

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District: No wood burning today

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2009

Wood burning is prohibited today, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced.

The residential prohibition applies to the burning of wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs. Fines for a first-time violation begin at \$50.

Exceptions are made:

- If wood burning is the residence's sole source of heat.
- If the residence does not have access to natural-gas service.

Wood burning banned in San Joaquin County on Thanksgiving Day

By The Record

Stockton Record, Thursday, November 26, 2009

Wood burning will be prohibited in San Joaquin County on Thanksgiving Day, air quality officials announced this afternoon.

It applies to anyone burning wood, pellets or manufactured fire logs. Exceptions are if wood burning is your only source of heat, or if the home does not have access to natural gas lines.

Gas fireplaces are permissible.

The prohibition is part of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's "Check Before You Burn" program. Every day the district evaluates whether wood burning is safe based on air quality conditions. Burning wood emits tiny particles which, if inhaled, may harm your health.

The daily wood-burning status report is available by 4 p.m. each day at www.valleyair.org. Or by calling (800) 766-4463.

Those who violate the ban may be subject to a first-time fine of \$50, the district says. Enforcement is driven mostly by complaints from neighbors.

Update: Woodburning rules and air quality

Sun-Star Staff

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Nov. 30, 2009

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Daily Air Quality Forecast

More information about the Daily Air Quality Forecast can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

More information about the Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm>.

MERCED

AQI Forecast for 11/30/2009: 64 Moderate (PM2.5)

School Flag color for 11/30/2009: Yellow

Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status for 11/30/2009: Please burn cleanly.

Update: Daily air quality survey and woodburning rules

By Sun-Star Staff

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Nov. 27, 2009

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Daily Air Quality Forecast

More information about the Daily Air Quality Forecast can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

More information about the Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status can be found at:
<http://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/WoodBurnPage.htm>.

MERCED

AQI Forecast for 11/27/2009: 58 Moderate (PM2.5)

AQI Forecast for 11/28/2009: 36 Good (PM2.5)

School Flag color for 11/28/2009: Green Fireplace/

Fireplace/Wood Stove Burning Status for 11/28/2009: Please burn cleanly

Valley fireplace use down; bad air still on rise

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Fresno Bee, Thursday, Nov. 26, and Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

Despite bans on fireplace wood-burning, concentrations of soot and other dangerous particles are getting worse in the Valley's air -- already the nation's worst for this kind of particle pollution.

It's an odd twist because the wood-burning bans have improved air quality around Thanksgiving and the winter holidays in Fresno and Bakersfield.

Yet the year-round average level of the microscopic debris -- called PM-2.5, which is linked with lung problems, heart disease and early death -- has increased more than 5% over the last several years.

Local air officials say the uptick is connected to weather and record-setting wildfires in summer, not fireplace smoke in fall and winter. They point to a longer-term decline of PM-2.5 over the last decade.

"What you're seeing is normal variation, and it's minimal to me," said Scott Nester, planning director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Valley air has an average of 45% more PM-2.5 particles than the federal health standard allows, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The agency averages readings in three-year increments to establish concentration levels.

High concentrations of PM-2.5 appear as part of the Valley haze, passing easily into the lungs and the bloodstream.

Wood and diesel smoke are the biggest direct sources of PM-2.5 specks. Wind-blown dust, debris from paved and unpaved roads and commercial meat cooking also contribute.

But about half of the Valley's PM-2.5 forms as oxides of nitrogen from vehicle exhaust and ammonia from dairies combine. Air officials say huge plumes of the pollutant, called ammonium nitrate, drive up the Valley's concentrations of PM-2.5.

Nobody knows for sure if large amounts of ammonium nitrate are harmful, because there has not been a lot of research on it.

But ammonium nitrate is not considered as big of a health threat as wood and diesel smoke, because it changes to nitric acid in the body. Nitric acid occurs naturally in humans.

Smoke from fireplaces and wood stoves is the bigger threat to Valley residents, air officials say, because many people in city neighborhoods are exposed to it. The smoke is more dangerous than generally known a few years ago.

The latest medical research shows the tiny specks in the smoke carry many chemicals into the bloodstream. Some, such as benzopyrene and chrysene, are considered carcinogenic. The same chemicals are found in toxic diesel exhaust.

"Your fireplace smells a lot better than diesel does, but as far as chemical content is concerned, they're very similar," said researcher Tim Tyner of the University of California at San Francisco-Fresno Medical Education Program.

PM-2.5 pollution is blamed for 800 premature Valley deaths each year. A study from California State University, Fullerton, last year found two-thirds of Valley residents are exposed to unhealthy levels of PM-2.5.

David Lighthall, district science adviser, said the worst seasons for PM-2.5 are fall and winter, when wood smoke sometimes hangs for hours in neighborhoods.

The district's rules have resulted in particle-pollution reductions of more than 12% in Bakersfield and Fresno over the last several winters.

"We're using a lot more burning prohibitions," he said.

But summer wildfires are adding to the year-round average, as the federal government's year-round figures might indicate. In 2008, there were hundreds of wildfires and smoke entering the Valley from all directions.

Scientists predict an increase of such fires as the climate warms over the next century. Air officials are working with the U.S. Forest Service to allow more prescribed burning, which would eliminate excess brush and reduce the size of the fires.

But the local air district can't control wildfires, weather or the Valley's bowl shape that traps a lot of air pollution.

"We have inherited the worst possible natural scenario here," said planning director Nester. "That's why we pursue the toughest rules."

Air Board site provides data on cleanest cars

Sacramento Bee, Friday, Nov. 27, 2009

The California Air Resources Board has a new Web site to help consumers choose the least-polluting motor vehicles on the market.

The site is www.driveclean.ca.gov.

It ranks vehicles according to their emission characteristics and includes online tools to compare models.

Last year, California adopted a regulation requiring auto manufacturers to affix an Environmental Performance Label to showroom vehicles to indicate specific models' smog and greenhouse gas emissions. Vehicles are assigned scores based on emissions data.

ARB said the new site uses this data as a basis for its vehicle rankings.

— Mark Glover

Bay Area officials issue air quality alert

The Associated Press

Merced Sun-Star, late Wednesday, November 25, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO -- Residents across the San Francisco Bay Area are being told to refrain from building a fire in the fireplace on Thanksgiving Day.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has issued a "Spare the Air" alert for the day, which bans the burning of firewood, pellets or manufactured fire logs, either indoors or outdoors.

The alert comes as officials say air quality in the Bay Area is expected to be unhealthy Thursday because of light winds and still air.

The wood-burning ban will be in effect for Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, southern Sonoma and southwestern Solano Counties.

Officials say wood smoke is the largest source of wintertime air pollution in the region.

Union Pacific wins award for cutting air pollution

By Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2009

Omaha, Neb. (AP) -- Union Pacific's efforts to reduce air pollution around the busy California ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles have been recognized.

The Harbor Association of Industry and Commerce of Southern California recently gave the Omaha-based railroad its "Salute to Industry" award.

UP says its fleet of locomotives is the cleanest of any North American railroad.

Since 2000, Union Pacific has added more than 3,300 fuel-efficient, long-haul locomotives and has retired more than 2,200 older locomotives.

Union Pacific also uses Genset switching locomotives in its California rail yards to help limit pollution.

Obama to commit U.S. to deep cuts in emissions

By H. Josef Hebert, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2009

Washington - -- Putting his prestige on the line, President Obama will personally commit the United States to a goal of substantially cutting greenhouse gases at next month's Copenhagen climate summit. He will insist America is ready to tackle global warming despite resistance in Congress over higher costs for businesses and homeowners.

Obama will attend the start of the conference Dec. 9, before heading to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. He will "put on the table" a U.S. commitment to cut emissions by 17 percent over the next decade, on the way to reducing heat-trapping pollution by 80 percent by mid-century, the White House said.

Cutting U.S. carbon dioxide emissions by one-sixth in just a decade would be likely to hike energy bills, but the administration says there would be important health trade-offs.

Carol Browner, Obama's assistant for energy and climate change, cited a \$173-per-year estimated cost in a briefing Wednesday - a figure for a family of four calculated by the Congressional Budget Office.

Republicans say costs would be higher.

But slashing carbon dioxide emissions could save millions of lives, mostly by reducing preventable deaths from heart and lung diseases, according to studies published this week in the Lancet British medical journal.

India feels growing pressure to set target for emission cut

As the U.S. and China issue pledges in advance of the global summit on climate change in Copenhagen, India holds back on announcing any goal that it fears could hinder economic development.

By Mark Magnier, staff writer

L.A. Times, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

Reporting from New Delhi - India found itself under growing pressure this week to set an emission reduction target after China and the United States announced their pledges in advance of a global summit on climate change that opens early next month.

The two Asian powerhouses, both of which have eschewed binding targets over concerns about undercutting national development, are seen in some Washington circles as the biggest impediment to an agreement.

China and India, as the world's two most populous nations and with rapidly developing economies, have said they will work toward a common position on a climate deal. On Thursday, China announced a plan to

pollute at a lesser rate compared with 2005 -- reducing emissions by 40% to 45% per unit of gross domestic product by 2020, and the U.S. pledged a 17% cut by 2020 in overall emission levels compared with those of 2005. But so far India has held back.

"It certainly puts pressure on India; we can't live in a world of our own," said Salman Haider, an analyst and former Indian foreign secretary. "There may well be some internal churning over this."

More than 190 nations are meeting in Copenhagen from Dec. 7 to 18, although entrenched bargaining positions, weak leadership and the global downturn make it unlikely that a final deal will be struck then.

India and China have argued that developed countries emit far more carbon dioxide and other harmful chemicals on a per-person basis than they do. They also say richer nations should shoulder most of the burden by transferring technology and compensating developing nations for cuts.

China's pledge is not binding, and this week's announcement only codifies plans already in place, said Kushal Singh Yadav, climate change project head at the Center for Science and Environment in New Delhi. And India has a better record on combating emissions so far, he said.

"But I admit by going ahead and announcing this, the perception is China's doing a lot more," Yadav said. "Most people won't look into the details."

Internally, India must weigh several factors in mapping out its next move, analysts and former diplomats said. Domestically, the government must consider how much economic pain and political opposition it can withstand in making any concessions.

Although almost every country is going through similar calculations ahead of the Copenhagen talks, India as a democracy -- and one that has suffered past voter revolts when its politicians were perceived as bowing to foreigners -- arguably faces more pressure than does China, with its more authoritarian system.

But India also has many international links -- as does China -- that have only grown stronger since economic reforms in 1992, and it can't afford to look too parochial or defiant when it comes to an agreement.

"China has given us a wake-up call," Indian Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh was quoted as saying by the Hindustan Times on Friday. "We have to think hard about our climate strategy now and look for flexibility."

Analysts said they did not think this apparent break would increase tension between China and India, which have traded accusations in recent weeks over border boundaries, visa policy and the Dalai Lama. Their common line in climate talks lasts only as long as it serves both of their national interests, analysts said.

"The question is what the impact of any move will be on India's economy," Haider said. "I think that may weigh much more than that China and the U.S. seem to be moving in the same direction."

New climate targets may not change daily life much

By Seth Borenstein, AP Science Writer

In the S.F.Chronicle, Washington Post and other papers, Friday, Nov. 27, 2009

WASHINGTON, (AP) -- Americans' day-to-day lives won't change noticeably if President Barack Obama achieves his newly announced goal of slashing carbon dioxide pollution by one-sixth in the next decade, experts say.

Except for rising energy bills. And how much they'll go up depends on who's doing the calculating.

The White House will commit the U.S. to a goal of cutting carbon dioxide emissions in 2010 to about 17 percent below 2005 levels at a U.N.-sponsored climate change summit in Copenhagen early next month.

That's about 12.5 percent below 2008 levels, according to the Department of Energy. He also set a goal of cutting emissions by 83 percent by 2050, which is what European nations want.

So the question is how big a burden would those double-digit cuts be for the average American.

Experts say it will mean higher energy bills, fewer deaths from air pollution, and maybe even a dividend check at the end of the year. But mostly, they say, it'll be small, slowly evolving changes that the public won't even notice.

Princeton University geosciences and international affairs professor Michael Oppenheimer compares what would happen under Obama's 2020 target to what has happened the past 30 years to refrigerators.

Without consumers noticing much, they have become three times more energy efficient. You only notice when you buy one, because they cost more, or if you look at reduced energy usage on your electric bill, Oppenheimer said.

But what would the overall cost of the big cuts in emissions actually be?

White House climate czar Carol Browner cites a \$173 a year cost for a family of four that was calculated by the Congressional Budget Office for the House climate bill, which has the same roughly 17 percent target. That summer CBO study said the poorest households would save \$40 a year, while those in the highest income ranges would face a jump of \$245 a year.

The Environmental Protection Agency put the overall cost at between \$80 and \$111 for the average household. But much of those estimates have lots of caveats, such as increased nuclear power use.

Energy companies, business interests, and Republicans say the costs will be far higher and hurt the average American far more.

A number of studies done at the request of business groups have pegged the cost for the average household at \$900 to \$1,539 a year by 2020.

Scott Segal, a Washington attorney who represents top carbon dioxide emitters such as power plants and refineries, said Wednesday a lot of the cost will depend on the details of how the goal is achieved. But he said the White House is quoting the lower, not the higher end of cost analyses.

"Price increases in those areas could be significant," Segal said.

Taking the White House and Congressional Budget Office figure, it amounts to less than half a buck a day, nowhere near the cost of a cup of coffee. But if the bulk of the increases came in four peak months in winter and summer, that would be an extra \$40 a month, which would be noticeable. And industry's figures are closer to \$5 a day.

John Reilly, associate director of MIT's Joint Program on the Science and Policy of Global Change, has conducted a detailed analysis of congressional plans. He says electricity bills could increase by more than 50 percent and a gallon of gas could jump by 26 cents by 2020, but those won't be as onerous as they sound.

The latest proposal for the intricate cap-and-trade system for pollution credits involves auctioning off the right to pollute, with the proceeds being returned to consumers. That means consumers would pay more in monthly bills and then get checks back from utilities at the end of the year, which would encourage them to use less energy, Reilly said.

That end-of-the-year check, he maintained, would offset some of the higher electricity prices.

And the projected gas price increase would be about the same as what happened a couple years ago, Reilly added.

"It's a gradual evolution," he said. "The idea is to gently direct us in another direction so it isn't a big dramatic shift ... to do this with the least amount of pain as possible."

Eventually cars may be made of different materials, Princeton's Oppenheimer said. Some coal power plants may be replaced with cleaner natural gas. Big cars will be more costly and discouraged. Smaller cars may be built to be more comfortable and inviting.

There will be "a million small changes ... most of them you will never know happen, some you will," Oppenheimer said.

"We don't see the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere," he said. "We're not going to see most of the measures to remove it from emissions. And we're not going to notice when it's gone except that very gradually over the long term the rate of warming of the world will slow down."

Public health officials from around the world on Wednesday released a series of studies showing that reducing greenhouse gas emissions — by the same 83 percent by 2050 that Obama targeted — would save millions of lives because of reduced air pollution.

Cutting carbon dioxide pollution and encouraging more exercise and less meat consumption to reduce emissions would reduce deaths from heart and lung diseases worldwide, study authors and health officials said.

Even a 17 percent emissions cut by 2020, as Obama outlined, would mean hundreds if not thousands of U.S. lives saved because there would be less air pollution to worsen heart and lung diseases, said

Christopher Portier, associate director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

"Relying on fossil fuels leads to unhealthy lifestyles, increasing our chances for getting sick and in some cases takes years from our lives," U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said.

"As greenhouse gas emissions go down, so do deaths from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. This is not a small effect."

Experts: nations' emissions pledges fall short

By Arthur Max, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

Amsterdam - -- Even after the United States and China set targets this week for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the world's combined pledges ahead of next month's climate summit fall far short of what experts say is needed to avert dangerous global warming.

Still, emission promises by the two countries, the world's biggest polluters, added much-needed momentum as governments began final preparations for the 192-nation conference in Copenhagen, where parameters will be set for a new climate change agreement.

From Beijing to Trinidad, governments huddled Friday to plan their negotiating strategies.

China hosted India and other major developing countries a day after announcing that Beijing would cut "carbon intensity," a measure of carbon dioxide emissions per unit of production, by 40 to 45 percent by 2020, compared with levels in 2005.

Unofficial calculations by U.N. climate officials said the move would put China on a path to reduce all its greenhouse gas emissions about 13 percent from "business as usual," the level those emissions would have reached without any action.

It wasn't until recently that the United States and China were willing to put any numbers on the table regarding carbon emission reductions.

The stalemate broke Wednesday when the White House said President Obama, who will attend the Copenhagen conference Dec. 9, would pledge to reduce U.S. emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, and that the United States would continue that downward path over the following 10 years to reach a 41 percent reduction.

The World Wildlife Fund said the U.S. pledge for 2020 translated to 4 to 5 percent below the commonly accepted benchmark year of 1990.

"It certainly doesn't bring us closer to that range of emission reduction levels that we need to see," said Kim Carstensen, the World Wildlife Fund's climate change director.

Scientists say the industrial countries must slash carbon emissions by 25 to 40 percent by 2020 below 1990 to prevent the Earth from adding 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the maximum considered safe.

In addition, developing countries need to lower their emissions growth by 15 to 30 percent from business as usual, according to the authoritative U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Perry leads Texas GOP fight against climate bill

By John McFarland, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle, Washington Post and other papers, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2009

DALLAS (AP) -- While the U.S. Senate considers a climate bill aiming to dramatically slash air pollution linked to global warming, Texas Gov. Rick Perry and other Republican leaders in the state that leads the nation in greenhouse gas production are watching closely — and objecting loudly.

Perry, backed by powerful business and industry groups, for months has been denouncing the measure, saying it would cripple the vibrant Texas economy and the heavy-polluting oil, gas and chemical industries it depends on. The governor plans to keep up his campaign against legislation he claims would lead to massive job cuts, industries fleeing overseas and more expensive energy for everyone.

"The bill does not help the environment," Perry said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It seems like it's more about controlling than it is on having a real impact on the environment."

The U.S. House narrowly passed the measure in June, with the Texas delegation voting against it 23-9, and a similar version is facing a tough fight in the Senate. Each bill would cut emissions significantly by 2020, with a "cap and trade" system allowing companies to buy and sell permits to release limited amounts of heat-trapping gases.

Most of the nation's 22 Republican governors oppose the measure — including Mississippi's Haley Barbour and Louisiana's Bobby Jindal — but Perry is one of the most vocal. He recently railed against it after being named the head of an oil group that includes elected officials from more than 30 states, and he says he'll use that position and the "bully pulpit" of his office to attack legislation he's called draconian, disastrous and onerous.

Environmental groups and Texans who support the bill say Perry is ignoring the legislation's economic benefits in order to help powerful polluters that support him.

"In short, we can ensure the people of Texas have the responsible and clean energy policies they deserve and that Texas remains at the forefront of the energy field, or we can get left behind," said state Sen.

Rodney Ellis, a Democrat who traveled to Washington with state leaders this year to work with the White House on clean energy legislation. "We can't continue fossilized thinking, pretend there is no problem, and resist innovative thinking."

Texas leads the nation in industrial pollution and has more oil refineries, chemical manufacturing plants and coal-fired power plants than any other state. The massive oil and chemical plants employ nearly 270,000 people and pay billions in state and local taxes. Texas provides about 20 percent of the nation's oil production, one-third of the natural gas, 25 percent of refining and 60 percent of chemical manufacturing.

Carbon emissions in Texas have dropped in recent years, and Perry says that's happened while those industries have helped build a strong economy that attracts about 1,000 people a day to the state.

"We've been able to reduce emissions and have a growing population and a growing economy, and we didn't do it through regulations and taxes. We did it through incentives," Perry said. "Put the cap and trade legislation in place, and those businesses at some point will pick up and move offshore. They just can't stay in business."

Jim Marston, director of the Texas office of the Environmental Defense Fund, doubts that claim. He says Texas companies can be at the forefront of a new green economy and that Perry's employing the same scare tactics used when the 1990 Clean Air Act was considered.

"This is just not credible," Marston said. "Rick Perry gets extra campaign contributions from industry folks or these people he spends time with at the country club and he's going to say what they want him to say."

Perry, locked in a tough primary re-election fight with U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison — who also opposes the measure — has been traveling around the state discussing the bill and the predicted consequences for Texas should it pass.

Environmentalists do agree with Perry on one point: his pushing of alternative energy.

Texas tops the country in wind energy, plans to expand a south Texas nuclear plant into the nation's largest and offers incentives for energy efficiency and solar-power use. In fact, Perry's usual speech calls for Washington to follow Texas' lead by offering incentives to cut emissions while promoting all sorts of alternative energy.

"This isn't just the governor of Texas standing up and saying no. I'm an all-of-the-above guy," Perry said.

But it's his ties to the notoriously polluting big oil and chemical industries that rankle environmentalists. That, and the fact that Perry is skeptical of the science linking climate change and carbon emissions — a stance shared by the three commissioners he appointed to lead the Texas environmental agency.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality contends that capping emissions will not affect global warming, and it would be bad for Texas.

"Due to the significant petroleum and petrochemical industry base of Texas that supplies the rest of the nation with fuel and other commodities, it is certain that cap and trade legislation being discussed will disproportionately affect both citizens and industry of Texas," spokesman Terry Clawson said.

Environmentalists say Texas needs to quit clinging to the past.

"I would say they are protecting the status quo — or even worse, protecting the status quo of the 1950s," Marston said. "It's playing to the stereotype that we're yahoos, and we're not."

Ohio school district sues over air pollution

By Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

Addyston, Ohio (AP) -- A school district near Cincinnati is suing a plastics plant, accusing it of continuing to release chemicals in the air that exceed government safety standards.

Three Rivers School District closed an elementary school across the street from the plant in 2005. The district says it has been unable to sell the building and is burdened by crowded classrooms.

Students were shifted to two other elementary schools, and some courses are taught in cafeterias or storage areas.

The lawsuit seeks compensatory and punitive damages. The plant had been cited with several environmental violations.

Terri Fitzpatrick, a spokeswoman for plastics maker Lanxess Corp., which previously owned the plant, says the company took steps to enhance environmental controls. The plant continues to operate under a joint agreement between Lanxess and Ineos Group.

Air quality drops in Fairbanks, North Pole

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2009

FAIRBANKS, Alaska—Fairbanks' municipal government is asking people to voluntarily halt wood burning after air quality in the area dropped below federal standards.

The Fairbanks Daily News Miner reports this week's drop in air quality was the first time since the summer wild fires that air pollution has worsened.

Fairbanks North Star Borough air quality technician Jim McCorkmick says pollution monitors show North Pole is being hit the hardest.

The drop in air quality happens when a layer of warm air sits on top of cold air, trapping pollution close to the surface. It's known as temperature inversion.

McCormick says the area is at mercy of Mother Nature and that's why they're asking people to cut back on wood burning.

The weather forecast suggests conditions for temperature inversion will continue throughout next week.

Europe's post-Soviet greening – gains and failures

By Arthur Max, The Associated Press

In the Washington Post, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2009

DNIPRODZERZHYNK, Ukraine -- Twenty years ago, when the Iron Curtain came down, the world gagged in horror as it witnessed firsthand the ravages inflicted on nature by the Soviet industrial machine.

Throughout the crumbling communist empire, sewage and chemicals clogged rivers; industrial smog choked cities; radiation seeped through the soil; open pit mines scarred green valleys. It was hard to measure how bad it was and still is: The focus was more on production quotas than environmental data.

Today, Europe has two easts - one that has been largely cleaned up with the help of a massive infusion of Western funds and the prospect of membership in the prosperous European Union; another that still looks as though the commissars never left.

The contrasting story lines are written in the ripple and flow of two rivers.

Drifting along Ukraine's Dnieper River, past this one-time powerhouse of Soviet rule, requires slicing through clouds of black and orange exhaust from a metallurgical plant.

Over a hill, passengers may catch a whiff of a burning garbage dump. Nearby fields are fenced off by barbed wire with signs warning of radioactivity. Farther along, the cruise passes the world's third largest nuclear power station.

Upstream from Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, the Dnieper picks up water from the Pripyat River, whose sediment is still laced with radioactive caesium-137 from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

To the southwest, in countries that have joined the EU, another river, the Danube, is bouncing back. Pleasure boats sail past public bathing areas and people of dozens of nationalities stroll down esplanades alongside a glittering waterway that inspired the music of Johann Strauss. Protected woods and wetlands are being extended along its meandering course.

In 1989 the stretch of Danube that flowed through the communist countries was like the Dnieper - an ecological disaster of epic proportions. Oil slicks glistened in rainbow colors on the water's surface. Long stretches were empty of fish, and stinking algae proliferated along the banks. Worse than the visible pollution was the insidious invasion of microcontaminants that poisoned the ecosystem.

But at the intersection of geography and history lie insights into the rivers' contrasting fates.

Originating in Russia and ending in the Black Sea, the Dnieper flows south through Belarus, cutting southeast across Ukraine, countries that have remained, in varying degrees, almost umbilically tethered over the past 20 years to the might of the Kremlin.

The Danube, on the other hand, traces a triumphant march through the European Union's eastward expansion, starting in traditional EU heavyweight Germany and flowing through or forming the border of new member states - Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

The river ambles 2,857 kilometers (1,775 miles) from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. Some 83 million people in 19 countries live in its basin.

Five years after the Berlin Wall fell on Nov. 9, 1989, most of the countries sharing the Danube signed a convention to manage the river, its tributaries, the basin and the ground sources. It was one of the iconic projects in a broader mission among Western powers to make billions of dollars available for a massive cleanup of eastern Europe.

In five years of peak action from 2000, the Danube countries spent \$3.5 billion building wastewater treatment plants in hundreds of towns and villages along the river and its 26 major tributaries. They spent \$500 million more restoring wetlands and cleaning industrial spillage and agricultural runoff befouling the water.

Chemicals that feed plant-choking algae and threaten human health have dramatically declined since 1989, although their levels remain far higher than in 1950, before the industrial buildup and growth of riverside cities.

Along with direct Western aid, many poor ex-Soviet-bloc countries had a huge incentive to throw themselves into the region's cleanup: EU membership. Racing to meet the bloc's environmental standards, they put scrubbers into coal-fired plants, built water purification stations and capped emissions that had been returning to Earth as acid rain.

It was a monumental task.

One area known as the Black Triangle at the junction of Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic was notorious. A concentration of coal mines and heavy industry suffocated the region under industrial ash and gas. Some 80 million tons of lignite, or brown coal, were burned annually, pouring 3 million tons of sulfur dioxide into the air that caused chronic breathing ailments, higher cancer rates, and heart and immunity problems. Satellite images showed half the pine forests in the surrounding hills disappeared between 1972 and 1989.

With help from the EU, the three countries mothballed factories, switched to cleaner fuels, and installed new technologies in the area, about the size of Maryland or Belgium. Within a decade, sulfur dioxide emissions fell 91 percent, nitrogen oxide fell 78 percent and solid particles dropped 96 percent, according to the UN Environment Program.

For the Danube, the cleanup was more than just an environmental project. The Danube Convention changed mindsets, breaking down barriers between former enemies, forcing countries and riverside populations to work together across previously hostile borders.

"The Danube is a living river that is bound up with the culture and the peoples who live there," says Philip Weller, the commission's executive secretary.

"It is not a wild river, in the sense of salmon jumping or white water," Weller said. "It is the lifeblood, the circulation system" that connects the richest part of Europe in western Germany to the poorest in Ukraine and Moldova.

The river is still not pristine, but "over the past 20 years much has changed for the better," said Andreas Beckmann of the World Wildlife Fund. After 150 years of abuse and the loss of 80 percent of the river's wetlands, "the Danube has significantly recovered."

With the fund's support, dikes were torn down and severed river systems were reconnected, restoring 50,000 hectares (123,000 acres) or one-fifth of the retrievable wetlands, Beckmann says.

Still, the river bears irreparable scars from the Soviet era.

Romania's Iron Gate dams and hydroelectric stations cannot be dismantled, forever blocking the migration route of the majestic sturgeon. Two of the five sturgeon species native to the Danube have virtually disappeared, though efforts are on to revive stocks in the lower Danube.

Economic progress brings modern threats: more packaging, more waste, more household detergents containing phosphorous that stimulate river-choking algae.

Sergei Rudenko, a teacher at a vocational school in Dniprodzerzhynsk, has been throwing a fishing line into the Dnieper for 50 years. Springing from the mountains of central Russia, the 2,285-km (1,420-mile) river was once rich at this spot in eastern Ukraine with perch, carp and bream.

Now its yield is miserly, he says.

"The Dnieper is destroyed," Rudenko said, casting his line from a highway bridge, from which the horizon is obscured by smoke from the metallurgical plant. "The fishing is not like in earlier times. My father always brought home many fish, many bream, and now there is none."

Dniprodzerzhynsk, a name that combines the river with that of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Bolshevik secret police, once was so crucial to the Soviet economy that it was closed to outsiders. With 250,000 people, it has 60 factories, some looming over the city in a permanent haze.

On the outskirts of town eight fields are fenced off with barbed wire, hung with yellow triangles warning of radioactivity. Nuclear waste was dumped here many years ago. Uniformed officers patrol the area, and stopped two Associated Press journalists to ask why they were there.

Next to a chemical plant is the city dump, where three decades worth of garbage is now a steaming landfill 30 meters (100 feet) deep. Dozens of trucks arrive daily, dropping more refuse into the ravine, cut through by a stinking scum-filled stream.

"When the wind is from there, I can't breathe," said Gregori Timoshenko, a 72-year-old waste site employee, nodding toward the fresh garbage. He shrugs when asked if working in such a polluted place affects his health. "I have lived my life, I have nothing to lose."

Not far away, Evgen Kolishevsky of the Voice of Nature, a local environmental group, takes a reporter to the foot of a mountainous slag heap, below which runs the Konoplyanka river that feeds into the Dnieper. "This is the waste from chemical enterprises and of processing and enrichment of uranium," he said.

"Dniprodzerzhynsk is one of the most contaminated cities in Europe," he said, shaking his head.

As world attention increasingly focuses on climate change, a visit to Ukraine is a jolting reminder that the old environmental problems of air pollution, dirty water and untreated waste still exact a devastating toll.

The Ukrainian steppe, once the industrial engine for the Soviet empire, reveals a skyline of artificial landmarks: a picket fence of smokestacks and huge slag heaps looking like flat-topped volcanic hills in the distance.

At the end of its journey, the Dnieper enters the only part of the Black Sea that suffers from "anthropogenic hypoxia," a chronic lack of oxygen caused by man-made pollution afflicting 50,000 square kilometers (20,000 square miles) of water - strangling fish and plant life.

Irina Schevchenko, a journalist and director of the local voluntary organization Vita, stands at the foot of one mountain of chemical ash, taller than any building in the eastern town of Gorlovka. In the 1970s, the state-owned chemical plant began dumping its waste at the edge of a nature reserve. Now, burned out tree stumps and a layer of steel-gray mud separate the dump from the woods.

In summer, smoke from chemical evaporation rises from the mound, said Schevchenko. "The wind takes it to the fields, to the houses of the people. When it rains ... it goes into these streams and gets into the underground currents. As a result, the concentration of chemicals in the soil and in the air of Gorlovka is twice as high as normal."

Victor Lyapin, a local health official, acknowledges the damaging effects.

"The first mistake of the Soviet Union," he said, "was to put factories and people shoulder to shoulder."

Settlement results in funds for NM biofuel project

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times and Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009

SANTA FE, N.M.—Biofuels research in southeastern New Mexico will benefit from a settlement reached by the New Mexico Environment Department and Western Refining Co. over air quality violations at two of the company's refineries.

The settlement calls for Western Refining to pay \$1.95 million to the Center for Excellence in Hazardous Material Management in Carlsbad for work that aims to turn algae into biodiesel.

The center has successfully cultivated and harvested a wild-strain algae to produce a feedstock that can be converted to biofuel. It has conducted the work at its facilities and at New Mexico State University's agricultural experiment station near Artesia.

The first payment of \$650,000 will be made on Monday. The next payment will be March 1.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2009](#)

Vierra: Small-town politician who is doing big-city service

We could never make this stuff up; we're not that creative.

Over the years, I've offered that remark to many people, usually at the end of a particularly "newsy" period or after a sequence of unpredictable stories. We're just coming off one of those periods.

Could we dream up a story that had a city council voting out its city manager, hiring a new one, backtracking on the new hire and then reversing itself on the original firing? Of course not. It's implausible. No elected body would do all that. But of course that's what has happened in Hughson in the last month.

On the heels of the raucous mayor's race in Riverbank, it leaves some people wondering about small-town politics. And I wonder, too.

This kind of behavior might seem entertaining, but it's mostly it's disappointing. Such incidents are embarrassing for the community involved — but worse, they fuel public cynicism about politicians — those who go to Washington and Sacramento and those who sit on the dais at city halls.

That's why I want to state — as I have before — that most of the people who run for local office have their community's interest at heart, and while they may change some of their views while in office, they usually don't lose sight of the community in their votes.

Let me offer an example of this kind of person — Chris Vierra, who was just re-elected to a second term on the Ceres City Council.

Lesser known is that Vierra is finishing up a year as the chairman of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board. This is the eight-county district that regulates stationary sources of pollution, chiefly industry and agriculture. Its board members include a supervisor from each county, plus several city representatives. The chairmanship rotates, so Vierra wasn't elected chairman. He just rotated into it.

That said, he's apparently doing a very good job.

Supervisor Bill O'Brien, who represents Stanislaus County on the board, said Vierra keeps good control of the meetings, which is no easy task given the sharp division of views. "He cares about air pollution, but he also cares about balance," O'Brien observes.

Vierra is a mechanical engineer and he brings that expertise and analytical approach to the chair. Our editorial board met with him a couple of weeks ago and he offered some interesting thoughts.

This has been a relatively quiet year for the air board, but one potentially controversial issue is coming up in December — a trip reduction rule for employers with 100 or more employees. As proposed, they will be required to have and to document several programs to reduce the number of vehicle trips by their workers. These could include things as simple as having direct deposit for paychecks or establishing a shared-ride board. Many employers already do such things but resist the idea of more recordkeeping.

Vierra clearly recognizes the burden on business, but he also understands that air pollution is a serious concern. He stresses how much can be accomplished by individuals, through obeying the fireplace burning restrictions and simply making one change in their daily lives.

Vierra's term as president will be over soon, but he has a six-year term on the air board. He'll be representing our interests in a thoughtful way.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2009:](#)

Voters input needed on amending Measure C

By Mary Savala

Former Fresno City Council Member Brian Calhoun's commentary Nov. 19 begins an important public discussion about amending Measure C.

Measure C is a mix of programs and projects for transit, school bus replacement, fixing local streets and roads, planning and constructing bicycle facilities and trails, funding transit-oriented development, supporting farmworker and commuter van pool and car pool programs, constructing roads and highways, and improving our regional air terminal.

In its first two years, the Measure C sales tax has already pumped millions of dollars into our local economy for the maintenance and improvement of our urban and rural transportation system.

The measure also provides dollars for consolidating the two railroads that run through the heart of the metropolitan area. Voters agreed that \$102.5 million was necessary seed money to correct a dangerous, inefficient railway alignment.

Motorists are familiar with stopping at Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail crossings while long freight trains go by, delaying emergency vehicles as well as buses, commercial vehicles and private passenger cars.

These idling engines release major air pollutants. Residents of quiet Fresno neighborhoods have long been concerned about rail accidents that could dump hazardous materials and gases in their backyards.

Conditions placed on rail consolidation seed money in Measure C require the money be spent for grade-separated rail crossings, similar to that at Marks and Shaw avenues, if federal and state funding cannot be obtained in the next dozen years to begin a consolidation.

Another far-sighted allocation of funding in Measure C is there to address transportation technologies voters couldn't specifically identify 20 years ahead.

Being mindful of how cell phone and computer technologies have become essential to our lives in such a short time, voters approved \$36 million for preparing Fresno County to move ahead with new mobilities in the future. The vision has been of matching these advanced technology funds with private investment for research and development of new transportation technologies here in Fresno County, thereby creating new business and jobs.

Measure C also wisely provides for an amendment process to the expenditure plan should circumstances require adjustments. Such a proposal has recently been made as Fresno looks at the possibility and potential for high-speed rail in the Valley.

Fresno business, government, and private citizens hope the High-Speed Rail Commission will locate the heavy maintenance yard in Fresno for building and maintaining the trains. There is serious competition among Valley communities for locating a maintenance facility. The benefits of the maintenance yard are huge and important to the community where it is located.

Fresno could be a more serious contender for the facility if we can guarantee a good site with the infrastructure necessary for train construction and repairs. A suggestion has been proposed that some money from the Advanced Technology and Rail Consolidation funds be guaranteed for securing the maintenance yard in Fresno.

Amending our Measure C expenditure plan will be a decision of the Council of Fresno County Governments and the Fresno County Transportation Authority. The boards of those agencies are city and county elected officials, with two public members on the FCTA.

The Measure C Citizens Oversight Committee has already looked at a suggestion to amend the expenditure plan, and agreed with member Michael Sigala's recommendation that the policy boards consider all sources for funding a maintenance facility in Fresno, refer the final proposal back to the Oversight Committee, and insure accessible, transparent public hearings on a amendment proposal.

As a matter of fact, public hearings are required prior to decisions to amend. The public should be paying attention to where and when those opportunities to ask questions and make comments will be held.

Now is not too soon to offer comments and ask questions of your local public officials. It's important the decision to amend the expenditure plan come not from the top down, but up from the voters.

Mary Savala is the chair of the Measure C Citizens Oversight Committee and served on the Measure C Extension Steering Committee.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Monday, Nov. 30, 2009:](#)

Real progress possible at climate-change summit

The upcoming climate-change showdown in Copenhagen is shaping up as a test of gamesmanship. Which is better: a Washington pledge to trim emissions slightly at the start, and then more steeply over the following decades? Or China's pledge to promise greater energy efficiency right away even if it remains the No. 1 emitter of carbon dioxide?

The contending claims and the politics behind them are a tangle. But that doesn't mean that next month's Danish conference dubbed "son of Kyoto" can't produce serious results.

President Obama first signaled that a breakthrough was unlikely. But now he plans to attend (while on his way to pick up his Nobel Peace Prize in Norway) and announce a 2020 goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent compared with 2005 levels. This timeline saves the best for last: a reduction of 83 percent by 2050, presumably when green tech gets rolling.

What he's leaving out - and the reason for his earlier caution - is a cross-eyed Congress. The House has passed emission reduction goals in line with his Copenhagen promises. But the Senate hasn't agreed yet, meaning Washington doesn't have his back on a major pledge. With health care soaking up the political oxygen, the final word may not come for months.

China's numbers sound impressive on the surface. The government, which will send Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, is promising a 40 to 45 percent drop in "carbon intensity" by 2020 compared with 2005 levels. It's an impressive-sounding statistic, especially given Beijing's foot-dragging on concessions it fears will undercut surging growth.

But other developed nations have pressed for 50 percent or better. Also, the rarefied term is built around more efficient energy use, which will still allow emissions to grow as the Chinese economy roars along.

With its smokestack industries and coal-fired power system, China passed the United States two years as the top greenhouse-gas emitter.

Copenhagen could sort out the differences. Which big economic power - and that includes India, Brazil, the European Union, South Korea, Indonesia and others in the G-20 cast - will commit first to tough steps that risk domestic blowback? This political gamble was the deal killer for the Kyoto accord in Washington, where an ambitious White House hit the rocks on Capitol Hill.

This time, at least both lead players in Washington and Beijing are bringing up definable steps that each intends to follow. Maybe on the world stage, these countries and their political leaders can be encouraged to go further in the cause of stemming climate change.

[Letters to the San Diego Union-Tribune, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2009:](#)

Air board: shameful or 'most competent'?

I want to commend you on publishing "The air board's shame" (Editorial, Nov. 22). The California Air Resources Board is showing its true colors by hiding the truth that came out about Hien T. Tran, the lead scientist and coordinator of its regulations that "justify" the new stringent diesel regulations that will create severe hardship for every company using diesel engines.

As you point out, instead of getting his doctorate in statistics from the University of California at Davis, he received his degree from a mail-order "university" coming from a UPS office in New York City. And now, as we have seen, board Chairwoman Mary Nichols wants to cover all this up and just go on with the restrictive rules.

Of course, this is the same board that voted Sept. 25 to institute the nation's first "carbon fee" on Californians that will result in higher gasoline prices and higher costs for every project using cement. When energy costs rise, you can put the blame on CARB and the 174 bureaucrats they will be hiring to figure out ways to extract more money from Californians for using energy.

Your editorial criticized the California newspapers and major news outlets for not publishing this, but I haven't seen this on your front page, either. Why is that? While you're at it, why not get our local CARB board member, Ron Roberts, to chime in as to how he apparently is just going on with the sham?

It's time the public saw the real California Air Resources Board and how it operates.

Jim Hancock, El Cajon

Your editorial challenging the California Air Resources Board's integrity is a disservice to victims of air pollution as well as the staff and board of perhaps the premier government agency in the state.

The facts are that a career employee who compiled health assessment information for an important truck and bus regulation falsely claimed to have completed his doctorate from an accredited university – a degree not required of his position. Second, the full board was not advised of this until after the board voted. The regulation is a rule that is designed to slash fine particulate matter that is widely recognized by the scientific community to be a cause of asthma exacerbations, hospitalization for heart and lung problems, and even premature death.

But there was no abuse, manipulation or dishonesty of any type. No one has questioned the accuracy or integrity of the report. After CARB management was made aware of the issue, CARB asked the same group of 10 external experts to reconsider their prior comments in light of this employee's bad judgment. All nine who responded confirmed their original comments on the report.

The employee involved was also subject to a disciplinary proceeding.

Based on the record we have reviewed, there is no evidence to question the regulation, the supporting studies or board ARB management. The board has learned from this unfortunate event by putting in place new safeguards and procedures, committing to verifying academic credentials of new employees, and adopting new protocol to assure that all pertinent information is provided to board members before all votes. As academic scientists who have observed the board from afar for decades and now serve on it, we assert that under the current leadership it is the most effective and competent government agency we have worked with.

John R. Balmes, M.D., California Air Resources Board Member
Daniel Sperling, Ph.D., Board Member