

Well-known journalist joins Florez staff

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

Mark Arax, a Fresno native, award-winning author and former Los Angeles Times reporter, has been hired as senior policy director on state Senate Majority Leader Dean Florez's staff, the senator announced Monday.

As a 20-year Los Angeles Times reporter, Arax covered high-profile stories on human rights abuses, official cover-ups in California prisons, air quality and farm worker treatment.

He has also authored three books: "In My Fathers Name," a memoir of Arax's search to find his father's murderers, "The King of California," about the Boswell farming family, and the upcoming "West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders and Killers in the Golden State," a collection of stories about California.

Arax will work for the Senate Select Committee on Air Quality, chaired by Florez.

"I am excited to see how policy can be advanced when we apply a reporter's perspective and tenacity to researching the challenges we face and ways in which we can better address them," said Florez, D-Shafter, in a news release.

Arax, 51, has been teaching literary non-fiction part-time at Claremont McKenna College since leaving the Los Angeles Times in 2007.

In the news release, Arax said "Instead of reporting to newspaper readers, I'll be reporting to the political leaders of the Senate majority... I see it as another great avenue to bring about important change."

Arax is among a handful of former reporters from newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and the Sacramento Bee to be hired to work on oversight, research or policy issues in the Legislature, according to a February report by Capitol Weekly.

Fresno writer Arax joins Florez's staff

State senator hires former L.A. Times reporter.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

Fresno Bee, Monday, March 9, 2009

SACRAMENTO -- Fresno's Mark Arax is giving up his byline for a government job.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, announced Monday that he is hiring the former Los Angeles Times reporter and author of three books as his senior policy director.

Arax will make about \$85,000 a year and will focus on [air quality issues](#), said Jennifer Hanson, a spokeswoman for Florez.

He will fill an existing position and will work primarily from Fresno, she said.

"Instead of reporting to newspaper readers, I'll be reporting to the political leaders of the Senate majority," Arax said in a statement.

Arax, an Armenian-American, left the Los Angeles Times in 2007 after a public dispute about the paper's decision not to publish a story he wrote about the Armenian genocide.

His career at the paper was marked by his coverage of the the San Joaquin Valley, including reporting on air quality and migrant farmworkers.

His books include "In My Father's Name," about the murder of his father, and the soon-to-be released collection of stories titled "West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders and Killers in the Golden State."

UC Merced gets second-highest 'green' certification on fourth building

By DANIELLE GAINES

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

UC Merced has announced that its Science and Engineering Building earned a "gold" rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

The university was recognized for the building's environmentally responsible design, construction and operation.

The building is the fourth in three years at the campus to earn the second-highest certification in the council's LEED -- leadership in energy and environmental design -- program.

The 211,000-square-foot laboratory and classroom building was completed in 2006. Features inside include water and energy conservation, natural lighting, air quality, waste diversion and recycling.

On the five-tier LEED scale, gold is the second-highest level. The University of California system has a goal to achieve a silver rating for all-new construction; the state of California has a bronze standard for all-new public buildings.

All buildings on the four-year-old campus meet or exceed the UC system standards, campus officials said. The other buildings with gold ratings are the central power plant, Kolligian Library and the main classroom and office building.

No other university in the country has earned LEED silver or better for every building on campus, UC Merced officials said.

The U.S. Green Building Council is an independent, nonprofit organization that rates buildings on 69 measures of sustainability.

Scientific integrity vow may have big impact

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg, The New York Times
L.A. Daily News, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama's directive on Monday to "guarantee scientific integrity" in federal policymaking could have a far-reaching impact, affecting issues as varied as climate change, national security, protection of endangered species and children's health.

But it will not divorce science from politics, or strip ideology from presidential decisions.

Obama delighted many scientists and patients by formally announcing that he was overturning the Bush administration's limits on embryonic stem cell research. But the president also went one step further, issuing a memorandum that sets forth broad parameters for how his administration would choose expert advisers and use scientific data.

The document orders Obama's top science adviser to help draft guidelines that will apply to every federal agency. Agencies will be expected to pick science advisers based on expertise, not political ideology, the memorandum said, and will offer whistle-blower protections to employees who expose the misuse or suppression of scientific information.

The idea, the president said in remarks before an audience of lawmakers, scientists, patients advocates and patients in the East Room, is to ensure that "we make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology": a line that drew more applause than any other. Irv Weissman, a Nobel laureate who directs an institute at Stanford University devoted to studying stem cells, called the declaration "of even greater importance" than the stem cell announcement itself.

It was also another in a long string of rebukes by Obama toward his predecessor, President George W. Bush. Bush was often accused of trying to shade or even suppress the findings of government scientists on climate change, sex education, contraceptives and other issues, as well as stem cells. But Obama's announcement does not elevate science to some new and exalted place in his administration.

"Scientists should have no illusions about whether they make policy - they don't," said Harold Varmus, president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and co-chairman of a panel

that advises Obama on science matters. The directive, he said, was simply intended "to provide the best available scientific information" to those who make policy decisions.

Scientists said they were thrilled by the announcement, as were advocates for patients, including Nancy Reagan, the former first lady who has made embryonic stem cell research a personal cause. Obama said in his Inaugural address that he intended to "restore science to its rightful place," and researchers said he had already made good on that promise by naming Nobel laureates like Varmus and Steven Chu, the energy secretary, to advise him.

"We're not dumb - we know that policy is made on the basis of facts and values," said Alan I. Leshner, chief executive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a former director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse under President Clinton and, briefly, Bush.

But by asserting "the centrality of science to every issue of modern life," Leshner said, Obama is suggesting that science rather than ideology will be the foundation for his decision-making. "What you are seeing now is both a response to the last eight years, and a genuine reaction to President Obama's enthusiasm for science," he said.

During the Bush years, congressional Democrats and scientists themselves issued report after report asserting the White House had distorted or suppressed scientific information: from efforts to strip information about condoms from a government Web site to the editing of air quality reports issued by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Soy fuel tested in Fairbanks

By Amanda Bohman, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

FAIRBANKS, Alaska—Discarded restaurant frying oil, put through a process no more difficult than a high school chemistry experiment, can be used to heat buildings and fuel pickup trucks.

But there's a problem, at least in northern climates.

The cooking-oil-turned-biodiesel gels in freezing temperatures, leaving behind a nasty sludge that builds up in filters and tanks.

An Indiana outfit says it has solved that problem and is touting its product, Permaflo Biodiesel, in Alaska.

What the Indiana Soybean Alliance is selling, starting next winter, they hope, is a refining process that alters the chemical composition of biodiesel to prevent it from gelling in temperatures down to 60 below.

If the claim is true and the price is right, the product could transform the Fairbanks Biodiesel Cooperative into a year-round operation, cooperative vice president Garrison Collette said. The 3-year-old group more or less goes dormant during Fairbanks' long subarctic winter.

The technology also has the potential to help Fairbanks remove itself from the federal government's air-pollution watch list, Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker said. Biodiesel burns much cleaner than petroleum diesel fuel.

The soybean alliance arranged for a barge to transport some of the fuel from Seattle to Anchorage, and last week a group of scientists drove a pickup truck and a small bus borrowed from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, up the Parks Highway from Palmer using Permaflo Biodiesel.

On Saturday, the scientists drove to the Arctic Circle using Permaflo and ran a generator on the fuel.

The biodiesel demonstration was supposed to take place at Yellowstone National Park in January, but that endeavor fell through.

"At the last minute, they backed out," Purdue University's Bernie Tao, the lead scientist on the project, said in an interview after arriving in Fairbanks last week.

Tao said the biodiesel performed "perfectly" during the drive down the Parks Highway.

"It's darn cold up here," he said. "We had no problems running it. We're burning it at 100 percent."

The soybean alliance, made up of farmers, is looking for more uses for soybeans, a biofuel feedstock. But there are many potential feedstocks for biodiesel, including fish oil, which is being studied as a potential source of fuel in rural Alaska. These non-soybean sources of biodiesel also can be converted into the low-temperature fuel.

Collette said the biodiesel cooperative is doing its own study to learn how much waste vegetable oil is available from Fairbanks eateries to make biodiesel.

Members have looked into additives to keep the fuel from gelling in the cold, he said.

"So far we haven't found one that will work all the way down to 40 below," Collette said.

The cooperative produces biodiesel for its members, but Collette said the cooperative hopes to sell it someday. Using Permaflo technology would be a leap forward toward that goal.

"This is very interesting," Collette said in an e-mail after studying the soybean alliance's Web site and other Internet sources. "I think they are onto something here. I hope we can get a bit of this to sample."

A local pumping and thawing company uses biodiesel to heat some buildings, and a mechanic used it for a time to heat his shop until it became too much work, Collette said.

"The process of turning veggie oil into biodiesel is labor intensive and expensive," Collette said.

The biggest expense is methanol, which is shipped from Tacoma, Wash., he said.

Whitaker met with the scientists and representatives of the soybean alliance on Friday. The borough runs an air quality program after the Environmental Protection Agency deemed Fairbanks a non-attainment area, meaning the air quality falls below minimum standards.

Whitaker wants to encourage cold-weather testing in Fairbanks, he said, but he also is interested in biodiesel applications in Fairbanks as a means to improve the air quality.

"It looks very promising," the mayor said after the meeting. "Biofuel can be used in home heating systems with no conversion costs."

Megan Kuhn, a spokeswoman for the soybean alliance, said the organization is documenting the trip through Alaska and plans to use the information in promotional materials.

The alliance wants to sell its technology to biodiesel producers, she said. A price for the technology has not yet been set, but Kuhn said producers should be able to make Permaflo Biodiesel for a price comparable to what it costs to buy traditional diesel fuel at the pump.

"It won't be cheaper," the spokeswoman said.

PROMISES, PROMISES: House fails to zero out carbon

By DINA CAPPIELLO - Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Modesto Bee and other papers, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

WASHINGTON -- It was a bold promise: the House would "lead by example" to fight global warming, becoming the first legislative body in the world to zero out its carbon impact on the planet.

Too bold, perhaps.

The House quietly shelved the idea late last month, the word delivered in an e-mail to a couple of reporters. It turned out that the House's goal to become carbon neutral - by removing as much carbon dioxide from the air as it releases - could not be guaranteed.

"No one can really tell you if you are truly carbon neutral, and the lack of that standard bothered us," said Jeff Ventura, a spokesman for the House's chief administrative officer.

The House already had spent \$89,000 to cancel out 24,000 tons of emissions that it couldn't erase by turning out lights, buying better light bulbs and making the Capitol's power plant burn more natural gas.

The money bought "offsets," which fund projects that reduce greenhouse gases, such as capturing methane from farm manure ponds, that supposedly wouldn't have happened without the investment.

It also bought bragging rights for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and other congressional leaders.

"The House must lead by example and it is time for Congress to act on its own carbon footprint," Pelosi said in April 2007, when she announced the "Green the Capitol" initiative. "Today, we announce our intention to operate the House in a carbon-neutral manner at the earliest possible date, with a deadline of the end of this Congress" in December 2008.

But since such carbon markets are unregulated in the United States, it is difficult to prove their environmental benefits. And it is also difficult to know whether the House accurately calculated the amount of carbon it produces.

Still, the initiative reduced the House's carbon emissions by 74 percent by the end of 2008. The savings came from replacing more than 10,000 incandescent bulbs with more efficient compact fluorescent lights, purchasing wind power from the company that provides the House electricity and increasing the share of natural gas used to heat and cool its facilities.

The House's problems foreshadow what's ahead as Congress crafts national legislation that will limit emissions of the gases blamed for global warming. One key question is whether the legislation will allow companies looking to meet emissions targets to buy offsets as the House did, and what types of projects could generate offsets to be sold on the market.

Pelosi, who hopes to have a bill in the House by summer, hopes legislation will clear things up so the House potentially could purchase offsets again in the future.

"It's now clear that there needs to be consistency across the board in the offsets market," said Drew Hammill, Pelosi's spokesman.

Meanwhile, the House's failed experiment has become a leading example for critics of carbon offsets.

In a hearing last week on the role of carbon offsets in future climate legislation, Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, the ranking Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, couldn't resist a mention.

"I'm sure you know that the congressional purchase of offsets that Speaker Pelosi initiated several years ago has been suspended for the very reason that they can't guarantee that the offsets are really what they appear to be," Barton said.

The House in the meantime is stuck with reducing the gases blamed for global warming the old-fashioned way: actually cutting pollution.

But that won't be able to zero out emissions.

"Any carbon we reduce is better than where we were at. We are going to do the best we can do," said Ventura. "It is a lot more complicated and ambitious than people think it is."

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Tuesday, March 10, 2009](#)

Our View: Deadline is nearing for air plans

Valley cities, counties that haven't amended general plans are at risk of losing lawsuits over development.

The general plans that govern development and land use in the cities and counties of the Valley must include ways to reduce air pollution, under a law that goes into effect this summer.

But a number of local governments are behind the curve in updating their plans, and it could come back to bite them down the road.

The law -- Assembly Bill 170, passed in 2003 -- requires that cities and counties in the Valley amend their general plans to include reports on local air-quality conditions, a summary of air-quality regulations and "comprehensive" goals, policies and objectives to improve air quality. The plans must also list measures to meet those goals.

Without those air-quality elements in their plans, local governments could wind up on the losing end of lawsuits to stop new developments.

That's not much of an issue right now, with development at a standstill in the current recession. But assuming a recovery is somewhere in our future -- the sooner, the better, of course -- construction of new developments, and all the jobs it would bring, could be stymied just when it's needed most.

The state Senate's local government committee warned of that scenario in a recent memo: If local officials fail to meet the deadline, but still proceed with major land-use decisions, "a court could invalidate those decisions and other development projects as well."

Amending general plans is a complicated process and time-consuming process. It can also be costly, which no local government wants to hear in this time of shrunken budgets. But the price of failure to meet the requirements of the law could be even higher.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District must review and approve the amended plans. Officials there said some cities and counties have not yet met the requirement. They'd better get moving: The deadline for cities in Fresno and Kern counties is June 30. Other municipalities have until Aug. 31, 2010.

The air district has guidelines for crafting general plans that meet air-quality demands.

The issue is not trivial. Air pollution affects us all, and every activity we engage in can be linked to something in the Valley's air that causes harm.

Development is a particular problem. Years of neglectful and sometimes downright bad planning have led to urban sprawl across broad swatches of the Valley. That has led in turn to long commutes, traffic congestion and high levels of vehicle emissions.

Neighborhoods haven't been planned to be air friendly -- walkways, bike paths, easy access to nearby goods and services were overlooked in favor of a vehicle-centered lifestyle.

We can't afford to build like that any longer, and local rules for development must reflect that fact. Cities and counties that haven't updated their general plans to meet the new realities must do so, and soon.

Otherwise, they run the risk of seeing growth -- even smart growth -- shut down by litigation. Avoid the rush; start good planning now.

[Editorial in the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, March 10, 2009:](#)

Editorial: Sparing the Bay Area air at what price?

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

BAY AREA air quality regulators are pleased with how the first Spare the Air season went during the winter months, which started in November and ended on the last day of February. Never mind that people's lives were intruded on and some industries suffered at the worse of times.

Inspectors from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District spent four months wandering the nine-county Bay Area region looking for smoking chimneys and wood stoves, and outside burn areas, to nail culprits who violated a Spare the Air warning.

Anyone caught received a warning and subsequent fines for further violations. It didn't come close to getting that far. The agency counted on people turning in their neighbors, and in fact, the air quality district received 1,442 reports of wood burning. Yet only less than one-fifth received even a warning and no one was fined.

The agency called this a victory because it figures everyone got the hint, but we have to wonder. It's obvious the reliability of reports came into question since only a small percentage earned warnings. Also, while there were 11 Spare the Air days, of the thousands of fireplaces, wood-burning stoves and outside burning areas in our region, only 254 received warnings. Either getting a warning in the mail has become an impressive scare tactic, or the program shows the air district lacks the resources to effectively enforce the ban.

Perhaps people were so confused that it was better not to burn. The agency put the pressure on the public to be informed when a Spare the Air night occurred. The agency claimed it tried to put out warnings by noon of that same day, but often, it came later in the afternoon, only hours before sundown. The agency offered a phone number, online information or people could sign up to be called or e-mailed. Why the agency couldn't warn people early in the morning when weather reports would be mainly accurate is anyone's guess.

And was it worth hurting numerous outlets who sold firewood or wood stoves? Worse, many people opted to burn natural gas and use more energy.

Experts say particles from wood burning are harmful, but it's not nearly as much as diesel engines and power plants. The air quality district found an easy target with the public and did not pursue aggressively the real culprits. If this is such a wonderful program why did the Bay Area still manage to exceed U.S. standards for particulates 13 times over this same time span?

We opposed the Spare the Air winter campaign from the start because the agency decided it should be a heavy-handed enforcement action rather than a voluntary program.

The agency simply doesn't have the resources for proper enforcement and this plan forces neighbor to tell on neighbor for minimal results. Until the air quality district decides to clamp down on the big polluters, not only does the little guy suffer, but our air doesn't get much better.

[Manteca Bulletin Commentary Tues., March 10, 2009](#)

Air quality cops: Cows both dead & alive are killing us in the SJ Valley

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

Burger King is killing you.

It used to be that you'd have to at least buy a charbroiled burger and consume it before you had to start worrying about your health. In the good old days all you had to fret about was trans fats and whether they cooked the meat enough to stay healthy.

Now the San Joaquin Valley Air Quality Control District is saying second-hand charbroiling can kill you.

The people who made dairy cattle public enemy No. 1 for cutting a bit too much cheese and creating methane gas are now going after steakhouses and fast food joints that charbroil meat. That dripping grease ends up sizzling and sparking a flame that spews smoke containing dangerous pollutants that escape into the atmosphere.

Throughout the San Joaquin Valley, the air quality folks estimate 2.6 tons of particles are released into the air each day from charbroiling. Altogether, 527 tons of pollutants that are considered lethal are released daily into the skies of the San Joaquin Valley.

The air quality people have a simple solution – technology. Of course, that means money. This new rule – which could cost between \$2,000 and \$100,000 a year per restaurant – is enough to choke a horse which, of course, you'd better not try to charbroil for fear of raising not the wrath of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals but from the air quality police.

Rest assured an annual investment of \$100,000-plus won't be the end of it. Remember Spreckels Sugar? Company executives said three things were killing them off in California: High labor costs, subsidized foreign sugar imports and ever tightening air pollution rules.

The Manteca factory spent well over \$1 million on scrubbers that removed almost 99 percent of the particles from the smokestack only to be told several years later that wasn't good enough. Spreckels saw the writing on the wall.

Who knows, maybe Burger King may call it quits too and leave the San Joaquin Valley restaurant business to the tofu food chains.

The pollution guys are saying that they plan to exempt businesses that cook small amounts of meat as well as backyard BBQs. Rest assured the two words missing are "for now." It is just a matter of time before you will start seeing bumper stickers on pick-up trucks reading "Outlaw BBQs and only outlaws will BBQ."

I've got nothing against cows but it almost seems like the solution is to kill off every last one of them. The experts say they're killing us by letting off too much methane gas, they're polluting ground water as well with their bodily waste and now when they're sizzled on the grill they're killing us as well. Talk about bad karma.

Forget the fact that cows provide dairy products and meat products that are considered essential for a healthy diet. I know people will argue the meat bit. I haven't consumed any form of meat for 23 years but I could care less if anyone else does.

I'll defend anyone's right to do so as I'm sure it is just a matter of time before someone goes after nuking veggie burgers as being unhealthy as well. After all, there are coal-powered plants somewhere that are powering my microwave.

Why not just cut to the chase and seize BBQs, ban cows, and outlaw people? That way the San Joaquin Valley can be well on its way to achieving air quality nirvana assuming, of course, Mother Nature doesn't return to its old ways and start lightning fires when the Central Valley turns tinder dry in its natural habitat during late summer.

I get the need for air quality. What I don't get is going after everything in carpet bombing fashion. If smokestacks, gas-powered vehicles, and open fires are the biggest sources why not concentrate all efforts on getting those down to a minimum? The goal shouldn't be absolutely pure air, it should be healthy air. There is a big difference.

[Letter to USA TODAY, Tuesday, March 10, 2009:](#)

Drive slower

USA TODAY published an excellent article detailing the drop in traffic fatalities in many states ("Traffic deaths decline in 42 states," News, Feb. 5).

No doubt less driving, prompted by higher gas prices last year, and slower speeds have contributed to the decline in traffic deaths. For every 1 mph over the 55 mph speed limit, you use more fuel, and have more accidents and air pollution.

I think President Obama and Congress should put a 55 mph speed limit on all our highways, as we did in the 1970s during the embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, at least until this economic crisis is over. This low-cost stimulus would save lives, reduce air pollution and help us beat the recession.

Richard W. Fenzel, Louisville

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Greenpeace blocks and occupy the EU building in Brussels and call for global climate bailout, while the ministers were inside. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Greenpeace bloquea el Consejo de la UE con los ministros dentro

EFE

El Diario, Tuesday, March 10, 2009

Bruselas— Unos 300 activistas de Greenpeace han bloqueado la entrada al Consejo de Ministros de la UE con los 27 ministros de Finanzas en el interior y mientras se espera la llegada del vicepresidente de Estados Unidos, Joe Biden.

Vestidos de amarillo, representantes de la organización se encadenaron a la puerta del edificio Justus Lipsius, donde se reúnen los ministros, cortando el paso por completo.

La protesta está motivada, según la organización ecologista, por la falta de compromiso "claro" sobre la financiación que la UE está dispuesta a dedicar a las medidas de adaptación al cambio climático en países en desarrollo.

La policía está en estos momentos intentando desalojarlos y ya ha informado de que se puede acceder al edificio por una entrada secundaria.