Windy forecast prompts Vegas air quality advisory

The Associated Press
In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

LAS VEGAS—Southern Nevada air quality officials have issued an advisory for blowing dust in Las Vegas and surrounding areas, with gusty winds expected.

The Clark County Department of Air Quality and Environmental Management is advising residents and construction site operators to prepare for gusts reaching up to 60 mph Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday.

The advisory calls for construction sites to take measures to prevent blowing dust.

Air quality officials say that if air quality becomes unhealthful, the department will post an alert.

Children, the elderly and people with respiratory diseases are urged to stay indoors during dust storms

Conn. company pays fine over pollution allegations

The Associated Press
In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

WALLINGFORD, Conn.—Federal officials say a chemical company based in Wallingford will pay a civil penalty of $155,000 to resolve claims it violated the Clean Air Act.

Cytec Industries will also spend $150,000 to perform an environmentally beneficial project to resolve the allegations by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. A telephone message was left Monday with a company official.

The EPA says an inspection revealed the company emitted excess hazardous air pollutants from resins, including formaldehyde and methanol. Exposure to formaldehyde can result in respiratory symptoms, and eye, nose, and throat irritation, while methanol can result in blurred vision, headache, dizziness and nausea.

Cytec has informed the EPA it has stopped producing spray dried resins.

EPA, Baja government join for air-quality studies

San Diego Union-Tribune, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

TIJUANA: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Baja California yesterday announced their collaboration in two air-quality studies on the U.S.-Mexico border in California.

One study will evaluate the condition of a network of 13 air-quality monitoring stations in Baja California. The stations, set up with support from the EPA and the California Air Resources Board, were turned over to the state of Baja California in 2007.

The second study involves updating a 1999 emissions inventory, focusing on Tijuana, Rosarito Beach, Tecate and Mexicali.

The studies, costing $173,000, are being funded by the EPA through the Border Environment Cooperation Commission, a binational agency created under a side agreement to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Calif. utility wants to buy more solar power

The Associated Press
In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- California's largest utility said it plans to boost the amount of solar power it buys from residents and businesses as the state pushes for wider use of alternative energy.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger predicted that Monday's proposal by San Francisco-based Pacific Gas & Electric Co. would open the way for more companies and homeowners to install rooftop panels to generate power.

Schwarzenegger last month ordered utilities to get a third of their power from renewable sources by 2020, the most aggressive green energy standard in the nation.

To meet the threshold "we have to really use every means to get there," the Republican governor told The Associated Press. "We all know that the more you give financial incentives, it leads people in that direction.
"We should encourage people to do everything that they can to put solar on the roof," he said.

About 50,000 homes and companies across the sun-splashed state generate solar power. When solar panels produce more electricity than customers need, they can return the excess to a utility and receive credits to offset their electricity use when the sun isn't shining.

The company's proposal must be approved by state regulators. Last year, solar power accounted for less than 1 percent of the electricity generated in California.

Under recently enacted state law, a customer can be paid for those credits at the end of the year or carry them forward to offset future electricity use.

In some case "you can zero-out your electric bill," said Susan Kennedy, the governor's chief of staff. "It makes the cost of installing solar panels pay for itself."

Schwarzenegger also plans to push to end limits on the amount of solar power purchased by utilities from customers. He said those limits chill investment in solar energy.
"We will continue to pursue additional clean renewable resources for our customers as we strive to meet the greenhouse gas emission reduction goals," the company said in a statement.

PG&E provides natural gas and electric service to approximately 15 million people in northern and central California, according to its Web site.

Kerry: US leadership at stake in climate debate

By H. Josef Hebert and Dina Capiello, Associated Press
In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The lead author of a Senate climate bill says action to combat global warming will raise energy prices, but also create jobs and that inaction could cause even worse economic and security problems.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said "America's leadership is on the line here" as he urged members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on Tuesday to approve a bill that would cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by mid-century.

Republicans are strongly opposed to Kerry's bill, but some Democrats don't like it either.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., said he was concerned about "the overall direction" of the bill. He said while Montana would be harmed by climate change "we also can't afford the unmitigated effects of climate change legislation."

Electric vehicles are charging up the automotive industry

A dozen all-electric or plug-in hybrid vehicles are expected to hit the market in the next three years. They promise to combine blinding fuel efficiency, radical new technology and futuristic styling.

By Ken Bensinger, staff writer
L.A. Times, Sunday, Oct. 25, 2009

Next time you're filling up the cavernous fuel tank of the gas-gulping family jalopy, imagine getting 230 miles per gallon.

Better yet, how about never buying another gallon of gas?

After years of hope and hype, electron-powered driving finally appears to be on the verge of reality.

In the next three years, at least a dozen pure electric or plug-in hybrid cars are slated to hit the market in the U.S. Electricity-driven vehicles from giants such as General Motors Co. and Nissan Motor Co., as well as start-ups like Fisker Automotive Inc. in Irvine, will provide consumers with a wide variety of choices. These new vehicles promise to combine blinding fuel efficiency, radical new technology and futuristic styling that makes the hybrid Toyota Prius look downright staid.

Battery makers and automakers alike are tooling up factories to produce big volumes of electric vehicles. Meanwhile, power utilities and regulators are scrambling to figure out just how big the market will be.

"This is happening and it's happening soon," said Mark Duvall, director of electric transportation at the Electric Power Research Institute, an independent, nonprofit research group. "By the end of 2011, consumers will have more choices in vehicles they can plug in than they currently do for hybrids."

The electric vehicles will be arriving at a good time. With gasoline prices creeping up once again and federal regulations calling for huge fuel economy gains in the next half-decade, there's increasing demand for cars that burn less fuel, make less noise and push automotive technology forward.

In August, President Obama set a national goal of getting 1 million plug-in vehicles on the road by 2015. It took about twice as long to get a million hybrids rolling on U.S. streets and highways.

But any new technology that involves high-voltage, exotic battery chemistries and 3,500-pound objects hurtling forward at high speed is bound to hit some potholes. Early adopters, experts say, will have to contend with charging infrastructure challenges and some pretty long waiting lists.

And did we mention price? Even the least expensive electric or plug-in car will cost more than $25,000, and most will come in closer to twice that.

"There will be some real challenges at first," said Roland Hwang, vehicle policy director at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "These are going to cost more than conventional cars. The infrastructure is not going to take care of itself. These issues will determine whether this is a trickle or a massive flood."

For those willing to take the leap, however, there is plenty to be excited about.

Restarting electrics

Electric cars are hardly new. In fact, a century ago, around the time of the dawn of the automobile, there were as many electric as gasoline-powered cars.

But technological limitations eventually killed those early EVs, and electric cars didn't truly raise their heads again until the late 1990s. That's when a smattering of electrics, including the much-lamented GM EV1, were made available in California as part of a government-mandated test program.

Wildly popular among a select group of enthusiasts, they were officially declared unfeasible and unprofitable by automakers. Today, only a few hundred are still on the road, among them a Toyota RAV4 EV driven by Paul Scott, co-founder of electric vehicle activist group Plug In America.

Nobody was happier than Scott when Tesla Motors Inc., a San Carlos, Calif., automaker, last year began selling its all-electric Roadster, a rocket of a two-seater that noiselessly goes from zero to 60 mph in less than four seconds. True, the Roadster costs $109,000. And it has a waiting list longer than Sunset Boulevard. But to people like Scott, its arrival signaled the coming of a new electric era.

"This time electric cars are here to stay," said Scott, who envisions charging cars using solar power, making them essentially cost-free to operate.

Tesla and other nimble start-ups have helped jump-start the industry. Now big automakers are getting their electric programs in gear. That's no minor development considering the titanic capital costs involved in developing high-volume-production vehicles.

For Ford Motor Co., better batteries were key. Previous technologies were just too heavy and inefficient, said Nancy Gioia, the automaker's director of global electrification. "They weren't ready for mass production," she said.

But in the last couple of years, huge improvements and new battery chemistries "opened the opportunity" for ambitious product plans, she said. Gioia predicts that as many as a quarter of new vehicles sold by 2020 will be electrics, plug-in hybrids or traditional hybrids.

Challenges ahead

Yet even the fiercest electric advocates admit that battery reliability still has room for improvement.

Arthur Krieger, a retired police officer in Los Angeles, drives a Prius powered by a relatively small nickel metal hydride battery to assist the gasoline engine. The battery needed replacement after nine years on the road. That's when Krieger got a nasty surprise: A new one would cost more than $4,800.

"That cost will wipe out the entire cost savings of having a hybrid in the first place," Krieger said.

The price would be even higher on an all-electric vehicle using the latest chemistry: lithium ion.

Already widely used in cellphones, watches and laptops, those batteries have storage, charging and weight characteristics that make them superior to previous technologies -- with premium prices to match. A replacement battery for a Tesla Roadster costs $30,000, and it can move the car only 200 or so miles before it needs to be recharged. That's a 3 1/2 -hour process on a high-powered charger, 30 hours on regular household current.

Then there is the matter of exactly where to re-juice all those electrics.

Some experts believe that public charging stations will be the best solution, either those put up by state and local governments or, perhaps, private for-profit companies. At present there is almost no such infrastructure. Building a nationwide network would cost tens of billions of dollars.

That means most electric owners will be charging at home initially. Plug-in hybrids, which primarily run on batteries but also have gasoline-powered engines to supplement range and power, can get by on standard household current. They're ready to roll in five or six hours.

All-electric cars, however, can take well over a day to charge unless owners invest thousands of dollars in home electrical upgrades.

That's because a fully electric vehicle calls for a 240-volt, 40-amp circuit, far above the limits of the socket in a typical garage, said Ed Kjaer, director of electric transportation at Southern California Edison.

Another issue, he added, is that "not everyone has access to a garage or other place to plug into," including apartment dwellers or people in urban areas that depend on street parking.

"Plug-in cars are not for everybody at this point," said Kjaer, who expects that infrastructure such as public charging stations will eventually help level the playing field.

A rewarding experience

For those willing (and able) to take the plunge, however, the rewards of owning electrified cars could include the financial kind.

Thanks to a provision in last year's $700-billion Wall Street bailout legislation, buyers of electric or plug-in hybrid cars can qualify for a tax credit of as much as $7,500.

Routine maintenance could be a bargain too. Since these vehicles use simple electric motors rather than complex gasoline or diesel engines, as well as pared-down or in some cases nonexistent transmissions, they are far easier to service than conventional vehicles. There's no oil to change, no radiator to flush.

There are other perks as well. In California, electric vehicles still qualify for special stickers that permit their drivers to travel solo in the state's carpool lanes. The stickers expire in 2011, but lawmakers are considering extending the privilege until 2016. It's unclear whether plug-in hybrids will qualify.

With all the excitement brewing over electric vehicles, it's easy to forget that 98% of the cars sold in America still have traditional drivetrains.

Simply put, the gasoline engine isn't going to disappear overnight. Even the most vociferous boosters of plug-in vehicles admit that the greater range and lower cost of internal combustion-powered cars and trucks mean they'll dominate vehicle sales for at least another decade or two. And for some applications, like hauling a trailer over the Rockies, they may never go away.

But for people like Chelsea Sexton, who drove an EV1 and now advises Silicon Valley firm VantagePoint Venture Partners on electric transportation, the next few years offer a tantalizing glimpse of a future with a lot less internal combustion.

"I really relate to the pure electric experience," said Sexton, who has test-driven the Chevy Volt, due out late next year, and liked it. "If I had a magic wand, we'd have four different configurations of electric cars and plug-ins to choose from tomorrow."

Ailing planet seen as bad for human health

Advocates' report links climate change to worsening of diseases

By David A. Fahrenthold, staff writer
Washington Post, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009

Climate change will make Americans more vulnerable to diseases, disasters and heat waves, but governments have done little to plan for the added burden on the health system, according to a new study by a nonprofit group.

The study, released Monday by the Trust for America's Health, an advocacy group focused on disease prevention, examines the public-health implications of climate change. In addition to pushing up sea levels and shrinking Arctic ice, the report says, a warming planet is likely to leave more people sick, short of breath or underfed.

Experts involved with the study said that these threats might be reduced if the federal government adopts a cap on greenhouse-gas emissions. But no legislation could stop them altogether, they said. Emissions already in the atmosphere are expected to increase warming -- and the problems that come with it -- for years to come.

"That [a cap on greenhouse gases] really is not enough," said Phyllis Cuttino of the Pew Environment Group, which funded the study. "We can see all these problems coming, but as a country, we haven't done enough to prepare for them."

The idea that climate change will be bad for people as well as polar bears is not new: It was explained in detail by a United Nations panel that won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work on climate in 2007.

Monday's report summarized some of the biggest worries for Americans in particular. They included:

-- Heat waves, which the report says are expected to increase. The danger is expected to be worst, the report said, in concrete-clad cities, where the lack of greenery creates an "urban heat island." Under climate change, the experts said, summer heat could also sneak up on people in cities where air conditioning hasn't been needed in the past.
-- More "extreme weather events," such as hurricanes, floods and wildfire-breeding droughts. Drought could also create crop failures, the report said, leading to malnutrition.
-- More widespread diseases carried by mosquitoes, ticks and other pests. If warmer temperatures allow these animals to expand their ranges northward, the result could be more cases of West Nile virus, Lyme disease and hantavirus.
-- Increased air pollution, caused because heat contributes to the formation of smog. This, the report said, could increase the incidence of severe asthma or pulmonary disease.

The experts who worked on the study said they could not provide a timetable for when and where these effects will appear. But they said it is already time to get ready for them, but many governments are not doing so.

"Some of the most personal effects of climate change are going to be health-related ones," said Jeff Levi, executive director of the Trust for America's Health. "We should want the government doing as much as possible now to prevent these effects, or minimize them when they occur."

Officials involved in the study said that preparations might include planting more trees in cities, to clean and cool urban air. Levi said they might also include laying in supplies of medicine for diseases that might appear in an area for the first time.

Merced Sun-Star editorial, Tuesday, October 27, 2009:

Our View: High-speed rail money makes sense

Why shouldn't California get a sizable chunk? And why shouldn't $1.4B come to the Valley?

California's high-speed rail advocates are lobbying for a sizable chunk of the $8 billion in federal high-speed rail funding that's available.

California's application includes about $1.3 billion for San Joaquin Valley routes that would run from Merced to Bakersfield.

The remainder of the application, about $3.4 billion, would include segments for San Francisco to San Jose and Los Angeles to Anaheim.

With 23 states going after the federal funding, California will have to prove its application is worthy, especially considering that the Golden State wants more than half of the federal money available.

California High-Speed Rail Authority leaders were on Capitol Hill lobbying for the state's $4.7 billion funding request.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer have also been pushing California's application with federal officials.

California would be perfect for high-speed rail because of the large distances between major cities and the need to get motorists off the state's crowded freeways.

For Valley residents, a high-speed rail system would offer quick and efficient transportation to the Bay Area and Southern California. It would help improve the Valley's air quality, and give residents other transportation options.

In addition, this massive public works project would create high-paying jobs in construction and related industries. The Valley could use those jobs right now.

If Merced County wins the contract for the system's maintenance facility at the Castle Airport, it would give a tremendous boost to our economy and future.

California voters helped the state's quest for a high-speed rail system in 2008 when they approved a bond that includes $9 billion to jump-start construction.

The entire system in California could cost $40 billion, and the rest of the funding must come from other sources, including state and federal funds and private donations.

We believe high-speed rail is part of our nation's future. It will reduce dependence on foreign oil, lower greenhouse gas emissions and provide a cheaper alternative to costly air travel.

There's no better place to start with high-speed rail than California. And right here in Merced.

Sacramento Bee commentary, Tuesday, October 27, 2009:

My View: Clearer thinking needed on 'cool cars'

By Bob Barr, Special to the Bee

In what some might see as a rare and refreshing bow to public pressure, the California Air Resources Board this spring backed away from a proposal to force vehicle manufacturers and painters to use only new, high-tech reflective paints for coating cars and trucks sold in the Golden State. Even the Big Kahuna of conservative talk, Rush Limbaugh, had weighed in on the issue, labeling the CARB regulators "tyrants."

Tyrants they may or may not be, but even in its current, scaled-back version involving only vehicle windows, the so-called "cool cars" initiative being considered by Director Mary D. Nichols and others at CARB presents serious problems. These problems go far beyond the technological

problems of developing a coating that can be readily applied to automobile glass and which will adhere for an extended period of time.

The cost of developing and applying the special coating is a worry to vehicle manufacturers, aftermarket windshield manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Even though CARB recently exempted vehicles with plastic rear and side windows, such as Jeep's Wrangler, from the proposed mandatory coatings, serious concerns remain. And these misgivings extend well beyond our shores and the Big Three auto companies.
Toyota, Nissan and other large foreign automakers recently urged California to back away from the window glazing proposal altogether.

The most serious concern – a truly major one – has to do with the fact that the metallic coating CARB is seeking to mandate interferes with electronic and radio signals emanating from or entering vehicles.
Understandably, manufacturers, installers and users of the myriad of electronic devices now commonplace in private and commercial vehicles are deeply worried about the direction in which CARB is leading California.

CARB ignores such concerns at its own peril.

The basis on which this regulatory agency is proposing to mandate the "cool" coatings may be laudable – reducing interior temperatures of vehicles so drivers would run their air conditioners less, which would reduce the fuel consumed, which would lower carbon emissions, which would lead to a reduction in greenhouse gasses. Serious questions about the validity of the "science" underlying such a linear argument already have been raised. Even leaving those concerns aside, the signal-interference problems resulting from the reflective coating could lead to serious questions of liability.

For example, if a motorist whose vehicle is equipped with an emergency radio locator device, such as GM's OnStar system, and whose windows have been coated with the CARB-mandated "cool" coating is in an accident, and their system will not transmit an emergency signal or sends one with erroneous locator data because of interference caused by the window glazing, who will be liable? If a car or truck owner spends money to enjoy satellite radio, but then is unable to properly receive the program signals, what are they to do? Are they expected simply to "suck it up" because this is the "price they pay" for arguably lessened greenhouse gasses?

And what about state and federal law enforcement? Will officers accept the fact that tracking devices installed on vehicles (either by law enforcement themselves, or using the commercially installed devices that also can be tracked by law enforcement) may be impeded or useless because of interference from the "cool" glazing? Will agents from California's Bureau of Investigation & Intelligence accept that their investigations are being impeded by another state agency to arguably save a small amount of greenhouse gas from entering the atmosphere?

CARB is scheduled to issue its final regulations at the end of this month on whether to require the metallic glazing on all vehicles sold in California. Let's hope the glimmer of common sense that caused the agency earlier this year to back away from requiring reflective body paint on all such vehicles is once again employed to avoid an unnecessarily costly and destructive mandate that would hit auto manufacturers, electronic device manufacturers, and consumers at just the wrong time.