West Park gets regional support, criticism

Written by Jonathan Partridge
Patterson Irrigator, Wednesday, Oct. 31, 2007

The group that hopes to develop the Crows Landing Air Facility has contended for close to a year that its project would cut down on air pollution.

Now, project officials hope to get a portion of $1 billion in infrastructure bond money for environmental improvements based on that claim.

PCCP West Park representatives have met with San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials the past several months about the potential to cut nitrous oxide emissions. So far, air district officials appear to favor the project.

“This is a new category that we haven’t really explored in the past,” said Rick McVeigh, deputy air pollution control officer of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Traditionally, the state Air Resources Board has looked at curbing air pollution from trucks by retrofitting trucks, placing new engines in them or replacing them with newer, more environmentally friendly vehicles. West Park’s proposal, which aims to take some of those trucks off the road, is a new approach to the problem, he said.

West Park hopes to turn the Crows Landing Air Facility and surrounding land into an industrial park, with a rail link to the Port of Oakland that would allow containers to be shipped between the port and Crows Landing.

The development group, headed by Gerry Kamilos, is negotiating with Stanislaus County to come up with a full proposal to be considered by county supervisors in April.

The case for clean air

West Park officials say the Crows Landing project would dramatically reduce air pollution emissions by replacing truck traffic from the Port of Oakland with trains.

One train could eliminate 115 truck trips, cutting down nitrous oxide emissions by close to a third and PM-10 emissions by more than half, according to West Park officials.

In addition, the project would use clean-fuel-powered trucks, possibly have an on-site truck engine retrofitting center and send clean-fuel buses to pick up West Park workers in cities such as Los Banos and Tracy, Kamilos said.

He said the project’s master transportation plan would look at West Park’s traffic impacts on the entire region. Both that and a technology plan would be completed during the environmental review process, which would happen if county supervisors approve West Park’s plan next year.

McVeigh noted that the district typically deals only with stationary sources of pollution, not mobile sources. However, the district has expressed interest in West Park’s plans to keep trucks off the road, so there’s been talk about supporting the developer’s efforts to get money for infrastructure for the mobile project.

McVeigh said the bond application process has yet to be determined. However, in the past, the air resources board has given the valley air district money to disperse, and various groups have applied for those funds. He said West Park could apply for money after it completed its state-mandated environmental review process.

Kamilos said he intends for the county to be the lead agency in applying for I-bond money - both for emissions reductions and for infrastructure investment.

The $19.9 billion state infrastructure bond approved by California voters in November 2006 includes $2 billion for infrastructure investment and $1 billion for trade corridor emissions reductions.

County Supervisor Jim DeMartini, a consistent critic of West Park’s project, said the environmental money is not supposed to be for infrastructure but for replacing dirty engines.

“What (Kamilos) is tryng to do is change the rules to subsidize his project,” he said.

DeMartini said he will state his objections to the funding mechanism when the Stanislaus County Council of Governments policy board discusses being the lead agency for West Park for bond money during its Nov. 14 meeting.

Supervisor Dick Monteith, an avid project supporter, said the environmental money is yet another option for the project in addition to the I-bond money.

Other methods also could be considered, such as West Park coming up with private financing, even if that extends the project timeline another eight years, he said.

“If West Park somehow came up with its own money, … I don’t see where there would be any objection to that,” he said.

Making the list

In regards to the $2 billion pool of infrastructure investment money, a group of local governments listed PCCP West Park’s proposed inland port project on a rail corridor “hot list” earlier this month. The list, sent to the state Business, Transportation and Housing Agency on Oct. 5, requested $248.5 million for five Tier One projects, including $26 million for the Crows Landing project.

Tier One projects involve the movement of goods along nationally significant trade corridors with local matching funds for at least half of the project and an identified delivery date.

Other projects on the list are a Highway 4 extension to the Port of Stockton, a train that would serve as a freight and shuttle between the Altamont Pass and Central Valley, an intermodal facility in Shafter near Bakersfield, and double-track rail through the Tehachapi Pass.

Kamilos said the air facility project’s placement as a Tier One project is consistent with the Stanislaus council of governments’ designation for it.

Andrew Chesley, the executive director of the San Joaquin Council of Governments and sender of the letter, could not be reached for comment after repeated calls.

Criticism from the south

As the project has garnered regional acclaim, it recently has received criticism closer to home. A draft letter from the Newman City Council last week stated opposition to the project, saying the council felt Stanislaus supervisors had ignored a previous letter in February that expressed concerns about West Park’s proposal.

City staff said Friday that the board decided to hold off on approving the letter because Councilman Ted Kelly was not present at its Oct. 23 meeting.

The letter asked for mitigation measures for the West Side and expressed worries about West Park’s size and its appearance, in addition to fears that homes would be built along with it.

“The city is concerned that a rail yard will have a negative impact upon the area and deter future investment in our community,” the draft letter states. “The city will not support a plan that transforms west Stanislaus County into a rail yard with stockpiles of graffiti-laden storage containers and rail cars.”

The letter also said the project was more than four times larger than the city of Newman and more than 30 percent larger than the city’s sphere of influence. It said the project should stay within the footprint of the Crows Landing Air Facility - a total of 1,527 acres - and stated opposition to any residential component.

Kamilos has said homes will not be a part of the project, and project maps show no houses. Newman Councilman Bob Martina said by phone last week that the council supported a business park at the airfield, just not West Park’s proposal.

“We’re restating what we said before the supervisors,” Martina said.

Valley urged to begin checking wood-burning regulations today

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee
Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007

It's time for people in the San Joaquin Valley to think twice before lighting a fire in a fireplace or wood-burning stove.

The "Check Before You Burn" season begins today and continues through February.

This is the fifth year that Valley residents have been asked to check the wood-burning status before burning wood, pellets or manufactured logs.

Burning those things is prohibited when the air quality is forecast to be unhealthy for everyone -- or an Air Quality Index reading of 151 or higher. Burning is discouraged on a voluntary basis when the air quality is projected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups -- or an index reading of 101 to 150.

People who burn on mandatory no-burn days may be issued notices of violation and be subject to $50 fines.

Officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issue county-by-county burn status reports that residents can check daily for the eight counties from Stanislaus to Kern.

The wood-burning rule is designed to reduce wintertime air pollution in the Valley.

Fireplaces and wood-burning stoves belch tiny pieces of soot and ash into the air that mix with other pollutants to create toxic specks that are small enough to penetrate deep inside lungs. The particles can trigger asthma, bronchitis attacks and heart problems.

Residential wood burning produces about a third of the wintertime air pollution in the Valley.

Air pollution levels can soar on stagnant days and evenings when everyone decides to light up stoves and fireplaces to ward off the cold.

"It just creates a very nasty mess," said Janelle Schneider, a spokeswoman at the air district. "People who have respiratory problems, and even people without respiratory problems, can find themselves uncomfortable because of this pollution."

The rule has helped clean the air, Schneider said.

Last fall and winter, the air district banned residential burning on 12 days in Fresno County, the most in the eight-county region. Tulare County had three no-burn days, and Madera, Merced and Kings counties each had two days when burning was prohibited.

Cooperation from the public has been good, Schneider said.

Air pollution officials issued 82 notices of violation in Fresno County in the 2006-07 season. There were only a handful of violations in other counties in the central San Joaquin Valley: five in Merced, four in Madera, one in Tulare and none in Kings.

The burn rule does not apply to natural gas or propane devices, cooking stoves, homes in areas without natural gas service, homes at elevations of 3,000 feet or higher, and homes where burning wood is the sole source of heat.

Many people burn wood to reduce utility bills in winter. Natural gas prices increase in the cold months.

Jeff Smith, a Pacific Gas & Electric Co. spokesman, said people can reduce their natural gas bills by making sure windows are sealed so cold air cannot enter. Thermostats should be set at 56 degrees when not at home and at bedtime, and at 68 degrees when at home.

Consumers also can call PG&E at (800) PGE-5000 or go to the Internet at www.pge.com to learn about programs for low-income customers and payment options.

Pollution rules on fireplace use start today

By Michael Miyamoto
Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007

It's time to Check Before You Burn.

The fifth annual campaign to curb Central Valley air pollution in fall and winter months kicks off today. The program remains in effect until Feb. 28.

Check Before You Burn is intended to reduce air pollution by discouraging or prohibiting the use of wood fireplaces, wood-burning stoves and pellet stoves when air quality is expected to be unhealthful, said Janelle Schneider, public information representative for the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District.

Last season, three such days were declared in Tulare County. Fresno County had the most Check Before You Burn days, with 12. San Joaquin County had one.

"There seems to be a high level of compliance in Tulare County," Schneider said.

Fresno County's high number of no-burn days has much to do with its dense population, Schneider said.

Each day's wood-burning status may be obtained by calling (800) SMOG INFO or going online at www.valley air.org. Those who ignore no-burn-day declarations are subject to fines, Schneider said, with first-time violations costing $50.

The fines become stiffer for repeat offenders.

Check Before You Burn rules do not apply to natural gas- and propane-fueled devices; cooking stoves; homes in areas with no natural gas service; homes at elevations of 3,000 feet or higher; and households with no other heat source other than a wood-burning stove or fireplace.

Residential burn season begins

Modesto Bee, Thursday, November 1, 2007

The fifth "Check Before You Burn" residential wood-burning season begins today, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said. Officials remind residents to check their county's wood-burning status daily before lighting a fireplace or stove that burns wood, pellets or manufactured logs. The program, which runs through February, helps reduce wintertime air pollution by either discouraging or prohibiting the use of wood fireplaces, wood-burning stoves and pellet stoves when air quality is expected to be unhealthy. The status is issued daily on a county-by-county basis and is in effect from midnight to midnight. It is available toll-free at 800-SMOG-INFO (766-4463) or online at www.valleyair.org.

Did you know?

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007

You can file a complaint about a smoking vehicle by contacting the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Call 1-800-55-99-AIR or go to www.valleyair.org/newsed/smokingcars/report.htm and you'll be asked to give the:

- vehicle's California license plate number
- kind of vehicle
- time, day and place you saw it

Vehicle owners are sent a letter saying a complaint has been filed, and explaining what to do.

Stop Wal-Mart Action Team to present air-quality film

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, November 1, 2007
The movement to stop Wal-Mart from building a distribution center in Merced unveils a new weapon tonight.

The Stop Wal-Mart Action Team is screening a film called "The Weight of the Air" at 7 p.m. at the Merced Multicultural Arts Center, 645 W. Main St.

The film, which is billed as a documentary, concludes that the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center in southeast Merced would worsen Merced's already poor air quality. A panel discussion will follow the film. Proponents of the Wal-Mart project say it will eventually bring 900 jobs to Merced. The environmental impact report on the distribution center is due out in January.

State panel OKs push to meet energy goals

California would fund research on and development of 10 fuel alternatives.
By Elizabeth Douglass, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times Thursday, November 1, 2007

The California Energy Commission on Wednesday approved an aggressive plan to fund research and push the use of 10 alternative fuels -- a step considered crucial to the state's twin goals of cutting its dependence on petroleum and sharply reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The plan recommends that the statewide use of alternative fuels grow to 9% in five years, 11% in 10 years and 26% in 15 years. The targets apply to fuels used by trucks and cars as well as construction and agricultural vehicles but does not incorporate fuel used by planes, trains or boats.

The extensive plan "lays out a strategy to get us toward our goals, and it shows us that there are cost-effective ways to reach those goals," said Luke Tonachel, a fuel expert at environmental protection group Natural Resources Defense Council.

If the plan's goals were met, California would eliminate the use of more than 4 billion gallons of gasoline by 2020 -- about a quarter of what state residents used last year. In addition, alternative fuels would provide more than half the energy needed to power cars and trucks.

Tonachel called the plan "significant," though his organization objects to a coal-derived fuel included among the commission's 10 alternatives.

"This really is the hub. This is where it all comes together," Energy Commissioner John Geesman said of the 107-page document. "You will find everything in here, and then some, as it relates to nonpetroleum fuels."

According to the plan, reducing pollution and petroleum use would require significant state and federal incentives, major infrastructure investment, policy changes that include increasing fuel-efficiency standards, and an unspecified amount of funding from the industry. The plan recommends that the state spend as much as $200 million a year on research.

The plan includes a preliminary analysis of the carbon content of various petroleum alternatives, taking into account how each fuel is produced and delivered. That information lays the

groundwork for California's new low-carbon fuel standard, which requires a 10% reduction in the carbon intensity of fuels used in the state by 2020.

"I think it sends a signal to the market -- and it sends a signal to the rest of the nation -- that we're very serious about alternative fuels, and not just ethanol," said Claudia Chandler, a commission spokeswoman.

In addition to ethanol, already blended into gasoline, the state fuel plan listed such alternative transportation fuels as biodiesel, hydrogen, natural gas, synthetics and electricity. The document is designed to be regularly updated to incorporate new information about the fuels and costs as they develop.

"We're not unhappy with this at all because we believe in fuel diversity," said Joe Sparano, president of the industry trade group Western States Petroleum Assn.

"But we're concerned that if we don't make the goals of this plan [to increase use of alternative fuels], and at the same time people are trying to reduce petroleum use, it could leave some big gaps in supply."

The plan was devised jointly with the California Air Resources Board, which will vote on it next month.

Airborne ash expected to be lingering problem

By Robert Krier, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER
San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007

The Santa Ana winds predicted this weekend to kick up soot and ash from the region's wildfires are expected to be too weak to cause widespread problems with air quality.

That's the good news.

The bad news is the county could be dealing with the problem well into next year. Until a soaking rain, any strong east wind could blow soot and ash from the barren earth all the way to the coast.

After the October 2003 wildfires, the county encountered the problem into the following February, said Bill Brick, senior meteorologist at the county Air Pollution Control District.

Lakeside resident Dennis Poe said he dealt with blowing ash nearly a year after the 2003 fires.

“The ash that fell initially was one thing, but the ash that fell later was just as adverse,” Poe said. “Every time a Santa Ana blew in, more ash would come.”

The winds this week should peak between midnight Friday and noon Saturday.

Near the burn zones, the air Saturday probably will be unhealthy for the very young, the elderly or people with asthma or chronic breathing problems. Those groups are encouraged to limit physical activity, and parents should consider holding children out of outdoor soccer games, said Rick Ford, director of respiratory care at UCSD Medical Center in Hillcrest.

Most cities should have good to moderate air quality, said Adam Canter, an associate meteorologist with the pollution control district.

If the air turns foul

People sensitive to airborne pollutants are encouraged to:

- Limit outdoor physical activity.
- Stay indoors as much as possible.
- Keep windows and doors closed and use a humidifier, if you can.
- Make sure supplies of respiratory medicines are adequate.

- Carry an inhaler with you if you have asthma, even on short trips.

Smoke gets in your skies

Local wildfires add to growing problem of global air pollution

By Scott LaFee, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER
San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007

In the immediacy of a raging wildfire, smoke is a tangible, burning presence. It has a taste and a smell. It can color the world.

But smoke is fleeting, too. When the fires are quenched or the wind shifts, the smoke can seem to vanish.

Only it really doesn't. Rather than ceasing to exist, the smoke may simply have moved on, physically drifting and chemically shifting toward other, sometimes distant, places.

You can see it in photos taken last week by NASA's Terra satellite, orbiting 435 miles above the Earth: Plumes of brown-gray smoke from Southern California's wildfires blowing west over the ocean, extending hundreds of miles out to sea.

Where - and how far - these plumes travel ultimately depends on wind currents and weather patterns. Some of the smoke may, in fact, blow back, becoming a local health hazard once again.

But scientists see in the plumes an even larger and longer-term problem: global air pollution and its effect on climate change.

There are growing concerns among scientists that fires - not just here but around the world - are part of a spiraling and destructive feedback loop: Hot, dry weather caused by climate change increases the frequency and ferocity of wildfires. These fires release into the atmosphere ever-larger amounts of particulates, pollutants and greenhouse gases that, in turn, result in even hotter, drier weather and more fires.

“It's not unreasonable to argue there's a connection,” said Veerabhadran Ramanathan, a noted climate scientist at UCSD's Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

To be sure, the connection is extraordinarily complicated and incompletely understood. Scientists cannot declare Southern California's wildfires last week to be the unambiguous consequence of global warming. The fires may, in fact, be primarily the result of local factors: a years-long drought, abundant fire-prone vegetation and Santa Ana winds, said Anthony Westerling, an assistant professor of environmental engineering at the University of California Merced.

How all of these components fit and work together, said Westerling in a statement with colleagues Thomas Swetnam and Gregg Garfin of the University of Arizona, is “not known with sufficient certainty to conclusively link global warming with this disaster.”

Nonetheless, diverse sources of data gathered here and around the world suggest an ill wind is blowing in an alarming direction.

Chemical brew

Wildfire smoke is a farrago of burned matter (particulates), gases, vapors and chemical compounds, the recipe unique to each blaze.

More than 90 percent of the mass of wildfire smoke consists of carbon dioxide and water, but hundreds of other chemicals can be present, among them: carbon monoxide, mercury, aldehydes, nitrogen oxides, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), sulfur dioxide, volatile organic compounds and ozone.

Many of these ingredients pose immediate and obvious health hazards. Smoke particles smaller than the diameter of a human hair can be inhaled deeply into the lungs, causing everything from lung irritation to an increased risk of cancer.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, tasteless, invisible poisonous gas. Mercury is an extremely toxic element. Aldehydes are gases that irritate the eyes, nose and mouth. Some forms, like formaldehyde, are carcinogenic, as are PAHs.

Nitrogen oxides are associated with acid rain. In the presence of sunlight and hydrocarbons (organic compounds readily produced in fires), nitrogen oxides combine to create ozone, a gas that inflames and impairs the lungs and triggers asthma attacks.

These compounds can linger in seemingly clear air for days, even weeks. Perhaps the best cleanser is rain, followed by time and dilution. But the problem is that the increased frequency and severity of wildfires means there are more fires billowing more pollutants into the air more of the time.

And they are doing so in enormous amounts.

In 2004, for example, massive wildfires in Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory - the worst on record - scorched more than 11 million acres, an area roughly the size of the states of New Hampshire and Massachusetts combined.

Scientists monitoring the resulting smoke plumes estimate that the fires from June through August produced 30 trillion grams of carbon monoxide - an amount equal to all human-generated CO production for the entire continental United States in the same period. Surface levels of ozone increased as much as 25 percent in the northern United States and 10 percent in Europe.

Something similar happened a couple of years earlier when widespread fires roared across western Russia and Siberia, leading to the so-called “dirty winter” of 2002-03, when unnaturally high CO and particulate levels hovered over much of the Northern Hemisphere.

“Satellite observations showed the Russian fires had a huge impact on air quality on a global scale,” said David Edwards, a researcher at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), based in Boulder, Colo.

Other sources

Wildfires aren't the only source of airborne pollutants. An estimated 8 billion metric tons of dry biomass is burned in vegetation fires each year around the world, much of it in fires intentionally set to clear land or old crops.

“Biomass burns are quite common in the tropics, most associated with agriculture,” said Daniel Jacob, an atmospheric scientist at Harvard University.

The result is approximately 4 billion metric tons of carbon released into the atmosphere, the equivalent of about 70 percent of all human fossil-fuel emissions (oil, gas, coal).

Black carbon particulate in the atmosphere causes complex problems. So-called “brown clouds” both absorb sunlight, warming the air, and block it, dimming the ocean's surface and interfering with photosynthesis. The overall effect is contradictory, but warming seems to be winning.

Ocean temperatures have generally risen over the last 50 years. A study published last year found that as seas warmed, growth rates for phytoplankton (microscopic marine plant life) broadly declined, due perhaps to less photosynthetic activity and less nutrient-mixing in the warmer, stratified water.

Carbon particulate plays a role on land as well. As it settles out of smoke and other forms of air pollution, it can behave like an electric blanket, reducing the albedo, or reflectivity, of the snow while simultaneously warming it.

“When smoke settles on snowy surfaces, it enhances absorption of sunlight, which plays an important role in the retreat of sea ice and melting snowcaps,” said Ramanathan at Scripps.

This soot can come from far away. For example, more than 75 percent of the atmosphere-warming, snow-melting soot that falls over the West Coast of the United States each spring is delivered by prevailing winds originating in Asia, according to a recent study by Ramanathan.

North America, in turn, sends its air pollution eastward, the jet stream carrying it over the Atlantic Ocean to Europe.

Dust plays a similar long-distance role. A study earlier this year by the National Snow and Ice Data Center found that windblown dust from drought-stricken or disturbed lands can shorten mountain snow cover hundreds of miles away by up to one month.

Virtually all scientists agree that the primary culprits in global warming are greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane and nitrous oxide. All three gases are abundantly produced by wildfires.

Tom Bonnicksen, a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University, estimates the Southern California fires generated 19 million tons of these gases in just the first three days of burning.

Plant life is among the great absorbers of carbon dioxide, removing the greenhouse gas from the atmosphere during photosynthesis. But the increasing loss of vegetation worldwide from fires and pollution may skew the process.

“In the past, forests have been an important buffer against climate change because of the way they absorb carbon,” said Johann Georg Goldammer, head of the fire ecology research group at the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry in Germany. “But warming, bringing more frequent drought and fires, may affect the balance of the global carbon pool and release extra CO_2 into the atmosphere.”

As a source of pollutants linked to global air pollution and climate change, human activity is far more problematic than nature. Wildfires tend to be seasonal. Human pollution occurs year-round. The sprawling brown clouds that blow from Asia (covering the distance in just days) are mostly produced by man-made sources, such as factories and auto exhaust. The situation has only gotten worse as the economies of China and other countries have grown rapidly.

In 2004, for example, it was estimated that China would surpass the United States in CO_2 production in 20 years. Chinese emissions are now expected to exceed American levels this year.

Without doubt, controlling and reducing local pollution sources remains the most pressing issue. “You can't really blame China for air pollution in Los Angeles,” said Gabriele Pfister, an atmospheric chemist at NCAR.

But the problem of global air pollution - and its implications for climate change - presents a bigger and more burdensome worry for scientists and, arguably, everybody else living on Earth.

The pollutants churned high into the atmosphere by last week's wildfires pose real and potential hazards, seen and unseen, for anybody downwind. The same can be said for the billions of tons of chemicals spewed daily into the air by human activity around the world.

And in this case, we all live downwind.

Fires spew tons of global warming gas

By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer
in the Modesto Bee, Wednesday, October 31, 2007

WASHINGTON — In one week, Southern California's wildfires spewed the same amount of carbon dioxide - the primary global warming gas - as the state's power plants and vehicles did, scientists figure.

A new study by two Colorado researchers shows that U.S. wildfires pump a significant amount of the greenhouse gas into the air each year, more than the state of Pennsylvania does. It raises questions about how useful it is to plant trees to offset rising carbon dioxide emissions and soothe environmental consciences.

Because the California wildfires occurred just as the study was about to be published, the researchers calculated how much carbon dioxide was likely to come from the devastating blazes Oct. 19-26. It's a lot: 8.7 million tons.

That's more than the state of Vermont produces in a year. And it's also more than the 6 million tons estimated by California's air control agency, which used a different calculation method.

On average, wildfires in the United States each year pump 322 million tons of carbon dioxide. That's about 5 percent of what the country emits by burning fossil fuels, such as gasoline and coal, according to the new research published online Thursday in the peer-reviewed journal Carbon Balance and Management.

"It is quite a big chunk," said study co-author Jason Neff of the University of Colorado at Boulder. But he adds: "It's nothing compared to our fossil fuels burning."

Mostly when scientists look at carbon dioxide emissions, they spend their time on the stuff that man adds to power industrial life. But Neff and Christine Wiedinmyer at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., looked at forests, which act as a sponge and absorb some of the carbon dioxide, but which also burn and produce it.

"The problem is that what goes in, comes out," Neff said.

In recent years, some people who want to compensate for their personal contributions to global warming (from driving gas-guzzling cars or heating huge houses) have paid groups to plant trees to soak up that extra carbon in the air. It's called a carbon offset.

Over several decades or centuries, replanted trees will capture some of the gas, but the first few decades it will be at a reduced rate, Wiedinmyer said.

"There's a real danger here that in the offsetting program you feel you've done your bit," said University of Victoria climate scientist Andrew Weaver, who wasn't part of the study. "You've got to be a little bit more creative than to think that you're going to solve global warming by planting trees."

In previous studies, scientists have shown that a general increase in American wildfires - but no one event - is linked to global warming. That raises the possibility of a self-feeding cycle, Wiedinmyer said.

The scientists used satellite imagery, computer models and combustion rates to determine how much carbon dioxide is released during a fire, Wiedinmyer said.

Last week, the California Air Resources Board estimated that just under 6 million tons of carbon dioxide were released by the recent fires. The board estimates that for every acre burned, the carbon dioxide emissions are equivalent to two cars driven for a year, said board spokesman Stanley Young. More than half a million acres have burned in Southern California.

Young and Wiedinmyer said estimates do vary widely on scientific method.

The paper finds remarkable differences state by state and month by month. August is the worst month for carbon dioxide emissions from fires.

The Western continental United States is responsible for more than one-third of the country's carbon dioxide from fires. But Alaska is king. Alaskan fires produce twice as much of the greenhouse gas than burning fossil fuels in that state. Alaskan fires make up 27 percent of the nation's yearly fire-related carbon dioxide emissions.

In the Lower 48, California, Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Louisiana, Montana, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Texas are top 10 emitters of carbon dioxide through forest fires.

Wildfires emitted large amounts of greenhouse gases

Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, November 1, 2007

San Diego **-** -- The fires that roared through Southern California last week spewed the same amount of greenhouse gases as what is produced in about one week from the state's burning of fossil fuels, according to scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research.

The preliminary data by the center and the University of Colorado at Boulder show that the fires emitted 7.9 million metric tons of carbon dioxide between Oct. 19 and 26. That's equivalent to 25 percent of the monthly emissions from all fossil fuel burning throughout California, according to the report.

The study used satellite observations and a computer model to determine emissions based on amount of vegetation that burned.

Large fires in western and southeastern states can pump as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in a few weeks as a state's entire motor vehicle traffic in a year, according to the paper, which will be published online Thursday in the journal Carbon Balance and Management.

The study estimates that fires in the contiguous United States and Alaska release about 290 million metric tons of carbon dioxide a year - 4 to 6 percent of the nation's total carbon dioxide emissions from fossil-fuel burning.

Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley has two new West Hills' representatives

By Record Staff
Coalinga Record, Wednesday, Oct. 31, 2007

Dr. Frank Gornick and Dr. Carole Goldsmith have been appointed to serve as board members for the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, which brings state agency secretaries and Central Valley representatives together to make recommendations to the governor regarding changes that would improve the economic well-being and quality of life for San Joaquin Valley residents.

Gornick will serve on the Partnership as a representative of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, of which he is currently president. It is an organization of chief executive officers of colleges from throughout the Central Valley.

His career in higher education has spanned more than 35 years and has been chancellor of West Hills since 2001. He served the district as superintendent and president from 1994 to 2001.

Goldsmith will serve as a board member for the San Joaquin Valley Clean Energy Organization. She has more than 15 years experience in the field of education and has been the director of workforce development at West Hills since 2003. Prior to joining West Hills, she was with Fresno Unified School District.

The California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, originally launched in June 2005, is focused on improving the economic vitality of the Central Valley, creating new jobs, providing educational guidance and advancements, endorsing the development of health care programs, enhancing the transportation system that plays a critical role in interstate commerce and improving environmental quality.

Experts: Green helps businesses' bottom line

By DHYANA LEVEY
Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, November 1, 2007

As urban sprawl stretching farther into undeveloped Merced County land, worries over the water supply, energy usage and pollution are causing more businesses to look at what they use and how they use it.

Which is just what they should do, said San Francisco real estate attorney Alexander Hamilton, who spoke to a group of Valley developers in Merced on Tuesday.

The architecture and building industries are responsible for almost half the United States' annual greenhouse gas emissions, he said. "The biggest culprit happens to be the building we are seated in," he added, referring generically to all buildings and their role in environmental warming.

Hamilton was one of two experts invited by InterWest Insurance Services to speak to its clients in the development business. They discussed the financial and social benefits for builders and insurers that make environmental conservation a priority.

The term "going green" has been a buzz phrase for years. And while Valley cities might be slower to jump onto the eco-bandwagon than places like San Francisco, no one wants to get left behind, said John Lightfoot, a vice president of InterWest Insurance Services.

"There's a lot I need to absorb," said Warren Wainwright, chief executive officer of Heritage Management Group in Merced, which built the Promenade, Greystone office complex and hundreds of local apartments. "It's new to me. I think it will have an impact on future activities."

Hamilton spoke at length to developers about the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED system. This is a voluntary consensus-based national standard for developing sustainable buildings and interiors.

Buildings are rated for water efficiency, effect on natural and agricultural areas, indoor air quality and proximity to alternative transportation, as well as many other environmental aspects. Points are given for such details as the amount of natural light allowed to spill into an office building or the sheer innovation of a building's design.

Then buildings are awarded with a silver, gold or platinum LEED certification based on the amount of points it received for each "green" practice completed. "It's easy to build LEED," Hamilton said. "But you have to really push it to make LEED platinum. ... A company that does that is really trying to make a statement."

No builder is required to complete LEED certification, but it has benefits that go beyond helping the environment, he explained. For one, it can draw positive attention -- good public relations -- for a company.

"Initially, 'green' got a bad knock," Hamilton said. "There was a perception that it cost a lot."

While the initial outlays to buy more environmentally friendly products may have scared off some people, Hamilton said some of these costs are going down. And a company making better use of its energy and water can save money in the long run.

"Green" buildings provide a more positive risk rate for insurers than traditional buildings, said Stephen Bushnell, product director of Fireman's Fund Insurance Co., based in Novato, and another speaker. "We see climate change having a devastating impact on the insurance agencies," he said. "We pay the bill for those hurricanes."

Hurricanes are becoming more unpredictable with the changing weather, he added. Insurance companies must also cover fires, which became a serious concern with the recent dry conditions.

There are other financial benefits to preserving resources. A building can save cash if it reduces water use by 50 percent and is structured to provide more natural lighting. "We are concerned about this from a selfish standpoint," Bushnell said. "If we save money on energy bills, we save more money on the bottom line."

Employee health is also a consideration. The materials in office partitions and carpets can be toxic, affecting the air an employee breathes, he said. And confined space with poor lighting takes its tool.

Recycled and natural materials in the office are healthier, and natural lighting and pleasant views can increase an employee's workability, he said, adding that "green" buildings have been known to reduce absenteeism by 15 percent.

"That's a huge number," he said to the Merced seminar attendees. "You guys know your biggest cost is employees. If you could have more people working, feeling better ..."

With all of these benefits in mind, insurance companies are taking steps to give special coverage to buildings that have or are trying to reach LEED certification. Fireman's Fund will pay extra costs for a building working to get back up to the proper LEED standards after a loss, he said. And the company itself is looking into its options on using solar power. "We believe green buildings are going to be the dominant way of construction," he said.

Green means green -- in more ways than one.

Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2007:

A small victory in sludge battle

A truck enters Los Angeles' Green Acres Farm near the intersection of Interstate 5 and Highway 119 to dump its load of Southern California sludge.

Good catch, federal Judge Gary Feess. If you want the tab paid, itemize your bill.

It's a minor victory in a bigger war over Southern California's dumping of its sludge on Kern County. But for the moment, we will savor it.

And call it poetic justice in a legal war that has seen Kern County outgunned by the fat wallets of Los Angeles and Orange County.

Sick of gagging on the fumes and dust, and worrying about groundwater pollution from millions of tons of Southern California sludge being hauled to Kern County and smeared onto farmland, Kern County voters overwhelmingly passed Measure E in 2006.

But the measure, which banned spreading onto Kern County farmland human and industrial waste scooped from Southern California sewer plants, was overturned this summer by Judge Feess, who ruled it violated federal commerce laws and state recycling rules. Kern County is appealing the decision.

Despite Measure E's passage, Southern California's crap has continued to flow into Kern County. The measure was placed on hold until legal challenges were resolved.

Meanwhile, the private farming and sludge-hauling companies that sued the county to block Measure E asked Judge Feess to order Kern County to pay them $1.77 million to cover their legal fees so far.

But Los Angeles and Orange County the companies' smelly sugar daddies already had promised to pay their legal fees.

Not so fast, Judge Feess last week told the companies, including Responsible Biosolids Management, farmer Shaen Magan and Sierra Transport Inc. Prove what you say Kern County owes you. Produce your bills.

While payment of the legal fees is a moot point, because Kern County is appealing Feess' decision to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals and possibly the U.S. Supreme Court, at least the ruling shows the judge is paying some attention.

And despite the mounting legal costs, it's still cheaper for Los Angeles and Orange County to stall Measure E and its sludge-smearing ban. It's still cheaper to haul the smelly, polluting mess to Kern County, rather than develop cleanup and disposal systems closer to "home."

It was once cheaper for Southern California sanitation districts to simply slide this sewer waste into the ocean. But ordered by the federal government to stop, the next best thing was to haul it to the closest rural neighbor.

Washington Post Letter Thurs. Nov. 1, 2007

The Health Toll the ICC Will Impose

The Oct. 30 Metro article "Roadway's Air Quality Data Faulty, Judge Is Told" was another sad example of the disregard of our government for citizens.

To convince our elected officials that the intercounty connector would be in compliance with federal clean-air standards, and therefore no health hazard, the Federal Highway Administration used a qualitative analysis based on data from a single air-quality monitor 1.5 miles from Interstate 95.

This is no comfort to the 8,500 mostly elderly residents of Leisure World.

All of them will be living less than a mile from the new highway. In fact, the closest point of the road's approach to a Leisure World condo will be less than 800 feet.

If the intercounty connector goes forward, a shroud of deadly particulate material from auto and truck emissions will be deposited over Leisure World, endangering residents who have heart and lung diseases.

Our government appears to be doing its best to cover up this looming catastrophe.

LEONARD S. COHEN