More 'no-burn' days coming

By Stacey Shepard, staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 17, 2008

With only a handful of objections from the public, valley air regulators Thursday voted to drastically increase the number of days when it's prohibited to burn wood in fireplaces, wood stoves and chimineas to cut wintertime air pollution.

The rule, which takes effect Nov. 1, is estimated to result in up to 48 no-burn days in Kern County this winter, compared to 12 last winter. San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said the rule is key to bringing the valley into compliance with federal standards for fine particulate matter by 2014.

Residential wood-burning is the largest source of fine particulate pollution in the valley, they said. And unlike a rule on industrial boilers adopted earlier in the day — estimated to cost valley industries hundreds of millions in the next seven years — it comes at almost no cost.

"I think we need to do everything we can to avoid exceedances," said Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson, an air district board member who voted for the rule.

The new rule also lifted an exemption to the no-burn rule for residences at higher elevations but kept previous exclusions for homes that use wood as the sole source of heat or that have no natural gas service.

In Kern County, homes in Frazier Park will now fall under the rule. However, Tehachapi and communities around Isabella Lake are not affected because they're in a different air district.

When the valley air district adopted the state's first wood-burning restrictions in 2003, it faced major opposition from residents throughout the valley. But only a few people spoke against the strengthened rule Thursday.

Bill Bonderov, a resident in unincorporated Bakersfield who heats his home with a wood stove, said he was disappointed with the new rule.

"Going from 12 to 48 days is unreasonable," he said, adding that trees are a "renewable source of energy."

Bonderov said he'd rather see the air district regulate the sale of green wood, which creates more smoke than dry or seasoned wood.

Other opposition to the rule came mainly from people who work in industries that sell fireplaces, woodstoves or wood.

David Lighthall, a senior environmental health scientist at Fresno State's Central Valley Health Policy Institute, supported the new rule, pointing to research that showed the rule adopted in 2003 had prevented about 30 premature deaths a year in Bakersfield.

Air district sued over dairy approval

Suit says adverse effects weren't considered.

By Pablo Lopez / The Fresno Bee
Friday, Oct. 17, 208

A lawsuit filed Thursday against the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District contends district officials approved a proposed 6,120-animal dairy in southwest Fresno County without considering global warming or adverse effects on human health.

The Center for Biological Diversity and California Rural Legal Assistance said the proposed dairy near the community of Burrel violated the California Environmental Quality Act by not requiring equipment that converts methane gas into energy.

The lawsuit in Fresno County Superior Court also said megadairies produce large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions such as methane, particulate pollution, hydrogen sulfide and ammonia that are dangerous to human health.

"By illegally downplaying the project's impact on global warming, human health and the environment, the air district squandered a critically important opportunity to incorporate solutions ... to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutions from dairies," said Matt Vespa, a senior attorney for the San Francisco-based center.

The air board approved the proposed dairy owned by Charles Van Der Kooi on Sept. 17.

The two groups want the court to nullify an environmental impact report that led to the approval of the dairy and order a new report that addresses global warming and human health impacts.

The lawsuit also challenges the approval process, saying the Fresno County Board of Supervisors should have jurisdiction over whether the dairy gets built, not the air district.

Air district officials had no immediate comment, spokesman Anthony Presto said.

The two groups represent Eugenia Melesio, a Fresno County resident.

"All I am asking for is that the responsible agencies do a good job of looking at the environmental impact, or else people suffer," Melesio said in a statement.

The proposed dairy would adversely affect Fresno County residents, the lawsuit said, because nearly one in five residents has asthma -- at least three times the national average.

"Every year, 300 people die in Fresno County alone from pollution-related causes," said Alegria De La Cruz, a lawyer in CRLA's Fresno office. "The average Fresno resident will die one or two years earlier here than elsewhere due to our high pollution levels."

Air district sued for OKing large dairy

Associated Press
S.F. Chronicle, Merced Sun-Start and other papers, Friday, October 17, 2008

An environmental group is suing the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, challenging the district's approval of a mega dairy and arguing it did not adequately consider potential harmful health impacts.

The Center for Biological Diversity and California Rural Legal Assistance filed suit Thursday arguing that the approval this month of a 6,120-cow dairy in western Fresno County violated the California Environmental Quality Act by not requiring equipment such as digesters to convert methane gas into energy.

The group says that mega dairies produce large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions dangerous to human health, such as methane, particulate pollution, hydrogen sulfide and ammonia.

The air board had no immediate comment.

Revelation jeopardizes support for refinery expansion

By James Burger and Stacey Shepard, staff writers
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 17, 2008

Late revelations that a controversial chemical is being used at the Big West refinery without it being reported to the county may have cost the facility's expansion proposal hard-won community support at a critical moment.

County Supervisor Mike Maggard said Thursday he was struggling to trust the company after it revealed hydrofluoric acid has been used, in a highly diluted form, at the refinery. He said the company has previously told the county the chemical is not used there.

"I don't think they've been truthful enough," Maggard said.

Big West officials denied withholding the information. The company's health, safety and environmental director, Bill Chadick, said the use of fluid containing low concentrations of HF to maintain injection wells was stated in the project's environmental impact report.

The fluid is commonly used in the local oil industry, he said, and doesn't pose the significant hazards of pure hydrofluoric acid, a highly regulated substance that sparked community concern when the company first proposed to use it in the expansion.

"We're not trying to hide anything," Chadick said. "There's a huge distinction here between anhydrous HF and the aqueous solution."

The expansion is scheduled to have its final review before supervisors on Tuesday. Maggard's stance is key because the project is in his district and supervisors commonly take that into consideration.

THE ACID

Big West's proposed use of hydrofluoric acid in new refining equipment it wanted to build was the most controversial aspect of its initial expansion plans.

Community groups and environmental lawyers raised big objections. If spilled, HF can form a toxic vapor known to cause serious burns to the lungs and skin, and exposure can be fatal. Big West later decided to use modified HF, a safer form of the chemical, but objections remained strong.

In recent weeks, most of the objectors, county planners and Big West coalesced around an alternative process that didn't involve using HF and the Kern County Planning Commission recommended supervisors approve the expansion.

Local officials said Thursday they are studying the risks of the diluted HF now being used at the refinery. It is used at some other facilities in Kern County, according to county records.

Chadick said the diluted HF used at the refinery, at concentrations of 1 to 5 percent, doesn't vaporize when spilled. He said the solution isn't stored on site and is only brought to the refinery a few times a year when a contractor performs maintenance on injections wells.

Betsy Ramsey, spokeswoman for Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid, said if the news about Big West is true, the company "has betrayed our community and our trust by placing countless thousands of
people — including our children — at risk from a danger they have failed to disclose."

Ramsey spoke up in support of Big West after the company embraced an expansion plan that did not use HF, modified HF or sulfuric acid.

“On a personal level I feel betrayed,” she said.

THE REVELATION

Over the last year, Big West has repeatedly told the county it did not currently use HF at the refinery, said county Planning Director Ted James.

But on Oct. 7, refinery officials asked to remove a proposed ban on the use of hydrofluoric acid, modified HF and sulfuric acid at the Rosedale Highway facility.

Planners asked why.

Refinery officials said a contractor is already shipping diluted HF to the refinery and using it to clean steam injection wells used to dispose of treated wastewater.

Shocked planners asked why the company told the county it wasn’t using the chemical.

“They said they weren’t thinking about the contractors and they weren’t thinking about the diluted HF,” said Kern County Planning Director Ted James.

Chadick said he couldn’t remember exact conversations about diluted HF but was sure its use to maintain injection wells was discussed with county officials. He said the process has taken place at the refinery for decades.

Kern County Environmental Health Services Director Matt Constantine said Big West has told the county that trucks carrying between 2,000 and 8,000 gallons of the HF-containing solution travel to the refinery a few times each year.

The material is used to clean steam injection wells — four of which currently exist on the property and nine that would be built as part of the expansion, said Kern County Planner Lorelei Oviatt.

Big West officials have told the county that wells need cleaning once every six to 24 months, Constantine said.

THE DANGER

Planners hope to finish an analysis of the chemical risks and release a report Monday.

“With a diluted liquid acid there is some concern if you’re directly exposed to it, but it generally wouldn’t present as much of a risk as an air release,” Constantine said.

In general such a low concentration of the chemical will not vaporize, he said.

Maggard said the major concern for him is Big West’s conduct throughout the refinery expansion process.

“I think there is a pattern with them that they haven’t been as transparent as possible, as soon as possible,” Maggard said.

Maggard said he will not automatically move to stop the project Tuesday or refer the expansion back to staff for months of additional review. But he could do both.

Refinery officials must come clean Tuesday about all safety risks to the “300,000 people (who) live in the shadow of that facility,” Maggard said.

Prescribed fire planned for area in Kings Canyon National Park

Staff Reports
Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Oct. 16, 2008

Starting on Friday, fire crews plan to conduct a prescribed fire on over 1,000 acres in the Cedar Grove of Kings Canyon National Park, park officials announced late Wednesday.

The fire, which will help rid the forest floor of accumulated brush, will be completed within two to three days and will only result in one trail closure, officials said.

The first half-mile of the Don Cecil Trail, starting at Highway 180, will be closed for safety reasons. All roads and guest facilities in the Cedar Grove area will remain open, officials said.

Half of the acreage targeted in prescribed fire was burned in previous fires in 1993 and 1997, while the other half has no known fire history, officials said.

Fire managers will work the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District to reduce impacts on local air quality, officials said.

For more information on how to limit exposure to smoke, visit http://www.airquality.org/smokeimpact/.

Tulare mulls racetrack referendum

If track is approved, opponents could seek vote on matter

By Luis Hernandez, staff writer
Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, Oct. 17, 2008

Should Tulare's planning commission and city council approve the proposed Tulare Motor Sports Complex later this year, opponents would have one avenue of appeal: the referendum.

"It's a move by the people," Tulare City Manager Darrel Pyle said.

But turning the matter over directly to the voters would cost an estimated $40,000, he said.

The Tulare Planning Commission will be the first to hold public hearings and vote.

That's expected to happen sometime next month, Tulare Planning Director Mark Kielty said.

The city council likely would take up the matter in December, at least 10 days after the planning commission decision, Pyle said.

As proposed by Fresno-based developer Bud Long, the sports complex would take up an estimated 711 acres in south Tulare near the International Agri-Center grounds.

It would include a race track, a drag strip, hotels and commercial and retail development.

Supporters say the tax revenue would be too good to pass up, while opponents say the track would bring noise, pollution and traffic congestion to the area. Opponents also say property values would decrease.

Should the project win city council approval, referendum organizers would also have to gather the certified signatures of 10 percent of the registered voters in Tulare — at least 1,874 signatures. The $40,000 price tag represents the cost of a single-item election.

The idea of a referendum was brought up at a Sept. 25 public forum hosted by the Tulare Motor Sports Complex Citizens Advisory Committee.

An estimated 250 people packed the Claude Meitzenheimer Community Center for the forum.

A question about the proposed project was the first asked at an Oct. 8 candidates' forum.

Tulare City Council candidate and challenger Wayne Ross noted that referendum would be one way to go.

Spare-air ban on winter indoor wood burning

Jane Kay, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 17, 2008

This winter, for the first time, Bay Area residents won't be able to burn wood in fireplaces and stoves on Spare the *Air* Days and Nights.

Regulators in the Bay Area Air Quality Management District are clamping down on wood burning between November and February as a way to meet a new federal law limiting the amount of breathable, fine particles.

During the winter months and under certain weather conditions, burning wood in households contributes up to one-third of the total fine particulate matter in the air on the worst Bay Area nights and threatens health, according to regulators.

The air district's board adopted the rule in July, ending nearly two years of controversy, even though similar bans had already been approved in other regions of California, including the San Joaquin Valley and Sacramento.

Debate over burning wood in about 1 million fireplaces and stoves in the nine counties elicited more than 400 comments, the greatest number ever to come to the air district over any rule.

Most people favor protecting the air, particularly in valleys and low-lying spots where smoke hovers on cold days and nights.

"We have neighbors that burn a low smoldering wood fire any time the temperature gets below 85 degrees. The smoke can get very thick in our yard and in through any open window," wrote Bruce Ramsay of Novato.
Carol Kiser of San Francisco wrote in support of the ban. "It is so bad in Cow Hollow that one must keep the windows shut. To walk outdoors is to be engulfed in smoke fallout."

Others said regulation would invade hearth and home.

"Sitting beside a fire to read or watch television soothes the psyche and calms the soul," wrote Cecil Bruce Saver of American Canyon. Janis Palmer, a Rohnert Park resident, wrote that her family burns wood to supplement the furnace. "Restricting the use of our fuel-efficient stove would add approximately $100 each month to our PG&E bill."

The federal government set a new standard in 2006, deeming air unhealthful if amounts of fine particles, 2.5 microns in diameter or smaller, surpassed 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air, averaged over 24 hours.
Based on past years, there could be 15 to 20 days when burning would be banned.

Physicians testified at hearings that smoky air sets off asthma attacks and other respiratory problems. Research shows that fine particles can move deep into the lungs and enter tissue and organs, ending up in the bloodstream.

In recent years, studies have shown that mortality and hospital admissions related to lung and cardiovascular disease increase on days with high particulate air pollution. The EPA cites studies showing a link between exposure to particulates and increased respiratory symptoms, decreased lung function, aggravated asthma, irregular heartbeat and nonfatal heart attacks as well as development of chronic bronchitis.

The air district's board offers an exemption for households that lack either electricity or natural gas, or had no other source of heat other than wood burning. Documentation may be required.

There will be a line dedicated to receiving complaints.

Inspectors will follow up on complaints and warn first-time offenders. Those who continue ignoring the ban are subject to fines up to $1,000 a day. Officials say much lower fines are likely.

In the Bay Area, the cities of Fremont, Gilroy, Los Gatos, Martinez, Mill Valley, Oakland, Rohnert Park, San Pablo and Union City have already instituted bans.

The new rule includes provisions that:
-- Limit thick, black smoke from chimneys at all times.
-- Require cleaner burning technology such as EPA-certified wood-burning devices, pellet stoves, low-mass fireplaces or masonry heaters in new construction or when the stoves are sold, resold or installed.
-- Prohibit the burning of garbage, plastics, chemically treated wood, waste petroleum products and other inappropriate materials.
-- Require labeling and disclosure of the moisture content on wood sold for use within the nine-county district, including instructions on how to dry the wood if it has moisture content greater than 20 percent by weight. Sellers of seasoned firewood must properly label it as seasoned. Pressed or manufactured logs or pellet fuels must be labeled with information on the no-burn rule.
-- Ban the use of chimeneas and other free-standing wood-burning garden heaters on poor air-quality days.

Fires used outdoors for cooking won't be regulated.

Air pollutants plaguing the Bay Area

Jane Kay, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 17, 2008

The nine counties around San Francisco Bay face the greatest health threats from three types of nasty *air pollution* - ozone, particulate matter and toxic *air* contaminants.

OZONE
The main ingredient in smog is formed in the summer at the ground when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds chemically react together in sunlight.
Amount: No available amount because it's not released directly into the atmosphere.
Health effects: High levels cause coughing, tightness of the chest and shortness of breath. Exposure may increase responses to allergens, trigger respiratory problems, cause asthma cases and be associated with increased mortality.
Sources: Exhaust from motor vehicles and off-road equipment; solvents emitted from architectural coatings and consumer products.

Particulate matter

The small solid particles and liquid droplets are discharged directly to the air or created from reactions of airborne gaseous pollutants. The most closely regulated by law include those under 10 microns in size, PM-10, and the fine particles, 2.5 microns in size, PM-2.5. One micron is one-seventh the diameter of a human hair. Cold, stagnant air in the winter is the worst time of year.
Amount: 225 tons a day of PM-10 and smaller.
Health effects: The tiniest particles penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, where they can cause respiratory and heart disease.
Sources: Winter wood smoke and cooking at restaurants and homes; trains and ships; construction and farm equipment; road dust.

Toxic air contaminants
Particles in diesel engine exhaust, benzene, formaldehyde, chromium and acrolein - a substance in cigarette smoke and car exhaust - are among the 180 airborne chemical pollutants that can cause serious health effects in small concentrations.
Amount: No available amount for each contaminant.
Health effects: The chemicals differ in their potential to do harm. Some can cause cancer. Others are linked to diseases of the lungs, liver and kidneys and short-term risks of eye and respiratory irritations.
Sources: Diesel exhaust from cars, buses and trucks; oil refineries and power plants; gas stations; dry cleaners.

Nitrogen oxides
Created when fuel is burned at high temperatures.
Amount: 538 tons a day.
Health effects: Nitrogen oxides irritate the eyes, skin, mucous membranes and respiratory tract, and can cause lung diseases.
Sources: Autos, trucks and buses; construction and mobile farm equipment; trains, ships, boats; lawn and garden equipment.
Carbon monoxide
Created when carbon in fuel is not burned completely. Highest levels occur in the colder months of the year when pollution gets trapped near the ground beneath a layer of warm air.
Amount: 2,140 tons a day.
Health effects: The toxic gas can damage the cardiovascular and respiratory systems and cause neurobehavioral changes at low concentrations. Young children, the elderly and those with heart and lung problems are at the greatest risk.
Sources: Motor vehicles; off-highway mobile sources such as tractors, golf carts and ATVs; consumer products; residential wood burning; construction and garden equipment; boats; forest fires; cigarette smoke.

Sulfur dioxide
Created when crude oil, coal and ore are burned and when gasoline is extracted from oil.
Amount: 64 tons a day.
Health effects: The gas mixes with chemicals in the air to form sulfates. When inhaled, they move to the lungs, where they can cause respiratory disease, labored breathing and premature death.
Source: Petroleum refineries; combustion from power plants, turbines and industrial furnaces; off-highway mobile sources; industrial processes.

Greenhouse gases
Carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxides, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulfur hexafluoride are measured as a carbon equivalent, each one weighted for its ability to absorb heat in the atmosphere.
Amount: Greenhouse gases equivalent to 110 million tons of carbon dioxide were emitted in 2007.
Health effects: Scientists say the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases released by human activities are adding to the naturally occurring greenhouse gases and pushing the rise in

ocean and atmospheric temperatures. The effects of global warming, including severe weather events and rising sea levels, affect public health.
Sources: Half of the emissions come from transportation; one-quarter from industry and commerce; and one-quarter from power plants, oil refining and home use.

EPA to slash toxic lead allowed in air by 90%

Dina Cappiello, Associated Press
In the L.A. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Friday, October 17, 2008

Washington **-** -- Three decades after removing lead from gasoline, the Environmental Protection Agency is slashing the amount of the toxic metal that will be allowed in the nation's air by 90 percent.

EPA officials, who were under a federal court order to set a new health standard for lead by midnight Wednesday, said the new limit will better protect health, especially children's health. Children can inhale lead particles released into the air from smelters, mines and waste incinerators and ingest it after it settles on surfaces.

Exposure to even low levels of lead early in life can affect learning, IQ and memory in children. Lead can also cause cardiovascular, blood pressure and kidney problems in adults.

"Our nation's air is cleaner today than just a generation ago, and last night I built upon this progress by signing the strongest air-quality standards for lead in our nation's history," Stephen Johnson, the EPA administrator, said Thursday. "Thanks to this stronger standard, EPA will protect my children from remaining sources of airborne lead."

The new limit - 0.15 micrograms per cubic meter - is the first update to the lead standard since 1978, when it helped phase out leaded gasoline. It is 10 times lower than the old standard, which was 1.5 micrograms per cubic meter.

The EPA estimates that 18 counties in a dozen states across the country will violate the new standard, requiring state and local governments to find ways to further reduce lead emissions from smelters, metal mines
and other sources.

A representative for the Association of Battery Recyclers said the new standard will be difficult to meet. Several members of the group, which represents 14 facilities that recycle lead from car batteries, met on Oct. 2 with the White House and EPA. They were hoping for a higher standard.

The limit announced Thursday is in the lower end of a range recommended in May by the agency's independent scientific advisory panel. By contrast, the Bush administration did not follow its own staff's advice or its science advisers when it set new health standards for smog and soot that were less stringent than recommendations.

"We have put in the best controls and we are going to still have compliance problems," said Robert Steinwurtzel, an attorney for the group. "We explained to them our concerns that if the standard was promulgated at the lower end of EPA's range it would threaten viability of industry."

Environmentalists hailed the move, but said the agency could have done more to monitor emissions to ensure that the standard is met. Along with the announcement of a new standard, the EPA said it will require lead to be measured in 101 cities across the country, and near sources that release at least a ton of lead per year. Advocates said Thursday that the EPA's plan would exclude hundreds of sources of lead.

"We commend EPA for taking a giant step in the right direction, but they need to greatly expand the lead monitoring network if they hope to enforce this standard," said Dr. Gina Solomon, a senior scientist with the Natural Resource Defense Council.

The EPA will designate areas of the country that fail to meet the new standard by October 2011. Based on air quality data from 2005-2007, 18 counties in Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas would fail to meet the standard.

The EPA said the cost of the reductions would be between $150 million and $2.8 billion, but the standard would produce economic benefits of about $3.7 billion to $6.9 billion. The EPA assumed that children would be smarter and earn more money as a result of less lead in the air when it calculated the benefits.

EPA: Airborne lead emissions must be cut by 90%

By Renee Schoof
Sacramento Bee, Friday, October 17, 2008

WASHINGTON – The amount of lead that can be emitted into the air will be reduced by 90 percent under a new rule the Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday to protect the health of millions of Americans – especially children.

It was the first new rule on airborne lead in 30 years and came in response to more than 6,000 scientific studies since 1990 that show that lead is dangerous to the human body at much lower levels than previously known.

The EPA was under a court order to complete its review for a new lead standard.

The studies have linked low levels of lead to damage to children's nervous systems that can lead to IQ loss, memory loss and permanent learning disabilities, EPA administrator Stephen Johnson said in announcing the new standard. In adults, it can cause in- creased blood pressure and decreased kidney function.

Children are especially vulnerable. They can inhale lead particles released into the air from smelters, mines and waste incinerators and ingest it after it settles on surfaces. Airborne lead also contaminates soil. The main way humans are exposed, however, is from ingesting tainted dirt or dust, as when children play in a polluted area and put their hands in their mouths.

The EPA last set a standard for lead at 1.5 micrograms per cubic meter of air in 1978. The new standard cuts that to 0.15 micrograms per cubic meter.

The new standard was in line with what EPA staff scientists and an independent body of science advisers said was necessary.

"Despite the dramatic decrease in environmental lead exposure, lead toxicity remains a major public health problem," the science advisory panel reported.

Emissions of lead into the air dropped by 97 percent since 1978, mainly because the government banned it in gasoline, Johnson said. But today more than 16,000 facilities such as smelters, cement factories and steel plants emit an estimated 1,300 tons of lead into the air annually.

"The new stronger standards address these remaining emissions and offer a shield to protect the health of our nation's children," Johnson said.

"They did a great job," said Gina Solomon of the Natural Resources Defense Council and a professor of medicine at UC San Francisco, who pushed for the new lower standard.

But, she added, EPA must "greatly expand the lead monitoring network if they hope to enforce this new standard."

The new rule requires a monitor in areas with populations of 500,000 or more. The agency estimated it would need to add or relocate 236 monitors.

Solomon said more monitors were needed and that they should be placed downwind of the plants that emit large amounts of lead. She said that with fewer than 200 air lead monitors now in operation, "scientists don't even know how much lead is in the air in most communities."

Firms that recycle lead tried to head off tightening of the standard. Several executives from battery recycling plants visited the White House on Oct. 2 to ask the EPA not to use its earlier proposed standard of a range from 0.1 to 0.3 micrograms of lead per cubic meter.

Heavy pollution from this year's wildfires

Peter Fimrite, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 17, 2008

The fires that rampaged through Northern California this summer and shrouded the sun in a smoky haze probably deposited more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than the calamitous fires that swept across the state last year, according to atmospheric scientists.

More lives were lost and more homes were destroyed in 2007, but more acres have burned so far this year, meaning more carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compounds were spewed into the atmosphere.

"The citizens were exposed for quite a long period in California and neighboring states to very unhealthy levels of air pollution," said Gabriele Pfister, a scientist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research.

Pfister's team of scientists at the University of Colorado at Boulder has studied the effect of California fires on air quality over the past two years by measuring ozone levels around the state at various times of the year.

Ozone is created from the pollutants emitted by fire after the compounds are bombarded by sunlight, which causes a chemical reaction, she said.

Although the test results for this year have not yet been compiled, the ozone levels during the fires that devastated Southern California in 2007 exceeded health standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency three times more often than during times when there was no fire, Pfister said.

"That tells me that fires really can significantly impact air quality," Pfister said.

Ozone, which depletes over time, is just one pollutant caused by fire. Pfister said carbon dioxide - the most abundant global warming gas - and methane stay in the atmosphere for years.

The fires in 2007 emitted almost 8 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in just one week in October, according to data from the research center. That's equivalent to 25 percent of the monthly emissions from all of the fossil fuel burned in California, according to the data, which are expected to be released in full in the next couple of weeks.

Fires in the contiguous United States and Alaska release about 290 million metric tons of carbon dioxide a year, according to the researchers. That's 4 to 6 percent of the nation's total carbon dioxide emissions from fossil-fuel burning.

Tom Bonnicksen, a California forest and wildfire expert, said the fires are undoubtedly contributing to climate change.

"These fires are spewing out greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide at a rate of 50 tons per acre," Bonnicksen said. "That's a lot."

And the picture isn't getting any better. Pfister said the smoke from the fires this summer probably did more damage because they occurred when the sun was shining brightest.

"I would expect the fires in 2008 to have a much more significant impact on air quality than the fires in the fall of 2007," Pfister said. "Sunshine has a major impact on the chemistry."

Another interesting finding, according to Pfister, is that smoke often causes a higher percentage increase in air pollution in rural areas far away from the fire. The reason, Pfister said, is that ozone is produced more readily in areas with less existing pollution, much as a person who has never been exposed to the sun will burn faster than a person who is often out in the sun.

This year's fire season was unusual in that it began early and saddled firefighters with a huge number of fires burning everywhere at once.

"The lightning season at the end of June was an unprecedented event," said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for CalFire. "We had over 2,000 wildfires sparked by the lightning."

Berlant said firefighters had never before seen so many lightning fires that early in the year. As fires ripped through Angel Island and Southern California this week, it was clear that the fire season is long from finished.

"Historically, October is our largest and most devastating for wildfires," Berlant said. "We have another month of very dry conditions and we will start to have stronger and more unpredictable winds."

The risk of catastrophic wildfires like those that swept through the state the past two years is expected to increase as the world heats up, forests dry out and weather patterns shift, forestry experts said.

Studies have shown that fires in general are burning hotter and bigger and that fire season is coming earlier in the year. A recent study by NASA predicted lightning will increase about 6 percent as the amount of carbon dioxide doubles.

Research by the U.S. Forest Service shows that the average number of trees killed by fires increases due to a warmer climate and consequently less snowmelt. The data were bolstered by UC Davis scientists who have reported significant changes in weather patterns over the years, including less snowfall and more rain in the Lake Tahoe Basin contributing to drier forest fuels and more severe fires.

"It's a vicious circle," Pfister said. "Global warming leads to dryness, more fires, more health effects, more dead forests and less vegetation to take up the carbon. And this all adds to more global warming."

NM calls for review of Asarco copper smelter plans

The Associated Press
Contra Costa Times, Friday, October 17, 2008

SANTA FE, N.M.—New Mexico Environment Secretary Ron Curry says a more stringent standard for the amount of lead allowed in the air should trigger a more intensive look at plans to reopen a Texas copper smelter.

Curry says the standard adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency this week means Texas and federal regulators need to review possible lead emissions from the Asarco copper smelter in El Paso.

Curry says Asarco's air quality permit renewal application shows the company will exceed the EPA's new lead standard.

He says lead has been an issue in the past for the New Mexico and Texas communities surrounding the smelter.

The EPA, under a federal court order, is slashing the amount of the toxic metal that will be allowed in the nation's air by 90 percent.

15 EU nations on track for Kyoto emissions goal

Associated Press
In the S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 17, 2008

Copenhagen**,** Denmark -- The European Union's 15 original member nations are on target to meet Kyoto treaty commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions, the bloc's environmental agency said Thursday.

The countries pledged by 2012 to reduce by 8 percent their emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases thought to contribute to global warming.

Only three countries - Denmark, Italy and Spain - were unlikely to meet individual targets, the European Environment Agency said.

But their shortfalls would be made up by Britain, Germany and Sweden, which were expected to show outstanding performance, according to agency's executive director, Jacqueline McGlade.

The 15 were the only nations in the European Union in 1997, when it joined the Kyoto Protocol under an EU burden-sharing agreement. The 12 nations that have since joined the bloc are not obliged to help meet its Kyoto targets.

The European Environment Agency released a report Thursday detailing each of the 15 nations' progress on cutting greenhouse gases, as well as an estimate of what Europe's long-term situation with emissions might be.

It said that while EU emissions were projected to decrease through 2020 - meeting its 20-percent reduction target compared with 1990 levels - the bloc was still far from implementing other measures, including a
European Commission proposal that the bloc derives 20 percent of its energy from renewable supplies by 2020.

High heating-fuel costs rekindle firewood's allure

By STACI MATLOCK The Santa Fe New Mexican
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, October 17, 2008

SANTA FE, N.M.—K.C. Wester looked out the window of his friend's Santa Fe home and saw flames billowing up from a neighbor's chimney.

Sooty creosote had built up, superheating everything inside the chimney until it came bubbling out onto the neighbor's flat tar roof.

"It was like a volcano," Wester said.

That was 1975. Wester was 15, and the chimney fire sparked his 30-plus-year career as a chimney sweep who wants his customers to prevent similar fires. In the last year, Wester, owner of Clean Sweep, also began installing wood stoves.

Wester is busier than ever, and so are area wood-stove stores. The steady rise in home-heating fuel has prompted a new interest in wood heat, according to Wester and Gene Butler, owner of The Firebird, a Santa Fe wood- and gas-stove company.

The two men have seen all kinds of mistakes in how wood stoves and fireplaces are installed, cleaned and used.

Butler said all stoves sold in the U.S. since the mid-1990s must meet U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards for emissions. The newer stoves burn wood almost twice as efficiently as old ones and are three times more efficient producing heat than most fireplaces.

Modern wood stoves have two burns. The first one burns the wood and the second, once the stove is superhot, burns off the remaining wood particles seen outside as smoke. Butler said most new stoves produce almost no visible smoke.

"You can tell if someone is using an old stove, because you'll see the smoke plume," he said.

Butler said before you buy a stove, decide what you want out of it. Is it to heat a single room or the whole house? Is it for backup heat or primary heat? Do you want a stove that heats up quickly or holds heat all night long?

"A lot of times people already have radiant heat and just want something that looks pretty," Butler said.

Knowing the size of rooms and ceiling heights also helps Firebird staff determine the right size stove for a customer.

"These questions lead you to the best stove for your needs," Butler said.

A stove has to be installed on a hearth and with ample distance from walls or other flammable materials to prevent a house fire. Most insurance companies require a licensed professional to install wood stoves.

Proper stove piping also is critical, Butler said.

"You really want the right pipe so you can sleep at night without worrying your house will burn down," Butler said.

Butler said it doesn't matter if the wood stove is inexpensive or top of the line, the pipe requirements are the same.

"In 20 years, I've never heard of a house burning down from a properly installed wood stove," Butler said. "The only time that's happened is because of owner error or stupidity or it was incorrectly installed."

A good chimney sweep is as important as a good stove installer. Stoves and fireplaces both need to be cleaned regularly, at least once a year, twice if the owner is using wood with a lot of pitch or burning fires regularly, Wester said.

If you hire someone to do the job, make sure they are licensed, bonded, insured and have references. Wester carries $1 million in liability.

"If somehow I broke off a piece of your flue and your house burned down because of a chimney fire, I would be liable," Wester said.

Wester and Butler recommend putting caps and screens on pipes and chimneys to keep out animals, debris and rain.

Hard woods like apple and oak burn hotter and cleaner than soft woods like aspen, pine and cottonwood. Pinon has a lot of sap and tends to produce creosote, Wester said.

If you buy your wood instead of cutting it yourself, hard woods cost more than pine. But the amount of heat produced per cord is greater, Wester said.

"You'll burn half as much, so it's worth the extra cost," Wester said. "Don't just shop for the cheap wood. It produces more creosote and you'll have to call me more often."

Wester said a common mistake people make in both stoves and fireplaces is cramming a bunch of wood in and starting a big fire. He said that causes cracks in the plaster outside kiva fireplaces because the materials are heated too quickly. In addition, the cold air in a chimney or stove pipe can force smoke back into a house.

"It's best to start with a small fire and grow it gradually," Wester said. "That allows the stove materials to heat gradually and warms up the air in the pipe."

Another no-no is using a steel grate to hold wood in a kiva. It prompts people to overload the wood and allows too much air to circulate underneath. That prevents the kiva from heating up properly inside and slows down a fire.

Heating the modern EPA-rated stoves to the right temperature before closing the damper is another trick to getting the most out of a fire. Catalytic stoves should be heated to 550 degrees. Then close the damper.

"If you don't, then you just spent a couple of thousand dollars on a pretty stove and that's about it," Wester said.

Noncatalytic stoves need to be heated to 1,100 degrees, Wester said.

"In today's economy, people are trying to get the most out of every dollar," Wester said. "Why wouldn't you want to get the most efficient heat you can out of a wood stove?"

Finally, don't forget to put ashes in a steel can with a lid and don't dump them in with flammable materials until they are cold to the touch. Don't set ashes next to a burning stove either.

"You'll be gassing yourself with carbon monoxide," said Wester.

Controlled burns planned for Eldorado Forest acreage

By Cathy Locke
Modesto Bee, Friday, October 17, 2008
The U.S. Forest Service will conduct a series of controlled burns in the Eldorado National Forest during the fall and winter months.
Approximately 9,000 acres of national forest lands are scheduled for the controlled fires, also called prescribed burns, according to a Forest Service news release.
Detailed maps of burn locations are available on the Eldorado National Forest Web site, www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado, and on the El Dorado County Firesafe Web site, www.edcfiresafe.org/index.php.
Such burns open up the forest for better health and make lands less vulnerable to wildfires by removing brush and small trees that can carry fire into the tops of taller trees.
"The timing of the actual ignition of a prescribed burn project depends on weather conditions, moisture in the fuels we intend to burn, our ability to control the fires and permission from the local air pollution control district," Jennifer Boyd, Eldorado National Forest fuels specialist, said in the news release.
Anyone with respiratory illness or who thinks the smoke might adversely affect them is advised to contact the nearest Eldorado National Forest ranger station to be placed on a "sensitive persons" list for notification before the burns.

People driving in the area of the burns may encounter reduced visibility because smoke can remain for days after the fires are started, given the large scale of the project, according to the news release.

Modesto Bee guest commentary, Friday, October 17, 2008:

High-speed rail an investment like universities, dams

By Cathleen Galgiani

Anyone who has traveled on Highway 99 or Interstate 5 recently or used any regional airport has seen just how well things are -- or are not -- moving in California. Our state's transportation network is simply locked in congestion. And as our population grows, it's only getting worse.

Proposition 1A offers a smart long-term opportunity to ease congestion. It will authorize construction of a high-speed train system connecting California's major cities.

How does downtown Modesto to downtown Los Angeles in under two hours for less than $50 sound? Or Modesto to Sacramento in about half an hour?

This train project couldn't be arriving at a better time. That's because long before the rails even carry their first passengers, the high-speed train will deliver a needed economic boost to the Modesto area and all of California.

Construction alone will create 160,000 jobs, injecting investment directly into local businesses and households. Once running, the whole system will generate more than 450,000 permanent jobs, including new businesses around vibrant downtown stations that will come to life in our cities.

The high-speed train will also pay dividends for generations to come in our environment. The all-electric trains won't burn fossil fuels, keeping some 12 billion pounds of greenhouse gas emissions per year from entering our environment. That's equivalent to taking one million cars off the road.

Plus, the high-speed train will save some 12.7 million barrels of oil per year. That's because a passenger on a train uses one-third of the energy of one on an airplane and one-fifth of the energy of one in a car.

Today, congestion on our roads and in our airports costs Californians about $20 billion per year in lost time and fuel. One recent study showed the high-speed train could save Central Valley drivers $2.2 billion per year in reduced freeway congestion costs alone. High- speed rail is a forward-thinking, long-term investment in California's future much as our university system and water projects were decades ago.

Proposition 1A would allow the sale of $9.95 billion of state bonds to help pay for the development and construction of high-speed rail. But the state will not do this alone. Construction will be funded through a partnership of federal, private and state dollars. That means every state bond dollar used for construction will attract at least two more dollars of matching funds, making the most of the bond investment.

And taxpayers are protected. If the matching funds for construction are not raised, the bond money for construction will not be spent. That is the law.

Ongoing operations of the high- speed train system will be funded by ticket revenue, without public subsidy.

Proposition 1A is supported by a diverse coalition including business groups from across the state such as the Modesto Chamber of Commerce; environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the California League of
Conservation Voters; and labor organizations including the California Labor Federation.

Proposition 1A, by building the high-speed train system, will provide a long-term, environmentally responsible solution to the congestion challenge California faces. It will reduce pollution and save oil. And Proposition
1A comes at a time when our struggling economy can definitely use the boost and the hundreds of thousands of jobs this project will bring to communities like Modesto.

Vote "yes" on Proposition 1A to ease congestion, fight pollution and create jobs.

Galgiani represents the 17th Assembly District, which includes Merced County and parts of Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties. She carried the bill to put Proposition 1A on the ballot.

Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, Oct. 17, 2008:

Yes on Prop. 1A

Now more than ever state needs jobs, cleaner air, easier travel.

A great deal is at stake with Proposition 1A, the high-speed rail bond on the November ballot. Jobs, cleaner air, reduced dependence on oil, a convenient and efficient alternative to driving and flying -- for all these reasons, a "yes" vote makes perfect sense for Californians.

Some of the opposition to the $9.95 billion bond comes from predictable sources -- groups backed by the oil industry, for instance. They seek to defend a status quo that is crumbling rapidly.

Sadly, much opposition has come from people who say they like the idea of 220-mph trains zipping up and down the state, but don't think we can afford it right now, in a time of budget disaster and economic crisis.

That sounds prudent, even reasonable, but it ignores an important fact of American history: Many of our most important public works projects have come in times of deep economic distress -- and they have been crucial elements in our recovery in those times.

Recall the Great Depression, when voters in the Bay Area passed bonds to build the Golden Gate and Bay bridges -- projects that lightened the impact of the Depression on that region and were critical to the postwar economic boom. Shasta Dam was built during the Depression, and remains a linchpin of the state's water system.

The greatest public works project in the nation's history -- the transcontinental railroad -- was set in motion by Abraham Lincoln at the outset of the Civil War, the most troubled period of our history.

The other gap in the reasoning of high-speed rail opponents is their nearly universal belief that we save money by not building the high-speed system, with its estimated price tag of $40 billion to $45 billion.

Sure, we'd save that money, but those "savings" would carry a steep price:
* We'd lose 160,000 construction jobs -- and all the economic stimulus of that vast payroll.
* We wouldn't have 400,000 new permanent jobs once the system begins to operate.
* We wouldn't see a reduction in our dependence on oil.
* We wouldn't get cleaner air, and we'd keep spending added millions each year in health costs attributed to air pollution.
* We'd lose a chance to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 12 billion pounds each year.

In short, the cost of not building the high-speed system is not zero.

In fact, in order to meet growing transportation needs, we'd have to spend two or three times as much money to expand highways and airports. Expanding Highway 99 in the Valley to an eight-lane interstate, for example, would cost as much as $25 billion alone.

We'd also lose federal funding that now appears on the horizon, as a growing bipartisan coalition in Congress seems ready to find the money to match state and private sector funding for such projects.

Other areas -- the Midwest, Texas, Florida, Colorado, the northeast corridor from Washington to Boston -- are working on their own high-speed rail plans. Right now, California stands at the head of the line for any federal funding, which Proposition 1A will require. But if the measure fails, we'll go to the very end of that line -- perhaps for decades.

The high-speed rail project is immense, and that can be daunting. The current economic situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. In the past, Californians have risen to such challenges with vision and determination. Voting "yes" on Proposition 1A is a declaration that we still possess those qualities, and have not surrendered them to a timid faith in a status quo that is no longer sustainable.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses California will continue with integral project against air pollution. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Seguirá California nuevo proyecto integral contra la contaminación

Manuel Ocaño
Noticiero Latino, San Diego, CA
Radio Bilingüe, Friday, October 17, 2008

California se regirá por un nuevo proyecto integral contra la contaminación del aire, que incluye cobrar multas proporcionales al daño que hagan empresas e individuos, nuevos límites y, en general, reducir el deterioro al que había en 1990.

La directora de la Oficina de Recursos del Aire de California, Mary Nichols, dijo que el proyecto integra unas 40 mil opiniones recogidas entre el público este año.

De cumplirse el plan anual, para el año 2020 California eliminaría 174 millones de toneladas métricas de contaminación.