

Valley flunks '06 air-quality report

Bakersfield is most ozone-polluted city; Visalia 3rd, Fresno 4th.

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, April 27, 2006

The American Lung Association's annual air-quality report card, made public today, flunks San Joaquin Valley counties for the seventh consecutive year. Bakersfield took the spot for the most ozone-polluted city in the country, edging out Los Angeles and Riverside. And Kern County topped the list of most-polluted counties for ozone, the main ingredient of smog.

The Visalia-Porterville area wasn't far behind, taking third place for ozone pollution. Los Angeles ranked second. The Fresno-Madera area was fourth; Merced, fifth; Hanford-Corcoran, 11th; and Modesto, 13th.

The rankings were based on government pollution readings from 2002 through 2004.

The Valley also fails the report card for particle pollution, tiny specks of dust, soot and chemicals.

Kern County ranked second, behind Riverside County, for short-term particle pollution and was the fourth most-polluted year-round.

Fresno County was the third-worst area in the short-term and seventh long-term. Tulare County was the sixth most polluted year-round, and Kings County was ninth.

But there is a little light filtering through the smog haze.

The San Joaquin Valley learned this week that the California Air Resources Board deemed the area no longer in violation of federal health standards for dangerous particles of dust and soot, called PM-10. The decision was based on pollution measurements from 2003 to 2005.

"The PM-10 attainment is a good indication the control strategies are working and we're seeing a lot of improvement in air quality," said Kelly Morphy, a San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman.

However, the Valley continues to be one of the dirtiest air basins in the country for the tiniest pollution particles, called PM-2.5, which can penetrate deep inside lungs.

A lot of work remains to improve air quality in the Valley, Morphy said. And the air district welcomes the Lung Association's report because "it can help put the public spotlight on air quality," she said. "The report is a really useful tool to the air district ... because it really underscores the importance and seriousness of air-quality issues in the San Joaquin Valley."

During a Lung Association telephone conference on the air report, Dr. John Balmes, a San Francisco pulmonary physician, said the Valley's air problems continue to be severe.

"It's premature to say the Central Valley has turned the corner in controlling air pollution," said Balmes, who serves on the American Lung Association of California's Clean Air Technical Advisory Group.

Richard Fallon, executive director of the American Lung Association in Kern County, said explosive growth in the Valley adds to air pollution problems. Said Fallon: "We definitely have a big challenge here."

Valley air board claims milestone in cleanup campaign

By MARK GROSSI - THE FRESNO BEE <mailto:metro@modbee.com?subject=Valley air board claims milestone in cleanup campaign>
in the Modesto Bee, Thursday, April 27, 2006

The California Air Resources Board announced this week that the San Joaquin Valley no longer violates federal health standards for dangerous dust, soot and chemical specks.

The state opinion, issued Tuesday after a Monday request by valley air officials, is part of the milestone process to declare Valley air healthy for PM-10 - specks of pollution about one-seventh the width of a human hair.

However, the area's air remains among the most unhealthy in the country for the tiniest pollution particles, called PM-2.5, and for smog.

The state now will ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to approve the valley's "clean" status for PM-10. The EPA has the final word.

The approval would be a huge step for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, officials said. The district has reduced more than one-third of the problem since 1990.

"Most people are surprised about it," district Executive Director Seyed Sadredin said.

"Most people think the air is getting worse. But we are improving."

The district has curbed particle pollution by forbidding fireplace burning on the dirtiest cold-weather days. The farming industry also has reduced dust with such practices as watering unpaved roads and making fewer tilling passes over fields.

Environmentalists dispute the district's cleanup claim, saying there have been numerous violations over the past three years.

Lawyer Paul Cort of Earthjustice said the district has violated the health standard 13 times in the last three years.

"The law permits only one violation day per year for three years," he said. "They're cherry-picking the data and leaving out some real problems."

The district and activists agree PM-10 is a dangerous pollutant. Medical science has linked the specks to reduced lung functions, heart problems and premature death.

Until now, the valley never has cleared enough particles from the air to achieve the PM-10 health standards.

The district still faces a difficult task in cleaning up PM-2.5, an even more dangerous particle. Because it is smaller, it can lodge deeper in the lungs.

PM-2.5 often forms in winter months when ammonia from dairies combines with oxides of nitrogen from vehicles. Specks called ammonium nitrate are created. PM-10 generally is considered to be dust, soot and specks that are a combination of moisture and chemicals.

Environmentalists said PM-10 still is a problem, adding that monitors in the Corcoran and Bakersfield areas showed violations in the last year.

"We all know the problem has not been solved," said Sierra Club member Arthur Unger of Bakersfield.

We're No. 1 ... in smog

By Sarah Ruby, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, April 27, 2006

Bakersfield is the nation's smog king. It's a title typically held by Southern California, but according to a report released today by the American Lung Association, Bakersfield now reigns.

Bakersfield is second to Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside when it comes to diesel fumes and other tiny particles known as PM 2.5, according to the report. The rankings use a formula to account for the number and severity of bad air days in a given metropolitan area. California is home to six of the top 10 smog-polluted cities, as well as five of the top 10 cities plagued by year-round fine particle pollution.

While California has made air quality gains, "most of the improvement nationwide has been on the East Coast," said Dr. John Balmes, a pulmonary specialist at UC San Francisco, in a conference call organized by the American Lung Association. California's air quality problem isn't as centralized as it is in the East, where regulators targeted coal-fired power plants and saw good results, he said.

"Too many Californians are breathing too much bad air on too many days," he said. "Cleaner air is not clean enough if people continue to get sick and die."

Fine particle pollution kills people, according to university studies that control for smoking, weight and other factors. Fine particles and smog also trigger asthma and aggravate other lung diseases.

There's no proven link between air quality and lung cancer, said Dr. Ravi Patel, an oncologist at the Comprehensive Blood & Cancer Center in Bakersfield. However, some experts believe inhaling smog and soot could inflame the lungs and trigger cancer in a similar way that chronic asbestos exposure does, he said.

"You don't want to give the impression air pollution is OK," he said. "It certainly produces added risk."

Katrina Beeson, 39, who breathes oxygen through a tank due to a lung-scarring disease known as idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, can't afford any more risk. For her, breathing is a bellweather for bad air.

When the air is brown, she feels like "a fish out of water struggling to breathe," she said.

The bright side

San Joaquin Valley air regulators acknowledge a problem, but it might not be as dire as the American Lung Association's report would suggest, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air district.

The report uses data from 2002 through 2004, but the valley had an unusually good year for smog in 2005, with fewer violations than the South Coast. The report also leaves out larger dust particles, which the valley has made strides toward reducing in recent years. This week, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District asked state and federal agencies to recognize it for having gone three years without a violation of the national standard for larger particles.

But even so, "we have a huge, monumental task ahead of us," said Sadredin. "No place in the country faces a tougher hurdle."

One of the toughest feats will be meeting the national standard for smog pollution by 2013, the federal government's goal for the district. Preliminary models show the San Joaquin Valley would have to cut emissions by another 60 percent to meet the deadline, Sadredin said.

That would be impossible for the district to achieve "even if we were able to have all the businesses shut their emissions down," he said.

It will require cuts in emissions from cars and trucks, which are regulated by the state, not the district, he said.

Why us?

California's air quality misfortunes are largely the result of geography -- the smoggiest cities tend to be surrounded by fume-trapping mountains.

But sources of pollution vary widely throughout the state. Los Angeles area residents are more likely to trade in old vehicles for newer, cleaner models, said Jerry Martin, spokesman for the state Air Resources Board. Aside from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which are significant sources of pollution, much of Los Angeles' industrial emissions have moved out of the area.

The San Joaquin Valley deals with pollution from agriculture and industry, as well as the emissions from a growing population, Martin said. And trucks heading up and down Highway 99 and Interstate 5, don't help.

Local lungs

Bakersfield resident Beeson lives on 45 percent of her lung capacity and can't afford to follow the state's pristine air coastward. Her car, built in 1988, wouldn't make it anyway, she said with a laugh.

So she stays here, mostly at home, tethered to a 57-foot cord attached to her oxygen tank. Despite asthma-like symptoms when air quality worsens, she lives a better life here than she would elsewhere.

Quality of life is a consideration for people who suffer from asthma or other illnesses exacerbated by air pollution, said Dr. Patrick Leung, an allergist in private practice in Bakersfield.

A \$300,000 home in Los Angeles might not buy you a neighborhood safe enough for your children to play in, he said. Spend the same amount in Bakersfield and "you're in a reasonable school district," he said.

For other families, it's a trade-off in the other direction. Until nine years ago, the McCoys lived near Taft, which was great for horses but not for their son, Mackenzie, who developed asthma when he was 6 months old. Doctors weren't predicting a long life for Mackenzie if he grew up in the thick of cotton fields and crop dusters, said Tim McCoy, the boy's father.

So they moved to Bakersfield, where 10-year-old Mackenzie can live up to his nickname, "The Terminator," as long as he keeps up with his treatments. Even so, "we can almost predict" the air quality depending on how Mackenzie is feeling, Tim McCoy said.

"It's a little bit frustrating," he said. "You have to watch him deal with the fact he can't get out and do what he wants to do."

U.S.'s top 10 smog-polluted cities

1. Bakersfield
2. Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside
3. Visalia-Porterville
4. Fresno-Madera
5. Merced
6. Houston-Baytown-Huntsville, Texas
7. Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Truckee, Calif. and Nev.
8. Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas
9. New York-Newark-Bridgeport, N.Y., N.J., Conn. and Pa.
10. Philadelphia-Camden-Vineland, Pa., N.J., Del. and Md.

County gets a breather

'Pass' grade awarded for annual air quality

By Mike Lee, Staff Writer

San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, April 27, 2006

As a new report highlights the need for more clean-air upgrades in San Diego County, air regulators are crafting rules that would impact the region's home sellers and developers.

Under state orders, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District is targeting old, high-polluting wood stoves and construction projects that kick up lots of dust. Also, the state is starting

to clamp down on diesel exhaust from ports and trains, but it needs billions of dollars to support that initiative.

The good news is that a key aspect of San Diego County's air quality finally passed muster with the American Lung Association, which for years has issued failing grades to the region for its air quality.

The advocacy group's seventh annual State of the Air report, released today, gave the county its first-ever "pass" grade for annual particle pollution.

The region continued to fail in the areas of ozone and daily particle pollution. All three categories were measured from 2002 through 2004, the latest year for which reliable figures are available.

"Our annual averages are looking better, so there has been some improvement," said Jan Cortez, vice president of environmental health for the association's San Diego chapter.

However, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has proposed stricter goals for particulates in urban areas. "If the federal standard becomes more health protective, then next year our grade could go back to failing again," Cortez said.

Many of the nation's most polluted spots are in California, particularly in the Central Valley and Los Angeles basin. Kern County moved to the top of the list of counties most polluted by ozone, and Riverside County had the worst particle pollution, the lung association said.

As part of a long-running effort to clean up the the state's air, the California Air Resources Board last week approved a plan aimed at decreasing diesel pollution from ships, trains and other methods for transporting goods. The goal is a 20 percent to 40 percent reduction below 2001 levels within four years.

In coming months, the state expects to develop rules for upgrading high-polluting trucks at ports and expanding the use of low-sulfur marine fuel.

By 2020, the port-related efforts are projected to save 1,500 lives a year, according to the air board. The changes will come through new regulations, incentive programs and voluntary efforts by truckers and others in the port industry.

Clean-air advocates generally support the plan, but they say it's short on specifics and money - up to \$10 billion over the next 15 years. Funding could come from a variety of places, including federal grants and fees imposed on businesses.

"The price tag is huge," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, vice president of government relations for the American Lung Association of California. "There is desperate need for new funding."

While the state plan takes shape, the county air pollution control district is forming rules to force home sellers to replace old wood-burning stoves and fireplace inserts. More than 10,000 stoves are used countywide as a primary source of heat, with numerous others used less frequently, said Rob Reider, the district's planning manager.

The vast majority of the existing wood-burning stoves are high-polluting units, a category that generally includes stoves manufactured before 1992, according to the air district.

By winter, the district aims to require homeowners to replace older stoves with EPA-certified appliances when they sell their houses. Doing so will slowly decrease the amount of particles emitted by home heating.

The other major initiative that air district officials are preparing for 2007 is to crack down on dust from construction projects, particularly those that involve large-scale grading and earth-moving. Those activities - including road building - are already regulated by other state and local codes, but they continue to generate large numbers of air-quality complaints.

District officials said they need their own rules to make it easier to regulate such projects. "What we think that this will mainly do is give us the authority to enforce things that (contractors) already are used to doing," Reider said.

At the Associated General Contractors chapter in San Diego, Brad Barnum, the chapter's government relations vice president, said he recognized the need to control dust at work sites.

However, Barnum said, new rules shouldn't create an undue burden on business. He's concerned, for instance, that construction companies could be held responsible for wind-blown particles from outside their work area.

"Fugitive dust is a problem," he said. "The (question) is how do you implement the issue to make it fair and cost effective?"

Valley air pollution report card mixed

Karina Ioffee - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Thurs., April 27, 2006

STOCKTON - Central Valley residents still breathe some of the worst air in the state and suffer a medley of ailments from it, according to a report being released today by the American Lung Association. But there is also evidence programs to reduce pollution and incentives for farmers, drivers and businesses are improving air quality in some of the most congested areas and helping air districts meet federal standards.

San Joaquin County received a C for smog pollution, up from a D last year, and an F for dust particle pollution levels, according to the report. Nearby Stanislaus and Sacramento counties failed in both areas, while Calaveras failed to meet smog standards but received an A for particle pollution.

"This is a public health crisis," said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, assistant vice president of government relations for the American Lung Association. "What people need to understand is that more people are dying from air pollution than traffic accidents. Four million children miss school each year because of asthma and other lung-related problems."

Twenty-eight counties in California received failing grades based on air quality measurements made by local and state agencies from 2002 through 2004, according to the ALA's State of the Air report. The annual study measures particulate pollution, commonly known as soot, that is emitted by factories and fireplaces, and ozone pollution, also known as smog.

The Los Angeles-Long Beach area received the worst score in the state, ranking highest for both short-term and year-round particle pollution. Kern County ranked suffered the highest ozone pollution, according to the study.

There are many sources of air pollution, not the least of which are diesel trucks that move produce and other goods across the state and the hundreds of thousands of vehicles that clog highways each day. Yet in the Central Valley, agriculture is a major contributor to poor air quality - from manure on farms to orchard clippings and gas-powered irrigation pumps - comprising a quarter of the area's total pollution, Holmes-Gen said.

Poor air quality contributes to not only pulmonary problems, but cardiovascular disease such as heart attacks and strokes.

In San Joaquin County, nearly 19,000 people suffer from chronic bronchitis, and more than 35,000 have emphysema.

"The air quality is definitely worse today than 20 years ago," said Dr. Michael Peterson of the University of California, San Francisco's Fresno campus, who has studied lung health extensively. "There are more people, more cars, trucks and more intensive agriculture."

But there are also signs of improvement.

For the first time in its 16-year history, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has attained federally accepted standards for one type of pollution caused by everything from tobacco smoke to wood-burning stoves. The district, which covers eight counties, including San Joaquin, recorded three consecutive years where airborne particulate matter was 10 microns or smaller, the federal level set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"It has taken a lot of work and hasn't always been easy but represents that through collaborative efforts, the Valley can meet these levels," said Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Since forming in 1990, the district has created incentive programs to encourage farmers to use cleaner technologies such as electric irrigation pumps and pushed for regulation of everything from dry cleaners to gasoline stations and wineries.

Meanwhile, clean air advocates are eyeing two pieces of major legislation they say are instrumental in reducing pollution levels across the state. Senate Bill 760 would establish a fee commercial operators would pay before they could transport goods across the state. The goal is to raise upward of \$10 billion to replace some of the oldest trucks and install particle traps on others. The second, SB764, aims to establish an emissions baseline to maintain pollution levels.

O.C. air still unhealthful

County remains high on list of the most polluted.

By PAT BRENNAN

The Orange County Register, Thursday, April 27, 2006

The nation's air quality improved a bit in recent years, but Orange and Los Angeles counties remained high on the list of the most polluted - with Los Angeles and Bakersfield at the top.

That's the conclusion of the latest State of the Air report from the American Lung Association, which tracked air quality measurements by state and local agencies from 2002 to 2004.

The Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside area was considered the worst in the nation for particle pollution, bits of soot and other fine particles that can work their way deep into the lungs. Bakersfield moved into the nation's No. 1 slot for ozone pollution, a lung-irritant, while Orange County earned failing grades for air pollution, one of 28 of California's 58 counties to do so.

Orange County got ninth place for short-term particle pollution, measured in 24-hour increments, and 10th place for year-round particle pollution. The county also received a failing grade because of ozone pollution.

The report says more than half the people in the United States live in counties with unhealthful levels of ozone or particle pollution.

The Lung Association urged various steps to reduce air pollution, including setting tighter limits on particle pollution, resisting efforts to roll back provisions of the Clean Air Act, and improving pollution control from power plants, ships at sea and diesel trains.

The group also urged U.S. residents to drive less, choose cleaner cars, avoid burning wood or trash, use less electricity and take part in public review of regional air-pollution plans.

Future farm spending bills may focus on environment

Ag products include more than crops, advocate says

By JOHN HOLLAND - BEE STAFF WRITER <mailto:metro@modbee.com?subject=Future farm spending bills may focus on environment>

Thursday, April 27, 2006

TURLOCK - Federal farm spending mainly has helped large-scale growers of a few crops, a farm advocate said Wednesday night, but change could be coming.

Ralph Grossi, president of the American Farmland Trust, said the farm bill to be crafted by Congress over the next year could have major increases in funding for environmental programs.

These could include efforts such as conservation easements, which pay farmers to resist development, and projects that cut down on air and water pollution from farms.

Grossi, speaking at California State University, Stanislaus, said a poll found that most taxpayers are willing to pay farmers for these benefits.

"Farmers produce open space, wildlife habitat, clean water, endangered species habitat," he said. "These are all farm products, and that's the way we have to start thinking about them."

Grossi was the latest speaker in a semi-annual lecture series sponsored by the university's Agricultural Studies Department and Yosemite Farm Credit. About 50 people attended.

Grossi, a third-generation rancher in Marin County, helped found the American Farmland Trust in 1980. It has become a major advocate of farmland preservation and sustainable agriculture.

Grossi said farm bills, which typically lay out five years' worth of federal spending on agriculture and nutrition, have their roots in legislation that helped family farmers during the Depression.

The bills have evolved into mainly support programs for large producers of rice, cotton, corn, wheat and a few other crops, mostly in the Midwest, he said.

"There is a growing perception that these programs are outdated," he said. "They were designed in the New Deal to stabilize income."

Leading to change

Grossi said several factors could lead to change:

Farm subsidies are under attack in global trade talks and at the World Trade Organization, which has declared U.S. payments to cotton growers illegal.

Americans increasingly are aware of the lopsided nature of federal spending on agriculture, with 10 percent of the farmers getting 75 percent of the subsidies.

Federal budget deficits are mounting, prompting some lawmakers to rethink subsidies to agribusiness.

"We feel there is a real opportunity for the first time in a generation because of some major forces agriculture is facing," Grossi said.

This year's spending under the current farm bill is about \$100 billion. About half of that is for food stamps and other nutrition programs. Relatively little of the farm portion goes to California, which mainly produces fruits, vegetables, nuts, milk and meat.

Jeani Ferrari, a Turlock-area farmer and president of the Farmland Working Group, agreed that the public is willing to pay for farming that enhances the environment.

"The urban population does recognize that farmers provide more than food," she said during a break in Grossi's talk.

Earlier this month, his group issued a report criticizing city and county officials for allowing development on prime farmland in the Central Valley. He said Wednesday that the next farm bill must include programs that help stem this trend.

Visalia Transit: 25 years and still rolling

By Jillian Daley, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, April 27, 2006

City transit has evolved since the city first established bus service 25 years ago, and customers are pleased with it - for the most part.

The Transit System has three basic services: Visalia City Coach, Visalia Towne Trolley and Dial-A-Ride. Passengers say they are mostly satisfied with the way the buses run, but some complain that buses are sometimes late. The main Dial-A-Ride complaint was buses are sometimes full in the morning, forcing some riders to make other arrangements. Most had few complaints about the trolley, a free downtown service.

The anniversary celebration last week showed the service has come a long way, but transit officials said more change is on the way. New buses will be more environmentally friendly with the diesel-powered buses being replaced by compressed natural gas vehicles.

Transit manager Monty Cox said, worst case, he gets about 25 complaints per month about bus service, and he takes each one seriously.

"I see every single one," he said. "They're not so frequent I can't deal with them."

In 1981, the service began as a curb-to-curb service until 1983 when routes were established. These days, there is a fleet of 25 City Coach buses that drive along nine routes in town, plus one to Exeter/Farmersville, according to city records. Bus stops include hubs like the Visalia Mall, Visalia Medical Center, College of the Sequoias and all of the city high schools and middle schools.

The operating cost for city transit is \$3 million per year, said Cox. Fares make up \$600,000 or 20 percent of the revenue. Federal assistance makes up 25 percent and state programs, using sales and gas taxes, makes up the remainder.

April Waters, 35, and Patrick Burns, 27, of Visalia don't have a car, so they use City Coach for most of their in-town traveling. They say it takes them wherever they need to go. Waters takes it to go to Golden State Business College on Fairway Street, and Burns rides to get to Valley Staffing Service on Demaree Street.

Burns worried about the lack of seat belts on the buses. Waters said sometimes a bus will be late, and buses get pretty warm in the summer. Despite minor problems, she likes the concept, like a large-scale carpooling service.

["This is the best way to conserve the air," she said.](#)

The couple, together for eight years, is considering buying a car, but money constraints prevent it for now.

"With gas prices and maintenance on a car, why bother?" Burns said.

Gas prices averaged \$3.16 per gallon for regular in the Visalia area on Wednesday, said Jeffrey Spring, spokesman for AAA Automobile Club of Southern California. The all-time record for Visalia, set Sept. 2005, is \$3.19 per gallon, he said.

Cox said gas prices may have driven some people to drop their vehicles in favor of public transportation. Ridership has been increasing since 2004 when buses began running on Sunday and the transit service added the Exeter/Farmersville route, he said.

Cox said as of March, ridership has shown an about 16 percent increase so far from last fiscal year - July 2004-June 2005 - to this one, July 2005 to June 2006.

Since July of last year to the end of March, the Visalia City Coach has had 995,251 passengers, said Cox. It is the most used system, followed by the Visalia Towne Trolley, which in the same time period has served 74,188 passengers. In the same time, Dial-A-Ride has had 25,416 passengers.

If passengers appreciate the bus as a car pool service now, it's going to get even better, Cox said.

In 10 years, Cox expects all of the transit vehicles to run on compressed natural gas, a cleaner burning fuel than the diesel buses run on now. By January, Cox said seven new City Coach buses running on natural gas will replace seven of the diesel buses, some of which are as old as 14 years.

As for adding seat belts, he said, it's not likely to happen soon, as the buses are large and withstand crashes well, though there is a push for belts on buses.

In 2004, 275 buses nationwide were involved in fatal accidents as opposed to 25,507 passenger cars or 22,337 light trucks, according to the National Center for Statistics Fatality Analysis reporting system Web site.

Cox did admit that buses do get pretty stuffy in the summer, and he said the air conditioning systems in older buses, plus the opening and closing of doors, makes it hard to keep buses cool. The newer buses should have more advanced cooling systems that will help, he said. An annual air-conditioning maintenance check also reduces air conditioning problems.

Cox said late is better than early for a bus because if a bus comes early and someone misses it, they have to wait about 30 minutes for the next bus, as opposed to five to 10 minutes for a late bus.

City Coach driver Lannie Hatfield said sometimes, buses can't help being late such as when they are blocked by traffic or rerouted by a detour.

He said passengers can help speed things along by having their money ready and being at the bus stop.

Dial-A-Ride

Dial-A-Ride, a service mostly for the elderly and disabled, began in 1981 before City Coach branched off of it. Those who are disabled can call ahead as far as two weeks to make an appointment and get priority when it comes to room in the buses. Seniors are next in priority and then, the general public. The service area includes just outside the city limits, Exeter and Farmersville.

Dial-A-Ride passenger Margaret Nuesse, 85, of Visalia, doesn't have a car and has been using the service for five years.

"I'm treated all right," she said.

Nuesse usually ends up taking a taxi when Dial-A-Ride can't come to her door.

Patsy Chester, 67, of Visalia is in a wheelchair because she had polio when she was 16. She uses the services to go grocery shopping, to the movies and to church on Sundays. She said in the past, she would call for a ride and wouldn't get it exactly when she needed it, but now, it has improved.

"I can see where a senior citizen would have a hard time getting a ride," she said.

Cox said 8 a.m. is the busiest time of day for Dial-A-Ride, and the service sends out eight of 10 buses instead of the usual six during that peak period in Dial-A-Ride ridership.

"We can't buy enough buses to meet one hour's demand and have those buses sitting around for the rest of the day," Cox said.

The transit service has a federal grant to purchase six vehicles for Dial-A-Ride in 2008, replacing five and increasing the fleet by one, Cox said.

Towne Trolley

The Visalia Towne Trolley, a free service established in 1998, has six vehicles that coast around downtown on four routes that stretch from Santa Fe Street to Woodland Street and Houston Avenue to Noble Avenue.

Tazzaria Coffee & Tea on Main Street co-owner Michelle Bacci-Jessen said the trolley helps revitalize downtown and cuts back on car traffic, which in turn decreases the need for parking spaces in the already crowded lots downtown.

"Having it drop people downtown would bring people here who normally don't come downtown or think parking is too hard," Bacci-Jensen said.

A consultant assessed downtown in 2000 and found demand to be 101 to 125 percent higher than supply, said Phyllis Coring, special project manager for the city. A 692-lot parking structure on Acequia Avenue between Floral and Locust streets should be completed in January 2007 to alleviate downtown's parking woes.

College of the Sequoias students Matthew Myers of Visalia and Brandie Parker of Exeter use the trolley.

Parker said she likes the trolley, except for its wooden seats.

"They're a little hard," she said.

Cox said they have wooden seats because they are modeled after trolleys that ran in cities in the 1950s.

[S.F. Chronicle column, Thursday, April 27, 2006:](#)

By Jon Carroll

Here's a fun fact: According to the California Air Resources Board, lawn mower engines produce, gallon for gallon, 93 times the amount of air pollution of automobile engines. There are several reasons for this, but the big one is: Lawn mower engines don't have catalytic converters. And why not? Briggs & Stratton, the dominant manufacturer in the motorized vegetable grooming industry, opposes the idea.

Lawn mower manufacturers sort of flew under the radar during the old dying-of-emphysema air pollution scare. They'd like to stay under the radar because they don't want to take any money currently invested in profit and put it back into public health. You'll recall we went through this with automobiles. Now it's the same old, same old, part deux. Why should they be part of the solution? They're part of the problem; that's their corporate culture.

One of the arguments that B&S made was that catalytic converters would cause the engines to overheat, burst into flame and injure blameless homeowners. We'll get back to that.

Briggs & Stratton has two plants in Missouri and, guess what, a senator from Missouri has taken up its case. Christopher Bond, a Republican, has been fighting against regulations for lawn mower engines since the century began. He has had a particular problem with California because our air pollution standards are higher than the national standards. He cut a deal with Dianne Feinstein (yes, that one) to hold off implementation of the California standards until studies could be done.

One of these studies was conducted by the National Research Council, and it focused on the policy implications of having California's pollution regulations be tougher than the national ones.

Another was by the EPA itself, studying whether catalytic converters did in fact cause lawn mower engines to burst into flame.

Those studies are now complete. In the words of Felicity Barringer of the New York Times, "the research council report was a paean to California's regulatory leadership. And the EPA said the new standards for lawn and garden equipment could be met safely."

So Bond had the two reports that he asked for. Unfortunately, they did not reach the conclusions Bond wanted them to reach. So what did he do? In the grand tradition of American politics, he denounced the reports. Through a spokesman, he complained that writing the reports "was not a public process. There was no input or comment by members of the public or stakeholders." This is why politics and science are so frequently at odds. Science is not a matter of public input; it does not work according to democratic principles. Science is an autocracy of the facts. Either the motors catch fire or they don't -- it's not a liberal or conservative issue. It's not "on the one hand, this" and "on the other hand, that" sort of deal. (Although, to be fair, I suspect it would be correct to say that the panel did not hear from members of the public who thought engines catching fire was a good thing. A definite anti-fire bias. I don't think that's what Bond is worried about, though.)

Free-market capitalism grew up doing certain things in certain ways. These ways were focused on short-term effects. That's not a bad thing by itself, but the modern system has been in place for more than a century, and long-term effects are becoming important -- long-term effects like dirty air, dirty water, ozone depletion, climate change, like that. Unfortunately, our political institutions are controlled by corporations, and corporations continue to see only the short term -- a situation aggravated by the demands of stockholders for higher profits.

In a perfect world, the elected representatives would be on the side of the people they represent, but this is not a perfect world. Christopher Bond is apparently indifferent to the quality of the air his constituents breathe, but he is definitely interested in protecting Briggs & Stratton. He will introduce amendments, propose studies, work to get bills killed in committee, do anything other than tell his corporate bosses: "Look, save us all some trouble, install the damn catalytic converters."

While they're temporizing back there in D.C., you might consider this -- small engines (not just lawn mowers -- leaf blowers, chain saws, stuff like that) put in excess of 22 tons of smog-forming chemicals into the air each day in California. That's equivalent to the gunk produced by 800,000 cars a day. That's the day I'm writing this and the day you're reading it and the next day too. That's May and June and July. Christopher Bond has a lot to answer for, although not in this lifetime.

I like the old hand-push kind myself, but that's not because I am greener than thou -- it's because I hate the noise worse than thou. Besides, my plot of earth is tiny, and the grass is sluggish and easily managed.

[Washington Post, Editorial, Thurs. April 27, 2006](#)

More Lawlessness at EPA

The D.C. Circuit gives environmental regulators a refresher course in the law -- again.

BARELY A MONTH ago, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit issued a stinging rebuke to the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to rewrite federal clean air law to weaken rules concerning power companies upgrading old coal-fired equipment. This week, a cross-ideological panel of the court unanimously accused the agency, once again, of defying federal environmental law -- this time concerning efforts to clean up the Anacostia River. The panel's strong, derisive language should send a message to the agency to take congressional enactments seriously, as written, not as the agency wishes Congress had written them.

Decades after the passage of the Clean Water Act, the Anacostia remains one of the dirtiest rivers in the country. To redress such problems, the law requires the EPA to identify pollutants and set what the law calls "total maximum daily loads" -- the daily dumping the river can take for each of these pollutants, measured at a level adequate to "implement the applicable water quality standards." The trouble for the Anacostia, and for a lot of dirty rivers, is that measuring the maximum load by the day requires expensive changes. Heavy rains can cause sewage to overflow into the river day, killing fish and blotting out sunlight necessary for plant life. Instead of forcing the D.C. government and the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority to create systems to prevent this, the EPA read the word "daily" to mean -- as it put it in one brief -- "non-daily" and measured the total maximum load for different pollutants on a seasonal and annual basis. This effectively allows big dumps now and then, as long as the total over time stays within specific limits.

This move was not, as was the power-plant rule, a crude effort by the Bush administration to rewrite the law to favor polluters. For one thing, the EPA seems to have adopted this reading of the statute long before the current administration; what's more, one federal court of appeals actually adopted it.

That said, it is plainly erroneous, as was argued by the D.C. Circuit panel, which included controversial Bush-appointed Judges Janice Rogers Brown and Thomas B. Griffith. Wrote Judge David S. Tatel for the panel, " 'Daily' connotes 'every day.' Doctors making daily rounds would be of little use to their patients if they appeared seasonally or annually. And no one thinks of '[g]ive us this day our daily bread' as a prayer for sustenance on a seasonal or annual basis." Federal regulators shouldn't need such judicial reminders that the law means what it says.