below the EPA standard.

However, all inserts and stoves sold since 1992, when the EPA established its certification process, comply with the standard. Not all of those units built before then meet the certification standard and may be available at yard sales or through other nonretail sources.

The certification is on a plate near the model number.

If the fireplace insert is already installed, how does a homeowner check whether it's approved?

Goldberg: "If you have an owner's manual, it will have the model number. The EPA has a Web site, www.epa.org, that has the certified units listed by manufacturer and model number. If it is not on the list, it is not certified." If the insert has solid doors, it is definitely not EPA approved, but some glass-door units are OK.

The approval plate is on the side of the unit, toward the front. To find it, remove the metal shroud or trim surrounding the insert. On some models, the certification plate is on the front. For information about certified units, call John Dupree at the EPA, 202-564-55950.

What if you're not confident you can remove or replace the shroud correctly?

Goldberg suggests having a chimney sweep do the work.

Where is the EPA certification plate on free-standing wood-burning stoves?

Goldberg: "There would be a metal plate visible on the back of the stove."

Is it OK to install your own wood-burning fireplace insert?

Crouch of the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association says his group "recommends all inserts be installed by a specialist certified by the Hearth Education Foundation. To locate a certified specialist go to www.hearthed.com. Always ask an installer about his credentials. Does he have experience with the make and model of the unit you are buying?" There's more information at www.hpba.org">www.hearthed.com">www.hearthed.com. Always ask an installer about his credentials. Does he have experience with the make and model of the unit you are buying?" There's more information at www.hpba.org.

Are there tips to burning cleaner?

Goldberg: "Use seasoned, dry wood. Pound for pound, all woods have about the same heating value. Denser woods such as oak or orchard take longer to ignite, but burn slower and more evenly. Softwood used for kindling, such as pine or fir, are low in density, ignite easily, burn fast and hot and will heat the firebox and flue quickly. They produce more particulates than denser woods."

What are good woods to burn in fireplaces?

Stephanian, the wood seller: "I sell only dry almond wood, which burns slow, gives high heat and low ash. There is very little smoke coming out of a chimney of burning dry almond wood. What you see is the heat hitting the air."

Goldberg: "That is true. The less smoke, the better for the air."

Will wood sellers go out of business if people switch to gas-fueled fireplaces?

Stephanian: "Right now, I have about 3,000 customers who use wood, and I am sure that many will keep burning wood. They will use up their supplies."

What will happen to all that wood people have piled up at home?

Stephanian believes homeowners may take their excess to farmers who have permission to burn. "The farmers will be burning huge piles of wood on approved ag-burning days. What will we have accomplished" with restrictions on home fireplaces?

Goldberg: "If farmers burn on approved days, at least the burns will be managed burns. They will only burn when the air quality is better."

How much wood do most people use to heat their homes and what does it cost them?

Stephanian: "Usually 1/2 a cord a month. I sell a cord of wood for \$175," which translates to \$44-\$87 a month in fuel cost.

How much to heat with gas?

Goto of PG&E: Cost depends on size and efficiency. Inserts average 40,000 BTUs (British Thermal Units) or .4 of a therm, which is how utilities bill customers for natural gas. A 40,000-BTU unit would cost \$10.80 per month if you lit the burners for an hour every day in a 30-day month. To figure costs, there's an energy calculator on PG&E's Web site, www.pge.com.

How efficient are gas fireplaces, and will they heat a room or the entire house?

Bogenschutz, who sells fireplaces and inserts: "They put out major heat. Depending on the size and layout of your house, two gas fireplaces could heat your whole house. One could heat your main living area and kitchen. Units go from 21,000 BTU to 60,000 BTU output."

Goto: "When shopping for a gas unit, look at not only the BTU output, but the AFUE (Annual Fuel Utilization Efficiency). That's how much of the heat goes into the house because you will lose some up the flue. Some have ratings as high as 75% or 80%. That's really good."

How can you convert your wood-burning fireplace to gas-fueled?

Bogenschutz: "You will need a professional plumber to run a gas line to your fireplace before having the gas fireplace unit installed. Not all fireboxes are suited for inserts. Small pre-fabricated fireboxes might not be able to accommodate inserts."

"And if someone who sells inserts says he can remake the insert to fit inside your small box, be suspicious. Sometimes, they can change an insert so much that it really isn't safe. It doesn't fit as it should. It is not airtight.

"Since you do not have to have a permit to install one, there is no one to see if the job has been done right. I guess you could take him to court if the job goes bad and he doesn't fix it."

If you have a gas line to your fireplace, will it cost less to switch to gas?

Bogenschutz: "Certainly. . . . An average price of a gas-burning insert, installed is \$1,600. The gas line alone is about \$250."

What about the chimney?

Bogenschutz: "I recommend having the chimney cleaned before having the gas fireplace unit installed. It comes with its own metal exhaust ducts and intake air units that fit the interior of the chimney. In a sense, they become the chimney."

Is there help for people who want to be in compliance but cannot afford the cost?

Goldberg: "We have nothing in place at this time."

However, Goldberg says, the district hopes to offer incentives similar to the gas lawn-mower turn-in, where people got half-off coupons to convert to electric mowers. A possibility is that people could deliver the noncomplying inserts and stoves to the district, which would scrap them.

What is the density issue regarding wood-burning fireplaces, and will wood-burning fireplaces be permitted in new construction?

Goldberg: "Wood-burning fireplaces would continue to be approved for houses on an acre or more. In areas with high density of population, like in subdivisions, which typically have four homes per acre, wood-burning fireplaces could not be installed." He adds that the Building Industry Association is in agreement with that part of the new rules.

Bogenschutz: "Personally, I think all of the new homes should have only gas fireplaces. We all have to breathe the air."

The reporter can be reached at kathyb@fresnobee.com or 441-6431. Additional reader questions about the proposals can be sent to features@fresnobee.com (Subject: wood burning) or to Kathy Barberich, The Fresno Bee, 1626 E St., Fresno, CA 93786.

District to hold no-burn forums

Officials want feedback on estimate of 15-20 mandatory bans a year.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, January 11, 2003

If you use one of the 400,000 fireplaces and other wood-burning devices in the San Joaquin Valley, don't miss the public workshop next month about mandatory no-burn days. Officials want to talk about how many no-burn days might be expected next fall and winter, when the restrictions begin. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has estimated 15 to 20 days per season, and officials want to know what residents think of that range.

But the issue now is complicated by measurement of dangerous particle pollution, which officials have this month begun to incorporate into air quality predictions. The measurement of PM2.5 --

particles 2.5 microns wide, or about 1/28 the diameter of a human hair -- will reveal more unhealthy air days than in the past.

Does that mean more no-burn days than previously estimated? Not necessarily, officials said.

"We took this measurement into consideration when we issued our estimate of 15 to 20 days in a season," said Evan Shipp, district supervising meteorologist.

But Shipp acknowledges the district will have to pick a point, based on health concerns, at which to call no-burn days.

If the Valley has a prolonged bout of fog and the particles hang around for many days, it is possible for the no-burn days to increase beyond the estimate.

"We're still exploring where the cutoff will be," Shipp said. "Can we reasonably call 10 days a year or 20 or 50? We don't know yet. That's not a scientific question -- it's more political. I think it's going to be worked out at the public workshops."

The public's reaction could mean a lot at the February meetings, for which no firm dates have been scheduled.

The district, under orders from the federal government, is honing rule changes for the mandatory no-burn days. The Valley is among the six worst air basins in the country for particle pollution.

Currently, the district merely asks people not to burn on the worst evenings.

One round of public workshops on the no-burn rule proposals took place last year. People learned that the Valley missed federal cleanup deadlines for particle pollution, which is linked to premature death, chronic bronchitis and other lung problems.

District officials also detailed exclusions to the rule, such as wood-burning residences with no other source of heating, dwellings above 3,000 feet in the foothills and units where no natural gas or propane service is available.

The proposal included a ban on wood-burning devices and fireplaces in new Valley subdivisions, unless the home is being built on a lot one acre or larger.

The one-acre exclusion is intended to allow wood burning in more open areas but eliminate it in more densely populated, future subdivisions.

Now the district hopes to discuss a level of pollution at which the no-burn days would be called. Officials say it will be connected to the Air Quality Index, or AQI, which is a health-based forecast of the air that takes into account weather and pollution measurements.

The AQI's rating system ranges from the healthiest air at zero to a lung-burning brew at 300 or above; any prediction of 150 or above is considered unhealthy. Any measurement higher than 100 is unhealthy for people with sensitive lungs.

"It's possible we'll set 150 as the trigger [for no-burn days]," Shipp said.

The PM_{2.5} particles, the byproduct of burning wood, vegetation or gasoline, drive the AQI higher than the larger PM₁₀ particles, which were the previous focus of measurements.

The finer particles are considered to be more dangerous because they can more easily evade the body's defenses and lodge in the lungs.

The federal government is nationally requiring measurement of the PM2.5 but is still studying the issue.

[Modesto Bee editorial, January 13, 2003](#)

How valley can solve its air and economic woes

We face tremendous challenges in the struggle to cleanse the valley's filthy air. But as in all challenges, there are opportunities as well. The development of the new technologies we will need will also mean the creation of new jobs. Given the depth of our problem, there is every reason for the valley to become a national -- if not a world -- center for such efforts.

The public colleges and universities in the valley -- the University of California at Merced and California State University campuses in Stanislaus, Fresno and Bakersfield -- plus the private and community colleges, have an opportunity to create research institutions designed to explore and develop new methods and technologies for cleaning up air pollution.

This would also be a fine chance for the governor and the Legislature, who talk a good game when it comes to helping the valley, to actually deliver. The creation of high-tech economies, aided by state incentives, fueled prosperity decades ago in Southern California with the aircraft and aerospace industries. Later, Silicon Valley and the computer industry did the same for the Bay Area.

Why not our turn next?

Much of this work is already under way elsewhere. But the valley is the natural testbed for the technologies that will be emerging. This is the sort of economic development campaign we've been looking for: industries that don't themselves pollute in the fashion of the traditional "smokestacks," bringing well-paying jobs that would help us diversify ourselves out of a low-wage agrarian economic base.

There is likely to be considerable dislocation as we go through the changes forced on us by the foul nature of our air. Here is a chance to soften those blows by creating alternative economic activities with a double payoff: greater prosperity and cleaner air.

We hear much about the need for public-private partnerships. What better example could we find than a partnership between academic and research institutions and the businesses they will kindle with their discoveries and inventions?

Innovation is inevitable; it just can't be scheduled. But we can hurry it along with the right atmosphere, and help clean up the real atmosphere as well.

[Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, January 13, 2003](#)

Blame the real polluters

I can't believe what I'm hearing! As I walk down J Street downtown, with all the sidewalk cafes, car fumes and bus exhaust are gagging me and making me sick, not those little puffs of smoke from a cigarette! This is ridiculous. No one will tackle the real problem polluters, so they are going to blame it on cigarettes. Get real.

EDWARD WILLIAMS

Modesto

Letters to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian

January 12, 2003:

Mayor thanks county

We all know that the quality of the air we breathe in the Southern San Joaquin Valley needs to improve. It is a long-term problem that will require sacrifice from all of us -- individuals, businesses and government.

Cleaning our air will require some changes in our lifestyle and business practices -- and in most cases require increased spending in both the public and private sectors.

At their first meeting of this year, members of the Kern County Board of Supervisors took an important step in the process of reducing our air pollution. They approved new policies aimed at reducing particulate pollution caused by fugitive dust from construction projects and dirt roads and shoulders.

These changes will not happen over- night and will require spending additional county tax dollars.

I would like publicly to congratulate and thank David Price, the director of the county's Resource Management Department, for recommending the policy changes to the Board of Supervisors. Our children will be able to some day breathe easier because of their action.

HARVEY HALL, Mayor of Bakersfield

January 10, 2003:

Look at bigger picture

I am appalled at the Dec. 31 article "Park, snowmobiles coexist well." One ride on a snowmobile in winter and all reasoning was out the window?

I am certain the ride is fun. I wouldn't dare argue an obvious point such as this. The big picture is much greater than you or I taking a joyride on a snowmobile.

For one reason, it is not just you and I out there -- this means thousands and thousands of snowmobiles. Noise pollution, air pollution and the risk of riders injuring wildlife of any kind -- plant or animal -- in such a pristine area are reasons enough to say no. Is it really all about our personal pleasures? Is a day's ride on the snowmobile worth all the consequences? Are we so selfish as to allow the corruption of our beautiful parks for self-indulgence?

Sorrowfully, I think the answer is "yes." And this article, printed in the heart of the worst air in the nation -- to not be concerned about the pollution -- baffles me. And us, situated so close to the Sequoia National Park, threatened by logging and new roads.

Unfortunately the writer and many readers are not thinking past their own generations. There is a price for all we do here on Earth. And we may not see the damage, but our children and their children will surely pay.

JENNIFER RANDALL, Bakersfield

Letter to the Editor, The Record, January 12, 2003

In defense of fireplaces

During the first weekend of the recent series of storms, our neighborhood was without electrical power, natural gas and running water from 2 p.m. Saturday until 9 a.m. Sunday.

With the reduction of PG&E repair forces caused by its bankruptcy, we can expect more of this. Are those faceless bureaucrats at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District going to tell me and my neighbors that we cannot own fireplaces in our homes and operate them for heating purposes under these circumstances?

Richard W. Johnson

Stockton
Monday

Letters to the Editor, The Fresno Bee

January 13, 2003:

'Losing credibility'

By Rose Synn
Clovis

The Bee recently published an excellent special report, "Last Gasp," outlining the air quality crisis in our region. Beyond outlining the problem, long-term solutions were presented as well as a call for elected officials to look for incremental opportunities to improve our air.

Fresno City Council Member Henry T. Perea's recent success in moving an ordinance forward to ban wood-burning fireplaces in all new home construction is an incremental step that would immediately take 15 tons of pollution out of Fresno's air during the winter months. With the thousands of new homes on the drawing boards around our community, why would we not pass this ordinance now to help clean our air?

Reading John Ellis' article certainly brought no new insights into the narrow thinking of Council Members Jerry Duncan or Brian Calhoun. They continue to distinguish themselves as backward thinkers who measure their success by just saying "no."

Surprising though, was Kevin Hall, representing the Sierra Club, saying the effort was meaningless. No one knows what the final rule changes will be from the air board or how long it will take to make them final.

Mr. Hall is rapidly losing credibility. In the end, he really becomes no different than Council Members Duncan or Calhoun. We can't forget that Mr. Hall sits on the county Planning Commission, which is nothing more than a rubber stamp for developers. Could Mr. Hall, to the detriment of our health, simply be trying to kill an ordinance that will cost developers more money to implement? Is this the best the Sierra Club can do?

January 12, 2003:

By Raymond Kistler
Ashland, Ore.

I am writing to thank you for your work on the air pollution special report, "Last Gasp," on Dec. 15. I was born and raised in Visalia and Fresno and suffered from asthma from age 2 until I left California as an adult in 1979.

I was in the old Children's Hospital emergency room barely hanging on to life more times than I can remember. I remember hearing doctors tell my parents, "I don't think he is going to make it this time." My family was in complete denial of the air quality as "all visual."

Living on Prednisone steroids like they were toxic candy, Nebulizer machines and giving myself Epinephrine shots to get through a school day at Sierra Junior High and McLane High School. Twice a week for six years getting those worthless "allergy shots" when I always knew it was the air pollution. Yes, I, too, have dozens of beloved extended family in Fresno and Tulare counties who seem to be as healthy as you all must be to stay.

What I can't understand as a parent of three children myself is why would any parent stay in the Valley when their children are suffering and dying from asthma? It isn't like there aren't jobs to be had other places.

All I remember about growing up was gasping for air, and it pains me to read that all these other parents would also put their kids, by choice, through such a nightmare, or even death. It is no worse child abuse than hitting them now that everybody should be aware of what the smog does. I would love to understand but not holding my breath for a very convincing explanation.

'Our addiction'

By Richard Haas
Fresno

Parade magazine on Jan. 5 had a feature story on the new, huge, expensive vehicles for next year and pointed out that one reason people buy civilian tanks is to send a message to the world. Probably true, and I would take the message to be a sort of in-your-face indifference to the objections of those who raise issues of waste, pollution -- and even war and peace -- that SUVs can represent. Overseas, the image of America is degenerating into caricatures of an arrogant, self-righteous people softened by our addiction to excesses such as huge vehicles.

The Jan. 8 commentary by Auden Schendler points out the many good reasons for anti-SUV bias. However, he informs us, many SUV owners are environmentalists, supporters of wilderness bills and the Nature Conservancy. I wouldn't have guessed that. Nor did I realize that people are forced into buying SUVs by industry and government and that a major motivation for buyers is to avoid decapitation in collisions with semis. That's pretty much what I fear, should I have a collision with an SUV.

[January 11, 2003:](#)

Free as the air we breathe: Where's the justice here?

By Jan Balcom

I know it gets cold enough for my neighbors to light up their fireplaces and wood stoves because the next day I wake up feeling as though someone is scrubbing my throat and lungs with sandpaper.

We should all have the freedom to be able to enjoy the warmth and comfort of a cheerful fire on a cold night. We should also have the freedom to be able to breathe without suffering a physical assault. How do we reconcile these?

Next guy's nose

If the Valley held only a few thousand families and my nearest neighbor lived a mile away, his freedom to heat his home by burning wood would not have much effect on my freedom to breathe. As an area grows and population density increases, so do the effects each of us have on his neighbor. There is an old saying that one person's rights end where the next guy's nose begins. The more people there are, the closer the next guy's "nose" is and more his rights and freedoms come into conflict with his neighbors'.

We don't want "big government" mucking with our private lives and regulating every aspect of how we live. We do, however, want government to restrict those who would use their freedom to harm us. We love our freedoms, but that includes the freedom from being robbed or murdered, poisoned or assaulted, cheated or terrorized. That is why we demand and tolerate laws and governments: to protect our freedom from the results of other people's freedom when the two come into conflict.

Growth drives more laws and more government. It requires, paradoxically, that some of our freedoms be restricted by regulations in order to protect other freedoms from being taken from us by the free and unrestricted actions of those around us.

Looking for balance

"Justice" is what we call this effort to equitably balance our shrinking freedoms when people with different needs are brought into conflict by increased population density. Justice is necessary to maintain freedom, but the more we need the protection of justice, the greater are the restrictions on freedom.

Although we proudly proclaim "freedom and justice for all" to be our ideal, our reality is often more of a difficult and wobbly balancing act between the two: restrictions on freedoms in the interest of justice and justice denied in the interest of freedom.

As the population of the Valley continues to grow, the once rare child with trouble breathing has become thousands of children with life-threatening asthma, a substantial group of people whose most basic freedom, the freedom to live, is threatened by everyone else's freedom to pollute the air: to burn wood, drive gas-powered vehicles, engage in construction, use and maintain dirt roads and develop their property in ways that generate increased air pollution.

We have chosen to live with this injustice for years, but it has gotten well beyond the point of simple injustice. We have let it go to the point where we are all at serious health risk, losing our most basic freedom to the dangerous combination of freedom and growth.

I treasure freedom. I don't like "big government" regulating our lives. I wish there were no need to restrict fireplace use, regulate agricultural practices or control and limit land use.

We need air

I would rather have us choose to control and reverse growth so that my neighbors can exercise more of their freedom without infringing on mine. In the meantime, however, there is this little problem about needing to breathe. With restrictive regulations, we all lose some freedom to protect some freedom. I get to breathe a little and you get to burn a little. Neither of us is happy nor satisfied this way, but it is just. With our excessive and growing population, striving for a little justice is the best we can do.

As long as we see growth as either desirable or inevitable, our freedoms will continue to be eroded. As long as we continue to accept and endorse the policies that encourage and create growth, we should expect and accept the loss of freedom that goes with those policies.

The undeniable benefits of growth come at a high price; they are bought and paid for with our freedom. There is no growth without a corresponding loss of freedom. If we cherish freedom more than we covet the benefits of growth and development, we will insist on policies that discourage and ultimately reverse growth.

If not, we will continue to fuel the need for more and bigger government and more restrictions and regulations controlling more and more aspects of our lives.

Jan Balcom is a homemaker who resides in the Fresno County foothills.

A healthy Valley is good for business

By Jemmy Bluestein

Many effective possible courses of action are available to us to address our abysmal air quality and what to do about it, but the most useful will require a major shift in thinking and overall attitude.

As I have maintained for many years, our perspective is the problem. In our current approach, anything that makes money for someone is sacred and beyond any control.

Agribusiness, for example, is free to poison our air, water and soil at will because it profits financially from it. Sustainability and overall survivability do not enter into the equation because the corporate controllers of our media, industry and political agenda forbid it.

Solutions: we must locally/regionally prohibit all ag burning immediately. (Shredding or mulching operations and cogeneration plants can make good use of this material.)

Organic farming methods must be encouraged and toxic farming practices discouraged through all available means. As an example, toxic farms should pay heavy use taxes to offset costs of water purification and medical costs to the general populace.

Ever notice that when the cotton growers spray their agent orange into our air to defoliate in the fall, everyone's eyes, nose, lungs and throats go crazy? Local doctors and hospitals notice.

Tap organic market

There are other ways to farm that are altogether nutritious to Earth and its inhabitants. The organic market is growing in leaps and bounds -- let's catch this train and show the world how it is done.

Land use is another biggie: at current rates of development, we will soon be unable to feed our own region, let alone the rest of the country or planet, due to the paving over of farmland for housing developments, shopping centers and freeways. Development proceeds largely unchecked, despite decades of warning and notwithstanding Operation Rezone and its revelations. The needed prioritization and follow-through on land use continues to be denied, leading to more freeways, more trips, more miles, less air. Our freeways are mostly Christmas presents for land speculators and developers.

As to transit considerations, we continue to be the poster child for denial and unimaginative backwardness. This is our worldwide reputation, and we earn it every day.

We need more, better and cleaner buses, and we should make them free to all riders at all times. We need bike paths that really work to navigate our area -- off the road shoulders, independent of highways. Other communities with much less favorable climates and topography do it. We can, too. The next Measure C proposal should place these issues at top priority. There are other ways of raising necessary funding as well.

Here's another concept: clean up blood alley, our most deadly stretch of road, by building a commuter train corridor up and down Highway 41. Many people would forgo the daily road wars for a gentle train ride, especially if convenient municipal transit awaited in town. This project could also solve congestion problems in Yosemite -- a mountain train ride to the park would appeal to many -- especially with added incentives, such as discount park entry or accommodations.

I would maintain that the solutions are not so hard to find. It is the collective and political will which is absent.

Currying favor

Where are our political leaders? They have their hands full every day with their No. 1 priority, as usual: currying favor and ensuring maximum profits for big-money players.

We need action -- yesterday, if not sooner. Contrary to popular belief, this is not rocket science. When we foul our nest, we all pay. Except the big boys.

We are giving away the farm and our quality of living along with it. We've enriched the rich, and it is costing our lives. We must demand and take back what is ours -- our resources, our lives.

We can employ our unemployed at sustainable work and make our region a world-class showplace of healthy business and living.

No better now

By Eddie Chapa
Madera

After reading the letter Jan. 4, "Want cleaner air? Shut down buses," it brought back lots of memories.

When I started working for Madera Unified School District in 1975 at the athletic department as equipment manager, it was in August, the start of football season. While traveling to San Luis Obispo, we didn't have enough room in the bus.

Then-varsity coach Bill Sherman told me to put the players' bags in my pickup, and have the trainer, Lindy Avakian, drive the pickup. Boy, we were right behind the buses, and we were getting all that black smoke, choking us, and up to this day, 27 years later, they are still shooting out all that black smoke. Here in Madera for the last few years they have been busing students down Stadium Road to the South Campus. The buses were right next to the equipment room, and while they warmed up in the morning, I was choking in there. I was glad when they moved out of town, on Pine Street.

Here in Madera we are going to have more air pollution, because sooner or later they are going to burn lots of grape vineyards that the farmers have been taking out. I'm hoping they find some solution for all this pollution.

'Swell and burn'

By Marge Kuffel
Reedley

Referring to your front-page story Jan. 7 on banning log burning: In 1982, my husband and I had a new home built. While going through the plans with the contractor, my husband told him to leave out the fireplace. He looked at me and said, "In 20 years from now, wood burning in fireplaces will be banned." I did not put up any argument because every time I was around a burning fireplace my eyes would swell and burn.

I love to step outside in the cool of the night, just before retiring and take a couple of good deep breaths. It is now impossible, especially in the winter because the air is full of smoke from all the fireplaces.

I think Fresno City Council Member Henry T. Perea is on the right track by wanting to draft an ordinance banning log-burning fireplaces in new housing developments in favor of gas-burning fireplaces, and I also think the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District should ask people not to burn in their fireplaces or wood stoves. I know there will be people who will bellow,

"Nobody will tell me I can't burn wood in my fireplace." Do people really need fireplaces to keep warm or is it just for atmosphere?

January 10, 2003:

Too many people

By W.M. Owen
Sanger

I must respond to Leland Adley's letter Jan. 2: He is absolutely correct. The air pollution in this Valley is a byproduct of our population and the removal of the oxygen-producing growth (farms).

I just finished reading the article in the Jan. 3 Bee regarding the county's and city's plan for land use for the next five years. They are not thinking of our poor air quality when they extend the city's sphere of influence to the southeast and north to create "villages" -- i.e., subdivisions, more homes, more people, more cars, more traffic congestion. Bad air.

The Gould Canal, Red Bank Creek and McCall Avenue are "country." Will they not be happy until all orchards and farms are paved over, 790,000 people are living here, trapped between two mountain ranges? Ugh!

We can't breathe now. This is definitely uncontrolled growth for profit and probably will be catastrophic down the road. Yes, it creates jobs, but why is the unemployment still so high?