Canada OKs Auto Emissions Pact

By Miguel Bustillo
Thursday, March 24, Los Angeles Times

Automakers and the Canadian government have reached an agreement requiring reduced greenhouse gas emissions from all cars sold in the country in an effort to combat global warming.

The voluntary pact, disclosed Wednesday to Parliament by John Efford, Canada's natural resources minister, comes after senior Canadian officials threatened to copy a landmark California law that seeks to force automakers to cut emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases.

Automakers are challenging the law in court, arguing that California is trying to set fuel standards for the entire United States and that only the federal government has that authority.

Canada's auto market is about the same size as California's, and each is responsible for about 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Canada's agreement requires automakers by 2010 to cut tailpipe emissions by 5.3 million tons, about what would be achieved by improving the fuel efficiency of all cars sold in Canada by 25%. But the pact does not specify that fuel economy be improved to meet the target.

If the companies fail to comply with the voluntary agreement, Canada plans to follow up with a legally binding regulation, officials said.

The agreement is "good for Canadians and it's good for the auto industry," Efford told the House of Commons in Ottawa.

Canadian officials said privately that automakers had demanded that the pact stipulate a reduction in tons of greenhouse gases instead of an improvement in fuel economy, as Canada initially sought.

The companies feared that an agreement to make cars in Canada more fuel-efficient would have made it harder to resist calls to do the same thing in the United States, the Canadian officials said.

Canada is bound under the recently enacted Kyoto Protocol to reduce its overall greenhouse gas emissions to about 6% below 1990 levels by 2012. But emissions in Canada have increased by nearly 20% since 1990, prompting the nation's leaders to take aggressive steps to cut the exhaust.

Canadian officials visited California to learn more about the state's law after the author of the California law, state Assemblywoman Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills), visited Canada.

Conservationists say Canada's voluntary agreement, combined with California's law, could have a significant effect on global warming, because they probably will lead automakers to make reduced-emissions vehicles for all of North America.

Automakers began working to reduce emissions in Europe after reaching a similar voluntary agreement with the European Union. However, they have argued that making such reductions to the U.S. vehicle fleet, which is larger and thirstier because of the popularity of sport utility vehicles and other larger cars, would be too costly.

Environmental groups praised the Canadian pact, saying it would make it difficult for automakers to continue saying they cannot make similar reductions in the United States.

"They continue arguing with a straight face that this can't be done, even while they are doing it in Europe," said Daniel Becker, director of the Sierra Club's global warming program. "When they go into court and say, 'Your honor, we can't do this,' we can now point out that they have agreed to do this just north of us in Canada."

A spokeswoman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, the trade group that filed suit against California, countered that the Canadian agreement would have no bearing on the industry's lawsuit. She noted that the suit was based on whether the state was unlawfully attempting to set a new national fuel economy requirement.

"Clearly, states cannot set fuel economy standards," said the spokeswoman, Gloria Bergquist. "So it is apples and oranges."

Airborne Soot Adds to Arctic Melting, Study Finds

By Miguel Bustillo
Thursday, March 24, Los Angeles Times

Soot pollution from southern Asia appears to be contributing to climate changes at the North Pole, raising atmospheric temperatures and speeding up the melting of snow and sea ice, according to a study by scientists at NASA.

The researchers, who have been using satellite imaging to track the effects of soot, or black carbon emissions, believe they have found a link between the timing of Arctic warming and ice loss and deposits of tiny particles from man-made pollution during the late 20th century.

The findings, which support earlier conclusions, demonstrate that the climate changes affecting the Arctic region are complex and may be a result of traditional pollution as well as global warming from the release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases.

The findings also show that most of the pollution in the Arctic does not come from smokestacks and tailpipes in the developed world, but from industrial emissions in South Asia and forest fires and the burning of other vegetation around the planet.

The study, co-authored by Dorothy Koch of Columbia University and James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, was published recently in the Journal of Geophysical Research.

"Soot is a particular concern in the Arctic because it can accelerate the melting of the ice and snow," Koch said in an interview. "The standard knowledge has always been that most of it comes from Northern Europe and Asia. We were surprised to find that much of it comes from further south."

When soot particles fall on ice, they darken the surface. The seemingly minuscule shift in coloration can make the ice more prone to absorb sunlight instead of reflecting it, and can thus cause it to melt more easily.

Similarly, tiny soot particles can warm the air and have been shown to alter weather patterns and affect the formation of clouds, which collect condensation around tiny airborne particles known as aerosols.

Pollution particles can increase the number of aerosols in clouds, which in some cases have been found to reduce the amount of rain that the clouds release. In other cases, research suggests that the tiny flecks can cause clouds to stay together longer, resulting in more intense precipitation when the clouds finally release their moisture.

Other NASA research into black carbon pollution three years ago suggested that soot emissions may have contributed to flooding in China.

During the 1980s, much of the soot pollution above the Arctic was believed to come from Russia and Europe. Though those emissions have declined, pollution from southern Asia appears to have increased.

About a third of the soot over the Arctic now comes from South Asia, which has the highest industrial soot emissions in the world, says the study, which used computer models and satellite data to track the pollution. Another third comes from the burning of vegetation and natural materials around the world; the rest comes from Russia, Europe and North America.

Playing with Asthma

Athletes find ways to deal with breathing ailment, but it isn't easy

By BRIAN Vanderbeek - BEE STAFF WRITER
Thursday, March 24, Modesto Bee

Jamie Landry found herself in a new town and a new climate at the start of her freshman year in high school.

The move from San Jose to Escalon meant leaving old friends and having to prove herself anew as an athlete.

But at the start of basketball season, she began having trouble catching her breath during running drills. Her difficulties would linger into the evening.

"It took a while for me to get my breathing back," said Landry, now a freshman track and field athlete at Modesto Junior College. "I felt a pressure in my chest, and it feels like you don't want to breathe because it hurts so much to breathe deep."

With one trip to the doctor, Landry was diagnosed as an asthmatic. With education and medicines, Landry was able to continue her athletic career.

The spring season is when MJC trainer Bob Boswell and Cal State Stanislaus trainer Gary Hogan put themselves on high alert for asthma attacks. This is pollen season in the Central Valley, and also when outdoor sports are in full bloom.

"I'm no expert in the correlation between bad air and attacks, but we see attacks increase twice a year: when the fall turns to winter and the winter turns to spring and the pollen is in the air," Hogan said.

According to the non-profit Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, one in 15 Americans suffers from asthma, a rate that continues to rise across age, sex and racial groups.

It causes an inflammation of all air passages, restricting flow and resulting in a tightening of the chest, wheezing, coughing and difficulty breathing, and results in around 5,000 deaths annually in this country.

Asthma doesn't care if you're an athlete, and you can't beat it by getting into better shape. The AAFA says you're no more likely to be prone to asthma if you're an athlete, but the act of being an athlete can trigger symptoms.

Of the five triggers of asthma, the exercised-induced variety is one of the most prevalent. The five are: allergic (caused by reactions to allergens); seasonal (triggered by airborne pollen or by breathing cold, dry air); non-allergic (typically triggered by chemicals or smoke); exercise-induced (caused by physical activity); and nocturnal (attacks during sleep).

And those five triggers interact. For instance, if you have exercise-induced asthma — the trigger afflicting Landry — you're likely to suffer even more when you exercise in colder weather or when the air is rich with allergens.

One of Stanislaus' women's soccer players, Michelle Coutu, feels the difference in the valley air. A freshman center-midfielder from Riverside, Coutu was diagnosed with exercise-induced asthma when she was 11, but faced additional struggles last fall when colder weather hit.

"It started getting worse at the end of the season, around October," Coutu said. "It was a lot worse than Riverside. By the end of the game I couldn't breathe and I found myself trying to play through an attack. I don't know how I did it."

At an appropriate break in play, she would run to the sidelines, where a teammate would be waiting with Coutu's inhaler.

"The agriculture in the valley makes it more difficult to exercise because of the mixture of dust and diesel fumes," said Dr. George Bensch, a partner in the Allergy, Immunology and Asthma Medical Group, which serves Modesto and six other Central California cities. "Around here, diesel fumes are the factor most associated with the inflammation of the lungs. When diesel levels are high you can actually damage your lungs by breathing.

"And when you mix the allergens in the valley with the bad air, there is a synergy created that makes it even worse."

There is a long list of asthmatic athletes who have gone on to greatness, including track and field stars Jackie-Joyner Kersee and Paula Radcliffe and cyclist Jan Ullrich.

Not coincidentally, several world-class swimmers, including Modesto-born Mark Spitz, Nancy Hogsehead and Amy Van Dyken, cite asthma as a barrier they had to overcome.

"You see a lot of young asthma sufferers taking up swimming," Dr. Bensch said. "It's much easier for them than other sports because in the pool they're breathing warm, moist air."

The most publicized case of an athlete succumbing to asthma was that of Northwestern University football player Rashidi Wheeler, 22, who died Aug. 3, 2001 following a conditioning drill.

Although his use of dietary supplement ephedra was widely reported as causing a heat stroke, the coroner listed asthma as official and sole cause of death.

Wheeler had trouble breathing after running sprints, collapsed with his inhaler in hand, stopped breathing, and died at a nearby hospital.

It can be controlled

There is no cure for asthma, but once properly diagnosed it generally can be controlled.

"If you think you have asthma, a pulmonaryfunction test needs to be done, and that's where the diagnosis is made," Dr. Bensch said.

Typically, all a person needs to suspend the onset of an attack is one or two puffs of the prescription drug albuterol from an inhaler. The drug, the most commonly prescribed bronchial dilator, relaxes the breathing passages for 3-4 hours, allowing the user to breathe deeply and freely without pain or tightness.

"The only thing you worry about is the overuse of the inhaler," Dr. Bensch said. "Some people with certain genetic backgrounds seem to build a tolerance to albuterol and those are the ones that become dangerous and must be monitored more closely."

As is the case with all ailments, the athletes need to communicate with the training staff about their physical problems.

At most colleges, athletes must fill out a form containing a brief medical history, listing past injuries, illnesses and chronic ailments that trainers may need to address.

"Our biggest episodes in the past have been from people who haven't been diagnosed," said MJC's Boswell. "Once you've been diagnosed, we know what we're supposed to do."

At MJC, the staff takes an extra precautionary step when the student-athlete is identified as asthmatic.

"If someone has an inhaler, we find out specifically what it's meant to do," Boswell said. "We ask the prescribing doctor to project what might happen with or without the inhaler. And athletes who need an inhaler are asked to provide an extra one to the training staff, because we know they'll invariably leave it at home at some point."

Once an athlete is seen in the early stages of an attack, quick action must be taken.

"I've had attacks here and also at the high school level and even seen cheerleaders get attacks," Stanislaus' Hogan said. "If the athlete has their own inhaler, their breathing will be corrected in a few minutes."

Like Landry, MJC sprinter Jerome Taylor is a Bay Area transplant who trains with an inhaler always nearby.

Taylor, 24, was diagnosed with asthma as a fifth-grader in San Francisco, but had it under control through his high school years, when he competed for San Francisco's Galileo High.

"I got sick one day and had a shortness of breath, and the doctor told me right then I had asthma," Taylor said. "After a while you get used to it and it stopped being a problem, but when I moved here in 1999 I had three to four episodes right away."

When Taylor feels the attacks coming on, a puff or two from his albuterol inhaler takes care of it. Landry takes albuterol as a preventive measure, before training or competing, as does Modesto Christian High basketball standout Adrian Oliver.

Oliver uses his inhaler before games, then carries it to the bench. During a second-quarter stoppage of play, he'll use the inhaler a second time. That regimen allows him to get through the game without incident.

"I was playing basketball in the summer before my sophomore year and started noticing that my chest would get really tight all of the sudden," said Oliver, a junior. "That went on for about a month and I didn't know what it was. I started coughing and it felt like my chest was cramping.

"I went to the doctor and he said I had a slight case of asthma. It's not bad. As soon as I take the albuterol, I feel fine. When I don't have it around, I have problems."

The constant worrying about when or if an attack will occur can take a mental toll on athletes.

"Many times I've considered quitting, because it becomes a mental strain," Coutu said. "I have to ask myself if I want to breathe or go through practice because I know that when I don't play, when I don't exercise, I don't have asthma."

Once properly diagnosed, with the right medication, there's no reason asthma has to inhibit an athlete's performance.

"I don't think my asthma has held me back," Landry said. "If it were that big of a problem, I would have quit sports a long time ago. It's just something else I have to overcome."

Lodi Electric pushing education over rebates

By Neil Gonzales
Thursday, March 24, Stockton Record

LODI -- Lodi Electric Utility's conservation efforts aim to rely more on community education and outreach in the future than a 6-year-old rebate program.

That shift is a way to get residents to better understand the need to conserve power and buy energy-efficient products, said Rob Lechner, the utility's manager of customer programs.

A workshop earlier this week at Hutchins Street Square helped lay down that groundwork toward what utility officials hope is a more energy-conscious community.

The free workshop is part of an educational series that began in August. The next workshop is April 11, focusing on solar power.

The workshops are a result of the utility's Public Benefits Program in which the state mandates that cities find alternative energy sources.

This week's workshop focused on the country's overall energy future and sustainable energy resources.

Lechner said residents need to know how they can make the resources they use daily such as natural gas and water last as long as possible.

"We're going through our natural resources at an incredible rate," he said. "We have a 24-year supply of natural gas left. What happens after that?"

Workshop participants learned conservation tips such as taking shorter showers, using cold water when doing laundry and setting the thermostat at 78 degrees or higher during the summer.

They also learned about alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power as well as energy-conserving products, including hybrid gas-and-electric vehicles and hydrogen-fueled cars.

"I think we're going in the right direction (with) solar power," said Al Nathe of Lodi, among about 40 people who attended the workshop.

He said using renewable energy saves money in the long run and reduces pollution.

Nathan Shibler, 10, added, "I think we should stop using coal because it creates all these gases."

Lodi has solar projects in place, including its Solar Port and Electric Vehicle Charging Station.

The city also plans to install solar panels at the Lodi Grape Festival grounds by late summer, Lechner said.

Lechner said the utility is looking to cut back on its rebate program partly because many household products that people can buy now are already energy-efficient.

"Why continue to provide incentive for these things?" he asked.

Instead, he said, the utility plans to do more hands-on conservation training in the community and further explore new energy technologies.

However, he said, the utility still plans to keep giving rebates for attic insulation and air-duct repairs.

"We'll still do rebates for large commercial customers," he added, "but we want to groom the community away from rebates."

Hearing on flare emissions plan

by Cecilia M. Vega
Wednesday, March 23, S.F. Chronicle

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District will hold a hearing in Richmond on Thursday to discuss a proposal to reduce flare emissions at five Bay Area oil refineries.

The district is seeking public input on its proposed rule on flares, which are safety devices used by refineries to burn off excess gas in emergencies. Refinery neighbors have charged that flares are being used in nonemergency situations.

"Refineries were using the flares not just for emergency situations, and we want to permanently decrease the amount of flaring and make the refineries more cautious about how they use their flares," said Teresa Lee, the district's spokeswoman.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ordered the Bay Area air district last week to require oil refineries in the region to improve the way they measure pollutants from flares.

Thursday's meeting will be held from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Richmond City Council Chambers, 1401 Marina Way South.

Foundry Pleads Guilty in Pollution Case

By LISA FALKENBERG, Associated Press Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Wed., March 23, 2005

Tyler, Texas (AP) -- An east Texas foundry with a history of safety violations pleaded guilty Tuesday to two federal felonies and agreed to pay a $4.5 million fine for violating environmental laws and hiding information from government regulators.

In the plea, officials at Tyler Pipe acknowledged concealing information when they rebuilt a 60-foot, pollution-emitting furnace in violation of federal law and did not seek permits.

The foundry also received a five-year probationary term that includes a compliance agreement requiring state-of-the-art pollution controls.

Tyler Pipe is the first company to be criminally prosecuted under a provision of the U.S. Clean Air Act that requires modern pollution controls at factories, according to Arnold Spencer, an assistant U.S. attorney.

Safety violations at the foundry have led to amputations and deaths among workers.

Federal officials declined to comment on whether they are investigating or have plans to prosecute individuals at Tyler Pipe.

F.R. "Buck" Files, an attorney for the company, said Tyler Pipe was required to turn over 400 boxes of documents.

"The plant has now turned the corner of environmental compliance and is working to become a model for other companies," Files said.

Tyler Pipe president David Green said the company has been making environmental reforms since 2001 and plans to spend at least $55 million on pollution controls and other improvements.

The foundry, which has 1,120 workers, is owned by Birmingham, Ala.-based McWane Inc.

McWane has been cited by the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration hundreds of times since the mid-1990s and paid more than $1 million in civil penalties.

Thursday, March 24, Los Angeles Times, Editorial

A Ray of Hope for Solar

How strange that solar energy remains a rarity in a state with such dependable sunshine, which beats down, wasted, on our rooftops. New legislation backed by the governor fixes gaps that plagued previous solar-construction bills and provides the first real chance for new-home solar to get off the ground.

Last year, a solar bill by state Sen. Kevin Murray (D-Culver City) started out on a troubling note

by requiring developers to install solar panels in a percentage of new houses, but it did nothing to make those more-expensive houses attractive to buyers. Builders predictably protested and for good reason. At this point, solar houses don't pay for themselves through energy savings, making them a costly - if altruistic - choice.

Murray's new bill requires only that builders offer solar as an option, like the more predictable granite countertops. It lures buyer interest by continuing a rebate program that had been scheduled to expire in 2006, along with a tax credit. A third financial incentive requires utilities to credit homeowners for the excess energy their solar panels generate, which the utilities can sell to other customers.

With all those pieces in place, solar homeowners over the life of the mortgage would see a slight profit on their investment of $13,000 to $15,000, as well as a house that's worth more when it's sold. That might be enough to persuade people, many of whom already want to do the right thing by the environment.

The rebates and tax incentives would gradually decline and, in 10 years, expire. Expecting the price of solar-energy systems to drop sharply as they become more commonplace and the price of conventional energy to keep rising, solar advocates are gambling that the solar industry will by then be self-sufficient.

That's a big gamble. There's no way of knowing whether the bill's incentives are enough to attract large numbers of home buyers to solar power.

It would be nice to see the odds improved with higher, longer-term rebates - so far funded by a surcharge that tacks, on average, less than 20 cents onto electrical bills for California households - and more regulatory pressure on developers to build more solar-powered houses.

The bill includes provisions for the state to study whether adopting such requirements makes sense, and builders, who generally favor the legislation, are understandably nervous about that. Utilities aren't happy about the prospect of being required to buy more of the energy produced by solar homes, saying it costs them too much to set up metering systems.

But legislators and the governor should resist any efforts to weaken the bill. This is the minimum needed to give solar a shot.

Surely a state this sunny can do at least this much to boost an energy source that doesn't involve despoiling wilderness, doesn't pollute, never runs out and is a lot more reliable than OPEC.