Refinery debate turns into advertising war

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, May 4, 2008

A massive and dueling campaign to sway public opinion on a local refinery's expansion plans is hitting people's mailboxes, televisions and newspaper pages.

Bakersfield residents have been peppered with television ads and letters by Big West of California touting the project while glossy mailers from a citizens group opposed to one element of it — the use of a controversial acid — have landed in mailboxes as far away as Rosamond.

In the process, unions, trade associations, nurses and even school board members have publicly taken sides.

Big West's campaign promotes the project's economic benefits and its commitment to safety. It's also meant to counter information distributed by the new group Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid.

"It's clearly our thought that this project is good for the county and we want the public to understand that," said Bill Chadick, refinery health, safety and environmental director.

Bakersfield Citizens opposes the refinery's plan to use modified hydrofluoric acid, or modified HF. It includes community members, the Kern County and Bakersfield firefighters unions, the Bakersfield police union and local nurses and businesses next to the refinery, according to spokeswoman Betsy Ramsey.

Since April, the group has held a press conference, created a Web site and sent mailers to convince Big West to use sulfuric acid instead of modified hydrofluoric acid.

The most recent mailer features a picture of and quote from Kern County Firefighter Union President Derek Robinson saying: "Having hydrofluoric acid in Bakersfield would give me nightmares. It's a disaster waiting to happen."

The mailer leaves out the fact, though, that Big West is proposing to use modified HF, not the pure form.

HF gained a bad reputation after several deadly releases at U.S. refineries in the 1980s and 1990s. It can form a deadly, ground-hugging cloud when spilled that can travel for several miles.

In response, the petroleum industry in the 1990s developed modified HF to address the hazards of pure HF. The modified acid contains an additive that suppresses the chemical's ability to vaporize by up to 80 percent.

Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid cites only accidents involving pure HF and does not list any incidents involving modified HF on its Web site or in literature distributed at its press conference. The group claims that modified HF can still form a toxic cloud capable of traveling miles.

Who's right? The Kern County Planning Department is trying to determine that and answers could be in an environmental impact report expected to be released in early June.

"We're finding that every chemical has it hazards," said Lorelei Oviatt, chief of the Kern County Planning Department special project division.

Big West has also paid for newspaper ads and mailers for a group called Kern Citizens for the Clean Fuels Project, which includes individuals, organizations and businesses that support the expansion, such as the Kern County Taxpayers Association and the Greater Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce.

Michael Turnipseed, executive director of the Kern County Taxpayers Association, said Kern Citizens for the Clean Fuels Project is "a loose-knit group of people that understand the value of this project to the community."

WHO'S SUPPORTING WHOM

Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid
Kern County firefighters union
Bakersfield firefighters union
Bakersfield police union

Local nurses
Also opposing use of hydrofluoric acid: State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter

Kern Citizens for the Clean Fuels Project (partial list)
Kern County Taxpayers Association
Greater Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce
Kern County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Independent Oil Producers Agency
Kevin Burton, Fruitvale School District trustee
Stan Ellis, Sierra Process Systems
Ken Mettler, Kern High School District trustee
Tulare, Clovis, Visalia chambers of commerce

Cleaning Up VOCs Won't Help Valley Air Says UC Davis Professor

By Valley Voice Staff Writer
Valley Voice Newspaper, Monday, May 05, 2008

San Joaquin Valley – Focusing substantial effort on cleaning up smog precursor Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) emitted from plants and animals won't pay off with any major beneficial impact on air quality in the San Joaquin Valley. That's the essence of several recent studies offered by UC Davis scientist Dr. Peter Green recently commenting on regulatory efforts aiming to improve our air.

Green spoke to the Valley Air Board recently regarding proposed rule 4566 that would force composting operations to invest in costly new measures to cut VOCs (see "Earth Day Shootout" article in the last Valley Voice). Green told the Air Board meeting that one measure suggested under the new rule – tarping of farm fields to cut emissions from chipping operations – would result in additional vehicle trips that could mean an increase in the other major precursor to smog – nitrogen oxides (NOxs).

"We've done about all we can to decrease volatile organic emissions that are abundant in the natural background," says Green. "The real problem is with NOx – mostly from burning petroleum in motor vehicles," he says. "On that issue, there is a state battle with the federal government over how fast we can go to clean that up." He notes the current struggle over whether California can regulate tailpipe emissions.

Green, in a letter to the Valley Air Board, cited their own Guiding Principles in the Valley Ozone plan that says "give precedence to nitrogen oxides (NOx) emissions. Any increase in NOx, even a small one, is a big step backward that must be avoided."

Green says studies just published in Atmospheric Environment (Feb. 08), a peer-reviewed journal — suggests the same conclusion with dairy cow emissions – that decreasing reactive organic compounds (the same as VOCs) from dairy cattle by decreasing the ethanol concentrations emitted from the feed source digestion – "will not likely lead to decreased ozone concentrations in the San Joaquin Valley."

Still, the San Joaquin Air Board is targeting VOCs from Valley dairies and other ag sources largely because regulators feel duty-bound by court order – due to lawsuits – to reduce VOCs as part of the clean air plan. "I don't know of any scientific disagreement with our findings – instead bureaucrats just shrug that they have to do it."

Green joined fellow UC Davis professor Frank Mitloehner in this new study who made headlines in the Valley a few years ago disputing regulatory mandates based on an emission factor for dairy cows far in excess of what could be scientifically justified. Some had complained that cows were a bigger contributor to smog than cars, based on a 1938 study.

Now, in this follow-up study based on measurements in a smog chamber, he came to the same conclusion that dairy emissions are much lower than would have been predicted based on current regulatory profiles.

The conclusion of the recent study: "Based on these results, the ozone formation potential of emissions from dairy cattle in California seem to be lower than previously estimated."

A 2007 study on the same subject found that dairy emissions were likely 6 to 10 times smaller than suggested by current estimates. Despite that, the Valley Ozone Plan plans to decrease VOCs by 15.8 tons a day out of an estimated 17.6 tons a day inventory.

Essentially by overestimating the problems, the regulatory body can suggest how much cleaner the air will get by requiring big cuts in pollution that are not there – but look good on paper.

Green says the same comparison can be reached about tighter rules aimed at composting and ag pesticide emissions. The later is referenced in the April 17 letter to the board pointing to the aerosol plan aimed at reducing PM2.5 emissions that he predicts will be "ineffective."

Target NOx Emissions

"The real benefit of regulation comes from targeting NOx emissions that play a huge part of the problem," says Green, noting that regulatory efforts to clean up air vehicle emissions make more sense than "focusing on dairy cow burps or composting emissions." Instead it's "the man-made emissions we ought to be targeted on, not those from trees, plants or animals," he says.

"Some say the dairy cow emissions are so bad we ought to move the industry out of California," says Green. "But that makes no sense because of the millions of California consumers who use the product daily, we would then have to truck it in from out of state to satisfy our needs – that means tons more NOx," suggests Green. The same logic would have all our food come from overseas. Instead, on a hopeful note – the U.S. appears to be going in the opposite direction – growing food close to urban areas.

"What makes sense is to grow the food close to the population to reduce vehicle trips."

Green says he supports efforts to reduce methane emissions making biogas for example that will cut greenhouse gas emissions in the future. But targeting VOCs from biological sources won't clean up our air.

Urban sprawl in the Valley is a much bigger problem than open fields, compost piles and dairy cows, concludes Green whose views at the recent air forum were cheered by ag groups desperate for ammunition against an onslaught of environmental regulations – most of it prompted by lawsuits – that farmers have been facing for the past few years. In fact, open fields are the very antidotes for urban sprawl – essentially a pollution control mechanism. Green spoke April 17 in Tulare County to citrus growers about the same subject.

There is at least some indication Green's testimony and that of stakeholders has sunk in and may yet have some effect on the proposed composting rules. Valley Air officials have proposed to meet with stakeholders soon before moving forward on the proposed rule that had been set to take effect next January.

City may peddle Vi-Cycles

Council to look at pilot program to repair, paint bikes for business use

BY GERALD CARROLL
Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, May5, 2008

Visalia is going green. Literally.

Recovered bicycles from sources such as the police department and transit system are to be rebuilt by prison inmates, painted green and sold to Visalia-area businesses for $25 each and named "Vi-Cycles" in a year-long pilot program up for discussion and vote at today's Visalia City Council meeting.

The 5 p.m. session, at City Hall, 707 W. Acequia, Visalia, will see the introduction of the idea by the city's newly formed natural resource conservation division.

Participating businesses, who would presumably use the forest-green bicycles — with a "Vi-Cycle" stencil added — instead of cars, need to:

- Fill out a Vi-Cycle application.
- Sign a release of liability.

- Agree to maintain the Vi-Cycle.
- Encourage users to participate in safety training.
- Return the Vi-Cycle to the city if it is no longer needed, not being used "as intended" in the program, or simply worn out and needing further repair.

"Any returned bikes from the program will be re-incorporated into the refurbishing program," wrote Shawn Ogletree, head of the city's natural resource conservation division, in a staff report released Friday.

The program could be "expanded to other parts of the city after its review," wrote Lindsay Bailey, who heads a citizens' committee on bicycle lanes and walkways in Visalia, in a Friday e-mail to fellow committee members.

"Kudos to city staff [and] Shawn Ogletree for developing this innovative Vi-Cycles program," Bailey wrote.

Ogletree stressed that the program is being limited to the downtown area at present "because of the density of businesses, restaurants, banks and lunchtime traffic."

"Downtown" is defined as an area bordered by Murray Avenue to the north, Mineral King Avenue to the south, Ben Maddox Way to the east and Conyer Street to the west.

The primary source of inmate labor for repairs would be the state-run Substance Abuse and Treatment Facility in Corcoran, according to the report.

Richmond seeks community benefits pact with Chevron

By Katherine Tam
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, May 2, 2008

Richmond city leaders are trying to extract a promise from Chevron to funnel millions into job training, public safety and other local services, an agreement unlike any other the city has secured.

Officials want to negotiate a community benefits agreement that would be tied to Chevron's estimated $800 million proposal to upgrade its hydrogen plant, power plant and reformer at the Richmond refinery. Some want the oil company to provide benefits equal to 5 percent of the project cost - about $40 million; some think that figure could be higher.

Chevron might not be legally required to finance a housing complex or park as part of its project, but officials hope to persuade the company to do something along those lines anyway out of a sense of social responsibility. Investing in the community should be part of doing business in Richmond, Councilwoman Maria Viramontes said.

"They're going to be making a profit, and I'm looking for them to provide benefits," said Councilman John Marquez, who said he wants funding for job training, public health and public safety.

A refinery representative said Friday that Chevron is open to negotiating.

"There are things outside the scope of the project and the issuing of a conditional-use permit that the city is interested in," said Dean O'Hair, refinery spokesman. "We would want to have those discussions."

Chevron's upgrade proposal has stirred debate on a number of fronts, particularly whether the changes would allow refining of heavier crude, increase pollution and endanger people's health. Chevron insists it won't process heavier oil or increase overall emissions. Opponents want a guarantee and are seeking tighter restrictions, including a limit on the kind of crude.

The Planning Commission resumes its decision-making hearing June 5. Officials expect the issue to be appealed to the City Council, no matter what the outcome.

Negotiations for a community benefits agreements will boil down to the number of benefits Chevron would provide and for how long. Council members want Chevron to invest in job training, police and fire, open space and funding for the nonprofit Brookside Community Health Center. Councilman Tom Butt, who prefers such provisions be conditions of approval rather than a separate side agreement, has compiled a

list that also includes funding for a fire station, nonprofit groups, streets repairs, land for the Bay Trail and a "green" affordable housing pilot project that would offer jobs and a renewable energy source on site.

These would be on top of environmental mitigations Chevron would make to comply with state environmental laws.

Chevron's O'Hair said Friday that it is too early to discuss the specifics of what the refinery would agree to, but he said creating job opportunities for Richmond residents is an example of where the company and city see eye to eye.

Other communities around the country have forged community benefits agreements, typically on commercial projects. If Richmond and Chevron hammer out a deal as comprehensive as the city envisions, it would be the first such agreement on an industrial use in the country, Viramontes said.

One of the first and broadest community benefits agreements was born in 2001 in Southern California. The Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice, made up of 25 to 30 neighborhood and environmental groups, unions and churches, banded together to seek local benefits from the Los Angeles Arena Land Co. as part of a 400-million-square-foot expansion of Staples Center, home to the Lakers basketball team. The legally binding deal calls for hiring locally; paying a living wage; and providing or funding a job-training and referral program, affordable housing, parks and other services.

The coalition leveraged its collective power as a group representing different sectors of the community, said Gilda Haas, who helped lead negotiations. "The developer needed the City Council to approve an entitlement that was going to involve a bunch of hearings. We might not have had the power to stop it, but we had the power to slow it down. Time is money," she said. "Having a broad coalition, we could show either broad opposition or broad support. We had something of value."

Other organizations also have had success. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy landed a deal in 2005 with the city of Los Angeles, which promised environmental mitigations, public health programs, job training and more as part of an expansion of Los Angeles International Airport. Neighborhoods affected by air emissions and noise are in line to benefit the most.

Those that enter into a community benefits agreement must be prepared to follow up later to make sure the provisions are met and any necessary amendments to contracts are made, Haas added.

There's no reason Richmond couldn't have a community benefits agreement of its own, city officials say. "Philosophically, any new or expanded land use that comes into a city should provide benefits. This project is no exception," City Manager Bill Lindsay said. "They would have to have the same philosophy as I do, beyond simply taking up space or making a profit. Development in any community is a privilege."

City hearings on replacing dirty power plant

Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 5, 2008

An old and heavily polluting power plant near San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood could soon close as a Board of Supervisors committee today considers a proposal to replace the behemoth with smaller, cleaner generators.

The project, expected to cost nearly $250 million, has taken seven years to get to this point, and its backers say the city needs to act now for financial and environmental reasons.

But critics of the project - which includes installing three combustion turbine generators on 4 acres near Potrero Hill and one generator at the airport - say San Francisco is the last place anyone should consider to build a fossil-fuel-burning power plant.

That sentiment is shared by city leaders, but they say they have no other valid options.

"No one has come up with another alternative that will bring about a huge reduction in pollution that has been causing great health effects in the southeast portion of San Francisco for decades," said Board President Aaron Peskin, who chairs the committee that will consider the legislation.

"This is a solution that is real, immediate and I think a lot of people think there are better alternatives, but it's pie-in-the-sky," he said.

The plan is the second phase of the city's effort to close aging power plants. The Hunters Point Power Plant, which was owned by Pacific Gas and Electric Co., was shuttered in 2006.

In order to close the 27-acre Potrero plant that is owned by Mirant Corp., the California Independent System Operator, which oversees the state's electrical grid, has demanded that San Francisco create a source of reliable power generation in the city.

San Francisco already owns the replacement generators. They were restitution paid by the Williams power company for its role in the 2000-01 state energy crisis. The generators are sitting in a Houston warehouse.

They would be placed just down the street from the existing plant. Last year, Mirant agreed to close its plant if the new generators are installed.

The company plans to redevelop the site, and the city has agreed to expedite the process for the company to do so.

'Green wave'

If installed, the new generators will produce only half the pollution released by the main existing generator, according to the city's Public Utilities Commission.

But that is not enough for those who want the city to use clean and or renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar. Today, the committee also will consider legislation by Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier that would call for the city to rework its plans by using renewable energy sources.

Joshua Arce, executive director of the Brightline Defense Project, a civil rights advocacy organization, said he thinks city leaders have not considered enough alternatives and are ignoring the "green wave that has swept over the nation.

"There's a debate about which dirty power plant is dirtier, the old or the new. We're taking it out of that context. We're talking about San Francisco taking the initiative to turn a page on fossil fuel generation forever," Arce said.

The Sierra Club and the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association also oppose the proposed project.

Officials at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which is overseeing the project, said that they had considered a number of renewable energy sources, but that none satisfied the Independent System Operator.

Gregg Fishman, an ISO spokesman, said San Francisco must find a source of power that is consistently reliable.

"Sometimes you get very high peak demands around the city in the winter months when you are not going to get a lot of solar (power)," he said.

Solar panels also do not generate power at night.

Barbara Hale, assistant general manager of the PUC, said the city cannot afford to wait for renewable technologies to advance enough to solve those issues, as part of the financing for the project would come from a contract with a state department for access to the power.

"To be fiscally responsible, we need to keep that in mind and not feel that we can extend our process too long," Hale said.

Revenue of $140 million

The project also would be paid for partially through revenues from the sale of hydropower from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, but most of the cost would be paid by the issuance of certificates of participation, which work similarly to bonds and are sold to banks and investors.

A report by the Board of Supervisors budget analyst concluded that the PUC could make nearly $140 million over 30 years on the project, mainly from selling excess power capacity.

Some people living near the existing plant say they also think it is a bad idea to wait, as the pollution that comes from the current plant continues to affect the area.

Philip De Andrade, chairman of a citizens' advisory committee on the project for the Board of Supervisors, said the committee voted 4-1 last week to support the legislation in front of the board today.

"We did it reluctantly, and we did only because (the Independent System Operator) has a gun to our heads. If want to close the Potrero plant, the only quick and reasonable way to do it is with these," he said. "You can talk about a future goal, but I want those damned things stopped right now."

Exxon Mobil offering aid to homeowners near LA-area refinery

AP State
In the Bakersfield Californian, Monday, May 5, 2008

Exxon Mobil Corp. is offering financial assistance to the owners of 19 homes near its Torrance refinery because toxic chemicals have been found in the soil.

Company officials told residents at a meeting Thursday night that it is offering to buy 10 homes and giving so-called price protection on nine others. Refinery spokeswoman Carolin Keith says that means that if the home sells for less than market value, the company will pay homeowners the difference.

Cancer-causing benzene has been found in neighborhood soil, as has methane. But state officials said the level of contamination is very low and poses no health threat.

More than 200 soil probes have been installed to monitor gas levels in the neighborhood as the source of the vapors is sought.

Smarter electric grid could be key to saving power

Associated Press
In the Merced Sun-Star, USA Today and other papers, Saturday, May 3, 2008

MILTON, Ontario (AP) - The glowing amber dot on a light switch in the entryway of George Tsapoitis' house offers a clue about the future of electricity.

A few times this summer, when millions of air conditioners strain the Toronto region's power grid, that pencil-tip-sized amber dot will blink. It will be asking Tsapoitis to turn the switch off -- unless he's already programmed his house to make that move for him.

This is the beginning of a new way of thinking about electricity, and the biggest change in how we get power since wires began veining the landscape a century ago.

For all the engineering genius behind the electric grid, that vast network ferrying energy from power plants through transmission lines isn't particularly smart when it meets our homes. We flip a switch or plug something in and generally get as much power as we're willing to pay for.

But these days the environmental consequences and unfriendly economics of energy appear unsustainable. As a result, power providers and technology companies are making the electric grid smarter.

It will stop being merely a passive supplier of juice. Instead, power companies will be able to cue us, like those amber lights in Tsapoitis' house, to make choices about when and how we consume power. And most likely, we'll have our computers and appliances carry out those decisions for us.

Done right, the smarter grid should save consumers money in the long run by reducing the need for new power plants, which we pay off in our monthly electric bills. However, if people fail to react properly to conservation signals, their bills could spike.

And certainly a smart grid that can encourage us to conserve will feel different. Envision your kitchen appliances in silent communication with their power source: The fridge bumps its temperature up a degree on one day, and the dishwasher kicks on a bit later on another.

Smart-grid technologies have gotten small tests throughout North America, as utilities and regulators scout how to coax people to reduce their demand for power. But there's little doubt it's coming. The utility Xcel Energy Inc. plans to soon begin a $100 million smart grid project reaching 100,000 homes in Boulder, Colo.

In Milton, an exurb where dense subdivisions encroach on farm fields, a test with the Tsapoitis family and 200 other households reveals what will be possible - and how much more work needs to happen.

Tsapoitis uses his computer to visit an online control panel that configures his home's energy consumption. He chooses its temperature and which lights should be on or off at certain times of the day. He can set rules for different kinds of days, so the house might be warmer and darker on summer weekdays when his family is out.

The family can override those changes manually, whether it's by turning on the porch light or raising the thermostat to ward off a Canadian chill. But the system guards against waste. If midnight comes and no one has remembered to lower the thermostat and turn off the porch light, those steps just happen.

These little tweaks add up nicely for another person testing the Milton system, Marian Rakusan. He's saved at least $300 on utility bills since the program began in September. Tsapoitis and his wife, Lisa, aren't certain of their savings but say their 2,400-square-foot home has lower energy bills than a friend's 1,800-square-footer.

This alone is not revolutionary, because programmable thermostats and other "smart home" controls let people craft similar resource-saving plans. The big change here is the combination of these controls with that blinking amber light on the switch - where the grid talks back.

Milton's local gas and electricity retailer, Direct Energy, will set those amber dots blinking in an emergency. It might happen a few times in a summer month. Maybe there will be congestion in Ontario's overtaxed transmission network. Perhaps a power plant will be down for maintenance. Or rapacious air conditioners will overwhelm electric capacity.

Whatever the cause, at that moment, this section of the grid needs a reduction in demand, fast, or else outages loom.

People in Milton's test are expected to configure a "brownout" setting on their computers, indicating how their homes should respond in such a situation. In this test, Direct Energy also will enforce conservation remotely. It can raise the set temperature in a participant's home by 2 degrees Celsius in the summer (nearly 4 degrees Fahrenheit), reducing its air conditioning load. The company also has permission to shut off the testers' hot-water heaters and electric pool pumps for four hours at time during these power emergencies.

Tsapoitis shrugs at that aspect of the arrangement. It's better than rolling blackouts. Rakusan, however, says he's not sure he likes the idea of the power company tweaking his home's settings.

Indeed, it appears unlikely that broad swaths of the public will accept remote control from the power company. California officials recently had to back away from a proposal to require remote-controlled thermostats in new buildings.

So a more likely scenario is that consumers will get powerful economic incentives to make those decisions themselves.

Typically we pay a flat rate for electricity, even if sometimes it falls below the actual costs of supplying power at a given moment. In a growing number of places, rates move slightly higher in hours that typically are busiest.

An advanced notion of this will be tested this summer in 1,100 homes served by Baltimore Gas & Electric. Pricing plans will vary, but generally the households will pay the cheapest, "off-peak" rates most of the time. Some testers will pay higher rates every weekday afternoon. And all of them will be subject to

"critical peak" periods of even higher charges, declared on as many as 12 weekday afternoons with stress on the grid.

The Maryland utility will have its own version of Milton's amber dots. Most of the homes will get 3-inch-high orbs that will glow different colors to indicate the price of electricity: red instead of their usual green, for example, during critical peak periods.

Even this will probably be a primitive step.

Eventually, the smart grid will let rates fluctuate even more dynamically, depending on conditions. That already happens in wholesale electricity markets, in which power suppliers buy energy from power producers. Now that would extend to the retail level - our homes. The price of electricity would dip when demand is softest, typically at night or on mild days, and rise in periods of strain.

There's only one problem. "Consumers are not sitting at home waiting for the latest signal from the power grid," says Rob Pratt, a scientist with the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. "To get the kind of widespread response that we'd really like to have, keeping it automatic is real important."

In other words, appliances designed to interact with the smarter electric grid will adjust themselves.

Pratt's lab has already built and tested controllers that can make it happen. And over the next decade, Pratt expects homes to get appliance controls with a sliding scale. At one end people could choose something like "maximize my ease and comfort." At the other, "save me the maximum amount of money." The highest-conservation settings might lead dishwashers to start only when electricity prices are at their lowest, or when wind power has kicked on.

When Pratt and colleagues tested aspects of this in 112 homes in Washington state, they determined the average household's electricity bills would drop 10%.

It says a lot that conservation would be encouraged by the very companies that make money off the use of electricity. But they have no real choice.

Electricity use per home rose 23% from 1981 to 2001, according to the Department of Energy. Blame increases in electronics and appliances, and our decreasing tolerance for sweating through the summers. The Census Bureau says 46% of single-family homes completed in the U.S. in 1975 had air conditioning. In 2006 that was 89%.

Meanwhile, meeting that demand is getting trickier. Raw materials that fuel power plants are soaring in price and being eyed more skeptically by regulators concerned about air quality and greenhouse gases. And that's even before the next U.S. president, as seems likely, supports caps on carbon emissions.

"We just can't keep building more coal plants," says Roy Palmer, head of regulatory affairs at Xcel Energy.

So until some bountiful and clean power source can be delivered cheaply, electric utilities are pressured to extend the generating capacity we already have.

The effects of well-chosen reductions in usage - an idea known as "demand response" - can be huge. A mere 5% improvement in U.S. electric efficiency would prevent 90 large coal-fired power plants from having to be built over the next 20 years, according to Jon Wellinghoff, a member of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission who advocates demand response.

Demand response isn't new, but it's existed in low-tech form. Utilities in capacity crunches would call companies and request that they do something to help, like idling an assembly line for a few hours. In some states, residents can get rebates if they let the utility trigger radio transmitters on their air conditioners that cycle the chillers off for a few minutes in strained summer hours.

Now though, technology can do demand response in a more sophisticated way.

Companies such as EnerNOC Inc. have built software and sensor networks that can remotely dim lights or raise refrigerator temperatures inside businesses, in an instant. For homes, upgraded electric meters can offer near-real-time feedback on energy use. And new generations of appliances and thermostats can coordinate with each other and electric meters over in-home wireless networks.

The key hurdle is figuring out how to pay for it all.

The equipment in Milton's tests costs more than $1,000 per house. That will come down with larger-scale efforts, and utilities will save money as networked meters free them from sending out human meter readers each month. But for bigger smart-grid investments, energy companies generally want regulators to let them recoup the costs through higher electric rates. That can get thorny.

Tsapoitis hopes some kind of smarter system sticks after his test ends in Milton this fall. When asked why he signed up, he said it might keep his 4-year-old son, Brogan, from worrying about global warming and other environmental threats. He pointed to a tattoo running down his arm that spells out Brogan's name in an Old English font.

"That," he said, "is what we do it for."

State, Houston at odds over pollution ordinance

The Associated Press
In the Contra Costa Times, Saturday, May 3, 2008

HOUSTON - Some Houston businesses trying to block the city's efforts to regulate air pollution are getting help from an unlikely ally -- the Texas agency that monitors air quality.

The Texas Commission for Environmental Quality contends the city ordinance requiring businesses to pay registration fees for various sources of air pollution is inconsistent with state law.

The agency's general counsel, Les Trobman, made the assertion in an April 24 letter to the Harris County District Court judge weighing a business coalition's lawsuit against the city over the ordinance.

The position caught city leaders off guard, who said Friday they've met several times with agency officials in recent months without mention of the ordinance in dispute.

"It's quite strange that the state's pollution control agency would meddle in the city's lawsuit on behalf of the polluters," Kathy Patrick, an attorney representing the city, said in Saturday editions of the Houston Chronicle. "It's a complete puzzlement."

In a statement, the TCEQ said the letter was sent to the court to provide information that already had been relayed to the city.

The business coalition, funded by some of Houston's heavy industries, filed the lawsuit against the city in February, arguing that businesses could face penalties for things considered lawful by the state.

Under the ordinance, businesses are required to pay registration fees, based on the number and type of pollution sources on each site. Fees range from $100 for a dry cleaning plant with fewer than six employees to $12,000 for plants emitting more than 10 tons annually of airborne contaminants.

Houston uses the fees to monitor air quality and to investigate complaints of violations of the Texas Clean Air Act. Those found breaking the state law can be fined by the city, according to its ordinance.

200 demonstrate in southwest China against petrochemical plant

The Associated Press
In the Modesto Bee, Merced Sun-Star, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Monday, May 5, 2008

BEIJING - About 200 people demonstrated in southwestern China against the building of a petrochemical plant they say will pollute their city, state media reported Monday.

The Beijing News said the protest march Sunday in Pengzhou, near the provincial capital of Chengdu in Sichuan province, lasted two hours and was peaceful.

The protesters oppose plans to build an 800,000-ton-a-year ethylene plant and oil refinery because they believe it would seriously pollute Chengdu's air and water, it said. The refinery would process 10 million tons of crude a year, the newspaper said.

It said China's National Development and Reform Commission approved the refinery's construction at the end of April.

A spokesman for the Sichuan Environmental Protection bureau defended the project.

"Scientists and experts have already researched the potential impact the project will have on the environment and have determined that the factory will not harm its surrounding environment," said the official, who gave only his surname Peng.

Ethylene is a common industrial chemical that can be fatal in high concentrations.

A spokesman for the Pengzhou government who refused to give his name said he had not heard of the protest. Officials who answered the telephone at the Chengdu police and government offices also said they had not heard of it.

Environmental protests have grown in China, especially among members of the growing middle class concerned about the effect of pollution on their quality of life.

Vulnerable Plants

By Juliet Eilperin
Washington Post, Monday, May 5, 2008

Ozone pollution not only affects pollinators but also directly harms many plants and flowers, according to a recent report.

Gary M. Lovett of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies and Timothy H. Tear of the Nature Conservancy listed a wide variety of East Coast vegetation that is considered vulnerable to air pollution in a paper titled "Effects of Atmospheric Deposition on Biological Diversity in the Eastern United States."

Tear said the effects of ozone on ecosystems "have been underestimated by society and conservation, as well." The list of vulnerable plants they found on National Park Service or Fish and Wildlife land includes:

- · Evening primrose
- Huckleberry
- Loblolly pine
- Jack pine
- Pitch pine
- Table-mountain pine
- Monterey pine
- Jeffrey pine
- Red elderberry
- Blue elderberry
- Yellow poplar
- Tall milkweed
- Mugwort
- Virginia creeper
- Quaking aspen
- American sycamore
- Black cherry
- Choke cherry
- Ponderosa pine
- Thimbleberry
- Cutleaf coneflower
- Sassafras
- Goldenrod
- Speckled alder
- American hazelnut
- Sweet mock
- Spreading dogbane
- Yellow buckeye

Air Pollution Impedes Bees' Ability to Find Flowers

By Juliet Eilperin
Washington Post, Monday, May 5, 2008

Air pollution interferes with the ability of bees and other insects to follow the scent of flowers to their source, undermining the essential process of pollination, a study by three University of Virginia researchers suggests.

Their findings may help unlock part of the mystery surrounding the current pollination crisis that is affecting a wide variety of crops. Scientists are seeking to determine why honeybees and bumblebees are dying off in the United States and in other countries, and the new study indicates that emissions from power plants and automobiles may play a part in the insects' demise.

Scientists already knew that scent-bearing hydrocarbon molecules released by flowers can be destroyed when they come into contact with ozone and other pollutants. Environmental sciences professor Jose D. Fuentes at the University of Virginia -- working with graduate students Quinn S. McFrederick and James C. Kathilankal -- used a mathematical model to determine how flowers' scents travel with the wind and how quickly they come into contact with pollutants that can destroy them. They described their results in the March issue of the journal Atmospheric Environment.

In the prevailing conditions before the 1800s, the researchers calculated that a flower's scent could travel between 3,280 feet and 4,000 feet, Fuentes said in an interview, but today, that scent might travel 650 feet to 1,000 feet in highly polluted areas such as the District of Columbia, Los Angeles or Houston.

"That's where we basically have all the problems," Fuentes said, adding that ozone levels are particularly high during summer. "The impacts of pollution on pollinator activity are pronounced during the summer months."

This phenomenon triggers a cycle, the authors noted, in which the pollinators have trouble finding sufficient food, and as a result their populations decline. That, in turn, translates into decreased pollination and keeps flowering plants, including many fruits and vegetables, from proliferating.

Fuentes said scientists now have a more sophisticated understanding of the signals for which insects are searching, and that air pollution rapidly eliminates as much as 90 percent of flowers' aroma.

"We now know what the pollinators are looking for when they're actually looking for the flowers," he said.

Most bees have poor eyesight, which makes scent particularly important, the researchers wrote.

Since 2006, honeybee colonies in the United States have been suffering from a widespread phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder (CCD), in which adult worker bees abandon an otherwise-healthy hive.

John P. Burand, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who is studying bee colony collapses, said the effects of air pollution described in the new study are probably not directly related to that phenomenon. But, he added in an e-mail: "There is no doubt that air pollution and air quality is having an effect on bees and other pollinators. It appears there is more than one factor that is contributing to the CCD phenomenon we are seeing with bees, and certainly air pollution in some fashion may be playing a role."

Burand, working with two other University of Massachusetts researchers and an insect ecologist at the University of Maine at Orono, just received a $150,000, three-year grant from the Agriculture Department to analyze microbes carried by bees that pollinate apples, squash and pumpkins. They are working with colleagues to compare the bacteria, viruses and fungi in healthy bee colonies with those in dysfunctional hives.

Richard Poirot, an air-quality planner at Vermont's Department of Environmental Conservation who helps advise the federal government on its national ozone standards, said it makes sense that the chemical reaction of floral hydrocarbons and pollutants such as ozone would reduce the power of a flower's scent and affect the insects that depend on those aromas.

"It does make sense that it certainly would be another stress factor" on pollinators, Poirot said, though he added that pollinators are declining for an array of reasons not related to pollution. "The question is, how significant is it?"

Timothy H. Tear, a senior scientist at the advocacy group the Nature Conservancy who studies the impact of air pollution on ecosystems, said the recent study confirms the extent of ozone's effects on habitats up and down the East Coast.

"We know that ozone levels continue to be high and go well beyond EPA standards for public health," Tear said. "What's been pretty consistent is the more we look at air pollution's impacts on natural resources, the more we find those impacts to be."

Tear and his colleagues have recently completed a survey of how atmospheric pollution is affecting biodiversity in the Eastern United States and concluded that high levels of ozone can decrease forest growth by as much as 30 percent.

A Northeast Movement to Cut Emissions

By JAN ELLEN SPIEGEL
N.Y. Times, Sunday, May 4, 2008

At a conference at Yale University last month, officials from New Jersey, New York and Connecticut were among leaders from 18 states who signed a declaration urging the federal government to take action on climate change.

But as they grow impatient over the absence of federal restrictions on carbon emissions, officials in several states, especially those in the Northeast, have decided to take matters into their own hands.

New Jersey was among the first three states in the nation to require significant reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that are believed to contribute to global warming. Connecticut is about to become the fourth.

Last week, Connecticut's state House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved tougher standards to cut the greenhouse gas emissions associated with global warming. The measure was to be considered by the Senate by the end of the week, and if it is approved, it would require Gov. M. Jodi Rell's signature.

"The environmental community is happy," said Charles Rothenberger, staff attorney for the Connecticut Fund for the Environment, one of several environmental groups, including Environment Northeast and the Nature Conservancy, that helped write the bill and push it onto this year's agenda.

While a number of other states have set voluntary goals for curbing greenhouse gas emissions, or set caps for a specific sector like power plants or motor vehicles, only three states, New Jersey, California and Hawaii, have taken on legislation that goes further. The Connecticut bill, similar to those in the other three states, could affect every source of greenhouse gas emission - including the public sector, industry, transportation and private homes.

The bill would require that total greenhouse gas emissions be reduced to 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and to 80 percent below 2001 levels by 2050.

In New York, a similar bill passed the Assembly on April 15, though its fate in the Senate is uncertain and Governor David A. Paterson has taken no position on it. The New York legislation would require yearly greenhouse gas reductions of 2.3 percent of 1990 levels beginning in 2014 and reaching at least 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Like the bills in Connecticut, New Jersey, and California - California's legislation is considered the granddaddy of so-called carbon cap bills - the specifics in the New York bill of how to reach cap levels are left for state agencies to determine.

"It allows different sectors to handle this in whatever way is appropriate for them," said Assemblyman Robert K. Sweeney, a Democrat from Lindenhurst, N.Y., and chairman of the Environmental Conservation Committee. "The ideal thing would be for the federal government to do this on a nationwide basis. That hasn't happened. I don't think we have the luxury of waiting to see whether they will do it."

New Jersey, nearly a year into its process of putting the Global Warming Response Act into effect, has nearly completed an inventory of greenhouse gas emissions - a necessary first step for figuring out where to cut them. The state has released a draft energy master plan that dovetails with the emissions cap and is on target to meet its first cap level in 2020.

“One of the things the governor expected and has totally played out is that in showing leadership on this issue, we would raise the volume on the level of dialogue and actions in the state,” said Lisa P. Jackson, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection. “Individual companies are taking climate change action on their own - in anticipation of what we are doing.”

In Connecticut supporters of carbon caps note that even a small state can pressure other states like Massachusetts and Vermont, which are considering similar legislation - and the states together can push the federal government into a national cap on emissions.

“I just think it’s too important of an issue for us to say we’ll leave it up to the federal government or leave it up to the bigger states,” said state Senator John McKinney of Southport, the Senate minority leader as well as the ranking Republican on the General Assembly Environment Committee.

Mr. Rothenberger said current state law, passed in 2004, set only “aspirational,” or voluntary, goals for reducing greenhouse gases. Those goals, he said, were not being met.

“This is really designed to put the foot on the accelerator,” he said. “Right now the agencies can act or not as is their inclination, and there’s really not much groups outside the agencies can say about it.”

Gina McCarthy, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, helped fine-tune the legislation into something that the administration of Governor Rell could support: firm goals with a flexible means to achieve them. The legislation was also designed to be in keeping with the governor’s stated desire to use such energy policies as economic development opportunities.

“I don’t think the be-all and end-all is mandatory climate caps; Connecticut has had that commitment regardless of whether it’s mandatory,” Ms. McCarthy said. “It’s not a magic pill. It still means you need to make investments and you need to make changes.”

Opponents in Connecticut, generally business groups and power companies, said they preferred to wait for the next presidential administration, which is believed more likely than the current one to set limits on greenhouse gas emissions. They also argued it would be better to see the effects of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (known by its acronym, RGGI, pronounced “reggie”) which later this year initiates a multistate cap and trade system for power plants in the Northeast.

Eric Brown, associate counsel for the Connecticut Business and Industry Association, echoed the concern of several energy companies that a cap would push energy prices higher. “The high cost of energy in this state is a major factor in driving business out of Connecticut and discouraging new business from coming into Connecticut,” Mr. Brown said. “This bill will do nothing more than exacerbate that trend.”

Robert Repetto, a professor at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, said that attaching a cost to the emission of greenhouse gases is the key to effective legislation and a way to make the necessary political impact.

“RGGI and the California cap have been quite important primarily because they have been partially responsible for bringing about a change in the political stance of big business in this country,” he said, adding that businesses are facing the reality that states are taking action even if the federal government is not.

Fighting to Save the Planet, at School

By NATE SCHWEBER
N.Y. Times, Sunday, May 4, 2008

CHAPPAQUA -- DANNY WEINGART said he recently spent a week standing outside his middle school with a sign encouraging classmates to ride the bus because of his concerns about global warming. If the more dire predictions come true, he worries that his favorite cities could flood.

“Personally, I don’t enjoy swimming everywhere,” Danny, who is 11, said jokingly as he and more than 20 other sixth graders at Seven Bridges Middle School met in a technology classroom at lunchtime to discuss a weekend trash cleanup project.

Danny belongs to a school club called Kids Against Pollution, which conducted a weeklong protest leading up to Earth Day. Its goal was to reduce the number of cars dropping off students at the school in Chappaqua, a village of fewer than 10,000 with a median household income of more than $163,000.

For five days, club members car-pooled to the school by 6:45 a.m. and counted the number of cars entering and leaving the parking lot. They held up signs with slogans like “Hop on the Bus, Gus” and “Make a New Plan, Stan.”

“It reduced the number of cars we had coming to school by the end of the week,” said Donna Raskin, 53, the principal of the school, which has 600 pupils in the fifth through eighth grades.

According to statistics that club members compiled, 206 cars dropped off students on Monday, April 14. The number crested at 213 the next day and dropped to 169 by that Friday.

The club fell short of its goal of reducing the number of cars driving to school each day by 50 percent, said Andrew Lafortezza, 11, president of the fifth- and sixth-grade classes. But he said that at a sports practice during the week of the protests, several parents said they had to drive their children to school because the bus did not reach them.

“That really shows that parents are aware of the problem,” Andrew said. “And awareness was another one of our goals.”

The club’s adviser, Mike Debellis, 34, a technology teacher at Seven Bridges for six years, raised the idea of a club to Andrew last October. Andrew responded enthusiastically.

“He wouldn’t leave me alone,” Mr. Debellis said. “He and his friends were in my classroom every other lunch.”

With a club core consisting of Andrew’s friends, word quickly spread, and pupils were so enthusiastic that Mr. Debellis had to cap membership at around 20 because his classroom was not big enough for all of them to meet during lunch periods.

Most members said they were worried about global warming. Aaron Kohn, 11, said that he had watched the movie “Waterworld,” about a future in which the polar ice caps have melted and most of the planet is underwater, and then researched on the Internet reasons the earth could flood.

When he read about global warming, Aaron said, he got scared.

Sarah Jane Weil, 11, said she is an animal lover and was upset by predictions that in her lifetime polar bears might become extinct as a result of global warming.

Olivia Sacker, 11, said she used to want to be a veterinarian when she grows up but now wants to be an environmentalist because she is worried about the health of the planet.

Club members brainstormed about what kind of project they could do to further the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. That was when they decided to protest outside the school in order to get more classmates car-pooling and riding the bus.

Club members said they had not anticipated the reaction to their protest.

“A lot of kids blew us off, some even flipped us off,” said Zac Gelfand, 11, the club’s president.

But despite the occasional negative responses, the club members were impressed with the positive feedback they got, mainly from parents and teachers.

“One teacher said to me that this was the best protest he’d ever seen,” said Kate Hawthorne, 11.

Chris Stasi, 35, another technology teacher at the school, said that because the club members stood up for their principles, they learned lessons that cannot be taught in a classroom.

“That was a real situation they were in,” he said. “Trying to express what you really feel and your beliefs.”

In addition to a trash cleanup on May 3, the club has set its sights on selling environmentally friendly T-shirts and bumper stickers to raise money for its “Totally Awesome” award, given to the most environmentally friendly business in Westchester; and helping a cousin of Zac’s start a Kids Against Pollution club at his middle school in Florida.

Mr. Debellis said he was proudest that the students learned that their actions could make a difference. He is optimistic that having the knowledge that they can make a change, along with youthful exuberance, could make Kids Against Pollution a powerful force for environmental change.

“Because what’s more annoying than an 11-year-old kid?” Mr. Debellis said. “They’re not used to people telling them no.”

The Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Sunday, May 4, 2008:

Safety key to Big West’s approval

Do we need clean and abundant energy? Do we need more jobs? Do we support the oil industry? Sure we do. But those are not the disputed issues in the debate over the Big West refinery expansion plans.

With the refinery surrounded by homes, stores and schools, the issue is: Can the refinery be safely expanded and operated?

Dueling advertising campaigns have been launched by the refinery and its supporters, and by plant expansion opponents, including community groups, first responders and unions. We have seen and heard the broadcast and print ads. Many of us have received material in the mail.

The campaigns would have us believe expansion plans will be decided in the arena of public opinion. They won't. They will be decided by Kern County planning commissioners and the Board of Supervisors after completion of studies and a careful evaluation of the risks. The decision must be based on proof that the refinery can be safely expanded and operated.

Both sides hope to excite the public sufficiently to pressure decisionmakers. But the ultimate test must be: Does the refinery that is now operating in the middle the city become a greater risk if it expands?

County planners are evaluating the controversial expansion plans that include use of a potentially deadly chemical modified hydrofluoric acid in the production of a cleaner-burning fuel. Initially the company proposed using a more deadly form of the chemical, but yielded to a public outcry and amended plans to use the less dangerous form.

But Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid, Bakersfield and Kern County firefighters, city police and labor union representatives insist a mishap involving even the modified form of the chemical could cause injuries and deaths to workers, as well as to those living, attending schools or shopping nearby.

Donald Hall, the refinery's former manager, wrote Saturday in a Community Voices article that he vigorously opposes expansion plans using modified HF. "This is an approach the majority of the refining industry does not use."

Of the 21 refineries in California, only two use modified HF. The others use sulfuric acid, a still potentially toxic chemical, but one that Hall and others say can be better controlled. Big West insists its plans to use modified HF are safe and have fewer consequences.

Hydrofluoric acid gained a bad reputation after several deadly releases at U.S. refineries in the 1980s and 1990s. It can form a ground-hugging cloud when spilled that can travel for several miles. Modified HF contains an additive that reduces the chemical's ability to vaporize by up to 80 percent.

County planners have hired a consultant to sort through the conflicting arguments and evaluate the risks. A revised report on the environmental consequences of the refinery's expansion is expected to be released for a 45-day public review period in June.

While Big West officials are anxious to move forward with their expansion plans, the permitting path is fraught with political and legal challenges.

Bill Chadick, the refinery's health, safety and environmental director, told *The Californian,* "I think there's a lot of misinformation getting around. We are eager to sit down and talk to any group or agency that would like to hear the facts about our decision."

Chadick and Big West officials will get their chance to convince the community not through a PR blitz, but rather during public hearings on their plans.

The Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Saturday, May 3, 2008:

Big West has better, safer options

As a longtime member of the local refining industry, my interest in the Big West Refinery expansion is more than passing.

This facility has value to our community and California. For the plant to be viable long term, it is necessary to expand and install new equipment to deal with a product called "gas oil."

How this upgrade is done is the source of contention. The Big West plan to use "modified HF acid" for alkylation is a strategy that I oppose vigorously. This is an approach the majority of the refining industry does not use. There have been good options from the beginning.

An option to their contentious decision to use "modified HF acid" follows:

California has 21 refineries. Two of them use "modified HF acid." All others use sulfuric acid. Many of them process crude oil similarly to the way Big West does it.

The claim that local crude oil is a reason to use "modified HF" is disingenuous. The ratio of plants across the United States using "HF" or "modified HF acid" vs. sulfuric acid is similar to California. The record for technology selection is clear the way most refiners look at this issue.

Big West claims if you use sulfuric acid there will be thousands of truck trips added to our local highways.

Here is the deal on that. Refiners that are remote from a source of sulfuric acid can have their own efficient sulfuric acid supply and regeneration units on site.

These installations are often funded, built, owned, operated and maintained by reputable companies, such as Dupont/Stratco, Rhodia and General Chemical. This approach is not uncommon. It is successful in use design. This eliminates the predicted convoy of the acid trucks!

It also eliminates the claim to use "modified HF acid" due to crude sources. There are those in the industry that cling to their belief in "modified HF acid" and the supporting technology. Most of those advocates either sell the design or license it. For others, this is all they know or use.

When all else fails, the advocates for such a strategy resort to the claim that it's the economics or the two acids are equally safe. I can't wait to hear their next story touting the goodness of "modified HF acid." The refining industry has generally made wise choices for alkylation technology. None of the Big West claims and pleadings meet the comfort or logic test for our community.

There are acceptable options for Big West to do the right thing for this community!

Donald Hall of Bakersfield worked in the refining industry from 1959 to 1998. He is the former refinery manager for what is now known as the Big West Refinery and was the manager of Texaco's Los Angeles plant.

Fresno Bee commentaries, Sunday, May 4, 2008:

TWO VIEWS: Offshore terminals are easy terrorist targets and floating environmental disasters

By Wayne Madsen

WASHINGTON -- New York Gov. David Paterson wisely rejected plans to locate a huge liquefied natural gas (LNG) barge in the waters off Long Island.

The LNG floating terminal was spearheaded by Shell Oil and Broadwater Energy and does little to move America away from dependence on fossil fuels. Paterson said the proposed mega-barge would "scar" Long Island Sound, and environmental groups like Save the Sound rallied to block the so-called Broadwater LNG complex.

The energy industry argues that LNG produces lower carbon emissions than oil or coal, but this factoid is a placebo designed to keep America's energy infrastructure wedded to the fossil fuel industry.

Non-carbon-based green technology solutions -- solar, wind, bio-fuels -- are the only answer to halting the carbon fuel vicious cycle that is threatening the Earth's climate with disastrous results.

Although LNG produces less carbon emissions than its dirtier alternatives, the extraction, and conversion process from gaseous to liquid and back to gaseous form directly contributes to carbon-dioxide emissions.

Placing a 28-story tall LNG barge the size of four football fields in Long Island Sound not only incurred the wrath of New York's governor but also the state of Connecticut, whose attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, vowed to sue to block the project. Connecticut argued that exclusion zones established around the Broadwater barge would severely affect Connecticut waterways and adversely affect fishing and recreational boating.

In addition to needlessly contributing more carbon to the atmosphere, LNG is extremely volatile. An LNG explosion in Long Island Sound during a weekend would turn recreational boats that plow the waters into crispy hulks.

New York Assemblywoman Ginny Fields summed up opposition to the Broadwater facility in stating the proposed barge has "the potential of industrializing the LIS (Long Island Sound) and it would prohibit recreational pursuits of Long Islanders within a large radius around it."

Connecticut's Republican Gov. Jodi Rell has questioned a favorable environmental impact statement on the Broadwater barge issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. She questioned how "any reasonable person or government agency" could conclude the LNG barge would have a limited adverse impact on the environment.

LNG barges are also attractive targets for terrorists. Last year, federal prosecutors charged a New York ring with planning to blow up fuel lines leading to John F. Kennedy International Airport. An attack on a super-tanker off-loading LNG at a barge off New York or New Jersey would have disastrous effects.

Delaware successfully sued New Jersey over a plan to build a four-mile long LNG terminal on the Delaware River. Delaware claimed that New Jersey was not permitted to build such a terminal as the Delaware River and its riverbed are part of Delaware.

The Supreme Court ruled in Delaware's favor, with even pro-business Chief Justice John Roberts siding with Delaware in opposition to the LNG terminal.

Baltimore County is fighting a similar attempt by AES to build a huge LNG facility at the old Bethlehem Steel Sparrows Point shipyard.

Even the floating LNG terminals that are being proposed for sites 20 miles offshore are clearly bad for the environment and public safety. On this point, the Democratic governor of New York and the Republican governor of Connecticut are in agreement.

A carbon fuel alternative like LNG is not the answer to creating "green energy" sources. Solar, wind, tidal and bio-fuels are the only answer to shifting the world away from destructive greenhouse gases.

New York, New Jersey and Connecticut are leading the way on this vital issue. Every American who cares about our fragile planet owes them a tremendous debt of gratitude.

Wayne Madsen is a contributing writer to the progressive Online Journal.

TWO VIEWS: Environmentalists praise 'clean' natural gas while blocking imports of liquid form

By Ben Lieberman

WASHINGTON -- Environmentalists love natural gas -- except when they hate it. This schizophrenic approach is costing the rest of us a bundle and is standing in the way of badly needed sources of supply like liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Environmentalists and legislators love natural gas relative to its dirtier fossil-fuel competitor, coal. Tough measures in the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments targeted new coal-fired power plants, and very few have been built since. In effect, new coal plants were declared "out of bounds" as an option for generating additional electricity. But while these power sources were consigned to the sidelines, America's electricity needs kept expanding.

That growing demand has been met largely by building natural gas-using facilities. In less than two decades, natural gas has gone from being a relatively minor source of electricity to providing 20% of the nation's needs. About 25% of our natural gas supply now goes to electric utilities, rather than to residential and industrial uses.

Of course, this added demand has raised prices. Though the jump in oil and gasoline costs in recent years has garnered most of the attention, the percentage rise in natural gas has been just as big.

At more than $9 per thousand cubic feet wholesale, that's more than four times its average price during the 1990s. Consumers are feeling the pain -- especially in winter -- given that nearly 60% of America's homes are heated with natural gas.

In addition, natural gas-dependent industries like chemicals and fertilizer production, which use it both as a chemical feedstock and an energy source, have seen hundreds of thousands of jobs lost to parts of the world where natural gas is relatively abundant and costs much less.

Here's where the love-hate stuff comes in. At the same time environmental policy drove up the demand for natural gas, it has also constrained the supply.

For example, substantial domestic reserves of natural gas, both onshore and offshore, have been placed off-limits due to various environmental restrictions. Many of the same activists and politicians responsible for higher natural gas usage are also among those standing in the way of increased natural gas drilling.

The same is true for LNG. It is uneconomical to ship natural gas from other continents in its natural, gaseous state. But natural gas can be condensed at very low temperatures and shipped as a liquid.

Special receiving facilities have safely handled shiploads of LNG for decades, but the need to expand has skyrocketed. LNG currently supplies less than 3% of our needs. It could provide much more.

Once again, the usual suspects are doing everything they can to stop any expansions of the LNG infrastructure. Sens. Ted Kennedy and John Kerry and Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts have been busy trying to block an onshore LNG facility in their state. Sen. Frank Lautenberg is no less critical of a proposed facility off the New Jersey coast. Ditto a large California delegation regarding several proposed LNG projects there.

The reasons for opposition -- usually safety and environmental concerns -- are belied by the excellent record LNG has amassed in this country. To be sure, these concerns, including the overhyped claim that LNG facilities would be easy terror targets, should be addressed through strong safeguards. But overblown fears are hardly a valid reason to stop these projects.

Natural gas is only part of the solution to our energy challenges, and LNG is only part of the natural gas equation. Nonetheless, affordable energy is indispensable to economic growth and to maintaining our nation's standard of living.

Americans will need access to every reasonable energy source available in the years ahead. Increased LNG should be a part of our energy future.

Ben Lieberman is a senior policy analyst in the Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

S.F. Chronicle commentary, Monday, May 5, 2008:

San Francisco needs to act now to shut down a polluting power plant

By Sophie Maxwell

It may be easy for those who stand to profit from inaction, and those who aren't impacted directly by pollution, to call for yet another study of the combustion turbine project that will shut down the polluting Potrero Hill power plant in San Francisco. But for those of us who live in the shadow of the smokestacks, the time to act is now.

Today, a committee of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors has the historic opportunity to reduce air pollution in San Francisco and bring environmental justice to neighborhoods that have too long suffered from the impacts of the polluting Potrero power plant.

For more than seven years, I have worked with Bayview-Hunters Point, Potrero Hill and Dogpatch neighbors and leaders to close the Mirant-owned plant, one of the most polluting left in the Bay Area. And for more than seven years, we have exhaustively explored alternatives to the ONLY project that state regulators have repeatedly said will pave the way for plant closure - the construction and operation of new, natural gas-fired combustion turbines. But when people's lives and health are at stake every day, at some point we must stop exploring and start acting.

PG&E is openly funding a cynical campaign against the peaker project. They have fought tooth and nail against efforts by the city to develop our own renewable power sources or assert our energy independence.

They oppose the peaker project only because it threatens their monopolistic stranglehold on our city. This time, their lies and misinformation threaten to do very real damage to the people of the southeastern San Francisco community.

The three proposed in-city combustion turbines are far cleaner and smaller than the existing four Potrero plant units. According to emissions data from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the entire Potrero plant emits three times the ozone and fine particulate matter that will come from the new combustion turbines.

The existing Potrero plant is also harmful for San Francisco Bay. Every day, the current plant discharges 226 million gallons of superheated water into the bay, damaging the local ecosystem and stirring up hazardous sediments settled on the bay floor. The new peaker units, however, will use recycled cooling water that results in zero discharge into San Francisco Bay.

PG&E claims that we should allow the Potrero plant to continue operating and make the neighborhoods wait while the city studies still more ideas to someday close the plant. But the city has pursued and investigated other options for years, including more energy conservation, more renewable and solar energy, advanced transmission upgrades and more, in the hopes that state energy regulators would accept these projects as a replacement for the peaker units.

Each and every time, the California Independent System Operator - the agency that monitors and oversees California's energy grid - has been firm in the need for the in-city power generation and "round-the-clock" availability that only the peaker units provide.

By any measure, completing the peaker units and closing the Potrero plant units will decrease visual blight and bring enormous improvements in air and water quality - and public health - to the surrounding neighborhoods. And let me be clear: I look forward to the day when we can shut down the peaker units as well. But until then, we have an obligation to shutter that rusty plant from 1975 that spews toxins into my neighborhood every single day.

Opponents of the project talk about the need for more options without presenting a single alternative that also guarantees closure. As a mother and a grandmother who has raised children in the Bayview, I cannot accept any more theoretical debate when people's lives are at stake.

Rejecting the peaker project will only guarantee the continued operation of the polluting Potrero power plant every single day for years to come. Let us see through PG&E's smear campaign. Let us bring environmental justice to the southeastern sector. Let us not squander our best chance to shut down the Bay Area's most polluting power plant, right here in San Francisco.

Sophie Maxwell is a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, May 5, 2008:

Go green, Fresno

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has launched "Green L.A., An Action Plan to Lead the Nation in Fighting Climate Change."

The plan is to install solar photovoltaic panels on the roofs of commercial, industrial, public and residential buildings. City vehicles will be converted to low-emission automobiles and biodiesel trucks and buses.

Mayor Villaraigosa is recognized as a leader in "Go Green." He delivered the opening address at the GreenXchange Leadership Conference in December 2007.

"Green Fresno" should not be minimized during this campaign for public offices at all levels.

Accelerated installation of solar panels on commercial, industrial, public and residential rooftops is needed. Schools and churches with solar panels would generate surplus energy during high-peak demand and low-occupancy periods, a needed cash cow for education funding. City fleets of low-emission, high-mileage automobiles and biodiesel trucks and buses would go a long way to reducing the gas-pump pain for taxpayers.

Joe Becvar, Fresno

The Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Monday, May 5, 2008:

Economy over environment

We should let Big West build its refinery as planned. If modified hydrofluoric acid were so deadly, it would be illegal. That's what we elected Sen. Dean Florez for, right? To protect us from evil corporations that hire non-union labor.

Maybe we elected him to protect us from evil jobs, economic expansion and lower oil prices for the sake of possible environmental hazards that were a problem decades ago. Thanks also to the environmental mafia for increased grocery and gas prices.

In converting corn into low-gas-mileage ethanol, concerned citizens do more damage to the environment than who know how many automobiles. So corn prices go up. Feed prices go up. Meat and dairy prices go up. Pizza, nachos, KFC. Everything that's wonderful in America!

Ethanol adds to the price of gas and lowers its efficiency at the same time. So we get a huge double whammy to protect the environment. On top of that, the environmental mafia cries foul whenever anyone wants to drill for oil in places like the Gulf of Mexico, the California coast and other American oil reserves, which reportedly rival anything in the Middle East.

Next, having children is going to be illegal because they are constantly spewing carbon dioxide and methane gas. Or carbon neutralizing filters will be required on our orifices to keep greenhouse gases from warming the earth.

Please do not vote for those who care for the environment more than they care for our economic well-being.

Alejandro Gonzaga, Bakersfield

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the majority of counties in California receive a failing grade in air quality. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Mayoría de condados en California, reprueba en calidad del aire

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino
Radio Bilingüe, Monday, May 5, 2008

La gran mayoría de los 58 condados en el estado de California obtuvo calificación reprobatoria en su calidad del aire, a juicio de la Asociación Americana del Pulmón, o de salud pulmonar.

Casi todos los condados tienen calificaciones de entre "D" y "F", en una evaluación anual que lleva a cabo la asociación para despertar conciencia de funcionarios públicos y residentes.

Las calificaciones se basan en el número promedio de días de cada año que cada condado tuvo con contaminación del aire en niveles de riesgo.

El sur de California, el Valle de San Joaquín y la Bahía de San Francisco reprobaron nuevamente sus exámenes.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses a shower of ashes in Argentina due to the eruption of a Chilean volcano.

Una lluvia de cenizas cubre localidades argentinas por la erupción de un volcán chileno

Hoy Internet, Friday, May, 2, 2008

Buenos Aires, 2 may (EFE).- La erupción del volcán chileno Chaitén afectó hoy a varias localidades del suroeste de Argentina, donde se desató una lluvia de cenizas que causó numerosos inconvenientes a la población, informó la Defensa Civil.

Al menos diez poblaciones del lado argentino de la cordillera de los Andes más cercanas al Chaitén sufrieron las consecuencias de la caída de cenizas volcánicas, si bien por ahora no se ha informado sobre personas afectadas.

"Después de cada erupción, se pone todo el cielo negro y se mantiene así durante unos 40 minutos. Nos está complicando el viento, que es del noreste. Va a seguir así hasta mañana a la noche, cuando podría llover", dijo Pablo Durán, secretario de Gobierno de Esquel, la ciudad más poblada de la región.

El funcionario hizo declaraciones al portal de internet del diario argentino Clarín antes de entrevistarse con el gobernador de la sureña provincia de Chubut, Mario Das Neves, quien viajó a la zona.

En las localidades afectadas por la lluvia de cenizas se recomienda a la población que evite circular con vehículos, debido a la reducción de la visibilidad, y se han suspendido las clases en numerosas escuelas.

Tras la erupción del volcán Chaitén hoy se registró un sismo de cinco grados de magnitud en la escala Richter en la provincia de Chubut, que no provocó víctimas ni daños materiales, informaron fuentes oficiales.

En Esquel, que tiene unos 32.000 habitantes, crecieron las consultas médicas por irritaciones oculares causadas por las cenizas y las autoridades sanitarias recomendaron la utilización de mascarillas, especialmente a personas alérgicas o asmáticas.

La secretaria argentina de Ambiente, Romina Picolotti, se trasladó a Chubut para conocer la situación en la zona y conformó un Comité de Crisis. Por su parte, el ministro del Interior, Florencio Randazzo, dijo que las autoridades nacionales siguen "al instante la situación que se generó" en el suroeste y puso a disposición de Chubut "toda la ayuda que sea necesaria".

En Chile la erupción del Chaitén, de sólo 960 metros de altitud, derivó en la evacuación de unas 700 personas en las localidades cercanas al volcán.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses days away from inauguration, Beijing is in the eye of the hurricane.

A días de inauguración, Beijing en el ojo del huracán

La Prensa Hispana, Saturday, May 3, 2008

El traslúcido camino que seguía Beijing hacia los deseados mejores Juegos Olímpicos de la historia se ha complicado de tal modo en las últimas semanas que, cuando quedan cien días exactos para que se alce el telón, China es objeto de todas las miradas más por cuestiones extradeportivas que olímpicas.

“Espero que la gente no mezclará asuntos irrelevantes con los Juegos Olímpicos”, dijo ayer Jiang Yu, portavoz del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores chino, refiriéndose al clamor internacional para que China respete más los derechos humanos.

Demasiado tarde. A estas alturas sólo la prensa china insiste en la bonanza de las instalaciones olímpicas, en el gran trabajo de los voluntarios o los carísimos y titánicos esfuerzos de Beijing por controlar las emisiones de CO2 y ofrecer un aire respirable durante la competición.

La tan traída contaminación de Beijing, objeto de un contundente informe negativo de Naciones Unidas a finales del año pasado y culpable de la ausencia del plusmarquista mundial de maratón Haile Gebreselassie en el evento, ha perdido vigencia en favor de asuntos más graves.

Las protestas del 14 de marzo en Tíbet, que se saldaron con la muerte de 19 personas, según el Gobierno, y de 200 tras la represión de las autoridades, según el gobierno tibetano en el exilio, sirvieron de detonante para alimentar la traca de protestas que ha ido explotando coincidiendo con el recorrido de la antorcha.

La lógica indica que la antorcha debería avanzar con total placidez durante los cien días que le quedan para llegar a Beijing, toda vez que hoy aterrizó en Hong Kong, territorio chino.

Sin embargo, según pudo saber Efe, la cadena pública de televisión CCTV decidió ayer suspender la conexión en directo que había programado para la llegada del fuego por temor a que simpatizantes de la causa tibetana arruinasen una vez más la fiesta. Atrás han quedado siete duros años de trabajo en los que Beijing consiguió una notable implicación de su gente; siete años con el único objetivo de componer un escaparate con los mejores Juegos Olímpicos de la historia para enseñar al mundo que China es un país moderno, desarrollado, tolerante y pacífico.

Quedan cien días para la ceremonia de apertura y ese objetivo, a estas alturas, parece una auténtica quimera.

“Hemos honrado nuestro compromiso con los Juegos Olímpicos”, dice Jiang, que recuerda que, salvo el Nido, todos los estadios están listos; que Beijing tiene 100 mil voluntarios; que los trabajos para garantizar la seguridad van por el buen camino y que “el relevo de la antorcha avanza sin problemas”.

Pero eso es sabido. China ha puesto todo de su parte para dar lustre al olimpismo. Pero justo ahora, cuando queda un suspiro para que empiece la competición, ya casi nadie piensa en los Juegos Olímpicos de Beijing únicamente como el más importante evento deportivo de los últimos cuatro años.

Incluso el COI, normalmente esquivo, alzó la voz a través de su presidente, Jaques Rogge, en su última visita a Beijing, en la que pidió a China que cumpla su “compromiso moral” con los derechos humanos.

Con esa declaración, que luego trató de suavizar, el COI se puso del lado de organizaciones como Amnistía Internacional, Reporteros Sin Fronteras o Human Rights Watch, que han encontrado en los Juegos Olímpicos el perfecto altavoz para sus reivindicaciones.

Hoy mismo, el Club de Corresponsales Extranjeros en China ha aprovechado la fecha para “instar a las autoridades gubernamentales a investigar las amenazas de muerte”, que están recibiendo algunos periodistas por parte de gente que entiende que las informaciones de los extranjeros sobre China son parciales y están contaminadas.

Toda esta situación, no ha hecho sino retroalimentar el ya de por sí exacerbado nacionalismo del gigante asiático. Si los Juegos Olímpicos eran un asunto de Estado, se han convertido ya en una cuestión de honor, lo que se traducirá de algún modo en las gradas de los estadios a partir del día 8.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses asbestos, a dangerous material. It’s a type of fiber that was used in construction between 1930 & 1950 la emits toxic particles.

El abestos, un material peligroso

Es un tipo de fibra que se usó en la construcción entre 1930 y 1950 que libera partículas tóxicas

El Tiempo Latino, Friday, May 2, 2008

El asbestos es un tipo de fibra mineral que se usó en el pasado en algunos productos para hacerlos más resistentes al calor y al frío. Con el tiempo se descubrió que este material liberaba partículas que si eran inhaladas producían cáncer de pulmón y se prohibió su fabricación.

Algunos tipos de techos y tejas fueron construidas con cemento de asbestos. Las viviendas de 1930 y 1950 pueden contener aislamiento hecho con asbestos.

También pueden estar presentes en pintura de textura y en mezclas que tapan orificios de paredes o uniones de cielorrasos. Su uso fue prohibido en 1977.

La brasas o cenizas artificiales para chimeneas de gas pueden contener asbestos. Así como las paredes y pisos alrededor de hornos a leña pueden estar protegidos por papel de asbestos o planchas de cemento.

Se puede encontrar en algunos pisos de losas de vinilo y en los protectores adhesivos que les colocan encima. Las tuberías de agua caliente en algunos hogares antiguos tal vez estén cubiertas con material de asbestos. También las estufas a carbón o aceite y las bisagras de las puertas pueden tener aislamiento de asbestos.

De todas maneras, el material que contiene asbestos en buen estado es mejor dejarlo donde está, porque existe un riesgo mínimo que libere fibras tóxicas.

Lo ideal es revisar con regularidad materiales sospechosos. No tocarlos, pero sí buscar señales de daño o desgaste.

Es aconsejable limitar la actividad al mínimo en las áreas donde haya materiales dañados que puedan contener asbestos. No sacudir, limpiar o pasar la aspiradora sobre restos de material que pueda contener asbestos. Y mucho menos serruchar, lijar, taladrar o raspar materiales con este tipo de fibra.

Lo primero que se debe hacer es llamar a un profesional para que repare el material tóxico o lo retire del hogar.

No usar cepillos o trapos abrasivos para quitar la cera de un piso de asbestos. Nunca un producto concentrado para limpiar un piso seco.

Tampoco hay que intentar lijar o tratar de nivelar un piso de asbestos o el contrapiso. Cuando haya que reemplazar el piso, lo más conveniente es instalar una nueva cobertura.

Si no se puede evitar caminar por el área afectada o donde haya restos de abestos, hay que limpiarla con un trapo húmedo. Si se trata de un espacio grande es mejor llamar a un profesional.

Para reparar, hay sólo dos opciones. El sellado (encapsulamiento), que se hace aplicándole un sellador al material que puede unir las fibras de asbestos o cubrirlas con una capa para impedir que se suelten. Esta solución funciona en el aislamiento de tuberías, hornos y calderas. Este es trabajo de un profesional.

La otra opción es colocar un producto alrededor o encima del material que contiene asbestos para prevenir que se liberen. Las tuberías exteriores de la casa se pueden cubrir con un envoltorio protector.