In the News – Online Clips, Monday, February 12, 2007

Tire Recycler Hits Bump in the Road

by Dave Adalian
Valley Voice Newspaper, February 12, 2007

Hanford - Owners of Modular Rubber Drains, Inc., a Goshen-based firm with a scheme for turning old tires into new products, will go back before the Hanford Planning Commission as soon as next month after losing their permit to build a recycling facility at the Kings Industrial Park due to a technicality.

According to city staff there was an error on the city's part when issuing public hearing notices to neighboring business owners at the industrial park, and that means plans for building Modular Rubber Drain's 12-acre facility there will have to make another trip through the review process.

"We'll figure it out," said Greg Graham, Modular's vice president for marketing and a co-owner of the company along with John Koster and brothers Bob and Larry Grimes. "The products we're going to make, we've already got big contracts. It's going to work."

Modular's recycling process involves turning chunks of worn tires, known as tire crumb, into new products by combining old rubber with used agricultural plastic sheeting. Funded by grants from the California Integrated Waste Management Board, Modular's products, such as roadside drains, have already been approved for use in the State Parks System and are being reviewed for use by Caltrans. Graham estimates the company will do $5 to $6 million in business during it's first year.

But before that can happen, Modular may have to meet the objections of its prospective neighbors at the industrial park and a Hanford-based citizens group.

Prior to the retraction of Modular's conditional use permit by the city, Leopold Wierzbickz, owner of Crown Natural Foods, a producer of yogurt, cheese and other foods, and California Bioproductex, a maker of liquid food supplements for livestock, attempted to file an objection based on his concerns over the possible effect of emissions from Modular's manufacturing process on his own products.

Wierzbickz's businesses occupy a location next to the 12 acres intended for Modular's facility, and he says his was the only business in the park that received notice from the city about hearings preceding the issuance of Modular's conditional use permit. Be believes other businesses in the park might also object to Modular's presence.

"No matter what you produce, there is no such thing as zero emission," said Wierzbickz, who holds doctorates in food science and bioengineering. "The city should have a special location where [recycling businesses] won't be exposed to other industry."

Graham says Modular's patented recycling procedure has been reviewed twice by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and twice been handed exemptions by that body. It has also been in use for years in Utah, where it has proved itself to be safe.

"We're not saying it's emission-free, we're saying it's so low-emission it's not even regulated," Graham said. "The state has been trying to get this process in California for three years. They're behind it."

Also voicing objections to Modular's plan are Andy and Robin Mattos, husband and wife co-chairs of the Hanford Environmental Awareness Team or HEAT. While they share Wierzbickz's worry about possible cross contamination, the couple also says there was an insufficient environmental review of Modular's manufacturing process and the company lacks a contingency plan in the event of a fire involving the tire crumbs.

"On the one hand, you have new technology ... to melt the plastic and tire crumb. We never saw any peer review of the process. None was included in the application," Andy Mattos said. "Fire suppression was also a concern."

Modular's manufacturing process does not rely on heating tire crumbs and plastic with an external source, but causes the material to melt using "thermokinetic" mixing, which Graham says is essentially using high-torque mixers to stir the components until they blend and can then be pressed into molds.

The Mattoses, however, say material safety data information filed with the Air Resources Board is incomplete, with Graham countering that Modular's process has now been reviewed a second time by that agency with "a fine-toothed comb."

“They’re a very rigorous agency,” he said. “They don’t give out many exemptions.”

As for the lack of an environmental impact report, Graham said Modular has not been required by law to produce one for its proposal and that the cost of such a report could exceed $50,000. Modular has also complied with all fire safety standards in the design of their facility, he said.

“We’re meeting all the requirements we’ve been asked,” he said. “We’re not going to have piles of tires out there. We’re going to have crumbs in totes inside. It’s all stored and neat and clean. You’ll have more tire rubber stored in a tire store downtown in tires than we’re going to have on our premises.”

While awaiting results of its permit application, Modular will fill its orders using production facilities in Utah, and should the situation in Hanford prove unsolvable Modular is prepared to look elsewhere.

“We’ve been approached by some other counties wanting this business,” said Graham, adding that tax breaks such as those which drew Modular to Kings County are available in other locations. “We liked Hanford. We’re not sure they like us.”

Teachers receive advice on dealing with asthma attacks

Almost daily challenge at day-care centers, schools

By JOHN HOLLAND - BEE STAFF WRITER <mailto:metro@modbee.com?subject=Teachers receive advice on dealing with asthma attacks>
Modesto Bee, Sunday, February 11, 2007

Amid the squeals and shouts on a preschool playground, one child might start to cough or wheeze or show other signs of an asthma attack.

Saturday, about 200 preschool teachers and day-care providers got advice on how to deal with such episodes - and to prevent them in the first place.

The gathering, held at the west campus of Modesto Junior College, took aim at a problem afflicting an estimated 12,000 children in Stanislaus County - about 10 percent of the total in this often-polluted place.

"Children are very susceptible to bad air, for many reasons," said Dr. Wallace Carroll, a Modesto allergist and chairman of the Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition. "They breathe twice as fast as adults do. They are much more active than we are."

He and other speakers said schools and day-care centers should keep vulnerable children indoors on smoggy or smoky days. They also urged having a physician-approved plan on hand for dealing with each child's attacks, including use of an inhaler.

And they were advised to control dust, mold and other substances that can trigger asthma. It is a narrowing and inflammation of airways in the lungs, fatal to about 5,000 Americans each year.

"We do everything in our power to prevent the attacks from happening," Trudy Wilcox, who teaches in a preschool program at Salida Elementary School, said during a break. "So far, we have never had an attack in my classroom."

Arasely Rojo-Mercado, a preschool teacher at Merryhill School in Modesto, said asthma afflicts her own daughter and one of her students. She said the key to dealing with attacks is staying calm.

"If you lose control, the child is going to get more panicked," she said.

The conference was sponsored by the Stanislaus County Children and Families Commission, which allots money from a state tobacco tax to programs benefiting children through age 5.

The event also featured information on car seats, literacy, playground safety and other topics, but asthma was front and center.

The condition has no cure, but its symptoms can be controlled and these children can even play sports, said Dr. Arlaine Gutierrez, a Modesto pediatrician and coalition member.

Carroll said not enough schools are taking part in a program, funded by the MedicAlert Foundation of Turlock, that uses colored outdoor flags to indicate each day's air quality.

"I love to see them flying, not only because it's a service to children at the school, but because it's a service to people who live near the school and have cardiac problems, respiratory problems," Carroll said.

Preschools and day-care centers have an easier time dealing with asthma if children learn at home how to manage the condition, said Kelly Hughes, an asthma educator for the Sutter Gould Medical Foundation in Modesto.

"Basically, they have control over their asthma," she said. "Their asthma doesn't have control over them."

At a glance

Advice from Saturday's conference for dealing with asthma at preschools and day-care centers:

ACTION PLAN

A physician-approved plan should be on hand for each child prone to asthma. It should note what allergens or other substances might trigger an attack, and the steps that should be taken if one occurs.

The child should be kept indoors when air quality is poor. The daily risk is indicated by colored flags at many schools, at www.valleyair.org <http://www.valleyair.org> and on The Bee's weather page and Web site, www.modbee.com/weather <http://www.modbee.com/weather>.

MILD TO MODERATE ATTACKS

Symptoms can include coughing, wheezing, rapid breathing, fatigue, chest tightness, a runny nose or scratchy throat.

The teacher or caregiver should administer the quick-relief medication on hand for the child, then watch for continued symptoms, preferably with a peak flow meter, which monitors breathing. The child should be kept calm and in a sitting position. The parents should be notified.

SERIOUS EPISODES

Symptoms can include very rapid breathing, severe wheezing, widening of the nostrils, trouble walking or speaking, tight skin between the ribs, or blue lips, skin or fingernails.

Medication should be given, and the parents and physician should be called, along with 911 if needed.

PREVENTION

Sites should be cleaned and ventilated to reduce asthma triggers, such as dust, pollen, pet dander and mold.

Smoking should be banned.

Employees can try alternatives to strong cleaning products that can trigger asthma. One such cleanser can be made with a quart of warm water, a teaspoon of baking soda and a teaspoon of liquid soap.

MORE INFORMATION

Stanislaus County Asthma Coalition: 558-4846 or www.stanasthma.org <http://www.stanasthma.org>

California Childcare Health Program: 800-333-3212 or www.ucsfchildcare health.org/html/pandr/factsheetsmain.htm <http://www.ucsfchildcare health.org/html/pandr/factsheetsmain.htm>

Sutter Health: www.kids.sutterhealth.org/health/asthma.html <http://www.kids.sutterhealth.org/health/asthma.html>

Fresno PE classes told to shape up

Physical education has to squeeze in between bad air and academics.
By Christina Vance / The Fresno Bee
Monday, February 12, 2007

Physical education for California's grade school students isn't supposed to be an option- it's the law.

There's just one problem: some Fresno Unified schools haven't followed the law for at least two years.

Struggling to raise test scores and limited by bad-air days, more than one-third of Fresno Unified's elementary schools didn't follow the state law last year, according to schools that participated in a district survey.

The previous year, about 70% of schools failed to follow the law, according to schools that answered the survey.

This year, Fresno Unified wants 100% compliance because physical education is "non-negotiable," said Caran Resciniti, administrator of curriculum and professional development.

"Our students deserve that," she said.

The California Education Code says students must exercise for 200 minutes every 10 school days, or about 20 minutes daily. Recess doesn't count.

The law is one tool to fight child obesity, and it's needed in Fresno County. More than 30% of children living here are overweight, according to a 2006 Healthy Fresno report.

Fresno Unified isn't alone in failing to meet the state requirements, said Linda Shelton, wellness and nutrition coordinator at the Fresno County Office of Education.

"There are mandatory minutes, and most schools are not getting those in for PE," she said.

The law says that a "vast majority" of children are not physically fit and declares physical education to be "of equal importance to that of other elements of the curriculum."

Resciniti said Fresno Unified teachers and principals believe in the importance of physical education.

She said students learn better if they get regular exercise.

"It's counterproductive when you take that away," she said.

Flushed and grinning students from Jefferson Elementary participated in a physical education class Friday morning. The fifth- and sixth-grade classes played team sports on a grass field and the blacktop.

About a dozen girls played basketball, with an adult coaching them on dribbling and getting open for passes. Fifteen boys shouted and ran during a lively round of touch football, and a smaller group of male and female students played kickball.

The Fresno Unified surveys from 2006 and 2005 often indicated partial compliance with the law, with some students and schools meeting the requirements and others falling short.

The surveys revealed some reasons why schools didn't meet the standards. Homan Elementary, a year-round school, said students met the requirements "unless poor air quality restricts PE."

Other schools, such as Norseman, said other classes got in the way.

"Due to requirements for [English language arts], math, science, [English language development], interventions and social studies, teachers find it difficult to schedule the required minutes," the survey said. "As a school, we acknowledge the importance of PE and continue to look for creative scheduling solutions.

"Pressure on schools to perform academically has increased since the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Schools failing to meet certain testing standards face sanctions ranging from curriculum changes to employee reassignments. A majority of Fresno Unified schools have failed to meet the standards.

Kirk Elementary Principal Carla Manning said her teachers struggle to fit in physical education, although they all believe in the value of exercise.

"By law, we have to get that time in and so we do the best we can," she said. "It is a big challenge for us."

Resciniti said the district knows that it's hard for teachers to fit everything in when they're focused on improving reading and math skills.

When testing hit the front burner, "we wanted extra time for reteaching," she said.

Resciniti expects this year's survey to demonstrate high compliance rates because teachers have been learning to make every moment of instructional time count, which frees up more time for PE.

"We're smarter now," she said. "We're really able to focus in."

The Environment: Cooked-up chemical waste a soil, water concern

1 pound of meth can produce 6 pounds of hazardous material

By MICHAEL G. MOONEY - BEE STAFF WRITER
Modesto Bee, Monday, February 12, 2007

That methamphetamine often destroys the health, and ultimately, the lives of those who become dependent upon it has been well-documented.

Less understood is the environmental damage left by the manufacturing of methamphetamine.

"Could there be long-term harm to the environment and groundwater from meth drug-lab dump sites?" asked Jim Simpson of the Stanislaus County Department of Environmental Resources. "Yes. But the conditions would need to be just right."

The extent of the pollution, Simpson said, depends upon a number of factors:

? How deep the waste was buried

? Whether it was covered or left open

? How long since the waste had been dumped

? In what type of soil it was dumped

At this point, officials do not believe there is a long-term pollution problem in the county that can be attributed to meth labs.

"Most of these dump sites are abandoned on the side of the road and discovered fairly quickly," Simpson said. "Many of the dump sites we go out to are just empty containers which the meth makers used. These are typically nonhazardous dump sites."

Deadly substances

Substances used and produced during the manufacturing or "synthesis" process are volatile and often deadly to breathe, said Simpson, the county's hazardous materials program manager, creating a "big concern for first responders."

Those caught dumping meth lab waste potentially face criminal and civil penalties.

Under the state's Health and Safety Code, those who illegally dispose of chemicals and other meth lab paraphernalia can be fined $1,000 to $75,000 per violation.

The Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, a division of the California Environmental Protection Agency, estimates that for every pound of meth synthesized from a clandestine lab, "6 or more pounds of hazardous materials or chemicals are produced."

And where do those materials end up?

? Municipal sewer systems

? Septic systems

? Back yards, orchards, farm fields, open spaces and-or ditches along roads

"The people who are cooking meth illegally aren't good environmental stewards," said Ron Baker, a spokesman for California EPA. "They pour chemicals down the toilet. They dig ditches and drain waste materials through them."

Stanislaus officials say the number of illegal meth labs found in the county has declined in the past three years. Yet the number of dump sites hasn't shown the same drop-off.

One theory is that big meth labs are moving out - some believe the largest labs are operating in Mexico - leaving behind a network of smaller and, perhaps, more mobile labs.

Today, from an environmental standpoint, most of the focus is aimed at air and soil pollution. But there is growing concern about groundwater contamination, although it is difficult to quantify.

The health and environmental threats meth labs create, experts say, are real, though there's no evidence of long-term damage.

"(Meth lab) neighbors should be worried," Baker said, "not only about their health and the environment, but the danger of explosion, too."

Cleaning up after meth

Often, said Vicki Jones, a county hazardous waste specialist, meth "cooks" fill empty propane tanks with hydrochloric acid, pack the openings with rock salt and use a faucet top to attach the cook hose.

The corrosive gas builds up inside, Jones said, eating away at the propane tank's walls. Without a pressure release valve, there's nowhere for the gas inside the tank to escape.

"It's dangerous to move those cylinders," she said. "The poisonous gas inside causes serious damage to your lungs if you breathe it and could be fatal."

Experts who handle the tanks wear protective suits and are equipped with respirators, said Jones, adding that the county hires specialized contractors to dispose of the tanks.

Illegal meth labs also can wreak havoc in structures. Homes, apartments, sheds, barns, even silos can sustain extensive contamination in the cooking process.

And damage can be costly to repair.

That's what the owners of a home southwest of Modesto learned when an illegal meth lab was uncovered there in 2006. They had used the two-story wooden structure as a rental property.

County officials said the owners had no idea that they had rented their home to meth lab operators. The owners declined to be interviewed by The Bee.

The owners bear no criminal culpability, said Jones, but they are responsible for cleaning up the mess- at a cost of about $25,000.

In addition to the expense, Jones said, cleanup can take months to complete.

Evaluation, testing and cleanup at the rural Ceres-Crows Landing area home began in March. It hasn't been completed.

A private contractor, Geological Technics Inc., is conducting the testing and cleanup. The Modesto-based firm specializes in undoing damage caused by meth manufacturing.

When the home was inspected in late December, stains on walls and carpeting of the second-floor apartment still were visible. The odors had dissipated. County officials said entering the house no longer posed a health risk, but it was not ready for occupancy.

Chemicals and gases used and produced in the meth manufacturing process- iodine, red phosphorus, muriatic acid, phosphine and hydrogen chloride - cause serious health problems and even death, depending upon their concentration.

Ray Kablanow of Geological Technics said that test samples showed widespread contamination inside the house, but it was worth saving.

"It's not in bad shape," he said. "The cooking probably was just getting going or they were being very careful and didn't make a lot of mess."

Even so, cleanup has required workers to virtually gut the interior. Flooring, drywall and carpeting throughout the home had to be removed.

Kablanow said appliances, including the refrigerator, stove and oven, were declared inoperable and will be "disposed of as contaminated waste."

The home's heating and air conditioning also were contaminated and all their components may have to be replaced. Jones said some components would be cleaned and tested to see if they could be saved.

All porous surfaces and materials, such as draperies and throw rugs, that had sustained contamination were removed from the home and garage.

Dumped into septic system

Outside, Kablanow said testing revealed that lab operators dumped chemicals and other waste into the septic system.

As a result, the septic tank will have to be pumped. Jones said the tank may have to be unearthed and hauled away.

The septic system's leach field and lines also must be tested to determine the extent, if any, of soil contamination. If contamination is found, the soil would have to be dug up and hauled away.

Water flowing in a nearby canal was of less concern, county officials said, because of the usually high volume moving through it during the spring and summer.

Assuming there was a high water volume in the canal when the contaminants were dumped, said Tony Moniz, a county hazardous materials specialist, pollution would be minimal.

Moniz and Jones reiterated that many roadside meth lab dump sites they investigate do not involve spilled materials.

"Most of the time," Jones said, "things are bagged or put in buckets."

But it's a problem if authorities are not told about the dump sites.

Sometimes, Jones said, sites go unreported because farmers or property owners are under the mistaken belief they will be responsible for cleanup costs.

Jones said that's not the case.

Unlike meth labs found in privately owned structures, state funding is available to cover the cost of cleaning sites found in farm fields and along the road.

Legislation is being drafted, Jones said, that would create a cleanup fund for meth lab damage caused to structures. It was not clear when the bill would be presented, however.

Some illegal meth dumps go undetected because the debris may be burned, buried or otherwise hidden from view.

Simpson said anyone finding what might be a meth lab dump site should call 911.

Nothing should be touched. And not only for health and safety reasons.
Said Simpson: "First and foremost, it's a crime scene."

Oakland port's greener trucks: A 'baby step'?

New vehicles produce next to no emissions, but activists say 11 is just scratching the surface
By Douglas Fischer, STAFF WRITER <mailto:dfischer@angnewspapers.com?subject=Inside Bay Area: Oakland port's greener trucks: A 'baby step'?>
Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, February 12, 2007

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and two trucking companies are bringing the next generation of trucks to the Port of Oakland, adding 11 liquefied natural gas trucks that belch next to no emissions compared to the diesel rigs they replace.

Getting those 11 trucks on the ground required $3 million-plus in grants, years of effort and a consortium of companies. Their arrival is touted as a landmark step in efforts to scrub the air of diesel soot, nitrous oxides and other shipping-related pollution.

But those trucks represent just 0.5 percent of the roughly 2,000 diesel big rigs roaring in and out of the nation's fourth-largest port daily. And truck traffic accounts for up to 40 percent of the port's air pollution.

That kind of math explains why community activists who have spent years calling for faster action dismiss such progress as "a baby step." The port maintains it is working multiple fronts to knock back emissions. The trucks, fueling station and infrastructure represent progress: A new, cleaner fuel source is available at the port. As skeptical terminal operators and hauling companies see that LNG works, its use will spread, backers say.

And with the port scheduled to expand by two or three times in the next few years, now is the time to show them.
"The tone and the tenor of this is we understand the challenge," said Roger Lowther, co-founder of CleanAir TransPort, one of the companies buying the trucks. "We're committed to bringing the rest of the industry along. We want to show people how to do it."

The trucks are not cheap. It'd be a lot easier if Kenworth mass-produced an LNG version of its trucks. But it doesn't. So Lowther is stuck paying an extra $100,000 or so to essentially custom-build CleanAir's LNG powered tractors.

Next week, the port is expected to approve a $3 million program to help underwrite the cost of those trucks and open a permanent fueling station.

Today the trucks fuel at a temporary station placed at the Oakland International Gateway, the BNSF Railway yard where containers are trucked from ships to trains for transport across the country.

The project had its start two years ago at a community meeting when PG&E's clean air transportation program manager, Chris Ferrara, met the man directing all of the Gateway's traffic, Omnitrax's operation's director Mike Bowden.

Ferrara, Bowden recalled, "had this crazy idea" to bring LNG - natural gas frozen to 259 degrees below zero near well heads in Wyoming, Texas, and Oklahoma and then trucked west - to the port.

Bowden runs 400 trucks through the rail yard a day. The slightest scheduling error can leave hundreds of containers stacking up in his yard. Yard operators aren't ones to take chances, but as Bowden looked at the conflict between two inexorable trends - explosive port growth and tighter emissions limits - he saw a way out.

He just needed some trucks.

The port runs a bit like a symbiotic organism: The Port of Oakland leases the land to the terminal operators, the terminal operators run the ships, BNSF runs the trains. The trucks - many dating from the '80s - are largely owned by independent owner-operators. Bowden controls only the schedule.

CleanAir TransPort hopes to elbow its way into this crowd with its clean-burning LNG and compressed natural gas trucks. It has plans to purchase or convert 70 trucks.

Community activists want to see such emissions savings translated faster on a larger scale. That isn't happening, they say, because the Port of Oakland has its head in the sand.

"There's an opportunity here, but they're not really looking, as far as I can tell, to be a leader in the field," said Swati Prakash, director of Oakland-based Pacific Institute's environmental justice effort.

"This is a baby step toward where we need to be.... There's all this work to get 10 trucks out there. And it's just a little more work to get 100 trucks. But to get those 100 trucks, you need a leader."

It's not like LNG is a new fuel: Waste haulers in Los Angeles and the Bay Area are using it, supermarket chains use it to distribute groceries to stores, PG&E is building a fueling station - its second - in Fremont.

But until there's a strong market signal, Lowther and his partners will be forced to rip the diesel engine out of every new truck they buy and pay someone to put in an LNG powerplant.

That's a cost they can't recover in fuel or other savings. Until the gap shrinks, CleanAir TransPort and any other operator hoping to run an LNG truck needs some sort of subsidy to be competitive.

Which means the signal won't strengthen and the market won't grow until someone forces it.

"The ports are driving this," said PG&E's Ferrara. "Westport" - the Canadian truck engine manufacturer - "is building 100 new LNG engines a year now. They can get to 1,000 depending on what the ports do."

Roberta Reinstein, the port's manager of environmental programs and safety, said the port is blazing a path. It is midway through a $3 million effort to replace 80 old owner-operated diesel trucks with 2004 model or later rigs. It has electrified all the cranes and refrigerated units and repowered yard equipment.

Shipping companies are switching to low-sulfur fuel for their massive container ships. The port's expansion into the old Oakland Army Base will feature state-of-the-art electrified terminals. And the port, added spokesman Harold Jones, has a "major collaborative effort" underway to work with the community and address concerns. The port and other local agencies intend to spend another $3 million to repower larger port equipment with LNG.

"We've been working on this for a while," Reinstein said. "Certainly we have more to do, and we have a lot of plans under development to be more aggressive. But I would disagree with the characterization of us not being a leader."

Those in the community are happy to see CleanAir and its LNG trucks. But they wonder why a small start-up is left to break such ground.

"It's not like the port is going out and buying 1,000 trucks to use LNG," said Margaret Gordon, co-chairwoman of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project.

"Everyone is pointing fingers," she added. "They're making billions of dollars in revenue, and we know it costs a penny on the dollar for them to do this kind of stuff."

Nation at last returns to clean energy source

San Diego Union-Tribune, Sunday, February 11, 2007

Nuclear power is poised for a comeback in the United States. Partly in response to federal incentives enacted two years ago, utilities are racing to build an advanced fleet of safer, less-costly atomic reactors.

More broadly, markets are responding to growing threats to national security, the economy and the environment. Key is an emerging political consensus that boosting nuclear energy would go a long way toward reducing such threats.

Foremost is national security. By now, everyone should know that U.S. purchases of imported oil partly fund oppressive regimes that, in turn, finance insurgents in Iraq and foster world terrorism.

So filling the family car in San Diego could very well pay for the roadside bomb that kills a Camp Pendleton Marine. It's just that terrifyingly simple.

Along with reducing energy demand, the best way to cut imports is to boost domestic energy production. Nuclear plants should play an essential role.

Major automakers are planning a fleet of plug-in hybrids and electric cars. They will be charged in the garage overnight, a job that's ideal for nukes, which provide vast amounts of “base-load” electricity around the clock.

And nuclear power is relatively cheap, particularly in California, where new conventional generators depend on volatile markets for natural gas. Federal regulators have pre-approved standardized designs for nuclear plants that can dramatically cut capital costs and speed construction.

Equally important is growing resolve among policy-makers to do something about global climate change. Nuclear power produces no air pollution, a virtue that is winning it grudging support from some longtime foes in the environmental movement.

Even die-hards such as California Democrat Barbara Boxer, who heads a key U.S. Senate committee that this week began marathon hearings on global warming, said recently that nuclear energy “deserves another look.”

Yet a nuclear renaissance remains fragile, facing a depressingly familiar set of obstacles.

In California, new reactors are banned until federal officials open a repository for nuclear waste, a project plagued by delays.

Meanwhile, concerns about on-site storage are breaking new legal ground. Last month the U.S. Supreme Court let stand an appellate decision that forces federal regulators to assess the environmental hazards of a successful terrorist attack against a spent fuel depot at Diablo Canyon, the nuclear plant near San Luis Obispo.

This could slow permits for all new plants, which already must meet rigorous security safeguards. What's more, environmental activists are openly soliciting more creative legal strategies to haltnuclear projects.

Most objections ring hollow. Nuclear waste is nasty stuff, but the entire 24-year output of the San Onofre plant, which powers 2 million homes, only partly fills a 25-by-60-foot pool.

Surely, the United States can handle toxic waste more easily than it has handled the Middle East.

New water rules could cost dairies big

Farmers say regulations will add expensive bureaucracy they can't afford
By Corinne Reilly, Merced Sun-Star, February 10, 2007

New regulations aimed at protecting the Central Valley's water could force some Merced dairies out of business, local dairy farmers and industry advocates say.

The proposed rules will likely require all dairies from Shasta to Kern County to test their soil, groundwater, plants and waste regularly -- in some cases as often as 10 times a year. They'll also require dairies to file a handful of new reports to show they're complying.

The requirements, which are expected to take effect later this year, are meant to ensure waste like nitrogen and salts aren't polluting nearby water.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, the state agency which is calling for the measures, says the requirements will provide important environmental protection that's long overdue.

But local dairy farmers and industry advocates say many of Merced's dairies are already doing enough to protect the water, and the new rules will only add expensive bureaucracy that some small dairies can't afford.

"There's absolutely the economic potential for this to take some of our dairies out altogether," said Joe Ramos, a Merced area field representative with the Western United Dairymen, a dairy industry advocacy group. "A lot of the things they're asking for are things that are already happening. They're just adding a much more costly paper trail to it."

Under current regulations, all Merced County dairies must have three permits to operate: one from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, one from the water board and a land-use permit from the county, said Jeff Palsgaard, director of Merced County's environmental health department.

The proposed changes, which are being called the most extensive effort to date to regulate dairies, would significantly strengthen current water protections.

Until 2002, only dairies with a history of environmental violations were subject to water protection regulations. But five years ago, the state Legislature voted to extend that oversight to all dairies.

The water board has been working since then to create the program that's now being proposed, said Ken Landau, an assistant executive officer with the water board.
The board has been through a handful of draft proposals already, and is expected to release a final one next month.

Landau said the board is working closely with dairy industry advocates to devise regulations dairies can manage, but many local dairymen and industry groups say the proposal's latest draft is still far too complex and will come with too high of a price tag.

"What they (the water board) are not figuring in all of this is whether some of these dairies are even going to be able to make a profit after this," said Diana Westmoreland Pedrozo, director of the Merced County Farm Bureau. "When costs go up in this industry, it's a direct hit."

According to a study released in December by the dairy industry advocacy group Community Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship, the new regulations will cost the average Central Valley dairy

$89,000 in initial expenses. The study estimated continuing costs will run the average dairy $58,000 a year.

"For small dairies, it's an unthinkable amount to absorb," said Mark Migliazzo, who owns a 700-cow dairy on Fox Road near Atwater. "And with all the new reports we'll have to do, we're going to be spending more time on paperwork than taking care of our cows."

Migliazzo said increased labor and feed costs, set milk prices and new air protection standards are already straining dairy farmers, and the time and expense of complying with the new rules could be too much for some to bear.

Many dairies, he said, will likely have to hire an additional employee just to handle the new monitoring and reports.

"It's not that we're not worried about protecting the environment," Migliazzo said. "But we're already in an over- regulated industry and we don't know where it's going to end."

Henry Te Velde, who owns three Merced dairies and 4,200 cows, said small dairies will be hit the hardest.

"When you spread the costs over fewer and fewer cows, it gets even tougher to make it work," Te Velde said. "I think a lot of people in government don't realize how tough it is just to stay operating."

The new rules also could require dairies to rely on outside help, such as hydrologists and private laboratories.

Ramos said he's worried there aren't enough experts to meet the demand the new regulations will create. "There's only so many hydrologists in the state," he said. "So whether we'll even be able to find someone to hire is a big question mark."

Ramos said dairymen who operate on rented land could face far higher monthly rents, or could be to shut down if landowners aren't willing to pay the extra cost of complying.

There are currently about 300 dairies operating throughout Merced County.

Local dairy farmers say they're not opposed to new regulations entirely, and admit that some dairies aren't doing what they should to protect the Valley's water.

But they say many local dairymen are already doing their part, and the water board's current proposal isn't the answer for all dairies.

"What's on the table now is too complex and way too expensive," said Ramos. "We can protect the environment without putting this kind of a burden on producers."

Palsgaard, the environmental health director, said he also believes the area's water can be adequately protected without the level of monitoring and reporting the water board is considering.

He said the environmental health department, which regulates dairies, has advocated for simplifying the water board's proposed plan.

"We definitely think there's room for improvement," Palsgaard said.

He said the department is currently working to develop a model plan and schedule local dairies can use to more easily follow the new regulations, if they're approved as proposed.

Landau, of the water board, said the board recognizes dairies as an important part of the Valley's economy, and will continue to work to achieve regulations all dairies can manage.

"We're very aware of the concerns that are out there, and we're not interested in collecting a ton of paper that doesn't serve a purpose," Landau said. "But the fact is that the time has come where we have to look more closely at how these dairies are impacting the environment.

"Protection of the surface water and the groundwater that's used by the whole community is important, and that's all we're trying to accomplish."

Landau said the water board will vote whether to adopt the regulations in June. If they're approved, some rules will take effect immediately, with the rest to be phased in over the next four years.

Dairy regulations

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board is proposing new regulations over Valley dairies.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The proposed rules will likely require all local dairies to test their soil, groundwater, plants and waste frequently and file a handful of new reports to show they're complying.

The water board says the new rules are necessary to protect the Valley's water, but dairies say they're already over-regulated and the new requirements could be so costly that some will be forced out of business.

WHAT'S NEXT?

A new draft of the proposed regulations will be out next month. They could be adopted as soon as June.

Company thinks outside the grid

Entrepreneur seizing on emission rules to promote alternate energy route.

By Jim Downing / The Sacramento Bee
In the Fresno Bee, Sunday, February 11, 2007

SACRAMENTO - During the 2000 California energy crisis, most people just saw high electricity bills.

Guy Archbold saw daylight.

"To me, it was a glimpse of what the future would hold," he said.

That year, Archbold, a retired investment banker with no experience in the power sector, founded BluePoint Energy.

His idea: Build super-efficient, on-site electrical generators and sell power to businesses like hotels and big-box stores, undercutting the prices offered by utility companies and offering a measure of energy self-sufficiency.

Today, the 30-employee company based in El Dorado Hills appears to be on the brink of roaring success.

Archbold predicts that he will finalize power contracts worth $60 million in the next six months, up remarkably from $4 million last year. A pair of big contracts and a partnership with giant engine maker Cummins Inc. have helped double BluePoint's stock price since mid-December. The company is wiping out its debt, and Archbold is tripling his office space at the headquarters and doubling the size of his factory near Carson City, Nev.

And he bought himself a new gray Porsche 911.

"It's been a good year," he said.

BluePoint's "EnviroGen" units employ a design strategy called "cogeneration," meaning the waste heat produced by the engine - which runs on natural gas - is captured and used again to run a boiler, a heating system or even an air conditioner.

BluePoint installs each unit at a project site - a resort hotel, for instance - and taps into the existing gas line. Each unit is built in a box about as big as a full-size van, and produces 225 kilowatts of electricity or more. BluePoint maintains ownership of the generator, while selling power to the business.

Because of the efficiency of getting both heat and electricity from the same generator, a cogeneration system like BluePoint's can compete with the prices offered by electric utilities.

If Archbold's revenue projections are any sign, BluePoint is offering a deal that plenty of customers are ready to jump at. A recent contract with one resort should save the hotel operators about $750,000 on energy costs each year, while still producing a profit for BluePoint, Archbold said.

But this is more than a story about simply being in the right business at the right time.

Archbold started his company after hearing about cogeneration systems from a business associate. He knew enough to recognize that he was far from the first to see the potential of the market in what is called "distributed generation" - power produced on-site by relatively small, highly-efficient generators, rather

than delivered through the grid. At the time, a competing startup, Capstone Turbine Corp., already had a stock market value of $4 billion.

So, instead of rushing to put out a product, Archbold aimed for a far-off regulatory barrier that he guessed would define the future of the cogeneration market: the California Air Resources Board's 2007 emissions standards, which were adopted in 2001.

"I made a strategic decision, which was to really prolong our [research and development] period, rather than just coming out with the technology we had," he said.

To make it through that long period without any sales, Archbold invested his own money in the company, attracted $8 million in venture capital and gave his engineering team a chance to do its work.

Archbold says he had to push hard against others in the company who wanted to put out a product more quickly. He stands a burly 6-foot-5, and at 55 has a full head of dark, slicked-back hair. It's difficult to imagine him losing an argument.

Back in 2001, the challenge for BluePoint in meeting the air board's 2007 standards was that emissions from the leading low-cost generator technology, the natural gas engine, didn't come close to complying with the coming regulations. Alternatives such as fuel cells that run on hydrogen met the emissions standards but were several times more expensive to build and operate.

Regulators are especially concerned about emissions from distributed generation units, primarily because they are installed in built-up areas, where more people are likely to be exposed to their exhaust. Big power plants that supply electricity to the grid, by contrast, tend to be sited far from population centers.

While the air board sets standards that apply only in California, its regulations can carry great weight in the global marketplace because other states and even nations often follow the state's lead.

Archbold gambled - correctly, it now appears - that his team could figure out how to cheaply clean up the emissions from a natural gas engine.

He won't say how his proprietary emissions-reduction technology works, but says that BluePoint makes the only natural gas-powered cogeneration unit of its size that meets the state's 2007 standards.

Industry consultant Keith Davidson said that while BluePoint does have an innovative technology, it also still has worthy competitors.

Texans Rally Against New Coal Plants

By JIM VERTUNO, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle, Monday, February 12, 2007

Austin, Texas (AP) -- Carrying signs with slogans of "Stop the Coal Rush" and "Shame on Texas," about 1,000 people rallied at the state Capitol to persuade lawmakers to abandon a plan to build up to 18 new coal-fired power plants.

Environmentalists fear the new plants will pump millions of tons of pollutants into the air every year.

"Coal plants seem so archaic," said Stacy Foss, a teacher who brought her two young children to the rally Sunday in the 50-degree weather. "Texas is so environmentally incorrect."

Energy giant TXU Corp., which wants to build 11 of the new plants, has said the facilities will meet the state's growing demand for power, give an economic boost to small towns and reduce toxic emissions by replacing older, less efficient plants.

The TXU proposal is on the fast track under an order Gov. Rick Perry issued in 2005 to expand the production of electricity and lower its cost.

Those attending the rally, organized by about 40 environmental and health advocacy groups, including the Sierra Club and the American Lung Association, called on lawmakers to support a time out on permits for the new plants.

A hearing on TXU's application is scheduled to begin Feb. 21.

State Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson has filed a resolution calling for a 180-day moratorium on new coal plant permits to give state officials more time to study environmental and health impacts.

"A moratorium would give us time to take a deep clean breath," Anderson said.

His resolution hasn't been scheduled for a vote in the House.

Many in the crowd Sunday carried signs warning about global warming and called for the state to invest in wind and solar power and conservation programs.

Several people dressed in costumes as coal miners with sooty faces. Damon Jones, an Austin restaurant manager, wore a gas mask with his black suit.

"I'm just another guy trying to avoid the pollution," Jones said.

Stephen Hodgsen, an engineer from Galveston, said he became motivated after watching former Vice President Al Gore's Oscar-nominated documentary about global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth."

"That showed me we need to do something," said Hodgsen, who supports more use of wind power and nuclear energy.

Marc Scott, a farmer who lives within just a few miles of four of the proposed plants, worries his family's health would suffer from air and water pollution.

"We're at ground zero," he said. "It won't matter which way the wind blows."

A coalition of business and energy interests recently bought more than $1 million in newspaper advertising to speak out against the coal plants and promote the rally. The Texas Clean Sky Coalition included at least one competitor of coal-fired plants - Chesapeake Energy Corp., a natural gas company in Oklahoma City.

Other opponents of the plants include 17 mayors whose cities are downwind of the plants, including Dallas Mayor Laura Miller and Houston Mayor Bill White.

TXU spokesman Tom Kleckner said the coal plants would be cleaner than environmentalists fear.

"These are not your grandfather's coal plants," Kleckner said as he surveyed the signs and listened to the speakers from the perimeter of the rally.

"They'll burn 80 percent cleaner than today's coal plants," he said.

In Congress, a shift over fuel economy

Lawmakers who have opposed stricter emissions standards find themselves pressured to combat climate change.

By Richard Simon, Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Monday, February 12, 2007

WASHINGTON - For decades, Sen. Ted Stevens has battled environmentalists, but the Alaska Republican now finds himself in an unusual spot: pushing tougher fuel-economy standards for cars.

Amid heightened concerns over global warming and U.S. dependence on foreign oil, Stevens is one of a number of lawmakers shifting gears in the debate over whether Congress should mandate stricter miles-per-gallon rules.

"I'm trying to protect my state," said Stevens, who recently called climate change "more apparent in Alaska than anywhere else."

The 83-year-old senator's change of heart illustrates how the landscape has shifted in Congress, and could signal a turning point in the long campaign by environmentalists - successfully fended off by Detroit - to toughen fuel-economy standards.

"There is clear bipartisan agreement, for the first time in 30 years, that Congress is going to have to act to increase fuel economy standards," said Philip E. Clapp, president of the National Environmental Trust.

Cars and light trucks - including SUVs, pickups and vans - account for about one-fifth of U.S. carbon dioxide production. The better the fuel economy, the lower the emissions of carbon dioxide, blamed for contributing to global warming.

For years, Congress has debated whether to mandate higher standards as the fleet-average fuel economy has declined from its peak in the mid-1980s. Under a 1975 law passed after the Arab oil embargo, each automaker's car fleet must average 27.5 miles per gallon and its light trucks 22.2 miles per gallon. The car standard has been untouched for 18 years; the truck standard will increase to 24 miles per gallon by 2011.

Stevens is sponsoring a bill to raise the standards for cars to 40 miles per gallon within a decade. Just two years ago, he voted against a similar measure. Stevens said he is convinced Detroit can build more fuel-efficient cars.

"Unless we put some urgency behind it and tell them we mean business," he said in a recent interview, "nothing's going to happen."

Legislation to require an increase faces strong opposition from the U.S. auto industry and its congressional allies, who contend it would lead to lighter, less safe vehicles; threaten auto industry jobs; and limit consumer choice.

Citing Detroit's economic woes, Rep. Joe L. Barton of Texas, the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said: "The last time I looked at the business pages, Ford and GM were … hemorrhaging jobs, they're losing market share. Yeah, let's pile on and pass a 40-mile-per-gallon mandate."

President Bush, although he called for an increase in fuel-efficiency standards in his State of the Union address, opposes any effort by Congress to mandate stricter rules.

Still, fuel-economy standards are likely to emerge as an issue in the presidential campaign, which could spark action in Congress.

Announced and prospective candidates Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) and former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) have supported stricter miles-per-gallon rules. That has prompted a Detroit ally, Rep. Joe Knollenberg (R-Mich.), to remind them that the Big Three automakers have plants in 17 states "that account for 225 electoral votes."

The last time the Senate voted on the issue, during consideration of the 2005 energy bill, a proposal to increase the standard to 40 miles per gallon by 2016 drew just 28 votes. In the House, a more modest proposal to raise the standard was rejected 254-177.

But some of those who voted against tougher standards in the past now support an increase, and Detroit's allies are worried. "The threat is at its highest level that it's ever been," said Knollenberg.

Those hoping Congress will act are encouraged.

"We now have Congress members on both sides of the aisle, plus the president, calling for a serious increase in fuel-economy standards," said David Friedman, research director for the clean vehicles program for the Union of Concerned Scientists. "I really do think this is the best chance we've had in quite a long time to actually get something serious passed."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) has made passage of energy and global-warming legislation a priority and has moved to establish a special committee to recommend legislation, bypassing House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), an auto industry ally who has fought tougher fuel-economy standards. The special committee is expected to be headed by Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), the House's No. 1 champion of stricter miles-per-gallon rules.

Markey, who plans to introduce his fuel-economy bill this week, said, "I've had both Democrats and Republicans coming up to me on the floor saying they agree with me."

Some hope Dingell, who has invited former Vice President Al Gore to testify before his panel about global warming, may be swayed by his Democratic colleagues to consider at least a modest increase in fuel-economy standards. "He recognizes the demand from the broader caucus to get real action on global warming and oil security," said Daniel Lashof, science director of the climate center for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

On the other side of the Capitol, Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, hopes to begin writing a fuel-economy bill by spring. With both him and Stevens, the committee's top Republican, supporting an increase in the standards, a bill is virtually certain to reach the Senate floor this year.

Inouye is a cosponsor of a bill that would raise average fuel economy standards for all vehicles to 35 miles per gallon by 2019. California's Democratic senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, are cosponsors.

Bush has set as a goal an increase of 4% per year, which would take average fuel economy to about 34 miles per gallon in 2017.

Dan Becker, director of the Sierra Club's global warming program, said Bush's call has given cover to Republicans to support tougher standards.

And David Doniger, climate policy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said Stevens' unexpected support suggests that "maybe the time has come" for congressional action.

Stevens isn't ready to abandon his fight to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. Nor is he ready to support mandatory limits on emissions from power plants. And some environmentalists remain suspicious of his motives, noting that his bill includes loopholes they don't like: for example, it applies only to cars, not SUVs.

But Becker said, "We welcome all epiphanies."

Promise, pitfalls seen in use of ethanol

Savings possible, but food prices could rise

By Michael Gardner, San Diego Union Tribune, February 12, 2007

SACRAMENTO - Long before global warming and $3-a-gallon prices at the pump, pioneering automaker Henry Ford designed the Model T to run on ethanol as well as gas.

All the world is waiting for a substitute for gasoline," Ford told *The Detroit News* in 1916. "When that is gone, there will be no more gasoline and long before that time the price of gasoline will have risen to a point where it will be too expensive to burn as a motor fuel."

His bold prediction has not come true - yet. But in reaction to a confluence of some of today's most pressing problems - climate change, Mideast turmoil and spiking gas prices - ethanol figures prominently in the national strategy to reduce reliance on foreign oil and slow global warming linked to burning fossil fuels.

But serious questions have emerged challenging whether ethanol should be the methadone for the country's oil addiction. Should other politically risky steps, such as higher taxes on oil or more fuel-efficient cars, be demanded instead? Should taxpayers subsidize production of a new fuel that commands top dollar on the open market? Will the trade-off be higher prices for corn flakes and tortillas? Are the environmental benefits of today's corn-based ethanol exaggerated?

Despite the challenges, ethanol is expected to reign until more environmentally friendly alternatives can be developed on a scale necessary to satisfy the market. In the coming years, ethanol will be produced using a variety of sources, from landfill waste to switch grass grown specifically for the pump.

Among states, California is the largest consumer of ethanol, burning 900 million gallons last year. Ethanol took root here in the 1990s as a clean-air additive, replacing the toxic substance MTBE. But it's also hailed as a gas extender. Most gas sold in California contains up to 5.7 percent ethanol.

Nationally, ethanol demand jumped 1 billion gallons to 5.4 billion gallons last year. Nearly 40 percent of all gasoline burned in the country includes ethanol.

President Bush and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger both tout ethanol; the president primarily for its role as a substitute for imported oil, the governor for its environmental virtues. It's also become big business, with plants seemingly springing up as fast as corn crops across the Midwest. Microsoft's Bill Gates has invested in Pacific Ethanol, California's first major corn-based processing plant. And the state has committed millions to promote research into expanding ethanol production.

"The ethanol industry is on the move and America is better off for it," Bush told an industry convention last spring. However, the president also raised a knotty issue at the gathering of the Renewable Fuels Association.

"You (have) just got to recognize there are limits to how much corn can be used for ethanol," Bush said. "After all, we've got to eat some."

Today, the food-vs.-fuel debate rages from the cornfields to halls of Congress. Critics warn that the demand for corn will push up prices at the supermarket and livestock feed lots and possibly create shortages in hungry Third World countries. Production of other staple crops, particularly soybeans, also could fall sharply as farmers focus on corn profits.

Cereal giant Kellogg and the meat company Tyson recently confronted the issue. The Kellogg Co. said inflation, mostly driven by higher corn prices, lowered its earnings from between 18 and 22 cents per share.

“Given the volatility we see resulting from alternative energy and its impact on grains and fuel in the U.S., we see even more cost inflation in 2007 than we originally expected,” said John Bryant, Kellogg's chief financial officer.

Tyson, one of the world's largest processors and marketers of chicken, beef and pork, has already passed on increases to grocers and restaurants.

“We need to decide as a country what the proper balance is in using corn for food or corn for fuel,” cautioned Dick Bond, Tyson's president.

Tyson's chief financial officer, Wade Miquelon, took the warning global. “I don't think that rising grains .... is going to be a U.S. phenomenon. I think this is going to have ripple effects throughout the world.”

That may have been foreshadowed in Mexico, where the cost of tortillas sharply increased. The price spike, which ignited massive national protests, was blamed in part on higher corn prices.

But some ethanol advocates believe consumers could find it easier to swallow higher prices for cereal and barbecued ribs in exchange for stability at the pump.

Corn growers and ethanol producers insist commodity prices will level off. The lure of profits one year generally encourages planting rushes the next. The result? Gluts that can depress prices. As they say, “the cure for high prices is high prices.”

Bad weather can drive down yields. In 1995, U.S. production came in at 7.4 billion bushels and attracted $3.24 for every 56-pound bushel. The next year, the national yield soared to 9.2 billion bushels and prices fell to $2.71. More recently, the corn harvest has climbed along with the interest in ethanol. Production hit 11.1 billion bushels in 2005, paying just $1.90. Recoiling, growers brought in 10.5 billion bushels last year and prices responded by moving to $3.20. Prices are now at about $4 a bushel.

“We don't feel it's going to be inflationary. It's a cycle,” said Ken McCauley, a Missouri farmer and president of the National Corn Growers Association. “We've created a new market and we're growing corn for that market.”

Corn growers have set a goal of 15 billion bushels nationally within the next few years: 10 billion for food and 5 billion for ethanol.

“When you do the math, you see we will have corn for our traditional customers,” McCauley said.

California interest is growing. The state has about 500,000 acres of corn in production, but most of it is used to feed dairy cows.

Some analysts suggest that more ethanol imports could be absorbed as U.S. demand climbs. Brazil is a huge producer of sugar cane-based ethanol, but a 54-cent-per-gallon tariff limits its competitiveness in the United States. Brazil exports about 100 million gallons of ethanol a year to this country.

In the Midwest, a fuel containing 85 percent ethanol is between 35 cents and 50 cents a gallon cheaper than regular gas. But it has to be. Cars don't go as far on ethanol, losing about 15 to 20 percent in fuel economy, according to Tim Gerlach, who represents the American Lung Association in six corn-producing states.

Nevertheless, Gerlach champions the fuel, E-85. The average car driven 15,000 miles on E-85 would prevent 4 tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere, he said.

“Ethanol is not a silver bullet,” Gerlach said. “It's one of many BBs.”

But in California, some state air-quality regulators say the environmental benefits of ethanol vary dramatically depending on how the corn is grown, processed into ethanol and delivered.

“We're looking very carefully at the carbon emissions from (out-of-state) corn-based ethanol,” said Robert Sawyer, chairman of the state Air Resources Board. “It's almost a wash.”

Sawyer's statement is heresy in ethanol circles. Yet he defends it, saying the life-cycle of production is the fairest measurement, from the tractor in the field to the coal-fired processing plant to the diesel-fueled tanker trucks traveling hundreds of miles to California. However, corn grown and processed in California

has significant environmental benefits considering it isn't shipped as far, production uses cleaner energy and the byproduct is fed to cattle, he said.

Sawyer has an ally in Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee, a San Luis Obispo Republican who once worked as a research scientist for Exxon.

“A lot of energy has to be put in to make ethanol work. The benefits are pretty modest,” said Blakeslee, referring to corn-based ethanol.

Bill Jones, chairman of Sacramento-based Pacific Ethanol, which has a plant in Madera, counters with several university studies that conclude ethanol reduces greenhouse gas pollution up to 40 percent when stacked against regular gas. Others advising the governor believe ethanol is a net benefit of at least 18 percent.

Jones, a Republican and former California secretary of state, bristles at criticism of a 51-cent-per-gallon tax credit given to ethanol blenders. The oil industry, he noted, reaps billions in exploration and production credits.

“We don't have one Marine defending the railroad between Omaha and Madera,” added Jones, in a reference to the war in Iraq.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich, D-Ill., defended the industry as well. Ethanol, he said, “is good for the environment and it's good for our place in the world. The quicker we can get off our oil dependency, the better it's going to be for national security.”

But the United States continues to rely on imports for about two thirds of its oil needs even with the inroads ethanol and other alternative fuels have made.

“The idea of us being energy independent is not going to happen,” said Robert Malone, chairman of British Petroleum America, which has committed $500 million to new research programs at universities in California and Illinois.

“We need to look at other fuels. .... Ethanol will help, obviously. But as we continue to grow, so does our consumption of (oil),” Malone said.

New EPA Rules for Gasoline Limit Benzene, a Carcinogen

Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post Staff Writer
Washington Post, Saturday, February 10, 2007

The Environmental Protection Agency issued rules yesterday that will dramatically cut toxic fumes from cars and trucks over the next 25 years.

The regulations, which will reduce the amount of cancer-causing benzene in gasoline and set tighter emission standards for autos in cold temperatures and for fuel containers, will help reduce toxic emissions from passenger cars by 80 percent from 1999 levels by 2030.

"Americans love their cars," EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson said in a statement. "By clearing the air from tons of fuel and exhaust pollution, President Bush and EPA are paving the road toward healthier drivers and a cleaner environment."

Among air pollutants, benzene -- which naturally occurs in crude oil and is increased through refining to boost gasoline's octane rating -- poses the second-biggest cancer risk to Americans, after diesel emissions. In 2004 it constituted 1 percent of U.S. gas on average; under the new rule benzene levels will drop to an average of 0.62 percent.

The EPA will allow oil refineries to trade pollution credits among themselves as long as the industry as a whole stays below the limit, but the agency imposed an absolute cap of 1.3 percent benzene in any given product. The rule also sets tougher emission standards for cars operating at temperatures of 20 degrees Fahrenheit or below, as well as for fuel evaporation from tanks, fuel lines and gas cans.

Environmentalists, who had successfully sued EPA for failing to issue a benzene ruling by 2004, hailed yesterday's move but questioned the decision to allow refineries to trade emission credits.

"We're happy that EPA has addressed this important public health issue at last, even if it did take a federal court case to make the agency act," said Marti Sinclair, a volunteer for the advocacy group Sierra

Club. "But it is disappointing that EPA would undermine its own program by adopting this dangerous trading scheme."

But Frank O'Donnell, who heads the advocacy group Clean Air Watch, said the new regulation would help improve air quality nationwide: "Benzene levels everywhere are going to drop."

In an interview, William Wehrum, acting assistant administrator for EPA's air and radiation office, said the agency is protecting Americans' health by capping benzene levels. EPA estimates that the rule, which will take effect in 2011 for gasoline, will cost $400 million to implement in 2030 and produce $6 billion in health benefits.

"We want to achieve good environmental outcomes in the cheapest way possible," he said. "We do expect some minor variations from place to place."

Charles T. Drevna, executive vice president of the National Petrochemical and Refiners Association, which represents oil refineries, said facilities in the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest "are going to have to do a lot more than we anticipated" to meet the new standards.

"What's the impact on supply and cost, that's my concern," said Drevna, who added that his members are already having to change their processes to meet low-sulfur diesel standards and other federal rules. "This is, as Pink Floyd would say, another brick in the wall."

Some environmentalists are still pushing to eliminate two other air toxics that improve gasoline performance, toluene and xylene, as well as to clean up diesel fuel. "This is a missed opportunity to clean up the air and save lives," said Reid Detchon, executive director of the Energy Future Coalition.
But Wehrum said the administration had tried to produce a practical and effective rule. "The single most important thing we can do to reduce the risks associated with toxic emissions is to focus on benzene," he said.

New EPA rules target toxic car emissions

Critics attack credit program allowing some refineries to avoid strict controls
By Matthew Daly, Associated Press
in the S.F. Chronicle, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Saturday, February 10, 2007

WASHINGTON - Toxic fumes from cars and gasoline would be cut significantly under new limits on cancer-causing benzene, adopted by the Bush administration under legal pressure from environmental groups.

The requirements, to take effect between 2009 and 2011, would reduce toxic emissions of benzene and other pollutants from passenger vehicles by up to 80 percent in the next two decades, the government said Friday.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the rules would toughen benzene standards for gasoline, require cleaner-starting engines in cold temperatures and tighten fuel container standards to reduce the evaporation of harmful fumes.

"Americans love their cars. By clearing the air of tons of fuel and exhaust pollution, President Bush and EPA are paving the road toward healthier drivers and a cleaner environment," said EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson.

The new rule meets a court order that EPA require refineries to meet an average 0.62 percent benzene fuel limit by 2011, down from the current average of 0.97 percent. The rule also would create a trading program that would let refineries buy emissions credits to meet new regional limits, rather than impose strict emissions controls.

Benzene is a highly toxic pollutant known to cause cancer and is one of the worst sources of cancer risk in many parts of the country.

While hailing the stricter standards for benzene emissions, some critics attacked the credit-trading program, which they said would let refineries in some parts of the country avoid significant reductions in benzene levels in their gasoline.

"Having benzene levels go down in Newark, New Jersey, won't do much for the health of people in Portland, Oregon," said Emily Figdor of U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

She and other critics called it disappointing that EPA would "undermine" its own program by adopting the trading plan.

Pacific Northwest lawmakers have complained that because much of the region's gasoline comes from benzene-rich oil from Alaska, its gasoline has nearly twice as much benzene as the national average.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said the new regulations would bring gasoline sold in Oregon and Washington in line with other parts of the country. The standard for the Northwest would drop from 1.8 percent benzene fuel limit to 0.69 percent by 2011 - just above the national average.

"Today the EPA acknowledged that folks in the Northwest have the same right to breathe clean air as folks in other parts of the country," Wyden said.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., said he was pleased EPA officials listened to concerns expressed by Northwest lawmakers "and are taking positive steps to safeguard the health and air quality of our region."

The EPA said it adopted regional standards because a single national standard would be difficult and costly to impose.

Benzene levels vary widely from refinery to refinery, and a program that required all refiners to reach the same benzene level at the same time would be extremely expensive for a large number of refineries, said EPA spokesman John Millett.

By setting a national average, the program provides refiners "a degree of flexibility in the amount of benzene reduction they pursue," resulting in an overall reduction in benzene levels while minimizing costs, Millett said.

Frank O'Donnell, president of the Clean Air Watch advocacy group, called the new rule "a positive step" that "suggests that the November elections may be having a positive impact on EPA actions." Wyden and other Democrats are now in a stronger position to challenge the EPA, O'Donnell said.

The new plan would set new evaporative standards for fuel containers, beginning in 2009. It would require, starting in 2010, that passenger vehicles started up at cold temperatures emit fewer pollutants.

And, by 2011, the agency would require that all gasoline, which is now allowed to contain little more than 1 percent benzene, have only 0.62 percent or less benzene.

Congress required EPA to issue mobile source air toxic regulations by 1995. Two environmental groups, represented by environmental law firm Earthjustice, won a court order in 2005 forcing EPA to issue a preliminary proposal last year and a final rule by Friday.

The new standards will cost consumers an estimated $400 million at dealers' lots and other stores, but the extra cost should be less than $1 per vehicle, EPA said.

On the Net: Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.gov>

CALIFORNIA

Automakers snub Brown's move to resolve dueling lawsuits

Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer <mailto:begelko@sfchronicle.com>
S.F. Chronicle, Saturday, February 10, 2007

State Attorney General Jerry Brown's invitation to automakers to try to resolve dueling lawsuits over vehicle emissions and global warming got a cold shoulder from the companies.

Their response, in a letter to Brown: We'd be happy to talk about dismissing the state's suit against us, but don't bother bringing up our suit to overturn California's global-warming law.

Rather than the meeting Brown proposed with chief executives of the companies, their lawyer suggested a briefing from the automakers' legal representatives on the voluntary steps the companies are taking to limit emissions by improving fuel economy and designing alternate-fuel vehicles. "I think you'll be impressed,'' attorney Theodore Boutrous said in the Feb. 6 letter.

Brown was undaunted.

"I'm very pleased that they are willing to engage in conversation," he said Friday. "I'd be prepared to talk with the lawyers about their lawsuits along with ours. I still intend to meet with the CEOs. I don't think they will wish to refrain from having an honest dialogue, because the issue is too important."

Brown's predecessor, Bill Lockyer, sued six automobile manufacturers in September, saying emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases from their vehicles were a significant cause of climate change that was already damaging the state's economy and natural resources.

Brown defended the case in a court filing Feb. 1 opposing the companies' request for dismissal. A federal judge in San Francisco has scheduled a hearing March 6 on whether the case should proceed.

But Brown also sent a letter Jan. 31 to a lawyer for the companies -- General Motors, Ford, Chrysler and the North American outlets of Toyota, Honda and Nissan -- seeking a meeting with their top executives to "discuss resolution of our pending litigation and moving forward cooperatively."

"As I review the litigation and learn more about the disputes, I am struck by the need for California and the automakers to work together to address the profound environmental challenges posed by global warming," Brown wrote.

He was referring both to the state's suit and to the suit by automobile companies and trade associations challenging California's first-in-the-nation law that limits vehicle emissions of greenhouse gases.

In his Feb. 6 reply, Boutrous welcomed Brown's "suggestion that we engage in a constructive dialogue about global warming issues." But he mentioned only the state's litigation and not the companies' suit against the state.

"The reality is that these issues simply cannot rationally be addressed through a tort lawsuit seeking damages against businesses for making essential, lawful and comprehensively regulated products that play such a crucial role in California's economy and culture," Boutrous wrote.

"We know that you inherited this lawsuit from your predecessor and remain hopeful that you will decide to dismiss it and instead focus on engaging in public debate and dialogue that will contribute to the best possible approach for dealing with global warming issues."

Asked why his letter did not refer to Brown's request to discuss settling the companies' lawsuit against the state law, Boutrous said Friday that the two suits were unrelated.

"We view this global warming case as a frivolous suit," he said. "We don't think it has any connection to the (automakers') case or any other case."

The auto manufacturers are also involved in a case before the U.S. Supreme Court in which California and 11 other states are challenging the Bush administration's refusal to regulate carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. The companies are siding with the Bush administration.

$25-million prize to clean up the air

From Times Wire Reports
L.A. Times, Saturday, February 10, 2007

Airline tycoon Richard Branson announced Friday that he would award a $25-million prize to the first person to come up with a way of scrubbing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and alleviate global warming.

The prize will initially be open for five years, with ideas assessed by a panel of judges. The winning technique must remove 1 billion tons of carbon gases a year from the atmosphere for 10 years- with $5 million going to the inventor at the start and $20 million at the end.

Bush urges Congress to approve energy proposals

Washington Post, Saturday, February 10, 2007

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President George W. Bush on Saturday urged Congress to approve his energy proposals, saying it was an area with "great potential for bipartisan cooperation."

Bush, who has to deal with a Congress led by Democrats for the first time in his presidency, has proposed developing technologies for alternative fuels with the goal of reducing America's gasoline consumption by 20 percent in 10 years.

Bush said cutting U.S. dependence on oil would reduce pollution and vulnerability to "hostile regimes" disrupting oil supply.

"A spike in oil prices anywhere in the world could lead to higher prices at gas pumps here in America," Bush said in his weekly radio address. "And burning oil and gasoline creates air pollution and greenhouse gases."

Environmentalists have called for mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions, which are believed to contribute to rising global temperatures and changing weather patterns. The Bush administration has rejected mandatory caps.

Bush proposed $2.7 billion to expand alternative energy research in the fiscal 2008 budget plan he sent to Congress earlier this week.

"Every member of Congress who cares about strengthening our economy, protecting our national security, and confronting climate change should support the energy initiatives I have set out," Bush said. "By working together to pass energy legislation soon, we can help solve one of the great challenges facing our generation," he said.

Mobile lab measures air pollution

Researchers use specially equipped vehicle to monitor air quality, with Southern California roads as their laboratory

By Janet Wilson, Los Angeles Times
Published in the Contra Costa Times, Saturday, February 10, 2007

Determined to pinpoint what kind of pollution is swirling in the air around the region's ports, a crew of scientists this week began cruising Southern California streets and freeways in a one-of-a-kind mobile research lab.

In a car equipped with $450,000 worth of the world's most sophisticated air monitors and a wind sensor protruding like a giant metal claw from the roof, researchers began sampling the air in several communities, examining exhaust from cars, trucks and other sources.

"We want real-life conditions, and if real-life conditions means people in traffic, then that's what we want," said Kathleen Kozawa, 28, a doctoral student at the School of Public Health at UCLA, who was at the wheel of the mobile lab on a recent weekday.

Chasing pollution in a laboratory on wheels helps fill gaping holes in data about the air in Southern California, which has just 35 fixed air-monitoring stations spread across 10,743 square miles.

The scientists, from the California Air Resources Board, completed a similar study a few years ago, showing how much bad air people breathe in their cars.

The publicly funded researchers learned that commuters on the Harbor and Long Beach freeways in Los Angeles County ingested half of their daily pollution while on the road -- even though most people spend just 6 percent of their day driving.

"We're taking the instruments to where people live and where people spend their time -- in their cars and their neighborhoods," said Scott Fruin, an air resources board pollution specialist who helped design and build the mobile lab and is now an assistant professor at the University of Southern California.

For the latest experiment, Fruin and other air board staff borrowed a discontinued model of an electric Toyota RAV-4 (so they wouldn't be measuring their own exhaust), ripped out the back seats and sawed, nailed, clamped and bungee-corded to the innards a dozen sophisticated monitors, a police "stalker vision" video camera, five marine batteries weighing a combined 400 pounds and a tangle of extension cords. On the roof they glued the giant claw to locate wind direction and plumes and a jumbo antennae to track humidity and temperature.

For the first study, completed in 2004 in a nearly identical lab, the scientists drove and re-drove a 75-mile freeway loop between Pasadena and Long Beach.

They learned that the air in a moving vehicle can change dozens of times in an hour, even if the windows are closed.

Drivers breathe four to eight times as much of the carcinogen benzene as found in normal air levels, five to 15 times as much choking diesel soot and 50 to 100 times as much butadiene, which is used in automobile tires and has been linked to cancer, especially in women.

On a hazy afternoon last month, Kozawa and Fruin took a reporter on a portion of the route used during the first study.

The scientists say their own chests grow tight and their throats sore after a typical 150-mile day in traffic, but they shrug it off as the cost of research.

The meters spiked upward as a wide Chrysler sedan with a stained tailpipe pulled in front.

"That's pretty gross," Kozawa said.

The needles danced in the medium high range as traffic flowed sluggishly under Stadium Way, then through four tunnels. Trucks lined the on-ramps, traffic idled at the exit for Interstate 5.

It was difficult to maneuver the heavy, equipment-packed vehicle, which drew the occasional obscene gesture from fellow motorists but also curiosity. One pickup truck driver honked loudly after Kozawa unintentionally cut him off, scowled as he pulled alongside, then gaped in amazement.

As the mobile lab reached the historic, leafy section of the highway past Via Marisol, the glut of traffic opened up. The needles drooped as the air freshened.

Near Avenue 60, a Chevy Trailblazer zipped past in the fast lane. The nitrogen oxide sensor leaped from 27 to 108 parts per cubic meter. A key component of smog, nitrogen oxide can cause asthma and other respiratory problems.

The drivers of such cars don't have to breathe their own fumes, Fruin said. It's those downwind who catch the noxious stream.

Keeping your windows closed won't help, he said. Cars are not designed to be airtight. They leak around every joint, especially at high speed. Using recirculation blocks some soot, but then carbon monoxide can build up, making drivers sleepy.

The monitors barely murmured as the test drive concluded on a quiet Pasadena side street. The PAH carcinogen needle was at 1.8 nanograms, the lowest level of the day.

At a community meeting in Wilmington, Kozawa paints a harsh picture for poorer neighborhoods south of the city. She already has zeroed in on a side street that hugs truck-laden Interstate 710. On a preliminary prowl, she found astoundingly high levels of ultra-fine particulates. It is well-known that sooty fine particles wreak havoc in our bodies, but now ultra-fine particles one hundredth the size have been uncovered and are considered "even more potent," Fruin said.

Kozawa shows graphs of the particles' sharp peaks and dips to the audience, asking for help. Representatives of refineries and shipping firms sit mum. But longtime residents and community activists shout out ideas.

"What day of the weeks were they? You can find out which days the ships come in ... and the trucks will be going nonstop to move the cargo out," pipes up Jesse Marquez of Wilmington.

"I think the Santa Ana winds were blowing one of those days," offers John Cross from West Long Beach. "Did you check?"

It is exactly the sort of information that might help solve the mystery. Fruin and Kozawa urge the audience to e-mail other clues.

"It's exciting, and a little scary, too," she says of the community meetings. "We stay in our little scientific bubble most of the time ... but you hear how passionate people are, and you realize it's not just numbers. These are people's lives."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Updating Bush's spin on climate change

The White House is choosing the president's past words carefully in its portrayal of him as a longtime ally in the fight against global warming.

By Maura Reynolds and James Gerstenzang, Times Staff Writers
L.A. Times, Sunday, February 11, 2007

WASHINGTON - President Bush is widely considered one of the world's most prominent skeptics of global warming. But to hear White House officials tell it, the world's view of him is wrong.

In recent days, White House officials have made a special effort to argue that Bush has always been concerned about climate change. Moreover, they say, he has long acknowledged that human activity may be a significant factor.

"Perhaps folks have not taken notice of the fact that this is an administration that's been keenly committed both to environmentalism and conservationism from the start," White House spokesman Tony Snow said last week.

Indeed, the climate around global warming in Washington is getting hotter. Members of both parties are scrambling to get ahead of each other - and ahead of public demands - to take measures against the threat.

Apparently concerned that Bush was not perceived as being on the global warming bandwagon, White House officials released an unusual open letter Wednesday contending that "climate change has been a top priority since the president's first year in office."

"Beginning in June 2001, President Bush has consistently acknowledged climate change is occurring and humans are contributing to the problem," said the letter, signed by John Marburger, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

But the record isn't quite so clear.

The letter cites a June 2001 speech by Bush, quoting him as saying that "we know the surface temperature of the Earth is warming…. There is a natural greenhouse effect that contributes to warming…. And the National Academy of Sciences indicates that the increase is due in large part to human activity."

But the parts of the speech excised or ignored by the letter give a somewhat different impression. For instance, the citation deletes a sentence that asserts that "concentration of greenhouse gases, especially CO2, have increased substantially since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution" - a time frame suggesting that the contemporary world may have played only a small role.

Moreover, Bush's mention of the National Academy of Sciences was quickly followed by a sentence that cast doubt on the notion of human contribution to climate change. "Yet the academy's report tells us that we do not know how much effect natural fluctuations in climate may have had on warming," Bush said at the time.

"We do not know how fast change will occur or even how some of our actions could impact it," he added.

Critics see such discrepancies as evidence that the White House is trying to take positions on both sides of the debate. "The president is all over the map," said Daniel Becker, a global warming expert with the Sierra Club, an environmental group.

The critics argue that Bush soft-pedaled the issue early in his presidency because of pressure from corporate interests, such as oil companies and operators of coal-fired power plants, that oppose regulation of greenhouse gas emissions. They note his frequent statements that technology is the answer to the problem.

"America is on the verge of technological breakthroughs that will enable us to live our lives less dependent on oil," Bush said last month in his State of the Union address. "And these technologies will help us be better stewards of the environment, and they will help us to confront the serious challenge of global climate change."

Last week's release of a United Nations commission report proclaiming that global warming is incontrovertible has put additional pressure on Bush to appear responsive.

However, despite his pledge to devote new funds to research and to support efforts to curb the use of gasoline, critics remain unconvinced that Bush truly intends to confront longtime business allies.

Bush's latest pronouncements suggest that he is no longer ignoring the problem, Becker said, but also that he is still not committed to acting.

Critics say that Bush has repeatedly pledged to take action on climate change, only to backtrack.

The pattern began, they say, in Saginaw, Mich., on Sept. 29, 2000, during Bush's first presidential campaign. While calling for greater production of oil and natural gas, and more coal mining to reduce the reliance on foreign oil, he also said that "with the help of Congress, environmental groups and industry, we will require all power plants to meet clean-air standards in order to reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, mercury and carbon dioxide within a reasonable period of time."

Six months later, as president, Bush stepped away from that pledge, saying he had decided not to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants out of concern that doing so could increase already high energy prices.

But perhaps the defining moment came in June 2001, when he declared the Kyoto Protocol- the United Nations' consensus document on climate change - "fatally flawed in fundamental ways" and announced that the United States was withdrawing from the pact. That is the speech his aides are now citing as evidence of his commitment to tackling the problem of global warming.

Kyoto "would have been economically ruinous and would have thrown a lot of people out of work," Snow said last week. "The president instead has aggressively pursued ways of trying to clean the environment that don't have to make people lose their jobs, and … at the same time, proceed on all the major areas where pollution is concerned."

The Kyoto agreement, completed in 1997, proposed carbon dioxide emission caps for the 35 richest countries. President Clinton signed it but never submitted it to the Senate, where it would have faced certain defeat from lawmakers concerned about the protocol's impact on the U.S. economy and irked that it did little to curb emissions from such large developing nations as China and India.

Bush in effect erased Clinton's signature, removing the United States from any obligation to meet the pact's emissions-reduction goals even without Senate ratification.

At the same time, Bush sought to blame global warming on "a natural greenhouse effect," suggesting it wasn't primarily caused by human activity. And, though acknowledging that limiting emissions was one way to stabilize concentrations of greenhouse gases, he immediately raised issues with such an approach, saying, "A growing population requires more energy to heat and cool our homes, more gas to drive our cars."

Whether White House officials succeed in their campaign to paint the president as a leader in battling global warming may, at this point, make little difference. The energy on the issue has moved to Congress, where the Democrats - now the majority in both chambers - and prominent Republicans are pressing ahead with an agenda that may depend little on Bush.

"For years we have been frustrated by the lack of recognition, much less cooperation, on the part of the administration in addressing this issue," said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a potential presidential candidate in 2008. "Hopefully, we have now turned the corner, in that there is finally recognition that the debate is over."

Sand, gravel could run short

Report comes amid Cemex mine talks

BY JUDY O'ROURKE
LA Daily News, Saturday, February 10, 2007

SANTA CLARITA - Folks in City Hall are thrilled Cemex won't open its proposed Soledad Canyon mine in 2008, but the move could prove costly for California taxpayers and consumers in the coming years.

The city of Santa Clarita has spent $8 million fighting the planned gravel mine, saying it would result in heavy truck traffic and unhealthful air quality. The two sides have declared a truce while they seek a compromise.

Meanwhile a report issued last week by the state shows long-term demand for sand and gravel - a key ingredient in cement and asphalt products used in construction - will far outweigh the supply.

The 56.1 millions tons of aggregate Cemex is permitted to mine in the canyon over 20 years was included in the projection.

"If Cemex's 56 million tons is not going to be mined, the area will have less than 7 percent of the aggregate it will need," said John Parrish, the state geologist and former executive officer of the state

mining and geology board. "That means, that 93 percent of its projected aggregate usage will have to be imported from surrounding areas."

These include the San Gabriel Valley, Claremont and Upland. Building costs rise when the material must be trucked from afar because it's expensive to transport.

"You can fly an ounce of gold from California to New York without really changing the value of that ounce of gold," Parrish said. "But a ton of aggregate may double in cost for every 30 miles of transportation.

Building one mile of six-lane interstate highway requires about 113,500 tons of aggregate. Transporting that tonnage 30 miles adds $510,000 to the base cost of the material at the mine, Parrish said.

Caltrans consumes only about 10 percent of the total aggregate used throughout California, so its projects don't have a significant impact on aggregate resources, David Anderson, a spokesman for the agency, said via e-mail. However, cost is another matter.

"It would cost more if we had to haul the material in from miles away as opposed to having an aggregate source nearby there in Santa Clarita," he said.

The report issued Thursday by the state Department of Conservation is intended to help municipalities better plan for growth. It includes a map dividing the state into 31 regions where the material is mined and used for building. Aggregate produced in a quadrant is usually sold within the same area.

Cemex earlier said material from the mine would be destined for greater Los Angeles.

Though house sales are slumping, homebuilding costs remain constant. Houses usually sit on concrete slab foundations, have concrete driveways, and some have swimming pools. Two-story homes may require additional concrete supports.

About 200 tons of aggregate is needed to build the average home. Building the 21,000 homes planned in Newhall Ranch, a master planned community just east of Valencia, may require roughly 4.2 million tons of aggregate.

If Cemex does not resume the project in a few years and local suppliers cannot meet the demand for the material, the price of houses would rise proportionately to the hauling distance.

On Tuesday, Cemex officials said they've called off plans to open the mine next year and want to negotiate a compromise instead. The city had spent roughly $8 million on a campaign to scale down the mine to historical levels of 300,000 tons a year or get it barred from the area between Canyon Country and Agua Dulce. Opponents claimed the mine would pollute the region's air and increase heavy truck traffic on local highways.

The compromise might hinge on federal legislation introduced this year, modeled on a measure introduced by Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon that failed in 2006.

In the Los Angeles-Orange County-San Gabriel area, only about one-third of the material required over the next 50 years has been permitted for mining and it takes five to seven years to obtain permits.

"The area will fall 66 percent short over the next 50 years unless additional permitting or additional resources are found," Parrish said.

In the next five decades, California will need 13.2 billion tons of aggregate and only 4.3 billion tons are permitted - roughly a 13-year supply. Parrish said the state's behind the curve because the numbers are based on current rates of use and don't encompass unforseen circumstances.

"It doesn't take into account accelerated construction programs as a result of major bond initiatives or from construction following a major damaging earthquake."

Several large construction companies declined to comment, but one local builder wonders if the city's taken on a NIMBY attitude - not in my back yard.

"Is Soledad Canyon the center point for the distribution of (aggregate)?" said Randal Winter, of Randal Winter Construction Inc. in Newhall. "If it is the logical center point for the resource with a minimal amount of travel to the end users ... (causing) less pollution and trucks on the road, just because we don't want it doesn't mean it isn't right."

However, Winter, who serves on the Newhall Redevelopment Committee and the West Ranch Town Council said he's glad the eight-year battle, which cost the city some $8 million, has resulted in a compromise.

Greenhouse effect

An unusual experiment in Orange County foothills could help forecast local effects of global warming.

By Pat Brennan
The Orange County Register, Saturday, February 10, 2007

SANTA ANA MOUNTAINS-The five-acre slice of scrub brush was charred with almost artistic precision.

On a cool winter afternoon, firefighters with drip torches ignited grasses, shrubs and native trees, and the parcel erupted in flame. Two days later, when UC Irvine ecologist Katharine Suding returned to the site, she marveled at the crisp boundary lines of blackened vegetation - apparently without so much as a blade of grass burned outside the prescribed area.

"In terms of a scientific perspective, I think it's perfect," she said.

The burn is part of a long-term experiment meant to simulate the possible future effects of global climate change. Using steel-ribbed shelters that look a bit like greenhouses, the scientists will expose some sections of the burn area to excess water, some to extreme dryness, and will do the same on an adjoining patch of ground untouched by the fire.

Then they will watch to see how the buried seeds and resprouting bushes respond.

By twiddling the knobs usually controlled by nature - excess moisture here, drought conditions there, plus the added stress of wildfire - the scientists hope to learn over the next six to nine years how climate change could alter Orange County's rapidly vanishing coastal sage scrub, a plant community that is home to threatened and endangered animals.

It is one of three such experimental plots in Southern California; the other two are in the San Jacinto Mountains near Idyllwild.

Suding and UC Irvine ecologist Michael Goulden want to know if the wild habitat treasured by many residents can withstand the powerful changes expected in coming decades as the effects of global warming become more pronounced.

Will the soft scrub brush convert to stark desert if it's sufficiently parched? Will it be replaced by thick stands of oak woodland if rainfall increases? Will grasslands spread or alien species take over?

"We don't know what it looks like when an ecosystem starts to fall apart," Goulden said as he walked the study site with Suding last week.

While a vast majority of climate scientists agree that human-driven warming is accelerating worldwide, predicting smaller, localized effects can be frustratingly difficult. Scientists know it won't be a smooth, uniform transition: some places could get greater rainfall, some far less; temperatures could rise in many places but might even drop in a few others.

Orange County sits in a kind of climatic twilight zone. Computer models predict potentially large changes, but because the likely north-south shift of the region's storm track cannot be accurately gauged, the models can't foretell whether Orange County will grow drier or wetter.

So a variety of potential changes will be imposed on 48 plots of native land.

"Burned and unburned, water or no water, seeds or no seeds - we want all possible combinations," Goulden said.

Although they could have conducted the experiment without it, hitting half the plots with the added burden of wildfire was important to the researchers.

The region's natural vegetation is adapted to periodic fire, which prompts seeds to germinate and woody plants to sprout back from toasted stumps. But the increasing proximity of civilization has brought far more frequent wildfire than the plants evolved to handle.

That, along with the stress of global warming, might mean that the bird and flower-filled coastal sage scrub is headed toward oblivion.

"Maybe new things will start to grow," Suding said. "Or the system could totally collapse. Or we could get something we've never had before. It's hard to predict without pushing the system."

In their cleverly designed experiment, tarps can quickly be drawn over the rain-out shelters to keep the plants beneath in a drought-like condition during storms. And the water that falls on the tarps will be collected and channeled to storage tanks on site. That water will irrigate plots that are supposed to simulate the effects of increased rainfall.

Another key factor: excess nutrients for plants that come from industrial and auto emissions.

Measurements in the region show that deposits of nitrogen are increasing in many parts of Southern California, a result of air pollution in the form of nitrogen oxides.

So some plots will be sown with extra nitrogen to see how that affects the already complex mix of altered conditions.

Seeds of trees and shrubs that normally grow in wetter or drier spots in the area also will be added to some of the plots. Such seeds can find their way into new areas occasionally over the broad sweep of years, but the scientists won't have time to wait decades. They hope adding seeds will reveal whether the changed conditions could prompt an entirely new palette of species.

The project will be funded in three-year increments by the Department of Energy, which is interested in how energy use alters habitat - for instance, how fossil fuel burning might affect the growth of vegetation. The first three years, which involve planning and setting up the experiment, amounted to about $1.2 million in grant funds.

The Irvine Co., which owns the land, the Nature Conservancy and the Orange County Fire Authority also cooperated to make the project a reality.

Part of the energy department grant covers air-sampling towers in a valley just east of the experiment site. These measure the rise and fall of carbon dioxide in the air over grasslands and scrub brush- in essence, Goulden says, monitoring the "breathing" of the plants by photosynthesis.

That provides a baseline for understanding the altered behavior of plants that the scientists expect to see on the experimental plots.

Both Suding and Goulden say they believe public debate about global warming is becoming more nuanced, with a greater hunger for specifics.

"The debate is shifting from 'Is global warming real and a risk?'" Goulden said. "Now, the debate is shifting to 'What is that going to mean?' The other thing that is getting more attention is, 'What can we do about it?'"

Suding says people she talks to seem to treasure Orange County's coastal sage, chaparral and woodland habitats, and are concerned about their fate.

"It's a really special system," Suding said. "For it to be one of the most threatened by future climate change is worrying. We're just changing things faster than it would naturally change."

As Goulden prepared to head back to urban Orange County after visiting the site, he placed things in even starker terms.

"We could see really big impacts," he said. "To me, it puts us in the crosshairs."

Illinois EPA report says state's air quality declined in 2005

Associated Press
Contra Costa Times, Friday, February 9, 2007

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. - Air quality worsened in Illinois in 2005 but remained well within acceptable levels overall, according to a report released on Friday by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

Air quality was good or moderate 90 percent of the time throughout Illinois in 2005, the agency's 35th Annual Air Quality Report concluded. In contrast, air quality was good or moderate 98 percent of the time - a record - in 2004.

Poorer air quality in 2005 was due to an increase in the burning of fuels, a stagnant regional air mass in the winter and a hot, dry summer, said Bob Swinford, supervisor of the Illinois EPA's air quality unit.

Three air-quality alerts were issued in February 2005 after stagnant weather caused fine particles to build up in the lower atmosphere. Particles are microscopic bits of soot, dust and liquid droplets that can damage the lungs and heart.

"Meteorology still plays a very important part in any given year," said Swinford.

Even so, air pollution emissions overall have fallen for years. Between 1996-2005, emissions of lead declined by 36 percent, carbon monoxide by 25 percent, ozone by 15 percent and particles by 2 percent, the report said.

Since weather and other variables play such an important role in air quality, Swinford said the 2005 figures don't necessarily reflect current air quality.

He characterized the quality of Illinois air today as "good overall."

"But we can still make improvements and we will continue to make improvements," he said.

On the Net:

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.state.il.us>

Fresno Bee commentaries, Sunday, February 11, 2007:

The five myths about suburbia and our car-loving culture

By Ted Balaker and Sam Staley

They don't rate up there with cancer and al-Qaida - at least not yet - but suburban sprawl and automobiles are rapidly acquiring a reputation as scourges of modern American society. Sprawl, goes the typical indictment, devours open space, exacerbates global warming and causes pollution, social alienation and even obesity. And cars are the evil co-conspirator - the driving force, so to speak, behind sprawl.

Yet the anti-suburbs culture has also fostered many myths about sprawl and driving, a few of which deserve to be reconsidered:
1) Americans are addicted to driving.

Actually, Americans aren't addicted to their cars any more than office workers are addicted to their computers. Both items are merely tools that allow people to accomplish tasks faster and more conveniently. The New York metropolitan area is home to the nation's most extensive transit system, yet even there it takes transit riders about twice as long as drivers to get to work.

In 1930, the interstate highway system and the rise of suburbia were still decades away, and yet car ownership was already widespread, with three in four households having an automobile. Look at any U.S. city and the car is the dominant mode of travel.

Some claim that Europeans have developed an enlightened alternative. Americans return from London and Paris and tell their friends that everyone gets around by transit. But tourists tend to confine themselves to the central cities. Europeans may enjoy top-notch transit and endure gasoline that costs $5 per gallon, but in fact, they don't drive much less than we do. In the United States, automobiles account for about 88% of travel. In Europe, the figure is about 78%. And Europeans are gaining on us.

The key factor that affects driving habits isn't population density, public transit availability, gasoline taxes or even different attitudes. It's wealth. Europe and the United States are relatively wealthy, but American incomes are 15% to 40% higher than those in Western Europe. As nations such as China and India become wealthier, the portion of their populations that drive cars will grow.

2) Public transit can reduce traffic congestion.

Transit has been on the slide for well more than half a century.

Even though spending on public transportation has ballooned to more than seven times its 1960s levels, the percentage of people who use it to get to work fell 63% from 1960 to 2000 and now stands at just under 5% nationwide. Transit is also decreasing in Europe, down to 16% in 2000.

Like auto use, suburbanization is driven by wealth. Workers once left the fields to find better lives in the cities. Today, more and more have decided they can do so in the suburbs. Commuters are now increasingly likely to travel from one suburb to another or embark upon "reverse" commutes (from the city

to the suburbs). Also, most American commuters (52%) do not go directly to and from work but stop along the way to pick up kids, drop off dry cleaning, buy a latte or complete some other errand.

We have to be realistic about what transit can accomplish. Suppose we could not only reverse transit's long slide but also triple the size of the nation's transit system and fill it with riders.

Transportation guru Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution notes that this enormous feat would be "extremely costly" and, even if it could be done, would not "notably reduce" rush-hour congestion, primarily because transit would continue to account for only a small percentage of commuting trips.

But public transit still has an important role. Millions of Americans rely on it as a primary means of transportation. Transit agencies should focus on serving those who need transit the most: the poor and the handicapped. They should also seek out the niches where they can be most useful, such as express bus service for commuters and high-volume local routes.

Many officials say we should reconfigure the landscape - pack people in more tightly - to make it fit better with a transit-oriented lifestyle. But that would mean increasing density in existing developments by bulldozing the low-density neighborhoods that countless families call home. Single-family houses, malls and shops would have to make way for a stacked-up style of living that most don't want. And even then the best-case scenario would be replicating New York, where only one in four commuters uses mass transit.

3) We can cut air pollution only if we stop driving.

Polls often show that Americans think that air quality is deteriorating. Yet air is getting much cleaner. We miss it because, while we see more people and more cars, we easily overlook the success of air-quality legislation and new technologies. In April 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency reported that 474 counties in 31 states violated the Clean Air Act. But that doesn't mean that the air is dirtier. The widely publicized failing air-quality grades were a result of the EPA's adoption of tougher standards.

Air quality has been improving for a long time. More stringent regulations and better technology have allowed us to achieve what was previously unthinkable: driving more and getting cleaner. Since 1970, driving - total vehicle miles traveled - has increased 155%, and yet the EPA reports a dramatic decrease in every major pollutant it measures. Although driving is increasing by 1% to 3% each year, average vehicle emissions are dropping about 10% annually. Pollution will wane even more as motorists continue to replace older, dirtier cars with newer, cleaner models.

4) We're paving over America.

How much of the United States is developed? Twenty-five percent? Fifty? Seventy-five? How about 5.4%? That's the Census Bureau's figure. And even much of that is not exactly crowded: The bureau says that an area is "developed" when it has 30 or more people per square mile.

But most people do live in developed areas, so it's easy to get the impression that humans have trampled nature. One need only take a cross-country flight and look down, however, to realize that our nation is mostly open space. And there are signs that Mother Nature is gaining ground. After furious tree chopping during America's early years, forests have made a comeback. The U.S. Forest Service notes the "total area of forests has been fairly stable since about 1920." Agricultural innovations have a lot to do with this. Farmers can raise more on less land.

Yes, American houses are getting bigger. From 1970 to 2000, the average size ballooned from 1,500 square feet to 2,260. But this hardly means we're gobbling up ever more land. U.S. homeowners are using land more efficiently. Between 1970 and 2000, the average lot size shrank from 14,000 square feet to 10,000.

In truth, housing in this country takes up less space than most people realize. If the nation were divided into four-person households and each household had an acre, everyone would fit in an area half the size of Texas. The United States is not coming anywhere close to becoming an "Asphalt Nation," to use the title of a book by Jane Holtz Kay.

5) We can't deal with global warming unless we stop driving.

What should be done about global warming? The Kyoto Protocol seeks to get the world to agree to burn less fossil fuel and emit less carbon dioxide, and much of that involves driving less. But even disregarding the treaty's economic costs, Kyoto's environmental impact would be slight. Tom M.L. Wigley, chief

scientist at the U.S. Center for Atmospheric Research, calculates that even if every nation met its obligation to reduce greenhouse gas, the Earth would be only .07 degrees centigrade cooler by 2050.

Wigley favors a much more stringent plan than Kyoto, but such restrictions would severely restrict economic growth, particularly in the developing world. Nations such as China and India were excluded from the Kyoto Protocol; yet if we're serious about reversing global warming by driving less, the developing world will have to be included.

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) notes that during the 20th century the Earth's temperature rose by 0.6 degrees centigrade and - depending on which of the many climate models turn out to be closest to reality - it expects the temperature to rise 1.4 to 5.8 degrees by 2100.

What does the IPCC think the effects of global warmingmay be? Flooding may increase. Infectious diseases may spread. Heat-related illness and death may increase. Yet as the IPCC notes repeatedly, the severity of such outcomes is enormously uncertain.

On the other hand, there's great certainty regarding who would be hurt the most: poor people in developing nations, especially those who lack clean, piped water and are thus vulnerable to waterborne disease.

The IPCC points out that the quality of housing in those countries is important because simple measures such as adding screens to windows can help prevent diseases (including malaria, dengue and yellow fever) from entering homes. Fragile transportation systems can also frustrate disaster recovery efforts, as medical personnel are often unable to reach people trapped in flooded areas.

Two ways of dealing with global warming emerge. A more stringent version of Kyoto could be crafted to chase the unprecedented goal of trying to cool the atmosphere of the entire planet. Yet if such efforts resulted in lower economic growth, low-income populations in the United States and developing countries would be less able to protect themselves from the ill effects of extreme heat or other kinds of severe weather.

Alternatively, the focus could be on preventing the negative effects - the disease and death - that global warming might bring.

Each year malaria kills 1 million to 3 million people, and one-third of the world's population is infected with water- or soil-borne parasitic diseases. It may well be that dealing with global warming by building resilience against its possible effects is more productive - and more realistic - than trying to solve the problem by driving our automobiles less.

Ted Balaker and Sam Staley are coauthors of "The Road More Traveled: Why the Congestion Crisis Matters More Than You Think, and What We Can Do About It" (Rowman & Littlefield). This commentary was written for the Washington Post.

LLEWELLYN KING: Stronger standards fastest way to reduce energy use

WASHINGTON - It's all about engineering really. Engineers, the artists of industrial societies, make things happen. But like artists, they need patrons. They need an assignment. Give engineers a challenge and they will produce astounding results. Think of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Suez Canal or any fighter jet.

Unassigned to a trail-blazing task, the genius of engineering often atrophies. That is why Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards represent a remarkable opportunity to begin to engineer our way out of excessive fuel use by automobiles.

Of course, CAFE standards represent government intrusion into the marketplace - but constructively so.

A previous attempt by government to reduce the consumption of oil was destructive. The 55-mile-per-hour national speed limit was an invitation to automobile manufacturers to make big, wobbly boxes, to ask nothing of their engineering departments and to encourage all Americans to break the law.

Tougher CAFE standards, on the other hand, will inspire a burst of new innovative engineering that will make cars more efficient, will improve the nation's balance of payments, security and will help the environment. That is a slam-dunk.

I did not just make this up. There is a beautiful example of how government coercion has produced better engineering, cleaner air and lower fuel consumption: the outboard motor.

The two-stroke outboard engine came into existence in 1909. They love fuel and spew pollutants, but they are reliable. But the Environmental Protection Agency got tough with manufacturers. They told the manufacturers, mostly Japanese, to clean up their act.

The manufacturers responded - as industry so often does - by telling the EPA that nothing could be done; that the two-strokes were inherently polluting and that four-stroke engines would be too expensive and too heavy for outboards. The EPA held tough and the manufacturers consulted their engineers.

Eureka! The engineers designed two-stroke engines with electronic fuel injection and other sophisticated electronics, which reduced pollution to what it would be from equivalent four-stroke engines.

They also use less fuel. Two-stroke outboard engines no longer smoke and distribute atomized oil. They are clean enough to meet EPA's 2006 standard for emission and the tougher California standard.

More: The outboard engineers worked on adapting four-strokes. They now dominate the market, pushing out even the improved two-stroke engines. It is a story of the triumph of engineering over a nettlesome problem.

Heightened CAFE standards will produce a new breakthrough in engineering that will extend fuel economy. A progressive twist would be to issue credits for manufacturers who exceed the fuel average economy for their fleets. A goal of 40-miles-per-gallon average is discussed as a target for manufacturers in the years ahead.

The first reaction of industry is nearly always to say it cannot be done; it will be too expensive and, in the process, innumerable jobs will be lost. Mike McCurry, President Clinton's press secretary, told me that nothing infuriated Clinton more than this line of argument.

For new CAFE standards to be effective, they have to be included in all vehicles that carry passengers, including light trucks and SUVs.

The political subterfuge that has shielded SUVs, defined as light trucks, has perverted the intent of CAFE standards. There is nothing wrong with SUVs, they are favored by many buyers over traditional sedan cars. But they must play by the rules.

If there is one thing that engineers love, it is a challenge. This time, let us leave out the lobbyists and the marketers. Renaissance patrons called for grand cathedrals, then left it to the architect-engineers to do the impossible - think of Filippo Brunelleschi and the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

Surely, modern automotive engineers - armed with the latest super-fast computers - can do no less.

Llewellyn King is the publisher of White House Weekly and host of the weekly PBS television show "White House Chronicle."

ANDREW P. MORRISS: Say 'no thanks' to tougher mileage rates

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. - With a new Congress in town, get ready for efforts to raise CAFE standards. This doesn't mean that politicians want to regulate your local coffee shop - although they may want to do that, too.

CAFE stands for "Corporate Average Fuel Economy" and these regulations attempt to force manufacturers to build higher-mileage cars. CAFE standards are snake oil - they don't work and, worse, they increase highway deaths. Rather than raise them, we need to "deCAFEinate" the auto industry and get rid of this lethal policy.

CAFE standards are based on the premise that while Americans really want higher-mileage cars, car makers insist on producing low-mileage cars instead.

Nonsense! The auto industry is vigorously competitive.

Any manufacturer who deliberately made undesirable cars would immediately lose market share as competitors responded with more popular models. People still buy lower-mileage vehicles because some consumers value other car characteristics more than they value higher gasoline mileage.

All else equal, of course, consumers prefer higher to lower mileage. But all else is rarely equal in evaluating a complex product like a car. Many consumers also prefer bigger, safer and more powerful cars.

Different people want different combinations of features. Some will trade leg room for higher mileage while others prefer the greater safety of a heavier car to the savings on gasoline.

Markets provide car makers an incentive to produce a range of different models to satisfy diverse combinations of buyer preferences so that consumers who want higher-mileage cars can buy them. At the same time, those who want a safer or faster car can buy what they want, too.

Why doesn't everyone buy a high-mileage car? A key reason is that a common way to make cars more fuel efficient is to make them lighter.

Lighter cars are not as safe, providing less protection for drivers and passengers in an accident. As a result, CAFE kills.

Recent experience has confirmed the long-standing relationship between CAFE and highway deaths. Lower gasoline prices in the 1990s led to an increase in vehicle weights. When a panel from the prestigious National Academy of Sciences examined the data, it concluded that "the recent increases in vehicle weight, though detrimental to fuel economy, have saved lives in return."

CAFE proponents have two responses when confronted with the highway deaths their regulations cause. The first is to point to hybrid cars as a way to improve mileage without reducing vehicle weight. True, but hybrids also cost so much more that gasoline prices will have to soar before a hybrid purchaser breaks even. Hybrids are a good addition to the mix of vehicle types - but they aren't a solution for average Americans who can't afford to pay the thousands of extra dollars hybrids cost.

The second response is that heavier cars are more dangerous for small-car drivers. A smaller, lighter car may not be safer for you, but if you drive one it will make other drivers safer. Of course, that doesn't take into account collisions with telephone poles, bridge abutments or other obstacles.

And the reverse is true as well. If we all drove bigger cars, we'd all be safer. Again, the data settles the question. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a trade group whose members have a strong financial interest in reducing the severity of accidents to cut insurance claims, is unambiguously in favor of stopping the reduction in vehicle weight because heavier cars save lives.

A final reason to oppose CAFE standards is that they don't work.

Since CAFE standards were first introduced during the energy crisis in 1975, oil imports, total gasoline consumption, and miles driven have all risen. If anything, making cars more fuel efficient and cheaper to operate makes people drive more.

So, when the political snake oil salesmen come by, claiming to offer a cost-free increase in auto mileage, tell them "No thanks, I prefer deCAFE."

Andrew P. Morriss is the H. Ross & Helen Workman professor of law at the University of Illinois College of Law.

Tracy Press, Guest Commentary, Saturday, February 10, 2007

Global warming is here

A column by Town Crier Mickey McGuire

Last weekend, the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its latest report about global warming. The fourth in a series of reports produced since 1988, this edition was signed by 2,500 scientists and reviewers and was endorsed by the United States and 112 other nations.

During the past two decades, the IPCC has sought to answer three fundamental questions. First, is the climate heating up The 10 hottest years of the past century have all occurred in the most recent 14. By the second IPCC report there had been “a torrent of new scientific evidence,” said John P. Holdren of Harvard University. It was clear to all but a few skeptics that the planet was heating up.

A second question is whether the warming is a part of a natural trend in climate cycles. We know there have been decades of warming and cooling in the past. In 1991, a body was discovered at high altitude in the Alps next to a melting glacier. The well-preserved mummy turned out to be an early copper-age man who had perished in a snowstorm and had been frozen in the ice since then. That spot had not seen fresh air and sunlight for more than 5,000 years.

Ice cores taken in Antarctica reveal what the climate was like during the past 650,000 years. It turns out that the concentration of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, is higher now than at any time since then. It is clear that our current warming is not part of a short-cycle trend.

A third question addresses the extent to which the rise in greenhouse gases is a result of human activity. The 2001 report said that most of the observed warming during the past 50 years was "likely due to increases in greenhouse gas concentrations due to human activities."

Jay Lawrimore, chief of the climate-monitoring branch of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said recently, "Burning of fossil fuels is causing an increase in greenhouse gases, and there is broad scientific consensus that is producing climate change."

There are several consequences that we are likely to see because of the greenhouse gases that have already accumulated. The IPCC report says temperatures should rise between 2 to 11 degrees between now and 2100. Sea levels should rise between 7 and 23 inches by the end of the century, and ocean acidity and salinity will decline. Recent measurements suggest that some of these predictions are too conservative.

Weather patterns will change. The effects of global warming will not be the same everywhere. Climatologists predict drying in subtropical regions and heavier precipitation at higher latitudes. There is some disagreement about whether there will be more cyclones and hurricanes, but broad agreement that their intensity will rise. Oddly, there will be more heat waves in Europe and heavy rain and flooding in Indonesia.

There are still global warming deniers. One frequent writer to the Tracy Press claimed that the National Climatic Data Center (a branch of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), said, "It found no evidence of global warming caused by humans."

But this is not an accurate representation of the center's views. Like several other writers, he seems to have relied too heavily on right-wing secondary sources whose reliability ought to be questioned. Had the writer actually done a little original independent research on the National Climatic Data Center Web page he might have read: "When one reviews all the data … it becomes clear that the Earth has warmed significantly over the past 140 years. As the ice-core data show, the increase in carbon dioxide is unprecedented. The recent increase matches the increase calculated from fossil fuel (oil, coal, natural gas) emissions."

The same letter to the editor stated, "the thickening of the Antarctic ice cap (is) in direct contradiction to the global warming theory." Actually, climate models predict heavier precipitation over Antarctica. (Warm air carries more moisture.)

Finally, the same letter writer tells us, "In November and December 2000, the U.S. experienced the coldest months recorded in 106 years," a "contradiction of global warming alarmists." This statement simply confuses climate with weather.

I understand why its fun to be a skeptic. But the evidence of our contribution to global warming is substantial, and the stakes for our grandchildren are very high.
Mickey McGuire, a retired high school social studies teacher, is among a select group of local residents rotating their columns in the Saturday Tracy Press.

OpEd in Orange County Register, February 12, 2007

Rich Lowry: Church of global warming panic

The issue's now a trendy vehicle for venting fears of the apocalypse
By RICH LOWRY, Editor of National Review magazine

Sophisticated people in Western societies don't stand in public and shout, "The end is near!" the way a nutty preacher does. They don't cut their scalps the way Shia Muslims do in a rite of self-flagellation to mark the day of Ashura. They do none of these things, because they have the issue of global warming instead.

The planet is indeed getting warmer (by about 0.7 degrees Celsius during the 20th century), and carbon emissions are contributing to it. This is a problem that deserves study and debate about what realistically

can be done about it. But it doesn't justify the bizarre panic that suggests the issue has become a trendy vehicle to express traditional fears of the apocalypse and for rituals of guilt and expiation.

The latest assessment of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - the Vatican of the Church of Climate Panic - prompted apocalyptic headlines worldwide. The New York Times dubbed it "a grim and powerful assessment of the future of the planet." Actually, the summary report was less grim than prior reports, but grimness is the only acceptable mood when it comes to climate change.

Christopher Monckton, a former adviser to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, points to the neglected data in the IPCC summary. It "more than halved its high-end best estimate of the rise in sea level by (the year) 2100 from 3 feet to just 17 inches." In his scare-documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore posited a catastrophic sea-level rise of more than 20 feet.

Monckton notes that, "The U.N. has cut its estimate of our net effect on climate by more than a third," and, "it now thinks pollutant particles reflecting sunlight back to space have a very strong cooling effect." As for the increase in temperature, Monckton writes, the best estimate for the effect of the carbon dioxide level reaching "560 parts per million, twice the level of 1750, was 3.5 C in the 2001 report. Now it is down to 3 C."

But no editors are going to run blaring headlines, "IPCC Climbs Down Slightly From Direst Predictions." The report was, in any case, crafted to avoid any such less-than-grim headlines. "I hope this report will shock people," the chairman of the IPCC said.

Shock tactics inevitably mean simplifying in an area of unimaginable complexity. No one knows how to create a reliable model of the planet's climate, and inconvenient anomalies muddy the story line of the warming zealots. From 1940 to 1975, the global temperature fell even as CO2 emission rose. Since 2001, global temperatures have gone up a statistically insignificant 0.03 degrees Celsius. And in recent years, the oceans have actually gotten cooler.

None of this, obviously, is to deny global warming, but to introduce a note of caution about the calls for individual and collective self-denial that accompany the warming panic. If people feel better about using compact fluorescent light bulbs, so be it, but schemes to mandate drastic reductions in carbon emissions based on avoiding an entirely speculative calamity are folly.

Even the Kyoto treaty, which would have only a slight effect on global climate even if fully implemented, is utterly unrealistic. Canada ratified the treaty in 2001, notionally committing itself to reducing its carbon emissions 6 percent from their 1990 level. But from 1991 to 2003, Canada's emissions increased 24 percent. That great climate scold, Europe, has been increasing its emissions at a rate faster than ours. China will soon pass the U.S. as the world's greatest polluter and is robustly unrepentant about it.

The sensible ways to try to mitigate global warming and counteract its effects in the long run are the development of new energy technologies in the West, as well as economic development and aid programs for those Third World countries that are most vulnerable to disease and sea-level rises. These solutions won't, however, satiate the deeper atavistic urges behind the global-warming panic. For that, people will have to head to their nearest place of worship.

Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, February 12, 2007

Pollution drifts our way

Editor: Last week the Wall Street Journal ran an article that stated studies have shown that air pollution can be a contributing factor to heart disease.

The article had names of cities, and the measurement of air pollution in each. Merced was named in the article and fell in the middle of the pack. Now this is before the racetrack that is being built just northwest of Merced.

I mentioned the north part, because cities to our north, Modesto and Stockton, had less pollution and the cities to our south, Fresno and Bakersfield had more pollution. So I can assume, that any pollution that is caused by the racetrack will be going through Merced as it drifts southward.

Also, it amazes me that the Sun-Star waited after the vote to investigate the background, and Web site of the sponsor of the racetrack. Was the Sun-Star trying to hide the facts, and now has come out to try and prove that they are an impartial newspaper?

Jules G Comeyne

Letter to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, February 11, 2007

Fix lights

I am an 11-year-old boy in scouts and I think the traffic in this city is horrible. Part of the problem is the traffic lights aren't timed well. It ends up being a lot of stop and go.

If the city just retimed its traffic lights, people would get better gas mileage. In addition, the air would be a lot cleaner, since you wouldn't be stopped at a light wasting gas. Something has to be done about the traffic lights.

Joshuah Cohen, Bakersfield

Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, Feb. 11, 2007:

The latest cause

The hysteria on human-caused global warming is the left's new spotted owl.

Gordon Pearigen, Fresno

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the urging by environmentalists to improve the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley or face consequences. For more information, contact Maricela (559) 230-5849.

Ambientalistas urgen a mejorar el aire del Valle de San Joaquín o a enfrentar consecuencias

Los grupos de salud y ambientalistas declararon por su parte que hay una emergencia en la región y que cualquier retaso es inaceptable

Aire Libre, California
Radio Bilingüe, Friday, February 9, 2007

La Asociación Estadounidense de Salud Pulmonar, la American Lung Association y la coalición de Médicos por un Aire Saludable de Fresno, entre otros, urgieron a que aún con diferentes ópticas las instituciones y funcionarios preocupados por mejorar la calidad del aire en el Valle de San Joaquín, California, reduzcan urgentemente en diez por ciento la contaminación.

Ambos grupos proponen conciliar una versión de la Oficina Distrital de Administración de la Calidad del Aire en el Valle, y un estudio que presentó el senador estatal demócrata Dean Florez que contradice a la oficina distrital, al mostrar que limpiar el ozono requeriría menos recursos y tiempo de lo que esa oficina regional estima.

Los grupos de salud y ambientalistas declararon por su parte que hay una emergencia en la región y que cualquier retaso es inaceptable.

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