Environment: Air quality restrictions anticipated
Saturday, March 20th, Merced Sun-Star
By David Chircop

MODESTO-- Upcoming rules aimed at cleaning the Central Valley's notoriously dirty air are fast approaching, and thousands of larger farming, dairy and livestock operations will soon fall under stricter air pollution controls.

Adding to a growing patchwork of federal clean air and water laws regulating agriculture, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is creating a set of rules in its eight-county area.

While many small livestock and crop farms are exempted from the new rules, larger operations will bear a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to a socioeconomic analysis of the new rules.

"Basically they are just regulations to cut down on the particulate matter that agricultural operations emit," said Anthony Presto, a spokesman with the Valley air district.

"These programs and rules are necessary to clean up the Valley's air. We have the second worst air quality in the United States and every feasible measure (to improve air quality) has to be implemented," Presto said.

In December air regulators avoided stiff federal sanctions by reclassifying the Valley's air quality to "extreme" noncompliance -- the lowest of all classifications, shared only by Los Angeles.

The new category bought the Valley air district time to clean up the air, saving billions of dollars in funding, but it also set strict goals for it to meet.

On Thursday air quality regulators, growers and industry representatives participated in a three-city workshop discussing draft Rule 4550, a wide-ranging set of conservation practices designed to reduce the amount of minuscule airborne particles in the environment.

The Governing Board is expected to adopt the rule in May and ag operators have until Dec. 31, 2004 to submit applications to the Valley air district.

The workshop was teleconferenced in Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield.

Specifically, the rule targets reducing PM10 in the air, or airborne particles with a diameter of 10 microns or smaller.

To put that in perspective, a single strand of human hair is about 60 microns in diameter.

Scientists have found that, when inhaled, these particles can accumulate in the respiratory system, contributing to numerous health effects including asthma and heart and lung disease.

While PM10s are often created through natural occurrences like wind and forest fires, human activity also contributes to the pollution. Automobile emissions, wood burning, industrial sources and disturbed soil also add to the problem.

"This is just one piece of the puzzle to reduce emissions," Dave Mitchell told a group of growers and industry representatives gathered around video monitors at the three locations. Thursday's meeting marked the final workshop on conservation management practices.

Mitchell, who spoke from the Valley air district office in Fresno, added that three other air districts in the country have also participated in similar campaigns.

Those programs in Southern California and Arizona have attempted to reduce particles from livestock waste, agriculture and feed yards.

What sets the Central Valley program apart is a requirement for ag operations to tell the Valley air district how they plan to reduce emissions. The Valley air district, in turn, creates a file that it can use to help determine the effectiveness of the program.

The Valley air district hopes to reduce PM10 by 5 percent a year. In all the program aims to reduce PM10 23 percent by 2010.

Roger Isom, vice president and director of technical services of California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association, said that some in the industry find the documentation requirements excessive.

But he noted that the ag industry has helped shape the new rules, ensuring greater participation.

"This is something we knew we would have to do," he said. "We've actually been meeting for more than a year."

He added that several of the practices included in the new rule are things that farmers are already doing.

While the driving force behind practices like conservation tillage is cost-cutting, Isom pointed out that that there are also positive environmental results.

Still, he noted possible negative effects like increased costs.

Since the price of ag commodities are set on the global market, costs associated with the regulations cannot be passed onto the consumer as they are in other industries.

Bob Weimer of Weimer Manufacturing Co. Inc. in Atwater said ag operations have been preparing for stricter dust control and burning rules.

While he hasn't watched the latest round of PM10 reductions closely, he acknowledged that grower input is a good way to shape a policy that can be followed.

"When it comes from the outside and it doesn't consider what really happens in the field, some of those rules and regulations don't make any sense whatsoever," he said.

For more information, go to <http://www.valleyair.org/>

Farms with 100 or less contiguous acres.

Feeding operations with less than

- 55,000 turkeys,
- 125,000 chickens (nonlaying hens),
- 82,000 laying hens,
- 500 dairy cows,
- 190 cattle.

Grazing land is also exempt.

Diablo permit stands
By Denny Walsh, staff writer, Sacramento Bee
Published in The Modesto Bee on March 23, 2004

SACRAMENTO—Over strong protests by environmentalists, a Sacramento federal judge has given the green light to what one attorney calls “a whole new city” in the foothills of western Stanislaus County—Diablo Grande.

U.S. District Judge William B. Shubb tossed out their lawsuit last week, ruling the potential harm they claim to endangered and threatened species and wetlands is based more on speculation than hard evidence.

Shubb’s decision lets stand a June 2001 permit issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to Diablo Grande Limited Partnership that paves the way for the initial phase of the resort, southwest of Patterson.

Phase one, which is set on 2,250 acres in Oak Flat Valley, consists of 2,000 homes, a town center, public ser- vices, a hotel and conference center and 70-acre resort complex, 1,160 acres of open space that includes two golf courses and a road system with a connection to Interstate 5.

Construction is under way on the first 187 homes overlooking the golf courses; residents have begun to move in.

Additional phases to be built over 30 years on 29,500 acres may consist of four golf courses, a research campus, a winery, municipal facilities, commercial centers, shops and offices, and a few thousand more homes.

The Corps of Engineers' permit authorized the discharge of dredge and fill material into 5.44 acres of water and wetlands for the construction of a road and residential lots for the first phase.

Environmentalists claimed in their lawsuit that the project probably will kill the San Joaquin kit fox, an endangered species, and the California red-legged frog, a threatened species, and destroy areas protected by the federal Clean Water Act. The lawsuit was filed 10 months ago on behalf of Protect Our Water, a Modesto-based group, and the San Joaquin Raptor Rescue Center, a Merced-based group.

It alleges the corps ignored pleas from two sister agencies—the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency— for further consultation and an environmental impact statement.

"Instead," plaintiffs' attorney Michael Sherwood said at the time, "the corps issues a permit for a small piece of the project and says it has no significant impact on the environment and species. We're saying, 'No, it's all a single project and you need to look at the overall impact.'"

Shubb points out in his 70-page order, however, that the required county approval for all but the first phase, Oak Flat Village, was rescinded following state court litigation. In order to move past the first phase, Diablo Grande will have to seek approval from Stanislaus County.

The judge cited the corps' environmental assessment, issued simultaneously with the permit, which says development of phases two through five "may occur over the next 25 to 30 years or not at all," and "cannot be considered to be reasonably foreseeable, and their impacts cannot be evaluated." Regarding objections raised by the EPA and Fish and Wildlife, the judge said the corps worked out its differences with the EPA, and the concerns advanced by Fish and Wildlife are not sufficiently grounded in fact.

Shubb found no evidence that any fox has perished, and there is not enough to suggest a "reasonably certain threat of imminent harm" to a fox. At most, he said, the evidence shows foxes "are in the vicinity" of the project.

Likewise, the judge found, there is no evidence of death or injury to a red-legged frog. Fish and Wildlife's prediction that frogs will die "does not suffice to demonstrate reasonably certain threat of imminent harm," he declared.

As for wetlands, creek waters and tributaries, the corps and EPA hammered out an agreement calling for protection and mitigation measures that the EPA says "will fully and completely compensate for all direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to aquatic resources associated with the permit," Shubb noted.

Contrary to the environmentalists' claims, the corps' actions were lawful and have not been arbitrary and capricious, and there is no showing Diablo Grande has violated the federal Endangered Species Act, he ruled.

Officials settle suit on reducing smog
By Jane Kay
The San Francisco Chronicle
March 25, 2004

Bringing a 2 1/2-year lawsuit to a close, regional transportation and air-quality officials agreed Wednesday to consider strategies to cut smog- forming pollution from refineries and cars.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission signed the settlement to the suit, which was filed by two environmental groups, Communities for a Better Environment and the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund.

The suit claimed the regulatory agencies' clean-air plan for the Bay Area fell short by 26 tons a year in reducing hydrocarbons, precursors to ground- level ozone, or smog. Under the agreement, the air district will complete an analysis of emissions from refinery flares, pressure-relief devices on tanks, fuel loading on vessels and wastewater systems. By 2006, the district must decide whether to adopt new regulations.

The MTC agreed, under its 2005 regional transportation plan, to prepare an alternative that includes measures for public transit and against sprawl.

Scientists call for more research to better control unhealthy soot pollution
JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press Writer
Published in the San Francisco Chronicle, March 24, 2004

The government can improve its standards for limiting soot in the air by doing more research into the possible health risks, a scientific panel recommended Wednesday.

Exposure to tiny microscopic particles of soot, or particulate matter, has been shown to aggravate asthma and other respiratory ailments. But a committee of the National Academy of Sciences, which began investigating the issue in 1998 for the Environmental Protection Agency, called for more research into such ailments as diabetes and heart disease.

Research until now has led to a better understanding of the health effects, the committee said, but still more can be done.

"The emphasis now should shift from studying whether particulate matter causes adverse health effects to studying the dose at which those effects are likely to occur," said Dr. Jonathan Samet, chair of Johns Hopkins University's Department of Epidemiology in Baltimore.

"We also need to know which aspects of particulate matter are most hazardous," he said, "and to learn how people are exposed to hazardous particles and how these particles trigger injury."

The current federal soot-control, health standards are aimed at reducing the amount of soot emitted by diesel-burning trucks, cars, factories and power plants.

They have not yet had significant impact, though, as they were delayed by several years of court challenges by industry opponents. They had argued the standards were based on uncertain science and cost tens of billions of dollars. The Supreme Court eventually upheld the controls.

Citing concerns about effects of soot on children, the elderly and asthmatics, the Clinton administration in 1997 issued the government's first standards for extremely fine particle pollutants -- those shorter than 2.5 microns, or one-millionth of a meter.

The annual average under the 1997 rule is no more than 15 micrograms of soot per cubic meter of air. The 24-hour standard is 65 micrograms per cubic meter. The Bush administration endorsed the standards once the courts rejected the legal challenges brought by industry.

EPA estimates the cost of compliance is as much as $30 billion a year.

The Clean Air Act requires the government to set national health-based air quality standards to protect people from carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, ozone, lead and particulate matter. States have to devise plans to meet those standards.

The academy's report is the fourth in a series to help EPA review the science behind its regulations. The academy is an independent organization chartered by Congress to advise government on scientific matters.

Recall of smog-bypass engines revisited

By Chris Bowman
The Sacramento Bee (Published in the Fresno Bee - Thursday, March 25, 2004, 6:00 AM)
California's air pollution police have backed off a plan that would have required manufacturers of diesel engines to recall at least 400,000 big trucks, buses and RVs that are electronically programmed to bypass smog controls at freeway speeds.

The state Air Resources Board instead is scheduled to vote today on a voluntary approach that would have no more than 80,000 of these big rigs reprogrammed by 2010.

The board would withhold regulation so long as the engine manufacturers and vehicle owners have made certain progress uninstalling the "smog defeat" feature.

Environmentalists say California would be foolish to rely on the word of manufacturers who rigged their engines to subvert state and federal pollution-control rules.

"Why should the public trust the industry that was caught cheating in the first place?" said Craig Noble, spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national environmental lobby. The air board's staff defends the voluntary approach as the most promising way of achieving large cuts in tailpipe emissions sooner rather than later.

Most of the world's top makers of truck and bus engines said last fall that they would sue California if it adopted a rule making them pay for fixing or "re-flashing" the computer chips sooner than required under a 1998 federal court-approved settlement.

State officials said the legal challenge ultimately would fail but likely would cost California years of delay in retrofitting the engines.

The proposed voluntary route promises to avert the legal obstacles and delays because it has the support of the diesel engine companies and the California Trucking Association, said Jerry Martin, the board's chief spokesman.

"We can start getting the tons of pollution reduction now as opposed to fighting the companies in court and getting the reductions two years from now," Martin said.

Accelerating the removal of the smog-defeat feature, as smog regulators call it, would result in a huge reduction of nitrogen oxides, or NOx, the toughest and most expensive of the regulated air pollutants to control. That's because it's relatively easy, quick and inexpensive to uninstall the program, which causes NOx emissions to more than double when rigs are at cruising speeds.

Technicians simply plug a laptop loaded with the correction software into the engine's electronic panel, which is usually accessible, said Karen Wilson, an official with the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

"It takes only 20 minutes," Wilson said.

From a regulatory standpoint, the Sacramento region has the most to gain from a hastened switch-out of the high-NOx engine program, state air board officials said.

That's because the Sacramento area has less than a year to bring its high NOx levels within compliance of national clean-air standards by the federal deadline. The smoggier San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles region have several more years to comply.

The air board targeted the smog-defeat programs last year after learning that fewer than 4% of an estimated 1.3 million trucks and buses equipped with the devices had been retrofitted with the compliant software, state officials said.

The rate fell far short of what state and federal air pollution officials had anticipated in negotiating an industry settlement over the rigged engines.

Under the agreement, seven engine manufacturers, including U.S. diesel giants Mack Trucks Inc., Cummins Engine Co. and Caterpillar Inc., promised to reprogram the engines when they were overhauled.

State air board officials understood that the heavy-duty diesel engines are rebuilt every 300,000 to 400,000 miles. As it turned out, the 1993 to 1998 models with the smog-defeat programs are running closer to 1 million miles before overhaul.

"Clearly, the industry gave us information that wasn't accurate," the air board's Martin said.

Industry representatives deny that they misled regulators.

"At no time did engine manufacturers misrepresent when engines would be rebuilt under the federal consent decree," said Tim French, an attorney with the Engine Manufacturers Association in Chicago.

In the October 1998 settlement, the engine companies said they did nothing illegal. The computer program was designed to save fuel at cruising speeds while still meeting the federal emission standards.

Manufacturers, however, agreed to pay a record-setting $1 billion in civil fines and corrective actions for allegedly committing what then-U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner called "high-tech cheating" that violated the Clean Air Act.

But over the protests of environmentalists and local smog enforcers, the consent decree did not require that the high-polluting engines be immediately recalled and modified.

Last year alone, the engines put out about 1 million more tons of NOx nationwide than they were supposed to, the equivalent of adding 65 million cars to the nation's highways, according to the EPA.

California has more that 400,000 of these rigs on its roadways, including about 80,000 registered in the state.

Under the voluntary plan, manufacturers would have to pay for the retrofits regardless of whether the vehicles were being overhauled.

The plan calls for 35% of the California-registered vehicles to be fixed by Dec. 1. If the deadline is blown, the air board can make the recall mandatory. The compliance goal grows to 60% by June 2005, 80% by February 2006 and 100% by 2010.

Full compliance would mean a NOx reduction of a projected 30 to 50 tons daily, the same effect as removing 1 million cars from California's roads, Martin said.

Clean Air Rule May Become Optional
Los Angeles Times - March 25, 2004
By Miguel Bustillo, Times Staff Writer

Six years ago, California air regulators concluded that they had caught engine manufacturers cheating. Computer chips controlling engines in tens of thousands of trucks, buses and motor homes made them run differently during government testing than under actual road conditions — resulting in significantly more air pollution.

Under a 1998 deal with state and federal regulators, engine makers were supposed to remove the deceptive chips. But they remain in place, and now California air officials are on the verge of agreeing to their being phased out voluntarily.

The possibility has outraged environmentalists, but air officials fear that, if they do otherwise, engine makers will sue the state, and none of the chips will be replaced for years while the dispute is fought out in court.

"It is a big leap of faith to trust these manufacturers to comply with a voluntary measure when they have cheated in the past," said Diane Bailey, an air pollution expert with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "We are scraping the bottom of the barrel to reduce air pollution, doing all kinds of things, and here we have tons of pollution that we are doing nothing about that never should have been allowed. That is the most frustrating thing about all of this."

The discovery by state and federal regulators that computer chips made truck engines perform differently during certification tests than on roads and highways was made in the late 1990s. The chips were in roughly 1.3 million trucks, buses and motor homes. Government officials determined that the heavy-duty diesel vehicles were releasing about 1.3 million more tons of

smog-forming gases nationally than the chips were suggesting — the equivalent of emissions from 65 million extra cars.

In California, the computer chips are allowing as much as 49 additional tons of nitrogen oxides to enter the atmosphere every day, state air officials estimate. Nitrogen oxides help cause acid rain and form ozone, the main ingredient in smog.

Under the 1998 settlements with state and federal regulators, who accused seven engine makers of deceiving them, the manufacturers agreed to fix the problem for free when truckers and other owners brought their aging vehicles in to be rebuilt.

The firms were also fined $1 billion, making it the largest clean-air settlement in history. They admitted no wrongdoing.

"It's time for the diesel engine industry to clean up its act and clean up our air," former Atty. Gen. Janet Reno said when the settlement was announced.

However, California regulators later discovered that the chips were not being repaired as expected because truckers were not rebuilding their engines as fast as anticipated. The engines, which used to be rebuilt at 300,000 miles to 400,000 miles, last as long as 1 million miles because of technological improvements. Fewer than 10% of the trucks and buses had the chips fixed as of last year, officials estimated.

In response, the California Air Resources Board proposed a new rule last year to require owners of trucks with the faulty computer chips to be fixed through a process known as a "chip reflash," which essentially consists of upgrading the software. It costs about $50 per truck and takes less than 30 minutes. In a cost-benefit analysis, the air regulators concluded that the regulation would be one of the state's most cost-effective measures for reducing air pollution in years.

But engine companies balked and threatened to sue the state, arguing that such a rule would violate the prior settlements.

"From our perspective, the air board was trying to renegotiate the agreement," said Jed Mandel, president of the Engine Manufacturers Assn., a lobbying group.

As a result, air board officials are proposing a voluntary rule that they hope will lead to the repair of 35% of the chips by December. It would not cover several thousand buses and trucks registered in other states that come into California, though it would apply to roughly 80% of the estimated 100,000 heavy-duty diesel vehicles based in California that have the faulty chips. If engine manufacturers do not meet the 35% goal, the state should pursue mandatory regulations, the officials propose. The board is expected to approve the plan today.

"We think this makes sense," Mandel said. "Under this voluntary program, the reflashes can start now, and the manufacturers have agreed to pay for them, which is a major concession. It is not something we have to do."

Asked why state regulators expect the industry to voluntarily clean up its act, air board spokesman Jerry Martin replied: "That is a legitimate question. But we are adopting a regulation that makes clear we will force them to do this in the very near future if they don't start to comply voluntarily."

Stephanie Williams, vice president of the California Trucking Assn., said the group would fully participate in the voluntary plan, and even planned a marketing campaign — centered on a "flasher truck" comic figure — to get truckers to fix the chips. Truckers, she argued, will take advantage of the opportunity, so long as engine companies pay the bill, not them.

"We bought these engines, thinking they were legal, and then came to find out they were not," she said. "Our concern has been that if this went to court, we'd get stuck paying for this."

Settlement to clean up dirtiest air in L.A. area
Los Angels Daily News - March 25, 2004
By Nicholas Grudin, Staff Writer

South Coast Air Quality Management District officials agreed Tuesday to allocate $1 million toward Los Angeles County's most polluted regions to settle a lawsuit filed last September by two environmental groups.

The suit filed by Communities for a Better Environment and Our Children's Earth claimed the AQMD had mismanaged a program intended to cut down on industrial smog by granting companies a limited number of pollution credits and making them pay for excess.

"This is an important environmental justice victory," said Scott Kuhn, CBE legal director. "This settlement provides funds to clean up the most polluted neighborhoods in Los Angeles and makes information publicly available to everyone concerned with air quality and smog."

AQMD officials initially said through a spokesman that the two groups' lawsuit was "completely without merit," but Tuesday they conceded that the groups had valid points requiring action.

"Both sides listened carefully to the other side's arguments and reached an agreement as to what the appropriate interpretations should be," said Barbara Baird, AQMD counsel.

The settlement requires the AQMD to alter the way that companies are penalized for exceeding air pollution limits. AQMD officials also agreed to ensure that all of the program's records are publicly accessible, Baird said.

Company plans to turn 'green waste' into useful products
Plant for natural gas, fertilizer proposed for Lancaster
Los Angeles Daily News - March 24, 2004
By Jim Skeen, Staff Writer

A Santa Monica company plans to build a $44 million plant to turn lawn clippings and leaves into fertilizer, poultry feed and compressed natural gas to power vehicles, company and city officials announced Monday.

With Terry Tamminen, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency on hand, BioConverter Inc. and city officials said the plant will take "green waste" that otherwise would have gone into the Lancaster landfill and produce 5,000 gallons of compressed natural gas a day.

"It solves multiple problems with air quality, water quality, landfill diversion and energy," Tamminen said. "We want to see, over the next several years, these types of projects up and down our state."

The plant is proposed on 18 acres at the northwest corner of Avenue H and Division Street, where a power plant had been proposed in 2001 during California's energy crisis but never built.

In addition to the compressed natural gas, the operation will create fertilizer, an organic liquid plant food, and a protein feed for poultry. The plant will also use the waste to generate its own electricity for its operations.

"This project we are building for Lancaster will become the prototype for similar facilities around the globe and we expect visitors from around the world to come to the city and see it in operations," McElvaney said.

BioConverter on Friday got preliminary approval from the Los Angeles City Council on a $16 million annual contract to build a Los Angeles power plant fueled by green waste.

Using methane gas created by the grass and leaves' decomposition, the Los Angeles plant would generate enough electricity to power 40,000 homes.

The Lancaster plant is expected to be able to handle 200 tons of green waste a day, said James McElvaney, the company's senior executive vice president and chief operating officer. The city and its residents and businesses now produce about 75 tons of green waste a day.

Construction is expected to begin this fall and the plant is expected to be operational in 2006. The project will create about 50 construction jobs and 15 to 20 permanent jobs.

The Lancaster plant will receive and process the waste inside enclosed buildings to keep odors from escaping, officials said. The plant will also include a visitor education center to showcase recycling technologies, said project architect Barry Berkus.

The plant will also include a compressed natural gas fueling station available to the public. The city also intends to use the fuel for its vehicles that run on compressed natural gas.

The company will pursue alternative fuel grants available through the Antelope Valley Air Quality Management District, but otherwise will finance the project privately.

Activists move ahead in clean-air battle
Three-year court case ends with stricter regulation on pollution
Tri-Valley Herald - Thursday, March 25, 2004
By Douglas Fischer, STAFF WRITER

Community activists and air and transportation regulators settled a long-running feud Wednesday on how to best promote regional mass transit efforts and clean the air.

The settlement calls for regulators to consider stiffer limits on refinery pollution and aggressively investigate smart growth and public transit alternatives.

It brings to an end an almost 3-year-old court battle in which activists sought -- and won -- a more precise accounting from regional air and transportation districts of their plans to bring regional air quality into compliance with federal standards.

The districts had appealed, staying that order.

The sticking point is a plan on the books calling for a region wide cut in smog-forming pollution of 26 tons per day without say how -- a sizable gap given that regulators mark progress in the hundreds of pounds per day by buying up old lawn mowers and retooling paint formulas.
The settlement puts the bull's-eye squarely on the region's five refineries, calling on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to analyze pollution from refinery operations -- flares, blow down and waste water systems, pressure release devices and marine loading facilities -- and decide before 2006 whether to regulate those sources.

It also forces the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to consider an "aggressive" smart growth and public transit alternative when drafting the Bay Area's next transportation plan.

"We've been saying for years there's significant emissions coming from these refineries," said Will Rostov, staff attorney for Communities for a Better Environment, which along with the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund sued the two districts.

"They have to produce the evidence and make some decisions ... They won't be able to say, as they have in the past, 'We're working on it.'"

Dennis Bolt, Bay Area representative for the Western States Petroleum Association, called any anticipation of big reductions from refineries misguided. Refinery emissions account for 3 percent of the region's air pollution.

"We've been studying these sources for over two years," he said. "There's no scientific evidence to support CBE's claims."

But the air district, happy to get the legislation behind it, is willing to take a look. "Any emission reduction is good as long as it's cost-effective," said spokeswoman Teresa Lee.

"(Regulators) get a fraction of a ton of emissions reductions ... and it's considered a good thing."

Scientists testing national park snow for airborne pollution
By the Associated Press
Published in the San Francisco Chronicle, March 24, 2004

Scientists are packing blocks of snow from national parks into freezers for testing to determine whether airborne pollutants have fouled the areas that many people believe are unspoiled.

The results should help determine whether long-term monitoring is necessary, said Tamara Blett, a Denver-based National Park Service ecologist who coordinates the project.

The study focuses on national parks in the West because earlier research focused on parks in the Midwest and East.

"We really know nothing about the West. It's just a blank slate, especially for the persistent organic pollutants, such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and DDT," Blett said.

Most of the testing is taking place at eight high-elevation or cold climate parks, including Mount Rainier and Olympic in Washington, Glacier in Montana, Rocky Mountain in Colorado, Sequoia in California and Denali in Alaska.

"It's really sort of a mystery we're trying to solve," said Dixon Landers, the lead scientist working on the Western Airborne Contaminants Assessment Project.

Landers and other scientists are trying to determine what toxic compounds and metals drop from the atmosphere into the parks, where they come from and whether their concentrations are significant enough to worry about.

PCBs were once used as coolants and lubricants in electrical transformers and capacitors. They are believed to cause learning disorders and behavioral problems in children. PCBs were banned in the United States in 1977, but they do not disintegrate over time.

In all, the scientists are looking for 85 pollutants and 49 metals, including mercury.

Scientists believe snowfall deposits most of the airborne pollution carried into the parks. But researchers also will analyze lake sediments, water, fish, lichen, willow bark and other so-called indicators, most of which are common to all of the parks under study.

Daniel Jaffe, a University of Washington atmospheric scientist, will use meteorological data to trace the origin of pollutants.

"We can't identify where every molecule came from," Jaffe said. But he expects to be able to track air currents from Southern California, Mexico and China, for example.

"Almost certainly some contamination comes from each of those places. The question becomes, how do we quantify how much from each?" Jaffe said.

Editorial, Visalia Times-Delta, March 25, 2004
Matching different uses is planning challenge

Visalia planning commissioners got an object lesson in the consequences of growth at their meeting this week that is a harbinger of conflicts to come.

The commission ultimately applied the principle that by using a buffer zone. That's a strategy the city will have to consider using more often as it finds itself planning on the edge.

The commissioners approved a 281-acre development along Goshen Avenue that would place homes next to a concrete mixing plant. They eventually settled on a compromise to keep the homes as far away from the industrial sites as possible.

Their action serves as kind of an early warning to the city: It will need to examine some of its growth hot spots to make sure current and future uses are compatible.

Mangano Homes proposes building homes, apartments, commercial uses, such as restaurants and gas stations, with space for a new elementary school on 281 acres.

The area is just west of other residential development, including a couple of upscale gated communities. But it is also just east of two large companies that manufacture building material -- Gang Nail Truss and Viking Ready Mix, which makes concrete. Ironically, both those companies have prospered thanks to Visalia's building boom. And both have been fairly good neighbors to residences and schools near them.

But as John Buada, representative for Viking Ready Mix pointed out, having a school and homes next to the concrete business will eventually force the business to move. Residential and school traffic is not compatible with big trucks, to cite just one conflict.

There are several other areas in Visalia with the same kind of conflict, including several areas along Ben Maddox Way, both north and south of Highway 198, the area between Akers and Shirk streets, and various sections in north Visalia.

The point is that the city can relieve the pressure on some of those areas, as well as the pressure on our planning commissioners, by setting up buffer zones that keep incompatible uses from clashing. Service businesses, for instance, that are used by both residential and industrial sites are good buffers.

In the case of the Goshen project, one of the attractive features is that it would bring eating places to that area of the city.

Good planning is more than a matter of setting limits. It's also a matter of mixing diverse uses so they serve each other without conflicting. That will be the challenge as Visalia continues to grow in places it has never gone before.