Study: Valley burn bans save 80 lives annually

By Mark Grossi – Fresno Bee
In the Modesto Bee, Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, December 30, 2008

FRESNO, Calif. — A new study suggests that forced cutbacks in fireplace use across the San Joaquin Valley save more than 80 lives each year.

Occasional wood-burning bans to reduce particulate pollution have been in effect since 2003 and were made stricter in November. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District bans burning when air quality deteriorates to unhealthy levels.

The study, by the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at California State University, Fresno, compared the death rate from respiratory-related illnesses before and after the ban. It found that at least 50 fewer people have died each year in the Fresno-Clovis and about 30 in Bakersfield.

The study's author, David Lighthall, is now the health and science adviser for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Study: No-burn days saving lives in Bakersfield

BY JAMES GELUSO, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

A study of mortality has put a number to the value of no-burn days in Bakersfield — about 31 fewer deaths a year.

The study was completed by a scientist under contract to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, and has already been cited as evidence for tightening the district's no-burn rule.

The 2003 rule bans burning in fireplaces when the air is already polluted. The revised rule, adopted in October, lowered the standard for deciding when the air is too dirty to allow burning.

"We find that in the winter, residential wood-burning really is a significant factor," said Brenda Turner, spokeswoman for the district.

The study was conducted by David Lighthall, of the Central Valley Health Policy Institute. Since completing the study, Lighthall has joined the district as its health science adviser.

Lighthall didn't find specific deaths that would have been prevented, Turner said. Instead, he used a database system called Environmental Benefits Mapping and Analysis Program, developed by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's an extrapolation from average causes of death for that particular area," Turner said.

Lighthall found that, statistically, 30 fewer people would have died in the Bakersfield area in 2001, 35 fewer in 2002 and 28 fewer in 2003 had the rule been in place.

Fireplace burning is the second-highest cause of fine particulate pollution, or PM 2.5, in the San Joaquin Valley, especially in the winter, according to data from the state Air Resources Board.

"This is particularly true for south valley urban areas where density of settlement coincides with powerful and persistent nighttime inversions," Lighthall wrote in the summary of his study.

The top source is agricultural burning.

Lighthall cited his work back in October when the district's board considered tightening the rule. The new rule was expected to result in four times as many no-burn days each winter.

Bag of permit woes bedevils firm

By Bruce Spence - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, December 27, 2008

STOCKTON - Mike Kao saw the recent relocation of his Oakland Bag Inc. to Stockton as a business-saving move, because industrial space is dramatically less expensive in the Valley than in the Bay Area.

But he has spent much of this month trying to figure out what he needs to do to appease Valley air quality regulators.

One thing is to get required permits from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which he is in the process of getting while still operating at 635 S. Aurora Drive in Stockton.

The company was cited in late November for operating without permits. Kao admitted he assumed that the approvals he had to operate in the Bay Area would be good here.

The company also was cited for possessing an ink that exceeds maximum limits for volatile organic compounds, or vapors, that can escape into the air and contribute to pollution.

However, the company was cited for a single, 5-gallon container of an alcohol-based solvent not even being used for printing, said Amy Fung, an Oakland Bag employee who is coordinating the permits request.

Otherwise, the company uses only water-based inks that are well under the air pollution district's maximum vapor limits, she said.

Tom Busenbark, supervisor and inspector with the air pollution control district, said that he isn't making permitting decisions on the company but that if Oakland Bag is indeed using water-based inks, they probably will meet district requirements.

"Usually, we won't force them to shut down if they're operating within guidelines and there's nothing fundamentally wrong with their application," he said.

Permitting requirements aside, Kao said he also needs to change printing inks to make his business viable in the long term.

About 80 percent of the company's business involves supplying the federal government with sturdy, woven, polypropylene bags -- white and emblazoned with red and blue type and a U.S. flag emblem -- that are filled with grains, such as rice and sorghum, and shipped to Third World counties.

Water-based colors work fine on paper bags, but on the plastic bags, they smear and stick to other bags unless they have drying times as much as five times longer than needed for alcohol-based inks, Kao said.

If he can figure out a viable solvent-based ink -- which he is working with the air pollution control district to accomplish -- he would be able to speed up production and double the current staff of about 40 who work at the 94,000-square-foot Stockton plant.

Print wastage should run no more than 3 percent, he said. With the water-based inks, it runs as high as 15 percent because of smears, sticking and low-quality impressions.

"I can't afford that," he said. "I can't even sleep or eat because of this. I just want to find a solution."

Otherwise, relocating to Stockton has been a good financial move in one respect.

Kao bought a former building materials warehouse for $3.3 million. The monthly mortgage payment of $18,000 is much easier to bear than the $65,000 per month rent he was paying in Oakland, he said.

"That was way too much rent for me over there," said Kao, who bought the bag business a year ago. "I had to cut costs."

Airline flight-tests biofuel in a jet's engine

George Raine, Chronicle Staff Writer
San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

Air New Zealand conducted a two-hour test flight Monday in which one of four Rolls-Royce engines on a jetliner was powered by a biofuel blend, another step down the long path the airline industry is taking to reduce carbon emissions.

Engine No. 1 of the Boeing 747-400 that departed Auckland International Airport was fueled by a 50-50 blend of standard Jet A1 fuel – effectively kerosene – and synthetic paraffinic kerosene derived from Jatropha oil, which comes from a shrub that grows in tropical and subtropical areas and is largely used as a hedge plant.

Air New Zealand's chief pilot, Capt. David Morgan, said the flight went without incident, additional evidence for sustainable sources of oil being used by an industry that produces up to 12 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

"We accomplished everything we set out to do," Morgan said in a post-flight interview. "It was a very successful test flight, and Jatropha is a reliable second-generation biofuel going forward."

The test flight, over the Hauraki Gulf of the North Island of New Zealand, was a joint effort between Air New Zealand, Boeing, Rolls-Royce and UOP, a Honeywell refining technology company.

Morgan took the airplane up to 35,000 feet, to test acceleration and to see if friction of the fuel slows down its flow to the engine. The engine was shut down twice in descent, then restarted. It was shut down and restarted again while taxiing on the tarmac.

"Today we stand at the earliest stages of sustainable fuel development and an important moment in aviation history," said Air New Zealand chief executive Rob Fyfe.

In a number of test flights being watched worldwide, particularly by the airline industry, carriers want to know if the performance of engines powered by biofuel is indistinguishable from those that are using traditional jet fuel. If so, the industry may be moving closer to achieving cleaner air.

On Feb. 24, Virgin Atlantic set an aviation milestone by flying the first commercial aircraft powered by biofuel in an effort to reduce carbon emissions. A Boeing 747 made the 90-minute flight from London's Heathrow Airport to Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport with one of its four main fuel tanks filled with a blend of 80 percent jet fuel and 20 percent coconut and babassu oil. The babassu tree is a species of palm that is native to Brazil's Amazon rain forest.

On Jan. 7, Continental Airlines will conduct the first biofuel-powered demonstration flight of a U.S. commercial airline. It will be using a blend of 50 percent traditional jet fuel and 50 percent biofuel from algae and Jatropha plants in one of two engines of a Boeing 737-800 aircraft departing Houston for a two-hour flight.

The U.S. Air Force, on Dec. 17, 2007 – the 104th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first powered flight – flew a C-17 Globemaster III coast to coast using a synthetic aviation fuel derived from natural gas. (Environmentalists were less than enthusiastic about that test. The Natural Resources Defense Council called it the "path of least resistance to make synthetic fuel from other fossil fuels.")

Other environmental groups have hailed these efforts, although Friends of the Earth said that any carbon savings from crop-based fuels would be negligible and that efforts should instead be made to reduce air travel. The group has said that the carbon savings will be erased by growth in the aviation industry.

In Burlingame, David Cush, the president and chief executive officer of Virgin America, the only airline based in California, said he would welcome a world in which airlines could make maximum use of biofuels. But he said economic circumstances must be in place before floors for energy prices will work.

Cush said jet biofuel can be refined at $3 per gallon, which looked good in July when jet fuel was $4.50 per gallon. It doesn't look so good in December, he said, when the industry is paying $1.40.

"Unfortunately, for biofuel-makers, those economic circumstances that existed several months ago have now gone away," Cush said.

In Houston, Susannah Thurston, a Continental Airlines spokeswoman, said some forecasters are predicting fuel costs will rise again and the airline is also concerned about fuel availability "and about the impact of traditional fuels on the environment."

She added, "Exploring alternative energy sources is as valid as working toward improved fuel efficiency. While use of transportation fuels can be expected to grow in the future, reducing carbon emissions per unit of travel, by any means, delivers environmental benefits that otherwise would not be achieved."

Part of the clean air effort likely will play out in court. In December 2007, California Attorney General Jerry Brown, four other states, the city of New York, the District of Columbia and the South Coast Air Quality Management District filed petitions with the Environmental Protection Agency seeking the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft.

Possible air hazards rarely considered in plans for schools

By Brad Heath, Blake Morrison and Dan Reed
USA TODAY, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

SPRINGDALE, Ark. — The battle over whether to build Bayyari Elementary School and the subdivision that surrounds it here was fought for the usual reasons before the school opened in 2004: Neighbors worried about sprawl and crime, and the city worried about dust and noise.

No one considered whether high levels of toxic chemicals might be in the air.

No law told them they should.

Had parents, school officials or regulators checked pollution reports from area companies on file with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, they might have noticed that the school sits in a section of the city where the air appeared to be tainted by toxic chemicals such as chromium and nickel.

"Nobody mentioned that to us," says Ronnie Bradshaw, an assistant superintendent of Springdale's schools. "If we thought there was an issue, we would have looked before we bought the property. If something's going to hurt kids, we'll address it."

USA TODAY spent eight months examining the impact of industrial pollution on schools across the nation and used a government computer simulation to identify schools in potential toxic hot spots, a task the EPA has never undertaken.

The newspaper identified 435 schools in locations where the air outside appeared more dangerous than at an Ohio elementary school that was shut down three years ago after officials found the air there saturated with carcinogens 50 times higher than what the state considers acceptable.

At least 43 of the 435 schools — or about 10% — opened in the past decade, USA TODAY found.

Some of those 43 schools are in new buildings. Others — primarily charter and nursery schools — opened in existing schoolhouses. Very few are in places where officials are required by state law to consider the potential hazards before the schools opened.

To identify schools where dangers appeared to be the greatest, USA TODAY used an EPA computer model created to trace the potential path of toxic chemicals released by industries. USA TODAY used it to compare the nation's 127,800 public, private and parochial schools with one another, based on the chemicals likely to be in the air outside.

The model's most recent version uses emissions reports that 20,000 industrial facilities filed with the agency in 2005. That means it reflects a snapshot in time: Some of the schools or companies may have closed since the government collected the data; others may have opened.

Children are especially susceptible to toxic chemicals, which can cause respiratory illnesses, cancer or other diseases if exposures last for extended periods. The health effects might not be evident for years, even decades.

Environmental regulations typically require builders to examine the effect that a structure might have on the surrounding ecosystem. But in most states, USA TODAY found, neither school officials nor factory owners are required to consider their proximity to one another before construction begins.

Close proximity to potential hazards is common.

Based on data USA TODAY supplied to the EPA, about half of the nation's schools are in what the government calls "vulnerable zones" — areas close enough to industrial sites that they could be affected by a chemical accident. Many are within blocks of companies that store or release toxic chemicals.

As President-elect Barack Obama pledges to spend billions of taxpayer dollars to construct and renovate schools, the lack of regulations about where schools can be built — and whether exposure to toxic chemicals should be considered — makes the issue critically important, activists say.

Obama wants to ensure schools are environmentally friendly, a process that some contend begins with where the school is located.

"What we're seeing all across the country is these schools being built on or near toxic chemicals because the land is cheap," says Lois Gibbs, executive director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, an advocacy group that focuses on children and schools. "But we have a moral responsibility to children."

Thirty years ago, Gibbs helped launch an investigation that found tons of toxic waste under her kids' 99th Street School in the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, N.Y.

She says the dangers to children from toxic chemicals remain pronounced — especially at locations where kids are required to gather. Gibbs says her group has tracked about 8,000 letters sent to members of Congress in the wake of USA TODAY's investigation. The letters, sent through the group's website, express concern about the location of schools and potentially dangerous levels of toxic chemicals in the air.

"When our kids get on a bicycle, we put a helmet on them," Gibbs says. "And here, our federal and state governments are putting our children at risk. There is someone forcing me to send my child to school."

No laws in 23 states

Many states have no laws that govern where schools can be built. A 2006 study, funded by an EPA grant and done by Rhode Island Legal Services, found that 23 states put no limits on building schools near environmental hazards. In fact, no regulations in those states compel school officials to consider such dangers when picking a spot to build.

Only a few states address the potential health risks from toxic chemicals in the air, the survey showed.

In most of those places — in big cities and factory towns from coast to coast — schools have co-existed with potential environmental hazards for decades. But some of the schools have opened recently, after the danger pollution poses to children was more thoroughly understood. Some are in areas that the government's own data suggest may be toxic hot spots, USA TODAY found. Among them:

• Oro Grande, Calif., in the desert east of Los Angeles. There, the Mojave River Academy opened two years ago in a building within yards of a cement plant. Using the EPA model, a computer simulation based on 2005 data, USA TODAY found schoolchildren there could have been exposed to high levels of metals in the air.

• The crowded Chicago suburb of Cicero, Ill. There, the city's school districts built a middle school and an alternative high school during the past decade.

The land where they put the schools is in an area where the EPA model showed students could have been exposed to elevated levels of manganese, a chemical that can cause neurological problems. The model indicated levels 20 times higher than what the EPA says is safe for prolonged exposure.

The steel foundry that government records show emitted most of the manganese closed this year. It was blocks from the schools.

"It's hard to find space to build on," says Donna Adamic, superintendent of Cicero's elementary school district. "It's not like we can go a couple miles away to look for a better location."

• Coatesville, Pa., west of Philadelphia. There, Graystone Academy Charter School opened six years ago in offices leased from a nearby steel company. It's an area where the model indicated elevated levels of manganese and chromium, a metal that can cause cancer in its most harmful form. The school was within a mile of three companies that told the government they stored or released toxic chemicals.

Schools usually make their decisions about where to build based on the price of land, activist Gibbs says.

Sometimes, Gibbs says, schools have no choice but to build in areas where the air could be dangerous. That's because no other property is available. Often, school officials aren't aware of the potential risk.

Land was a bargain

Bayyari Elementary School opened in 2004, in a new neighborhood of modest, one-story homes and duplexes. At the time, Springdale, a city of 67,000 in the northwest corner of the state, was growing so fast that it opened a new school every year.

The school district got a bargain on the land: It paid $500,000 for 21 acres, and the subdivision's developer picked up the cost of bringing utilities to the school. That saved taxpayers millions of dollars, says Bradshaw, Springdale's assistant superintendent.

Later, developer Fadil Bayyari, who acquired the Hidden Hills project from its original developer, gave the district a second lot nearby. In exchange, the district put his name on the new $6.8 million elementary school.

"I don't think there was any thought with anybody at the school system or even in the neighborhood that we (were) going to put this school too close to an industrial park," Bayyari says.

When developers first proposed building the subdivision that surrounds Bayyari in 2002, it drew immediate protests from neighbors. They worried that the planned neighborhood would encroach on their property and become a magnet for crime, traffic and other problems.

The only environmental concerns were about noise from a Danaher Tool Group factory and dust from the Beaver Lake Concrete plant near the subdivision.

"We tried to tell them the Danaher plant makes noise all night, but they said no," says Fred Davis, a neighbor. "But that plant's always made noise, and the cement plant has been here 15 years or so, and in the summer, you could see the dust cloud just hanging over the meadow where they built all those houses and the school."

The city asked for tests, Bradshaw says. The school district's tests examined how much dust was in the air, not what chemicals were in the air.

"The noise was no worse than crickets," Bradshaw says, "and the dust wasn't very high."

Arkansas doesn't require school districts to consider air pollution when they're deciding where to build, says Doug Eaton, head of facilities for the state's education department.

The EPA's computer simulation indicated that the levels of chromium and nickel outside Bayyari appeared high enough to rank the school among the worst 2% nationally, though it was not among those that ranked worse than the shuttered Meredith Hitchens school. Chromium can take several forms, and the model does not indicate which could be in the air. Its most harmful form can cause cancer. Nickel also has been linked to cancer.

The model indicated that both came primarily from the Danaher plant, a boxy, one-story factory about a quarter-mile from the elementary school. (The cement plant did not report any emissions to the EPA and therefore played no role in the rankings produced by the model.)

The model also indicated that the air around Bayyari was more than 15 times worse than the air at a typical location in Springdale. That means kids who go there could live in less polluted areas.

A manager at Danaher, which makes hand tools sold under several names, referred questions to its headquarters in Washington. For many weeks, USA TODAY tried to reach a spokesman there. The spokesman did not respond to a dozen telephone calls, e-mails or faxes, or to a visit by a reporter Monday.

This fall, USA TODAY teamed with scientists from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland to monitor the air outside Bayyari and 94 other schools nationwide.

At Bayyari, a reporter monitored for five days, using the same protocols employed by many universities and industries. A scientist who helped oversee USA TODAY's efforts, Patrick Breysse of Johns Hopkins, cautioned that the newspaper's monitoring represents a "snapshot" and should not be considered definitive.

Bayyari Elementary was among 64 schools where the levels of toxic chemicals were higher than what some states consider acceptable. Scientists such as Philip Landrigan, a pediatrician who leads a unit on children and the environment at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, say the risks to children might be 10 times greater than to adults because children breathe more air per pound and because their bodies are developing.

The tests at Bayyari detected chromium and nickel in the air, although they were at levels lower than what the model indicated. The monitoring could not identify the source of the chemicals. Longer-term monitoring would be needed to know what sort of risks kids there might face.

Mike Bates, head of the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality's air division, says he doesn't have "any significant concerns" about pollution in the area. Even so, he says, the state hasn't monitored Springdale's air to know for certain.

'A little dusty'

California's school siting laws are among the nation's toughest. Schools there cannot be built if they're within a quarter-mile of a facility that handles or releases hazardous substances, unless the school can show that those facilities do not endanger the students or staff.

But even in California, schools generally can open near potential hazards — as long as they move into buildings that already exist. That's what happened two years ago in Oro Grande, a town 85 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

The Mojave River Academy, a charter school, moved into a building that also houses the local elementary school. It's within sight of a cement plant that sent tens of thousands of pounds of hydrochloric acid, formaldehyde, manganese and other toxic chemicals into the air each year, according to reports its operator, TXI Riverside Cement, filed with the EPA.

When the charter first opened, "it was a little dusty," says the school's director, Joseph Andreasen. He says he never considered whether the toxic chemicals in the dust might prove dangerous to his students.

Frank Sheets, a spokesman for TXI, says the old plant had been cited by the EPA for problems.

He says the company works hard to stay within its permit and its emissions created "no significant risk" in Oro Grande. This year, it opened a new kiln as part of a nearly $400 million upgrade; in a settlement with the EPA, it agreed to shut off seven old ones.

Next year, the EPA plans to issue guidelines to help schools avoid such potential environmental hazards. The agency's advisory committee on children's health had been asking for such guidelines since at least 2002, USA TODAY found.

Congress has ordered the agency to finish by June. Even that was controversial: When the law requiring the guidelines passed, some school boards said the EPA should stay out of education issues, even though its guidelines will be voluntary.

Gibbs of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice called the guidelines a good first step. But she says states must be more aggressive with laws of their own.

"We have laws against parents neglecting their children," she says. "There's no reason that we shouldn't have laws to protect them against school boards that are erring."

Pennsylvania to Move Forward With Implementing Clean Air Interstate Rule

Power Plants Must Prepare to Meet Ozone, Fine Particulate Emissions Standards

Fresno Bee, Monday, Dec. 29, 2008

Pennsylvania will move ahead with its plans to implement the federal Clean Air Interstate Rule on Jan. 1 after a federal court reversed an earlier decision that struck down the rule.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia on Tuesday ordered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to fix flaws in the Clean Air Interstate Rule, or CAIR, but did not set a deadline. In the meantime, the rule will be implemented.

"The court's decision is a positive outcome for Pennsylvania's air quality, as it will allow residents of the commonwealth to benefit from the CAIR emission reductions while EPA addresses the flaws the court identified with the rule," said Acting Environmental Protection Secretary John Hanger. "The decision will allow Pennsylvania to move forward with our state implementation plans to meet ozone and fine particulate standards and to improve visibility while reducing regional haze."

CAIR is designed to reduce air pollution from power plants in the commonwealth and in states downwind of the plants where air quality is affected by the emissions. The EPA estimates that in 2010 CAIR would reduce nitrogen oxide emissions across the multistate CAIR region by 44.6 percent, or 1.2 million tons, and sulfur dioxide emissions by 71 percent, or 3.6 million tons.

One implication of the new court decision is that owners and operators of Pennsylvania power plants covered by the CAIR must be prepared to meet the requirements as of Jan. 1. A federal implementation plan will govern the power plants until the EPA approves the commonwealth's CAIR state implementation plan.

On July 11, the same federal court had vacated the entire federal CAIR regulation, but widespread concerns about adverse implications for short-term air quality and other harms led the court to reconsider.

The court's decision Tuesday came in response to a petition filed with the court by the EPA in September requesting a rehearing. Pennsylvania joined other states in court in recommending that the CAIR not be vacated. The states argued that though there are flaws in CAIR's cap-and-trade process to reduce air pollution, the short-term benefits of reducing air pollution using the first phase of the program weigh in favor of leaving it in place while the EPA works to correct the flaws.

The court did not set a deadline for EPA to remedy the flaws it previously identified in CAIR, but the court warned the federal agency that it did "not intend to grant an indefinite stay of the effectiveness of this court's decision."

For more information, visit www.depweb.state.pa.us, keyword: Air Regulations.

Pa. will enforce new power plant pollution rule

By MARC LEVY - Associated Press Writer
Tri-Valley Herald and Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

HARRISBURG, Pa.—Pennsylvania on Thursday will begin enforcing a new federal rule designed to cut power plant emissions of smog, soot and acid rain-causing pollutants, the Rendell administration said.

A three-judge appeals panel in Washington, D.C., revived the Clean Air Interstate Rule last week, but ordered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to make revisions to provide more protection for states downwind of the dirtiest power plants.

"The court's decision is a positive outcome for Pennsylvania's air quality, as it will allow residents of the commonwealth to benefit ... while EPA addresses the flaws the court identified with the rule," Gov. Ed Rendell's top environmental adviser John Hanger said in a statement.

The rule requires 28 states in the East, South and Midwest to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide from power plants.

By 2015, the nation's pollution from nitrogen oxides are to be reduced by 61 percent below 2003 levels, while sulfur dioxide pollution would be slashed by 73 percent below those levels, according to the federal government. The reductions are scheduled to occur in stages.

With well over 30 coal-fired power plants, Pennsylvania is among the nation's biggest producers of nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide. The pollutants contribute to acid rain, smog and soot, which can cause asthma, bronchitis and other breathing problems.

Power plant owners were unhappy about meeting the new pollution rules announced in 2005, but they protested when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit threw out the entire rule last July because it contains a pollution credit-trading provision they support.

Three judges from that court made up the panel that issued the latest ruling.

Under that provision, a power plant owner gets credits for cutting emissions by more than the required amount, and can sell those credits to owners of power plants elsewhere that do not meet pollution limits.

In Pennsylvania, power plant owners have spent more than $4 billion to meet the requirements of the Clean Air Interstate Rule, and stand to earn some of that back by selling credits, industry spokesman Doug Biden said.

"The emission allowances that are created by virtue of these investments will have value now" that the judges revived the rule, said Biden, who is president of the Harrisburg-based Electric Power Generation Association.

However, North Carolina complained that the credit-trading portion of the federal rule would not do enough to reduce pollution in states that are downwind of dirty power plants.

Report: Pollution is factor in crab decline

By Brian Witte, Associated Press Writer
Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

ANNAPOLIS, Md.—Pollution and overfishing have caused devastating declines in Chesapeake Bay blue crabs, and the federal government has been undercutting state efforts to restore the bay by failing to enforce environmental laws, a conservation group said Monday.

The Environmental Protection Agency should impose a regulatory cap on the amount of pollution that can enter the nation's largest estuary and enforce the Federal Clean Water Act, the report by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation concluded. Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania must also do more to control pollution from agricultural runoff, the report said.

"I think the most important thing right now is for the federal Environmental Protection Agency to do its job," said William Baker, president of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "That will help the states reinforce the efforts of the states."

The report, titled "Bad Water and the Decline of Blue Crabs in the Chesapeake Bay," cites pollution and overfishing—particularly of female blue crabs—as the two causes of the problem. While as many as 791 million blue crabs were estimated to live in the bay in 1990, their numbers plunged to about 260 million at the end of 2007.

Among the report's key findings:

- Low-oxygen "dead zones" have killed crab food, preventing the growth of 75,000 metric tons of clams and worms a year—enough to support more than 60 million blue crabs a year.
- Nitrogen and phosphorous pollution are causing algal blooms that kill underwater grasses needed for crabs to hide from predators. More than half of the bay's eelgrass has died since the 1970s.
- Watermen have overfished the bay by catching an average of 62 percent of the bay's blue crabs each year over the last decade—far above the 46 percent scientists say are sustainable.
- A cleaner bay could revive crab populations enough for watermen to catch the same number they are harvesting now without going over the 46 percent threshold.

The report was based on government data, scientific papers and interviews with leading crab researchers and water quality experts.

"We have been hearing the same song for 25 years," Baker said. "There is nothing different other than the species of crabs, oysters, clams are declining. When are we going to learn?"

Scientific understanding of the bay's woes is vast, Baker said, and all that's lacking to revive its waters is the political will to do what's necessary to reduce pollution.

"We know precisely what needs to be done," Baker told reporters. "It's simply a matter of enforcing the law and following the rule of science."

Benjamin H. Grumbles, the EPA's assistant administrator for water, said science and cooperation between governments and stakeholders are needed to clean up the bay, not fingerpointing and lawsuits like one threatened by Baker's group to force pollution reduction.

"It takes a partnership, and EPA is committed to working with everyone to accelerate progress and hold polluters accountable," Grumbles said in a statement.

While the continued "politics of postponement" of essential conservation steps have harmed the bay, Baker said proper enforcement of current laws and help from a federal economic stimulus package under consideration could turn things around.

"We think if the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act are enforced you could see water quality improvements within five years," Baker said.

In September, the federal officials made a disaster declaration for the bay's blue crab fishery, making watermen in Maryland and Virginia eligible for up to $20 million. For the second year, Maryland has announced plans to limit the number of caught female crabs to 34 percent.

Gov. Martin O'Malley and members of Maryland's congressional delegation have been working to identify infrastructure projects that could receive a jump start, if federal money aimed at pumping new life into the economy becomes available. Maryland has more than 100 water and wastewater infrastructure projects with a total estimated cost of nearly $1 billion, many of them of benefit to the health of the Chesapeake Bay by reducing pollution, according to a letter written by O'Malley earlier this month.

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On the Net:
Chesapeake Bay Foundation report, http://cbf.org/badwater2008

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Editorial, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008:

Report on air quality needs study

Reports of the possibility of air pollution from an animal feed plant in Kingsburg are contradictory at worst and confusing at best.

We are tremendously sensitive about the risk to children from contamination by heavy metals, and any threat to their health ought to be taken seriously. In this case, however, it is hard to determine from the evidence that extreme intervention ought to take place.

We urge local and regional officials to consider an updated series of tests that will settle for all whether the Nutrius plant in Kingsburg is a threat, and of course to intervene immediately if it is found to pose a threat to anyone's health.

A report in the Times-Delta based on research conducted by USA TODAY examined the issue of air pollution that might originate from an animal feed plant in Kingsburg. USA TODAY used a computer model developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and found that metal compounds expelled by Nutrius LLC from its plant at Highway 99 and Mendocino Avenue in Kingsburg might be circulating in the air around 155 of 180 Tulare County schools.

One Visalia school, Hurley Elementary, could be particularly vulnerable to contamination because it lies downwind from the Nutrius plant and near the Kawneer plant. The contaminants recorded from the Nutrius plant include manganese, glycol ethers, xylene and nitric acid, any of which can be harmful in high enough concentrations after prolonged exposure.

The data appears to be entirely theoretical, however. It was extrapolated from a computer model. No actual environmental testing took place.

In fact, when a portable air sensor was placed at Hurley school to determine what might be in the air, it found evidence of two other particulates not found in the USA TODAY study: carbon tetrachloride and benzene. Carbon tet is a cleaning agent. Benzene is a byproduct of vehicle exhaust.

Visalia Unified School District has said that levels of particulate matter around Hurley are well below harmful levels for children. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District testing reveals no harmful

levels of exposure to Tulare County schools. Testing and certification of the Nutrius plant by state and regional agencies find no harmful emission levels.

From what our reporting could determine, there have been no widespread reports of respiratory or other health problems among Hurley students or students of other nearby schools.

So is there smoke there? And should somebody be looking for the fire?

Based on the evidence, we would find it hard to conclude there is any actual contamination that would warrant an intervention such as requiring Nutrius to prove it has eliminated emissions or face other sanctions such as restriction of operations.

But this would not be the first time that an environmental problem had festered unbeknown to authorities only to become a problem later.

The EPA's computer model can't make an definitive conclusions about actual contamination. It can present a scenario in which it can identify the potential for contamination by examining meteorological and geographical data.

From that point a full air-quality study needs to take place to determine whether reality confirms the model.

We urge federal, state, regional and local officials to conduct such a study.

We understand that studies of that kind are technically challenging and expensive. The San Joaquin Valley air has some interesting factors — dust, other particulate matter, ozone, pesticides, exhaust, etc. — that make it even more complicated.

Parts of this study have already been conducted, however. Confining the study to Hurley school and the Nutrius plant might limit the expense and complexity. A positive finding on that portion alone might allow air quality technicians to draw more tangible conclusions that could be used in a wider study.

We cannot ignore any study that reveals a significant threat to the health of children, but we aren't comfortable with leaving this study at this stage, which basically says, "There could be a problem here."

If so, let's study it. Without further evidence, there's no telling what if anything should be done next.

L.A. Daily News Commentary, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008:

Solar energy remains a hot idea, despite flap

By Richard Nemec

The flap over the city's March 3 solar energy ballot measure, Measure B, while unfortunate and avoidable, should not obscure the merits of the proposal. After all, solar energy should not be a partisan issue since harnessing the sun's power is in everyone's best interest.

What is needed is more of a realistic view of this energy source that has bedeviled mankind for centuries. First, it isn't "free." Second, it will always cost a little more, but it carries broader economic and environmental advantages.

With that understanding, voters can better deal with the political follies surrounding Measure B. As usual, the political insider games at City Hall once they became public have tainted a worthwhile initiative involving the city utility, the Department of Water and Power, which through a combination of local leadership and statewide pressure from Gov. Schwarzenegger's administration has caught the renewable energy bug.

With solar, you have to start with the realization that it currently is one of the most expensive renewable, or pollution-free, ways to produce electricity, and the economics even within the solar space vary among individual home and small-business systems, larger industrial-size ones, and the huge solar-thermal projects proposed for the Southern California deserts.

Most of the signs are positive for solar development, but aside from the still-disputed cost of the DWP program that Measure B is supposed to help pay for there is no doubt that the cumulative cost of making solar a bigger part of our energy supply runs into the tens of billions of dollars category. And this is just

part of the answer to a much more costly attack on global warming that will take decades and cost trillions of dollars.

A recent example is the approval by California regulators of a $2 billion, 120-mile transmission line in the southern end of the state to bring power supplies from still-to-be-built solar, wind and geothermal electricity projects in far-off Imperial County. San Diego County's ever-expanding population needs the green juice.

An advantage for the Measure B-type program is that no added transmission lines need to be built. DWP will widely site smaller solar photovoltaic systems that convert sunlight to electricity and hook them to the existing grid system. The city utility will own and maintain the solar panels which, compared with traditional electric-generation plants, require little day-to-day maintenance.

As the L.A. City Council's overly hurried action to put Measure B on the March ballot demonstrates, there is a lot of momentum behind solar energy development these days. Hopefully, policymakers will continue to see this and other renewable energy development as an added economic stimulus.

A recent two-year progress report on California's 10-year solar initiative for providing homes and businesses with incentives to install solar PV systems on their roofs indicated that some 414 megawatts worth of solar systems have been installed or have been approved for rebates, and an additional 150 megawatts is expected to be added in the next 12 to 18 months, bringing with it what the state energy agencies estimate will be an added $2.5 billion of investment in the state's sagging economy.

While the City Council consultant's report on Measure B still deserves more public airing, it should not become a roadblock or detour to the state's current solar push. Solar is still a hot idea, and even more so in the environment and economy we face in 2009.

Richard Nemec is a Los Angeles writer covering energy for several national trade publications. He can be reached at rnemec@ca.rr.com.

Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008:

No-burn days pointless

I can't sit on the sidelines like the cord of wood that sits along the side of my house that I purchased this fall, just waiting for the day that I'm allowed to "burn cleanly." The belief that no-burn days are working is just misinformation to receive federal money.

Location, location, location -- we've all heard it and Bakersfield is at the "end of the road" in terms of the valley's air, not the beginning. There have been study after study for as long as I can remember, going back to the 1960s, to identify the leading cause of our bad air.

Can we all remember back this last summer to the Monterrey fires? And where did all that smoke of those fires end up? Yes, Bakersfield choked for days upon days due to the smoke of those terrible fires, and our air index went sky high. But yet this winter, it's not about unhealthy air, it's about a predetermined amount of no-burn days!

I really do need a breath of fresh air! Would someone please address the big contributors to our bad air quality? Then I'll feel better about supporting no-burn days.

MARK SWEO, Bakersfield

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Mexicali is asking that their residents refrain from polluting the air. They have prohibited fireworks and outdoor fire pit use. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Menos frío mañana y un exhorto a no contaminar

Por Brisa Montes Avitia
La Voz de la Frontera, Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

La Dirección Estatal de Protección Civil dio a conocer el pronóstico extendido para estos días festivos en los que la influencia de un sistema de alta presión mantendrá cielos despejados y un tiempo seco, con un leve ascenso en las temperaturas durante el día hasta mediados de la próxima semana.

La presencia de vientos para estos días mantendrá mañanas y noches frías para el domingo y heladas en zonas más bajas, como lo es Mexicali y su valle, esperando para hoy martes una temperatura máxima de 18 grados centígrados equivalentes a 64 grados Fahrenheit y con una mínima de 2 grados centígrados, que son 36 Fahrenheit con un cielo despejado.

Para mañana 31 de diciembre se espera cielo despejado con una temperatura máxima de 21 grados centígrados igual a 70 grados Fahrenheit y una temperatura mínima de 5 grados centígrados equivalentes a 40 grados Fahrenheit.

Reiteran: no cohetes, fogatas ni disparos

Se registró un aumento en los niveles de contaminación en Mexicali la noche del 24 y madrugada del 25 de diciembre, por motivo de la quema de cohetes y las fogatas, informó la Secretaría de Protección al Ambiente del Estado.

Según un estudio revelado por el titular de la dependencia estatal, Sócrates Bastida Hernández, el miércoles de Nochebuena después de las 20:30 horas, se incrementó el monóxido de carbono en la ciudad, sobrepasando las once partículas por millón, siendo los valores máximos que rebasan la norma.

Para el festejo de año nuevo se exhortó a la ciudadanía a evitar las prácticas contaminantes del medio ambiente, y agregó Bastidas Hernández que se reforzará la vigilancia con el apoyo la Dirección de Seguridad Pública Municipal, en especial de las patrullas ecológicas y la participación de bomberos para lograr mejorar la calidad del aire.