

Victory over Calif. fires in grasp

By William M. Welch

USA TODAY, Monday, July 15, 2008

LOS ANGELES — California officials say they are getting the upper hand on what has become the worst siege of wildfires since the state began keeping records.

"We now have light at the end of the tunnel," Daniel Berlant, spokesman for the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention, or CalFire, said Monday.

Firefighters have contained nearly 1,500 of 1,781 wildfires that have broken out across the tinder-dry state since thunderstorms June 20 brought fire-starting lightning.

The fires have consumed almost 840,000 acres in national forests as well as state, private and local land.

Lisa Page, spokeswoman for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said the devastation has come early in the year, compared with past years, and appeared to be the most acres burned in the state over a comparable period going back to at least 1950, when records were first kept. She and Berlant said inadequate records made it difficult to say with certainty whether 2008 has set an absolute record for acres burned this early in the year.

"It's a record for a single fire series or siege," Berlant said.

The fires have consumed more acres than the firestorms last fall across Southern California, fanned by hot desert winds. More than 642,000 acres were burned, including large sections of neighborhoods in and around San Diego.

Late last week, the governor ordered 2,000 National Guard personnel to join firefighters. Monday, firefighters from Australia, Greece, Mexico and New Zealand were en route to California to assist efforts, CalFire said in a statement.

Several big fires were more than 50% contained, the governor's Office of Emergency Services said, including a fire that has burned almost 120,000 acres and threatened Big Sur along the coast. It is 61% contained, and 1,400 residences remain threatened; 27 homes have been destroyed.

A fire that once threatened the Southern California coastal town of Santa Barbara is 90% contained.

NC lawsuit against utility opens in federal court

Modesto Bee, Monday, July 14, 2008

ASHEVILLE, N.C. -- North Carolina lawyers asked a federal judge Monday to force the Tennessee Valley Authority to install better pollution controls on [11 coal-fired power plants that they say pollute air across state lines](#).

North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper filed the lawsuit in 2006, arguing that the TVA had a history of not complying with pollution controls without legal pressure. The lawsuit said sulfur dioxide, mercury and other chemicals from the power plants enter North Carolina and harm health and the economy.

TVA lawyer Frank Lancaster argued the utility has invested billions of dollars and cut pollution from 900,000 tons to 374,000 tons per year.

"TVA is not a public nuisance," Lancaster said. "North Carolina is not suffering significant harm to its air quality. There will be a lot of evidence the air quality in North Carolina is good."

U.S. District Court Judge Lacy Thornburg is hearing the case without a jury.

"TVA will state that it is planning to implement controls," said James Gulick, a senior deputy state attorney general. "But a plan is not a legal requirement, and plans change."

Gulick argued that the benefits to North Carolina outweighed the costs incurred by TVA to improve the plants in Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama.

The state wants the judge to impose caps on pollution like those imposed on North Carolina industry under the state Clean Smokestacks Act of 2002.

EPA experts detail global warming's health risks

By DINA CAPPIELLO Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Monday, July 14, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Government scientists detailed a rising death toll from heat waves, wildfires, disease and smog caused by global warming in an analysis the White House buried so it could avoid regulating greenhouse gases.

In a 149-page document released Monday, the experts laid out for the first time the scientific case for the grave risks that global warming poses to people, and to the food, energy and water on which society depends.

"Risk (to human health, society and the environment) increases with increases in both the rate and magnitude of climate change," scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency said. Global warming, they wrote, is "unequivocal" and humans are to blame.

The document suggests that extreme weather events and diseases carried by ticks and other organisms could kill more people as temperatures rise.

Allergies could worsen because climate change could produce more pollen. Smog, a leading cause of respiratory illness and lung disease, could become more severe in many parts of the country. At the same time, global warming could mean fewer illnesses and deaths due to cold.

"This document inescapably, unmistakably shows that global warming pollution not only threatens human health and welfare, but it is adversely impacting human health and welfare today," said Vickie Patton, deputy general counsel for the Environmental Defense Fund. "What this document demonstrates is that the imperative for action is now."

While the science pointed to a link between public health and climate change, the Bush administration has worked to discourage such a connection. To acknowledge one would compel the government to regulate greenhouse gases.

The administration on Friday dismissed the scientists' findings when it made clear that the Clean Air Act was the wrong tool to control global warming pollution. Instead, the administration asked for public comment on a range of ways to reduce greenhouse gases from cars, airplanes, trains and smokestacks under the 1970 law.

A better solution, the EPA said, would have Congress writing a law aimed just at global warming.

Jonathan Shradar, a spokesman for EPA chief Stephen Johnson, said that while the administrator knows that "the science is clear and that climate change is a significant issue", Johnson did not want to make a "rash decision under the wrong law."

"Once there is an endangerment finding, then the Clean Air Act is activated and regulation may begin," Shradar said.

In December, the White House refused to open an e-mail from the EPA that included the finding that climate change endangered public welfare. The determination was based on an earlier, and similar version of the document released Monday. At the time, the White House insisted on removing all references to the science, according to Jason K. Burnett, a former adviser to Johnson on climate issues.

Burnett, a Democrat, has charged that Vice President Dick Cheney's office deleted portions of congressional testimony last October prepared by the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that made similar assertions on the health effects of global warming. The White House contends the testimony was changed because of doubts about the science.

After the release of the EPA analysis, industry representatives suggested the link between climate change and health was weak.

"The question is not a scientific one. It is a legal and political question, of how much impact justifies the extraordinary use of the Clean Air Act," said Scott Segal, director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council, a coalition of power companies.

While no one doubts that more people die in a heat wave, the question is whether that death is "related to manmade greenhouse gas emissions," he said.

Governors talk of moving beyond corn-based ethanol

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Associated Press Writer

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PHILADELPHIA --Governors from the coal fields of West Virginia to the corn fields of Iowa talked Sunday at their summer meeting about moving beyond ethanol produced just from food sources.

They sometimes have different priorities in reaching this conclusion - priorities that can be as simple as who grows corn and who feeds it to livestock.

And they're also not talking about replacement so much as supplementing: using switchgrass or wood waste products, for example, along with corn.

Still, the conversation - including an energy forum Sunday - has big implications. The nation has 134 ethanol plants in 26 states with 77 more under construction or expanding, according to the Renewable Fuels Association, a trade group for the ethanol industry.

This year's corn crop, expected to be a record, is worth about \$52 billion.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture Department says economic growth in developing countries, tight global grain supplies and demand for ethanol have pushed corn prices to record or near-record prices.

That in turn has led some to blame the push for ethanol on high food prices. Disagreeing sharply, the ethanol industry and corn growers point the finger at record fuel prices driving up the cost of growing and shipping food.

"Corn-based and commodities-based ethanol for states like Minnesota has been a success story," said the state's governor, Tim Pawlenty.

"But we recognize that this has to now move to phase two," he said.

Pawlenty was among about half the nation's governors who gathered for the summer meeting, where clean and renewable energy is the top official topic.

Pawlenty, a Republican, launched "Securing a Clean Energy Future" when he took the reins of the National Governors Association last year as the group's chairman, a one-year post.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry raised the stakes in the debate in April when he asked the Environmental Protection Agency to cut by half a requirement in last year's energy law to produce 9 billion gallons of ethanol in 2008 for blending into gasoline.

Perry and other opponents of the requirement say the push to turn more corn into ethanol is raising food prices and the cost of feed for livestock.

The EPA hasn't acted on Perry's request and the Energy Department isn't thrilled about it, saying it would slow investment in biofuel technology.

Several Republican lawmakers - but no other governors - have signed onto Perry's request.

"I truly do not believe that a food-based product should be used for energy," said Gov. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, where almost all energy needs are met by coal. "It should be used for human consumption."

Gov. Mark Sanford of South Carolina called the EPA requirement "a totally bogus government mandate" at Sunday's energy forum.

The current buzz is cellulosic ethanol, or ethanol made from plant matter. Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm pitched the idea Sunday of using more wood products because of the large number of forests in her state.

Gov. Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania says his state "could be to cellulosic ethanol what Iowa was to corn-based ethanol." A new state law will require a minimum of a billion gallons of fuel annually pumped in Pennsylvania come from renewable fuels.

Iowa Gov. Chet Culver said he welcomed the debate as a way to reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil. But he said that "you can't get to cellulosic ethanol until you do ethanol first."

He pointed to the construction of a plant in Emmetsburg, Iowa, by ethanol maker Poet where the company hopes to produce cellulosic ethanol on a large scale.

"We should be thanking these Iowa farmers, these ethanol producers, these innovators, that are - as we speak today - out in Iowa trying to solve that energy security challenge," Culver said.

"No one believes that, long term, ethanol is going to be the silver bullet, but it is clearly one of the better options right now," he said.

Pawlenty says biofuels will be a big part of the nation's energy future but the type of biofuels will evolve and change.

Gov. Jon Huntsman of Utah echoed that notion when he dismissed the idea of an energy argument along the lines of to drill or not to drill for oil.

"The choices increasingly are plentiful," he said on C-SPAN Sunday.

"The question before policy makers really is what are the choices we have to get us from today's very hydrocarbon dependent world to one, 20, 30, 40 years from now, that will be much less hydrocarbon dependent," he said.

China says energy efficiency improving

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 15, 2008

BEIJING --China is making progress in a five-year effort launched in 2006 to improve energy efficiency in its fuel-guzzling economy, a state news agency said Tuesday, but the country is still falling short of its annual targets.

Energy consumption per unit of economic output fell by 3.66 percent last year, after a 1.79 percent drop in 2006, the Xinhua News Agency said, citing the National Development and Reform Commission, the country's top planning agency.

But that was short of the minimum 4 percent annual decline required by the plan, which calls for a 20 percent overall improvement by 2010.

Beijing imposed the efficiency goals as part of efforts to clean up China's heavily polluted environment and reduce growing reliance on imported oil, which communist leaders see as a security threat.

Chinese industries use 20 to 100 percent more energy per unit of output than their U.S., Japanese and other counterparts, according to the World Bank. China's government says the gap is even bigger, putting energy use at 3.4 times the world average.

China is the world's second-biggest oil consumer and importer after the United States and also relies heavily on domestic coal supplies to fuel an economy that is expected to grow by at least 9 percent this year.

The region with the biggest improvement last year was Beijing, where energy use per unit of economic output shrank by 6 percent, Xinhua said. It said that was due in part to special efforts to clean up the city for the Summer Olympics this August.

The government has closed a string of smaller, less efficient coal-fired power plants since 2005.

So far, plants with a total generating capacity of 26 million kilowatts have been shut down, Xinhua said. It said that would save 32.6 million tons of coal and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by more than 550,000 tons per year.

[San Diego Union-Tribune Commentary Monday, July 14, 2008](#)

As gas costs keep rising, look at ways to fight back

DEAN CALBREATH

With gas prices hovering above \$4.50 per gallon and with the growing likelihood that those prices may rise to \$7 or more in the near future, the time has come for America to declare war.

"Declare war?" you may say. "Aren't we already waging one too many wars these days?"

But I'm not talking about war on another nation. We need to declare war on oil itself: a multipronged attack involving business, government and you and me.

Today, *The San Diego Union-Tribune* began a four-day series on how oil prices are profoundly changing local driving habits, housing choices and finances. Here are some ideas to fight back against oil:

- Flextime/telecommuting. Flextime – letting workers set their own hours – saves fuel by cutting the time workers spend in gas-eating rush-hour traffic. Telecommuting is the ultimate gas saver. You can't spend money at the pump when you're working at home. While telecommuting's not right for everyone, a lot of jobs could be handled from home.

Only 10 percent of businesses allow the majority of their employees to use flextime on a daily basis, according to a recent study by the Families and Work Institute in New York. Only 1 percent allow a majority of workers to telecommute on a daily basis.

By making employees commute to work, businesses force them to dig into their pockets, which will make them demand higher wages or seek work elsewhere, adding to corporate expenses.

Telecommuting has applications beyond the business world. The rise in gas prices is driving college students to seek their educations through online courses, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

But the student-related traffic jams on Interstate 8 near San Diego State University or La Jolla Village Drive near the University of California San Diego suggest that our local colleges, so proud of their technological achievements, are behind the times when it comes to telecommuting.

SDSU, for instance, offers only one undergraduate degree and half a dozen post-graduate degrees online. Although it has been offering upper-division classes online for a while, it only this summer began offering such lower-division classes as Psychology 101.

In contrast, such institutions as the University of Maryland at Rockville, the University of Massachusetts at Cambridge and the University of Illinois at Springfield offer a wide array of undergraduate degrees and lower-division classes online.

"As gas prices approach \$5, I'm sure more students will be looking for online courses," said James Frazee, director of instructional technology services at SDSU. "With competition growing, the people who are responsible for governance here are starting to realize we need to embrace these new modalities."

-- Four-day workweeks. California is often seen as a cutting-edge trendsetter. But the state is being outpaced by such outliers as Arkansas, Alabama and Utah in a shift to four-day workweeks, designed to cut commute expenses and energy bills.

Starting next month, 17,000 state workers in Utah will be put on a schedule of 10 hours per day Monday through Thursday. Although the system is being tweaked to accommodate parents with young children, among others, the governor forecasts millions of dollars in cost savings.

Some Californians are getting on the bandwagon. [The San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District, for instance, is promoting four-day weeks as a way to combat Central Valley smog](#) – a side benefit of the war against gasoline.

Some local companies, such as General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, are experimenting with modified workweeks. But the idea has not gained much traction locally.

"It's a new trend, but only time will tell if it can meet its goals of getting people off the road," said Marney Cox, economist at the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG. "Right now, we're putting more of our emphasis on telecommuting. But (the four-day week) is a new trend, so things may change."

-- **Public transportation.** With the rising price of oil, demand has been rising. Between fiscal 2004 and 2007, ridership on local bus and rail routes jumped 12 percent, compared with a 10 percent reduction from 2000 to 2003, when gas prices were still relatively low.

As gas prices rise, demand for public transit will undoubtedly grow. But so will operating expenses, which jumped 19 percent between 2004 and 2007.

Ironically, at the same time demand has risen, the level of public financial support for transit systems is faltering. Within the past year, the Metropolitan Transit System and North County Transit District have had to raise fares, cut back on poorly traveled routes, eliminate free transfers and even – in the case of North County – lay off 10 percent of personnel.

Cox suggests that one way of gaining more funds for the system is to segment the market, offering faster and higher quality transit to upscale customers at a higher fee, which would help subsidize fares for other customers.

But that's only a partial solution. Cox said that for the short term, at least, the quickest way of keeping public transit healthy is to raise local sales taxes.

Which gets us to the stickiest issue of all:

-- **Taxes.** Despite all of the gnashing of teeth about the rise of gasoline to \$4.50, the fact is that Americans pay less for gas than people in other industrialized nations. In Europe, prices range between \$8 and \$10 a gallon, largely because motorists are forced to pay high taxes on gasoline to discourage driving and subsidize the heavily utilized but relatively cheap bus, train and subway systems.

In the United States, by contrast, we keep gasoline prices low by international standards but fail to adequately invest in our public transportation systems, forcing people onto the highways.

Sevren Borenstein, who heads the University of California Energy Institute at Berkeley, recommends one possible solution. Boost gasoline taxes, earmarking them specifically for improved public transportation systems. And then offset the tax increase by lowering taxes on income.

That kind of tax trade could hurt low-income workers or small businesses who don't have the financial wherewithal to face a rate hike. One possible answer could be to offer gas stamps – similar to food stamps – that would allow needy people and businesses to buy gas at a discount.

"If we raise taxes on oil to \$3-\$4 per gallon, and lower taxes on income, that would be a great move for the U.S. economy," Borenstein said. "What we should be doing is taxing people for things that we don't want them to do – such as smoking tobacco or driving cars – and not taxing them for things we want them to do, such as working. Instead, we do the opposite."

[Fresno Bee commentary, Tuesday, July 15, 2008:](#)

JOEL STEIN: We can achieve better living through \$8 gas

I love \$4 gas. It makes me appreciate freedom. I watch as the dollars spin and think, "You, Triceratops, did not get squished by an asteroid in vain. You got squished for a \$60 drive to Vegas."

So I didn't go to last week's MoveOn.org protests against high gas prices, which included one at the most expensive gas station in the Los Angeles area, the Union 76 in Beverly Hills.

MoveOn's news release explained: "We want to make sure the world knows that Beverly Hills residents are fed up with gas prices and want a president in the White House who will bring the cost of gas down."

MoveOn always understands the problems plaguing Americans, such as the cost of gas in Beverly Hills. If the group succeeds on this issue, I hope it will next tackle the onerous two-year contract on the new iPhone and how late heirloom tomatoes arrived this year.

If MoveOn and Barack Obama really were going to confront America bravely with hard, necessary truths, they would tell us how great \$4 gas has been for us.

With public transit use nationally at a 50-year high, traffic dropped 2.1% in the first four months of this year across the country. That mileage reduction -- along with people driving smaller cars, and more slowly, to save gas -- could mean that 12,000 fewer people will die in traffic accidents this year, according to a study by professors Michael Morrissey at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and David C. Grabowski at Harvard Medical School.

Air pollution has been reduced enough, said economics professor J. Paul Leigh at the University of California at Davis, to prevent 2,200 respiratory-related deaths over the past year. Less eating out and more walking and biking could mean a 10% reduction in obesity, according to Charles Courtemanche, an assistant economics professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Apparently higher gas prices also keep econ professors employed.

Yes, it's easy for me to revel in \$4 gas because I'm rich. And because my wife and I own a Mini Cooper and a Prius. And because I work at home. And because some of the mutual funds I own contain a fair amount of Exxon Mobil stock. And because I'm brave enough to ignore the manufacturer's suggestion to use high-octane gas.

Cheap gas is unfair. Driving creates huge social costs in the form of traffic, health-damaging pollution and global warming that aren't suffered solely by the person buying the gasoline.

Governments usually set up idiotic systems to offset such social costs (emissions trading, ethanol subsidies, taco truck regulations) instead of forcing individuals to pay for their own mess by adding a tax to remedy the imbalance. That kind of tax -- the most fair kind, really -- is called a Pigovian tax, and its use is why gas costs \$8 to \$10 a gallon in Europe, where they have fewer road deaths even though they drive like complete idiots.

If the U.S. were to jack up gas taxes slowly until we're in the \$8 range, life would be better. We not only would be safer and have reduced greenhouse-gas emissions, but we probably would be happier too.

Studies show that the only thing that consistently increases personal happiness is social interaction; high gas prices have led to real estate prices falling faster in suburbs and exurbs than in cities, so we soon might have more content downtown-dwellers.

Those same studies show that the thing that makes people least happy is commuting, and telecommuting is way up this year. We could use the tax revenue to fund public transportation. And we would go back to the days when driving a car was a way to show people what a rich jerk you were. In other words, we no longer would need SUVs for that.

Sure, \$8 gas is unfair to poor people, but so is all of capitalism. Rich people get more of the globe's resources. No one has a right to cheap gas any more than he has a right to other things needed for a full and productive life, like an iPhone or a weekly newspaper column where you can tick people off.

We spent 50 years using government money to build the freeways that led to the driving-centric, mall-rat lifestyle I grew up with, so it surely will take decades more to restructure our society into something better.

And as bummed as I am to pay a lot for gas, it's a fair price for improving society. I also think government should look into some kind of heavy taxation on Facebook usage.

Joel Stein is a columnist for the Los Angeles Times.

[Tri-Valley Herald commentary, Monday, July 14, 2008:](#)

Cameron Sullivan: Heat and smoke blow in cool creativity

By Cameron Sullivan

Staying indoors to avoid the heat and poor air quality wasn't working.

You can only play so many board games, card games or rounds of hide-and-seek before somebody gets angry over losing too often. You can only let the kids watch a certain amount of TV or play a certain amount of video games before they turn into zombies.

I have to give my children credit for creativity. This summer they developed the Sullivan Kids Creamery, an ice-cream shop with its own list of frozen confections. The menu includes ice-cream islands, which are made by stirring ice cream and milk into milkshake consistency at the bottom of a bowl to represent the ocean, then dropping in a scoop of ice cream as the island.

The kids received special creamery bowls and spoons from their cousin Nicki for their summer birthdays. Nicki even found some sprinkles shaped like dolphins, sharks and tropical fish, which the kids sprinkle into the ocean around the ice-cream island.

The Sullivan Kids Creamery menu states: "Everything is \$FREE (but please tip us)!" One of my children takes the orders, one mixes the concoctions — eating two spoonfuls for every scoop served — and the third delivers the confections to the table.

The other day, I overheard them dreaming up such ideas as, "Let's put a lucky sticker on the bottom of one of the bowls and whoever gets that bowl wins a prize."

Soon they were designing banners to hang from the front of the house and fliers to pass out around town. I nixed the signage after giving them each a 10-cent tip for the next mint chocolate chip island I ordered.

But like every other indoor activity, you can only eat so many ice-cream islands. Eventually, you have to leave the Sullivan Kids Creamery to get some exercise. Late last week, we reached that point.

Our destinations had to meet some important criteria — they had to be largely indoors, and they had to offer significant physical activity to burn off the ice-cream island calories.

The choices are out there. Many city pools have reduced admission on 100-degree days, if you don't mind 85-degree, murky pool water. Also, cities have designated cooling centers at such places as senior centers and libraries.

After trying a variety of these options, we needed something that offered more exercise and more fun. Bowling in Dublin and Livermore and a visit to Super Franks Fun Adventure in Pleasanton were good choices.

Next, the kids wanted to go for a "walk around the toy store" for exercise.

At first I said no.

Nevertheless, I knew we needed to get out of the house. When you've been stuck inside for several days, you not only need a good reason for not having found time to clean the bathrooms, but you need to think up a way to put off these tasks even longer.

Then it hit me. When I asked the kids if they wanted to start another partnership called the Sullivan Kids Cleaners, my business-minded children jumped at the chance. In less than 90

minutes they vacuumed the house, cleaned the bathroom floors, counters and mirrors, and even dusted some baseboards. The kids' teamwork was so inspiring that I stopped my own work to join them for a while.

The kids earned some money doing the chores I least enjoy, and had fun in the process. Later that hot, smoky day, we took that "walk around the toy store" and each of the kids found something to buy with the cold, hard cash.

Meanwhile, for a huge discount off the cost of a professional cleaning service, my prize was a clean house. I'm hoping the Sullivan Kids Cleaners offer weekly visits all summer long. A pay raise may be in order.