

Ban on senators' SUVs sought

Senate leader wants colleagues to choose vehicles that consume less gas.

By Ed Fletcher

The Sacramento Bee

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SACRAMENTO -- With an eye toward ending the Legislature's gas-guzzling ways, Senate President Pro Tem John Burton is moving to bar lawmakers from choosing SUVs for their state vehicles.

The San Francisco Democrat said stopping lawmakers from driving SUVs would be good for the environment and could save the state some money on fuel costs.

"What I would hope to do in the Senate [is] basically, you know, phase them out," Burton says.

The issue was to be discussed at the Senate Rules Committee last week, but with one key Democrat absent, Burton chose not to bring up the matter.

Burton said he wasn't inclined to snatch away SUVs from members who already have them and would reconsider the matter if "they come up with a hybrid SUV or something that isn't a gas-guzzler and a gas waster."

Burton's rule -- which he said is still a work in progress -- would apply only to vehicles used by state senators.

A separate effort in the Assembly would push lawmakers into fuel-efficient or alternative-fuel vehicles.

Most state lawmakers lease a vehicle at state expense to be used in their districts.

Through rules adopted by Senate and Assembly rules committees, the state caps its contribution toward each vehicle lease at \$350 per month, so taxpayers generally pay no more for a \$50,000 vehicle than they do for a \$35,000 vehicle. Lawmakers make up the difference for the more expensive vehicles.

As of December when the new Legislature took office, 95 of 120 state lawmakers had requested vehicles, according to legislative records.

More than half -- 48 -- opted for SUVs.

Sen. Rico Oller, R-San Andreas, said he doesn't see the point of Burton's move.

"It just seems to me to be kinda silly," said Oller, who drives a non-SUV, a Lincoln LS. He said members who live in rural districts often deal with snow and inclement weather. It makes less sense for members from inter-city districts to drive an SUV, he said.

In December, the Assembly adopted rules giving members who select a super-fuel-efficient or alternative-fuel vehicle an extra \$10,000 for their office budget.

"That is to at least nudge people in the direction of buying alternative-fuel vehicles, instead of large SUVs," said Assembly Rules Committee Chairman Joe

Nation, D-San Rafael. "People will still have the ability to purchase whatever they want to, but we're hopeful the incentive will move people in that direction."

Smog alert comes early But clouds and wind avert hazardous breathing conditions in Valley.

By Mark Grossi and Barbara Anderson

The Fresno Bee

(Published Friday, May 30, 2003, 8:50 AM)

Air authorities took no chances Thursday morning as temperatures and corrosive smog levels climbed -- they called a rare, early health advisory to keep schoolchildren indoors.

But the weather shifted after midday, and the pollution didn't reach dangerous levels. Still, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District stood by its decision.

"We don't want to cry wolf," said spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "But we want to protect the children. This shows you how difficult it is to predict what will happen because the weather can change around noon and again at 4 in the afternoon."

The 106-degree heat and the violation of two federal health standards on Wednesday seemed pretty persuasive, authorities said. But clouds and wind began moving into the Valley Thursday afternoon from a low pressure system in the ocean near Northern California.

Though the temperature hit 101 by 4 p.m. in Fresno, the subtle change in conditions sabotaged the reaction that makes ozone, the chief ingredient of smog. Ozone forms best when chemicals from vehicle emissions and other sources combine on a calm, sunny, hot day.

The air should be even better today, if the National Weather Service forecast is any indication. Temperatures should fall several degrees because more marine air will spill into the Valley.

Fresno's high temperature today should be about 95, according to the Weather Service. Los Banos, in western Merced County, is expected to be 88.

The cool-down should continue tonight, but temperatures will slowly climb Saturday and Sunday, said Weather Service meteorologist Cindy Bean. She said triple digits might return next week.

The heat and high smog levels are early this year. The Valley, one of the worst places in the country for air pollution, already has three violations of the one-hour standard for ozone. Last year in late May, the Valley had no violations.

When a health advisory is called, state law forbids schools in the affected areas from allowing outdoor activities. The advisory Thursday covered the Fresno-

Clovis metropolitan area and eastern Valley cities such as Arvin, Edison, Sanger, Parlier and Reedley.

But schools had finished many activities for the year.

Fresno and Clovis public school districts had no athletic events scheduled for Thursday.

At Fresno Christian Schools, a private school with about 750 kindergarten-through-12th-grade students in northeast Fresno, students were released early on their last day of school Thursday.

Fresno Christian Elementary School Principal Pat Unruh had no need to check her e-mail for a late-afternoon health advisory from the air pollution district.

Last fall, after a string of hazardous-air days, Unruh asked district staff to add Fresno Christian Schools to those receiving health advisories. Private schools and preschools aren't notified unless they personally request the service. They can add themselves to the list by calling the district at (559) 230-5800.

Being notified is nice, Unruh says, but she doesn't rely on it. She checks the air district's Web site on a regular basis to assess the air quality. Last week, she told teachers to restrict outdoor recess and activities when ozone levels crept into an unhealthy range, but not dangerous enough for the district to issue a warning.

Jackie Dugan used her instincts to decree a bad-air day Thursday at the Children's Center on Alluvial Avenue. No one would be riding tricycles after waking from afternoon naps at the preschool and day-care center in northeast Fresno.

Thursday wasn't a difficult call: It was hot.

"If it's over 100, we don't allow the children out at all," Dugan says. But it would help, she says, if the air district sent preschools official notice.

She also uses another yardstick. On days when her asthma flares, she keeps the children indoors. "I watch the news because I'm asthmatic. If I go outside and I can't breathe, we don't go outside."

While the health advisory requires schools to keep children inside, the air district also has a voluntary pollution program for summer, called "Spare the Air." It begins June 6, and more than 700 employers are involved in promoting the pollution reduction efforts.

Air district officials ask residents to curb their pollution-causing activities, such as mowing the lawn or driving. People who have sensitive lungs are advised to stay indoors during the afternoon hours when the smog peaks.

This year, the district will issue two-day forecasts for the first time, officials said.

"The two-day forecasts will give everyone more planning time to implement Spare the Air car pools and other pollution-reduction activities," said supervising meteorologist Evan Shipp.

The reporters can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com and banderson@fresnobee.com or 441-6330.

Visit www.valleyairquality.com to read The Bee's special report "Last Gasp."

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In the heat of the valley

By CHRISTINA VANCE, Bakersfield Californian staff writer

e-mail: cvance@bakersfield.com

Thursday May 29, 2003, 11:52:46 PM

A one-two punch of smoggy air and blazing heat prompted officials to issue health warnings Thursday in Bakersfield.

And after a short break, triple-digit heat could return next week.

Temperatures in Kern County were 10 to 15 degrees above normal, hitting at least 104 degrees on Thursday, according to the National Weather Service.

"We should be in the upper 80s right now," weather service meteorologist Mike Sowko said from his office in Hanford.

Today and Saturday, temperatures should top out in the upper 80s to lower 90s, according to forecasts.

But Sowko said to enjoy the lower temperatures while they last.

Forecasts say the heat could climb well into the 90s Sunday and should surpass the 100-degree mark through part of next week.

Thursday's poor air quality triggered a health advisory that urged schools in the southern and foothill areas of Kern County to cancel outdoor activities.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health advisory for the second day in a row. While Wednesday's alert was the earliest in a season issued since 1990, air district officials said today's advisory marks the first time they have ever issued such an advisory so early in the day.

The announcement came at 10:30 a.m. from air district meteorologist Evan Shipp as ozone levels soared again due to unseasonably hot temperatures and weather that's keeping smog from dispersing.

"Even putting out a health advisory this early in the day is unheard of," said air district spokeswoman Kelly Hogan Malay.

The Kern High School District nixed all practices on Thursday, a spokeswoman said.

Individual schools decide what to do after getting the warning, but Superintendent of Schools spokesman James W. Varley said most of them don't take chances.

"My experience is they're pretty diligent about these things," he said.

For information on air quality, call the air district at 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org.

-- Staff writer Matt Weiser contributed to this report.

Smog levels reach unhealthy levels in Southern California

The Associated Press

Friday May 23, 2003, 07:55:06 PM

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Reversing a trend of recent years, Southern California smog levels reached unhealthy levels before Memorial Day, air quality regulators said Friday.

Beginning May 16, the region had seven straight days where ozone, a main ingredient in smog, reached unhealthy levels in Riverside, desert areas such as Palm Springs and foothill communities such as Santa Clarita and Pasadena, according to the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

In recent years the air quality has remained good until about mid-June. A layer of warm air trapped smog over valleys and contributed to the poor air quality, AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood said.

Cooler temperatures, coastal fog and mild breezes slightly improved the air quality Friday, he added, and predicted the smog would dissipate for the Memorial Day weekend.

The AQMD region includes all or parts of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

More small steps

As Valley heat triggers smog alerts, a glimmer of relief advances.

Fresno Bee Editorial (Published Friday, May 30, 2003, 4:56 AM)

Some minor milestones in the struggle to improve air quality in the Valley were reached recently, as the state Senate passed three of 10 pieces of legislation on the issue brought by Sen. Dean Florez.

SB 700, passed last week, repeals a longtime exemption for agricultural sources of air pollution from an existing permit process. It also contains incentives in the form of low-interest loans for farmers who must undertake the potentially expensive change to newer and cleaner technologies.

SB 705, also passed last week, would end the ancient practice of burning ag wastes from pruning and field crops in the open air by 2005. Additionally, all other types of open-field ag burning, including waste from orchard and vineyard removals, and weed abatement, would be banned beginning in 2010.

SB 707, passed Thursday, would put restrictions on how close to urban areas new dairies can be built or existing ones expanded, and give local governments a greater say in such decisions. It also would bring the construction of new dairies under the same California Environmental Quality Act provisions currently in place for industrial facilities.

Broader reasons

Fresno Bee Letter to the Editor

By R. Kirby Smith

Fresno

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I'd be a wealthy man if I received a buck for every narrow-minded letter in The Bee making the claim that the Valley's air pollution is the exclusive reason for the occurrence of asthma. The latest was from Robert D. Merrill (May 26), in which he figures that Fresno City Council Member Jerry Duncan is somehow causing asthma by failing to support legislation dealing with air quality. If reducing the occurrence of asthma is the goal, we might want to start with pets in homes and dust mites first.

According to the American Academy of Allergies, Asthma and Immunology, an asthma episode can be caused by a wide variety of so-called "triggers." Air pollution is one such trigger. There are also many more prevalent ones: pet dander, dust mites, cockroach droppings, cigarette smoke, food allergies, cold, dry air, intense emotions, stress, viral infections and strenuous exercise. All these can cause an asthma episode with varying severity and duration.

So to constantly repeat, like an annoying drumbeat, that air pollution is the only reason for asthma is not only irresponsible, it minimizes investigation into other agents that trigger attacks of this serious affliction.

Before we pass legislation that uses a pollution-equals-asthma premise, we might want to do more research to ensure that the legislation won't turn out to be both costly and completely ineffective.