

Board vetoes freeze on dairies

Applications will be processed in groups, not in single report

By GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2004

There'll be no emergency freeze barring new dairy applications in Kern County.

There'll be no single environmental report, either, for two dozen projects now on the table that could bring an additional 214,000 new cows here. That's on top of an estimated 290,000 dairy cows already in Kern.

County supervisors Tuesday voted down both ideas -- at least technically -- during a nearly daylong session in which sharply divided opinion split a board often criticized for marching in lockstep.

What supervisors did vote on:

Dairy applications will be processed in groups, the board agreed unanimously.

An initial group of nine facilities, all near Wasco, was chosen because all had made it past the first permit phase. The group will be processed under one environmental report with a separate "chapter" for each project.

About 14 other facilities will form the seeds of a second group.

And from now on, new applications will be grouped according to seniority and geography.

The county will hire any consultants needed to complete specialized environmental reports.

Dairy applicants will pay for the consultant, based on time required for individual proposals.

The Petrissans family dairy south of Bakersfield was allowed to be processed on its own because it was already at an advanced permitting stage.

In a 3-to-2 vote, supervisors rejected setting up a temporary ban on new dairy applications.

Barbara Patrick and Jon McQuiston supported the temporary ban, saying it would give the county breathing room while processing existing applications. Ray Watson, Pete Parra and Don Maben opposed it.

In a separate dairy-related item, board members voted 3-to-1 to approve the Vanderham dairy near Shafter. McQuiston voted no, saying the dairy was too close to the city and nearby Maple School. Maben did not vote because he left for another meeting at 5 p.m. The Vanderham project, which is under court supervision following environmental lawsuits, will now go back to a judge.

While the temporary ban on new applications was rejected, the policy of processing dairies in groups will have much the same effect, according to county planners and lawyers advising the board.

That's basically because new applicants will have to wait their turn in line, possibly for a couple of years or more, knowing other groups will be processed before them.

A batch of new dairy proposals hit radar screens in June, and the numbers have grown since then. The prior couple of years saw few dairy applications here.

About 70 people attended the meeting. Most stayed even when the morning session dragged into late afternoon. Public comment took up almost three hours before a lunch break. Nearly 20 people spoke.

One recurring theme was that the board's decision would be sending a message to the outside world.

"It's a great responsibility you have today," John Dunlap III, a dairy industry consultant who'd organized more than a dozen other speakers, told the board. "It's going to have a profound effect that will reverberate throughout the state."

But after the day's deliberations, some questioned exactly what message had been telegraphed.

Parra, for example, gave a lengthy opinion, drawn from his years as a job developer, that roused applause from dairymen.

He said dairies would bring needed jobs here. He criticized newspapers for being mostly negative about dairies. He recalled bitter arguments about proposed warehouses at the Tejon Industrial Complex south of Bakersfield.

If the county doesn't want warehouses and doesn't want dairies, Parra asked, "By God, what do we want?"

Every town, he said, would like to be a high-tech success like Silicon Valley.

But "let's be realistic," Parra said. "The message we send is important."

Patrick, on the other hand, said her main priority was 3rd District residents.

"The message we're sending is that we really care about the people in Kern County," she said.

She criticized past board members, including herself, for not "biting the bullet" two years ago and creating a countywide environmental dairy report paid for by the county's general fund.

"Shame on everybody in this room we didn't proceed with that," Patrick said.

McQuiston bristled at comments from some dairymen that the county's shifting policies in recent years has been like a door slamming in the industry's face.

Like Patrick, he recalled the board's offer for a countywide environmental report that would have made dairy siting easier. He said the dairy industry turned it down.

"That offer was made; that offer was refused," McQuiston said.

And Maben, despite ultimately rejecting the temporary ban, said he was concerned for existing dairymen and other farmers.

"They're the ones that are going to pay the price" of any negative environmental effects from new dairies, Maben said.

Caroline Farrell, an attorney with the environmental group the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said after the meeting that if a message had been sent, it was that Kern County supervisors didn't want to deal with the dairy issue.

Dairymen Amos De Groot, whose family is proposing the Rex Ranch dairy near Wasco, didn't necessarily see the outcome as a victory.

"We feel a little more welcome," he said.

Dunlap, the industry consultant, asked after the meeting what his response was, paused a moment and said: "Gratified."

U.S. report on warming puts blame on humans

White House shifts view on the causes of greenhouse gases

Andrew C. Revkin, New York Times
in the S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004

A new report to Congress focuses on federal research indicating that emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases are the only likely explanation for global warming over the past three decades, a striking shift in the way the Bush administration has portrayed the science of climate change.

In delivering the report to Congress on Wednesday, an administration official, James Mahoney, said it reflected "the best possible scientific information" on climate change. Previously, President Bush and other officials had stressed uncertainties in understanding the causes and consequences of warming as a reason for rejecting binding restrictions on heat-trapping gases.

The report is among those submitted regularly to Congress as a summary of recent and planned federal research on shifting global conditions of all sorts. It also says the accumulating emissions pose newly identified risks to farmers, citing studies showing that carbon dioxide promotes the growth of invasive weeds much more than it stimulates crops and that it reduces the nutritional value of some rangeland grasses.

American and international panels of experts concluded as early as 2001 that smokestack and tailpipe discharges of heat-trapping gases were the most likely cause of recent global warming. But the White House had disputed those conclusions.

The last time the administration issued a document suggesting that global warming had a human cause and posed big risks was in June 2002, in a submission to the United Nations under a climate treaty. Bush distanced himself from it, saying it was something "put out by the bureaucracy."

That may be harder to do this time. The new report -- online at [www. climate-science.gov](http://www.climate-science.gov) -- is accompanied by a letter signed by Bush's secretaries of energy and commerce and by his science adviser.

The White House declined Wednesday to explain the change in emphasis, referring reporters to Mahoney, the assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and the director of government climate research.

In an interview, he said the report was mainly an update on the overall climate research program and was not intended to be a conclusive "state of the science" summary of the administration's thinking. A series of 21 reports is promised on particular issues in coming years, he said, and the studies on climate models, agriculture and other subjects mentioned in the new report are "significant but not definitive."

Still, the report was disputed by some groups that oppose restrictions on carbon dioxide emissions and have attacked research that blames dangerous warming on humans.

Myron Ebell of the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute said the report was "another indication that the administration continues to be incoherent in its global warming policies."

At the same time, the report did not please environmental groups, which have repeatedly criticized Bush for opposing efforts to require restrictions on the gases linked to global warming, though he has gradually come around to the position that warming is at least partly caused by emissions.

"The Bush administration on the one hand isn't doing anything about the problem but on the other hand can't deny the growing science behind global warming," said Jeremy Symons of the National Wildlife Federation.

The studies in the report that point to a human cause for recent warming all involved supercomputer simulations of climate, which have increased in power over the past several years.

The latest analysis, done at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., found that natural shifts in the output of the sun and other factors were responsible for the warming from 1900 to 1950 but could not explain the sharp and continuing rise since 1970.

The report's section on agriculture focused on several studies in which fields and grasslands were exposed to double concentrations of carbon dioxide, with growth patterns in plants shifting in ways that could harm yields.

In such conditions, the report said, plots of short-grass prairie in northeastern Colorado contained less of the nutrient nitrogen and were less digestible than plots that grew with no extra carbon dioxide.

"In another experiment, increased CO2 stimulated the growth of five of the most important species of invasive weeds, more than any other plant species yet studied," the report said. This suggests that some weeds could become bigger problems as CO2 increases.

Goshen ethanol plant to be built

Fuel-producing business could create 30 jobs

By Laura Florez, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004

An ethanol plant that will bring more jobs to Tulare County and provide motorists with cleaner burning fuel got one step closer Wednesday to making a home for itself in Goshen.

The Tulare County Planning Commission on Wednesday approved a special-use permit to Western Milling so it can expand a Goshen feed mill to include a 4.2-acre ethanol plant on the east side of Highway 99 north of Betty Drive.

The plant could be up and running by late January, said Richard Eastman, president of Phoenix Bio Industries Inc. LLC, the developer and operator in partnership with Western Milling.

The plant will produce ethanol, a fuel additive, made from fermented corn, which allows cars to run more cleanly.

"For the most part there's been support for this," he said. "We will be bringing in additional jobs to the community and increasing the tax base of Goshen."

The plant, which will sit on a 33-acre site, could bring as many as 30 jobs to Goshen, he said.

It is the second ethanol plant trying to establish itself in Tulare County, said Roberto Brady, project review division manager for the Tulare County Resource Management Agency. In July, a special-use permit for a \$65-million ethanol plant that could produce 40 million gallons of the fuel a year in Pixley was granted to Calgren Renewable Fuels, he said.

It is scheduled to be built north of Pixley, but Calgren has not yet applied to the county for building permits, he said.

Once Western Milling files its building permits with the county, it could begin construction in as little as two to three weeks, Brady said.

The plant will produce 25 million to 30 million gallons of fuel-grade ethanol alcohol each year, according to a report prepared by the RMA.

Concerns surrounding the project during the public hearing included traffic and water issues.

Doreen Caetane-Jungk, who grows walnuts in the area, asked that a study of groundwater in the area be completed.

The commission agreed to ask the applicant to undertake a groundwater study as one of several conditions for approval of the permit.

For the most part though, there is support for the project.

Chad Tafti, chairman of the Goshen Planning Committee, told commissioners that Goshen residents welcome the plant to the area.

"When asked what they think about an ethanol plant being constructed," he said, "most are excited by the jobs it will create and the increased income it will mean for the Goshen Redevelopment Area."

Revised housing plan goes to panel

By GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004

A controversial housing development in Rosedale has been modified and will return to county planning commissioners tonight.

The development of about 380 homes, slotted for the southeast corner of Heath and Hageman roads, first came before commissioners in February.

At that time, the project totaled about 400 homes. It riled up neighbors and environmental groups, who said homes were too close together. Traffic would be a problem, they said, as would [air pollution](#) from a slew of cars.

Developers Hageman Northwest LP addressed some concerns in the redesign, but the proposal will still likely draw opposition, county planners said.

One contentious point was rezoning the 160-acre development to create mostly quarter-acre lots. Surrounding homes sit mostly on estate-size lots.

County planners have recommended a concentration of half-acre lots at the development's southwestern corner, along the intersection of Heath and Meacham roads. That would mean larger lots at some main entry points.

Most lots inside the walled project would be a quarter-acre.

If commissioners approve the plan, it will head to county supervisors.

Commissioners will also:

- Consider enforcement proceedings against the operator of a long-defunct surface mine near Mojave. Planners want commissioners to fine Brutoco Engineering and Construction \$500 and revoke the firm's mining permit. They also want the firm ordered to return the 40-acre site to its natural condition.
- Take up a proposed 74-home development in Pumpkin Center. Because of unsolved sewer requirements, planning staff said, the project is likely to be postponed until planners and developers can work out issues.

No room for gloom

Glowing economic report shows happy days are here again in Kern despite state budget cuts and other uncertainties

By MARYLEE SHRIDER , Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004

Midway through the year, local business leaders and consumers are feeling pretty positive about Kern's economic future, according to the latest economic report from Cal State Bakersfield.

Despite concerns about state budget cuts and national security, the overall business outlook has become increasingly optimistic, a local economist said.

"Business managers believe financial conditions of their companies have improved and that this improvement is going to continue," said Abbas Grammy, a CSUB economics professor and publisher of the Kern Economic Journal.

Grammy said that when local residents see "positive things" happen in Kern County, they become more optimistic about their future. Positive developments so far this year include a rise in non-farm jobs, the continued real estate and construction boom and soaring oil prices.

While current oil prices translate to higher costs at the gas pump, they also contribute greatly to the local economy, Grammy said.

"On the consumer side we have to deal with higher gas prices, but local businesses profit and government takes advantage of this because of property taxes," he said.

The journal has been tracking local economic data since 1999. A key indicator in the report, the business outlook index, jumped 12.4 percentage points from 126.5 in the first quarter to 138.9 in the second quarter of 2004 -- indicating that business managers are optimistic about local conditions.

The index has increased continually since the second quarter of 2003, gaining 37 percentage points.

Grammy said one of the most surprising revelations in the report was the increase in home price appreciation numbers.

He said he had expected to see a jump in the numbers, but the 26 percent to 58 percent increases in some areas was unanticipated.

"I was expecting 7 to 10 percent, so these numbers are way above my expectations," he said.

Home prices in Kern County, Bakersfield, Delano and Tehachapi appreciated from 25.9 to 28.5 percent, according to the report. In Rosamond, home prices appreciated 37.5 percent and in California City, houses selling for \$95,000 in June of last year were going for \$150,000 a year later -- a change of 57.9 percent.

In contrast, housing prices have depreciated in Ridgecrest by 2.2 percent and in Taft by 6.8 percent.

Kern County remains one of the most affordable areas of California.

According to the current index value, a family earning the median household income has 46 percent of the income necessary to qualify for a conventional loan covering 80 percent of a median-priced existing single-family home.

"With interest rates still at historic lows, I would expect that the house price bubble may not burst too soon, but these incredible rates will continue," Grammy said. "As a homeowner, I hope so."

The report found a modest increase in personal income for Kern County residents and a slight decline in the unemployment rate -- from 12.6 in the first quarter of 2004 to the current 11.5.

But in a feature new to the quarterly report, Grammy and his fellow economists take a critical look at socioeconomic indicators that impact the local quality of life.

If Bakersfield wants to fare better in the ranking of California cities, Grammy said, city officials must find a way to slow the population growth, enhance the level of education, further reduce unemployment and [improve air quality](#).

"We know what the problems are, but when you put it in the context that these problems reduce the standard of living in the community, that makes it an urgent matter," Grammy said. "It's an agenda for future improvement if some policy makers want to pay attention."

Ad Firm Targets Emissions Proposal

Spots claim proposed rule to fight global warming will result in more traffic deaths.

By Miguel Bustillo, Times Staff Writer, Los Angeles Times, August 26, 2004

A public relations firm with ties to the automobile industry has launched ads suggesting that a proposed California rule to cut carbon dioxide exhaust could cause more people to die in traffic accidents.

Starring "Squeezy the Clown," the radio and newspaper advertisements by the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America use humor to make a questionable claim: The regulation to combat global warming will compel auto companies to make smaller vehicles, forcing California families into diminutive cars and trucks that could endanger their lives.

The campaign, which asks the public to sign a protest petition to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and other state officials, is an attempt to create grass-roots opposition to the carbon dioxide regulation before it can be approved by the California Air Resources Board next month in Los Angeles.

But SUV Owners of America is not a grass-roots organization. It is run by Strat@comm, a

Washington, D.C., public relations firm whose clients have included General Motors, DaimlerChrysler and Ford, as well as the auto industry's two major trade groups.

The firm purchased the SUV owners' organization from its Wisconsin founder two years ago for an amount it declined to disclose. It turned it into a nonprofit group whose governing board is made up of Washington lobbyists.

"Like all Americans, we support efforts to make our air cleaner," the petition to California officials states. "But the new proposed rules (mandated by Assembly Bill 1493) to restrict CO2 from cars and trucks will not accomplish that goal. More importantly, these rules could kill or injure many Californians."

Consumer and environmental groups supportive of the global warming regulation say the ads are an example of what has become known as an "Astroturf," or fake grass-roots, campaign.

Orchestrated by public relations professionals, the campaigns can generate a groundswell of opposition to regulations that a particular industry does not like. The campaigns, which have been waged by tobacco companies, HMOs and many others over the last decade, often rely on inflammatory arguments that might not be considered credible if they were made directly by an affected industry.

Critics call the SUV Owners of America campaign deliberately misleading. The 2002 law that directed the state to craft the global warming regulation specifically prohibits state officials from reducing vehicle weights and sizes, or banning large SUVs, they say.

"These guys are not just exaggerating, they are outright lying," said Russell Long of the environmental group Bluewater Network, which helped write the law. "It creates an artificial backlash to something that does not exist."

Automakers deny any connection to SUV Owners of America.

"My understanding is that they are a completely independent organization. We do not have any ownership stake in SUVOA," said General Motors spokeswoman Joanne Krell.

A spokesman for SUV Owners of America, which claims 23,000 supporters and does not charge membership fees, said its funding comes from individual donations and banner ads on its website.

Many of the banner ads promote SUVs, such as the Chevy Avalanche and Jeep Grand Cherokee. One touted a 2003 Dodge Durango - a model nearly two years older than the Durango soon to appear in dealer showrooms around the country.

"Frankly, it does not matter who else we might work for. What matters is what we have to say about the issues - such as the safety record of these [sport utility] vehicles," said Ron Defore, a Strat@comm founder who serves as the SUV group's communications director.

"There is nothing sinister about it," Defore said. "Frankly, it is common in this town for people to wear two hats."

Defore added that the easiest known way to reduce carbon dioxide exhaust is to build vehicles that burn less fossil fuel. Therefore, he argued, automakers will clearly react by producing smaller cars and trucks to improve fuel efficiency, even if California's regulation does not require them to downsize.

To support the safety concerns the group has raised, Defore pointed to studies by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety showing that SUVs were among the safest newer-model cars. But

other data points to the opposite conclusion, including figures released this month by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which showed that SUVs are much more likely to roll over than other passenger vehicles in an accident, exposing the occupants to a greater chance of death or serious injury.

Asked what kind of car he drove, Defore declined to answer, saying only that he has driven SUVs in the past and was "in the market for a Hummer." Defore made the same remark in news articles published last year.

California's global warming regulation seeks to reduce tailpipe emissions of carbon dioxide by nearly 30%. It would apply to cars and light-duty trucks sold in the state from the 2009 model year onward. Its requirements would increase over eight years, according to the most recent draft of the proposal, which is set to be approved Sept. 23.

Although the rule is not intended to reduce the size of cars and trucks, it is clearly going to make them more expensive. Automakers may be forced to make standard newer technologies that up to now have largely been sold as options. Included are transmissions that continually shift to find the most fuel-efficient gear and alternative refrigerants in air-conditioning systems.

As a result, the price of an average car or small truck will go up \$626, and a larger truck or SUV \$955, according to air board officials' estimates. Automakers dispute those figures, saying the increase is likely to be significantly greater.

While California makes up roughly one-tenth of the nation's car buying market, the rule could have nationwide - and even international - effects, becoming a de facto standard for the auto industry.

California is the only state that has the authority to adopt air pollution regulations stronger than those set in the nation's capital. Other states can then follow California's lead - and a number do, citing frustration with weaker pollution rules being approved in Washington.

New York, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont automatically adopt any air regulations approved by California. Connecticut, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have indicated they may approve California's global warming rule. Together, the states make up more than one-fourth of the American car market. Canada is monitoring the California rule as well as a prototype for its own global warming regulation.

Automakers have been tight-lipped about the global warming rule, referring questions to a trade group, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. It has indicated that the carmakers may sue California on the grounds that the state was unlawfully setting a new fuel economy standard.

Automotive analysts believe the industry, which has tried to cultivate a greener image after years of fighting California pollution rules, is careful to avoid being perceived as an enemy of the environment. A statewide poll last month by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found that 81% of respondents backed the global warming regulation. Schwarzenegger has said he supports it.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

White House Puts the West on Fast Track for Oil, Gas Drilling

A Changing Landscape, Battling over the nature of the West

Los Angeles Times, August 25, 2004

By Alan C. Miller, Tom Hamburger and Julie Cart, Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON - Placing a heavy emphasis on energy production in the American West, the Bush administration has moved aggressively to open up broad areas of largely unspoiled federal

land to oil and gas exploration.

The administration has pressed for approval of new drilling permits across the Rocky Mountains and lifted protections on hundreds of thousands of acres with gas and oil reserves in Utah and Colorado. In the process, it has targeted a number of places prized for their scenery, abundant wildlife and clean water, natural assets increasingly valuable to the region's changing economy.

Soon after taking office in 2001, the Bush White House set up a little-known task force that acts as a complaint desk for industry, passing energy company concerns directly to federal land management employees in the field. Although the creation of White House task forces is commonplace, experts on the executive branch say it is unusual to have one primarily serving the interests of a single industry.

In addition, the Bureau of Land Management has been pushed to issue drilling permits at a record pace for three of the last four years, an increase of 70% since the Clinton administration.

Internal memos and interviews show senior administration officials have directed federal employees to be responsive to industry, commended offices that approved large numbers of drilling permits and chastised those that were slow.

The effort is so intense in the oil- and gas-rich Rockies that some Bureau of Land Management employees there have taken to calling the region "the OPEC states."

The administration says increased drilling is necessary to satisfy America's growing demand for power and to reduce reliance on foreign energy sources. Interior officials say they are proceeding with respect for the land and with input from communities that must cope with the effects of new production.

The acceleration of energy development, however, could transform some of the region's most treasured landscapes, places that call to mind the works of such painters as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, who immortalized the Rocky Mountain region in the late 19th century.

At stake are areas such as New Mexico's Otero Mesa, a lonely stretch of low, knobby mountains incised with Native American petroglyphs that rise out of one of the nation's last Chihuahuan Desert grasslands. And there is Wyoming's Jack Morrow Hills with its towering, multi-hued buttes, undulating sand dunes and herds of rare desert elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. It is also the terminus of the longest wildlife migration route in the continental United States.

The push for oil and gas, which could lead to more than 1,000 wells in the Jack Morrow Hills area, would open the way for networks of roads, pipelines, well heads, generators and waste ponds.

It can take many years for environmental damage to appear. Wild herds don't disappear overnight. Officials of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department warned in a draft report last month that the proliferation of natural gas wells could have a negative effect on deer, elk and pronghorn antelope. The report went on to say that the protective measures by the BLM in Wyoming had been "inconsistently applied" and "frequently modified or waived."

Chris Sullivan, whose family has a ranch near an expanding natural gas field south of Pinedale, Wyo., said he used to see 700 or more antelope on his property during hunting season. "Last fall, I don't think we had 100," Sullivan said. "This summer we've had a handful."

Outlined during the 2000 campaign, the administration's course was set the following year with a national energy plan developed by a Cabinet-level group headed by Vice President Dick Cheney. Citing executive privilege, the vice president has kept confidential the records of people who met with the group.

The evolving policy is being carried out by senior officials at the Department of Interior, a number of whom have past ties to the energy industry.

Drilling applications are skyrocketing, driven by record-high energy prices and new technology that allows the industry to exploit previously inaccessible supplies.

In a recent interview, Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton said the administration had streamlined some energy production processes, including speeding up oil and gas permits to ease a backlog.

"We have a larger and larger percentage of resources found on federal lands because we have tapped out the reserves now on privately owned lands," Norton said. Nevertheless, "we're really talking about very small areas in comparison to the vast areas of land that we manage."

But she said the BLM had not promoted energy production at the expense of recreation, conservation and wildlife protection.

Kathleen Clarke, director of the BLM, agreed.

"I absolutely reject the premise that the BLM ignores the bulk of its mission to promote a single use," she said. "When the agency issues oil and gas leases, it's carrying out its multiple-use mission no less than when it issues a special recreation permit."

But government memos, interviews with agency employees and budget documents show that the emphasis on oil and gas is transforming the BLM's historic mission to balance commerce, conservation and recreation on the 262 million acres it oversees.

The shift is stirring resentment not only with some longtime agency staff but among some hunters, ranchers and others who supported President Bush in 2000.

"All these farmers and ranchers are fit to be tied about what they consider their administration is doing," said Laurie Goodman, a lifelong Republican who served in the administration of Bush's father and as an aide to a Wyoming senator and who now works with Trout Unlimited, a fishing advocacy group.

Amid growing criticism of its energy policies, the Bush administration is scrambling to polish its environmental image, particularly in such states as New Mexico and Colorado, where the November presidential election could be close.

White House and Interior officials have been working to mend fences with hunting and fishing groups that expressed alarm about the effects of oil and gas policies on wildlife.

Industry executives say that if the administration has made any difference, it has been to restore a proper balance between development and environmental protection. And they say it is the market, not Washington, that is responsible for the upsurge in activity.

"The high rate of drilling in the Rockies is not done on marching orders from Bush-Cheney. But, in fact, is being driven by high prices," Keith O. Rattie, chairman of Questar Corp., said at a recent energy conference in Denver.

Industry experts say the Rocky Mountain region is one of the top six gas-producing areas in the world, with 41% of the potential gas reserves in the U.S., according to one survey. Nationally, 5% of America's oil and 11% of its natural gas are produced domestically from onshore public land.

Yet environmentalists and some current and former BLM officials contend that the administration is sacrificing some of the most spectacular natural spaces in the West for a short-term bump in supplies. Despite all the drilling, they say, foreign imports of oil and gas have not declined. They

also say Bush's and Cheney's failure to emphasize energy conservation and alternative sources is leading to irreversible damage to federal lands, water, air and wildlife.

"Deer, elk, sage grouse, all the charismatic mega-fauna we have tried to protect, are no longer considered to be part of the natural heritage; they're considered impediments to oil and gas development," said Dennis J. Willis, an outdoor recreation planner for the BLM in Utah and a 28-year agency veteran, who made it clear he was speaking for himself and not the bureau. "It's like saying the Vatican and the Colosseum are impediments to urban renewal in Rome."

The concerns aren't only about wildlife.

In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, natural gas extraction involves pumping an estimated 60 million gallons of water from methane-laden coal beds to the surface each day. Much of the wastewater is contained in shallow ponds and, in a few cases, reused for livestock and crops. The quality of the pumped water varies widely, but some of it is high in saline and other contaminants.

Ranchers in the Powder River area and in the San Juan Basin in New Mexico have complained that drinking water from their wells has been fouled, that their cattle have died after drinking from contaminated ponds and that water tables are being depleted - all this during a severe drought.

Pulling natural gas from subterranean coal beds - and leasing lands to oil and gas companies in general - took off during the Clinton administration and has accelerated under Bush. BLM officials acknowledge that water-quality issues have been a major challenge, especially with gas extraction from coal beds.

Agency officials say the BLM is pursuing various steps to address the concerns. They say that in the Powder River Basin they are proposing to reduce the amount of wastewater discharged into streams. In the San Juan Basin, the BLM says, it makes companies reinject water that has been pumped out of the ground.

Changing Priorities

The rush to drill is just one of the shifting priorities under the Bush administration that critics say departs from a 40-year tradition of federal land stewardship.

Few decisions have angered critics more than the legal settlement Norton signed last year that effectively reversed the Clinton administration's policy of shielding 2.6 million acres in Utah and 600,000 acres in Colorado from development. The land was being protected by the Department of Interior under a "take care policy" to preserve its wilderness qualities pending an official decision by Congress and the White House.

Soon after the settlement, the BLM began leasing tens of thousands of acres of the area to oil and gas companies; some of the sites are visible from Dinosaur National Monument.

Norton's settlement reaches well beyond Utah and Colorado, effectively giving up BLM authority to evaluate and provide protection for any other lands proposed for wilderness consideration. Norton maintains that only Congress has the authority to provide such protection.

And Congress has exercised that authority rarely since Bush took office. He has signed legislation preserving 529,604 acres - far fewer than any American president since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964.

In contrast, President Reagan signed legislation preserving 10.6 million acres in his two terms, and George H.W. Bush, the president's father, approved the protection of nearly 4 million acres during his single term. President Clinton ratified the designation of nearly 9.5 million acres during

his two terms.

Interior officials said the administration had recently decided to support several bills that would create nearly 900,000 acres of new wilderness. They also said they supported designating another 1.4 million acres of wilderness in the Chugach National Forest in Alaska.

In addition, Norton said the administration had greatly increased funding for grants to states, private landowners and conservation groups to preserve open space and improve habitat.

However, the administration continues to lift restrictions on federal land.

Last month, the Department of Agriculture announced it was rolling back a Clinton administration rule prohibiting new roads on 58 million acres managed by the Forest Service. The ban had kept the remote lands off limits to industry. The BLM administers drilling permits on Forest Service and other federal land, but the Forest Service controls the surface.

The action gave states greater power to decide whether to permit logging, mining or energy exploration in the areas, administration officials said. Energy companies have expressed interest in prospecting for oil and gas in roadless areas ranging from the Badger-Two Medicine region of the Lewis and Clark National Forest near the Canadian border to a rugged section of the Los Padres National Forest near Santa Barbara.

Energy Connection

Critics attribute the administration's energy policies in the West to its long-held ties with the energy industry.

The president's father was a Texas oilman before entering politics, and the younger Bush started his own oil and gas company after college.

Before running for office in 2000, Cheney was chairman of Halliburton, one of the country's largest energy services firms.

With two energy veterans topping the ticket, the oil and gas industry gives more than 80% of its campaign contributions to Republican candidates, up from 63% in 1994.

The industry has given about \$140 million to federal campaigns of all candidates and committees during that period, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group. About 50 of the Bush campaign's premier fundraisers - nearly 10% - are energy executives. Each has raised \$100,000 or more.

Upon assuming office, Bush appointed several senior officials with oil and gas industry connections who moved quickly to boost production.

Norton, a former Interior Department associate solicitor and Colorado state attorney general, was heavily supported by energy interests during an unsuccessful 1996 Colorado Senate bid. She had previously worked for the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a conservative think tank that opposed wilderness protections and pushed to make public land more accessible for commercial development.

Deputy Interior Secretary J. Steven Griles is a former lobbyist for coal, oil and gas interests, including companies seeking greater access to Western energy deposits.

As a lawyer in Montana, Assistant Interior Secretary Rebecca W. Watson represented natural gas interests, among other clients, before joining the department. She said she also represented ranchers in cases against energy companies.

In addition, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, a close Bush friend and his chief campaign fundraiser in 2000, is a former energy company executive.

The thrust to open Western lands for oil and gas began with the national energy policy group convened by Cheney. After meeting with industry representatives in 2001, the Cabinet-level group called for a streamlined review of federal "land status and . impediments to federal oil and gas leasing," and for changes "where opportunities exist" to promote energy development. It added that such changes should be consistent with "good environmental practice."

The White House wrote to Cabinet officers asking them to "identify ways your agency could expedite the review of permits or other authorizations for energy-related projects" and "accelerate the completion of such projects," according to a memo obtained by the Natural Resources Defense Council through the Freedom of Information Act.

The instructions, in turn, were reinforced by the BLM. An agency directive ordered field offices "to take the necessary steps to work with local oil and gas operators" and other agencies to speed the processing of drilling applications.

In Wyoming, the state director gave an award to the Buffalo field office in 2002 for approving more drilling permits than all other BLM offices combined. The citation praised the local office for working "diligently" and "creatively" with industry to set the record.

Conversely, on Jan. 4, 2002, a Utah BLM official distributed a report critical of delays in approving drilling permits in the state.

"The leasing delays and [drilling approval] backlogs are created by the people responsible for performing the wilderness reviews" and environmental assessments, the report said. "Utah needs to ensure that existing staff understand that when an oil and gas lease parcel or when an application for permission to drill come in the door, that this work is their number-one priority."

A BLM spokeswoman said the memo was an "information bulletin" for the oil and gas team and not a directive.

However, some BLM staffers said environmental reviews suffered in the push to process drilling.

"All we do is issue permits for oil and gas," said a career BLM staff member in a Western office who spoke on the condition that he not be named. "We're told to follow new deadlines that are totally driven by industry. We're not given time to do adequate [environmental reviews] and to consider the consequences of our decisions."

Mat Millenbach, a longtime BLM employee and former state director in Montana who left in 2002, said he became concerned when the Bush administration began referring to wildlife protections as "impediments" to leasing.

"Those restrictions were coined as a way to enact multiple use of public land - to preserve wildlife while allowing oil and gas development. It was never intended as an impediment," Millenbach said. "It was intended to allow development while preserving another important resource, wildlife."

BLM officials said the agency was not cutting corners on environmental reviews, or granting waivers to protections that would harm wildlife. A spokesman said the agency still had long delays in approving drilling permits, in part because it was committed to doing complete assessments.

Several officials told of receiving calls from the White House if they took too long. The calls came from the Task Force on Energy Project Streamlining that was formed in 2001.

Its purpose is to act "like an ombudsman" mainly for companies frustrated with the slow pace of the bureaucracy, according to James Connaughton, head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, who talked about the task force in a recent interview.

The task force has also met numerous times with environmental groups, he said, and has made calls to speed other energy projects such as transmission lines and a wind energy initiative. But most of the task force's efforts are aimed at oil and gas development.

Connaughton said that, while the task force most often represented the energy industry, it did not apply pressure on the BLM or other federal agencies.

He said that when the task force called a land management agency, the purpose was to obtain information in response to complaints and to encourage agency coordination and efficiency.

"We bill ourselves as outcome neutral," said Robert W. Middleton, the task force director.

But White House documents show dozens of cases in which the task force was contacted by oil and gas companies with specific complaints. Each time, Middleton or other members responded by asking Interior officials about the corporate concerns, requesting "an expedited response" and often making telephone calls requesting greater efficiency, records show.

After Middleton called in 2003 on behalf of one of the nation's largest energy companies, El Paso Corp., local Forest Service employees said they felt pressured to act.

El Paso officials had contacted Middleton's office after the Forest Service rejected their bid to probe for natural gas in New Mexico's Valle Vidal, a complex of mountain meadows teeming with wildlife that for years has served as a retreat for the adjacent Philmont Scout Ranch, the nation's largest Boy Scout training center.

This month, the Forest Service took the first steps toward approving El Paso's bid to explore for gas on 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal.

Wayne Thornton, who helps oversee oil and gas leasing for the Forest Service's Southwest region, said there was no pressure from Washington to reverse protections that had been in place for 22 years.

But two employees of the Forest Service office in charge of the project, including its public affairs officer, Benjamin Romero, said they believed the task force leaned on the Forest Service to alter its stand on the Valle Vidal at El Paso's behest.

For some BLM field employees, getting a call from the White House has conveyed a powerful message.

A BLM archeologist said he was so stunned to hear from a White House official that he thought the call was a gag. "You guys must have the thing in Iraq taken care of if you have time to call somebody in a field office about a gas well," he initially responded.

But the caller said he was with the White House task force and asked about a pending application for a permit to drill. The archeologist paid attention.

"I know it's political. I know it's hot. It becomes a top priority because you don't want the bosses to jump down your throat," said the archeologist, speaking on the condition that he not be named. "I've worked for the federal government since the Reagan administration, and that's never happened before."

Experts on executive branch management said the creation of a White House advocate for a particular industry was unusual.

"Ombudsman offices have been set up at IRS and other agencies, but their role is to advocate broadly for citizens," said Paul Light, an expert on the executive branch at New York University. "I have never heard of an ombudsman created for just one industry, much less one set up in the White House."

Meanwhile, funding for the BLM's program that administers oil and gas exploration and development activities on public land has jumped 50% since the Bush administration took office.

In contrast, funding for wilderness management has increased only marginally, the budget for threatened and endangered species has grown 16% and funding for wildlife management has declined. Congress directed some of the additional funds to the oil and gas program to reduce the backlog of drilling applications.

The top-down pressure and bigger budget have produced results as industry is seeking drilling permits to capitalize on high energy prices. The BLM approved 4,421 permits to drill for gas and oil on federal land as of Aug. 4, topping last year's record high of 3,802. BLM officials say the total for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30 will exceed 6,000. While drilling permits have increased dramatically, Interior officials point out that the BLM has approved 25% fewer leases per year on average than the Clinton administration. On the other hand, the agency is opening up more land per lease than it did under Clinton.

The amount of federal land under lease to oil and gas companies was over 38 million acres as of June and could rise substantially in the next few years. The administration is revising about 70 resource management plans, which are long-term blueprints for commercial, recreational and conservation use of public land. Some of the draft plans propose to open up more gas and oil development in sensitive areas, including Otero Mesa and the Jack Morrow Hills.

BLM officials said their proposed plans would limit the amount of oil and gas activity in those areas at times that would do the most harm to wildlife. And they say they are pushing energy companies to use new technologies to reduce environmental damage.

"This administration is committed to restoring balance to the multiple-use mandate, which means that oil and gas development has a place at the table," said Clarke, the BLM's director. She said the mandate covered all lands not formally protected as wilderness.

West's New Terrain

In the 2000 election, Bush carried every Rocky Mountain state except New Mexico. His views are shared by many residents of the West who resented the efforts of past administrations to put federal lands off limits not just to the energy industry but to chain saws and pickups.

But the West is changing.

In January, 100 Western economists wrote to Bush and Western governors warning against heavy reliance on extractive industries, including oil and gas drilling.

"Extractive industries and agriculture now play a smaller economic role because their ability to generate new jobs and higher incomes has declined," the economists wrote. "Across most of the West, a community's ability to retain and attract firms now drives its prosperity. But if a community's natural environment is degraded, it has greater difficulty retaining and attracting workers and firms."

While Wyoming officials can point to the state's billion-dollar-plus surplus, largely due to oil and

gas industry royalty payments, Gov. Dave Freudenthal, a Democrat, has expressed reservations about proposals to drill for oil and gas along the pronghorn antelope migration route south through Pinedale and toward the Jack Morrow Hills.

In Wyoming, wildlife-related activities account for \$500 million, more than any other income source except oil and gas.

Norton, Clarke and other senior administration officials have crisscrossed the country to meet with hunters, fishermen and ranchers.

Watson, the assistant Interior secretary, touted a series of initiatives intended to protect wildlife at a recent summit of hunting and outdoor groups in upstate New York. Robert Model, the coalition's chairman and president of the Boone and Crockett Club, founded by Theodore Roosevelt and one of the country's oldest hunting and conservation organizations, said afterward that the administration was "responding by making important moves toward addressing and mitigating the concerns of our community."

Bush has spoken at several events to the self-described "hook and bullet crowd." He appeared on a TV fishing show this month, did an interview with Field and Stream magazine and announced an expanded national wetlands program from a farm in Minnesota with the head of a hunting group.

Some Westerners remain more impressed with the effects they see on the land than with the administration's outreach.

"I can't understand all the rapid expansion of drilling and more drilling everywhere," said Courtney Skinner, 68, a lifelong Republican and former Bush voter who leads expeditions into the mountains of western Wyoming. "I think it's going to cost the West a terrible price - not only in our water, our air, our way of life. It's going to cost us the freedom that the West stands for."

FAX cleans up

City continues strong effort to convert to alternative-fuel vehicles.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004:](#)

The city of Fresno has taken another commendable step in the direction of cleaner air for the Valley with the award of a contract to build a compressed natural gas fueling station for buses and other vehicles. The move will reduce deadly diesel pollution, tiny particulate matter that works its way deep into the lungs, causing cardiovascular and respiratory illness.

The \$3.3 million fueling station, at the city's corporation yard downtown, will be the largest in the central San Joaquin Valley when it opens in about eight months. The city already operates a liquid natural gas fueling station for its garbage trucks at the yard.

Fresno Area Express operates more than 100 buses. Today about 28 of them, including trolleys, use compressed natural gas instead of diesel. Come April, another 10 such buses will be added to the fleet.

That's a remarkable figure, considering that just a few short years ago the idea of converting to alternative-fuel buses was being dismissed by the City Council because those buses are more costly than conventional diesel models. Increased awareness of air quality problems has been backed by concrete action, for which the city's elected leaders and staff deserve much praise.

The city currently uses a UPS facility for natural gas fueling. The new station will dramatically speed the rate at which those vehicles can be refueled, saving labor costs. FAX buses use about 4,500 gallons of diesel fuel each weekday. By the time the fleet is fully converted, around 2010, that will be at an end.

"It's going to improve the air quality in the community," said James Samuel, FAX maintenance manager. Bravo.

Too many people

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004:](#)

Bill McEwen had the courage to say in his Aug. 15 column that air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley is caused by population growth, along with the Valley's geography and political failure. He is absolutely right. The population of California has doubled in the past 25 years and will double again in the next 25 years to 65 million people. I wonder, how will the air be then?

This population increase was brought about mainly by the government's failure to enforce immigration laws. In the same Aug. 15 Opinion section, the editorial "Well connected" says that as the state's population grows, water will be ever more precious, since there is a finite supply. This sends a strong message that maybe we should control our population growth. It should start with the government stopping illegal immigration.

Steven Wright
Atwater

'Become the leader'

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2004:](#)

Our air pollution is the worst in the United States. We have the chance here to become the leader in solving this problem. All I hear about is how bad the air quality is here and what small steps we are taking to make it better. This is not a diaper derby. It is time we stand up, dust off our knees and make a difference.

We should be at the leading edge of technology in solving this problem. We should be known for how we solved what has become an international crisis.

Are we able to build dams that hold back millions of gallons of water? Are we able to construct roads and railways to cross our great nation? Can we not figure out how to begin pulling the dirt out of our air?

If we must build large structures to do so, then we could surely get some kind of federal funding. The bad air bully is in our own yard beating up our kids as well as ourselves. Aren't we tired of being beaten up?

Derek Carlon, Fresno

A Start in Fixing Port Smog

[Editorial published in the Los Angeles Times, August 25, 2004](#)

If the soot and fumes rising from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach wafted out of a factory smokestack rather than the diesel engines in thousands of idling trucks and docked ships, local leaders would have long ago demanded a fix. That there has been little progress toward cutting toxic emissions speaks to the scope of the problem and the deep fears that putting a lid on pollution would smother port growth. A bill close to approval in the Legislature offers a modest start on clearing the air over the harbor.

Ports flounder in a regulatory Bermuda Triangle when it comes to pollution control. Local regulators can order emissions cuts at refineries, dry cleaners and other fixed facilities, but their jurisdiction does not include container ships and trucks. State rules target cars and trucks, but federal law bars California from regulating large container ships and tankers.

A 1999 study by the Air Quality Management District found that diesel emissions were responsible for 71% of the cancer risk from air pollution in the Los Angeles Basin. Because the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports are the biggest single air polluter and a major source of diesel emissions in the region, residents in San Pedro, Wilmington and Long Beach have borne the brunt of that increased cancer risk - and they're angry and scared. Similar hot zones surround

other U.S. ports, but the problem has become acute in Southern California because port traffic is soaring.

The bill, by Assemblyman Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach), would require the ports to cap air pollution at or below 2004's already-high levels. The legislation, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, does not dictate what port officials should do, simply insisting that they do something.

As part of a new deal by L.A. City Hall and various parties active at the port, terminal operators will open their gates for shipping during off-peak hours, a move that should ease truck congestion - and emissions. There are obvious next steps: State and local funds have already helped retrofit with cleaner engines some of the dirtiest trucks hauling cargo into and out of the port. An estimated 6,000 more need overhauling; the ports and the state together could cover that cost. Also, cleaner-burning diesel fuel is now available for ships; the European Union is considering mandating its use by ships that dock at European ports. The Los Angeles-Long Beach ports, the largest in the nation, could do the same.

Separate versions of Lowenthal's AB 2042 have passed in the two houses of the Legislature, and lawmakers in the Assembly are now reconciling them. Shipping and business groups, including the California Chamber of Commerce, oppose the legislation out of concern that it would smother growth. But it is just a small, sensible step toward solving an urgent problem, and if it gets to the governor, he should sign it.