

Telegraph fire grows

Mariposa County blaze destroys 25 homes; 4,000 structures threatened.

By Barbara Anderson, Jim Guy and Doug Hoagland / The Fresno Bee

Also in the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

A destructive wildfire raged another day across Mariposa County on Monday, raising the number of homes destroyed to 25 and leaving scores of evacuees wondering when they can return home.

The so-called Telegraph fire grew to 27,000 acres and was only 10% contained late Monday night. The blaze forced the closure of Highway 140 into Yosemite National Park in the afternoon, but commuters were being escorted through the burned area of the roadway starting Monday night.

Several thousand firefighters battled the flames with more than 450 engines, helicopters, air tankers and bulldozers.

About 4,000 structures were threatened by flames that in some places leaped 100 feet into a grayish Sierra sky. Ash floated to the ground near Mariposa, creating the eerie sense of a summer snow storm.

About 25 homes in the Coulterville area were added to the mandatory evacuation list.

The day culminated with a community meeting at Mariposa County High School, where more than 500 people packed the facility to capacity while others listened through open doorways. Cal Fire officials said the communities of Mariposa, Midpines and the Mount Bullion Conservation Camp were under an evacuation advisory.

Kelley McClard, 50, learned at the meeting that a home her family built 15 years ago had been destroyed. She vowed to rebuild.

"That's where we belong," she said.

Areas hit hard by the fire included Whitlock Road, Sherlock Road, Mount Bullion Ridge and Morissey Road.

Rep. George Radanovich, R- Mariposa, attended the meeting. He said his home, on Ben Hur Road, was safe but added that he had friends who were not so fortunate.

At Mariposa Elementary School, evacuees waited Monday for news about the homes they fled.

"I'm one of the homeless," said Mike Chaty, 54, a California Highway Patrol lieutenant.

On Saturday, he and wife, Renee Chaty, 46, prepared to leave their house, thinking it was a voluntary evacuation. They grabbed a few things, but then decided to stop to eat. While eating, a sheriff's deputy came to their house and said, "You've got to get out now."

"We could see the flames coming directly up the canyon to our house," Mike Chaty said.

With tears in his eyes, he added: "This is very, very traumatic."

Katrina Stone, 29, was at the evacuation center with her three sons, Devon Blackwell, 9, Logan Stone, 7, and Travis Stone, 4.

She said people tell her the fire has "just one more mountain to get to our place." Her parents already have lost their house. Stone was able to get three of her horses out, and also four horses belonging to neighbors who are vacationing in Mexico. She also got four dogs out.

Her boys "have got the clothes they're wearing, but I got everybody out, and that's what matters."

Some residents were celebrating news that their homes were spared.

Frank Jacobson, 65, said a 200-foot clearance around his home saved it from the flames. "Everything is cool," he said.

He meant that literally. Because of generator power, "there's beer in the refrigerator," he said.

In nearby Yosemite Valley, smoke cleared somewhat Monday, but the power still was out, except where generators were running. The park remained open, though Monday's traffic appeared lighter than usual because some people mistakenly believe the park is closed, said park ranger Greg Nespor.

Authorities said the fire apparently was sparked Friday by a target shooter. As the blaze grew Saturday, temperatures topping 100 degrees and low humidity made it difficult for firefighters.

On Monday, however, weather conditions helped crews in Mariposa, with a high temperature of 90 degrees, down slightly from the day before, and little wind, said Jim Dudley, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Hanford. Humidity went up to 23%, which helped because moisture reduces fire spread.

The National Weather Service was expecting similar conditions today, with slightly higher humidity.

Meanwhile, air district officials said the fire was sending ash over Mariposa and Madera counties Monday, which in some areas could trigger asthma attacks and acute bronchitis and increase the risk of respiratory infections.

Smoke was detected Monday from about noon to 1 p.m. at the district's observation station at the Fresno airport, but mild winds were enough to lower the concentration of particulates. The smoke came from the Telegraph fire and a smaller fire in eastern Fresno County.

Fire doesn't deter tourists

Despite loss of power and closure of a main road, Yosemite area accommodates its visitors with generators and hazy vistas

John Coté, Chronicle Staff Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Yosemite Valley -- A 26,000-acre wildfire burning about 12 miles west of Yosemite Valley has destroyed 12 homes and forced closure of the main road to Yosemite National Park on Monday, but has had little effect on the park beyond obscuring the stunning views and forcing visitors to take cold showers.

The blaze, dubbed the Telegraph Fire, cut power to Yosemite Valley, but backup generators have kept much of the park services open, including the Village Store and the Yosemite Lodge.

"We're going backpacking, so we were planning on being without electricity," said Steve Nichol of Salt Lake City as he plucked a bottle of water from the Village Store's cooler. "It's not really much of an issue."

The lack of power meant a pizza restaurant was closed in the park and there was no hot water in rooms at the lodge, but that did little to deter the throngs of guests that streamed in and out of the lobby.

"The folks aren't coming here for the lodging. They're coming here for Yosemite," said Kenny Karst, a spokesman for the park. "It's still not really disrupting the guest experience."

Roy and Angie Borego, who rode their Harley Davidson motorcycle up from the Orange County town of Cypress, weren't deterred on their maiden trip to the park.

"At first you want to feel sorry for yourself because the smoke is obscuring your view," Angie Borego said as she looked up at Bridal Veil Fall, "but that's nothing compared to people losing their homes. We'll just come back."

The fire had consumed 26,130 acres and was 10 percent contained as of late Monday afternoon, burning 12 miles west of Yosemite, just south of the small town of Midpines (Mariposa County).

It was started Friday by someone who was target-shooting, said Suzanne Grin of the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. She provided no information about that person and said no one has been arrested.

The state said initially that the blaze threatened about 2,000 homes, but increased that number to 4,000 by mid-afternoon Monday. Those threatened are in Midpines, Briceburg, Mariposa, Greeley Hill, Coulterville, Bear Valley and Mount Bullion Camp. Evacuation was voluntary.

The fire was burning in an area with steep canyons, making it hard for firefighters to get to the flames, Grin said. Temperatures rose to the mid-90s Monday, and the humidity at 4 p.m. was 21 percent.

Fire crews and support personnel battling the blaze totaled more than 3,100.

The blaze also knocked out power to the town of El Portal at the park's western entrance on Highway 140, damaging business during the peak tourist season.

Officials ordered closure of the highway Monday from the park entrance to 3 miles west of Briceburg. Anyone needing to enter or leave the valley had to use Highway 41 or Highway 120, Grin said.

"It's had a significant impact," said Kevin Shelton, vice president of marketing for Yosemite Management Group, which runs two lodges in El Portal, including the Yosemite View Inn. "We've had some cancellations, but some people have chosen to stay."

With backup generators able to offer only limited power, like some lighting in the Yosemite View Inn lobby, guest rooms were left with no air conditioning or hot water. The hotel restaurant was closed, but workers were selling sandwiches and ice cream from the lobby.

Juergen and Constanze Roehler from Hamburg, Germany, on a 17-day tour of the American west with their son, had a reservation at the Yosemite View Inn, but decided to spend Sunday night in Merced, about 65 miles away.

"Now were thinking about whether we should stay or go," said Constanze Roehler, 51.

They drove into Yosemite from Mono Lake in the east and didn't realize there was a fire raging beyond the park until they got into the park.

"We opened the windows and my son and me, we said, 'It smells like fire,' " Constanze Roehler recalled. "My husband said, 'No, it smells like a forest.' Later we were sure it was fire."

The smoke levels varied in Yosemite Valley throughout the day on Monday, ranging from slightly hazy to totally obscuring the iconic view of Half Dome.

Earlier on Monday, portions of the fire were burning directly across the Merced River from Highway 140 west of El Portal, prompting both tourists and firefighters to pause for pictures of the flames.

Fire destroys 25 homes near Yosemite National Park

By Garance Burke, Associated Press

In the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Visitors to Yosemite National Park weighed whether to cut their vacations short Tuesday as a destructive wildfire raging miles from the famed wilderness threatened thousands of homes and left evacuees stranded.

Authorities said late Monday the blaze tearing through a steep, dry river canyon had destroyed 25 homes, more than double the number reported earlier in the day. The fire has forced the evacuation of about 300 homes in the nearby towns of Midpines and Coulterville and is endangering as many as 4,000 others.

More than 46 square miles of mostly wilderness terrain have burned since a target shooter sparked the wildfire on Friday. The fire was 10 percent contained Monday night as it burned about 12 miles from Yosemite National Park, which remained open.

Still, some visitors packed their bags and left campgrounds and other areas near the park because of the fire and the smoky haze that accompanied it.

"You would like to be relaxed on your holiday," said Trees Duipmans, visiting from Holland with her three teenage children. "If you're looking for tension you visit New York City. This here is a whole other kind of tension."

Duipmans and her three children, ages 14 to 18, arrived at a campground outside Yosemite on Sunday afternoon, when smoke had already turned the sun a deep glowing red. They camped overnight but decided to leave Monday.

"There was ash falling on our tent. We think we will go to the beach," she said.

Highway 140, which leads to one entrance of the park, remained closed Monday evening, according to the California Department of Transportation. Other entrances to the park were still open along Highway 120 at Big Oak Flat, Highway 123 over Tioga Pass and Highway 41 through Oakhurst.

Earlier in the day, Yosemite's chief ranger Steve Shackelton stood along Hwy. 140 watching flames lick down the side of the river canyon.

"See that," he said, pointing at a flaming pine cone tumbling down the hillside. "If wind comes from the north, the embers from that pine cone could jump right across this canyon."

As Shackelton spoke, the pine cone left a flaming trail that sent fire raging up the slope of dry grass, sending out a veil of smoke that obscured the view of the blaze.

"This is some of the most difficult territory you can find in California for fighting fires," said Mikel Martin, chief of the Madera-Mariposa Unit. "That country is so steep you could almost say it's straight up and straight down."

At the peak of summer, as many as 4,000 visitors a day stream into the park. Officials didn't expect the fire would keep many away.

"People are out there hiking, the campgrounds are full, everyone is taking the smoke in stride," said Scott Gediman, a park ranger.

Power has been out since Saturday in the park and in the outlying community of El Portal on the park's western boundary. Hotels in the area are open and running on generators.

California has been dogged by wildfire since June, and hot, dry conditions have turned flare-ups into prolonged fire fights. While many earlier blazes were ignited by a massive lightning storm, the fire outside Yosemite was sparked by a target shooter.

High temperatures are expected to remain in the low- to mid-90s, with low humidity and afternoon wind, National Weather Service meteorologist Dan Gudgel said Monday.

Outside the town of Midpines, some residents ignored mandatory evacuation orders, while for others the damage was already done.

"Everyone's taken it really bad," Phillip Mitchell said of the loss of his uncle's double wide mobile home, which family members identified as one of the 12 destroyed in the fire. "I'm grateful though for the lives that have been saved."

Air pollution warning from two area fires

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, July 28, 2008

The valley air district warned today that smoke from two area fires could raise pollution levels in foothill and mountain communities.

The fires, near Yosemite National Park and in Fresno County, are producing particulate matter, the air district said in a statement, that can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease and cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis.

The air board statement said that seeing or smelling smoke is an indicator of impact. The warning was for valley counties from San Joaquin south, including Tulare County.

Central Valley air quality suffers from fires

The Associated Press

Sacramento Bee, Stockton Record and other papers, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

FRESNO, Calif. -- Smoke from a fire burning out of control near Yosemite National Park has prompted air quality warnings as far south as Kern County.

Officials from the San Joaquin Valley Air District say particulate levels from the fire, and another one near in Fresno County, are expected to be high from San Joaquin County south through Bakersfield.

Particulate in smoke can cause health problems, asthma attacks and acute bronchitis and increase the risk of respiratory infections. Air district officials warn people to avoid prolonged exposure and heavy exertion outdoors.

The fire near Yosemite fire has destroyed 12 homes and forced the evacuation of about 200 others. Fire officials say it has charred more than 40 square miles since a target shooter sparked a flame Friday.

Targeting those diesel polluters

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Significant dollars are being offered to remove some of the big old diesel trucks that contribute mightily to the valley's air pollution. Money is available to replace or retrofit trucks older than 2003. More information on the incentive programs is available in the "Grants and Incentives" section at www.valleyair.org or by e-mail from weberip@valleyair.org, or through the Emission Reduction Incentive Program at 800-766-4463. The money comes from Proposition 1B, the transportation bond approved by voters in November 2006.

Trucking group files port lawsuit

By Art Marroquin

LA Daily News, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

The American Trucking Association filed a federal lawsuit on Monday against the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, alleging that the Clean Trucks Program will squeeze out small trucking companies in favor of large-scale motor carriers.

The suit, filed in U.S. District Court in downtown Los Angeles, also alleges that the twin ports are trying to impose labor controls on the trucking industry, which was deregulated by the federal government in 1980.

"We firmly believe that these concession programs unlawfully re-regulate the port trucking industry to the detriment of motor carriers, shippers and the businesses and consumers that depend on the products that are handled at those ports," said Bill Graves, president and CEO of the ATA.

Graves said he is not opposed to the ports' goal to reduce diesel truck emission by 80 percent within five years, and also supports a \$35 cargo fee to pay for the \$1.6 billion phased-in program.

Beginning Oct. 1, trucks built before 1989 will be banned from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. By 2012, trucks will be required to meet 2007 vehicle emissions standards.

Officials with both ports said they do not expect to see a delay in implementing the Clean Trucks Program this fall.

"We are committed to rolling ahead with the world's most ambitious and bold plan to simultaneously green and grow a port," said Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

"When thousands of lives are cut short every year by toxic emissions from the port, we have a moral mandate to act," he said. "The health of our environment and the public is at stake, and it is time to hit the brakes on the 16,000 dirty diesel-spewing trucks polluting our air every day."

Despite the projected environmental benefits to the region, the program could drive several small trucking companies out of business. To keep costs down, the small firms rely on a system that allows them to contract with independent drivers, rather than hiring them as employees.

Carlos Alba, owner of APA Intermodal in Long Beach, said proposed costs associated with the concession plan could shutter the business he has worked so hard to build over the last decade.

"Most of us feel helpless since we don't have the funds to fight against the ports and the cities, so I'm glad to see somebody stepping up to the plate," Alba said. "We're all scared because it feels like we're getting bullied."

"Now I know what it feels like to have the mob visit my shop and demand money to join their club."

The ATA is also challenging a requirement adopted by the Port of Los Angeles that calls for completely banning independent owner-operator truckers within five years. At that point, only truckers employed by trucking companies will be allowed to enter the port.

"That requirement, which has nothing to do with the clean air goals of the ports' Clean Trucks Program, threatens a well-established trucking industry operational practice that provides efficiencies and the flexibility needed for the trucking industry to effectively serve our customers," Graves said.

The Federal Maritime Commission - the agency that determines commerce law - determined last month that competition among trucking firms would not be harmed by the provisions adopted by Los Angeles.

Details of a legal analysis completed by Port of Los Angeles attorneys were not immediately released, but executives said that the Clean Trucks Program does not violate any federal laws and called ATA's claims "unfounded."

"We strongly believe that our plan is lawful, and we will vigorously oppose any action that will delay cleaning up the air so that Angelenos can begin to breathe easier," Port of Los Angeles executives said in a statement.

"The Clean Trucks Program achieves the port's and the city of Los Angeles' business objectives and is well within their rights as a landowner," the statement read. "The law has always recognized that a landowner can control the activities that occur on its property and, in fact, has an obligation to mitigate the impact of those activities."

Hoping to avoid a legal battle, the Port of Long Beach went down a different path and adopted a plan that allows both employee and independent owner-operator truckers to continue hauling goods to and from the port, as long as their vehicles meet the program's new emissions standards.

"We have worked closely with the trucking and shipping industries to develop a workable program," said Richard Steinke, executive director of the Port of Long Beach.

"It is disappointing that the ATA is seeking to impede this critical air-quality initiative," he said. "Despite this litigation, we are still moving full speed ahead toward our goal of reducing pollution from the truck fleet by 80 percent by 2012."

Both versions of the Clean Trucks Program are heavily favored by environmental groups and will be defended in court with help from the Sierra Club, the National Resources Defense Council and the Coalition for Clean Air, according to representatives of those groups.

However, the ATA has a strong argument by alleging that both ports are attempting to regulate commerce laws, said Susan Ross, an attorney who specializes in international trade for the Los Angeles law firm of Mitchell Silberberg and Knupp.

Ross said she expects the ATA to file an injunction to block the Clean Trucks Program from starting by Oct. 1.

"They are both doing essentially the same thing, which is to regulate the trucking industry under the guise of environmental issues," Ross said. "If this is allowed to go full force, you will see large and midsized trucking companies take advantage and succeed under the program, while many of the smaller trucking companies will leave the industry, effectively changing how we get goods to market."

Trucking group sues Long Beach, Los Angeles ports over pollution plan

The ports require trucks to have permits, which the lawsuit contends puts an "unreasonable burden on interstate commerce" and violates federal laws.

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

The nation's largest trucking association filed a lawsuit in federal court Monday alleging that portions of a landmark program to upgrade a fleet of 17,000 old trucks servicing the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach place an "unreasonable burden on interstate commerce" and could harm the U.S. economy.

Port authorities said they intended to proceed with the air quality initiative.

"Truck pollution is a serious threat to public health, including the health of truck drivers," said Richard D. Steinke, executive director of the Port of Long Beach. "We need to move forward without delay."

The lawsuit was filed by the American Trucking Assn., which represents 37,000 licensed motor-carriers.

It aims to block plans allowing freight hauling companies to access port terminals only if they have permits called "concession contracts."

Such restrictions, according to the lawsuit, violate federal laws that prohibit state and local governments from regulating motor-carrier routes and services.

In the suit, which was filed in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles, the association requests an injunction against the restrictions, which are scheduled to take effect Oct. 1.

In a prepared statement, Bill Graves, president and chief executive of the association, said "the litigation is not aimed at and should not interfere with the ports' clean air efforts.

"We are challenging only the intrusive and unnecessary regulatory structure being created under the concession plans," he said.

Together, the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports serve as the gateway for 40% of the goods imported into the United States.

Pressures to grow -- and to clean the air of noxious diesel emissions -- prompted the ports to develop a joint clean-truck program to replace high-emission cargo trucks with new or retrofitted models by 2012.

Lawsuit aims to preserve access to LA-area ports

By LAURA E. DAVIS, Associated Press Writer

In the Merced Sun-Star, Modesto Bee and other papers, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

LOS ANGELES -- A trade group representing nationwide truckers filed a lawsuit Monday claiming plans to clean up the air around the twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach place unfair restrictions on truckers.

In the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court, the American Trucking Associations said it does not oppose efforts to clean up the air but is concerned that other measures in the plans violate federal laws by unfairly regulating prices, routes and services.

The regulations favor bigger trucking companies over independent truckers and limit the number of trucks allowed to enter the ports, reducing market competition, the lawsuit claims.

Truckers must agree to the plans to retain access to the ports after Oct. 1.

"It's a barrier to entry," said Curtis Whalen of the Intermodal Motor Carriers Conference, an affiliate of the 37,000-member association. "We don't think the ports have the legal ability to do that."

The association wants the court to permanently restrict the plans from being implemented.

Defendants named in the lawsuit include the cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach along with their harbor departments and commissions.

"We feel that the program is legally defensible and we see no problem in continuing to move forward with this plan," said Lee Peterson, a spokesman for the Port of Long Beach.

Both cities passed plans earlier this year aimed at reducing truck pollution at the ports by as much as 80 percent. The plans would require trucks to meet tougher 2007 federal emissions standards by Jan. 12, 2012, along with a \$35 cargo fee to pay for the newer, cleaner-running trucks.

"We are committed to rolling ahead with the world's most ambitious and bold plan to simultaneously green and grow a port," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said in a statement in response to the lawsuit.

When the Los Angeles Harbor Commission unanimously passed its plan in March, officials also lauded it as a way to regulate thousands of independent drivers and ensure port security and maintenance of the truck fleet.

Unlike the Long Beach plan, Los Angeles would require the nearly 17,000 independent truckers who work at the port to eventually become employees of trucking companies.

Critics have charged that this is a thinly veiled attempt to unionize low-wage drivers, a claim disputed by the commission.

In its lawsuit, the association claims the different restrictions regarding independent truck drivers amounts to "a textbook case of the need for federal pre-emption to prevent a patchwork of service-determining laws, rules and regulations."

The California Trucking Association, which has more than 3,600 members, issued a statement Monday supporting the lawsuit. It said the cities' plans would displace thousands of independent truckers and force smaller trucking companies out of business.

Rain, wind clears Beijing air ahead of Olympics

By HENRY SANDERSON, Associated Press Writer

In the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

BEIJING After days of hazy, dark skies raised concerns about pollution levels during the Olympics, wind and rain helped clear Beijing's air Tuesday and officials hoped it will stay for the games' start next week.

The heavy haze was among the worst seen in Beijing in the past month, despite drastic pollution controls put in force July 20 that included pulling half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads.

It is not known how much the measures, which also included halting most construction and closing some factories in the capital and surrounding provinces, have helped.

Du Shaozhong, deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau, told reporters that the air quality had greatly improved in July compared to the same month last year.

Since July 1, all pollutants have been reduced by 15 to 20 percent, Du said. There have been 25 days of clean air in July, he said, two more than the same period last year.

Du also confirmed that Beijing could institute emergency measures if air pollution worsens during the games, and said a contingency plan was already in place.

The official China Daily newspaper said Monday that Beijing could pull more cars from the roads and shut down additional factories as part of contingency measures if air quality worsens during the Olympics.

Beijing's air quality should improve over the next few days, said Zhai Xiaohui, a spokeswoman for the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau.

While the government's measures have helped, she said, weather is also important.

"One other major factor is that the air flow has been better with windy and rainy weather conditions. It helps pollutants to dissipate," she said.

The National Meteorological Center said that rain is forecast for the next few days in Beijing.

The city's chronic air pollution has been a source of concern for Olympic organizers. The games, which will bring 10,500 athletes and hundreds of thousands of spectators to Beijing, open on Aug. 8.

The air pollution index dropped to 90 from 96 Monday, after reaching 118 on Saturday, a level classified as unhealthy for sensitive groups. An API below 50 is considered good and between 51 to 100 is moderate, the bureau said.

Critics say moderate levels are still above the World Health Organization's guidelines for healthy air.

Associated Press reporter Chi-Chi Zhang contributed to this story.

2008 Summer Olympics: Hong Kong sets new pollution record as horses arrive

USA TODAY, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

We told you yesterday about the air quality in Beijing. News agencies say the pollution has eased a bit thanks to more favorable weather conditions.

This photo by Bobby Yip of Reuters shows the smog today in Hong Kong, which is set to host equestrian competitions during the 2008 Summer Olympics.

"Just days before the Olympic Games are due to begin, the benchmark air pollution index reached an unprecedented 202 in Tap Mun - one notch higher than the previous record of 201 set in 2005 at Tung Chung," *The Standard* tells its readers in Hong Kong.

The Chinese government doesn't think we should be using photographs to assess the level of pollution.

"We do not approve of the use of pictures to pass judgment on air quality ... you have to look at the complete monitoring system, and scientifically look at the data," Du Shaozhong of the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau tells reporters, according to Reuters. "Cloud and fog are not pollution. This kind of weather is a natural phenomenon, and has nothing to do with pollution."

Note: We tried to add links to the official website for Beijing 2008, but the English-language version wouldn't load for us.

Today's photo: Haze blankets Beijing 10 days before Olympics

As we noted last month, when we compared two photos of the city's gray haze, BBC News has been charting the level of pollutants in the air around the city's athletic venues.

With the Summer Olympics set to begin in less than two weeks, local news organizations say the government may take emergency steps to curb air pollution in and around the capital. "The city has not experienced a 'blue day,' that is, healthy air quality in the past four days," according to *China Daily*. "The air pollution index (API) has stayed above 100, the national standard for good air quality."

"The air quality in August will be good," Du Shaozong, an official at the Environmental Protection Bureau, tells the Associated Press. On the off chance that it's not, AFP says a Japanese company has donated dust masks to that country's athletes.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses that the pollution in Beijing's skies has not been reduced, even though there has been new traffic restrictions and industries have closed. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

No baja la polución en cielos de Beijing

Las restricciones en el tráfico de automóviles y el cierre de fábricas de plano no han dado resultados

By Jim Yardley

El Universal, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

BEIJING.— A menos de dos semanas de los Juegos Olímpicos, los cielos de Beijing están contaminados a tal grado que las autoridades ya se encuentran en estado de emergencia. Esto después de que las últimas restricciones en el tráfico de automóviles y el cierre de fábricas simplemente no ha dado resultados.

Durante los últimos cinco días, Beijing ha sido una combinación de cielos grises y humedad. Los niveles de contaminación han sobrepasado los límites nacionales desde el pasado jueves, pese a que desde el 20 de julio entró en vigor un plan de contingencia.

Esto incluye un plan para que diaramente dejen de circular dos millones de autos, así como controlar la producción de algunas fábricas.

Pero ayer, el periódico chino en inglés China Daily, anunció que las principales autoridades de ñla ciudad han decidido aplicar ya medidas extremas: reducirán el tráfico de vehículos en un 90% y cerrarán temporalmente las fábricas.

Algunas delegaciones, incluyendo la de Estados Unidos, proporcionarán máscaras a sus atletas para que practiquen al aire libre sin verse tan afectados.

En las últimas conferencias de prensa, sin embargo, las autoridades chinas han expuesto que la contaminación ha bajado en un 20% con respecto del mes de julio de 2007.

El gobierno le echa la culpa a que en los últimos días ha llovido fuerte (algo raro para la región en esta época del año); las precipitaciones detonan los altos niveles de humedad que a su vez provoca que la contaminación no se diluya sobre la capital china. Un poco de viento ayudaría pero este factor tampoco se ha presentado.

“Estamos confiados en resolver el problema”, dijo Du Shaozhong, uno de los encargados de la rama del medio ambiente del gobierno de Beijing. “Nos aseguraremos de que la calidad del aire sea buena durante los Juegos”.

El cuestionado índice de calidad del aire en Beijing, calcula ésta en una escala de 1 a 500, siendo 500 lo peor; menos de 100 se dice que es una cifra aceptable.

Cuando el problema hizo crisis fue el jueves pasado, cuando el registro fue de 113; el viernes fue de 109; sábado de 118, y domingo de 113. El nivel del lunes no había sido anunciado.

Pero efectivamente, estos números son mejores que los de julio de 2007, cuando se llegaron a registrar cifras de 151. Pero lo cierto es que los niveles actuales están lejos de cumplir con los objetivos que tenían los organizadores de los Juegos.

Incluso, cuando las autoridades abrieron la Villa Olímpica el fin de semana pasado, la visibilidad era limitada.

Zhu Tong, un catedrático de la Universidad de Beijing y que ahora es asesor del Comité Organizador, dijo que es la falta de viento lo que está causando esta crisis: “Normalmente, estos niveles de contaminación duran dos o tres días tras una lluvia, pero no tenemos viento y llevamos una semana; eso hace que incluso se acumulen los contaminantes”.

Las medidas a tomar se oficializarán en el transcurso de esta semana, según informaron ayer medios de comunicación en China.

[L..A Times commentary, Tuesday, July 29, 2008:](#)

T. Boone Pickens' 'clean' secret

Proposition 10 would put California taxpayers on the hook for his natural gas plan.

By Anthony Rubenstein

Texas oil billionaire T. Boone Pickens is pushing a national campaign to make the U.S. "energy independent" through wind power and vehicles that run on natural gas. His blitz of TV ads featuring his own down-home voice has picked up a lot of admiring news coverage. To date, Pickens has yet to explain whose dime will pay for this.

Well, Californians can clarify exactly whose dime it will be: Ours. Along with being the country's biggest wind power developer, Pickens owns Clean Energy Fuels Corp., a natural gas fueling station company that is the sole backer of the stealthy Proposition 10 on California's November ballot. This measure would authorize the sale of \$5 billion in general fund bonds to provide alternative energy rebates and incentives -- but by the time the principal and the interest is paid off, it would squander at least \$9.8 billion in taxpayer money on Pickens' self-serving natural gas agenda.

The initiative deceptively reads like it's supporting all alternative-fuel vehicles and renewable energy sources. But a closer read finds a laundry list of cash grabs -- from \$200 million for a liquefied natural gas terminal to \$2.5 billion for rebates of up to \$50,000 for each natural gas vehicle.

Much of the measure's billions could benefit Pickens' company to the exclusion of almost all other clean-vehicle fuels and technology. Engines that run on compressed natural gas have a place in pollution reduction, especially for heavy trucks and public buses. But natural gas is a nonrenewable fossil fuel that we import from foreign sources, and it is no better (and in some cases worse) when it comes to emissions and fuel efficiency compared with the best hybrid cars or the new ultra-clean diesel engines. Most insidiously, Proposition 10's lavish rebates for natural gas-powered cars and trucks could crowd out superior technologies from taking root in California, the largest transportation market in the United States.

Even worse, private trucking and delivery companies could buy 5,000 natural gas trucks, collect California taxpayer-funded rebates of \$200 million or more and immediately send those fleets out of state. There's nothing in Proposition 10 to prevent that. It's like asking California voters to finance a new bridge with taxpayer dollars, without mentioning that the bridge could be in Ohio.

Pickens is selling Proposition 10 to green-minded, high-gas-price-paying Californians under the official name of "The California Renewable Energy and Clean Alternative Fuel Act." If the name rings a bell, that's because it's intentionally similar to the "California Clean Alternative Energy Act" of 2006, also known as Proposition 87. Proposition 87's rebates and incentives would have been funded by fees on the oil industry for petroleum extracted in California, not by taxpayers.

Proposition 87 lost after the oil industry spent more than \$100 million campaigning against it. I was the founder and chairman of Californians for Clean Energy, the force behind Proposition 87, and am disgusted that Pickens' lawyers and natural gas sales team have lifted Proposition 87's language and twisted it into such a deceptive, counterproductive initiative.

Pickens' raid on California's general fund comes while Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature are racking their brains trying to make state ends meet. The payments over the 30-year life of the Pickens bonds would deprive Californians of at least \$325 million a year to fund schools, fight wildfires and keep emergency rooms open.

Yet in the paragraph of Proposition 10 titled "Accountability," there isn't a word about requiring proof that the billions of dollars spent would result in one less ounce of petroleum used or one fewer wisp of greenhouse gases emitted in California.

I've met Pickens, and I'll vouch for his patriotic intentions to get the U.S. off of foreign oil -- but not for funding his interests on the sly with billions of dollars from California's taxpayers. In fact, I'd prefer to believe that he's being ill-served by his lawyers and political consultants, because it's clear that the shortcomings of Proposition 10 could ultimately hurt his energy independence message.

Given that Pickens can also play rough -- he was a funder of the nasty "Swift boat" campaign in the 2004 presidential election -- it'll take guts to challenge him. California's governor, attorney general and treasurer should be the first to say no, because there's certainly a case against a \$5-billion bond that results in almost no lasting infrastructure, could siphon taxpayer money out of state and would distort the clean-vehicle market. The makers of hybrid and biofuel vehicles, and California teachers, hospitals and firefighters, who would be on the losing end of Proposition 10, should also think hard about what Pickens' plan would do to them.

Anthony Rubenstein consults on clean technology, eco-sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

[Fresno Bee and Sacramento Bee editorial, Tuesday, July 29, 2008:](#)

Air board takes a strong stand against polluting bunker fuel

When it comes to air pollution, there's oil and there's oil. And then there is bunker fuel, the dirty, tarlike oil ocean-going ships burn.

Emissions from bunker fuel are a major source of the soot-like particles that aggravate respiratory diseases and cause cancer. An estimated 600 Californians die prematurely every year from breathing pollution emitted by dirty ships. But for years, the shipping industry has successfully resisted international efforts to force them to reduce pollution.

Now California's Air Resources Board has acted boldly on its own. Last week, the ARB unanimously adopted regulations that will force oceangoing vessels operating within 24 nautical

miles of California's coast to replace bunker fuel with cleaner low-sulfur diesel. The rule will apply to some 2,000 ships that dock in California ports every year. Ship owners who violate the rule would face fines of \$44,500 for a first offense and up to \$227,500 for repeat violations.

The shipping industry argues that California doesn't have the authority to impose environmental rules on foreign-flagged ships, that the rules violate both international law and the U.S. Constitution. Industry officials point out that federal courts threw out an earlier ARB regulation that forced ships docked at California ports to reduce emissions from their auxiliary engines.

But the invalidated emission rule required California to get approval from the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The newly adopted fuel rule does not. Under the federal Clean Air Act, California has authority to set more protective fuel standards than the federal government.

It's estimated that the cleaner fuel will cost the typical cargo ship making one trip across the Pacific to California \$30,000, adding approximately 1% to the cost of the voyage. So be it. The ARB calculates that California will save \$20 for every extra dollar spent on cleaner fuel.

Shipping industry officials don't dispute the benefits of the California rule. It's "the right thing to do," one official conceded. "The question is, who should be telling us to do it?"

The answer to that is clear -- the government agency with the legal authority and the courage to act to protect public health. For now, both in the United States and across the world, that's the California Air Resources Board.

[L.A. Times editorial, Tuesday, July 29, 2008:](#)

Living the dream

A nation running on clean, renewable energy isn't a fantasy; it's smart policy.

People scoffed at former Vice President Al Gore's call for the nation to get all of its electricity from clean, renewable sources such as the sun and wind within 10 years: "It's impossible." "The timeline is too short." "The technology isn't there."

Maybe they're right. No matter. The nation and its economy have everything to gain by taking this goal seriously and formulating interim steps toward it, instead of dismissing Gore as an obsessive environmentalist who can't get his head out of the global-warming clouds. Climate change is just one compelling reason to wean ourselves off oil and coal; this nation's own energy independence is of equal importance, as is avoiding the despoilment of wilderness areas and coastal waters by new drilling that would provide only short-term relief. Nations that can produce and sell energy will hold the leading edge in the global economy, whether that's through oil or by developing the best alternative-energy technologies.

This much we know: Solar installations on homes more than paid for themselves before the run-up in energy prices, and they are an ever-better investment now, especially because utilities buy the excess energy they produce. The problem is that start-up costs, about \$20,000 per home if installed during construction, are paid back over about 15 years -- although that can be as short as five years in the sunniest zones.

Retrofitting an existing house with solar installations is far more expensive. This means that nearly every house built without solar during California's recent construction boom represents an opportunity lost. Even California's solar initiative, which requires builders to offer solar as an option, doesn't go nearly far enough.

Under a more effective energy policy, the federal government would provide interest-free loans for solar installations, allowing homeowners to repay with the money they earn by selling their excess energy. Because the money would return to public coffers, it could be continually recycled

into new installations. Similarly, subsidies for wind farms in the Midwest and Texas (and solar farms in the desert) would prove a better energy investment than subsidies in the same regions for corn-based ethanol.

The question isn't so much whether we can manage energy self-sufficiency as whether we're willing to shift gears on outmoded energy policies. The science is reliable and will only improve (and become cheaper) with greater use and more research. A program that requires measurable year-to-year progress toward real energy independence is more the stuff of determination and smart policy than of dreams.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Tuesday, July 29, 2008:](#)

SOUNDING BOARD: Will Californians climb aboard train?

Although some legislators, including Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, are attempting to derail it, a \$9.95 billion bond measure to begin construction of a north-south high-speed rail route through California remains on the November ballot. The ups and downs of the state's economy have bounced the measure from ballot to ballot, with proponents digging in their heels this time to force a vote.

Construction of a high-speed rail system for California carries a more than \$40 billion dollar price tag. The Californian asked some members of the Opinion section's Sounding Board if the system should be built.

Following are some of their answers. What do you think? E-mail opinion@bakersfield.com.

What we need is faith in the future. The high-speed rail system should be built. Even if it costs two or three times current projections, we need this for our future. The Panama Canal was a very controversial project when it was built and cost many times more than initial projections, but we can't even begin to imagine the savings in transportation costs and improved trade that the canal has provided for nearly 100 years. Think about the jobs construction would create, the reduced traffic on the I-5 and the reduced air traffic, not to mention reduced pollution.

Jim Francisco is a district trainer for a pharmaceutical company.

Perhaps someday the system should be built, but not now. This country must first go through a gasoline metamorphosis; it must decide that trains are a viable alternate to driving or flying. We have many existing rail lines that could be modified for passenger service, but Americans don't seem to have the stomach for that. Americans have come to rely upon the car. Perhaps we need to wean from our cars to regular trains first.

Paul Lewis of Bakersfield is a nurse at North Kern State Prison.

The need for high-speed rail may be there, the the question is, will Californians use it? The billions spent to build it may end up being the cost of a failed social experiment. Where will it start, stop and how will I get there? If I still have to use an automobile, odds are I won't use the high-speed rail. More California cities need better city mass transit systems so a new generation of mass transit users can develop before we look at high-speed rail. The bet that Californians, including me, will give up their personal transportation is too much.

Karen Wass of Arvin is a retired Realtor.

It still needs to be proven that people would get out of their cars and use the rail system. I attend meetings in Sacramento and still drive so I have my car when I am there. People still need to get around once they get to their destination. We are too used to the freedom of our own vehicle.

Robert Klinoff is a deputy Kern County fire chief.

High-speed rail, like every other public transportation, will never be embraced or supported by California travelers. We do, however, need to expand high-speed rail for commercial purposes to move fresh agriculture products and provide faster delivery of manufactured and packaged goods to remain globally competitive.

Lou Leto of Bakersfield is a business consultant.

A high-speed rail system should substantially reduce pollution from private vehicles and provide a more efficient system of transporting people from north to south, without the impact on our highway infrastructure. It will not solve the problem of truck traffic air pollution and the significant impact of trucks on the highway infrastructure.

The bigger question: In the big picture of priorities, how should California tax dollars be best spent? To ensure a better future for all, we need to invest first and foremost in education.

Sheryl Barbich of Bakersfield is a business consultant.

California absolutely needs a high-speed rail system. We need to do all in our power to wean ourselves from our dependency on foreign oil. We should undertake this task like a modern Manhattan Project. Americans have shown that when we put our minds to it, we accomplish great things. Alternative transportation and alternative fuel sources should be a national problem to tackle. The state should take on the same challenge.

Terri Richmond of Bakersfield is a high school teacher.

Anything that connects mass transit centers in the state's largest cities is a good idea. A reasonable alternative to air travel or long individual trips in the car is long overdue. As much as it's a nice experience flying from the new terminal in Bakersfield, it's also expensive and not too good on the schedule. High-speed rail would simplify getting from Bakersfield to points north and south.

Fred Valenzano of Bakersfield is an engineer with a consulting company.

Considering the price of gas, I would rather take a "fast train" to get to one of the larger cities than drive there. It would also save a lot of travel time along with gas. But most of all, it would help save the environment and perhaps clean up some of the air pollution.

Kathy Van Reusen of Bakersfield is a Kern County health educator.

Mass transit works in some societies and cities, but I have my doubts about its viability in California. I have not seen any convincing evidence that people will use a high-speed system if it were available. Even if they do, I am not convinced the cost justifies the benefits to the average citizen. In addition, government cost estimates are usually far below the ultimate cost. So if they say it may cost \$40 billion, I can see the real cost escalating.

Bob Hawkes of Bakersfield is a business consultant and teacher.

There are at least two things that few people will dispute: we are exposed to massive health-endangering air pollution; and highway congestion is bad and getting worse. One of the least polluting forms of people movers is the train. One train can carry enough passengers to remove many cars, buses, or planes from their congested routes and in most cases at lower cost to the passengers. It will cost to build high-speed rail, but would it cost any less to build new highways?

Don Daverin of Tehachapi is a semi-retired minister.

Why is America lagging behind the rest of the world in its approach to transportation? Most European and Asian countries have had high-speed rail service for decades, while America continues to rely on a massive, decaying system of concrete highways and single vehicles. High-speed rail could transport people and goods from California's southernmost border to Oregon at 220 mph. It would also reduce the need to build new roads through pristine ecosystems. We could eliminate our dependence on foreign oil and in the process reduce the pollutants.

The only thing standing in the way is people's reluctance to learn a new method of travel and their unwillingness to pay for progress.

Audrey Baker of Bakersfield is retired after working for the Panama-Buena Vista School District.

It's the kind of change that is needed in order to shift our viewpoint about "solo" transportation. The problem is one of marketing. If the general populace knew how cool it is to ride in a train, they would ardently support the idea.

Peter Kjenaas of Frazier Park is president of Cartwright Entertainment Inc.

We should consider our local mass transit system. Since we refuse to pass a half-cent sales tax to maintain our roads, an investment in efficient mass transit should hold more appeal. It is planning for our future in the most intelligent manner. A well thought out transit system, in combination with a high-speed rail, would effectively reduce emissions and make employment options more viable for those that can't afford a vehicle.

Jennifer Cecero of Bakersfield operates a small family business.

We need a high-speed rail system much more than wasting our tax dollars fighting the phantom of manmade global warming. Since the California Legislature can't control its abusive spending, we will never be able to afford a high-speed rail system.

Roger Allred of Bakersfield is president of Millennium Energy LLC.

A high-speed rail system should be built to relieve highway congestion, reduce air pollution, rebel against the oil tycoons, reduce the need for road repairs and save lives by reducing car accidents. I am dumbfounded as to why there isn't train service between here and Vegas! Let's start with that!

Darlyn Baker of Bakersfield is the co-owner of Interim Health Care.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register editorial, Tuesday, July 29, 2008:](#)

Fires have taken toll on air quality

Air quality was at unhealthful levels all weekend, with high concentrations of ozone.

Dense air and high ozone concentrations are typical of our local summer weather conditions. The past couple of weeks the bad air has been exacerbated by wildfires in the Sierra Nevada and elsewhere in the state.

Tulare County itself has not been that hard hit by wildfires, but many other places have, and the smoke and particles have had their effect on our air.

This year's fires - and we are not very deep into the fire season - have already been devastating and costly to land and property.

But they have also created dangerously unhealthful air quality conditions.

This summer's poor air is another argument that state and federal stewards of forests and public lands must be more aggressive in reducing the threat of fire and of managing fire in the mountains in a way that minimizes the damage to our air quality.

Part of this is already taking place, and we applaud the U.S. Forest Service for the announcement by Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell last week that the USFS will take strong measures to suppress all wildfires immediately for the duration of the fire season. In the past, the service has managed some fires in remote areas and allowed them to burn as long as the fire or smoke did not threaten people or property.

Not this year. The suppression policy became necessary for two reasons: The high fuel content in the Sierra make it easy for small fires to get out of control. That leads to situations such as occurred this week near Yosemite: An out-of-control wildfire claimed 12 homes and about two dozen other buildings near the entrance to Yosemite National Park.

If a fire can get that much traction at the gates of one of the nation's most protected public lands, imagine how easily this can happen elsewhere.

The second reason for the suppression policy is the effect on air quality. While in the past, forest managers might have allowed a fire to burn and thin some of the excess foliage and fuel, that is now a dangerous option because of the effect on air quality.

At some point, though, these lands must burn. That is how they remain healthy, sustained and relatively safe.

The forest service and park service must employ an aggressive program in the offseason to limit the fuel in the forests. Commercial cutting to thin the forest must also take place.

The longer these issues are not addressed, or simply treated with halfway measures, the longer summer air quality in the San Joaquin Valley will continue to decline.

It might take a few years, but at some point, the forest, its fires and air quality must return to a balance. As we have learned in the past few weeks, even a distant fire can do damage in our Valley.