

Local farmers get funding to reduce pollution

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, May 10, 2009

Local farmers facing a tough economy are getting some federal funding to help cut their air pollution. A U.S. Agriculture Department program that kicked in April 30 provides \$20.9 million to help California growers in the most polluted areas take steps to reduce emissions.

Kings is one of 36 counties eligible for the funds. The amount available to local growers will be determined based on how much pollution reduction each proposal would achieve, said Anita Brown, spokeswoman for the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

All the listed counties fail at least one federal clean air standard.

In Kings, the failure is in two categories: Ozone and very small particle pollution.

The Agriculture Department program, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, is taking applications until June 26 for the available funds.

Two local growers had applied as of Tuesday afternoon, according to Genett Carstensen, Kings County soil conservationist.

The growers could not be identified because their names aren't public record until they receive funding, Brown said.

Under the program, farmers can be reimbursed for up to 75 percent of the cost of replacing old diesel pumps and buying new off-road equipment.

Replacing or retrofitting older models is designed to reduce nitrous exhaust emissions that contribute to ozone and small-particle pollution in the San Joaquin Valley.

Other practices that could qualify include orchard chipping, oiling roads and reducing tillage.

Newer spraying techniques that cut emissions might also qualify, Carstensen said.

Such techniques involve "smart" sprayers that sense the location of weeds or trees and sprays each individually rather than blasting the orchard with a cloud.

Carstensen is hoping that more growers apply for the assistance.

"I don't think people really know about the air quality program now," she said.

UC Merced professor has biomass study published

Plant matter converted to electricity is more efficient

By Sun-Star staff

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 8, 2009

Scientists are examining biomass -- plant matter that's grown and used to generate energy -- as a potential power source. Two biomass technologies involve ethanol and electricity. Biomass converted into ethanol, a corn-based fuel, can power internal combustion vehicles. Biomass converted into electricity can fuel a vehicle powered by an electric battery.

In the study, Campbell, along with Christopher Field of the Carnegie Institution's Department of Global Ecology and David Lobell of Stanford University, the scientists found that biomass

converted into electricity produced 81 percent more transportation miles and 108 percent more emissions offsets compared to ethanol.

In other words, said Campbell, vehicles powered by biomass converted into electricity "got farther down the road" compared to ethanol. As a result, Campbell added, "we found that converting biomass to electricity rather than ethanol makes the most sense for two policy-relevant issues, transportation and climate."

The authors said their study looked at two criteria, transportation and greenhouse gas offsets, but didn't examine the performance of electricity and ethanol for other policy relevant criteria.

"We also need to compare these options for other issues such as water consumption, air pollution and economic costs," Campbell said.

Campbell joined UC Merced as an assistant professor in the School of Engineering in 2008. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Stanford University and Ph.D. from the University of Iowa.

A copy of Campbell's abstract can be viewed online at:
<http://www.sciencemag.org/sciencexpress/recent.dtl>

California air board sued over fee tied to global-warming fight

By Jim Downing

Sacramento Bee, Friday, May 8, 2009

A collection of business and taxpayer groups sued the California Air Resources Board on Thursday for allegedly failing to provide certain documents detailing the administrative costs of waging the state's war on global warming.

Air board spokesman Stanley Young said the agency has complied with the groups' Public Records Act requests.

The dispute concerns a new fee on energy the air board is scheduled to propose today. The fee would cover agency salaries and other expenses associated with implementing Assembly Bill 32, the 2006 law that requires the state to cut greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Revenue from the fee would total about \$50 million annually, Young said.

In a news release, the business groups said the board has not provided documents "that would substantiate the basis for and the amount of fees to be collected."

Plaintiffs include the California Chamber of Commerce, California Small Business Alliance, Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and the Western States Petroleum Association. In a news release, they claimed the suit is the first associated with AB 32.

Bike to Work Day aims to raise awareness

By Rachel Gordon, Chronicle Staff Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 11, 2009

Bay Area cycling activists expect 150,000 people to hop on their two-wheelers Thursday for Bike to Work Day, an annual event that mixes politics with exercise.

From Napa to Santa Clara, businesses, government officials and community groups will be encouraging people to don their spandex or their most comfortable business attire and ride their bikes to work, school, on errands or just for the fun of it.

Joel Stein already commutes by bike. The 39-year-old warehouse supervisor who works in San Francisco's South of Market is trying to convince his co-workers to join him Thursday.

"I tell them it sure beats the hell out of sitting in traffic," he said Friday morning, stopped for a red light on Market Street, about halfway through his 20-minute open-air commute.

Special "energizer stations," where cyclists can grab something to drink and eat, will be set up along major bike corridors throughout the region on Thursday. A free bike-parking valet service will be offered in downtown San Francisco.

The idea is to raise the awareness of the role biking plays in transportation.

Just how significant a role, however, is subject to debate. While government officials and bike advocates point to surveys that show the number of people cycling is up in the Bay Area, it still represents a small segment, with car travel and public transportation dominating the spectrum.

The true believers in pedal power say the benefits can't be ignored. Not only is biking one of the cheapest ways to get around, "it's also a fun way to exercise and help reduce pollution," said Andrew Casteel, executive director of the Bay Area Bicycle Coalition.

It also can be one of the most controversial, at least in San Francisco, where a proposed expansion of the bike network led to a lawsuit that effectively held up the striping of new bike lanes, installation of new bike racks and most other city-initiated bike-improvement projects since the summer of 2006.

Critics, concerned about the impact on traffic and parking, in particular, succeeded in blocking implementation of the San Francisco Bicycle Plan until a full-blown environmental review of the proposed projects was completed and approved. In all, more than 50 projects, most of them new bike lines, have been stalled.

The San Francisco Planning Commission and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency are both likely to consider the bike plan in late June. If, as expected, approval is given, opponents can appeal the decision to the Board of Supervisors. That process would delay the bike plan getting the go-ahead for at least a month. At the end of that process, the city attorney can go back to the Superior Court for relief.

"Once the injunction is lifted, we are ready to go and will start striping new lanes," said Nathaniel Ford, executive director of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.

Realistically, the earliest that could be done would be July.

The timing makes this Bike to Work Day particularly exciting for Andy Thornley, program director for the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition.

"We are on the threshold of bike improvements in San Francisco," he said. "We've had pent-up demand for almost three years."

Benicia ozone level Bay Area's fourth highest

By Tony Burchyns, (Vallejo) Times Herald

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Saturday, May 9, 2009

BENICIA — An air-quality study tied to the Valero refinery shows that Benicia had the Bay Area's fourth worst ozone level in 2008, according to results made public last week.

But even though the refinery daily emits ozone precursor gases, which combine with heat and sunlight to form ozone, its exact contribution to ozone creation is unknown, officials said.

"It is nearly impossible to determine on any given day what amount of ozone was formed due to emissions from a particular industry," said Eric Stevenson, an air-monitoring manager for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Stevenson said some ozone precursor gases are produced locally, mainly by vehicle traffic, Valero and the Benicia port. But some drift in from other areas and get trapped in Benicia's microclimate, he said.

According to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District report, Benicia — at a high of 75 parts per billion — was No. 4 behind Bethel Island, Livermore and Concord.

The ranking was based on yearly averages from 23 Bay Area monitoring stations.

The health effects of ozone exposure include respiratory damage and heightened sensitivity to allergens.

Benicia's ozone levels still met national standards for both 2007 and 2008, Stevenson said.

The results were shared Wednesday at the Valero Benicia Refinery Community Advisory Panel meeting.

Officials at the meeting also discussed creating a community air-monitoring system similar to one established in Rodeo in the 1990s.

The system would differ from the air district's measurements by detecting and reporting short-term air-pollution events on a local level, in real time on the Internet, said Don Gamiles, a principal at Argos Scientific.

"The air district does measurements based on state and fed standards," Gamiles said. "By definition, a community monitoring system is a different beast."

The 18-month air district study, partly funded by Valero under an agreement with the community, concluded in December.

Benicia has no ongoing, independent air monitoring. But Valero is working to installing Argos monitoring equipment on Tennys Drive near East Second Street. The station is expected to be running inside of two months.

Gamiles also discussed installing what he called a "fence line system" to analyze air quality at the edge of the refinery. The system, which his company sells, would cost about \$35,000, he said after the meeting.

Rodeo, which borders the ConocoPhillips refinery, has used a fence-line air-monitoring system for more than a decade.

Obama won't fight global warming with bear rules

By H. Josef Hebert, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, May 9, 2009

WASHINGTON, (AP) -- The Obama administration, which promised a sharp break from the Bush White House on global warming, declared Friday it would stick with a Bush-era policy against expanding protection for climate-threatened polar bears and ruled out a broad new attack on greenhouse gases.

To the dismay of environmentalists, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar refused to rescind a Bush administration rule that says actions that threaten the polar bear's survival cannot be considered when safeguarding the iconic mammal if they occur outside the bear's Arctic home.

The rule was aimed at heading off the possibility that the bear's survival could be cited by opponents of power plants and other facilities that produce carbon dioxide, a leading pollutant blamed for global warming.

The Endangered Species Act requires that a threatened or endangered species must have its habitat protected. Environmentalists say that in the case of the polar bear, the biggest threat comes from pollution — mainly carbon dioxide from faraway power plants, factories and cars — that is warming the Earth and melting Arctic sea ice.

Salazar agreed that global warming was "the single greatest threat" to the bear's survival, but disagreed that the federal law protecting animals, plants and fish should be used to address climate change.

"The Endangered Species Act is not the appropriate tool for us to deal with what is a global issue, and that is the issue of global warming," said Salazar, echoing much the same view of his Republican predecessor, Dirk Kempthorne, who had declared the polar bear officially threatened and in need of protection under the federal species law.

Kempthorne at the same time issued the "special rule" that limited the scope of the bear's protection to actions within its Arctic home.

The iconic polar bear — some 25,000 of the mammals can be found across the Arctic region from Alaska to Greenland — has become a symbol of the potential ravages of climate change. Scientists say while the bear population has more than doubled since the 1960s, as many as 15,000 could be lost in the coming decades because of the loss of Arctic sea ice, a key element of its habitat.

Environmentalists and some members of Congress had strongly urged Salazar to rescind the Bush regulation, arguing the bear is not being given the full protection required under the species law.

Others, including most of the business community, argue that making the bear a reason for curtailing greenhouse gases thousands of miles from its home would cause economic chaos.

Reaction to Salazar's decision Friday was sharply divided.

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin hailed the decision as a "clear victory for Alaska" because it removes the link between bear protection and climate change and should help North Slope oil and gas development. Both of Alaska's senators and its only House member also praised the decision and rejected claims the bear won't be protected.

Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, a global warming skeptic and the ranking Republican on the Senate Environment Committee, applauded Salazar "for making the right call and applying a commonsense approach to the Endangered Species Act" and climate.

But environmentalists and some of their leading advocates in Congress were disappointed.

"The polar bear is threatened, and we need to act," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who chairs the environment panel, adding that she disagreed with Salazar's decision not to revoke the Bush regulation.

Andrew Wetzler, director of wildlife conservation at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the Endangered Species Act should be part of the government's arsenal in fighting climate change "and it shouldn't be unilaterally disarming itself for no reason."

"For Salazar to adopt Bush's polar bear extinction plan is confirming the worst fears of his tenure as secretary of interior," said Noah Greenwald, of the Center for Biological Diversity, which along with the NRDC and Greenpeace has a lawsuit pending challenging the bear rule.

Salazar noted that he has overturned a string of Bush-era regulations, including last week restoring a requirement that agencies consult with the government's most knowledgeable biologists when taking actions that could harm species. "We must do all we can to protect the polar bear," he said, but that using the species protection law "is not the right way to go."

The way to deal with climate change is a broad cap on greenhouse gases, he said.

Congress is considering cap-and-trade legislation forcing a reduction on greenhouse gases, and, separately, the Environmental Protection Agency has begun working on a climate regulation under the Clean Air Act.

Last month, the EPA declared carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels and other greenhouse gases a danger to public health.

The last word is still to be heard on linking species protection and climate change.

Earlier this week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began a review of whether the American pika, a tiny rabbit relative living in high altitudes of 10 Western states, is threatened by climate change because the mountain areas are becoming warmer.

The American pika is no polar bear, but the arguments may be the same.

U.S. Curbs Use of Species Act in Protecting Polar Bear

By Andrew C. Revkin, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Friday, May 8, 2009

The Obama administration said Friday that it would retain a wildlife rule issued in the last days of the Bush administration that says the government cannot invoke the Endangered Species Act to restrict emissions of greenhouse gases threatening the polar bear and its habitat.

In essence, the decision means that two consecutive presidents have judged that the act is not an appropriate means of curbing the emissions that scientists have linked to global warming.

The bear was listed as a threatened species under the act last May. But the special rule, adopted in December, said this designation did not give the Interior Department the authority to limit greenhouse gases outside the bears' Arctic range.

In announcing Friday that the rule would stand, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said, "The single greatest threat to the polar bear is the melting of Arctic sea ice due to climate change." But, Mr. Salazar said, the global risk from greenhouse gases, which are generated worldwide, requires comprehensive policies, not a patchwork of agency actions carried out for particular species.

"It would be very difficult for our scientists to be doing evaluations of a cement plant in Georgia or Florida and the impact it's going to have on the polar bear habitat," Mr. Salazar said. "I just don't think the Endangered Species Act was ever set up with that contemplation in mind."

"I do think what makes sense is for us to move forward with climate change and energy legislation," he added. "It is a signature issue of these times."

Environmental groups have turned in recent years to a variety of legal tools, including the endangered species law, as a strategy to force government agencies to rein in emissions that scientists say are the dominant cause of recent warming.

This year, for example, the Environmental Protection agency, prodded by a lawsuit, agreed under the Clean Water Act to start assessing the risks posed by the main greenhouse gas emission, carbon dioxide, as it is absorbed in seawater.

And only this week, also in response to a lawsuit, the Interior Department announced that a study was being undertaken to assess whether another mammal, the diminutive American pika, should be listed as threatened because of climate change.

The administration's decision to retain the polar bear rule appears to signal President Obama's willingness to let such suits play out in the courts as broader policies are developed to fight global warming.

Environmentalists who had been pressing the White House to drop the Bush-era rule criticized the decision, predicting that the rule would ultimately be deemed illegal in the courts.

"The action taken by Salazar today, and the spin on that action, is every bit as cynical, abusive and antiscientific as the Bush administration," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of several environmental groups that have sued to challenge the rule.

Some critics of the decision said it contradicted the approach the administration took when it chose to pursue restrictions on greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. That measure, which applies to national air pollution standards, is also not a perfect fit for a globally dispersed gas like carbon dioxide, they said.

Yet Democratic lawmakers, dozens of whom had signed a letter to Mr. Salazar urging that the rule be dropped, were largely silent on Friday. They are pushing hard for climate legislation limiting greenhouse gases and are still working out details with Mr. Obama.

Republicans in Congress and industry representatives had argued that without the rule, any proposed housing development, power plant or other project requiring a government permit could face a review of how its emissions might harm not only polar bears but eventually a list of other species that could be imperiled by climate change.

Jack N. Gerard, president of the American Petroleum Institute, endorsed Friday's move by the administration, saying it would provide "greater regulatory certainty not only to the oil and natural gas industry but also to all U.S. manufacturers."

Some environmental campaigners offered a mixed view of the situation.

John Kostyack, executive director for wildlife conservation and global warming at the National Wildlife Federation, criticized the decision to retain the rule, which he said falsely asserted that there was no direct link between specific greenhouse gas emissions and the decline in the polar bear's habitat.

But Mr. Kostyack said there was no way that the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Interior Department agency responsible for carrying out the Endangered Species Act, could handle the burden of trying to police emissions.

In addition to conventional threats, a vital focus for wildlife managers should be figuring out how to help vulnerable species adapt to climate stresses, he said.

"The last thing we want to do," he said, "is saddle them with solving the causes of global warming, too."

UN: Treaty expanded by 9 more dangerous chemicals

By Alexander G. Higgins and Elaine Engeler, Associated Press
In the Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, May 9, 2009

GENEVA -- A U.N.-sponsored treaty to combat highly dangerous chemicals has been expanded to include nine more substances that are used in pesticides, electronics and other products, U.N. officials said Saturday.

The additions include one called PFOS worth billions of dollars in a wide range of uses from making semiconductor chips to fighting fires. Another is lindane, a pesticide widely used in combatting head lice.

The chemicals accumulate in the environment up through the food chain and stay in people's bodies, said Donald Cooper, executive secretary to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, or POPs.

He said they travel long distances in the air.

The alarm over the original chemicals was sounded because they were being found in high concentrations in the fatty tissues and blood of the Inuit Indians in Canada even though they were thousands of miles away from the production or use of any of the chemicals, Cooper said.

Participating countries have one year to say whether they will ban or restrict the chemicals or whether they will need more time or an exemption, Cooper said.

The additions to the list make it possible for developing countries to receive international help in containing and destroying stockpiles of the chemicals which might otherwise seep into the soil and water supply, Cooper said.

The 2004 treaty aims to protect the environment and people's health from very dangerous chemicals that last a long time in the atmosphere, soil or water, and ultimately phase them out.

The treaty had included 12 chemicals, such as the widely banned pesticides DDT and chlordane. Countries that have ratified the treaty also enact national legislation to enforce the bans and restrictions it imposes.

The use of DDT in sprays to kill malaria-spreading mosquitoes has been allowed under an exception in the treaty. But the U.N. environmental and health agencies said this week that there are good alternatives to combat malaria. They announced the aim of phasing out DDT completely by the early 2020s.

The so-called POPs pose a risk to humans and the environment because they often damage reproductive health, can lead to mental health problems, cause cancer or impede normal growth, said Cooper.

The pollutants have some characteristics that make them exceptionally dangerous, he said.

"These chemicals transit boundaries. They are found everywhere in the world," Cooper said. "They don't go away. They persist in the atmosphere, they persist in the soil, in the water for extremely long periods of time."

Some of the additions to the list are chemicals that are used less than they once were, but there may be large stockpiles of them around the world in leaky containers.

Among them are chlordecone, which was used as an agricultural pesticide; hexabromobiphenyl, an industrial chemical that was used as a flame retardant; and lindane, which has been used in insecticides for soil, wood and animals.

Now the pressure will be on to switch to safer alternatives, he said.

The meeting also decided to restrict the use, production and trade of PFOS, a toxic chemical used in many electronic applications, such as semiconductor chips, but also in fire fighting foam, photo imaging, hydraulic fluids and textiles.

PFOS has been the most difficult chemical to list because it is still widely used, Cooper said.

He said developed countries have signaled that they intend to phase out the production and most of the use of PFOS over the course of the next 10 years because it will take awhile to develop alternatives.

Developing countries have indicated they would do that within 15 years.

The new chemicals targeted for elimination are:

- alpha hexachlorocyclohexane, still produced as an unintended byproduct of lindane
- beta hexachlorocyclohexane, still produced as an unintended byproduct of lindane
- hexabromodiphenyl ether and heptabromodiphenyl ether, used in flame retardants
- tetrabromodiphenyl ether and pentabromodiphenyl ether, used in flame retardants
- chlordecone, an agricultural pesticide
- hexabromobiphenyl, or HBB, a flame retardant
- lindane, used in creams for treatment head lice; also has been used in insecticides.
- pentachlorobenzene, used in PCB products, dyestuff carriers, as a fungicide, a flame retardant

For elimination or restriction:

- PFOS - perfluorooctane sulfonic acid, its salts and perfluorooctane sulfonyl fluoride

Cleanup funds benefit energy giants

By Evan Halper, Los Angeles Times

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Sunday, May 10, 2009

SACRAMENTO — Some of the country's wealthiest oil companies and gas-station chains have collected hundreds of millions of dollars from a cleanup fund conceived to help smaller, financially struggling businesses.

Environmentalists and former lawmakers who pushed to establish the fund, which motorists pay into whenever they buy gasoline in California, say they never intended it for large energy corporations with the means to repair environmental damage from their own operations. Yet, big companies have taken \$490 million from the fund since it was created in 1989.

Although the number of small businesses tapping the fund has dropped sharply, the program has been extended repeatedly amid lobbying by politically powerful corporations. Those companies are now positioned to collect up to \$900 million more.

Among the beneficiaries of the fund is Exxon Mobil Corp., which earned a record \$45.2-billion profit in 2008.

The logic behind the fund was that "mom-and-pop service stations wouldn't have the money for this," said V. John White, a veteran environmental lobbyist, referring to the cost of removing leaky underground storage tanks and cleansing contaminated soil.

Where petroleum was leaking into soil, it was fouling water supplies. Some small businesses in rural areas had been bankrupted by the cleanup costs. Some were abandoning their properties.

Barry Keene, a former state senator and North Coast Democrat after whom the tank cleanup fund is named, said the legislation he drafted was intended to help small businesses and individuals in his rural district.

He recalled being moved by one Californian who inherited property requiring cleanup that would have cost significantly more than the land was worth.

"We had cases like that," he said, so the fund was aimed "toward the shallow pockets."

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, also a Democrat, worked with Keene on the legislation as a state senator. "We felt the big oil companies could take care of themselves," he said.

Big oil companies were to fund most of the cleanup kitty through a fee levied by the state. They pass the fee on to drivers at the pump.

The large companies successfully lobbied for access to the fund at its inception and secured a provision guaranteeing them at least 14 percent of the money, according to company officials and legislative staff. Since that time, state records show, the companies have received nearly 20 percent of the approximately \$2.4 billion in payouts.

In 2008, lawmakers renewed the program for eight more years "even after most of the mom-and-pops had finished their cleanups," White said.

Motorists today pay a 14-cent levy for the fund on every 10 gallons of gasoline they buy.

Representatives of the large companies note that smaller businesses get first access to the money. And even though it is drivers who actually pay the bill, energy corporations say that because they are ultimately responsible for the fees, they should not be barred from making claims on a substantial share of the fund.

"The oil industry has paid millions into this fund, it has always supported the fund, it has supported increases in the fees when appropriate," said Tupper Hull, a spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association, which helped craft legislation to extend the program.

"The industry has accepted the reality that they are at the very end of a list of priorities for being reimbursed."

The fee has been increased several times. The last hike, of 14 percent, occurred in 2004. A state Senate committee analysis asked whether, "at a time of extreme budget cuts and scarce resources for environmental and public-health protection," Californians should be paying more to a fund "that primarily benefits large corporations and others."

But lawmakers approved an extension then and again in 2008. It was one of the few measures Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed last year, when he made a point of vetoing almost everything lawmakers sent his way. The program, originally set to expire in 2005, will live until at least 2016.

Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Lisa Page said the extensions have been "about continuing an environmental program that removes dirty underground oil tanks that are leaking."

She said the governor also backs a separate proposal to make the fund available to small gas-station businesses struggling to pay for costly fuel nozzle upgrades required by new state air-pollution rules.

The extension the governor signed last year, a bill by Democratic Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach, irked some early champions of the cleanup fund because it promises to be particularly beneficial to large companies and retail chains. Those companies have fought gasoline taxes for transportation projects and other purposes.

Legislative staff members involved in drafting the extension bill, introduced at the request of the 7-Eleven convenience store and service station company, say it is geared to keep the fund solvent until the state can clear out all pending claims, 4,400 of them from companies with more than 500 employees.

Major oil companies and gas retailers, including Exxon Mobil, Shell, ConocoPhillips and 7-Eleven, account for most of the claims by big companies. They are seeking a total of \$900 million in reimbursements; 7-Eleven has 205 pending claims totaling \$36.5 million, according to state records.

Large companies lobbied heavily for the latest extensions, playing key roles in a state-sponsored stakeholder committee, testifying at hearings and lobbying lawmakers individually, records show.

Lowenthal said that although he doesn't necessarily support the oil companies passing on their fees to drivers, he believes the program was always intended for the cleanup of all storage tanks. And he said that his extension legislation also initiated a program to divert \$10 million from the fund annually to pay for cleanup of abandoned storage tanks.

The oil companies and gas-station chains are among California's largest campaign contributors year after year and wield considerable influence in the Capitol. 7-Eleven, for example, donated \$80,000 to state politicians in 2008, including a \$10,000 contribution to the governor two months before he signed the Lowenthal bill.

Oil companies gave \$1.4 million to California politicians and ballot measures they supported between passage of the Lowenthal bill in August and the Nov. 4 election.

The recent decline in gasoline consumption has reduced the fund's revenue, causing the state to temporarily suspend a number of payments to companies big and small. But as a result of the 2008 legislation, big corporations are the ones positioned to cash in when the economy rebounds, energy use rises and more money flows to the fund.

By 2016, state statistics suggest, most of the remaining claims filed by small businesses and individuals will have been paid.

Scooters, motorcycle makers get stimulus shot

By Daisy Nguyen, The Associated Press

In the Washington Post and other papers, Sunday, May 10, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- Sales of motorcycles and scooters shifted into high gear last year when gas prices soared. Then recession-wary consumers hit the brakes.

Now, like so many other industries, the makers of two-wheeled, fuel-efficient bikes are relying on tax breaks offered in the federal stimulus package and other incentives to get sales moving again, while easing gas consumption.

"Even before we quote the price, we tell people how much they can get off the bike," said Jeff Bosco Biafore, a salesman at the San Jose Motorsport Scooter Center in Northern California.

Under the stimulus plan, the same provision that lets taxpayers deduct sales and excise taxes on the purchase of a new car or truck also applies to a motorcycle or scooter. They also can get a 10 percent federal tax credit if they buy plug-in bikes.

Before the federal incentives kicked in Feb. 17, California offered a \$1,500 rebate for certain electric scooters, but there were so many applications that funding for the \$1.8 million program for alternative fuel vehicles ran out.

Recently, state air quality regulators approved an additional \$5 million in grants for plug-in cars and motorcycles.

With a new job that stretched her commute from 10 to 40 miles a day, freelance film and television editor Cindy Parisotto says she is considering an electric scooter to reduce her commuting costs and carbon footprint.

She's interested in an electric scooter from Vectrix Corp. that has a top speed of 62 mph and a range of at least 35 miles per charge. She would need to charge the bike everyday, but Parisotto says she figures her electricity bill will be lower than what she spends on gas.

The \$10,000 bike also comes with a \$450 rebate from the company, meaning she could save about \$2,000.

Manufacturers and dealers say it's too early to tell whether the incentives are making a difference in sales.

One analyst says the tax breaks, especially for non-electric models, aren't enough to make a difference.

"It's a bit of a break, but it may not be enough if you lost your job or if there's a lot of pressure on your paycheck," says Robin Diedrich, senior consumer analyst for Edward Jones. "You don't buy a motorcycle because of \$300 in tax savings."

The cost of a new scooter ranges from \$1,000 to \$10,000, while motorcycles can cost anywhere from \$3,000 to more than \$10,000, depending on the model.

Scooter sales reached their highest annual level ever last year at roughly 222,000, largely due to soaring gas prices, said Ty van Hooydonk, spokesman for the Motorcycle Industry Council.

Dealers say sales might have gone even higher if manufacturers could have made more to keep up with demand.

"Business was insane, we couldn't get bikes in the shop fast enough, and in the summer we had 30 to 40 people on the waiting list," said Mike Frankovich, owner of NoHo Scooters in North Hollywood.

Since then, gas prices have dropped to about half of the peak national average of \$4 a gallon.

In the first quarter of this year, motorcycle sales fell 30.5 percent while scooter sales plunged 36.7 percent, compared to the same period last year, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council.

Those sales generally dip during cold winter months, and the discretionary nature of such purchases makes them easier to delay.

The tight credit market has also made it harder for potential buyers to finance purchases.

Still, shops and manufacturers are promoting the savings made possible by the stimulus package and other incentives.

NoHo Scooters is posting fliers explaining how much buyers can deduct on their income tax forms next year. The San Jose Motorsport Scooter Center is proclaiming the savings in newspaper and online ads and on posters throughout the store.

Despite the tough fall and winter, Frankovich says he's starting to see business pick up _ as it usually does when the weather warms up.

"We're getting customers who can't afford to buy another car or are looking to save money on gas," he says. He says sales of Genuine Scooter Co. models that run about \$3,500 have been brisk.

"It's low enough that you can put it on your credit card," he said.

Paolo Timoni, the president of Piaggio Group Americas, which makes the popular Vespa scooters, flew from New York to Southern California in early April to promote scooter riding. Sales at his company declined by 6.7 percent during the first two months of 2009 compared with the same period last year.

Timoni said scooters can be a fun, fuel-efficient way to get around urban areas. Parking is easier, and in some states scooter and motorcycle riders are allowed to split lanes when traffic is heavy, he said.

The tax breaks provide "an extra perk," he says.

Noting the rising interest in two-wheelers, Consumer Reports began test-riding scooters and motorcycles this year for the first time since 1981.

For its March issue, the magazine reviewed six scooters and two motorcycles designed for people who have no riding experience and are considering the bikes as a commuting alternative.

"Even though fuel prices have gone down, we still see a lot of people interested in fuel-efficient vehicles just because they're not sure what's going to happen," said Jake Fisher, senior automotive engineer at the magazine. "What's been proven is that fuel prices aren't stable."

U.S. Drops Research Into Fuel Cells for Cars

By Matthew L. Wald, staff writer

N.Y. Times, Thursday, Published: May 7, 2009

WASHINGTON — Cars powered by hydrogen fuel cells, once hailed by President George W. Bush as a pollution-free solution for reducing the nation's dependence on foreign oil, will not be practical over the next 10 to 20 years, the energy secretary said Thursday, and the government will cut off funds for the vehicles' development.

Developing those cells and coming up with a way to transport the hydrogen is a big challenge, Energy Secretary Steven Chu said in releasing energy-related details of the administration's budget for the year beginning Oct. 1. Dr. Chu said the government preferred to focus on projects that would bear fruit more quickly.

The retreat from cars powered by fuel cells counters Mr. Bush's prediction in 2003 that "the first car driven by a child born today could be powered by hydrogen, and pollution-free." The Energy Department will continue to pay for research into stationary fuel cells, which Dr. Chu said could be used like batteries on the power grid and do not require compact storage of hydrogen.

The Obama administration will also establish eight "energy innovation hubs," small centers for basic research that Dr. Chu referred to as "Bell Labettes." These will be financed for five years at a time to lure more scientists into the energy area.

"We're very devoted to delivering solutions — not just science papers, but solutions — but it will require some basic science," Dr. Chu, who won a Nobel Prize for his work in physics, said at a news conference.

He said he would probably reverse another Bush administration decision and restore funds for FutureGen, a program to build a power plant prototype. The plant would turn coal into gas, separate out the carbon dioxide — a major contributor to the greenhouse gases that cause global warming — and pump it underground. Then it would burn the hydrogen, which is nearly pollution-free.

An international partnership had selected a site in Mattoon, Ill., for construction of the plant, but the Bush administration decided that the costs were too high and that the money should be spread among more projects.

The Obama administration will also drop spending for research on the exploration of oil and gas deposits because the industry itself has ample resources for that, Dr. Chu said.

While the budget request for the Energy Department is \$26.4 billion, an increase of less than 1 percent, actual spending will actually be far higher because some projects will be financed by the economic stimulus package, said Steve Isakowitz, the department's chief financial officer.

While Dr. Chu emphasized the allocations for research, a former Energy Department official, Robert Alvarez, pointed out that the budget still includes \$6.4 billion for nuclear weapons and \$4.4 billion for naval reactors, nuclear nonproliferation activity and safe storage of surplus plutonium. "Weapons still make up the largest single expenditure," he said.

[Fresno Bee Smog Blog, Monday, May 11, 2009:](#)

Southern California is smog central right now

By Mark Grossi

The Valley's ozone problem hasn't kicked into gear yet -- and Southern California's problem has.

The Valley has six federal violations so far this year. South Coast has 12, including some very high concentrations. Imperial County and San Diego both have five violations this year.

Whether it's because of the Santa Barbara fire or just the weather conditions, Southern California is having a tough time. The Valley is not nearly as bad.

This region had a violation Saturday, which was the first since April 22.

It happened at Sequoia National Park, which was the park's first federal violation of the year on Saturday. The interesting thing is that the violation occurred between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m., before the heat of the day.

[L.A. Times editorial, Monday, May 11, 2009:](#)

Full speed ahead on Long Beach port improvements

The Middle Harbor project would update old piers to increase cargo capacity while cutting pollution. Posturing by other cities and environmental and labor groups shouldn't be allowed to interfere.

May 11, 2009

Southern California's strict environmental rules and green political culture make it notoriously difficult to build industrial facilities here, especially when they're on the coast and bring pollution with them. That's as it should be -- with the worst air quality in the country, Los Angeles and environs have to take extraordinary measures to protect residents' health and welfare. But there are times when the touchy local environmental community doesn't know when to unman the barricades and declare victory.

That time is now in Long Beach, where the City Council on Tuesday must decide whether to approve an environmental study for the first major project at the Port of Long Beach since 2002. The Middle Harbor project would update a pair of old piers to double the amount of cargo they're capable of handling, adding thousands of good-paying jobs. And it would incorporate innovations that would ultimately cut pollution generated by the facility to half the current level, despite the traffic growth.

The project would do this by increasing on-dock rail capacity, meaning most of the added cargo could be carried to and from the docks by train rather than more-polluting trucks. The piers would have clean cargo-handling equipment and would allow container ships to plug in to shore-based power while docked, so they wouldn't have to keep their engines running during loading and unloading. That would cut a tremendous amount of diesel pollution, as would rules imposed on ships using the new terminals -- they would have to switch to low-sulfur diesel fuel when within 40 miles of the port, and slow down to about half their normal speed.

Despite the obvious benefits, several cities and organizations are lobbying the council to send the environmental report back to the city's Harbor Commission for more study, which could further delay an already overdue project. The cities of Riverside and Commerce fear the new terminals would add truck and train traffic in their communities (even though the study shows the traffic increase wouldn't be significant), and environmental and labor groups including the Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Teamsters are raising a host of picayune objections, such as the notion that the port should have to account for emissions with only a tenuous relationship to the project -- for instance, the greenhouse gases emitted by ships along the entire journey from their home countries to the port.

That's posturing, not environmentalism; blocking this project would foul both the region's economy and its air. The Long Beach City Council should embrace green growth at the port and approve it.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, May 9, 2009:](#)

Consider all facts

Two facts we must deal with concerning the Wal-Mart distribution center are our need for jobs and our need to protect our health.

The main problem that I see is that those opposing the center acknowledge our need for jobs and offer alternatives in that regard, while those supporting the center are dismissive about the severe health risks that it will certainly produce.

There are benefits to the center and there are costs; please, let's be honest about both.

If you support the center realize these facts: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has rated Merced's air as the worst in the nation among small cities regarding pollutants such as ozone and particulate matter, that ozone and particulate matter are the main contributors to lung disease, and that highway truck traffic is among the largest contributors to these pollutants.

Therefore, as a matter of fact, if you support the center you also support a lot more air pollution that all of us, especially our children, will be breathing; thus, there will be much higher rates of lung disease and premature deaths due to your decision.

In nearly every argument for the center the authors state at some point that even if it was placed away from our city there would still be the same amount of trucks, and so the same pollution.

This reasoning suggests an inability to arrive at the obvious fact that if the center is placed to the south of Merced, as one possibility, then all southbound traffic, to Fresno and Bakersfield for example, would not pass through Merced.

One other fact is that none of the trucks would be getting on and off the freeway and standing idle here, which is where much of the pollution is produced.

Please, for the sake of our health, let's seriously consider all of the facts.

Keith Law, Merced

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Department of Agriculture announces it will offer funding to producers in order to remove pollution from the air. They will also offer assistance in removing and disposing of stakes and other debris without having to burn them. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

El Departamento de Agricultura anuncia nueva asistencia contra contaminación

By Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Friday, May 08, 2009

El Departamento de Agricultura informó que tiene disponibles varios programas de financiamiento para ayudar a productores a eliminar la contaminación del aire en California. Aparte, las autoridades agrícolas ayudan también a los productores para deshacerse de la poda sin tener que quemarla o convertirla en polvos que deterioren el ambiente y a deshacerse de pesticidas. Uno de los escasos obstáculos para la ayuda financiera contra la contaminación en el campo sería que los solicitantes obtuvieran más de un millón de dólares de ingresos anuales.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses converting biomass into clean energy is a more efficient technology than trying to obtain ethanol. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

CIENCIA Y SOCIEDAD: Convertir materias vegetales en energía eléctrica, mejor que el etanol

Impacto USA, Thursday, May 7, 2009

Washington, 7 may (EFE).- La conversión de materias vegetales o biomasa en energía eléctrica podría ser una tecnología más eficiente que la obtención del etanol, según un estudio que publica hoy la revista Science.

El estudio encabezado por Elliott Campbell, de la Universidad de California en Merced, y Christopher Field, del Instituto Carnegie, determinó que una cosecha de biomasa puede llevar a un vehículo eléctrico más lejos que a uno que consuma etanol.

Las preocupaciones por el precio del petróleo y las gasolinas y los efectos a largo plazo de las emisiones de gases que contribuyen al calentamiento atmosférico han estimulado la investigación científica y la experimentación tecnológica en busca de alternativas con fuentes de energía renovables y no contaminantes para el transporte.

Sobre el uso de la biomasa se han desarrollado dos tecnologías: la conversión en etanol para motores de combustión interna y la conversión en electricidad para vehículos con baterías.

La pregunta que se plantearon estos investigadores es sencilla: ¿cuál de las dos tecnologías rinde más kilómetros por hectárea?

Y su respuesta es que los vehículos motorizados con baterías rinden un promedio de un 80 por ciento más kilómetros de transporte por hectárea de cultivos, al tiempo que reducen a la mitad las emisiones de gases que contaminan la atmósfera.

"Es una pregunta relativamente obvia, una vez que uno la ha hecho, pero la realidad es que nadie la había planteado antes", dijo Field, director del Departamento de Ecología Global en el Instituto Carnegie.

"Las motivaciones que llevaron a las personas a pensar en el desarrollo del etanol como combustible para vehículos han sido un tanto diferentes de las que llevaron a otras personas a considerar los vehículos con baterías eléctricas, pero donde ambos esfuerzos se tocan es en el área de maximizar la eficiencia y minimizar los impactos adversos para el clima", agregó.

Los investigadores ejecutaron un análisis del ciclo de vida tanto de la tecnología de bioelectricidad como del etanol, tomando en cuenta no sólo la energía producida por cada tecnología, sino también la energía que se consume en la producción de los respectivos vehículos y sus combustibles.

"La bioelectricidad fue, sin duda, la ganadora en la comparación de kilómetros de transporte por hectárea de cultivo, sin importar que la energía se produjera del maíz o de pastos autóctonos (*Panicum virgatum* o "switchgrass")", señaló el artículo.

Por ejemplo, un vehículo todo terreno pequeño que emplee bioelectricidad puede recorrer 22.530 kilómetros en autopista con la energía neta producida por media hectárea de pastizales, en tanto que un vehículo comparable con motor de combustión interna puede recorrer sólo 14.500 kilómetros con esa misma fuente de energía.

"El motor de combustión interna, simplemente, no es muy eficiente, especialmente si se le compara con los vehículos eléctricos", dijo Campbell.

"Aun las mejores tecnologías de producción de etanol y el uso en vehículos híbridos (que combinan motor de combustión y motor eléctrico) no son suficientes para superar esta diferencia", agregó.

En cuanto al impacto ambiental, los investigadores también encontraron diferencias entre el uso de biomasa para la producción de electricidad y el uso de esos materiales para la conversión en etanol. EFE

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Santiago, Chile is on alert for having very unhealthy air. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Alerta en Santiago de Chile por la mala calidad del aire

La Opinión, Thursday, May 07, 2009

SANTIAGO DE CHILE (EFE).- Las autoridades de Santiago de Chile decretaron hoy una alerta ambiental preventiva con el fin de atenuar los riesgos que provoca en los seres humanos la contaminación instalada sobre la capital chilena.

La medida, adoptada por la regular calidad del aire de la ciudad, supone la salida de la circulación de unos 200 mil automóviles en las calles.

Estos vehículos suponen el 40 por ciento de los automóviles sin convertidor catalítico, una medida tomada tras la alerta decretada por las condiciones meteorológicas que dificultan la ventilación de una ciudad en la que viven 6,2 millones de habitantes.

El pasado 8 de abril, las autoridades de la capital chilena decretaron la primera alerta ambiental del año.

Entre las medidas por la alerta, se le recomendó a la población abstenerse de realizar actividades deportivas al aire libre.

La capital chilena, la segunda ciudad más contaminada de América Latina después de Ciudad de México, registra constantes episodios de alerta ambiental que conllevan la prohibición de circular para ciertos vehículos, quemar leña o poner en marcha más de 700 industrias.