It's clear: The Bay isn't as murky

By Mike Taugher
In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Monday, October 5, 2009

After more than a century of being murky from enough Gold Rush-era mining sediment to fill 60 Superdomes, researchers say, the Bay suddenly crossed a profound threshold 10 years ago and became much clearer.

"The conditions in the water "... changed dramatically," said Dave Schoellhamer, a U.S. Geological Survey research hydrologist who made the finding. "We crossed a tipping point."

The finding brings both good news and bad, as well as unknowns for scientists to investigate.

On the "good news" side, ports probably will have to do less dredging to maintain shipping channels, and the increasingly clear water means sunlight can penetrate deeper and cause more phytoplankton to bloom, which could increase the amount of life in the Bay.

On the "bad news" side, too much phytoplankton could deplete the Bay's dissolved oxygen and kill fish.

That could place more attention on discharges from the Bay Area's sewer treatment plants and other pollution sources as nutrients become a more important factor in determining the amount of phytoplankton in the Bay, researchers said.
The change also means less sediment is available to deposit on the Bay's shores to rebuild and maintain wetlands.

Beginning in 1999, the amount of suspended sediment suddenly dropped by about one-third, Schoellhamer said. It took several years of data to convince colleagues the change was not due to random fluctuation.

The change, Schoellhamer said, occurred because the fine sediments in the Bay essentially were exhausted. Mining sediment, particularly heavy sediment, remains, but by 1999 there no longer was enough fine sediment to put into the water all the muck it can carry.

The result: Sunlight can penetrate deeper into the Bay, and that set off a host of ecological changes.

Around the world, estuaries frequently are damaged by low dissolved oxygen levels, and the Bay has a nutrient load similar to that in some of those estuaries, one researcher said.

"Our nutrient concentrations are not much lower than other estuaries around the world," said Jay Davis, senior scientist at the San Francisco Estuary Institute, which published the findings in its annual report on water quality in the Bay and in the Delta. "Since the water has not been that clear, we haven't had algae problems."

With more sunlight entering the Bay, the control of phytoplankton will depend on controlling nutrients in the water, researchers said. And that could focus more attention on discharges from the Bay Area's sewage treatment plants. Fertilizers from suburban lawns, farms, pet feces and phosphates in detergents also are nutrient sources.

From the mid- to late 1800s, hydraulic miners who blasted the flanks of Sierra Nevada mountains moved massive amounts of sediment — the estuary institute's annual report, released today, says enough sediment to fill 60 Superdomes was deposited in the Bay and Delta by the mining.

The sediment was tainted in many cases with mercury that was used to extract gold from rock.

To this day, the mercury from those mining activities and Coast Range mercury mines, industry and air pollution of coal-fired powers in Asia and elsewhere, resides in Bay and Delta fish, so much so that health advisories are in effect to limit consumption of such fish.

The new findings could have an effect on mercury pollution, but that is unclear. Davis said the increased sunlight penetration might break down the dangerous form of mercury, methylmercury, into its less dangerous elemental form.

The new findings are in the estuary institute's "Pulse of the Estuary," which focuses on water quality data gathered since the early 1990s. Schoellhamer and Davis said without the extensive data-gathering effort it is unlikely the change in the Bay's clarity would have been noticed and confirmed anytime soon.

"We never anticipated there would be an abrupt change in concentrations," Davis said.

It points to new questions. How much clearer will the Bay become? Is the Bay at risk of losing too much dissolved oxygen?

And will the loss of sediment reduce the threat of mercury pollution?

"These findings will force us to re-evaluate that," Davis said.

Carbon storage new factor for timber

By John Holland and Jim Downing
Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, October 4, 2009

About 20,000 acres of Tuolumne County timber are part of an effort to capture some of the carbon dioxide believed to be changing the climate.

Sierra Pacific Industries, a major lumber producer, announced last week that it will manage the land in a way that increases carbon stored in trees over the next 100 years.

The goal is to keep the gas from wafting into the atmosphere, where it could trap the sun's heat and warm the planet.

The people involved said it is the largest such effort on U.S. timberland.

The announcement came a week after the California Air Resources Board approved rules for quantifying how trees store carbon during growth and release it via fires or decay.

The timber industry supports the rules because they allow continued logging. Advocates say removing some of the trees in dense stands provides more room for growth of young trees, which absorb carbon especially fast. The thinning also can reduce the chance of major fires, which spew carbon-laced smoke into the sky.

"This project demonstrates the utility of California's new forestry protocol and recognizes the value of working forests in meeting the state's climate change goals and ecosystem sustainability," said Mark Emmerson, chief financial officer at Sierra Pacific.

The company, based near Redding, plans to apply the approach to about 60,000 of its 1.9 million acres. This includes about a quarter of its Tuolumne County holdings, most of it near Calaveras Big Trees State Park.

The plan drew criticism from some environmentalists because it allows clearcutting on some of the acreage.

"This is the thing we were worried about," said Michael Endicott, resource sustainability advocate at Sierra Club California.

Clearcutting fits the state rules if forest managers can show that it is an improvement over how the land would have been managed otherwise. For instance, a forest in an area that has been cleared every 40 years might instead be allowed to grow for 80 years before logging, a cycle that would likely store more carbon.

The rules allow clearcutting on only part of each creek or river watershed.

The Nature Conservancy supports the rules as a balancing between protecting the land and making the program attractive to owners.

"There's a fine line with how far you should go with additional (environmental) requirements," said Michelle Passero, the group's senior climate policy adviser, who helped craft the rules.

Gov. Schwarzenegger praised the Sierra Pacific plan during a climate change summit in Los Angeles last week.

The carbon flows on Sierra Pacific land will be monitored by Equator LLC, a company based in New York City.

The added carbon storage over the first five years is estimated at 1.5 million tons, equivalent to taking 300,000 cars off the road for a year.

Forest conifers absorb carbon dioxide through their needles as they grow, storing the carbon in the trunk and roots.

The new state rules account for this storage and for the carbon captured in lumber, furniture and other long-lived wood products.

The rules also account for decreases in carbon storage because of fire, insect infestations or other causes. The total carbon might drop temporarily after logging, but a net gain is required over a century.

"We can still manage our forests, but we have to meet or exceed the baseline conditions," said Mark Pawlicki, a spokesman for Sierra Pacific.

The company has a sawmill in Chinese Camp that makes cedar fencing. It closed its nearly century-old mill in Standard in August because of poor housing demand and limits on logging.

After a Devastating Fire, an Intense Study of Its Effects

By Randal C. Archibold, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Friday, Oct. 2, 2009

ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST, Calif. — The Station fire, which in over a month has burned away nearly a quarter of this vast, mountainous backdrop to the Los Angeles skyline, is finally just about out, sending all but a handful of firefighters home. Now, the scientists swoop in.

Adam Backlin and Liz Gallegos, federal biologists, stood thigh-deep in a stream last week, sweeping a large net over and over like frustrated anglers to collect Santa Ana speckled dace fish as part of research on the damaging effects of fire on fragile wildlife.

Earlier, another biologist, Diana Papoulias, hauled out centrifuges, dry ice, syringes and other equipment to perform autopsies on fish, delving deeper into the role that heat, fire retardant and debris in the water may have played in their demise.

And Todd M. Hoefen, a geophysicist, scooped up white and black ash as part of research to analyze “the impact of it, what blows out of these fires and what are people breathing.”

Fire, typically touched off by lightning strikes, has always been part of the life cycle of the wilderness here and elsewhere, to a large degree crucial to regenerating it. Most wildlife and landscape eventually come back.

But with the increasing frequency and size of fires — 7 of the state’s 10 largest wildfires have occurred in the last six years, and most were caused by people — scientists are intensifying study of the environmental aftermath of the changing burn pattern.

“Fire dynamics have changed a lot, and urbanization has fragmented the landscape,” said Robert N. Fisher, a biologist with the United States Geological Survey, which has coordinated a team to take a closer look at this fire and other recent ones. “We have to figure out a way to give animals a way to persist in a way they did before in a landscape that is burning too fast and too much.”

This week, Mr. Fisher coordinated an unusual evacuation of sorts. A multiagency team of state and federal forest and wildlife representatives removed a colony of mountain yellow-legged tadpoles, endangered in Southern California, from a tributary of the San Gabriel River before rock and debris unleashed by fall and winter rains imperil their creekside habitat.

The tadpoles were taken to the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, where they will be raised, with the young spawned there eventually returned to the wild.

But such maneuvers represent the extreme. Much of the scientists' work is intended to provide a better understanding of the ecological aftermath of fires, particularly those in areas where development meets wilderness and threatened and endangered species are present.

Scott L. Stephens, a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, and president of the Association for Fire Ecology, said the Station fire work coincided with a burst of fire science research in recent years designed to answer questions not only about what happens during and after fires but also about the effect climate change and drought may be having on forests and scrubland in high-burn areas.

Underlying much of the interest, Dr. Stephens said, are questions like these: "Are there things we can do to mitigate fire? Are there things managers can do to reduce their impact?"

The Station fire, which was named for its start on Aug. 26 near a ranger station, has destroyed several dozen homes and caused the deaths of two Los Angeles County firefighters. It ranks as the largest fire in the modern history of Los Angeles County. It has burned more than 160,000 acres, or 250 square miles, an area nearly the size of Chicago, and has cut off access to one of Los Angeles's most popular wilderness getaways, about 20 miles north of downtown.

But the fire may be best remembered for the towering, thundercloud-like plume that loomed for days over the city.

Just what happened to all that ash and how thousands of gallons of fire retardant sprayed on the forest is affecting its creatures is now the focus of much investigation.

Much of the work requires painstaking field research in the deepest reaches of craggy forest.

On a recent afternoon, in the moonscape of the "burn scar," Mr. Backlin and Ms. Gallegos bounced in a truck along trails and hopped out at the edge of a creek for an afternoon of "fishing."

With a Forest Service fire truck parked nearby and water-dropping helicopters dashing overhead to hit the last smoldering hot spots, the two cast a literal wide net in an effort to collect small, finger-length speckled daces.

"We're on fire now," Mr. Backlin exulted, after several previous efforts turned up nothing but trout and water bugs.

"When the winter rains come, we won't have any idea what these fish were like if they are washed away," he said, tossing a few more into a collection bucket.

Later, the two biologists sat in the dirt and measured the specimens, euthanized them and placed them in jars to take back to the laboratory for autopsies.

DNA samples were taken, their internal organs analyzed and other tests performed to assess their overall health and the presence of toxins.

With Forest Service officials already warning that heavy rains could produce severe mudslides because so much vegetation holding the soil in place has burned away, scientists worry about the consequences, particularly to aquatic creatures.

Cascading rock and debris can turn streams into roiling, concrete-like concoctions, burying or shredding all manner of aquatic life, Mr. Fisher said.

Another group of scientists from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Arizona State University and the California Institute of Technology plan to take detailed, high-resolution aerial photographs of the burn in the coming days as part of research on erosion and the movement of sediment in the mountains.

"Fire changes a lot of dynamics and releases a lot of sediment," said Todd Farr, a geologist with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, whose offices in La Cañada Flintridge abut the forest.

But even without the rain, the fires created a threat.

Already, scientists have found that ash particles in the streams can shred the fish's gills and drive up the water's alkalinity, possibly affecting reproduction and setting the stage for die-offs.

A research ecologist, Edward E. Little, said soil and water samples reddened by retardant were being analyzed to determine toxicity to fish and amphibians, among the creatures most susceptible to environmental changes.

Similar work has been done after fires in Colorado and Idaho, Dr. Little said, but "the interesting thing about the Station fire is it is such a different kind of fire than we have visited, in terms of devastation of vegetation in the area."

Mr. Hoefen, who also helped analyze ash from the World Trade Center collapse, said ash samples had shown elevated levels of minerals that could be the result of what the burned plants had absorbed from the soil or air pollution. They mirror findings from devastating fires in San Diego in 2007, he said, though additional research is needed to pinpoint how harmful the ash could be to human health and the environment.

With rains expected to wash much of the ash into the watershed, Mr. Hoefen said, the quality of rivers, streams and reservoirs could be affected.

"Hopefully, our science will start to show people that it is not just fire, but there could be problems for the frogs, fish and the runoff," Mr. Hoefen said. "Wind and rain blowing the ash into streams and ponds could have an effect after the fire."

Think globally, act locally

Mayors move on climate change

By Kim Murphy, staff writer
L.A. Times news blog, Sat., Oct. 3, 2009

In a new report on efforts by U.S. cities to outdo the federal government on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels admits that even the early strides made by Seattle -- reducing the city's 1990 carbon footprint by 8% in 2005 -- don't allow the city to rest on its laurels. Today's gains could be tomorrow's losses. Real measures to slow the warming of the planet will take patience, persistence and a determination to press on despite setbacks.

"I'm a realist, and I see Seattle's population growing, so I know we're going to have to increase our environmental vigilance in the coming years in order to stay on track and reach our climate protection goals," said Nickels, who announced that 1,000 mayors have signed on to the U.S. Conference of Mayors initiative to unilaterally limit their own greenhouse gas emissions.

"I also know that this generation, which is showing such a bold willingness to shed old behaviors and habits in the name of climate protection, won't come up with all the answers and won't make the atmosphere a pure place any time soon," he added. "But with each passing decade, we'll make more and more progress greening our cities ... and nobody will forget that all this started because 1,000 courageous and broad-minded mayors thought of the Earth as well as their neighborhood turf at the same time."

The report on the program so far outlines what cities across the country are doing to transition to cleaner fuels, phase in lower-energy lighting, synchronize traffic lights to keep traffic moving more quickly and cleanly and raise energy-efficiency standards for new construction.

"The city of Los Angeles has the largest carbon emissions output of any city in the state of California, which has the largest carbon footprint of any state in the U.S., which has the largest carbon footprint of any country in the world," Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said in the profile on Los Angeles, which has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 35% below 1990 levels by the year 2030.

Vegas on the Water

A ship so big it has seven neighborhoods, four pools, an amphitheater and more. Who needs to go ashore?

By Philip P. Pan, Washington Post Foreign Service
Washington Post, Sunday, October 4, 2009

There's a story about a grizzled foreign correspondent in Asia who once was taken to task over a taxi fare on an expense report. He defended it as routine, but the accountants pointed out that he'd been reporting from an aircraft carrier at sea on the day in question. Without missing a beat, the correspondent growled, "Well, do you know how big those things are?"

I couldn't help thinking of that joke while in Finland last week, touring Royal Caribbean International's new Oasis of the Seas, a ship that eclipses the U.S. Navy's Nimitz-class supercarriers and will be the world's largest cruise liner when it makes its much-anticipated maiden voyage in December. As I stood in the bow, it didn't seem completely unreasonable to take a taxi to the stern, almost a quarter-mile away. In fact, the meter in a D.C. cab would charge 25 cents for the distance.

Under construction in the quaint port town of Turku since 2006, the Oasis of the Seas is longer, taller, wider, heavier and more expensive than any other passenger ship ever built. It's five times the size of the Titanic and more than half again as large as the mammoth Queen Mary 2. A piece of it will have to be retracted just so it can squeeze under a bridge and make it out to the Atlantic. On its 18 decks, a crew of 2,165 will tend to as many as 6,296 paying customers, nearly 45 percent more than the largest cruise ships now operating, the Freedom-class vessels launched by Royal Caribbean three years ago.

But the Oasis of the Seas isn't just a jumbo version of its predecessors. More important than its staggering size is what its designers have done with the extra space: filled it with attractions never before seen on a cruise ship, including an open-air park with trees and hanging gardens, a boardwalk-style area with a merry-go-round, a pool that changes into a stage for high-diving shows and a theater that has booked the Broadway musical "Hairspray."

In short, Royal Caribbean has created a Las Vegas resort that floats -- yes, there's a casino, too -- and the closest thing in real life to the Buy n Large luxury spaceships in "WALL-E," where humans spend the centuries getting fat after mass consumerism has left the Earth a polluted mess.

In fact, the ship -- built at a cost of $1.4 billion, most of it borrowed money -- represents a huge gamble that mass consumerism is alive and well, the state of the global economy and environment notwithstanding. Royal Caribbean's chairman, Richard Fain, is betting that the Oasis will defy the recession and expand the industry's market by bringing in what he describes on his blog as the "poor souls" who are the "most die-hard cruise resisters." In fact, he's doubling down: A sister ship of the same size, the Allure of the Seas, is under construction in Turku and scheduled to set sail next year.

Wall Street has been skeptical, and some cruising enthusiasts have voiced concern as well, complaining that the Oasis will be too crowded, that its prices are too high, and that all the onboard amenities will ruin the magic of an intimate journey on the open seas to an exotic destination.

But Paul Motter, editor of the enthusiast Web site Cruisemates, predicted that the Oasis of the Seas, love it or hate it, will do for cruise ships what Disneyland did for amusement parks. "The image of cruising is about to change forever," he said. "I think it's going to be the first ship where people truly book just for the ship and hardly care where it goes."

Viewed up close from the outside, the ship doesn't seem like an industry game-changer. It looks instead as if someone decided to stack an ugly, imposing chunk of the Crystal City Hilton or the Watergate on the keel. But step aboard, and it immediately feels different.

Raimund Gschaider, the Oasis hotel director, took me through the vessel's belly and then up to Deck 5, where arriving guests will get their first glimpse of the inside. The ship was already in the

water and had completed its first sea trial, but it was still littered with scaffolding, tools and building materials and buzzing with thousands of workers trying to finish the interior.

Even with the clutter, though, it was clear that coming aboard the Oasis would be less like climbing onto a boat than like walking up the concourse of a fancy sports stadium. Instead of placing a block of cabins in the middle of the ship, the builders have stacked the rooms on either side, a radical innovation that left an airy, glass-enclosed atrium longer than a football field at the core.

Gschaider called it the Royal Promenade and pointed out stores, restaurants and the first cupcake shop at sea. I told him it felt like a nice shopping mall. "It's a shame you've never been on a cruise; then you'd understand how different this is," he replied, noting that only a few ships in the world have a space like this, and that the one on the Oasis is twice as wide as the largest out there now.

It was clear that Gschaider viewed me as a challenge, a member of the Oasis target market, those "poor souls" who have never found the idea of taking a cruise appealing. Determined to impress, he led me up a few decks to the area dubbed Central Park. (There's a small bar and lounge on a platform that moves up and down between the decks, but we took the stairs.) Now we were standing under the sun in what felt like a plaza between two small apartment buildings, actually walls lined with cabin balconies.

Gschaider pointed out art galleries and restaurants, and told me that when the ship arrives in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., at the end of the month, more than 2,000 plants will be installed on the deck. "Imagine sitting here under the sky, amid the bushes and trees, with the light breeze of the Caribbean, enjoying your steak," he said.

But he wasn't done. The Promenade and Central Park are just two of seven "neighborhoods" on the Oasis. Two decks down and toward the stern is the open-air Boardwalk, complete with faux wood tiles, leading to a high-diving pool at the end of the ship. From the amphitheater-style seats, 600 guests can watch acrobatics and synchronized swimming with the ocean as a backdrop.

Nine decks up, atop the roofs of the cabins, is the Sports Zone, which might be described as a more traditional cruise ship's outdoor space if weren't for the size. I counted four swimming pools, two rock-climbing walls, a miniature-golf course, a jogging track, a basketball court, two water rides that simulate surfing, and a zip line you can buckle yourself into and glide along over the Boardwalk far below. Nearby are the luxury lofts, penthouses with a view of the sea that sell for as much as $34,000 per week.

And somehow, below deck, the architects also managed to squeeze in a big children's play area, a sizable gym and spa, and an entertainment section with a theater, ice rink, casino, comedy stage and several nightclubs. I was getting lost -- the ship's 38,000 signs had yet to go up -- and Gschaider was wearing me down. I kept thinking, "This is cheesy, but it might be fun with my 2-year-old."

Carolyn Spencer Brown, the editor of the online site Cruise Critic, thinks the designers managed to make the ship feel both spacious and cozy. "I remember walking around it and forgetting I was on a cruise ship," she said in a phone interview. "The design is interesting because it tries to move people to every corner, with these separate, smaller areas."

Part of the appeal, I realized, lies in the knowledge that you're not just in a resort but also in a marvel of engineering, an enormous, seaworthy craft that can cruise through the ocean at a speed of 22 knots. From the stern, I could see its half-completed sister ship nearby in drydock and look down into its mechanical guts. The ships are too big to be built the traditional way, from the bottom up, a deck at a time. Instead, pieces as large as buildings are finished on shore, then hoisted into place and welded together like so many Lego blocks. The Oasis took 181 blocks, each weighing about 600 tons.

Tor Olsen, one of the ship's captains, could barely contain his excitement as he showed off a high-tech bridge full of keyboards, joysticks and computer screens. (Uh-oh, they're using Microsoft Windows.) Suddenly, I realized that we hadn't talked about the destinations, the stops

in St. Thomas, St. Maarten and the Bahamas, where harbors have been modified to accommodate the enormous ship.

"Our hope, of course, is that people don't get off, because this ship itself is the destination," Olsen said. "This is better than a lot of the islands."

But if the port calls don't matter, then why take a cruise at all? Why not just go to a resort in Las Vegas? "This is better than Vegas," Gschaider insisted.

Later, I spoke with Royal Caribbean president Adam Goldstein. "The challenge for our brand and for cruise in general is to fight for market share with land-based vacation options for all the consumer vacation dollars," he told me. He said the Oasis was critical to the strategy, because the vast variety of options it offers will destroy the popular myths that there's nothing to do on a cruise ship, or that cruises are only for older people. Asked about sales so far, he would say only that the company is "pleased" with how they're going.

Royal Caribbean is also hoping that the Oasis will be able to command a big price premium, perhaps double the $499 that other ships charge for a seven-night cruise. But even at a higher price, Goldstein argued, the ship will be a bargain because it offers so much.

The cruise-resister in me still had concerns. How would it feel to be trapped on a boat with so many people? Gschaider said the Oasis is so big that there's more space per passenger than on other ships, and it will feel less crowded.

And what damage would such a big ship do to the environment? Goldstein pointed out that the Oasis is equipped with the most advanced wastewater purification systems and technology, which makes it much more energy efficient. But environmentalists say that it doesn't do enough to reduce air pollution, and that a cruise ship will always burn more fuel than a land resort.

This poor soul was torn, but beginning to wonder if he could put a ticket on an expense report.

Texas cement plant pulls tire-burning request

By John McFarland, Associated Press Writer
In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Saturday, October 3, 2009

DALLAS—A cement factory near Dallas has withdrawn its state request to burn about 145 million pounds of old tires a year, citing a federal crackdown on the Texas air pollution permitting process.

Texas Industries Inc. spokesman David Perkins said Friday that the company scrapped the plan in part because it applied for a type of permit that the Environmental Protection Agency last month ruled was not in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

The company planned to use old tires as fuel at its plant in Midlothian, one of three area plants that make up the nation's largest concentration of cement factories. Perkins said the plan would have been beneficial because tires burn cheaper and cleaner than coal and need to be disposed of somehow.

Environmental groups, elected officials and residents lobbied the EPA to halt the permit, arguing it would allow more toxins to be released into the air. The company withdrew the permit Tuesday, but Perkins said it hopes to revive the project.

The plants produce 6 million tons of cement a year. According to the most recent EPA statistics, the plants in 2007 emitted about 300 tons of sulfuric acid, nearly 20 tons of benzene, and smaller amounts of mercury, chromium, manganese and other chemicals.

"They have over the years burned a lot of hazardous waste that should not have been burned," said state Rep. Lon Burnam, D-Fort Worth, who wrote to the EPA on behalf of his district that's downwind from Midlothian.

"Almost everybody knows you should not be burning tires and putting it into the air we breathe."

The Dallas-Fort Worth area hasn't been within federal ozone pollution limits since they were set in 1990, and environmentalists say the cement plants are a huge reason. The TXI plant is the biggest polluter of the plants and the only one permitted to burn hazardous material.

Perkins acknowledged that changes were occurring in air pollution regulations, but said the company believes "this process will withstand these reviews."

Jeff Robinson, chief of the EPA's air permits section for the region that includes the Dallas area, said the EPA reviewed the permit after it was withdrawn and found significant problems.

Among the chief concerns was the use of one of the types of permits the EPA said on Sept. 8 should be thrown out. Robinson said officials also were worried that the plant might emit more ozone-causing nitrogen oxide and toxic sulfuric acid.

The concerns were outlined in a letter to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality on Wednesday.

Steve Hagle, director of the TCEQ's air permits division, said the state told TXI its permit did not meet standards before it was withdrawn.

While states have leeway in enforcing the Clean Air Act, Texas and the EPA have for years disagreed on how best to do that. TCEQ maintains its programs are in compliance, but the EPA's rejection of several key aspects of the state's permitting program becomes official after a 60-day comment period.

Environmentalists have for years claimed the pollution permitting process is just a formality in the business-friendly state, and some credited the EPA's scrutiny with TXI's decision to withdraw the permit. They said the EPA decision will help fight a process that Gov. Rick Perry hasn't addressed.

"We now have an effective counterweight to Rick Perry's 'no questions asked' approach to letting industry pollute the air," Jim Schermbeck, director of the cement plant watchdog group Downwinders At Risk.

TCEQ's three commissioners are appointed by the governor and have approved 97 percent of the air permits they vote on, but most permits are rejected before the commissioners hear them, according to the agency. Perry's office has deflected such criticism, saying he merely appoints qualified people bound by law to fulfill their duties.

Midlothian is a town of about 16,000 just south of Dallas. The factories have 10 huge kilns that fire cement at temperatures up to 2,800 degrees.

Best, Green Intentions . . .

By Pat Mertz Esswein, Kiplinger's Personal Finance
Washington Post, Sunday, October 4, 2009

If you're like most people, you're more than happy to buy green -- as long as it also saves greenbacks. A recent study by the Shelton Group found that people who buy eco-friendly products at least occasionally are more interested in spending their money wisely than in improving the environment.

To that end, here are 10 oft-cited green myths and the truth behind them -- plus how much money you may be burning by buying into them.

Myth

Never leave the lights on when you leave a room.

Reality

Mom had it right when it comes to incandescent bulbs, but she'd be wrong about today's compact fluorescent lights. The more often you switch CFLs on and off, the shorter their operating life. In most parts of the country, it's cheaper to leave fluorescents on if you'll only be out of the room for

15 minutes or less, according to the Energy Department (www.energysavers.gov). In areas with high electric rates or during peak demand periods, the length of time may shorten to 5 minutes. On average, a CFL bulb costs $2.50 more than an incandescent bulb, but it will save $5.41 annually on your electric bill compared with an incandescent, according to the Energy Department.

If you haven't converted to CFLs because you fear pollution from the mercury they contain, keep in mind that generating electricity is the main source of U.S. mercury emissions. A 60-watt light bulb will use 480 kilowatt hours of electricity and contribute almost 6 milligrams of mercury to the environment over its lifetime, according to Energy Star. A CFL will use less than a fourth of the electricity and result in a third of the mercury emissions. For more information on properly disposing of CFLs, visit http://www.energystar.gov/cfls.

Myth

You can trust product labels that say "green," "eco-friendly," "earth smart" and the like.

Reality

The green-washing machine loves to crank out vague marketing terms, and the Federal Trade Commission has begun to crack down on environmental claims that fail the regulatory smell test (visit www.ftc.gov and search "Sorting Out Green Advertising Claims"). Manufacturers have begun to improve the labeling, consumer information and advice on their Web sites, including lists and definitions of ingredients. Also look for the EPA's Design for the Environment label.

Myth

Switching to solar is a great way to achieve energy savings.

Reality

Solar systems, even with government incentives, are expensive. The owner of a typical single-family home in the United States wastes almost $350 annually on heated or cooled air that escapes to the outdoors. So for most houses in most places, the first line of defense is to reduce demand, says Bruce Harley, author of "Cut Your Energy Bills Now." That means tightening up the house and its ductwork, improving insulation, switching to CFLs, upgrading appliances and changing your behavior. After that, if you still want to go solar, you may be able to make do with a smaller system that costs less. For example, instead of a 4-kilowatt photovoltaic system (the size recommended for the average home) -- which would cost $16,800 installed after an average state-tax incentive of 25 percent and the federal discount of 30 percent -- you might get by with a 2-kilowatt system, which would cost $8,400.

Myth

Energy savings (and tax credits) will eventually pay for replacement windows.

Reality

True, windows are a big energy waster, but you probably have bigger fish to fry. The average cost to replace a window with a high-efficiency model is $300 to $700, and another 50 to 100 percent if you must replace a rotten or damaged frame, according to http://www.CostHelper.com. Through 2010, you can get a tax credit for 30 percent of your cost, up to $1,500, for super-efficient windows (many that are currently Energy Star-approved don't qualify). Many older homes don't have huge amounts of window area, and newer houses tend to have more energy-efficient windows that meet existing standards for Energy Star labeling. If you still want to upgrade your windows, you may wait until products meeting new and more rigorous Energy Star standards reach the market in April 2010.

Myth

"Biodegradable" products that return to their natural state save landfill space.

Reality

Modern landfills are designed to keep out sunlight, air and moisture to prevent air and water pollution, thus inhibiting degradation. The FTC's definition of a biodegradable product is one that will completely decompose within a reasonably short time under customary methods of disposal. Because most landfill garbage won't pass that test, you're better off reducing your contribution to solid waste (according to the EPA, the average American generates almost five pounds of garbage a day). At the store, look for a claim of "post-consumer recycled" content, then recycle what you can. Also use sites such as Freecycle.org instead of hauling reusable stuff to the dump.

Myth

You'll recoup the higher price you pay for a hybrid car in savings at the pump.

Reality

You may not earn back the $3,000-plus premium you'll pay for a hybrid with savings at the gas pump. Hybrids always run cleaner than gasoline-fueled engines, but they only make financial sense when gas prices are high, you drive a lot and you plan to keep the vehicle for, say, five or more years. (Use our hybrid calculator to compare the ownership costs of a hybrid versus gas-powered vehicle.) Paying the hybrid premium might be worth it as an insurance policy against higher gas prices in the future, says Bradley Berman, editor of HybridCars.com.

Myth

It's worth paying 20 to 40 percent extra to buy organic because the food is healthier.

Reality

A recent and hotly debated British study asserts that organic food is no more nutritious than conventionally grown food. But this isn't an all-or-nothing issue: If you want to minimize your exposure to pesticides and save money on organics, too, spring for the organic label only on the Environmental Working Group's "dirty dozen" -- fruits and vegetables that carry the most pesticide residue. They are (from most to least residue): peaches, apples, sweet bell peppers, celery, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, kale, lettuce, grapes (imported), carrots and pears. The clean 15 (from least to most residue) include onions, avocados, sweet corn (frozen), pineapples, mangos, asparagus, sweet peas (frozen), kiwi fruit, cabbages, eggplants, papayas, watermelons, broccoli, tomatoes and sweet potatoes.

Myth

You can reduce your carbon footprint by eating locally grown foods.

Reality

While locavores often cite "food miles" -- that is, the distance food is shipped to market -- as a reason to eat local, Christopher L. Weber and H. Scott Matthews, professors at Carnegie Mellon University, say that transportation accounts for only 11 percent of total greenhouse-gas emissions associated with food, while 83 percent is related to production. Produce grown close to home may be fresher and taste better. But food grown where conditions are most auspicious will require less fertilizer, pesticides, labor and investment in tools, says Art Carden, who teaches economics at Rhodes College in Memphis. If you really want to reduce the carbon footprint of your diet, cut back on consumption of red meat, which Weber and Matthews say is responsible for producing 150 percent more greenhouse gases than chicken or fish.

Myth

You can neutralize your personal share of greenhouse-gas emissions by buying carbon offsets.

Reality

Measuring your carbon emissions is a squishy science, and measuring the offsets is even squishier. For example, Carbonfund.org sets the cost to offset an airline trip cross-country (round-trip) at $8.92 for .0.89 tons of fumes. Sustainable Travel International charges $45.34 for 1.8 tons. (The price of a carbon offset can vary from $5 to $25 per ton on average. Clean Air-Cool Planet, a nonprofit devoted to climate-science education, says that it's impossible to prove that buying

offsets will "render purchasers carbon neutral." There's no clear standard in use for certifying offsets, although the FTC is investigating the issue. For further guidance, read "A Consumer's Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers" Cleanair-coolplanet.org. Also check the fine print on sellers' Web sites to see whether the criteria for selecting projects are explained and the benefits quantified.

Myth

New homes are more energy-efficient than older homes.

Reality

Homes built over the past decade or so gobble about as much energy as homes built decades ago. That's because newer homes are bigger, more architecturally complex and full of energy-hogging electronics, says Harley, the author of Cut Your Energy Bills Now. Even a new-home owner will benefit from paying for an energy audit and following through on its recommendations. According to the Home Performance with Energy Star program http://www.energystar.gov, improving energy efficiency will produce utility-bill savings of 20 percent or more.

Hurdles Remain on Climate Change Goals

By Juliet Eilperin, Staff Writer
Washington Post, Monday, October 5, 2009

Like most members of President Obama's climate team, David Sandalow was one of President Bill Clinton's negotiators in Kyoto. And he carries an indelible lesson from the experience of signing off on the international climate pact there 12 years ago: "Only agree abroad to what you can implement at home."

He had been elated at the deal by more than 180 nations in December 1997. But within months, a television ad appeared, decrying the agreement for not including developing nations such as China and India. "It's not global and it won't work," said the ad, which was sponsored by business groups including the American Association of Automobile Manufacturers and the American Petroleum Institute. It captured the growing discontent in the United States over the Clinton administration's signing off on a package that did not force similar cuts by major developing countries.

That political backlash is one of several reasons why any deal struck two months from now in Copenhagen will at best signal the start of a new global approach to tackling climate change, rather than its successful conclusion.

Kyoto's legacy -- including the decision to exclude major developing countries from the agreement, the failure of the United States to ratify it and the fact that many of its signatories have missed their emissions targets -- continues to dominate U.N. talks aimed at curbing the world's greenhouse gas output. It has made the United States more cautious about defining specific reductions, made other industrialized nations skeptical of the U.S. commitment and made developing countries more insistent on getting money from rich nations to address their problems.

"If we have any kind of international agreement in Copenhagen, there will have to be some accommodation of American political realities, but you have to meet a number of political realities on the other side," said Melinda Kimble, senior vice president of the U.N. Foundation and a lead negotiator for the State Department when Kyoto was forged.

These realities have made it harder for most of the key countries, whose representatives have been meeting in Bangkok, to reach an agreement by December, especially one that involves a massive shift of their nation's economic trajectories for the sake of a long-term reward. Even the Japanese have proposed abandoning the Kyoto agreement for a completely new structure.

"The Kyoto Protocol is a very historic protocol," said Kenichi Kobayashi, who directs the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' climate change division. "But now the situation has greatly changed in the last 10 years."

The biggest change is that developing countries such as China, India and Brazil -- none of which are bound to specific climate targets under Kyoto, and continue to say they will not embrace them as part of an international treaty -- are much bigger carbon emitters than they used to be. China has surpassed the United States as the world's largest emitter, according to the International Energy Agency, with the two nations accounting for about 40 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

The agency said that 97 percent of the rise in energy-related carbon dioxide emissions will come from developing nations by 2030. That makes centrist Democrats such as Sen. Evan Bayh (Ind.) hesitate at the idea of backing mandatory curbs on U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. "I could not ask the American people to sacrifice and not solve the problem of global warming because the developing world was not participating," he said in an interview.

But Jairam Ramesh, India's minister of state for environment and forests, told reporters Friday that America's near-term climate targets remain too modest. "The stalemate in negotiations has not been caused by China and India," Ramesh said. "The make-or-break issue is emissions cuts. If there's no agreement on that, there's no agreement in Copenhagen."

Todd Stern, the U.S. special envoy for climate change, said he is focused on achieving "the art of the possible. . . . The task here is to get a deal consistent with those [constraints], which pushes us in the right direction."

In some ways the political climate has loosened the Obama's administration's constraints in recent months. Major U.S. companies such as Wal-Mart, General Electric and even utilities such as American Electric Power now back a federal cap on greenhouse gases, and the combination of the House-passed climate bill and legislation introduced last week by Democratic Sens. John F. Kerry (Mass.) and Barbara Boxer (Calif.) suggest that the president could meet his much-publicized goal of reducing the nation's emissions to their 1990 levels by 2020.

Several environmentalists say U.S. negotiators have been too hesitant to use provisions in the House bill -- such as its emissions targets and funding to help poor countries preserve their forests and cope with climate effects -- to lay the groundwork for a global deal.

"The ghost of Kyoto hangs over the U.S. more than it does over most nations," said Ned Helme, who heads the Center for Clean Air Policy. "I think we could be a bit bolder now because we have a good story to tell internationally."

But on Friday, Obama's top domestic climate adviser, Carol Browner, said it was "not likely" that a final bill would be signed by the president before Copenhagen. Stern is unwilling to codify targets internationally that the United States has yet to adopt.

"It's very difficult to do that right now if you have your eye on the prize, which is getting a good piece of legislation signed into law by the president," said Stern, who was in Kyoto as a White House staffer 12 years ago.

Instead U.S. negotiators, as well as ones like India's Ramesh, are exploring whether the world's major emitters could forge a pact that encompasses nationally binding goals and is subject -- at least to some extent -- to international review. James L. Connaughton, who chaired President Bush's Council on Environmental Quality, said the outcome in Copenhagen could resemble what Bush and his top deputies had sought for years.

"What countries came to realize after Kyoto was it was hugely problematic to have international environmental negotiations establishing domestic economic and energy policy without first forging a domestic consensus," said Connaughton, Constellation Energy's executive vice president for corporate affairs, public and environmental policy.

"What all major economies realized this time around is that they need to establish a domestic consensus on an agreed level of effort as a stronger basis for the commitments they make internationally, and as a catalyst for international cooperation."

At least this time, the White House might not face the same sort of attack ads. William O'Keefe, who now serves as chief executive of the libertarian George C. Marshall Institute and helped

keep the anti-Kyoto ads on air in 1998, said he would probably accept a global pact that "pays allegiance to Kyoto but is much more flexible and focused on objectives" rather that one with specific emissions targets.

"If that happened, that would be a big step forward," O'Keefe said.

Chilly reception for theory on global warming

By David A. Fahrenthold, Washington Post
In the S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, Oct. 4, 2009

Has climate change been around as long as the pyramids?

It is an odd-sounding idea, because the problem is usually assumed to be a modern one, the product of a world created by the Industrial Revolution and powered by high-polluting fossil fuels.

But a professor emeritus at the University of Virginia has suggested that people began altering the climate thousands of years ago, as primitive farmers burned forests and built methane-bubbling rice paddies. The practices produced enough greenhouse gases, he says, to warm the world by a degree or more.

Other scientists, however, have said the idea is deeply flawed and might be used to dampen modern alarms over climate change.

Understanding the debate requires a tour through polar ice sheets, the inner workings of the carbon molecule, the farming habits of 5,000-year-old Europeans and trapped air bubbles more ancient than Rome.

"The greenhouse gases went up, and they should have gone down" many thousands of years ago, said the University of Virginia's William Ruddiman. "Why did that happen?"

His answer is based on circumstantial evidence. Ruddiman said two events in world history - an apparent shift in the composition of the atmosphere and the first explosion of human agriculture - took place at nearly the same time.

"Greenhouse gases do something they never did before," Ruddiman said. "And humans do something the Earth (had) never seen before."

Ruddiman first presented his idea of ancient climate change in 2003. But he returned to the subject in August, in a paper intended to rebut one major criticism - that there were not enough people on the planet thousands of years ago for their emissions to make a difference.

Ruddiman's response: yes, there were. And in those days, one farmer was as destructive as multiple farmers are today.

He and Erle Ellis, a professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, wrote in the journal Quaternary Science Reviews that early farmers did not have modern fertilizer or factory-made tools, but they did have a lot of land. They would clear an area by cutting or burning it, farm the ground until it was nearly barren and move on.

"Those tens of millions (of people) had the impact of hundreds of millions because per person, they had 10 times the impact," Ruddiman said. "And that's enough to start the curve turning around."

The assertion is the heart of Ruddiman's arguments - and his critics' complaints. Where he sees human impact on the curving plot of global temperatures, they see a misunderstanding of what nature was doing at the time.

"I think it's a bunch of bosh," said Wallace Broecker, a professor at Columbia University. Broecker said he worried that the idea of pre-modern people as carbon emitters would turn into an argument that the modern world need not worry so much about its own pollution. "I get really upset with him because people who oppose global warming (legislation) can use this as some dodge."

The science of the debate begins with the idea that Earth has natural freeze-and-thaw cycles, driven heavily by changes in its orbit. The planet is in a warm "interglacial" period, which began 10,000 years ago with the end of the last Ice Age.

Beginning more than 8,000 years ago, Ruddiman said, things should have started slowly cooling off again.

But for some reason, he said, the cooling was less than expected.

Ruddiman thinks the explanation is revealed in long "cores" taken from polar ice, in which tiny bubbles of air have been trapped for thousands of years. He has examined the bubbles and found that about 5,000 years ago, they began showing unexpected increases in carbon dioxide and methane.

His theory is that the gases were pollutants, produced by civilizations on several continents that were picking up the settled life of farmers.

The carbon dioxide, Ruddiman said, could have come from smoke, from forests burned to create farmland on several continents. It could have seeped out of felled trees as they rotted. The methane, a byproduct of decay in swampy water, could have come from areas of Asia newly flooded to grow rice. It also might have been expelled by livestock.

In the atmosphere, Ruddiman says, the gases trap solar heat that might otherwise have bounced back out to space. They were greenhouse gases, the same as now.

His theory is that the trapped heat, amplified by natural feedback cycles, may have kept Earth's temperature steady when it otherwise might have slipped back toward an ice age. That effect lasted until modern times, he said: Temperatures might be more than one degree Fahrenheit higher than they would have been.

The early farmers "did not ... change the actual climate," said Ellis, Ruddiman's collaborator on the recent paper. "They kept the climate from changing."

But Ruddiman's critics say he is wrong to see human impact here: Nature was in control all along.

"I think it's more or less a hypothesis without any evidence to support (it)," said Ken Caldeira, a researcher at the Carnegie Institution for Science at Stanford.

In fact, critics of Ruddiman say, there is strong scientific evidence to prove him wrong. They say recent studies of very deep ice samples show that ice ages did not always come and go on the same schedule. That could throw off Ruddiman's calculations for when the next round of cooling was supposed to start.

And there is evidence, they say, inside the carbon atoms themselves. Carbon atoms that come from plants can be tracked by looking at the number of neutrons in their nucleus. If Ruddiman was right, and ancient farmers burned enough plants to change the climate, then the amount of carbon from plants in those bubbles would rise significantly.

But, they say, it did not.

Fresno Bee editorial, Monday, Oct. 5, 2009:

No benefit as more get to use car pool lanes

Imagine you are a California commuter who -- to save money and wear and tear on your car -- has arranged with co-workers to car pool every day.

The first year of your commute, you save a half-hour each way in the car pool lane. But a few years later, you notice the car pool lane is a little more crowded. In fact, on some days it doesn't appear to go any faster than the regular lanes next to it.

Car poolers, and there are hundreds of thousands of them across the state, have a right to be annoyed by their sluggish commutes.

In 2004, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an ill-considered bill that allowed solo drivers of 75,000 fuel-efficient hybrids, Toyota Priuses almost exclusively, to use car pool lanes.

The Legislature later increased the number to 85,000.

In the years since, 54% of the state's car pool lanes have slipped into what state highway officials consider congested conditions, making car pool lanes less effective at easing commutes during rush hour and thus making car pooling less attractive.

Predictably, exemptions for solo drivers of hybrids set up a clamor for car pool lane access from competing carmakers that produce fuel-efficient vehicles.

The Legislature is considering a new bill to allow solo drivers of an even more fuel-efficient set of vehicles to gain access to car pool lanes when the current hybrid access bill expires at the end of 2010.

Car pool lane access also has been proposed for doctors, seniors, veterans and the disabled.

The list grows and, as it does, the purpose and effectiveness of these lanes suffer.

Any legislation that allows any category of solo driver to use the car pool lane compounds the mistake made five years ago when hybrid drivers were given access.

Federal highway officials have ordered the state to come up with a plan to unclog its car pool lanes.

There is an easy fix: Limit carpool lanes to people who've taken the time and effort to organize car pools.

Tracy Press Editorial, Friday, October 2, 2009

Our Voice: A tale of two power plants

by the Editorial Board

Just across the county border, a few miles from Tracy and a stone's throw from Mountain House, two energy companies are looking to plop down power plants. But these two projects are not created equal.

On one hand, there is a project by Mariposa Energy LLC, an outfit owned by Mitsubishi.

Its 10-acre footprint will be 2½ miles west of Mountain House's edge and the San Joaquin County line, but renderings provided by Mariposa show that the four 80-foot cooling towers shouldn't impact the quality of the westward view any more than the area's many existing power lines and the windmills that dot the Altamont Hills behind.

Its impacts on air quality seem to be similarly small. Despite being permitted to run 4,000 hours a year, Mariposa execs don't foresee running the 200 megawatt facility — a peaker plant designed to go on- and off-line quickly to meet changing demand — more than 600 hours per annum. And pollution tests projected for the maximum 4,000-hours-a-year level indicate that the risk to the nearby downwind communities — namely Mountain House and Tracy — is virtually nil.

This is no off-the-cuff decision for the company, either. The site was chosen, Mariposa officials say, over some 50 others because of nearby infrastructure — the next-door Byron Bethany Irrigation District will provide water, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. can provide natural gas to fire the plant via nearby pipelines, and its electricity can be plugged into the grid through the substations and transmission lines that cross the area.

Plus, the company already has an energy purchase agreement with PG&E that will cover the first 10 years of the plant's expected 40-year lifespan. The plant should also create eight full-time jobs once it opens in 2012.

For these reasons, the Mariposa project strikes us as a good fit, even though power plants typically don't make the best neighbors.

The flip side

On the other hand, however, is the East Altamont Energy Center, a Calpine project. This proposal makes Mariposa's truly look like a welcome addition to the neighborhood.

First on our list of concerns is the project's size. Calpine would build a 1,100-megawatt facility that could run as many as 8,000 hours each year, and it would likely run far closer to full-time than Mariposa's proposed peaker plant.

Second on our list is its proximity to Mountain House. East Altamont is nearly twice as close to the town as the Mariposa project — less than 3,000 feet from the fence of Mountain House.

Third, the East Altamont permit process began in 2001 and was approved by the California Energy Commission in 2003. As construction on Mountain House only began in 2001, it's unlikely that present and future residents — those who will consider the plant a neighbor — had a say in its construction.

Though it has state approval, the East Altamont project is on hold for now — Calpine has until August 2011 to get a power purchase agreement together and begin construction.

And that's fine with us. Because while we realize the need for increased energy production in California, this project doesn't seem to fit its location.

The main worry

But really, our biggest concern applies to both energy projects. Namely, that Alameda County seems more than willing to place its less-than-ideal industries in someone else's backyard.

Alameda County, which includes Oakland, Berkeley and Pleasanton, is mostly on the west side of the Altamont Hills. Only a tiny corner of it touches the flatlands of the Central Valley — the very corner where the Mariposa and East Altamont projects are slated for. That is no coincidence.

Nor is it a coincidence that Alameda County was ready to host a 1,120-megawatt plant off Patterson Pass Road, also on this side of the Altamont Hills. (At least, as of last week, that project is dead in the water.)

It appears Alameda County would like to reap the benefits of having a new energy plant or three within its borders, while exporting the negatives — both real and perceived — to its over-the-hill neighbors.

San Joaquin County residents, not those in Alameda, look as if they will deal with the shadow of these projects. And whether those impacts are small or large, nonexistent or life-changing, is entirely beside the point.

The Mariposa project, on its own merits, makes sense to us, and we're ready to see that plant spring to life. But it is a disturbing development when seen as part of a larger trend in which Alameda County approves heavy industry for San Joaquin County's side of the hills.

By the numbers:

• 194: Megawatts that will be produced by the proposed Mariposa Energy Project.

• 4: Number of turbines, powered by burning natural gas, at the Mariposa plant.

• 80: Feet, in height, of the four cooling stacks that will accompany the turbines.

• 2½: Miles that will be between the Mariposa plant and the edge of Mountain House.

• 1.8: Miles of water pipeline that will be built for the plant.

• 0.1: Miles of natural gas pipeline that will be built for the plant.

• 10: Length, in years, of the plant's power purchase agreement with Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., Oct. 3, 2009:

Suppressing technology

When I think about global warming and oil dependence, I am dumbfounded because the answer is so simple.

God has given us billions of gallons of free clean energy, and it's all around us. In one gallon of water, there's more atomic energy than 2.5 million barrels of oil. When water is split, it becomes the most abundant elements in the universe — oxygen and hydrogen. It can be made very cheaply.

People have already built cars that run on water. It's not a myth, it's fact. Look on the Web under hydrogen technology and water cars. You can see they have and sell torches that run on water and formatted a car to run on water. This car can go 500 miles on one pint of water and the exhaust is pure oxygen and pure water.
This technology has been suppressed by Big Oil, and they're killing our world. We need to talk to our leaders about water as fuel and convince them so that we can become world leaders in this clean power and use oil for lubrication instead of burning it all up. Then we can save the world for our children.

O.C. Register blog, Friday, October 2, 2009:

One Earth, One Dream, one EcoFest in Laguna

posted by Pat Brennan, green living, environment editor

Laguna Beach plays host this weekend to the "One Earth, One Dream Ecofest," a kaleidoscope of music, food, art and speeches meant to address environmental troubles around the planet.

"It's to raise consciousness as to the changes in climate, and the problems with our air and our water, and to educate people as to what they can do to help stop this process and make this a cleaner, safer place to live," said organizer Bonnie Macmillan of the Endangered Planet Foundation.

There will be product displays and murals of environmental artwork from children around the world.

A highlight, she said, will be an opening song about 11 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 3, by 50 children from the Anneliese's School in Laguna.

And a pyramid of photos of school children's artwork, set up at the group's first EcoFest last year, will be erected again this year, Macmillan said.

The event also includes a book signing Sunday by Chris Prelitz of Laguna Beach, author of "Green Made Easy, the Everyday Guide to for Transitioning to a Green Lifestyle."

In the evening, organic wine and beer will be served.

The festival is part of the non-profit Endangered Planet Foundation's work around the world, Macmillan said.

"We bring people together to help spread this message," she said.

The event is being held at the Lumberyard Mall, 384 Forest Ave., on Oct. 3 and 4.

N.Y. Times column, Sunday, Oct. 4, 2009:

Divisions in U.S. Over Emissions

By Tom Zeller Jr., staff writer

NEW YORK — If anyone in the global community was still straining to see where the fault lines lay in the American debate over climate change, last week will have provided some clarity.

The very public departure of several large businesses from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which describes itself as "the world's largest business federation representing three million businesses of all sizes," was punctuated Wednesday with an announcement by the shoe manufacturer Nike that it, too, had found itself at odds with the chamber's stated positions on global warming and how it ought to be addressed.

“We fundamentally disagree with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on the issue of climate change,” the company explained in announcing, through a published statement, that it was resigning its seat on the chamber’s board.

“It is important that U.S. companies be represented by a strong and effective Chamber that reflects the interests of all its members on multiple issues,” the statement added. “We believe that on the issue of climate change, the Chamber has not represented the diversity of perspective held by the board of directors.”

Nike said it would retain its chamber membership “to advocate for climate change legislation inside the committee structure,” but its stated opposition to the chamber’s stance on climate change came just days after several large utilities — including Pacific Gas & Electric, PNM Resources and Exelon, the largest U.S. operator of nuclear plants — quit the association altogether.

As my colleagues Clifford Krauss and Kate Galbraith reported last week, the significance of the dust-up was open to interpretation.

Utilities that rely heavily on emissions-free nuclear power, after all, stand to come out nicely, should the American Congress manage to pass the sort of carbon-cutting legislation now on the table, and to which the chamber has thus far been vehemently opposed.

Still, the discord was unsettling enough for the Chamber of Commerce to prompt a response from its chief executive, Thomas J. Donohue, who argued in a statement last week that the business lobby “continues to support strong federal legislation and a binding international agreement” to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

“Some in the environmental movement claim that, because of our opposition to a specific bill or approach, we must be opposed to all efforts to reduce greenhouse gases or that we deny the existence of any problem,” Mr. Donohue continued. “They are dead wrong.”

Stakeholders in the environmental community, naturally, were quick to question the sincerity of that assertion — and it arrived just as two Democratic senators, John Kerry of Massachusetts and Barbara Boxer of California, introduced their answer to the climate bill passed by the House in June.

Ms. Boxer seized on the perceived splintering of opinion within the business community. “We feel with Exelon quitting the Chamber of Commerce, because they feel they’re anti-business, we have momentum on our side in terms of the businesses that are coming out to support us,” she said.

Speaking to a reporter for Greenwire, Bruce Josten, a vice president for government affairs with the Chamber of Commerce, suggested that discord within the lobby’s ranks was nothing unusual and was unlikely to prove a catalyst for pushing a climate bill through Congress.

“I feel pretty good today if 75 percent of our members agree with something,” Mr. Josten was quoted as saying — adding: “Three companies’ leaving the chamber is not momentum for Senator Boxer.”

President Barack Obama might well share that sentiment. Against the backdrop of the chamber dust-up — and on the same day that the Senate bill was unveiled — the administration announced that

it was pushing ahead with plans to have the Environmental Protection Agency regulate industrial greenhouse gas emissions on its own.

The move was seen by some as an effort to light a fire under Congress to reach agreement on a climate bill this year — and before the global summit meeting in December in Copenhagen, where delegates hope to hammer out a successor accord to the expiring Kyoto Protocol.

But with the likelihood of Congressional action dimming, and the administration facing the prospect of arriving in Copenhagen with no clear evidence that the United States is willing or able to address its substantial carbon footprint, having unleashed the E.P.A. to begin regulating emissions might well be the only card the American delegation will have to play come December.

Indeed, the administration appeared to concede as much Friday, when Carol Browner, the director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, told a gathering in Washington that the United States would not have a climate bill in hand at Copenhagen.

“Obviously we’d like to be through the process” of forging legislation, Ms. Browner said. “That’s not going to happen.”

Of course, even the E.P.A.’s ability to manage emissions is far from clear. Under proposed rules issued last week, the agency suggested it would be aiming only at large industrial emitters: “This is a common sense rule that is carefully tailored to apply to only the largest sources,” Lisa Jackson, E.P.A. administrator, said in a published statement.

Large emitters quickly fired back, however, suggesting that if the E.P.A. aimed to regulate greenhouse gas emissions as pollution, it had better do so uniformly. “You can’t pick and choose which industry and which emitter E.P.A. is going to regulate,” said Charles T. Drevna, the group’s president, in a chat with Kate Galbraith for our Green Inc. blog.

Given that industry, for the most part, disputes the E.P.A.’s claimed prerogative, under the Clean Air Act, to regulate greenhouse gas emissions at all, the strategy here is almost certainly to force the agency into a regulatory quagmire in which every commercial source of carbon dioxide — from belching cattle to the neighborhood bakery — would require federal oversight.

And trade groups — including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — have already threatened to sue over the E.P.A.’s role in managing emissions.

“Our position is simple,” the chamber asserts as part of its “Five Positions on Energy and the Environment,” posted on its Web site.

“There should be a comprehensive legislative solution that does not harm the economy, recognizes that the problem is international in scope, and aggressively promotes new technologies and efficiency.”

“Protecting our economy and the environment for future generations,“ the chamber continues, “are mutually achievable goals.”

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses clean ports, but at cost of the drivers. Truck drivers are obligated to leave their dirty trucks behind and instead have to payout of pocket rental fees for newer units, fuel, maintenance and fees per load. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Puertos limpios, pero a costillas de los choferes

Los obligaron a dejar sus camiones viejos, y ahora rentan unidades nuevas pagando su combustible, mantenimiento e impuesto por carga

Isaías Alvarado
La Opinión, Sunday, October 04, 2009

El complejo portuario más grande del país, integrado por las terminales de Long Beach y Los Ángeles, casi logra su meta de reducir en un 80% la contaminación en comunidades aledañas.

A sólo un año de que inició el Programa de Camiones Limpios, la calidad del aire mejoró un 70%, gracias al retiro de unas 6,000 unidades antiguas.

El problema, afirma una organización que en un principio luchó por la implementación del plan, es que todo el peso ha recaído en los hombros de miles de choferes.

"El programa prometía que las compañías se harían cargo de los camiones, pero está pasando todo lo contrario, son los choferes quienes se están haciendo cargo", reclamó Patricia Castellanos, directora de la Coalición de Puertos Limpios y Seguros.

Originalmente, este proyecto planteó que miles de conductores independientes dejaran sus camiones viejos y se convirtieran en empleados de las empresas de transporte, con salarios competitivos y prestaciones laborales.

Pero, un año después, el panorama ha sido otro: rentan las unidades nuevas y pagan de su bolsillo el combustible, el mantenimiento y el impuesto por transportar carga pesada, conocido como road tax.

A esto se suma una de las peores temporadas comerciales debido a la crisis económica, que ha reducido el arribo de contenedores en ambos puertos.

"Nos pusieron entre la espada y la pared", exclamó Nicole Huerta, una madre soltera y chofer desde hace seis años. Cada semana, Nicole gana $300 porque la nueva tarifa por traslado de contenedor es de $21.

"Me indigna más que entramos a trabajar a las 4 de la tarde y salimos a las 5 de la mañana; regalamos el trabajo", reprochó.

Arley Baker, portavoz del puerto de Los Ángeles, explicó que quienes participan en el Programa de Camiones Limpios en esa terminal deben rentar una unidad y cubrir sus gastos porque son considerados transportistas de vehículo con licencia y no dueños operadores, como en el sistema anterior.

Ello representa una oportunidad comercial para propietarios de flotas pequeñas, indicó. "Como en toda industria, hay individuos que son capaces de cumplir acuerdos financieros".

Sin embargo, también reconoció que en un futuro "más sostenible" la industria necesita tomar responsabilidad de las unidades.

A decir de Castellanos, mientras esa promesa sigue en el aire muchos conductores han empezado a buscar otro tipo de empleo. "Es una situación pésima, antes los choferes estaban mejor".

Nicole ha optado por continuar temporalmente con las extenuantes jornadas de trabajo y el raquítico salario, que apenas si le permite mantener a sus tres hijos.

"Todavía no me endeudo, pero creo que voy para allá", dijo