District re-opening lawn mower trade-in program

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Apr. 21, 2008

Are you looking for a deal on new lawn mower?

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is distributing vouchers for steeply discounted, electric lawn mowers to valley residents who trade in their gas-powered machine. Those who take part will get a new, $399 air-friendly mower for $150.

The program runs through May 31 but supplies are limited.

For more information, call the air district at 326-6900 or send an e-mail to public.education@valleyair.org. Vouchers will be mailed along with information on how to surrender your gas mower.

Panel says link between smog and premature death is clear

By H. JOSEF HEBERT, Associated Press Writer
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

WASHINGTON — Short-term exposure to smog, or ozone, is clearly linked to premature deaths that should be taken into account when measuring the health benefits of reducing air pollution, a National Academy of Sciences review concludes.

The findings contradict arguments made by some White House officials that the connection between smog and premature death has not been shown sufficiently, and that the number of saved lives should not be calculated in determining clean air benefits.

The report released Tuesday by a panel of the Academy's National Research Council says government agencies "should give little or no weight" to such arguments.

"The committee has concluded from its review of health-based evidence that short-term exposure to ambient ozone is likely to contribute to premature deaths," the 13-member panel said.

It added that "studies have yielded strong evidence that short-term exposure to ozone can exacerbate lung conditions, causing illness and hospitalization and can potentially lead to death."

The panel examined short-term exposure - up to 24 hours - to high levels of ozone, but said more studies also were needed on long-term chronic exposure where the risk of premature death "may be larger than those observed in acute effects studies alone."

Ground-level ozone is formed from nitrogen oxide and organic compounds created by burning fossil fuels and is demonstrated often by the yellow haze or smog that lingers in the air. Ozone exposure is a leading cause of respiratory illnesses and especially affects the elderly, those with respiratory problems and children.

While premature deaths from ozone exposure is greater among individuals with lung and heart disease, the report said such deaths are not restricted to people who are at a high risk of death within a few days.

The scientists said they could not determine, based on a review of health studies, whether there is a threshold below which no fatalities can be assured from ozone exposure. If there is such a point, it is below the ozone levels allowed for public health.

Environmentalists and health advocates have argued that a string of health studies and surveys show that exposure to smoggy air not only aggravates respiratory problems, but annually causes thousands of deaths.

But in a number of instances the EPA and the White House Office of Management and Budget, which reviews regulations, have been at odds over the certainty of a link between smog levels and deaths.

The Academy's report "could have important consequences" on such future disputes, said attorney Vicky Patton of the advocacy group Environmental Defense.

She said the OMB in a number of air pollution regulations has sought to minimize the relationship of pollution and premature deaths, resulting in a lower calculation of health benefits from pollution reductions.

"This has been used by industry to try to attack health standards by minimizing the societal benefits," said Patton.

One such case involves the EPA's decision last month to toughen the ozone health standard, reducing the allowable concentration in the air.

When the cost-benefit analysis was being prepared in connection with the rulemaking, the OMB argued there is "considerable uncertainty" in the association between ozone levels and deaths.

As a result, the EPA issued a wide cost-benefit range from an annual net societal cost of $20 billion to a savings of $23 billion, depending largely on whether one takes into account lives saved from ozone-related premature deaths.

OMB officials also have objected to the EPA quantifying ozone-related mortality benefits in new emissions standards for lawn mowers and other small engines that release large amounts of ozone-forming pollution.

In response, the EPA removed "all references to quantified ozone benefits" in the proposed rule, according to an e-mail sent by EPA to the OMB. The small engine regulation is awaiting final action.

Tulare County fights to save railroad tracks

Company wants to sell its rails as scrap metal

By Hillary S. Meeks
In the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Lindsay-based Tulare Frozen Foods saves $500,000 a year by using trains to carry 50 million pounds of frozen vegetables as far as Texas, Florida and New Jersey.

That savings could soon disappear if San Joaquin Valley Railroad officials abandon nearly 40 miles of Tulare County track. The railroad company, owned by Rail America, has for the second time filed a federal request to abandon a 9.2-mile segment from Exeter to Strathmore and a 30.57-mile segment from Strathmore to Jovista.

The company's apparent intention is to sell the track as scrap metal, said Paul Saldaña, chief executive officer of the Tulare County Economic Development Corporation.

"We think this is just the first of several abandonments that they'll file, not just on our railroad, but probably on other Rail America holdings throughout the United States," Saldaña said. "I think they probably figured we were the easiest ones to pick off."

That would be a mistaken assumption, Saldaña said. Almost every incorporated city in Tulare County, and the county itself, have filed opposition to Rail America's request. The request is pending decision by the Surface Transportation Board.

Calls to San Joaquin Valley Railroad and to Rail America's attorney were not returned.

Effects of abandonment

"This is a significant threat to Tulare County," Saldaña said. "It will rob us of the ability to put companies in that would use rail service in Lindsay, Strathmore, Exeter and Terra Bella."

Tuff Stuff, a company that recently relocated to Terra Bella from Downey, has been watching the abandonment request anxiously. One of the reasons Tuff Stuff moved to Tulare County was the

opportunity for expansion — something that might not happen if the rail is abandoned, said general manager Max Lee.

"Freight is an issue that is pressing more and more," Lee said, "because the cost of gas is going up every day."

Tuff Stuff uses low-density plastic polyethylene to make 100 percent recycled products, including farm buckets and dollies. The company, which needs trains to bring in the plastic it recycles, plans to open the Terra Bella operations in August, hasn't considered what it will do if the railroad tracks are abandoned, Lee said.

"We will try to do what we can to stop it," he said. "We would definitely like [the railroad] to stay so we can all grow together."

Abandonment also would be a blow to county efforts to fight air pollution, said Mike Ennis, Tulare County supervisor for District 5, which includes much of the area where the affected tracks are. More trucks would mean more pollution, Ennis said.

Tulare County supervisors and cities in the county have been discussing the possibility of expanding rail service to help air quality, he said.

But companies such as Tuff Stuff and Tulare Frozen Foods would likely use trucks if the San Joaquin Valley Railroad lines are abandoned. Jim Fikkert, Tulare Frozen Foods president, said the company would either:

- Truck its frozen vegetables around the United States.
- Truck them to another site where they'd be loaded onto trains, a process called "transloading."

"Transloading would be a better option than all trucks, Fikkert said, "but it would still have a serious impact on cost."

Tulare Frozen Foods is the only company currently using the South Exeter Branch tracks, Saldaña said, but that's because San Joaquin Valley Railroad introduced a $950-per-car surcharge in 2006.

The surcharge has kept other companies away, he said.

"It's very intentional on their part to drive away the business so they can essentially scrap the rail line," he said. "Their interest isn't in being a railroad company. It's in pulling off the rail and salvaging it."

Tulare County got a consultant from Pennsylvania to see whether the tracks are up to par, Saldaña said. With the exception of some parts south of Terra Bella, he said, the tracks are in good shape.

Area officials don't plan to give up on them.

"I think rail is going to be the future," Ennis said.

Group touts telecommuting's green benefits

By Tom Abate
S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

An estimated 1.35 billion gallons of gasoline could be conserved annually if every U.S. worker with the ability to telecommute did so 1.6 days per week, according to a report released today by the American Electronics Association.

"Fewer commuters on the roads means reduced fuel consumption, traffic congestion and air pollution," said Christopher Hansen, president of the association, the nation's largest high-tech trade group.

And, he said, "It is a win for workers, who can reduce long commute times and strike a better life-work balance."

The report suggests that 45 million Americans already telecommute at least one day a week.

In addition to benefiting the environment and employees, "teleworking," as the association calls it, has advantages for employers. For instance, the association noted that when recruitment firm Robert Half
International surveyed 1,400 chief financial officers, 50 percent said telework arrangements are the second-best recruiting inducement, after salary. One-third classified it as the best incentive.

Rick Albiero, who helps create work-at-home programs through his San Francisco consultancy, the Telecommuting Advantage, said 9 out of 10 times the impetus for such efforts comes from a company's leadership that sees some business advantage to the move.

These include lower office occupancy costs, quicker and less costly recruitment, and better retention of valued employees.

Telecommuting advocates can find a variety of sources to bolster their case, including the Bay Area Council. That public-private partnership has advised its member firms that telework "reduces absenteeism and turnover and complements family-friendly" policies.

In the South Bay, several governmental, corporate and civic groups have formed the Sustainable Silicon Valley Initiative to call attention to the impact of driving - they estimate the average car emits enough carbon dioxide to fill 1 million party balloons a year - and how companies are trying to make a difference with telecommuting, carpooling or bicycling.

When employees try to spur telecommuting programs from below, they face an uphill climb, said Albiero, the consultant. In his experience, the chances of success are greatest when several employees, working in different departments for the same firm, approach their managers more or less in unison to ask about work-from-home options.

"Ultimately, what they are looking for is a champion at the executive level," he said.

Cutting carbon dioxide

The Environmental Protection Agency calculates that conserving 1.35 billion gallons of gas a year through increased telecommuting would prevent 26 billion pounds of carbon dioxide from being released into the environment.

A University of Maryland survey says that nearly half of all commuters travel more than 20 miles round-trip to and from work; 22 percent travel more than 40 miles; and 10 percent travel more than 60 miles.
Source: American Electronics Association

L.A. and San Francisco vie for title of 'greenest city'

Both cities' mayors have proposed new building standards. Newsom's plan is much more stringent, but Villaraigosa's would cover twice as much space.
By Margot Roosevelt
L.A. Times, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Mirror, mirror on the wall: Who is the greenest of them all?

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has a plan to slash his city's planet-warming greenhouse

gases to 35% below the 1990 level by 2030, and make L.A. the "cleanest and greenest city in the country."
San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has a blueprint to cut his city's greenhouse gases to 20% below the 1990 level by 2012, creating "the greenest large city in the United States of America."

In both metropolises, those lofty promises are facing a critical test.

Today, the L.A. City Council will hold a public hearing and vote on Villaraigosa's proposal to make private developers meet nationally-developed green building standards. Next month, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors will act on Newsom's proposed building ordinance.

Which is stricter? San Francisco's, by a long shot.

Which will remove more carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere? Los Angeles' -- but only because it's a bigger city, with a population approaching 4 million; San Francisco's population is under 800,000.

By and large, city governments can't control gas-guzzling SUVs, devastated forests and big industrial pollution, all of which are major causes of global warming. On the other hand, the built environment is their bailiwick. Buildings account for an estimated 43% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., compared with 32% from transportation and 25% from industry.

But buildings' environmental footprints can be dramatically reduced by using low-irrigation landscaping; efficient heating, air-conditioning and lighting; solar panels; roof gardens; and low-emission paints, glues and carpets.

Seventeen states, including California, and 80 localities require public buildings to meet green standards. But so far, only one state and 14 cities are applying those rules to private construction.

Los Angeles would be the biggest city to join the list. Still, San Francisco's proposed standards "would far surpass those of any other large city," according to Brooks Rainwater, director of local relations for the American Institute of Architects and author of a comprehensive study on green building programs.

Both cities use the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design system, developed by an industry-led nonprofit, the U.S. Green Building Council. The group audits buildings after construction and judges them as LEED certified, the most lenient standard, up through LEED silver, gold, and platinum.

The LEED system is spreading rapidly across the country, with architects and developers competing to offer customers the most eco-chic projects.

Since 2003, L.A.'s public structures, such as libraries and fire stations, have had to be LEED certified if they have more than 7,500 square feet of floor space. But San Francisco has gone a step further, requiring LEED silver certification for any public construction over 5,000 square feet.

San Francisco also has a higher standard for fast-track permitting: Buildings must be LEED gold to qualify, while the threshold in Los Angeles is silver.

Nancy Sutley, L.A.'s deputy mayor for energy and environment, acknowledged that her city is moving more cautiously, but noted the "sheer scale" of its construction activity compared with its Northern California rival. "We think of San Francisco as a boutique city," she said.

Jared Blumenthal, director of San Francisco's Department of the Environment, counters that among other multimillion-dollar projects, his city is converting a 500-acre former Naval base into 6,500 units of housing that will be certified as a LEED platinum neighborhood development.

"Hardly boutique!" he exclaimed.

And with slight condescension, Blumenthal adds, "We are thrilled that L.A. is now going to start reducing its CO2 . . . If L.A. implemented our ordinance, it would have an even greater impact for all Angelenos."

L.A.'s new proposal for private construction, which would take effect in November, is looser than San Francisco's in every category. It would require the equivalent of LEED certification only for buildings of 50,000 square feet or more. In San Francisco, over the next four years, commercial buildings of 25,000 square feet or more would have to meet LEED gold standards, and residential high-rises of that size would have to meet LEED silver levels.

The L.A. plan would cover low-rise residential and single family homes only in developments with at least 50 units. San Francisco's would cover all single-family homes and low-rise developments.

Sutley noted that the Los Angeles ordinance would cover more than twice as much space -- 7.5 million square feet -- as the San Francisco program, which would cover about 3 million square feet. "There were legitimate concerns about overwhelming the system," she said. "We will learn by doing."

Some critics discern a lack of political commitment in L.A.'s plan. "San Francisco's Department of the Environment is a robust, well-funded agency led by professionals with experience in green building," says Matt Peterson, president of Global Green, a nonprofit group that has advised both cities on their programs. But L.A.'s effort, he said, is understaffed and lacking in authority.

Sutley countered that green building is "a high priority" for the mayor, and said the city's existing staff has ample experience working with LEED-certified municipal buildings.

As for San Francisco's stricter ordinance, she said with a chuckle, "I don't know what to tell you. It's a different group up there."

California to sign UN compact to help China cut emissions

By Samantha Young
In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Monday, April 21, 2008

Sacramento, Calif. (AP) -- California, which puts out more greenhouse gases than any other state, is promising to share ideas and research to help China cut back on its own emissions, which rival those of the U.S. as the world's largest.

Despite its output, California is leading efforts to curb emissions. The state's top environmental official is in Beijing to sign an agreement with the United Nations to help China's efforts.

According to the four-page agreement to be signed Tuesday on Earth Day, the state also would mobilize public agencies and encourage private entities in California to support climate change projects in China.

"I think it will help show them they can indeed reach set targets and move forward on environmental protection and maintain a strong economy as California has," Linda Adams, California's Environmental Protection Agency secretary, said Monday in a telephone interview from Beijing.

President Bush called last week for a halt in the growth of greenhouse gases by 2025, but his administration has refused to sign international commitments to cut emissions, saying the U.S. would be at a competitive disadvantage unless those treaties also include China, India and other developing nations.

But China and others have said their output is still less than that of industrialized countries.

Beijing is one of the world's most polluted cities. A fog of particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide often blankets the city at levels five times higher than safety standards set by the World Health Organization.

The pollution has been a worry for some athletes hoping to participate in this summer's Olympic Games. Although the International Olympic Committee has said the pollution would not endanger their health, several athletes have said they are considering wearing masks during competition.

California's agreement with the development program, a subsidiary of the U.N., follows several years of international outreach by the state.

In 2005, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an environmental agreement with the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau to help improve air quality and water quality. The agreement was amended in 2007 to further bolster California's support of Beijing's air quality programs.

On Monday, Schwarzenegger said the state's agreement with China recognizes that climate change requires a global solution.
"America has to lead, and we are doing so with or without Washington," Schwarzenegger said in a news release. "California is not waiting for the federal government to take action."

Government to release proposed fuel economy rules

By Ken Thomas
Modesto Bee, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

WASHINGTON — The nation's fleet of new cars and trucks will be required to achieve 31.6 miles per gallon by 2015, The Associated Press has learned.

Transportation Department Secretary Mary Peters was outlining the plan on Earth Day, setting a schedule that was more aggressive than initially expected by industry officials.

The plan responds to a new energy law pushed by Congress and signed by President Bush that requires the fleetwide average of new cars and trucks to meet 35 mpg by 2020.

New cars and trucks will have to meet a fleetwide average of 31.6 mpg by 2015, said a government official familiar with the proposal. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, was not authorized to speak about the plan, which will set standards from 2011 to 2015.

Under the plan, the fleet of new vehicles will be required to achieve 27.8 mpg by 2011, with passenger cars achieving 31.2 mpg and pickup trucks, sport utility vehicles and vans reaching 25 mpg by that year. By 2015, the efficiency of cars will be required to meet 35.7 mpg while the fleet of trucks would need to achieve 28.6 mpg.

The plan is expected to save $54.7 billion gallons of oil over the life of the new vehicles built between 2011-2015. It will add an average cost of $650 per passenger car and $979 per truck by 2015, the official said.

Transportation Department officials declined to comment on the proposal, which is expected to be finalized by the end of the Bush administration.

Automakers opposed increases to the regulations in previous years, but supported a compromise version of the legislation in Congress amid rising gasoline prices and concerns about global warming.

The regulations would require the industry to implement more than half of the fuel-efficiency requirements by 2015 and push them to build more gas-electric hybrid cars, diesel-powered trucks and SUVs and advances such as plug-in hybrids and electric vehicles.

"These numbers are very challenging. They will stretch the industry to innovate in ways they haven't had to do in the past and will continue to set us on a course to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from new autos," said Charles Territo, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents General Motors Corp., Toyota Motor Corp., Ford Motor Co. and others.

Amid rising gasoline prices and concerns of global warming, Congress sought the tougher standards, requiring the nation's fleet of new vehicles to increase its efficiency by 10 mpg from its current average of 25 mpg, or a 40 percent increase.

The new law represented the first major changes to the auto mileage rules in three decades.

The fleet of new passenger cars is currently required to meet a 27.5 mpg average, while sport utility vehicles, pickup trucks and vans must hit a target of 22.5 mpg.

Members of Congress and environmental groups have pushed for higher standards, arguing that requiring vehicles to become more efficient would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the nation's dependence upon imported oil.

Democrats have said the fuel economy requirements will save motorists $700 to $1,000 a year in fuel costs and reduce oil demand by 1.1 million barrels a day when the more fuel-efficient vehicles are in wide use on the road.

Strict EPA rules tag unlikely areas

By Traci Watson and Paul Overberg
USA TODAY, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Smaller metropolitan areas — not gritty urban centers — are the most likely to be labeled as smoggy under a strict definition that the Environmental Protection Agency announced last month, an analysis by USA TODAY found.

The new limit also would ensnare many communities that contain large expanses of pristine wilderness. Places that would fall under the new ozone limit include Boise; Bar Harbor, Maine; and Biloxi, Miss.

Pollution from cars and other sources forms smog. Under the EPA's old limit, set in 1997, air was unhealthy if it had an average of more than 84 parts per billion of ozone. The new limit is 75 parts per billion or more.

The new EPA limit takes effect in two years. Using the 2004 to 2006 data, the most recently available, the USA TODAY analysis shows:

•Counties in metro areas of more than 1 million people, which now account for two-thirds of U.S. counties with unhealthy air, would account for 40% of new violators.

•The number of high-smog counties with fewer than 250,000 people would jump from five to 47.

•The number of smog-ridden counties with federal wilderness areas would nearly triple from 16 to 46. The total number of wilderness areas in such counties would rise to 185 from 106.

Many counties that face the prospect of cleaning up their air receive pollutants from elsewhere on prevailing winds. To address that problem, adjacent counties that contribute to smog will be declared in violation, too, the EPA says.

Among the steps counties, working with state and EPA officials, can take: inspecting private cars and adding emission controls to buses.

Eighty-five counties now violate the smog limit. Nearly 350 would violate the new limit, based on the most recent data.

Cleanup efforts by counties will be helped by a host of new federal emissions limits, such as restrictions on diesel trains. Because of those rules, the "vast majority of the counties violating the new standards … are likely to come into compliance by 2020," says Scott Mathias, EPA's associate chief of air-quality policy.

Even so, counties have to draft cleanup plans well before then.

Trudy Fisher, head of the Mississippi environmental-quality department, says counties shouldn't have to act until federal efforts to cut smog have fully unfolded. "For goodness' sake … the game plan is working," she says. "Let's stick with the game plan."

Study finds low cost to cutting U.S. emissions

Advocacy group reviews economic models for forecast

By Renee Schoof
Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

WASHINGTON — Americans won't pay huge new electricity and heating bills, unemployment won't skyrocket and the U.S. economy won't be damaged in the decades ahead if Congress passes legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, according to a study released Monday.

The Environmental Defense Fund, an advocacy group that supports a mandatory cap and a substantial reduction of emissions, conducted the study by examining a range of peer-reviewed economic models from five academic and government groups. The models looked at the costs of emissions-slashing proposals that are at least as tough as the one the Senate will debate in June.

That measure, sponsored by Sens. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., and John Warner, R-Va., would cut greenhouse gas emissions by about 60 percent below 2005 levels by 2050. It sets up a "cap and trade" plan in which the government would give or sell allowances to pollute, reducing the overall amount each year. Companies could buy or sell the allowances, or they could save them to use in later years.

There have been wildly different estimates of the cost of the legislation. Studies that hide their assumptions or make assumptions that skew the results are "a dime a dozen," said Peter Goldmark, director of the Environmental Defense Fund's climate program.

Now that they've lost the debate on the science of global warming, opponents of a cap on greenhouse gases have shifted gears and are spending millions to try to "scare the public into thinking this will put scads of people out of work and damage the economy," he said.

Goldmark and economist Nathaniel Keohane, the director of the group's economic policy analysis section, examined models produced by the Energy Information Agency, the Research Triangle Institute, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Pacific Northwest National Laboratories.

The bottom line, they found, is that the United States could continue its economic growth over the next decades while making "ambitious reductions" in greenhouse gas emissions.

"If we put a cap-and-trade policy in place soon, we can achieve substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions without significant adverse consequences to the economy. And in the long run, the coming low-carbon economy can provide the foundation for sustained American economic growth and prosperity," the report said.

Only the EIA model made job projections. It found that a cap on greenhouse gases would essentially have no effect on jobs.

For the average family, capping carbon is expected to raise the prices of goods and services slightly due to higher energy prices. The report estimated a reduction in household consumption of less than a penny for every dollar of household income.

The authors calculated that from 2010 to 2030 the median increase in a home electricity budget would be $3.30 a month, or about 3.5 percent.

The report also estimated that higher prices would lead to lower demands for heating fuels, resulting in increases of an estimated 5 percent on monthly oil bills and 14 percent for natural gas bills in 2030.

The U.S. economy has been growing nearly 3 percent per year and is projected to continue at that pace. The EIA analysis foresees a business-as-usual annual growth rate of 2.86 percent from 2010 to 2030, compared with a 2.84 percent growth rate with an emissions cap. The most pessimistic model projected a reduction of annual growth rates of 0.15 percentage points.

Port Authority Plans a Web Site to Help Offset Pollution

By Ken Belson
N.Y. Times, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey will announce plans on Monday to become the first tolling agency in the country to set up a Web site where drivers and airline passengers can buy credits to offset the carbon emissions created by the trips they take.

The money from the so-called carbon-offset credits is typically used to plant new trees, build windmills, install solar panels and other measures that may mitigate the effects of emissions from greenhouse gases.

The credits are bought at places like the Chicago Climate Exchange, which barters with companies that produced credits by reducing their emissions and companies seeking to reduce the impact of their emissions.

The Port Authority does not plan to make money off the Web site initially. Instead, it will seek bids from companies that want to build and operate the service on its behalf. TerraPass, LiveNeutral and Driving Green.com are among the many providers that already sell the credits to consumers and companies.

The Port Authority, which will announce the details of its service once a provider is chosen, hopes to follow the lead of airlines like Delta and Continental that have in recent years been helping their customers compensate for the pollution produced by the planes they fly on.

While the Web site is for people who use the Port Authority's bridges, tunnels and airports, the agency itself has taken steps to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases created at its facilities.

In recent months, the Port Authority has pledged to buy carbon offsets to reduce the impact of the greenhouse gases it produces.

It plans to convert Stewart International Airport into the nation's first carbon-negative airport and has built a geothermal-powered building at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Over time, the Port Authority hopes to attract enough customers to its carbon-offset Web site to combine that money with the agency's own credits and invest them together into local renewable energy and environmental cleanup projects, said Anthony R. Coscia, the agency's chairman. The Port Authority could eventually add carbon offsets into the prices it charges at its facilities, he said.

“Since we are right at the center of the largest city in the U.S. and operating a transportation network in that city, if we became a facilitator, we could make a difference,” Mr. Coscia said. “We want to create a way so that our money and our patrons’ money becomes a deep enough pool of capital to invest in things.”

Critics of carbon offsets contend that drivers buy the credits to justify continuing to use their cars. They add that since some of the money from offsets is spent overseas, some people feel it has little direct impact on their lives.

But transportation experts say that carbon-offset programs like the one the Port Authority is planning are better than spending little or nothing to reduce greenhouse gases. They add that tolling agencies now have more interaction with their customers, which gives the agencies more opportunities to work with them on an array of projects including carbon offsets.

“With E-ZPass and electronic toll collection, a lot of tolling agencies feel a lot closer to their customers, and they try to make the driving public feel like the authority is concerned about their customers,” said Michael Kolb, a consultant at Traffic Technologies Inc.

Treading lighter with low-carbon diets

To address the problem of greenhouse gases, conscientious consumers are turning their attention to the supermarket and dinner table. It's not just paper versus plastic anymore.
By Kenneth R. Weiss
L.A. Times, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Not every student in line at the University of Redlands cafeteria was ready for self-sacrifice to save the planet.

"No hamburger patties?" asked an incredulous football player, repeating the words of the grill cook. He glowered at the posted sign: "Cows or cars? Worldwide, livestock emits 18% of greenhouse gases, more than the transportation sector! Today we're offering great-tasting vegetarian choices."
The portabello burger didn't beckon him. Nor the black-bean burger.

"Just give me three chicken breasts, please," he said -- and with that, swaggered off to pile potato wedges onto his heaping plate.

Although this perhaps wasn't the most accepting reaction, it resulted in the desired dietary shift as Bon Appétit Management Co. rolls out its new Low Carbon Diet in 400 cafes it runs at university and corporate campuses around the country. Chicken, it turns out, has a lower carbon footprint than beef.

Conscientious consumers who want to tread lightly are increasingly concerned about their own carbon footprints. They've changed lightbulbs. They covet a Prius more than a Porsche. Now their anxiety over global warming has shifted to the supermarket and dinner table.

The global food and agriculture system produces about one-third of humanity's contribution to greenhouse gases. So questions about food are shifting from the familiar "Is this good for me?" or "Will it make me fat?" to "Is it good for the planet?"

But what's the right thing to do? It's not just paper versus plastic anymore. Is throwing out leftovers better than taking them home in a plastic container? Is refrigerated better than frozen? A French brie sandwich or chicken salad?

Sensing this, the country's major food service companies are talking about energy efficiency, waste reduction and, now, how to reduce carbon emissions associated with the food they serve.

Changing the meaning of "carb" in "low-carb" has been kicking around for years. Those who preach eating local, such as the locavores, have hogged much of the attention with a focus on "food miles," the distance that food travels from farm to fork.

Food science has begun to look beyond transportation, to the smorgasbord of contributors to carbon dioxide and other gases with even greater atmospheric warming potential, such as methane.

Researchers tally emissions related to each of hundreds of steps in the life cycle of various foods, from the energy-intensive process of manufacturing fertilizer for crops to the leftovers scraped from plates that end up rotting in a landfill, burping methane.

As they perfect these life-cycle assessments, scientists are ready to answer the question raised by a cartoon-book character in a Roy Lichtenstein-inspired poster outside the university cafe: "Is my cheeseburger causing global warming?"

Frequent-flier sushi

It was a sparkling spring day at the Getty Center in the Brentwood hills. Instead of heading into the sunshine for their lunch break, museum staffers filed into a darkened auditorium to hear a lecture: "Play With Your Food."

The crowd appeared to be a thoughtful bunch, many of them foodies, and more receptive than a famished football player to weighing the environmental and social consequences of their food choices.

Helene York took the stage with her PowerPoint slides, fulfilling the directive of Fedele Bauccio, Bon Appétit's blunt-talking chief executive: "Customers make choices for us. We need to educate them."

York, who directs the Low Carbon Diet initiative, explains that the diet is to slim down the company's greenhouse gas emissions by 25%, beginning by changing the 80 million meals it serves a year.

"That sounds like a lot," she said. Yet it's nothing compared with what can happen if Bon Appétit persuades its parent company, Compass Group, to follow suit, as it did with the switch to sustainably caught seafood. Compass Group is the largest food-service company in North America, with 8,000 accounts including sports arenas, hospitals and Chicago's public schools. Other food service companies, such as Sodexo (Marriott), are also considering menu changes.

To start, Bon Appétit has targeted those items with the biggest impact. That means reducing the amount of beef and cheese.

"Inherently, beef and lamb are worse than every other form of animal protein," York said. The reason? These ruminants incessantly belch methane gas. She points out that methane has 23 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide.

Vegetarians think they get a free ride, she said. Yet if they nibble on a grilled cheese sandwich, they buy into the same industrialized system, which is fertilizer-intensive. Overuse of fertilizer releases nitrous oxide into the atmosphere, a gas that has 296 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide.

"Does your sushi get more frequent-flier miles than you do?" another poster flashes on the screen. It draws a laugh from the audience -- until York explains that Bon Appétit is phasing out fresh seafood brought in by air freight.

About 80% of the seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported, and nearly all of it takes to the skies. That means delicate slabs of fresh halibut and salmon carry a long contrail of aircraft exhaust to the table. Bon Appétit is setting up supply lines to buy Alaskan salmon fillets and other fish frozen at sea. York said top chefs swear that diners cannot tell the difference if fish is properly prepared.

Bon Appétit, which long ago joined the buy-local movement, is slowly eliminating out-of-season produce flown from Chile and other Latin American countries and cutting by half its imported tropical fruit, such as bananas, pineapples and papayas.

It has also phased out imported bottled water, she said. No more San Pellegrino. No more Perrier.

"Voss water, what's that? It's water that comes in a fancy glass bottle from Norway, of all places," York said, revealing her Brooklyn accent. "Don't we have enough water here?"

York told the group that plastic packaging, despite its bad reputation, is only a minuscule part of the carbon footprint. So if it's a question of taking leftovers home in plastic containers or leaving the food to be thrown away, she said, take it home.

"The food with the highest carbon footprint is the food we don't eat," she said, explaining that 3% of America's energy use is tied up in food trucked to the dump.

Although Americans are piling more food onto their plate than ever, studies show that not all of these extra calories are expanding waistlines. As much as 25% of those leftover peas and carrots and gristle ends up buried in the landfill. Deprived of oxygen, the mash of rotting food produces methane gas.

Bon Appétit has begun to reverse the trend of super-sized meals. Burgers on many college campuses, for instance, have been downsized from one-third to quarter-pounders, with prices adjusted accordingly.

York, a Harvard- and Yale-educated MBA, is part carbon cop -- "I spent a lot of time beating up our suppliers" -- and part mom, reminding customers that their mother was right: You should eat more vegetables. You shouldn't waste food.

She's also a food detective. She leads the company's effort to track the origins of Bon Appétit's food purchases to assess carbon emissions.

That's not always easy. She has found confounding things, such as San Joaquin Valley-grown tomatoes that get shipped to Massachusetts and back because of the peculiarities of the nation's food distribution system.

She isn't the only one who's frustrated. The Tesco supermarket chain in England wants to affix a carbon score to each item on its shelves but has been bogged down in the complexity of the task.

The U.S. Congress in 2002 took a step toward unmasking food supply lines by passing a law requiring meat and produce to carry a label revealing the country of origin. But under pressure from food suppliers and grocery chains, legislators have repeatedly postponed the law's implementation for all but seafood.

That leaves supermarket shoppers staring at well-stocked shelves from around the globe without any sure way to tell where the food is from.

Bon Appétit has brought together a group of scientists to help consumers sort through the thicket with an online carbon calculator at www.EatLowCarbon.org.

Later in the week, York is off to Redlands to train the Bon Appétit managers from various university campuses about today's national rollout of Low Carbon Diet day. The University of Redlands cafe is the test case. A poster invites students: "You've changed your light bulbs, now change your lunch. Find out how food choices affect climate change."

On this day, bananas have been replaced by local strawberries. Next to slices of cheese and pepperoni pizza were "cheese-less" options, a slice of double tomato, another with pesto and chicken. And then there was the grill station, missing its most popular item: all-beef burgers.

"The kids, they love their burgers," said Luis Delgado, a gregarious and popular grill cook who spent much of lunchtime dishing out disappointment. "I tell them they'll get them tonight."

Kaethe Selkirk, a freshman studying art history, and her boyfriend, Billy Kingsborough, settled for turkey burgers. But neither seemed willing to cut out their regular off-campus trips to munch on Double-Doubles at In-N-Out Burger.

"No one is going to admit that they don't care," she said. "It's not socially acceptable to *not* be for saving the planet."

How about reducing waste?

Rachel Rocklin, a petite senior with silver toenail polish, plopped down her tray on a conveyor belt, leaving a half-eaten turkey burger and half a bowl of broccoli soup.

She walked past the sign that explained that the university's food program produces 15 tons of waste each week. "The natural tendency is to fill up your tray. However, is that the right amount of food for you or the planet?"

She stopped, took it in and nodded.

"I would rather see it go down the conveyor belt than make me fat," Rocklin said. "I guess next time I could ask for a half a burger."

Washington Post, Column, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Ethanol's Failed Promise

By Lester Brown and Jonathan Lewis

The willingness to try, fail and try again is the essence of scientific progress. The same sometimes holds true for public policy. It is in this spirit that today, Earth Day, we call upon Congress to revisit recently enacted federal mandates requiring the diversion of foodstuffs for production of biofuels. These "food-to-fuel" mandates were meant to move America toward energy independence and mitigate global climate change. But the evidence irrefutably demonstrates that this policy is not delivering on either goal. In fact, it is causing environmental harm and contributing to a growing global food crisis.

Food-to-fuel mandates were created for the right reasons. The hope of using American-grown crops to fuel our cars seemed like a win-win-win scenario: Our farmers would enjoy the benefit of crop-price stability. Our national security would be enhanced by having a new domestic energy source. Our environment would be protected by a cleaner fuel. But the likelihood of these outcomes was never seriously tested, and new evidence has shown that the justifications for these mandates were inaccurate.

It is now abundantly clear that food-to-fuel mandates are leading to increased environmental damage. First, producing ethanol requires huge amounts of energy -- most of which comes from

coal. Second, the production process creates a number of hazardous byproducts, and some production facilities are reportedly dumping these in local water sources.

Third, food-to-fuel mandates are helping drive up the price of agricultural staples, leading to significant changes in land use with major environmental harm. Here in the United States, farmers are pulling land out of the federal conservation program, threatening fragile habitats. Increased agricultural production also means increased fertilizer use. The National Academy of Sciences reported last month that meeting the congressional food-to-fuel mandate by 2022 would lead to a 10 to 19 percent increase in the size of the Gulf of Mexico's "dead zone" -- an area so polluted by fertilizer runoff that no aquatic life can survive there.

Most troubling, though, is that the higher food prices caused in large part by food-to-fuel mandates create incentives for global deforestation, including in the Amazon basin. As Time magazine reported this month, huge swaths of forest are being cleared for agricultural development. The result is devastating: We lose an ecological treasure and critical habitat for endangered species, as well as the world's largest "carbon sink." And when the forests are cleared and the land plowed for farming, the carbon that had been sequestered in the plants and soil is released. Princeton scholar Tim Searchinger has modeled this impact and reports in Science magazine that the net impact of the food-to-fuel push will be an increase in global carbon emissions -- and thus a catalyst for climate change.

Meanwhile, the mandates are not reducing our dependence on foreign oil. Last year, the United States burned about a quarter of its national corn supply as fuel -- and this led to only a 1 percent reduction in the country's oil consumption.

Turning one-fourth of our corn into fuel is affecting global food prices. U.S. food prices are rising at twice the rate of inflation, hitting the pocketbooks of lower-income Americans and people living on fixed incomes. Globally, the United Nations and other relief organizations are facing gaping shortfalls as the cost of food outpaces their ability to provide aid for the 800 million people who lack food security. Deadly food riots have broken out in dozens of nations in the past few months, most recently in Haiti and Egypt. World Bank President Robert Zoellick warns of a global food emergency. The immediate necessary step is a major increase in global food aid. But beyond that, America must stop contributing to food price inflation through mandates that force us to use food to feed our cars instead of to feed people.

Taking these together -- the environmental damage, the human pain of food price inflation, the failure to reduce our dependence on oil -- it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that food-to-fuel mandates have failed. Congress took a big chance on biofuels that, unfortunately, has not worked out. Now, in the spirit of progress, let us learn the appropriate lessons from this setback, and let us act quickly to mitigate the damage and set upon a new course that holds greater promise for meeting the challenges ahead.

Fresno Bee commentary, Tuesday, April 22, 2008:

ED BEGLEY JR.: I was a recycler before it was cool

I have been a quote-unquote environmentalist for 38 years, and I couldn't be happier about the green bandwagon that's rolling through Hollywood and the rest of the country these days.

It hasn't always been so easy being green. Back in the 1990s, when environmentalism was looked upon as a holdover from the days of hippies and the Whole Earth Catalog, my lifestyle was considered so strange and extreme that I suspect it may even have cost me acting work. But now, like miniskirts and skinny neckties, "green" is back in style -- and I'm convinced that it's not just a fad, but a fundamental shift in our culture.

My environmentally friendly life began not in Hollywood, but in the more conservative San Fernando Valley. My father, a staunch Republican of Irish descent, didn't allow anything in our home to go to waste. He was a child of the Great Depression and taught me to be frugal -- to reduce, reuse and make do.

Love the outdoors

He also urged me to join the Cub Scouts, and later the Boy Scouts, which taught me to love the outdoors in spite of the terrible air quality in Los Angeles. I couldn't run down the block without wheezing, and people used to ask us why the San Fernando Valley was called a "valley"; the smog made the surrounding hills and mountains practically invisible.

Then, in 1970, Earth Day was celebrated for the first time. My father had always told me, "Eddie, don't tell people what you're going to do. Show them by doing it." So that year, I bought my first electric car.
Essentially a golf cart with a windshield wiper and a horn, it went 15 mph at top speed and conked out after 15 miles.

I also started composting that year, burying food scraps next to the railroad tracks near my house. And what do you know, green things sprouted there!

Little by little, I discovered that good environmental practices were also good for my bottom line. The more money I saved, the more I invested in new technology. In the 1980s, I bought a better electric car and a solar water heater. I invested in a wind turbine in the California desert in 1985 and installed solar electricity in 1990.

Back in the 1990s, I was known for these "stunts." My wife, Rachelle, likes to tell people that I drove around looking for natural gas to fill up my flex-fuel car while she was in labor with our daughter, Hayden. Rachelle was fine, of course, but she makes it sound as if I were more interested in avoiding the purchase of gasoline than the birth of our child.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that people, including Hollywood types, thought I was weird. Some producers and directors may have been afraid to hire me. "We can't have that guy on the set," they seemed to think. "What if he won't get in the car for the driving scene because it uses gas? What if he won't sit down at the dinner scene because he's a vegetarian?"

But as I've said many times about my wife, I think I'm winning them over ... over time.

You always seem a little weird when you're a pioneer, or an "early adopter," to use the current term. And maybe I am a little weird -- I have a stationary bicycle that I use to generate power for my toaster.

(Fifteen minutes of riding gives me enough juice to brown two pieces of bread.) But people don't look at me quite so strangely anymore.

Hollywood goes solar

Many of my Hollywood friends now have solar electricity in their homes. There are so many Toyota Priuses in the parking lots of Southern California that my wife and I sometimes have trouble finding our car. Bill Nye the Science Guy recently moved into our neighborhood and has started a friendly contest: He wants to make his home greener than mine.

So I've gone from being the "weirdo" to the competition. My wife still loves me, my friends still come around, and the Studio City recycling program now accepts all seven types of plastic in their blue bins. Life is complete.

Ed Begley Jr., an actor, is the author of "Living Like Ed: A Guide to the Eco-Friendly Life."

S.F. Chronicle commentary, Tuesday, April 22, 2008:
OPEN FORUM

Why S.F. should shelve 'peaker plants' idea

By Egon Terplan and Van Jones

We are facing a major decision - whether to spend a quarter of a billion dollars on new fossil-fuel burning power plants in our city, or to initiate a program that provides incentives to install solar on rooftops citywide.
The juxtaposition of approving polluting power plants while stalling a modest solar program puts at risk San Francisco's reputation as an innovator and leader in climate change.

The city is considering a proposal to install four peaker power plants that will run on natural gas and be used when our energy grid needs power. The peakers were originally a part of a deal to help close an existing power plant in Potrero Hill. While the peakers were given to the city as part of a legal settlement, the cost to install them is now $238 million and could grow further.

Meanwhile, a $3 million pilot solar incentive program that is stalled in City Hall would provide cash incentives to city residents who install solar. This would jump-start San Francisco's solar industry and provide needed green-collar jobs. It could nearly double the installation of solar on private rooftops in just the first year alone by leveraging $15 million in state and federal incentives and private investment.

We think it's time to reconsider the peakers but move forward on the solar program. Here's why:

1. Clean energy is a better investment for our residents, environment and economy. Launching the solar program would lead to solar firms relocating to the city and the creation of hundreds of green-collar jobs at living wages. One of the largest solar installers in the country, Solar City, has pledged to open its national solar job training academy in the Bayview if San Francisco moves ahead with its solar incentive program. If not, the company is very likely to locate in San Jose.

2. The peakers are unnecessary. We can meet the same level of energy reliability through a combination of new supply and reduced demand. This includes a new Transbay cable that opens in 2010 and will bring three times the energy as the peakers (and could in the future export clean energy from San Francisco to surrounding communities). Ways to further reduce our need for additional fossil fuel energy include the hundreds of millions in energy efficiency investments, demand management programs (where users voluntarily agree to have their energy reduced during peak times), new green building standards, and the growth of local clean energy, primarily solar.

3. The peakers are polluting. Annually, they would emit about the same level of dangerous greenhouse gases as the current Potrero power plant's main natural gas unit does today. Residents of nearby Potrero Hill and Bayview Hunters Point have for too long borne the negative health impacts of existing power plants.

Why are people pushing for the peakers? A combination of reasons. Some hope it will pave the way for public power. Others see this as the fastest way to close the Potrero power plant. Some say that the state requires it. But this logic is faulty. The state's assessment was made before new supply and energy reduction measures were taken into account. This means we have to reconsider the case for the peakers.

But if we advance fossil fuel power today while the solar program stalls, we are turning back the clock to old polluting technology.

Let's insist on a clean energy future with green-collar jobs. This befits our role as an innovative and forward-looking city. San Franciscans deserve nothing less.

Egon Terplan is the economic development and governance policy director of SPUR (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research). Van Jones is former executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and the founder and president of Green for All

Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Funds aren't going where they should

During the Reagan-Wilson era, plans were in place and money earmarked for the construction of a new animal shelter. It was to be constructed adjacent to either the MJC West Campus or the Safety Center. When the dust settled from the megadump scandal, the project mysteriously disappeared from the agenda. Oddly enough, there is apparently money by the truckload for grandiose projects like Tenth Street Place (and its embarrassing water feature) and the Gallo Center for the Arts.

As these shrines and monuments arise, our animal shelter and the roads leading to it continue to molder like forgotten cheese in a broken refrigerator. Once again the game is afoot for a new shelter, but three of our supervisors are distracted by a flashy industrial park scheme that will gobble up twice its own weight in agricultural land. This makes little sense in an area with poor air quality and whose backbone has long been, and continues to be, agriculture.

How about less politics and more pragmatism and common sense from the occupants of Tenth Street Place? Or are they all about fancy architecture rather than much needed infrastructure?

ROY COOK, Modesto

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses California might soon begin to site for every ton of air pollution emitted. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Proyectan California comenzar a aplicar multas por cada tonelada de aire contaminado

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino
Radio Bilingüe, Monday, April 21, 2008

Autoridades ambientales del norte de California proponen multar a todo tipo de empresa y negocio por cada tonelada de contaminación del aire que produzcan a partir de julio próximo.

La iniciativa para nueve condados en las inmediaciones de San Francisco pudiera sentar un precedente para otras regiones aún más contaminadas de California, de acuerdo con la Administración Distrital de Calidad del Aire en la región.

Según cáculos de la propuesta, una simple multa de unos cuatro centavos por tonelada de contaminación se traduciría en hasta 200 mil dólares anuales a algunas empresas energéticas.