

Switchgrass to Biofuel Test Plot Growing Near Visalia

By John Lindt

Valley Voice Newspaper, Monday, June 15, 2009

Tulare County - Tulare County Ag Commissioner Gary Kunkel says he has approved a test plot of less than 30 acres of biotech enhanced switchgrass that is already planted near Visalia.

The plot is part of a pilot project of Visalia-based ethanol maker EdenIQ. The company plans the first commercial conversion of the tall perennial grass to fuel ethanol in the state to be refined at the firm's Visalia Industrial Park plant in coming months.

The test is part of a venture capital-fueled race to increase the yield of ethanol from the tall native grass on a per acre basis – lowering the cost to produce cellulose-based biofuel.

Company spokesperson Will Gardenswartz confirms the plantings some weeks ago, but says no more details will be available until June 15 when a big ethanol conference in Denver is scheduled.

Gardenswartz would not confirm what is believed to be true – that EdenIQ's partner in the venture is L.A.-based Ceres Inc. that just announced greatly enhanced yields from patented switchgrass varieties – more than 50% above yields predicted by federal estimates to be expected in the future. Switchgrass is considered the most promising non-food crop to make the nation's future biofuel mandated by the U.S. government.

The thin grass that once covered the prairies of the Midwest was of course supplanted by wheat, soybeans and corn and today the trend may head back the other way.

Dramatic Yields Reported

Ceres Inc. reported yields last month of up to 19 tons per acre on varieties tested in California, compared to an average yield seen around the country of just 2 to 4 tons per acre.

Ceres Inc. spokesperson Cory Christensen, Ph.D. said he expects “that through trait development, better genetics and improved crop management practices, we can continue to increase average yields for many years to come.”

Commenting on the news in the May Wall Street Journal, he noted that “the knock against cellulosic ethanol” is that you would have to cover New Jersey twice over to grow enough switchgrass to make enough biofuel, but with this increased yield, you only need to cover New Jersey once over.”

The push to make more ethanol from fewer acres of switchgrass sets the stage for a potential boom in the planting of a biofuel crop and refining of cellulosic ethanol considered “just around the corner” for years.

Switchgrass is considered attractive as the next stage in biofuel development after corn-made ethanol, in part because it's a non-food crop. It can be grown on marginal land and “sequesters” carbon from the atmosphere at a higher rate than when it is burned as fuel. That makes it “carbon negative” in the battle to cut greenhouse gasses.

Switchgrass is typically planted in late spring and can grow to 7 feet tall with little fertilization. Since it is drought-tolerant, the crop might be attractive to the Valley's Westside where the new normal appears to be persistent drought.

Since 2007, several switchgrass varieties have been undergoing trials at the UC Westside Field Station in Five Points. Director of the center Bob Hutmacher says water used to grow switchgrass in the Valley could vary depending on many factors but could be similar to cotton.

Now in its third year of trials, Hutmacher explains that as the plant root system gets more established, it performs better in second and third years after planting when higher yields can be achieved. Hutmacher confirms yields in the 18-ton range, similar to the Ceres numbers. Ceres participates in the trials at the UC stations. There are four around the state testing the crop.

Depending on whether you could trade off some yield for reduced water application, you could grow a crop using about 30 inches of water, says Hutmacher.

Most testing of the new switchgrass varieties has been under university or seed company control, making this private Visalia venture to produce fuel more newsworthy. Once it is planted, switchgrass grows fast with several cuttings during the season and new crop coming up the following year.

More Crop per Acre

Farmers and seed makers have succeeded in squeezing more yield per acre and more yield per drop of water in recent decades, making it likely it will cost less in the future to make a gallon of biofuel. In part, this is also due to intense research going on worldwide.

Generally, ag's productivity has been impressive. For example, in 1960, the state's farmers applied 28.5 million acre feet of water to produce 32.3 million tons of crops at a value of \$3.2 billion. By 1995, just about the same amount of water produced a 60 million ton crop valued at \$22 billion. This is according to the California Department of Water Resources.

Potentially, this is a crop that could backfill some of what had been almost a million acres of cotton crop land we saw until recent years in the Valley.

"I get the sense that this may play out if a small group of farmers near a refinery (or a plant that could be scaled up) would grow switchgrass. You might make it more attractive because there would be lower transportation costs. If you have to haul a crop too far, margins can go from OK to lousy real fast," remarked Hutmacher.

Regional refineries could take the crop to make the fuel helping to return the Valley's shuttered ethanol refineries into production even if high corn prices prevent their original use. Two of those plants are in Tulare County. EdenIQ wants to build a phased plant in Visalia if all this works out.

EdenIQ is also busy trying to improve margins in the corn ethanol business where returns have been upside-down for the past nine months. The company just announced patented technology that increased yields of ethanol by 10 percent at existing ethanol plants – an amount that could be the difference between losing money or earning a profit.

These days, corn ethanol producers continue to suffer poor returns with corn prices today over \$4.50 instead of the \$3.50 range producers had hoped for. Futures prices for ethanol have been following gasoline up, however, helping to improve margins.

Part of the work with existing corn ethanol plants included EdenIQ's patented device – the Cellunator – that breaks down more of the corn plant for fuel, enabling a corn-based producer to claim additional credits for making cellulose based fuel.

Another Google?

Company founder Larry Gross told the magazine Ethanol Producer in recent days that cellulosic ethanol can now be made for \$1.50 per gallon, with a federal mandate of 21 billion gallons to be produced by the year 2022." That's a \$30 billion industry being created out of nothing... the size of another Google," he said.

While Google may have made Silicon Valley rich – a dedicated energy crop may help prop up this Valley that needs all the help it can right now. President Obama's Energy Secretary Steven Chu is well behind cellulosic ethanol – ready to spend \$800 million in the next few years to help develop the motor fuels we need to decrease reliance on petroleum – much of it from unstable parts of the world and all of it a greenhouse gas problem.

A few days ago, Brazilian officials announced sugar cane-based ethanol made in their country will fuel 75 percent of light vehicles there by 2020, with petroleum just fueling 17 percent. Chu recently sounded off on a plan to increase the blending of ethanol in the U.S. to 13 percent (it's just 6 percent today in California) and says he supports the idea. EPA is expected to close the comment period on the plan next month.

A recent science journal article suggested switchgrass grown for electricity production made more sense than using the same switchgrass for ethanol fuel, considering electric cars can go further and produce fewer CO2 emissions.

No matter that the switchgrass as a practical matter is co-fired with coal. Nor does the study appear to consider the much higher yields in making biofuel from switchgrass.

But the main problem in the electricity vs. biofuel debate is that 99.4 percent of cars today are not plug-in cars and depend on the internal combustion engine to make them go.

If you are going to displace any volume of petroleum, you need a portable liquid fuel that works in today's ICE fleet across the globe. Battery range on electric plug-ins is still a problem and passion for this kind of car isn't enough to make a real dent on the world global warming threat. Obama promised to put a million electric cars on the road by 2015 but there are 200 million cars in the U.S. and will soon be 3 billion cars worldwide.

In California, CARB has let it be known that it has its doubts about corn-based ethanol but hails the coming of cellulose based biofuel.

Brazil blends ethanol at 25 percent compared to 6-10 percent in the U.S., showing a potential to grow a "green crop" in the Valley that could make a difference to the farmers' bottom line, in the gas tank and in our air.

Public can voice corridor concern

Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, June 14, 2009

People interested in a future expressway north of Modesto are invited to an informational open house Monday in Riverbank. The 25-mile North County Corridor would connect Highway 99 at Salida to Highway 108-120 east of Oakdale and could cost \$1.2 billion. Many owners of homes and farms that might be in its way, depending on a final route decision, have protested at monthly meetings this year. Monday's session gives people a venue for submitting comments that would be addressed in the current phase of environmental studies. The current focus is on the 18-mile portion east of McHenry Avenue. Officials hope to transfer to that stretch the \$91 million in state money previously set aside for an Oakdale Bypass, which is being abandoned in favor of the North County Corridor. The freeway should ease congestion, smog and travel time for people in Riverbank, Oakdale and Tuolumne County, leaders say. Monday's meeting starts at 6:30 p.m. in the Riverbank Community Center, 3600 Santa Fe St. For more information: www.dot.ca.gov/dist10.

New air rules may require changes for Tulare County school buses

By David Castellon, staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, June 13, 2009

Pending regulations on diesel emissions targeted mostly at big-rig trucks ' also would affect some buses, including school buses, across the state.

While diesel buses would not have to be replaced, they would have to have particulate-matter filters installed. Shuttle buses also are affected, but city and county transit buses are subject to pollution-reducing regulations that took effect years ago.

In addition to reducing emissions, the changes are intended to reduce school children's exposure to cancer-causing soot, said Erik White, chief of the California Air Resources Board's Heavy-duty Diesel In-use Strategies branch.

The cost will be about \$19,000 per bus, said Robert Groeber, assistant superintendent for administrative services for the Visalia Unified School District.

"It's basically [installing] a catalytic converter for diesel," he said.

Most of the district's 84 buses run on natural gas or gasoline, he said. Nineteen run on diesel, he said, but only 10 will require filters.

The other nine buses' designs will not allow them to have particulate-matter filters installed, so they'll be taken out of service by the district by 2017 and likely will be stripped for parts, Groeber said. The district will look for grants to help pay for replacement buses.

The Earlimart Elementary School District is looking at the prospect of retrofitting five of its six buses. A 2008 bus that the district owns came with the required filter system already installed.

"Eventually, all buses will have to be retrofitted," said Mike Fernandez, director of maintenance operations and transportation for the Earlimart district. "Or we have to get rid of them and get new ones."

Officials have another concern regarding the filters: maintenance costs. The filters have a tendency to plug up, said Robert Zuripa, transportation supervisor for the Tulare Joint Union High School District.

Four years ago his district used grant money to retrofit eight of its 27 buses with particulate-matter catchers.

"So far, it's cost me two engines and a whole lot of headaches," Zuripa said.

A bond act to raise \$200 million ' enough to cover estimated costs for all the required filter retrofits for school buses across the state ' is in the works, White said. School districts already have begun applying for that money, but many wonder whether the state actually will pony up enough to cover all their costs.

"We've had many traditional revenue sources that we thought would be safe," Groeber said.

School district officials note that the governor is looking to cut funds for school transportation by 65 percent. If that happens, schools may have to stop using some buses and possibly reduce the number of students transported, they say.

New rules

The new state emission rules would require pre-1977 school buses to be phased out, White said. The state will not pay to replace them.

It's unclear whether any buses that old are operating in Tulare County.

Some districts have trucks that will fall under more stringent emission guidelines, requiring them not only to have filters installed but also those trucks or their engines would have to be replaced with newer, less polluting trucks or engines a few years down the road.

Visalia Unified operates seven food service trucks that will be affected by the new rules. Groeber said three will be converted from diesel to natural gas vehicles this year at a cost of about \$16,000-\$18,000 per truck.

The district will have to seek out grants or other funding sources to have the other four converted in the next few years.

Schools: Mt. Whitney student wins poster-essay competition

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, June 15, 2009

Mt. Whitney High School junior Christina Min won the grand prize in the Tulare County Association of Government's "Make a Difference in Air Quality" student poster and essay contest.

Min's poster took the top award. Her poster featured a beautiful neighborhood street where trees grow and people carpool. She also showed the effects of littering and pollution on the same neighborhood street, according to a news release.

For winning, Min received a \$500 gift card.

Critics say 'cash for clunkers' bill is a lemon

The \$1-billion bill, backed by the auto industry, would pay consumers to trade in gas guzzlers. Opponents say criteria are so lax that the government could subsidize the trading of one gas hog for another.

By Janet Hook, staff writer

L.A. Times, Saturday, June 13, 2009

Reporting from Washington -- Congress is about to approve a new federal program to pay car owners up to \$4,500 for trading in gas-guzzling automobiles for more fuel-efficient cars, to the applause of the struggling auto industry. But the program is drawing heavy criticism from an unlikely quarter: environmentalists who are sworn enemies of big, old clunkers that get poor mileage.

Critics contend that the "cash for clunkers" bill, which has auto industry backing, was designed more to boost auto sales than to reduce global warming.

The bill would provide vouchers toward the purchase of more efficient vehicles to people who junk their less-efficient cars. But critics say the improvements required in the trade -- as little as 1 mile per gallon for certain light trucks -- are so lax that the federal government could end up subsidizing consumers who swap one gas guzzler for another.

For passenger cars, consumers would receive a \$3,500 voucher if their new vehicle is 4 miles per gallon higher in combined highway and city mileage than their trade-in vehicle. They would get \$4,500 if the improvement is 10 miles per gallon or more.

Congress tacked the \$1-billion program onto unrelated legislation that funds the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an urgent bill that is expected to clear Congress next week.

A House-Senate conference committee that on Thursday drafted the final bill included the car-swap program over the objections of Republicans, who disliked the cost.

Also objecting, however, were environmental advocates such as Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), who said the program failed to ensure that subsidies would not be used to buy new gas guzzlers.

At a time when President Obama is moving aggressively to curb greenhouse gases and the U.S. auto industry is struggling to survive, "cash for clunkers" has become a policy fad in Congress practically overnight. It also had the potential to create a politically appealing marriage between auto manufacturers, who want to boost sales, and environmentalists, who are clamoring for improved fuel economy.

But as the legislation moved through Congress this year, the details ended up pitting the two interests against each other. In the program included in the war-funding bill, the industry won.

"This was a face-off between the auto industry shaking its tin cup in new and different ways and environmentalists saying: If you're going to give a new bailout, there has to be more efficient vehicles," said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign.

"It is amazing how quickly a good idea can go bad in Washington," said Feinstein and Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) in an opinion article in the Wall Street Journal. It was headlined: "Handouts for Hummers."

Feinstein, Collins and other senators had sponsored an alternative that would have imposed stricter mileage standards and allowed used cars to be purchased with the vouchers.

But proponents of the program that eventually emerged, and which had passed the House earlier this month by a wide margin, had no apologies for designing it in a way that would maximize new car sales.

"Getting new cars moving is what gets Americans working," said Phaedra Dugan, spokeswoman for Rep. Candice S. Miller (R-Mich.), a cosponsor of the measure. "Our bill puts American workers and the American economy first, and our bill still gets gas guzzlers off the road."

Christin Baker, spokeswoman for Ford Motor Co., said the bill was "critically important" for the beleaguered auto industry.

"U.S. auto sales have seen the steepest decline in more than 50 years, and we need to help boost consumer confidence and jump-start auto sales," Baker said. "This program will help support jobs for automakers, suppliers and dealers in every community." Congress will soon have a chance to revisit the issue, because the program included in the war-spending bill will last only until Nov. 1 or until the \$1 billion provided for the program runs out.

To qualify for a voucher, a consumer would need to remove a car from the road that has a fuel economy of 18 miles per gallon or less. In addition, the car must have been owned by the consumer for one year.

Vouchers would be available for cars purchased between July 1 and Nov. 1, 2009. In addition to meeting the improved fuel economy targets, new cars purchased in the program would have to cost less than \$45,000 and get at least 22 miles per gallon. Consumers would be eligible for vouchers regardless of their income.

An earlier version of the bill would have provided subsidies only to cars made in North America, but that provision was dropped in the face of complaints that it could violate trade law.

Feinstein and Collins, in their recent opinion article, argued that the bill would allow subsidies for buying a new Hummer H3T, which gets 16 miles per gallon, according to federal data, but not for a 2-year-old Ford Focus, which can get as much as 27 miles per gallon. This is because the bill sets low targets for mileage improvements for light trucks but does not cover the purchase of used vehicles, the senators said.

"Our legislation is not aimed at bailing out the auto industry, although it would spur vehicle sales," Collins said in a statement this week about the alternative bill. "It is environmental legislation that has the added benefit of helping the auto industry."

Polluting vehicles still in state's cross hairs

'Cash for clunkers' efforts expanding

By Michael Gardner, U-T Sacramento Bureau
San Diego Union-Tribune, Monday, June 15, 2009

SACRAMENTO – California plans to accelerate its ongoing campaign to sweep more dirty cars off the streets while Congress duels over high-profile “cash for clunkers” legislation.

In Sacramento, the Air Resources Board this month is expected to approve a \$30 million expansion of a program that pays motorists \$1,000 to turn over their heavy-polluting vehicles for dismantling.

The goal is to scrap 15,000 vehicles on top of the more than 18,000 crushed on average each fiscal year.

In Washington, two competing \$4 billion measures are being driven more by a desire to spark flagging auto sales than an interest in curbing smog.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is leading the push for one of the bills that aim to lure customers to showrooms by offering vouchers of up to \$4,500 to exchange gas-guzzlers for higher-mileage vehicles.

The government vouchers combined with anxious dealers mean budget-minded buyers could come out winners. It's unclear whether motorists could take advantage of both the proposed state and federal programs.

“It's a very good time to buy – no doubt about it,” said George Belch, professor of marketing at San Diego State University.

At the same time, he cautioned that the tight credit market and job jitters could be enough to keep buyers away even with the vouchers.

“A lot of people are still very nervous,” he said.

Under the federal bills, the trade-in must be crushed by a certified dismantler, ensuring smog savings, limiting opportunities for fraud and preventing a flood of used cars from deflating the market.

But in some cases, federal vouchers would be paid out even if an owner's new vehicle averages just 2 miles per gallon more than the old one.

“It's really designed to move SUVs off the lot,” said Patricia Monahan, a clean-vehicle specialist for the Union of Concerned Scientists. “We would like to see financial incentives tied to air pollution.”

California interests generally favor Feinstein's legislation, noting that she crafted more stringent mileage standards for eligible vehicles.

“Her program is designed not just to sell cars, but to improve the overall fleet's environmental performance,” said Mary Nichols, chairwoman of the air board.

Both federal bills offer bigger vouchers for better mileage. For example:

To qualify for a \$2,500 voucher under Feinstein's proposal, a passenger car trade-in cannot average more than 17 miles per gallon and the new vehicle must get at least 7 mpg more than the old car; a 13 mpg improvement would draw \$4,500. For larger vehicles such as trucks and minivans, the improvement could be as little as 3 mpg to qualify for the minimum check of \$2,500; a 9 mpg gain would bring \$4,500.

Under the House measure approved last week, car owners would get \$3,500 if their trade-in got 18 mpg or less and their new car got at least 22 mpg; a 10 mpg improvement would bring in \$4,500. Owners of sport utility vehicles or trucks would need an improvement of at least 2 mpg to gain \$3,500.

The air board will take up a plan to build on an existing voluntary "cash for clunkers" program at its June 26 meeting. The incentive program would start next year.

The new concept also includes a limited pilot program that for the first time would issue replacement vouchers to some motorists if they buy newer, cleaner vehicles in addition to the initial money to take the clunker off the road.

Once enacted, vehicles would not have to first flunk a smog check to qualify for scrapping. That means pre-1976 cars now exempt from smog checks will be eligible, along with some newer models.

"If you have an older vehicle and you pass, it doesn't mean you meet the same standards (for newer cars). You just have a much lower bar to jump over," said Tom Evashenk, an air board engineer.

"They account for roughly 20 percent of the fleet, yet they contribute over 60 percent of the total smog-forming pollutants," he added.

As part of the proposal, state regulators want to launch the pilot program in the Los Angeles and Fresno regions, where the air is the dirtiest.

In those locations, most owners could get the basic payment of \$1,000, plus an additional replacement voucher for \$2,000 to buy much newer, cleaner vehicles that are not more than four model years old.

Funding will be raised from an existing \$1 fee on registration bills. The smog savings would amount to 1.6 million tons annually, regulators say.

But there is some opposition, primarily from car hobbyists who fear a shortage of affordable parts as they restore bygone classics, from Corvairs to Firebirds.

John Quilter of Brisbane is one of those. He has fixed up an MG and closely follows the car-restoration hobby. "California is one of the most climate-friendly states to the preservation of automobiles," he said in explaining why so many survive for so long.

He also could be summing up the sentiments of many Californians scratching their heads over spending \$30 million on this program when the state is too broke to provide many basic services.

"Quite frankly, what planet are you on these days?" Quilter asked in a letter to air-quality regulators.

Monahan, the clean-air advocate, said public health must take priority. "Our focus is cleaning up the dirtiest vehicles on the road," she said. "These pre-1976 vehicles are the worst."

While the air board is charged with approving the proposal, it will be operated in conjunction with an existing voluntary vehicle retirement program through the Bureau of Automotive Repair.

"It means a consumer will have more opportunities to participate," said Tonya Blood, consumer assistance manager for the bureau. "There is no conflict at this time."

Under the bureau's current program, owners of vehicles that fail a smog check can receive \$1,000 if they turn it in to a registered dismantler. Low-income owners also have the choice of receiving up to \$500 in state-subsidized repairs of emission control systems if they want to keep their car.

Some county air boards, including San Diego's, operated independent programs at various times. In San Diego, \$2.7 million was paid to scrap 5,277 vehicles cumulatively in 1994-95 and again from 1996-2005. But the county folded its program, mostly because the state's checks were larger than the \$500 to \$700 offered locally.

In 2007-08, the state spent \$22.2 million to retire 21,909 cars, and an additional \$16.1 million to help 44,154 low-income motorists repair emissions systems. Cumulatively, those actions eliminated 12,000 tons of pollution.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been a supporter of "cash for clunkers." In 2005, he launched a "breathe easier" campaign to revitalize the program after a brief suspension put in place to save money.

"Every time we terminate one of these cars," Schwarzenegger said at the time, "we take another step toward cleaner air."

U.S. to restart plans for a coal plant to capture greenhouse gases

The Energy Department and the FutureGen Alliance consortium agree to resurrect the project. It calls for a \$1.5-billion facility to be built in Mattoon, Ill., to try to collect coal emissions.

By Jim Tankersley, staff writer

L.A. Times, Saturday, June 13, 2009

Reporting from Washington -- Federal officials announced an agreement Friday to restart plans to build an experimental coal plant that seeks to collect greenhouse gas emissions before they enter the atmosphere.

If completed, the project would be the first commercial-scale effort in the country to test such technology.

The agreement will at least temporarily resurrect the so-called FutureGen project, which the Bush administration had discontinued in 2008, citing rising cost estimates. The plant, which would be built in Mattoon, Ill., is expected to cost more than \$1.5 billion.

The deal is between the Energy Department and the FutureGen Alliance, a public-private consortium of coal users and producers.

In a move that Energy Secretary Steven Chu has hinted at for months, the Energy Department pledged Friday to spend about \$1.1 billion to pursue the project, with nearly all the money coming from the economic stimulus bill that Congress passed this year. The FutureGen Alliance will raise and spend an estimated \$400 million to \$600 million on the project. Early next year, after completing cost estimates and fundraising activities, the alliance and the department will decide whether to proceed with the plant or to discontinue it.

Half the U.S. electricity supply comes from conventional coal-fired generating plants, which spew a stew of pollutants into the air. FutureGen would represent a radical departure.

Instead of burning coal, the plant would use a process called gasification to break the fuel into chemical components while releasing energy. Carbon dioxide would be separated from hydrogen and stored deep underground, according to FutureGen's website.

Chu said the steps reflected the Obama administration's commitment "to rapidly developing carbon capture and sequestration technology as part of a comprehensive plan to create jobs, develop clean energy and reduce climate change pollution."

Environmentalists are split over the FutureGen concept. Some say coal is so inherently dirty that nothing should be done to encourage its use.

Henry Henderson, Midwest program director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, said there was no way to make a pollution-free coal plant. But FutureGen could represent a vast improvement while demonstrating the economic viability of such processes, he acknowledged.

Communities at risk, but coal ash sites secret

By Dina Cappiello, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Friday, June 12, 2009

WASHINGTON—Dozens of communities nationwide are at risk from a coal ash spill like the one that blanketed a Tennessee neighborhood last year, but the Obama administration has decided not to tell the public about it because of the danger of a terrorist attack.

The Environmental Protection Agency, as part of an investigation opened after the Tennessee spill, classified 44 coal ash storage ponds in 26 communities as potential hazards.

The agency, which earlier this year pledged to be transparent and carry out its work in the public view, wanted to disclose the information until the Army Corps of Engineers said it shouldn't because of national security concerns.

The information is now caught in a bureaucratic tussle, with one agency wanting to alert the public to the hazard and another agency fearing that widespread release of the information might, if terrorists got involved, put the public in danger.

"We intended to release the information, but then we received this letter," said an EPA official, who was not authorized to speak about the matter.

In a letter dated June 4, the Corps told the EPA and the Federal Emergency Management Agency that the federal government should not alert the public to the whereabouts of the sites.

"Uncontrolled or unrestricted release (of the information) may pose a security risk to projects or communities by increasing its attractiveness as a potential target," Steven L. Stockton, the Army Corps' director of civil works, wrote in a letter obtained by The Associated Press.

At the same time, the Corps letter says the information should be passed on to state officials or coal plant operators and they should tell nearby communities of the risks.

The sites have existed for years with little or no federal regulation. And oversight at the state level varies, with some treating coal ash ponds like dams used for power generation and flood control and others not regulating their construction or siting at all.

The 44 sites were ranked as high hazards, meaning they could cause death and significant property damage if a storm, a terrorist attack or a structural failure caused them to spill into surrounding neighborhoods.

Eric Halpin, special assistant for dam and levee safety for the Corps of Engineers, said that "we did not direct anyone to withhold or not release information," but he said federal policy says "you shouldn't make it easy for the bad guys to do their jobs" by posting lists on the Internet or giving them to the media.

A Homeland Security Department spokeswoman said late Friday that the Corps position was not the final word on the matter and could be reversed. A final recommendation will be made by the FEMA administrator after a review by the National Dam Safety Review Board.

On Dec. 22, more than 5 million cubic yards of ash and sludge poured out of a storage pond after an earthen dike failed at a power plant near Kingston, Tenn. The grayish, toxic muck covered 300 acres and destroyed or damaged 40 homes.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., in a news conference Friday, questioned why coal ash storage ponds are not being treated like other hazardous waste sites. For instance, the EPA readily discloses the location of Superfund hazardous waste sites and also annually reports pollution released by chemical facilities and other factories in neighborhoods.

The Energy Department also posts on its Web site the power plants with waste ponds and landfills and how much ash is deposited in them each year.

"If these sites are so hazardous, and neighborhoods nearby could be harmed irreparably, I think it is essential to let people know," said Boxer, adding that she was told the location of the sites with the understanding that she could tell only Senate colleagues whose states have one or more of the storage facilities.

The EPA estimates that about 300 dry landfills and wet storage ponds are used around the country to store ash from coal-fired power plants. The man-made structures hold a mixture of the noncombustible ingredients of coal and the ash trapped by equipment designed to reduce air pollution from the power plants.

The latest Energy Department data indicates that 721 power plants nationwide produced 95.8 million tons of coal ash in 2005. The ash can contain heavy metals and other toxic contaminants, but there are no federal regulations or standards that govern its storage or disposal.

The EPA is currently considering regulating the waste, but it is unclear whether the agency will classify it as hazardous or regulate its disposal like it does household garbage.

Lisa Evans, an attorney with the environmental group Earthjustice, was told by the EPA in a June 3 e-mail that her request for information about coal ash sites was being delayed because the agency was still trying to resolve whether the information could be released to the public, given the Army Corps' concerns.

"It shows you that we should have been very concerned about these sites from day one," Evans said.

70 solar installations planned by Caltrans

Madera Tribune, Saturday, June 13, 2009

The California Department of Transportation has announced plans to install \$20 million in new solar energy systems at 70 of its facilities throughout the state.

The department estimates that, over 25 years, state taxpayers will avoid \$52.5 million in energy costs and 70 million pounds of greenhouse gases.

Instead of burning fossil fuels to produce electricity, the panels will harvest energy from the sun, producing more than three million kilowatt-hours of electricity each year.

In 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed Assembly Bill 32, which established a program to reduce greenhouse gases.

Fresno Bee column, Saturday, June 15, 2009:

Cyclist pumps for better Fresno bike trails

By Bill McEwen

Bryan Jones rides a bike -- and has a scar on his forehead to prove it.

A car cut him off, he grabbed the brakes and flipped over the handlebars.

That was years ago.

Now he's a Fresno city traffic engineer and bent on making our town more bike and pedestrian friendly.

Don't bet against him.

Thanks to the Measure C transportation tax extension, Fresno has about \$25 million to spend on trails, bike lanes and safety education over 20 years -- plus other money the city might obtain through grants.

"We want to create a comprehensive system of bike lanes and trails to encourage and enhance the cycling experience in Fresno," says Jones, a graduate of UC Davis, where bikes are as mandatory as term papers.

"Even if someone rides a bike just 20 times a year, they're lightening car traffic and [cleaning the air](#)."

To receive Measure C help, the city must complete a bicycle master plan by 2012. The effort begins with three outreach meetings over the next two weeks in which people can voice their opinions.

"We want to identify the routes that people use," Jones says. "Cyclists think differently than motorists on their commutes. They're looking for streets where there is less traffic, lower speeds and more bicycle facilities."

Jones acknowledges that getting around Fresno on a bike can be a joy -- or a headache -- depending on the part of town you're riding.

"Most of our newer streets, those built in the last 20 years, have bike lanes installed on them," Jones says.

But there also are streets with bike lanes that end suddenly, and dangerous intersections that should be avoided: "Our focus is on connecting the gaps," he says.

Jones disagrees with people who contend that bike riding isn't a realistic alternative to the car because of Fresno's hot summers. He points out that commuting by bike is popular in Sacramento and Tucson, which also have scorching summers.

"Most of our months are ideal for cycling," Jones says. "Fresno is flat, making it easy to ride. On short trips, when you consider the time it takes to park a car, there's not much difference between riding and driving."

So, what does Jones see in the years ahead?

The return of "bicycle rodeos" at which kids learn bike safety. Moms and dads riding bikes to school with their children instead of using cars, reducing street congestion. More bike racks

placed at the front of businesses. Encouraging cyclists to ride lightly traveled streets with upgraded bike lanes. And here's my favorite: Building miles of biking and pedestrian trails alongside canals.

Jones doesn't buy the argument of local irrigation districts that such trails would be dangerous because children might fall into the water and drown.

People already are using Fresno canals, he says, and many cities in California have turned the land adjacent to their waterways into trails. Some examples: the Delta De Anza Trail in Pittsburg, Marsh Creek Trail in Brentwood and the Turlock Irrigation District Trail.

"Trails have become a quality of life issue," Jones says. "We have lots of opportunities to increase the quality of life for all Fresnoans with all of our waterways."

If you can't make one of the hearings, you can have a say in Fresno's biking future by filling out a short biking survey before July 1 at www.fresnobmp.com.

BICYCLE MASTER PLAN OUTREACH MEETINGS

- * **WEDNESDAY:** Fresno City Hall, 11 a.m.-1 p.m.
- * **THURSDAY:** Sunnyside High School, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
- * **JUNE 23:** Malloch Elementary School, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

[Sacramento Bee commentary, Sunday, June 13, 2009:](#)

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang: California can lead the U.S. in kicking the gasoline habit

OK, California. Please do it again.

Seven years after the state paved the way with major cuts in global warming pollution from automobiles, President Barack Obama ordered up similar progress for the nation's entire fleet. Now it is time for California to lead the country to the next big thing: Kicking the gasoline habit.

Given the state's green history, its reliance on the automobile and the looming threat of global warming, it is only natural that California show the rest of the country what the future can look like – at least from the vantage point of the freeway.

In 2002, the state passed a law requiring automakers to significantly cut tailpipe emissions of greenhouse gases. A dozen states followed Sacramento's lead. Last month, the Obama administration extended the program to cover the nation.

By 2016, cars and trucks across the country will be required to average 35.5 miles per gallon.

The United States' biggest single step in the fight against global warming will bring a new gleam to California's reputation as an environmental pioneer. The state ought to be proud. It introduced Detroit to the 21st century.

The national adoption of California's Pavley rules, named for then-Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, offered new evidence that when California leads, others follow.

The state law that became the model for national action will bring a 30 percent reduction in global warming pollution from automobiles when fully phased in, in 2016 – a full 14 years after the bill passed.

The arduous task of bringing change to the auto industry is like painting a bridge. As soon as you reach one end, it is time to start again at the other.

It takes five years to bring a car from designer's sketch to assembly-line reality. So, it is time for California – Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Air Resources Board – to start on the next round of requirements if the cars of model years 2017-2022 are to make the needed cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

The changes in engineering that will allow automakers to meet this current round of state and now federal regulations are sitting on the shelf. They rely on making gasoline engines run more efficiently. But those changes take us only so far.

California's new mission is akin to ordering up the sort of innovations that have transformed the music industry.

Recordings no longer rely on wax cylinders or vinyl discs, but on digital media. To preserve our atmosphere we must shift to 21st century technology to run our cars and light trucks.

The United States can't get from here to there – achieving the sorts of emissions reductions that scientists say we need to turn back global warming – without moving beyond the internal combustion engine.

Will the car of the future be a plug-in hybrid that largely runs on rechargeable batteries, with a gasoline engine as a backup? Will it rely only on batteries? Will it rely on hydrogen for fuel? We don't want to dictate what the next automotive power plant will look like.

What is important is that California continues to put pressure on the nation's auto industry – and Detroit's engineers – to take us to the next level. The key is setting standards strict enough to move the industry to begin to phase out the internal combustion engine.

By leading the way, the state will show Washington, D.C., as it did over the past seven years, how to bring the rest of the country along. Additional reductions in emissions will help lessen the impact of global warming around the world. But there is a special need in California.

Heat drives up ozone pollution. Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Visalia, Fresno and Sacramento are among the 10 most ozone-polluted metropolitan areas in the United States, according to "The Climate Gap," a study published last month by professors at UC Berkeley, the University of Southern California and Occidental College.

Cut the risk of global warming and we reduce the number of Californians who "already suffer a relatively high disease burden from air pollution," the report said.

California's natural and economic resources will also benefit.

The rivers, and the ecosystems that depend on them, will gain from a reduced risk of summer drought. Sensitive species such as the Sequoia and redwood will be spared the worst effects of global warming.

And gasoline savings mean that money that would have been exported for oil will instead be spent locally, helping build California's economy and jobs.

The decisions made in Sacramento must be sufficiently tough to propel the auto industry far enough down the road that we finally begin to break our addiction to oil and the internal combustion engine. They can shape the nation's autos for decades to come.

What's good for California is good for the nation.

[L.A. Times editorial, Monday, June 15, 2009:](#)

Is Obama caving in to coal?

The administration deserves credit for some minimal restrictions on mountaintop mining, but the president's hands-off approach to coal defeats his climate-change efforts.

Clear-cutting forests, then blowing the tops off of mountains and dumping the debris into stream beds is an environmentally catastrophic way of mining for coal. President Obama and the green activists he has appointed to run his interior-focused regulatory agencies surely know this. But their contortions over mountaintop mining would make a Cirque du Soleil performer wince.

The administration last week announced a number of new restrictions on mountaintop coal mining in the six Appalachian states where it occurs. They are minimal steps that, among other things, will make it harder for mining companies to escape environmental review when seeking permits to blow up mountains. For this, Obama merits polite applause.

That's in contrast to the much-deserved boos he received last month from environmentalists after his administration quietly sent a letter to coal industry loyalist Rep. Nick Rahall II (D-W.Va.) saying the Environmental Protection Agency wouldn't stand in the way of at least two dozen new mountaintop-removal projects. It was a dismaying move from an administration that in March had blocked several such projects on grounds that they needed further review -- yet some of the ones it greenlighted in May were as big and damaging as the ones it blocked two months earlier. What gives?

Obama is clearly intimidated by coal's powerful lobby. The industry is a major employer in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and other Appalachian states, where miners tend to vote for whichever party is friendliest to Big Coal. Yet there's also strong grass-roots opposition to strip mining in those states because of the effect it has on local communities; the technique poisons water supplies and pollutes the air with coal and rock dust. It also turns forests into moonscapes, ravages ecosystems and buries streams, which is good for neither wildlife nor the tourism industry.

The best approach to mountaintop mining would be to ban it completely. It's cheaper and less labor-intensive than underground mining, but not worth the environmental cost. At a minimum, Obama should address some other highly destructive rule changes imposed by the Bush administration -- a good place to start would be restoring a regulation that forbade mining within 100 feet of a stream, and disallowing the use of mine waste as "fill" material in waterways. Obama can't sidestep this issue forever, especially because his hands-off approach to coal defeats the purpose of his efforts to fight climate change. Coal is a key culprit in global warming, and it makes no sense to encourage cheap coal while seeking to boost renewable energy.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Saturday, June 13, 2009:](#)

Thumbs down to Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield; Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia; and Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa, all of whom voted against the "cash for clunkers" bill, which aims to boost new auto sales by allowing consumers to turn in their gas-guzzling cars and trucks for vouchers worth up to \$4,500 toward more fuel-efficient vehicles. The bill passed the House on Tuesday.

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Saturday, June 13, 2009:](#)

Back green power bill in Congress

Write or phone your congressional representative to vote Yes on the American Clean Energy and Security Act (House Resolution 2454). The Union of Concerned Scientists shows that combining energy and transportation policies with a strong cap on emissions -- set at 56 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 -- would save the average U.S. household \$900 on electricity, heating and transportation costs in 2030.

Businesses would save \$130 billion.

HR 2454 includes funding for education and training for green jobs. Our valley could benefit from solar power and the savings would be much quicker. Payback is generally 15 years or less, after which power is free (except for maintenance) until the inverter or panel wears out 15 years or more later.

Where are you going to be 15 years from now? Will you be paying the going rate or nothing? If you are 50 or older, you may very well be taking a nap and making money from a solar panel that is paid off. Better still, the benefits of a solar panel that is installed today helps our economy's bottom line today.

Steve Hay, Modesto

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Monday, June 15, 2009:](#)

Clunker bill is a joke

The so-called "clunker bill" is an insult. To give away \$3,500 to \$4,500 so someone who made an irresponsible decision to buy an oversized vehicle can now buy one that gets two to five more miles per gallon is a joke. Every manufacturer has increased mileage by two to five MPG in the past five years. Instead of my Ford Focus, I should have bought a Hummer so I could now get \$4,500 to buy a new Hummer H3.

Sam Taylor, Fresno