Fireworks likely to worsen Valley air pollution, health problems

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee
Tuesday, July 4, 2006

Air-quality officials Monday warned San Joaquin Valley residents about possibly dangerous showers of microscopic pollution in the smoke from Fourth of July fireworks.

Breathing the tiny particles, which contain metals from the coloring in fireworks, can trigger asthma or heart attacks, medical research has shown.

"We are reminding folks to be aware of their own health situations before exposing themselves to fireworks smoke, but also to be considerate of their neighbors," said planning director Scott Nester of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Such worries about fireworks are not new.

Neighbors around Disneyland in Anaheim have complained for years about smoke and fallout from frequent fireworks at the amusement park.

In the Valley, residents will notice the pollution most between 7 p.m. and midnight, authorities said.

Aside from the microscopic specks tonight, residents usually face smog during the day.

The Valley already has almost twice as many violations of federal smog standards this year compared to 2005.

An early heat wave in June helped produce 13 consecutive smog violations through Sunday.

The Valley now has 25 smog violations so far this year. Last year through July 2, the season total was only 14 violations, largely because of cooler weather.

The Valley is one of the dirtiest air basins in the country, but some years are worse than others.

"From one year to the next, it's impossible to predict" how many violations will occur, air district spokeswoman Janelle Schneider said.

July 4 is pretty predictable, though.

In Fresno last year, particle pollution jumped for about one hour in the late evening to three times the maximum allowable daylong average. In Corcoran, it was six times higher, and Bakersfield's pollution climbed nearly 10 times higher.

The health threshold is set for microscopic particles, called PM 2.5, or particulate matter 2.5 microns or less in size. Thirty of these specks would fit along the width of a human hair. They lodge deep in the lungs, evading the body's natural defenses, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Only Bakersfield and Corcoran last year violated the daylong standard for PM 2.5 on the Fourth of July.

That's because the pollution level in those cities spiked high enough to push their 24-hour-average reading beyond the health threshold.

"The episode can be very intense in a local area for a short time," said meteorologist Shawn Ferreria of the air district.

"But the 24-hour average usually stays below a violation. It has to go pretty high for a violation."

The Bombs Polluting The Air

Smoke makes breathing hard

By Ken Carlson - Bee Staff Writer
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 4, 2006

Valley residents can relax and breathe in the moderately clean air today.

At least until nightfall.

Then, the smoke from fireworks will fill the air with pollution that can be harmful to people with sensitive health, officials said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a special warning for today regarding the health hazards of fireworks.

According to the district's warning, those fountains and Whistling Petes can result in brief but unhealthy levels of microscopic particles that can aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks or increase the risk of getting a respiratory infection.

This type of pollution also raises the risk of heart attacks and coronary arrhythmia, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The people at greatest risk are those with heart or lung diseases, and small children. The district's forecast calls for moderate air quality for most of the day, with higher levels of pollution from 7 p.m. to midnight.

Shawn Ferreria, a meteorologist for the eight-county air district, is in his fourth year of studying the Fourth of July pollution.

Beside the air district, the pollution from fireworks combustion is also attracting more attention from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Ferreria said that air monitoring equipment from Modesto to Bakersfield recorded a dramatic increase in particle pollution on the evening of July 4, 2005.

Modesto's concentration of airborne particles went from 15 micrograms per cubic meter at 8p.m. to eight times that level at 9 p.m.

Compared to the 8 p.m. reading, the concentration of particles was 16 times higher at 10p.m.

Weak breeze won't cut pollution

The pollution was four times higher than the daylong health standard for about an hour.

"When night falls, large numbers of people start lighting fireworks all at once," Ferreria said. "The atmosphere can only take in so much material and then it becomes overwhelmed."

Officials expect today's weather conditions will be similar to those of last July 4. The evening breezes won't be strong enough to disperse the pollution.

The coloring in fireworks also contains metals that are considered a health concern. But the air district warning issued Monday did not discuss the metals.

Although community fireworks shows contribute to the overall pollution, people are most directly exposed from ground fireworks, said Janelle Schneider, an air district spokeswoman.

"It is close to the ground, so you are breathing the particulate matter," she said.

"If you are susceptible to the effects of particle pollution, you should not get so close that you are inhaling large quantities of it."

Sensitive people should sit farther back, away from the path of the smoke. Schneider said the general rule is that "if you can smell it, you are breathing it."

During the summer months, air quality officials usually are concerned about smog, or ozone pollution, which results when sunlight reacts with motor vehicle and industrial plant emissions.

Particle pollution rarely occurs in the summer, except on July 4 or when the smoke from wildfires intrudes on the valley.

Cities confront global menace

Hughson, Waterford plans have eye on environment

By Adam Ashton - Bee Staff Writer
Modesto Bee, Mon., July 3, 2006

Al Gore can skip Hughson and Waterford.

The lessons of his global warming roadshow are reflected in the communities' new growth plans, which acknowledge that human-induced climate change could reshape life in the Central Valley.

Neither plan commits the cities to a concrete policy. They attempt to reduce pollution by curbing energy use and bringing jobs closer to neighborhoods.

"Those are just smart land-use policies and that translates to less" emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, Hughson Planning Commissioner Matt Beekman said. "Good land use also is good for the environment."

Beekman said he has not made up his mind on whether people are responsible for global warming, a trend of rising temperatures over the past 100 years that scientists attribute to emissions released by the burning of fossil fuels.

Despite his doubts, he voted for the plan, and no one raised a question about global warming in months of public meetings where Hughson residents discussed the document.

That's a sign that a growing number of people are becoming mindful of climate change, said Tim Duane, a professor of environmental policy and planning at the University of California at Berkeley.

"It shows a remarkable shift in public opinion about this issue," he said. "We're not talking about San Francisco or New York City. We're talking about Hughson and Waterford."

Duane said planning decisions that limit car trips and encourage construction of energy-efficient housing could help a community reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Those gains could be countered, however, by ineffective regional planning that leads to long drives from expanding bedroom communities to job centers.

"It's a much bigger issue than these cities can address, but they can be a part of it," Duane said.

Chuck Bowen, a geography professor at California State University, Stanislaus, said global warming likely would intensify weather patterns, leading to more violent storms and heat waves that could make the Central Valley an unlivable place.

A recent summary of state climate change research from the Union of Concerned Scientists indicates rising temperatures could make the Central Valley too hot for orchard crops such as almonds and apricots. Global warming also could reduce California dairy production by 20percent if temperatures go up 8 degrees, according to the report.

Call to action needed

Bowen expects stringent planning guidelines from state and local governments if warming trends continue. One option, he said, would be to require developers to offset greenhouse gas emissions from subdivisions by supporting environmentally friendly practices elsewhere.

That could mean a Central Valley developer who wanted to build 1,000 houses would have to plant trees or set aside land to counter the subdivision's environmental impacts.

Cities are "seeing growth as something good," Bowen said. "The best thing to do is preserve the cropland and limit the urban development."

That isn't an option, planners say.

Catherine Reilly, a consultant who drafted Hughson's growth plan, said California expects to grow and cities have a state-mandated responsibility to plan for new residents. More cities want to accommodate that growth in environmentally friendly communities, she said.

"You're not going to get a 50-story high-rise in most Central Valley communities. It just doesn't fit the community's character," said Reilly, a senior associate at Berkeley-based Design, Community and Environment. "But you can look at reducing lot size and allowing mixed-use communities" that put commercial development near homes.

Reilly said her company usually puts global warming references in plans it drafts. No city has asked for removal of a global warming reference.

"There is more of a movement and recognition of trying to be environmentally responsive," she said.

Small steps eventually add up

Hughson's plan mentions climate change on page 107 of a 200-page document as a reason to limit energy use. Waterford's plan discusses global warming in the context of the city's desire to cultivate sustainable environments.

For Waterford Mayor Charles Turner, that starts with making walkable neighborhoods that would get people out of cars. It also means designing smooth traffic patterns so drivers don't spend time idling in traffic.

"People can do small things to help improve their communities," Turner said. "When they do, they can start to help the environment."

Half full or half empty?

Hughson Planning Commissioner Jerry Lederman said it's doubtful small towns could make a dent in global warming without guidance from the state. He called the global warming reference in his city's plan "meaningless."

"Are you going to have people quit driving cars and are you going to cut off manufacturing plants? We're going to get rid of cows? All of those things are not at our level," he said.

But Candice Steelman, the newest member of the city's Planning Commission, said little actions could start to make a difference as communities begin changing growth patterns.

"There are things that can be done, and what any city can do is make its citizens more aware of the problem and get everyone to have some buy in for some level of responsibility," she said.

Growth plans for Hughson and Waterford attempt to improve air quality by:

- Encouraging the planting of trees, which absorb carbon dioxide and cool streets and sidewalks
- Limiting development on the cities' agricultural borders
- Reducing energy use by positioning buildings to take advantage of sunlight for heating or shading to cool them
- Laying out city facilities so people need fewer and shorter vehicle trips
- Attracting industrial and commercial development so people don't have to drive far to shop or work

Houseplants can be just like a breath of fresh air

Palm and fern families work to purify home and office of toxins and specific chemicals

Amy Coombs, Special to The Chronicle
S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, July 5, 2006

One spring afternoon my aunt noticed the potted ferns in my mother's living room looked a bit dehydrated.

"But they're silk," said my mother in amazement. "How can silk plants be wilting?"

Upon closer inspection the plants did look a little droopy, and the mistake became a family joke. "Don't forget to water the silk," my mother would say.

My parents, both excellent outdoor gardeners, turned to silk after losing several houseplants to neglect. After the silk began to droop, they reverted to plastic houseplants -- a move toward convenience many families have made.

Yet according to B.C. Wolverton, an environmental consultant and retired NASA scientist, research shows that live plants are worth the extra trouble. In his book, "How to Grow Fresh **Air**" (Penguin Books, 1999), he describes the way houseplants, when used strategically, filter toxins from the **air** in your home.

"Our idea is to let plants be the lungs of a building like the tropical rain forests are the lungs of the Earth," Wolverton says. His firm is developing greenhouse window boxes designed to pump filtered **air** into a room, and has designed indoor ecology gardens in Tokyo.

While at NASA, Wolverton demonstrated that plants also break apart the chemicals most commonly released by plastics, paints, synthetic carpets and cleaning supplies. The Environmental Protection Agency has identified more than 900 of these volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in homes and schools, and some have been linked to cancer, neurological disorders and sick building syndrome.

Because high levels of synthetic chemicals can affect astronauts aboard space stations, he initially began investigating plants as potential **air** purifiers in microgravity environments.

Bay Area scientist Gerard Heyenga works on a similar project at NASA Ames Research Center in Mountain View. He recommends selecting houseplants that are robust and easy to maintain. "The key is to find plants that grow well in the typical busy California home," he says. "Plants like ferns and ivy are good **air** filters, and they also show clear signs when they need to be watered."

Grace Olsen and Sarah Ostrenga, houseplant buyers at Yama Gami's in Cupertino, advise customers to start with something simple, like a snake plant. According to Ostrenga, too much watering is the No. 1 houseplant killer, with light starvation being the second. "If you buy something that looks pretty but is hard to maintain, you might be disappointed," she says.

For those with a little gardening under their belts, they recommend Boston ferns. Plant stores are offering a new variegated variety with leaves of different shades of green. Lady palms are also excellent **air** filters, and they don't need a lot of light or water.

Wolverton agrees that palm and fern families are among the best filters. While at NASA, he observed they can be used to target specific chemicals. The Boston fern, for example, removes the most formaldehyde -- a chemical used to preserve carpeting, upholstery fabrics and the foam in mattresses and couch stuffing. In contrast to the Boston fern, the lady palm removes less formaldehyde, but filters more ammonia than any other houseplant tested.

Many plants filter one type of chemical better than another and, according to Wolverton, this specialization will make plants the indoor **air** technology of the future. He projects rooftop greenhouses will one day circulate clean **air** through apartment complexes, and that indoor gardens will become a staple of the green building industry.

Lisa Van Cleef, the education specialist at San Francisco's Conservatory of Flowers, the largest indoor garden facility in North America, says houseplants work well indoors because they evolved under the dark canopy of the rain forest. "Typically there is a 30-story canopy of trees, and anything beneath has to survive in low light, like you have inside," she says. In the moist jungle,

houseplants also developed the ability to reduce levels of airborne molds and microbes, making them ideal for an indoor environment.

Wolverton's firm is looking for an American distributor for a patented planter designed to use these natural capacities. The soil-free device is on the market in Japan, and uses pebbles, activated carbon and zeolite to absorb toxins and wick water to the roots. It holds a UV lamp embedded in the pot that helps kill unwanted microorganisms, and has shown to increase a houseplant's filtration capacity by nearly 100 times.

According to Wolverton, the pot makes use of the tiny microscopic organisms that live near the roots of all plants. Unlike manmade filters that absorb chemicals like a sponge, plants suck **air** into the ground when they transpire. Microscopic organisms then break the chemicals into fundamental sources of energy and life. Because each plant species evolved with different microbes, filtration capacities differ from plant to plant.

"Spider plants are excellent," says Wolverton, "because they target benzene, the chemical released from house paint." To diminish the levels of benzene, he recommends moving several spider plants into a room after it's freshly painted. For an average 12-by-12-foot room with standard levels of chemical toxins, two or three healthy plants will usually do the job.

"If you kill a spider plant, the next step is silk!" says Charlie Keutmann, owner of the Garden Co. in Santa Cruz.

Fred Bove from the San Francisco Botanical Garden Society also recommends the spider plant -- known as Chlorophytum comosum. He encourages people to blur the boundary between outdoors and in.

"Plants can help ease the transition between the inside and outside," he says "putting plants around doors and windows, creating a greenhouse or patio room, and simply opening a window can help create a transition zone."

Wolverton recommends clustering plants in strategic breathing zones. "Plants need to be placed where you spend the most time breathing," he says. "On the nightstand next to the bed, or perhaps on either side of your favorite chair." He believes people see the best health results when they place plants around their desk at work, where the indoor **air** quality is often very poor because of the recirculation of **air** through dusty ventilation systems.

He warns, however, that the **air** in the average home can also be a problem. As developers began to abandon hardwoods and natural building materials in the 1970s, the amount of synthetic materials in homes also rose. While smoke from fireplaces plagued the homes of the past, a lack of **air** circulation combined with increasing levels of synthetic toxins characterizes the modern indoor environment.

In Edwardian Britain, fumes from the burning of coal caused houseplants to drop dead. "The only plant left standing was the aspidistra (or cast iron plant)," says Heyenga, "which has a high tolerance for ethylene and the other gases released when coal is burned." He argues that it's too soon to know if modern homes are less toxic than they were 100 years ago.

"The modern-day home has different types of toxins," says Heyenga. "Homes are also becoming progressively more insulated and sealed, which means toxins can accumulate." While it's helpful to open a window and let a light breeze circulate through the house, he also recommends purchasing a healthy stand of indoor plants.

Amy Zavora, an educator at the San Francisco nonprofit Garden for the Environment, encourages indoor vermin composting to fertilize your plant stand. Apartment models range from a simple plastic box to a four-tiered structure, and rely on worms to compost fruit and vegetable

waste. "Worms eat half their weight in food per day, so why go out and buy fertilizer for your houseplants when you can recycle green food waste?" she asks.

Experimenting with plants can also be a stylistic adventure. Fragrant lemon and lime trees do well in the Bay Area's coastal climate, especially if they can be periodically moved outside to soak up the sun. Many types of ivy can be trained to climb decorative triangular or ball-shaped frames, and creative pots are abundant at art sales and thrift stores.

Cheryle Yednak, a gardener at Santa Cruz County's Aptos Gardens, suggests potting peace lilies, a plant Wolverton says targets ethyl and methyl alcohol as well as acetone and ammonia. "Peace lily blossoms, also known as white sails, are reminiscent of the sails on a sailboat when they are full of wind," Yednak says. "The peace lily fits most houses well because it can grow in a dark corner, and when exposed to bright, indirect light, it will bloom."

The atmosphere in your home will certainly benefit from that added splash of color, at least according to a Washington State University study that found houseplants reduce stress and help people relax. Plants have also been associated with increased employee productivity and a patient's ability to tolerate pain and physical discomfort.

This is why houseplants are so important," Wolverton says. "Not only do they target the invisible chemicals right under your nose, they also increase the overall quality of your life."

House plants that clean out toxins
Lady palm
Peace lily
Areca palm
Boston fern
Bamboo palm
Spider plant
English ivy
Dwarf date palm
Philodendron oxycardium
Moth orchid
Dendrobium orchid
Gerbera daisy

E. Palo Alto builds new determination to drive out recycler

Pivotal battle looms against Romic This is the first in a continuing series on the East Palo Alto-based Romic.
by Suzanne Bohan and Micheal Manekin
Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, July 5, 2006

EAST PALO ALTO - In the early 1980s, Romic Environmental Technologies Corp. began to wear out its welcome.

Although the hazardous waste recycler was once the largest employer in town and a major financial supporter of community events, a long track record of compliance violations had ground down community support. Since 1999, for example, inspections at Romic have found dozens of violations of the terms of its operating permit, including the use of damaged containers and storage of hazardous waste in unauthorized areas, according to state reports.

Then came the accidental release on June 3 of a toxic plume containing such chemicals as hydroxylamine, monoethanolamine, toluene and acetonitrile from a tanker at Romic, which has only steeled determination by city leaders to drive the plant from the city.

Opponents of Romic also see this summer as a pivotal juncture in their long battle against the plant, as the state is expected to decide in the next few months whether to renew Romic's operating license.

"Romic has always been an intense campaign," said Annie Loya, a 22-year-old campaign leader with Youth United for Community Action, or YUCA, an East Palo Alto advocacy group that opposes the renewal of Romic's license.

"Because this summer (the state) is making a decision, the efforts are to be more directional and more targeted," Loya added.

The campaign this summer against Romic culminates more than two decades of vocal opposition to the hazardous waste recycling plant by city leaders and activists, which took root around 1983 when East Palo Alto incorporated and became a city.

"After the incorporation, I began to oppose it," said

A. Peter Evans, vice mayor of East Palo Alto, who in 1959 worked at the hazardous waste recycling plant, which began operations in 1956 under a different name. In 1963 the plant was purchased and renamed by Romic.

Before East Palo Alto became a city, it was part of unincorporated San Mateo County. Community leaders in East Palo Alto back then objected that they had little political sway as a result, and one consequence of their lack of influence was that the area became "the dumping ground for San Mateo County," Evans said, in that large areas

were zoned for heavy industry by the county's Board of Supervisors. It was this kind of powerlessness that led to the drive by East Palo Alto leaders - which began in 1931 - to form a separate city and steer its own future, according to a city history posted on the City of East Palo Alto's Web site.

One of a kind

Romic recycles a vast amount of toxic waste generated by manufacturing companies throughout the state, such as computer firms and electronics manufacturers. The firm employs roughly 220 workers and is the largest facility of its type in the state and possibly the nation, said Romic president Steve Petridis.

"There really isn't anyone else in the state that can do this," Petridis said.

Each workday, trucks carrying loads of 55-gallon drums or 3,000-gallon tanks rumble over the well-worn asphalt of Bay Street, which leads to Romic's entrance. The barrels and tanks are filled with liquid products like industrial solvents, paint thinner, used ink, photo-processing chemicals and discarded paints.

Workers at Romic take the toxic material and, in simple terms, pump it into tall distillation towers where it's recycled, or they prepare it for out-of-state shipment by railroad to serve as fuel at cement kilns, in place of oil, natural gas or coal. A small percentage can't be processed and is sent to an incinerator or to a landfill, where the solvents are buried in drums.

For example, when used antifreeze, which arrives as a dark, murky liquid, is pumped into distillation towers, the liquid is heated up, causing it to separate into its constituent parts. Heavier materials fall to the bottom, and pure, clear antifreeze rises as vapor. The vapor is then cooled and condensed by water that circulates - in a system separated from the toxic material - around the distillation towers, and the process is repeated until no more pure liquid is extracted. During the process, hot water turns to steam emitted from the towers. The reclaimed antifreeze is then shipped out for reuse.

The heavier material at the bottom, which can't be recycled, is put into tankers and mixed with the unrecyclable liquids destined for the cement kilns.

Recyclers like Romic perform an essential function in the manufacturing industry, said William A. Shirley, an environmental attorney and author of an article on hazardous waste recycling for the journal Chemical Engineering Progress.

"What are the alternatives? If you don't recycle (the waste), you could incinerate it," Shirley said. "But if the incinerator shuts down unexpectedly, yourelease chemicals into the air.

"You could landfill it, but if you develop a leak, you contaminate your groundwater," he continued. "You could ship it somewhere else, but you incur large costs and generate air pollution."

Recycling hazardous solvents also reduces the need to extract natural resources to create new products.

"You don't need new oil from the Gulf of Mexico to create antifreeze," Shirley noted. "It gives you another chance to use that oil."

The bigger issue

Loya, of YUCA, acknowledged the recycling role of Romic, but said that arguments emphasizing that aspect of the issue miss the point.

"We're not naive enough to say that we don't understand the purpose of Romic," Loya said. "But burdens should be shared. It shouldn't just be on one community

to feel the effects of what we all buy, what we all produce, what we all contribute to the issue (of hazardous waste generation)."

Loya raised the larger question of what she viewed as excessive demand by consumers for products that generate such a stream of waste. But, she added, "this is the bed we've made, so now we have to lay in it. What could be done is to share the burden and find alternatives so there's not such a significant impact environmentally."

Rubin Abrica, mayor of East Palo Alto, echoed that view: "We've done our share all these years, carrying the heavy burden in this community for those kinds of operations."

Petridis detailed the ways the heavily regulated plant strives to protect the community by keeping toxic materials on-site and carefully contained. He also expressed deep concern for the June 3 release, and said an ongoing investigation will be crucial to the company in understanding how to prevent another release.

Efforts to contain toxic materials include developing piping systems that prevent spills, treating wastewater with bacteria, which is then sent to the county's sewage treatment plant, and capturing rainwater that lands on the facility with a liner buried in the ground. The white plumes from the distillation towers, he said, are just steam.

Activists scoff at those assurances, and are certain that the plant is responsible for health ailments in the community, although they lack hard evidence.

Coming to the nuisance

The feud in East Palo Alto between the hazardous waste recycler and community members has its roots in the concept of environmental justice, which regards as fundamentally unjust the high prevalence of polluters in low-income areas.

"As environmental advocates, we are in favor of recycling and conservation," said Philip Huang, a staff attorney with Communities for a Better Environment in Oakland, which specializes in environmental justice issues. "The important thing is that these benefits as a whole are not achieved at the expense of communities of color, where many of them are sited."

The environmental justice movement, which began in the early 1980s, was bolstered by a landmark 1987 study by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice which found that race was closely linked to the location of the most polluting facilities. A 1991 review by the Environmental Protection Agency also reported that racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately lived near hazardous waste plants and as a consequence suffered greater exposure to pollutants.

But environmental justice challenges also often collide against a centuries-old legal theory called "coming to the nuisance," explained Gary Lucks, an environmental lawyer with Beyond Compliance in Oakland, which advises clients on pollution prevention and sustainability strategies.

"There used to be a school of thought that if you came to a problem, you were aware of it," he explained. In fact, due to the "coming to the nuisance" theory, many environmental justice lawsuit have failed, Lucks noted.

Loya, however, is disdainful of the concept.

"It's as if because East Palo Alto grew up around Romic, it's OK," Loya said. "Because of where East Palo Alto is headed, it's time for us to go our separate ways."

Send it somewhere else

Though city leaders call for Romic's departure, none interviewed had suggestions for where the firm might relocate.

"I have no idea, and I don't care," said Vice Mayor Evans.

Romic executives are well aware of the city's animosity toward the operation, but they have no intention of pulling up stakes.

"Where would we go?" asked Petridis. "Even if we remotely considered the possibility, how long do you think it's going to take to get a permit?"

Chris Stampolis, director of government relations for Romic, added that, "California needs an industrial waste option. The question comes down to where should it be?"

The irony is we are probably more on their side than on the other side," added Petridis. "They see us as the polluters, when in fact what we're trying to do is recycle what other people pollute," he said.

"I don't think they've actually thought or considered what happens if we're not here," Petridis continued. "They just have the attitude of, 'Not in my backyard, go send it somewhere else.' But we should be natural allies instead of on the opposing side of the fence."

Huang, the environmental justice lawyer, pointed out that Romic's record of violations doesn't help its efforts to earn acceptance by East Palo Alto residents.

"It seems to me there's an immediate concern that Romic has not been complying with its permit," he said. "I think Romic, and any other hazardous waste facility, needs to comply with the terms of the permit, and then we can really look at the future of it."

Next in the series: A look at Romic's history of permit violations, how those violations have eroded community trust, and ways company officials plan to try to win it back. Later in the series: What are the health and environmental risks of the Romic operation?

Big subsidies run Folsom buses

The city's reliance on state aid appears to be the heaviest in the region.

By Jim Downing and Molly Dugan -- Bee Staff Writers
Sacramento Bee, Mon., July 3, 2006

The bus ride to Folsom Lake College from the Iron Point light-rail station is a great deal for students but not so much for state taxpayers.

For each ride on a Folsom Stage Line bus between campus and the light-rail station, state taxpayers chipped in $17.65 in 2004-2005, according to figures from the city.

The private Folsom Lake Cab service would charge $14.75 for the 4.8-mile trip, co-owner Alex Vartolomey said.
The subsidy appears to be the highest in the region.

There is no scam here. The problem is bus service is not a popular ride in Folsom even though the state is pushing such service to help improve air quality.

The hammer over the state's head is a federal threat to cut transportation money to the state if the air quality doesn't improve.
And no one can be forced to ride the bus.

"We know that with low ridership and frequent bus runs that the subsidy amount is high, but we look for that to come down as usage increases," said Mayor Andy Morin. "This means of transportation is very important for a rather small group of people. We anticipate, however, that group becoming larger over time."

Though fares don't cover operating costs even for heavily used urban bus systems, apparently no suburban bus lines are as inefficient as Folsom's, according to figures obtained by The Bee.

The overall subsidy for Folsom in 2004-2005 was $8.20 per ride, which includes the now discontinued downtown commuter bus, Folsom Stage Lines and Dial-A--Ride services. That amounts to an 84 percent subsidy.

The subsidy for Roseville's local bus service is $6.16 per rider; and in El Dorado County, $9.37.

Regional Transit's per-ride subsidy is $3.19 -- the agency's figure includes the popular light-rail system and does not separate out bus service. Further, urban transit systems almost always have a lower subsidy than suburban routes.
"It's always been a challenge revving up public transit in suburban areas," Morin said

"Would we like to see that subsidy come down? Absolutely. And I think as the community matures, we'll see that."

The Folsom Stage Line is funded entirely by state Transportation Development Act funds, which are drawn from sales and motor fuel taxes.

The funds are now allocated to Folsom's share of Regional Transit for light rail and to the Folsom Stage Bus lines, which includes Dial-A-Ride services for seniors.

To receive those funds, the city ordinarily must demonstrate each year that it is recovering at least 20 percent of its operating costs in fares.

In past years, the Folsom Stage Line was able to meet the farebox recovery targets because it also ran a well-used commuter bus service to downtown Sacramento. The city canceled the service when light rail opened, because Transportation Development Act funds can't be used for redundant services -- bus and rail, for instance -- along a single transit corridor.

But because the city reconfigured its local bus service last fall when RT started light-rail service into old Folsom, it is eligible for a two-year exemption from the 20 percent standard.

The exemption is designed to give ridership a chance to grow following a major adjustment to a transit system.
Folsom is entering the second year of the exemption.

With the midyear elimination of the downtown commuter bus and the addition of light rail, Folsom transit authorities say they cannot calculate a more current subsidy figure.

However, Cindy Patrinellis, a senior management analyst, expects that the bus subsidy has already dropped.
"The fixed-route ridership has increased dramatically within the last year with the addition of light rail," she said.

Any jurisdiction that receives state transportation funds must meet annually with residents and analyze ridership figures to determine what services people are using and what additional services are needed.

The city could dedicate more money to Regional Transit to increase light-rail service, but would have to reduce bus services to do so, city officials said.

"Our biggest challenge is balancing light rail with bus service with this finite amount of money," Morin said. "It's a moving target."
In a typical day in March, Stage Line buses operated for a total of 44 hours but picked up only about 185 riders.

That figure was up 15 percent since the previous October, said Transit Director Kent Gary, but fare recovery remains under 5 percent.

The driver of the 40-foot Blue Bird diesel bus on Stage Line Route 10, Joe Dunmoyer, knows most of the passengers by name.
He gets a burst of students every day at 3 p.m.

"That's when I earn my pay," said the former flight instructor and policeman.

"Everything revolves around light rail."

L.A., Long Beach Ports Put Past Into Drydock

After a long history of contention, the facilities are beginning to address mutual problems together.
By Jim Newton, Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Tuesday, July 4, 2006

It was just over a year ago that the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach were engaged in a testy standoff with far-reaching implications for Southern California: Members of their governing commissions refused to attend each other's meetings and could not even agree on a baseline year for analyzing pollution caused by their facilities.

Last week, those same leaders announced a joint air-quality plan that reflected a significantly new approach to stemming pollution and profoundly changed the relationship between the historic antagonists that command the nation's first- and second-largest commercial harbors.
Many factors have contributed to the turn from competition to cooperation. The rising influence and changing views of labor, the growing power of environmental interests and the shifting winds of local politics all have played a part.

The result, said leaders of both ports and some outsiders, is a newly minted cooperation between two entities whose leaders have regarded each other with suspicion for decades. Indeed, when the two commissions met a few months ago, it was the first such joint session since 1929.

Those leaders now are attempting to chart a common course in enforcing pollution controls and other regulations on their customers - one key plank of which was unveiled last week with their far-reaching proposal to reduce pollution from trains, ships and trucks that use the port by more than 50%.

Among the proposed requirements: Ships that use either the Long Beach or Los Angeles port will have to use cleaner fuels and electricity rather than diesel when tied up; in return, the two ports promise expansions that will allow shippers to increase their business in the region.

"Historically," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said last week, "what we've been doing

with Long Beach … was in competition."

Bob Foster, the new mayor of Long Beach, agreed: "There has been some tension."

That tension reflects the competition between the two ports and the different place each holds in its city.

Los Angeles' port, the nation's largest, encompasses 43 miles of waterfront and features 26 massive cargo terminals. It is a bustling and often gritty complex, through which moved nearly 7.5 million 20-foot equivalent containers last year. But it is appended to the rest of the city by the thin band of Los Angeles that reaches down to the coast.

Long Beach, by contrast, is nestled directly next to its booming port, which shipped 6.7 million of those same containers in 2005. It covers 3,200 acres and is responsible for about one of every eight jobs in the city.

Together, the shipping centers generate more than 500,000 Southern California jobs, dwarfing other major industries in the region. But the ports also cough up pollution: Trucks stream in and out of the complexes, and the cargo ships that moor there bellow thick smoke, heavy with particulates. A single tanker that burns dirty fuel can produce as much air pollution as 12,000 cars. That pollution wafts across the entire region, with Long Beach being especially hard-hit.

Faced with growing community concern about that pollution and with the realization that neither port, acting alone, could arrest it, the two began to send out cooperative feelers last year.

Officials and others said one early and important move was Villaraigosa's selection of S. David Freeman, formerly the head of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and a fervent environmentalist, to lead Los Angeles' Board of Harbor Commissioners. Villaraigosa staffed the balance of the commission with advocates for labor, the environment and the community.

With Freeman's enthusiastic endorsement, the commission hired the former No. 2 official of the Long Beach port, Geraldine Knatz, as executive director of the Los Angeles port. In years past, that might have contributed to the rivalry. But in this case, Knatz, who took over the Los Angeles port in January, has served as a bridge.

Richard Steinke, once Knatz's boss at the Port of Long Beach, said he viewed her departure as a loss to Long Beach but a boon to regional cooperation. "It was our contribution to the greater good," he said.

The colorful Freeman, who at 80 still sports a cowboy hat and speaks in a Tennessee drawl, describes Knatz as "110 pounds soaking wet" and admires her work ethic: "She gets up at 4:45 in the morning, and kicks butt all day." By all accounts, Knatz has energized the Los Angeles port and solidified its relations with her former employer in Long Beach.

Knatz downplays her role in producing the new comity between her current and former employers - she worked at the Port of Long Beach for 23 years before moving back across the harbor to Los Angeles, where she had worked from 1977 to 1981 - saying that there were moments of cooperation before her move. The ports, for instance, worked together in the development of the so-called Intermodal Container Transfer Facility in the 1980s and also on the Alameda Corridor in the 1990s. But those strands of common interest were overshadowed by rivalry as the two ports competed for customers and sniped at one another across the bridge between them.

The demand for a comprehensive program on air quality, however, forced the two entities to deal with each other.

"One could gain a competitive advantage over the other if we had different standards," said

Steinke, executive director of the Long Beach port.

Instead, the new rules will apply to any company doing business with either port. And the effect of union participation may spread the deal's impact even further, as leaders of the longshoremen's union have pledged to pressure other West Coast ports to adopt similar regulations. There, too, Villaraigosa's mark is evident, as he helped persuade union leaders that tougher environmental standards were important to their workers, since they handle the cargo at the ports and thus are the people most often affected by pollution there.

After this week's announcement of the air quality regulations, labor was quick to offer its support. The proposals, International Longshore and Warehouse Union President James Spinosa said in a statement, deserve to be "replicated at ports all along the West Coast, throughout the U.S. and the world."

The coalition of labor and environmental interests is a hard one to beat in Southern California's current political climate, where the two camps hold the best cards of anyone at the table. Against them, business forces have a harder time being heard. But in this case, the shippers' options are limited.

In the case of the ports, for instance, shippers could move goods through Oakland or Seattle, both major West Coast ports. But those facilities are crowded and much farther from commercially vital Southern California. Instead, long-reticent shippers are giving in to the combined approach of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Only last month, the largest shipping company in the world, Maersk Inc., announced that its vessels that serve California ports would begin burning cleaner fuel. Maersk, which operates the largest container terminal at the Los Angeles port, said it was initiating tests of other air quality improvements.

The company's move broke it from the rest of the industry and offered the potential for gigantic reductions in emissions at the ports. The cleaner fuels produce 90% less sulfur oxide and 73% less particulate matter than the dirty fuels they are replacing.

Moreover, the Long Beach and Los Angeles port operators have attempted to sweeten the deal with a gift to shippers and big labor: Whereas dirty ports are difficult to expand - neighbors object, local air quality regulations interfere - cleaner ones may be able to grow, supplying more space for goods and more jobs for those who load and unload ships.

"Neither port has certified an EIR [Environmental Impact Report] for a major project for six years," Knatz said. That stasis has been bad for business as well as labor, as both benefit from a growing port.

Because community opposition has formed around growth that contributes to pollution, the only route toward more business is to do it more cleanly, Knatz and others said.

Altogether, those developments have left longtime observers of the ports impressed by the recent turn of events.

State Sen. Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach) has been working in and around the ports for more than a decade. In 1992, when he walked his Long Beach district in search of votes for his first City Council campaign, neighbors complained of soot on their windows and voiced fear over the health implications of the air they breathed. He won that race, and since has watched as the two ports fought through lawsuits and over business, elbowing for the honor of being the biggest and cutting deals to make that happen, often at the expense of the other.

But recent events seem more based on a common conception of the ports' mission and

responsibility, he said. They suggest the glimmers of real change, not just another ephemeral agreement.

"They have come to realize," Lowenthal said, "that they either sink or swim.

Study: Pesticide harms human brain development

The Associated Press
Published in the Merced Sun-Star
July 5, 2006

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Babies of California farmworkers who were exposed to the insecticide DDT have neurological effects that include mental and physical impairment, according to a study published Wednesday.

The study by scientists at the University of California, Berkeley measured levels of various pesticides in 360 pregnant women who recently emigrated from Mexico to the Salinas Valley and tested the mental and motor skills of their U.S.-born infants and toddlers. The mental tests measure the children's ability to learn and think, including memory and problem-solving skills.

For every tenfold rise in DDT exposure, the children's scores on mental tests dropped 2 to 3 points. Their motor skills were also reduced. In the most severe cases, the highest DDT doses were associated with a 7- to 10-point drop in the mental scores of 2-year-old children compared with those who were not exposed.

The researchers tested the women for other pesticides, but only DDT was connected to neurological effects. It was not known whether the effects found in the toddlers will persist. The UC Berkeley team plans to study the same children until they enter school.

"This suggests that DDT has effects that no one thought to test back when it was in use," said Walter Rogan, an epidemiologist with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. He was not involved in the study, published in the journal Pediatrics.

DDT was banned in the United States in 1972. The Salinas Valley women had very high exposures, eight times higher than average levels in the U.S. population reported recently by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Researchers say they were probably exposed in Mexico, because most of them had lived in the United States for less than five years.

Mexico allowed the use of DDT on farms until 1995 and for mosquito control until 2000.

The study is part of a federally funded UC Berkeley project that assesses whether agricultural chemicals in the heavily farmed Salinas Valley are harming children.

The study's findings have particular relevance to the current debate on the use of DDT in Africa to combat Malaria.
"The take-home message is that this is not an entirely benign compound even though the great advantages of its use when you're saving lives with effective malarial control are very important," Rogan said.

Ione company to destroy fireworks for state

Lodi News Sentinel and other papers, Wed., July 5, 2006

SACRAMENTO - State fire officials have reached a novel court settlement with a special effects company charged with violating hazardous waste laws.

MP Associates of Ione, which helped make "Star Wars" and "Ghostbusters" movies, has agreed to make four portable devices for police to safely dispose of tons of illegal fireworks.

The company says it doesn't yet know how it will build the devices but is confident it can. The chambers will replace the state's current system of storing fireworks at various locations and then occasionally transporting them to an incinerator that doesn't meet clean-air standards.

Under the settlement, MP Associates must make the devices capable of destroying at least 170 pounds of fireworks an hour, for at least eight consecutive hours everyday.

The devices must also work without violating pollution standards - or burning up. Company officials say the challenge will be making the devices capable of withstanding temperatures of burning fireworks - up to 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

MP Associates had been cited for burning contaminated gloves, paper and faulty products that contained perchlorate, a component in rocket fuel that's known to cause thyroid disorders.

Grease Guzzlers

These Folks Fuel Their Diesel Cars With Cooking Oil. Slick, Huh?

By Allan Lengel, Staff Writer
The Washington Post
Saturday, July 1, 2006; B01

In these days of eye-popping gas prices, Mike Leahy gets fuel for his Volkswagen Beetle at the Barking Dog, a popular Bethesda pub. Shane Sellers fuels up at a Chinese restaurant in Frederick. And Ben Tonken heads to a Tex-Mex eatery in the District.

"There's a bit of a smell when you get out," said Leahy, a D.C. lawyer. "A slight french fry smell. I kind of like it; it's kind of sweet. It smells better than diesel."

Welcome to the world of greasel -- the shorthand some use for grease and diesel. Leahy and the others are among a tiny but growing band of environmentalists and thrifty consumers who are turning to restaurants for free, used vegetable oil to fuel their diesel-engine cars.

With a little filtration and a car conversion kit, oil that once fried potatoes, egg rolls or tortilla chips is ready for its second act: air pollution fighter.

Sure, saving the world would be nice. But these folks don't really expect to. Most seem to be getting their hands greasy more to prove a point: There are alternatives to fossil fuels, and vegetable oil, according to studies, burns cleaner than diesel fuel. What's more, it can save money.

As for performance, drivers say there's virtually no difference. Wear and tear on the engine is the same, as is acceleration. So is gas mileage: about 40 to 55 miles per gallon, depending on the vehicle.

When Sellers, 31, bought an $800 conversion kit two years ago, "it had nothing to do with fuel prices; it was just a decision on having some sort of independence and challenging the use of fossil fuels," said the adjunct professor of art at Frederick Community College.

But with gas prices skyrocketing, he's saving $80 to $100 a month. Sellers is already on his second grease car, a 2002 VW Golf hatchback. He installed the conversion kit himself, but those who lack the mechanical chops pay an average of $900 to have it done. Installation in trucks can cost as much as $2,500.

Sellers's car still uses diesel when it has to. But once the engine and the vegetable oil warm up, he flips a switch to convert to vegetable oil, which is stored in a separate fuel tank. He burns through about 30 gallons a month, mostly canola oil.

The concept of vegetable oil as fuel is more back-to-the-future than leading edge. In 1900, an engineer named Rudolf Diesel used peanut oil to demonstrate his new high-compression engine at the World Exposition in Paris. Historians say he hoped that small-scale farmers would be able to "grow" their own fuel. But petroleum-based fuels soon became plentiful and cheap and wound up the fuel of choice.

More than 100 years after the world's fair, the "greasers," as some enthusiasts call themselves, are once again piquing the public's curiosity.

About a half-dozen times a day, as businessman Ben Tonken's silver 2002 VW Jetta station wagon idles at a red light, fellow motorists pepper him with questions after spotting the car's "powered by vegetable oil" decal.

"Some people laugh," said Tonken, 32, of Rockville, as he drove in Northwest Washington. "That's unfortunate. They're the nonbelievers."

Jim Hickey, 46, of New Market also gets his share of wisecracks as he drives his 1984 Volvo equipped with a VW diesel engine. He fuels his car with canola oil that has fried tempura shrimp, vegetables and chicken at The Orchard, his whole-foods restaurant in Frederick.

"It smells more like a chicken barbecue," Hickey said. "Everyone laughs about it." And some ask: "How's the tempura taxi running?"

Jokes aside, the idea is catching on, said Lee Briante, a spokesman for Greasecar in Amherst, Mass., one of the largest manufacturers of conversion kits.

The company has gone from selling about 20 kits a month in 2000 to as many as 100 a week this year, he said. In its six years of existence, the company has sold 3,000 kits nationwide, including 50 in Virginia, 30 in Maryland and 10 in the District.

"In general, we see a direct relationship with fuel prices to sales," Briante said. "Over the last two years, I'd say more folks just can't afford to run their vehicles."

There is no official count of the number of U.S. vehicles fueled by pure vegetable oil. Briante and Charles Anderson, owner of Golden Fuel Systems of Springfield, Mo. , another leading manufacturer of conversion kits, guess that there are 8,000 to 10,000.

Still, Jonathan Overly, executive director of the East Tennessee Clean Fuels Coalition, sees limited growth ahead. "It's really going to be your green community," he said. And people must be determined enough to collect used oil from restaurants.

"There's a whole lot of individuals who don't want to do that," Overly said.

Leahy, a lawyer for a wildlife conservation group, noted that the resources are finite. "I don't think there's enough used cooking oil to fuel the masses," he said.

A more practical option, Overly and others said, is biodiesel, a more sophisticated formulation that combines plant or animal fats and some form of alcohol, such as methanol. It burns cleaner than conventional diesel fuel and requires no conversion kit for the diesel engine.

Some municipalities, including Falls Church, use biodiesel to run fleets of trucks or buses. About 75 million gallons were produced in the United States last year.

Another popular alternative, ethanol fuel, is a mix of fermented corn sugar and gasoline that can be used in regular car engines. Last year, nearly 4 billion gallons were produced across the country.

Still, the "greasers" remain true to their low-tech fuel. And for now at least, getting grease is a cinch. Most restaurants have to pay to dispose of it, so they're happy to give it away.

One recent evening, Leahy pulled up to the Barking Dog in downtown Bethesda to pick up his fuel, which he would take home to filter.

As kickball players filed through the front door for a night of beer and frivolity, owner John McManus brought out a five-gallon pickle pail for Leahy. The pickles were long gone; soy oil sloshed to the brim.
"I wish everyone would do it," McManus said.

Fresno Bee columnist, Wednesday, July 5, 2006:

Sparing the air one mower at a time

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

I used my cordless electric lawn mower for the first time this past weekend and I'm happy to report that it works great.

This is the mower I bought last month at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District sale at Fresno State. It cost me $150 with the gas-powered mower trade-in.

We like our new mower so much that we now plan to buy the edger attachment.

So we got a good deal on the electric mower, we are pleased with the results and it beats using our old gas-powered mower that - because it doesn't burn fuel efficiently - spews out 40 times the pollutants of a late-model car.

Not so fast, one reader e-mailed me when I wrote about the air district's lawn mower offer four weeks ago. The reader essentially said, "Big deal."

"I'm gonna guess that the population of Fresno is about 400,000 and there must be at least 10,000 lawn mowers ... in town," he wrote. "You therefore are very much impressed that 300 electric mowers will be sold."

He was not. His point is that the 315 electric mowers bought in Fresno and put into use last month is a pittance compared with what needs to be done to clean up the air.

OK, this is just a small step. But our collective quest to make our air easier to breathe will take many small steps.

So this is my family's contribution toward improving the dirty air that leads to an asthma rate for Fresno County children that is double the rest of the state's - and blurs our view of the Sierra Nevada, except after a good rain.

Now, I'm not sitting on mountain high self-righteously preaching because I believe I did such a noble thing and bought an electric mower. I've been a longtime contributor to the region's filthy air, driving a 48-mile round-trip commute for the past 20 years.

I'm part of the problem.

I've tried over the years to figure out a way to get to work without riding solo. Car pooling isn't much of an option because I don't have set hours.

I rode the Orange Cove Transit bus into work one day about three years ago. It was fine, except that with all the stops through Reedley, Parlier and Sanger, it took me an hour and a half one way, three times longer than usual. And the schedule also didn't mesh well with my workday.

Still, I vowed to ride the bus at least once every other week. I never tried it again.

See, there's always an excuse.

I did win a nice propane Weber barbecue in a drawing. It was part of The Bee's spare-the-air efforts in which employees were given bus passes.

Anyway, I am in the market to replace my 1995 Jeep Cherokee that has nearly 170,000 miles and gets 18 miles per gallon - maybe. I'm hoping to find something in the 30 to 35 miles per gallon range.

Again, I'm not looking for a pat on the back. It's time I did my part.

A Public Policy Institute of California survey found Central Valley residents believe that the most important issue facing the region is air pollution and pollution in general.

It's great that we're concerned about air pollution. Now we need individually to continue to do something about it.

Modesto Bee, Guest Commentary, Wed., July 5, 2006

Valley's environmental problems don't get fair hearing

By BRAD BARKER <mailto:metro@modbee.com?subject=Valley's environmental problems don't get fair hearing>

Are you ready for the equivalent of 10 new Fresnos? That's how many new people are expected in the San Joaquin Valley by 2040, according to experts from the Great Valley Center.

Clearly, it's time to update the old cliché, "Growth is inevitable." Here are the replacements: Soul-sucking monstrous growth is inevitable. Don't like that one? How about: Cookie-cutter developments covering the most productive farmland in the history of the world are inevitable. Or maybe: Growth that is extremely unhealthy for children and other living things is inevitable. Which is your favorite?

Speaking of that sprawling urban area called Fresno (my birthplace), I moseyed down to Fresno last week for the Blueprint Summit. The summit's goal was to start some regional planning for all this growth. The gathering was sponsored by local government councils from the eight San Joaquin Valley counties and by the Great Valley Center.

When I attend these future-of-the-valley meetings, I hope for a fair presentation of the environmental perspective; I'm always disappointed. A token environmentalist often is included in the program, but he or she seems to be one of the organizers' family friends, perhaps someone who once voted for a Democrat, and certainly not anyone who might ruffle a few feathers by asking questions that need to be asked.

In August, at a town-hall meeting in Modesto sponsored by the California Environmental Protection Agency, the panel included one soft-spoken environmentalist. He never said a word after the opening introductions and was confused as to why he was invited.

At last week's Fresno summit, the "environmentalist" was a river runner from ElDorado County. His remarks avoided the most pressing environmental issues of the valley: air quality, sprawl, farmland preservation and the influence of the building industry on local politics.

These halfhearted environmental presentations usually are wedged among those of business and agriculture representatives who rail about a hostile regulatory climate for their industries. Putting it nicely, the panels are lopsided.

None of the speakers last week mentioned the front-page story about the Modesto Chamber of Commerce in that morning's Fresno Bee. Our chamber, builders and a taxpayer group are suing to prevent builder fees based on decreased air quality because of sprawl. The plaintiffs claim the fees are illegal because they don't relate directly to pollution emissions. (They don't count the obvious correlation.)

In Fresno, where one in six children has asthma (double the rate for California), air quality is a crucial public health issue. That might be why The Fresno Bee put the story about our chamber on their front page while The Modesto Bee ran it the next day on Page B-5. Our asthma rates aren't quite as high.

I wish I had an inspirational conclusion to this column; I don't.

Let's not kid ourselves. Those of us who care about the environment in this valley are being marginalized at best. Sprawlocrats rule. In local elections, our only choices are the candidates who seem least likely to receive text-message instructions from the building industry during public meetings.

I wish I were joking. Here come 10 new Fresnos. Enjoy.

Commentary in the Capital Press Weekly Fri., June 30, 2006

Don't chase biofuel illusion

There are better ways to reduce dependence on foreign oil than using crop land to grow fuel

By Julia Olmstead, Guest Comment

There's been a lot of talk lately about the promise of biofuels - liquid fuels like ethanol and biodiesel made from plants - to reduce our dependence on oil.

Even President Bush beat the biofuel drum in his last State of the Union speech.

Fuel from plants? Sounds pretty good. But before you rush out to buy an E-85 pickup, consider:

- The United States annually consumes more fossil and nuclear energy than all the energy produced in a year by the country's plant life, including forests and that used for food and fiber, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Energy and David Pimentel, a Cornell University researcher.

- To produce enough corn-based ethanol to meet current U.S. demand for automotive gasoline, we would need to nearly double the amount of land used for harvested crops, plant all of it in corn, year after year, and not eat any of it. Even a greener fuel source like the switchgrass President Bush mentioned, which requires fewer petroleum-based inputs than corn and reduces topsoil losses by growing back each year, could provide only a small fraction of the energy we demand.

-The corn and soybeans that make ethanol and biodiesel take huge quantities of fossil fuel for farm machinery, pesticides and fertilizer. Much of it comes from foreign sources, including some that may not be dependable, such as Russia and countries in the Middle East.

- Corn and soybean production as practiced in the Midwest is ecologically unsustainable. Its effects include massive topsoil erosion, pollution of surface and ground water with pesticides and fertilizer runoff that travels down the Mississippi River to deplete oxygen and life from a New Jersey-size portion of the Gulf of Mexico.

- Improving fuel efficiency in cars by just 1 mile per gallon - a gain possible with proper tire inflation - would cut fuel consumption equal to the total amount of ethanol federally mandated for production in 2012.

Rather than chase phantom substitutes for fossil fuels, we should focus on what can immediately both slow our contribution to global climate change and reduce our dependence on oil and other fossil fuels: cutting energy use.

Let's be bold. Let's raise the tax on gasoline to encourage consumers to buy fuel-efficient cars and trucks. We can use the proceeds to fund research and subsidies for truly sustainable energy.

Let's raise energy efficiency standards for vehicles, appliances, industries and new buildings.

Let's employ new land-use rules and tax incentives to discourage suburban sprawl and encourage dense, mixed-use development that puts workplaces, retail stores and homes within walking distance of each other. Let's better fund mass transit.

Let's switch the billions we now spend on ethanol subsidies to development of truly sustainable energy technologies.

And why not spend money to make on-the-shelf technology like hybrid cars more affordable? Fuel-efficient hybrids aren't the final solution, but they can be a bridge to more sustainable solutions.

The focus on biofuels as a silver bullet to solve our energy and climate change crises is at best misguided.

At worst, it is a scheme that could have potentially disastrous environmental consequences. It will have little effect on our fossil fuel dependence.

We must reduce energy use now if we hope to kick our oil addiction and slow climate change. Pushing biofuels at the expense of energy conservation today will only make our problems more severe, and their solutions more painful, tomorrow.

Julia Olmstead is a graduate student in plant breeding and sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University and a graduate fellow with the Land Institute, Salina, Kan. She wrote this for the institute's Prairie Writers Circle.

Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wednesday, July 5, 2006:

'Real reductions'

Seyed Sadredin of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District correctly claims this is the first time they have made a rule to regulate dairies (letter June 24). But, he overlooks the fact the rule is worthless. Those 21 tons of pollution he claims to reduce are not being produced. The new rule is simply a paper exercise where each dairy documents the good and efficient management practices they are already using.

The real reductions of pollution found in the rule are the optional practices that no dairy will choose voluntarily because they would involve costs not currently part of their daily operations.

If this is the way the air district is going to solve our pollution problem, I have another suggestion. Why don't they claim another 21 tons of pollution credit by having a million car owners in the Valley sign a form that says they will park their car an average of 20 hours per day? Those people who participate won't have to get smog certificates. It would be just as effective as this dairy rule and we would still be breathing the worst air in the nation.

Tom Frantz, Shafter

Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, July 5, 2006:

Bike Bakersfield

I would like to thank *The Californian* for printing the recent article, "Burn calories, not gas." This was a great article on getting started commuting by two wheels. However, it would have been helpful to post something on Bike Bakersfield next to the article. We have great programs going on right now to assist those who are interested in bicycling for transportation:

- Safe Routes Program: If you are interested in commuting by bike but are unsure on the best route to work, we can help. Email: info@bikebakersfield.org.
- Recycle-a-Bicycle: Bike Bakersfield takes in donated bikes and puts them back on the street where they belong. If you would like a bike but can't afford one, you are eligible for a free bike. We are also in need of bikes. If you have a bike that's sitting in your garage collecting dust you can donate it to Bike Bakersfield. All donations are tax deductible. Email: info@bikebakersfield.org.

- John Lotze is a league certified instructor who hosts "Street Skills" classes at the Bike Bakersfield office. Enroll today if you are interested in building your confidence while riding on the street. Email: barton@bikebakersfield.org.

Bike Bakersfield has a lot to offer the community and there's never been a better time to get on your bike and ride. By riding your bike you're saving money on gas (even if it's just a trip to the grocery store) you're doing your part for cleaner air, you're getting exercise and most importantly -- you're having fun!

-- MAT BARTON, Bakersfield