

On a Clear Day, You Can't See the Pollution

Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, May 23, 2006

By Janet Wilson

Views are getting better at some of America's national parks, but that doesn't mean visitors will necessarily breathe easier.

New National Park Service data show that while visibility at some parks in the West has improved, ozone pollution has worsened significantly between 1995 and 2004 at 10 of them: Canyonlands, Craters of the Moon, Death Valley, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Mesa Verde, North Cascades, Rocky Mountain, Sequoia-Kings Canyon and Yellowstone.

The park service did not publicize the new findings, posted on its website, but a national environmental group said that, with summer visits by millions of Americans approaching, it was important to get the word out.

Breathing ozone can cause asthma attacks, lung inflammation and other respiratory illnesses. Ozone pollution also damages plants, including giant sequoias, other native vegetation and crops.

"The federal government's own monitors show that America's crown jewels like Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain and Grand Canyon national parks are at risk from worsening air pollution," said Environmental Defense senior attorney Vickie Patton. "We need thoughtful clean-air action to protect this precious legacy for our children and grandchildren."

John Bunyack of the National Park Service's air resources division, based in Denver, said the report showed various trends in air quality, depending on what was being measured.

"Some parks are going up in some areas, and some are improving in other areas," he said. "There are some areas getting worse and worse. Most people think they're going to go to a national park and experience clean, fresh, clear air, and that is not the case in many places. We're trying very hard to improve it, and I think we're making progress in some areas."

Ozone is a colorless, odorless pollutant, making it possible for visibility to improve sharply in Yellowstone National Park, for instance, even as ozone levels climb steadily. Brown haze and other visible smog has decreased in many parks because of a 1999 Environmental Protection Agency edict, Bunyack said, which has led to stiffer controls on industries that produce visible particulate pollution.

But Patton and Bunyack said that huge increases in oil and gas drilling in interior western states — along with emissions from coal-fired power plants, cars and other sources — were causing ozone to drift across some of the nation's most famous parks.

"We don't have any control over external sources," Bunyack said. "Although we do contribute with traffic ... most of the sources are outside the parks."

Environmental Defense and three other groups have sued the federal government in U.S. District Court to try to force air quality improvement changes in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management has authorized 33 million acres of new oil and gas development there, with as many as 165,000 new coal-bed methane wells, despite testimony from other federal and state agencies that the project would lead to serious air pollution at Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Theodore Roosevelt, Wind Cave and other parks.

"There are immediate, cost-effective controls to limit pollution from the massive oil and gas activity across the West," Patton said. "They are proven, they're used in a number of technologies, but the BLM is not asking any of the proponents ... to thoughtfully mitigate the serious air pollution impacts."

Orange County's dirty air

The county has some of the most polluted air in the country, according to national data. Scientists and doctors discuss the health risks.

By COURTNEY PERKES and BLYTHE BERNHARD

The Orange County Register, May 23, 2006

Orange County residents breathe some of the dirtiest air in the nation despite years of state regulations to reduce toxic emissions, according to recently released Environmental Protection Agency data from 1999.

The EPA's most comprehensive national look at 177 chemicals in the air also calculated the slim risk of developing cancer from breathing toxins in the air.

While one-third of Americans can be expected to develop cancer over their lifetimes, less than 1 percent of cancers are thought to be caused by air pollution. Still, more people in Orange County are expected to become sick from dirty air than they would in most places in the United States.

As scientists and environmentalists debate the health risks of air pollution, each new study raises more questions about the air we breathe.

Q. What does the EPA data say?

A. California ranks No. 2 in the country in air pollution - second only to New York. Oregon, Washington, D.C., and New Jersey round out the top five with most polluted air.

The country's cleanest air is enjoyed by residents of Wyoming, South Dakota and Montana, according to the data.

Q. What about the risk of cancer?

A. The EPA data from 1999, the most recent available, indicate that about 42 in every million Americans are at risk for developing cancer from toxic air pollutants. In Orange County, the risk is nearly doubled: 79 cancer cases per million residents.

But a 1999 study by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, Southern California's smog control agency, found the local rate to be 18 times higher - with 1,400 people out of a million developing cancer over a lifetime from polluted air. That's primarily because the state agency included diesel fumes, which were considered responsible for 70 percent of the cancer risk.

The local agency is wrapping up a study on air quality and health risks and will report results by the end of the year.

EPA officials did not include diesel in its calculations because scientists disagree on the threshold for causing cancer, said agency spokesman John Millett.

UCI researchers said that logic is surprising.

"I think the California estimates are probably a lot more realistic," said Ralph Delfino, an associate professor of environmental epidemiology at UC Irvine. "Diesel is an incredibly important source of air pollution here in the Los Angeles basin."

The EPA data also don't include indoor pollutants, commute time or proximity to freeways, all factors thought to increase health risks, Delfino said.

Q. What does the EPA say about the findings?

A. Millett of the EPA said while it's clear that air quality is worse in urban areas with more traffic and industry, the data was not intended to compare regions. He said that's because not all counties provided complete information.

"We have to acknowledge its imperfections. Some comparisons may not hold up. We see Oregon in the top five and that surprised a lot of people."

Q. What are the other health risks of breathing polluted air?

A. Poor air quality can contribute to health problems including asthma, emphysema and heart disease. It's even been linked to premature births and birth defects, health experts said.

People who don't smoke, and who eat right and exercise, can feel helpless about toxins in the air they breathe. But while it's important to care about the cleanliness of the air, there's no need to panic, the experts said.

"I don't think it's useful for people to develop anxieties over this," said Michael Kleinman, an environmental health researcher at UCI. "We've made some really good strides in reducing the emissions of these toxic agents. As we learn more about where they come from, we're able to do a better job of reducing the exposures."

Q. Are the health risks worse for children?

A. Yes, because kids' developing lungs are more susceptible to pollutants in smog.

One result: increasing rates of asthma. About 15 percent of Orange County children have been diagnosed with the breathing disorder, and the numbers are rising quickly.

Kids' asthma attacks - many believed to be triggered by smog or smoke - accounted for nearly 9,000 trips to Orange County emergency rooms last year.

"During the fires, we did see an increase in asthma attacks," said Dr. Afif El-Hasan, a Garden Grove pediatrician and American Lung Association board member. "Studies have shown if a person lives in an area with very poor air quality, their lung capacity over time is going to be less than a person with very good air."

Q. Why is air still so bad in California despite regulation of cars, heavy industry and dry cleaners?

A. According to Sam Atwood, spokesman for the Air Quality Management District, California is on the forefront of air-quality regulations, but the federal government has not regulated pollution coming from transportation industries under its control.

"While California does have some of the cleanest cars in the world, certainly some of the cleanest businesses in the world, we have the same old dirty ships that you'll find in any port in the world and to a large extent the same old dirty polluting locomotives that you'll find anywhere in the country," Atwood said.

Q. How can you improve the air you breathe?

A. There are a few ways to improve the quality of air in your community - car-pool, drive a hybrid car, use public transportation.

At home, air filtration systems aren't effective against the tiniest and most dangerous particles. But there are a few things you can do, the UCI researchers said. Always use the exhaust hood if you cook on a gas stove. Don't allow smoking in your home. And minimize the time your car's engine is idling.

When smog alerts are high, try to avoid strenuous outdoor physical activity.

Filthy Air Could Hurt Hong Kong's Economy

From Bloomberg News, in the Los Angeles Times, Monday, May 22, 2006

HONG KONG — Todd Prado blames Hong Kong's air pollution for his decision to move to Singapore at the end of this year.

He keeps his job as head of Asian trading for Janus Capital Management, and his children, ages 9 months and 3 years, keep their health.

"I like Hong Kong — it's a great city, very dynamic," said Prado, who was recruited from Fidelity Investments in Tokyo six years ago. "But the fact that my kids and I have to strap on a gas mask every time we go outside is appalling."

Foul air cost Hong Kong \$300 million in medical bills and lost productivity last year, a 3.8% increase from 1995, the University of Hong Kong calculates. With more than one day in four now marred by poor visibility, the city soon may be counting the cost of lost talent and investment, said Jack Maisano, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong.

"We're close to a tipping point where the negative investment impact is going to be measurable," said Maisano, adding that the evidence is still anecdotal. "Everybody knows someone who is leaving or has left, or is intending to leave."

Residents aren't the only people affected by air quality, said Harry O'Neill, managing director in Hong Kong of Whitney Group, which specializes in recruiting financial services executives. Potential hires from overseas are turning down job offers in Hong Kong because of health fears, he said.

"We've brought in quite a few people this year, but it's definitely a major consideration and we certainly have rejections," said O'Neill, a resident of Hong Kong for 13 years. "It's not even that they want more money. People with young children seriously worry about living here."

Hong Kong's air contains almost three times more particles of soot and other pollutants than air in New York and Paris, and more than double the amount in London, according to the University of Hong Kong. In Los Angeles, the most polluted U.S. city, people breathe in 29% fewer such particles.

Residing in Hong Kong is worse than living at a Formula One race track, said Anthony Hedley, a doctor and professor of community medicine at the university. "We have the worst pollution of all the socio-economic developed cities of our type in the world," said Hedley, who has studied air pollution for 18 years.

The situation may be even worse because Hong Kong's government doesn't make public some of the most dangerous emissions, said Rob Morrison, chief executive in Hong Kong of CLSA, the Asian investment banking unit of Credit Agricole.

The Environmental Protection Department reports the amount of large, so-called respirable suspended particulates in the air rather than fine ones. In general, the smaller the particulates, the deeper they penetrate into the lungs, department reports show. Health effects range from respiratory irritation to lung-tissue damage that may lead to heart attacks, strokes and cancer.

"Hong Kong talks about being Asia's world city, but they use third-world calculation methodologies for calculating pollution," Morrison said. "If they had a fine sieve picking up the fine particulates, what would the reading be then?"

Melisse Craig isn't waiting around to find out. Her family compared four work options, including extending their 4 1/2 -year stint in Hong Kong, before deciding to move to Singapore in July, she said.

"We made our list of pros and cons," said Craig, a homemaker from Toronto with children ages 5 and 9. "On the top of the cons list is the air pollution."

Some progress is being made. The city's 18,000 taxicabs completed a switch to cleaner liquid petroleum gas from diesel fuel in 2003. Unleaded gasoline has lightened the haze to white from brown, said Maisano of the American Chamber of Commerce.

Still, the number of hours when it wasn't possible to see farther than 5 miles increased last year to 2,438, the equivalent of 102 days, from 960 hours in 1997, according to Hong Kong's meteorological office. The count excluded hours when fog, mist or rain were present.

ECA International, a London-based human resources consultant, recommends that companies pay a 10% hardship allowance to lure expatriates, partly because of air quality, said Lee Quane, the company's general manager in Hong Kong.

CLSA commissioned a report on Hong Kong's pollution in 2004 because the environment affects investment decisions, Morrison said. Foul air may depress the long-term value of residential property as well as having an effect on public health and the economy, the report found.

CLSA is trying to persuade two senior recruits to settle in Hong Kong instead of Tokyo, Morrison said.

"Pollution isn't the only issue, but it's definitely an issue," he said. "If you've got like for like situations, pollution will surely be a tipping point."

Governor to Appoint Democrat as Head of Cal-EPA

By Janet Wilson, Times Staff Writer
Los Angeles Times, Friday, May 19, 2006

Linda Adams will be named director of the California Environmental Protection Agency today by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, an administration source said.

"With more than 30 years of service to the state ... Linda Adams is eminently qualified to serve as secretary for the Cal-EPA," said Bill Maile, spokesman on environmental issues for the governor's office.

Adams, 57, a Democrat who has won praise from environmentalists, worked in high-ranking jobs for both state Controller Steve Westly and Gov. Gray Davis, and ran the state Department of Water Resources, among other positions.

Westly is running against Treasurer Phil Angelides in the Democratic primary to unseat Schwarzenegger in November.

Adams said she was "very excited" by the opportunity, and "obviously I'll support my [new] boss" in the election. "I think the governor is going in the right direction on these issues."

Environmental lobbyists said Schwarzenegger had made a shrewd campaign move by picking her, and a good policy choice.

"She's terrific," said V. John White, executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, a Sacramento-based environmental group. "This appointment tells me the governor is going to run on a very strong environmental platform."

Adams, whose appointment must be confirmed by the Senate, would earn \$131,412 a year.

She would oversee half a dozen air and water agencies in the state, just as major battles are shaping up over Schwarzenegger's far-reaching infrastructure and air emissions plans.

White and others said Adams was instrumental in getting the greenhouse gas tailpipe emissions reduction bill passed and signed by Davis, and in getting renewable energy standards set.

"She's very experienced at doing policy.... Nobody's going to push her around," White said.

Industry groups did not comment on Adams' appointment Thursday but reiterated their opposition to mandatory "cap-and-trade" programs on greenhouse gas emissions and other costly control programs.

"We hope any EPA secretary will recognize that California is already one of the most effective states in the country in terms of greenhouse gas emissions reductions," said Gino DiCaro, spokesman for the California Manufacturers and Technology Assn. "California manufacturers have already spent a lot of money becoming more efficient. To put any more mandates on them ... [will] just send the manufacturers to other states, where they have less stringent climate mandates."

Calif. city to expand boundaries

By John Ritter,
USA TODAY, Friday, May 19, 2006

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. — This city known for its dusty oil patch, blast-furnace summers and country music stars is planning for the future by turning to the past.

At a time when many areas of the country are trying to contain sprawl, the City Council won approval this year to expand an area chosen for development outside city limits that could nearly double Bakersfield's size in the years ahead.

Critics see the expansion as a green light to builders that will encourage more suburban sprawl, gobble up more prime farmland and aggravate traffic congestion and air pollution.

Many developers and politicians, however, see a way to satisfy a feverish housing demand that has turned a once-conservative backwater — hometown of country icons Merle Haggard and the late Buck Owens — into one of the state's fastest-growing cities.

Mayor Harvey Hall says Bakersfield has little appetite for higher-density developments and other urban design trends. "I certainly respect the interests of the smart-growth people," Hall says. "But as the mayor, I support prosperity. You just can't stop growth."

Bakersfield has swelled by more than 50,000 residents since 2000. Its 4.7% increase last year, to 312,000, was more than any other California city over 200,000. Fueling the influx are home buyers from coastal areas eager to accept long commutes for a chance at a house with a yard they can afford.

Real estate frenzy

"Single-family homeownership, the American dream, is Bakersfield's bread and butter," says James Movius, city planning director. "Bakersfield is definitely proud it can provide housing to the common guy."

At least a quarter of residents in some new subdivisions commute two hours or more on congested Interstate 5 to Los Angeles, Movius says.

Bakersfield's median home price has tripled in four years but stood at just \$289,000 in March, compared with \$565,600 in Los Angeles and \$719,220 in the San Francisco Bay Area, according to the California Association of Realtors.

Robert Lang, author of the forthcoming Boom Burbs, says Bakersfield is a vestige of the post-World War II "growth machine" model of unconstrained expansion.

"If L.A. wants to shut down growth, if Las Vegas is getting crowded, if Phoenix is getting expensive, you could come here and get a good house," says Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "But it's rare to find cities that are flat-out still pro-growth."

The real estate frenzy has cooled slightly but probably not for long. Bakersfield's population could more than double to 730,000 in three decades.

If traditional growth patterns persist — opposition to large-lot, cookie-cutter sprawl has been muted but is on the rise — it will mean further loss of some of the world's most productive farmland. Bakersfield sits at the southern end of the flat, fertile Central Valley, a 400-mile-long food machine that provides much of the nation's fruit and vegetables.

Farmland is being urbanized across the valley, but nowhere as fast as here: 70,000 acres in 1988-2002, more than 7,000 acres in 2002-04, the state conservation department's most recent reporting period.

Last year, the department warned Bakersfield that it was illegally expanding in protected farmland. "They're as sprawl as sprawl can get," says Edward Thompson, American Farmland Trust's California director.

Big money for farmland

Glen and Terrie Stoller, farmers and nursery owners, see development moving rapidly toward their 2,000 acres outside the city. With the housing comes intense pressure to sell their land as new residents complain about pesticide spraying, foul odors and farming's other side effects.

Farmers are getting so much money for their land — from \$25,000 an acre three years ago to \$130,000 and up today — that land trusts that buy and preserve land for farming can't afford it, Terrie Stoller says.

"I hear farmers say it makes estate planning a lot easier," Glen Stoller says.

The debate heating up here is over how to grow: same old sprawl vs. more compact, mixed-use subdivisions; build on prime farmland vs. less productive acreage; an ever-widening suburban fringe vs. redeveloping in the city core.

Through lawsuits and threats of lawsuits, the Sierra Club has forced some developers here to offer solar electricity, protect wildlife habitat, add parks and build park-and-ride facilities. In 20 settlements, the club has collected \$6 million to offset pollution caused by development. Bakersfield and the valley, along with Los Angeles, have the nation's foulest air.

"We keep bugging the city about cumulative impacts of these projects, and they don't consider it," says the Sierra Club's Gordon Nipp.

Developer Castle & Cooke has three projects featuring "new urbanism" principles, such as smaller lots; mixed housing styles and sizes; narrower, tree-lined streets; and walkable neighborhoods.

"It takes us much longer to get projects approved," says Bruce Freeman, the firm's California head. "You have to push and push. This community hasn't been ready culturally for higher density."

In a fall survey by Vision 2020, a local group, residents for the first time rated "quality of life" their top concern, reflecting mounting unease over congestion, an inadequate road system and pollution, says 2020 president Sheryl Barbich. "People say, 'Do we want to be another Fresno?'" she says.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Wednesday, May 24, 2006](#)

Valley deserves protection from toxic chemical

By DEBBIE DAVIS and SARAH SHARPE

It has been more than eight years since the city of Modesto sued chemical manufacturers over contamination of the city's drinking water from a toxic chemical widely used in dry cleaning. This chemical also contaminates soil, ruining several proposed downtown developments because of high cleanup costs. If that's not bad enough, you bring this toxic substance home with you in your dry-cleaned clothes.

The culprit is perchloroethylene (perc), a solvent the state of California lists among chemicals known to cause cancer. Perc is estimated to have contaminated one in 10 public wells in California.

Perc also is one of the state's top 10 most toxic air contaminants, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency. Perc may cause headaches, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, fainting, fluid buildup in the lungs, and damage to the central nervous system, kidneys, liver and reproductive system, according to the EPA.

So we shouldn't drink the stuff. And we shouldn't breathe it. We shouldn't even clean clothes with it.

And we don't have to.

Effective and affordable alternatives, such as "wet" cleaning, exist and increasingly are used by cleaners throughout the state, especially in the Los Angeles area, where use of perc has been restricted by the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) since 2002. The South Coast district has set 2020 as the year all perc will be banned in its jurisdiction -- Los Angeles and Orange counties.

In 1998, Modesto sued the manufacturers, distributors and users of perchloroethylene to recover its (that is, the taxpayers') cleanup and abatement costs for wells that had been contaminated by perc. Last year, the city's Redevelopment Agency was allowed to join the lawsuit, arguing that the soil pollution stopped downtown development projects, costing the city because of missed opportunities. After eight years, the city still is waiting for a decision.

In 2003, use of perc was discouraged through the passage of Assembly Bill 998, which established a fee on every pound used in the state. It mandated demonstration programs for nontoxic alternatives and set aside money to help cleaners make the transition to nontoxic methods.

At a hearing Thursday in Sacramento, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) will consider how to deal statewide with perc in dry cleaning. Unfortunately, CARB does not take this problem seriously enough. It barely has started collecting the fees mandated by AB 998, has not set up a single demonstration, and has helped only 14 of the state's 5,000 dry cleaners make the switch from perc.

The board is considering a proposal that would prohibit new perc machines in co-residential facilities -- where a dry cleaner shares a building with residences. The CARB proposal allows the continued use of this dangerous chemical indefinitely at stand-alone locations, posing a risk to all neighborhoods.

"The state Air Resources Board acknowledges that there are cost-effective nontoxic, nonsmog-forming alternatives to perc," said Luis Cabrales, Coalition for Clean Air's Campaign and Outreach Associate. "We urge the board to replace the current proposal with an expeditious phase-out of perc dry cleaning."

Restrictions similar to those imposed by SCAQMD should be a no-brainer -- or doesn't the Central Valley deserve the same environmental protections as the people living in Los Angeles?

CARB must not pass up the opportunity to address this long-overlooked health issue. Lawsuits are a slow and costly way to tackle ongoing health hazards and do not necessarily address future pollution. We deserve protection and expect CARB to deliver on its mission to protect all of California's residents from deadly pollution.