

Work remains to improve air

By Adam Ashton

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Oct. 8, 2004

Central Valley air quality borders on the worst in the nation and residents should take steps to protect their health, a panel of regional air experts said Thursday night.

Tom Jordan, special projects director for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the area has made some gains in controlling pollutants such as carbon monoxide in the 13 years since his organization was created.

Ozone and particulate matter, however, continue to plague the Valley's air quality, he said.

"We hadn't cleaned up far enough fast enough," Jordan told an audience of 50 at a Merced County League of Women Voters forum in Merced.

Jordan said ozone, also known as smog, takes its greatest toll on air quality in summer months. It can cause sore throats, coughing and fatigue. Controlling it means working out new plans for cars and factories that emit the chemical.

Particle pollution does the most harm in the fall and winter, though for different reasons.

Tiny particles of dust from Valley agriculture can pollute the air during the fall harvest season, causing respiratory problems for some people.

In the winter, fog traps particles from vehicle exhaust and fireplaces, posing a greater health danger, Jordan said.

He said the district is preparing a new plan to clean its air by 2010, its third deadline to meet federal air-quality standards.

Mary Michal Rawling, project manager for the Merced-Mariposa Asthma Coalition, encouraged the audience to be mindful that poor air quality can cause asthma in children.

"Yes, we're worse than L.A.," she said, pointing to a graph showing that the Valley suffers more bad air days for longer periods of time than Southern California's notoriously bad air.

Diana Westmoreland Pedrozo, executive director of the Merced County Farm Bureau, said new air-quality restrictions are taking an inordinate toll on the Valley's agriculture industry.

Farmers received some air quality exemptions for the past 50 years, but those are ending, creating new problems for the state's agriculture industry, she said. Some of these restrictions will limit burning and use of diesel engines.

"I'm not even sure what agriculture's contribution (to air quality problems) is -- my guess is 25 percent, maybe. We're getting 100 percent of the burden," she said.

UCI wins \$7.5 million for atmospheric studies

The funds will be used by a team of scientists to investigate air pollution, climate change.

By Gary Robbins

The Orange County Register, Friday, Oct. 8, 2004

The National Science Foundation is giving UC Irvine \$7.5 million to study air pollution and global warming through the analysis of chemical reactions in the region of the atmosphere where air interacts with moisture, such as rain, fog and humidity.

The announcement, which comes one day after a UCI researcher shared the 2004 Nobel Prize in chemistry, says the work will be carried out by a newly established Environmental Molecular Science Institute, one of only seven in the United States.

The EMSI will be led by UCI chemist Barbara Finlayson-Pitts, who said in a statement, "Our mission is to uncover how molecules in the environment are interacting and potentially influencing everything from the amount of air pollution in Los Angeles to climate change.

"Our research area is particularly exciting as only recently have scientists understood that chemical reactions occurring at the boundary between air and liquid water in the atmosphere may influence air quality in a number of previously unrecognized ways."

Finlayson-Pitts' team at UCI includes such well-known chemists as John Hemminger and Doug Tobias, and Donald Dabdub from the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering. A large group of students also will be involved in the institute.

UCI ranks in the top 10 nationally in producing students with degrees in various branches of chemistry.

List of 10 endangered wildlife refuges

The Associated Press

S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 8, 2004

The 10 most endangered national wildlife refuges as chosen by the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife, and reasons cited by the group:

- * Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska: Proposals to by the oil industry to drill inside the refuge.
- * Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona: Increasing illegal drug and immigrant traffic and Border Patrol operations.
- * Delta National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana: Effects of private gas and oil companies.
- * Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Nevada: Proposals by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to drill water wells in the refuge.
- * Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, California: Polluting runoff, invasive species and rapid suburban development.
- * Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuges, Oregon and California: Pesticide pollution and use of the basin's water for industrial farming.
- * Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, North Dakota: Air and water pollution from coal-burning power plants in Canada and North Dakota.
- * Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Texas: Development surrounding the refuge's fragmented parcels of land.
- * Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, North Carolina: A landing field for Navy fighter jets to fly 100 sorties a day at low altitudes.
- * Upper Mississippi River National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa: Agricultural runoff, habitat loss, mercury contamination, water pollution and invasive animal and plant species.

Nausea caused by spray for bugs

Fire officials discover that malathion sickened 11 in Orangeburg neighborhood

By ROSALIO AHUMADA

Insecticide a man sprayed around his trailer caused a pungent smell that sickened 11 neighbors Wednesday night, a Modesto Fire Department official said Thursday.

The trailer sits behind a Pearl Street home near Kearney Avenue, two blocks north of West Orangeburg Avenue. The trailer's resident sprayed malathion during the day, Battalion Chief Hugo Patino said, and "the atmosphere was just right to cause it to go through the neighborhood."

The insecticide is legal and available at hardware stores, Patino said, but a high concentration can be harmful. "It's a pretty pungent-smelling insecticide," he said. "If you're sensitive to those kind of things, it's going to bother you."

People said the fumes made breathing difficult, burned their eyes and throats, and brought on nausea. They were treated at the scene.

From about 9 to 10 p.m., a hazardous-materials team searched the alley behind Pearl Street - but could not find the source of the fumes.

Firefighters spoke to the trailer resident, and he said he didn't know where the smell was coming from, Patino said. Later, after authorities started a house-to-house search, the man told about his spraying, but said he did it according to the label's directions, Patino said.

"It smelled like when you fog your house to kill fleas," said Joyce Freeman, whose family closed its home's rear windows and slept in the front living room with the windows open Wednesday night. Freeman said most of the smell had dissipated by morning.

Still, she said, she was coughing and her 17-year-old daughter, Megan, was feeling nauseated in the morning. They both felt better by the end of the day.

Machado, Podesto face off

Debate more civil than ads of candidates

By Audrey Cooper , Stockton Record Staff Writer

Friday, Oct. 8, 2004

STOCKTON -- In what is likely to be the most important debate of their campaigns for state Senate, Michael Machado and Gary Podesto discussed state tax policy, transportation funding and even their own infamous tempers Thursday night, but largely avoided the spiteful attacks that have so far marked the bitter campaign.

About 500 people crowded into a concert hall at University of the Pacific to pick their favorite candidate for Senate: incumbent Machado, a Linden Democrat, or Podesto, the Republican mayor of Stockton.

Behind the scenes and prior to the debate, it looked as though the debate might be a rerun of the angry forums that they've participated in over the past few weeks. The two men couldn't even agree on who would be the first to give his opening statement.

But after they walked out from behind the velvet curtains and shook hands, they calmly volleyed issues such as driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, challenges for women in the workplace and the state budget.

Among the most glaring differences to emerge between the candidates is how they propose to handle the state's budget deficit, expected to hover around \$8 billion next year. Machado said he would consider new taxes instead of cutting vital state services. He criticized the mayor for taking a "no-new-tax" pledge.

"I think the issue of raising taxes is always appropriate and no tools should be taken off the table. Budgets are about compromise, and you can't do that if you take away possible tools," the senator said.

Podesto complained businesses are likely to become California's No. 1 export, and said the state should focus on developing job opportunities.

"If California continues to raise taxes, you'll continue to drive businesses out of the state," he said.

Some audience members applauded and others hissed when Machado said that Podesto's city government was an example of "leadership gone amok." He said the Stockton City Council has often attempted to circumvent voters, most recently by trying to rush forward with plans to include 6,000 acres of farmland in the eventual city boundaries, even though voters will decide on Election Day whether to freeze the city's growth limits.

Podesto countered that he was offended by Machado's "unwarranted attack" before accusing Machado of writing a bill because it would benefit a generous campaign donor.

Both men brushed aside questions about whether the slew of negative attack ads appearing on TV has been fair. In one, Podesto's campaign accuses Machado of taking "dirty money, illegal money," even though the Fair Political Practices Commission has said there was nothing unlawful about campaign donations that Machado has kept. [In other ad sponsored by Machado's campaign, an unidentified announcer decries Podesto as winner of the fictitious "black lung award" because he opposed a certain clean-air bill dealing with agriculture.](#)

Both men said they used the negative ads merely trying to point out how their opponent felt about certain issues. Each candidate said they were unfairly tarnished by the negative ads and tried to argue that their opponent was the real flip-flopper.

Podesto said he wouldn't vote for Proposition 71, a \$3 billion state bond to establish a new medical research institute that would provide funding for stem-cell research. The mayor said the proposition was too expensive, and that embryonic stem-cell research doesn't hold as much scientific potential as research focusing on adult stem cells. The money would be better used for education or roads, he said.

Machado said he would vote for the initiative because it could help cure diseases such as muscular dystrophy and Alzheimer's. The research that would result from the initiative would likely pay for the bond several times over, he said.

Robert Silva, a 32-year-old student from Lodi, said he came to the debate in hopes of choosing a candidate. After the debate, he still wasn't sure who would get his vote.

"They definitely have different ideas on taxes and the budget. Now I have to figure out who I think is right. I'm looking for the FDR candidate right now," said Silva, a registered Republican.

Because of the way political boundaries were redrawn in 2001, the 5th Senate District is among only a few competitive races this year. The race between Machado and Podesto may become the most expensive race of its kind in U.S. history. Both candidates have said they expect to spend at least \$3 million.

Throw Caltrans from train?

Valley group thinks rail service would benefit from local control

By Matt Weiser, Californian staff writer,
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 8, 2004

A coalition of valley leaders is proposing to take over the Amtrak San Joaquins passenger train service from Caltrans in hopes of increasing capacity on the route.

The proposal comes from the San Joaquin Valley Rail Committee. The panel of local officials works in an advisory capacity with Caltrans, which currently manages the passenger train route between Bakersfield, Sacramento and Oakland.

The committee is proposing to create a joint powers authority to oversee the route, as allowed by 1996 legislation. A similar arrangement has been in place for several years on the Capitol Corridor Amtrak route, operating between Sacramento and San Jose, and advocates say it has led to major service improvements there.

"I think it's well worth looking at," said Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson, a member of the committee. "As our population continues to grow, we're going to need more and more rail service."

Art Lloyd, facilitator for the committee, said there would be no financial liability to local government, except for startup costs of perhaps \$50,000 to \$100,000 each. Caltrans and Amtrak would continue to subsidize the service at existing levels, and Amtrak would continue to operate the trains.

But local officials would start calling more of the shots, and they could directly lobby for money. That could lead to more frequent train service, more passenger capacity and station improvements, among other benefits.

For instance, the joint powers authority operating Capitol Corridor trains has added eight daily round trips to the route since taking over from Caltrans in 1998. As a result, it has become a popular commute alternative between Sacramento and San Jose.

"The local jurisdictions have more direct input as to how the service is run and how it changes over time," said Jim Allison, a planner with the Bay Area Rapid Transit District, which manages the Capitol Corridor under contract with its joint powers authority.

Local leaders could also gain some clout in negotiating with other players.

A case in point is the desire to restore service between Bakersfield and Los Angeles, one of the biggest missing links in California passenger rail. The link ceased operating in 1971. In recent years, Caltrans has been unable to convince Union Pacific Railroad to open its tracks over the Tehachapis to Amtrak trains.

Local officials might be able to exert more pressure to restore that service. The rail committee is also looking into building a new rail line between Bakersfield and Palmdale as an alternative. Lloyd said a new joint powers authority would improve prospects for that concept.

He said there is no deadline to create the joint powers authority, but committee members are now shopping it around to local leaders between the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

Richard Silver, executive director of the Rail Passenger Association of California, said local control of the San Joaquins route is long overdue.

The San Joaquins is one of the fastest-growing routes in the Amtrak system, partly because of Caltrans funding and oversight. But Silver said more improvements are needed, and they could come faster with local management.

"I worry this may be one of those trial balloons that just floats away," said Silver. "But my sense is that this is moving farther and faster than anything in the past."

Bakersfield Californian editorial, Friday, Oct. 8, 2004:

Nov. 2 D-Day in Wasco -- as in dairies

It would be an oversimplification to say that Wasco's current City Council race is shaping up like a referendum on dairies.

But the little farm town 30 miles north of Bakersfield, famous for its roses, is by most accounts at a crossroads, and cows are starting to graze in the intersection.

With the Central Valley's population accelerating at an unprecedented rate, residential growth is starting to trickle down from the Bakersfields and Fresno and Modesto of the state to towns like Wasco, which until the last few years had virtually maintained a decades-long status quo in the population department.

Now the locals see an imminent residential building boom. The likelihood carries attendant questions that demand answers: What does Wasco, pop. 22,000 (including 6,000 at Wasco State Prison), want to be when it grows up? Does it continue to honor its agricultural heritage to the possible detriment of other economic fronts, or does it look at ag with a more critical eye than before, knowing that farming and growth-driven housing are often unhappy neighbors?

If it's the latter, Wasco will want to evaluate most carefully the relative benefits and drawbacks of the dairy industry.

That's exactly what the town is doing with Measure U, an advisory vote on the November ballot that asks Wasco voters whether the town ought to draw a 10-mile no-dairy buffer around itself. It carries no legal weight; such things, when they are outside city limits, rest in the hands of the Kern County Board of Supervisors.

Measure U will merely send a message. If the measure passes, it'll be this: Wasco doesn't want the smells and water-table contamination risks that sometimes accompany dairies. If the measure

fails, it'll be this: Wasco is still an ag-first town that can overlook or work toward minimizing dairies' widely perceived negatives. (Or, possibly this message: The issue is ultimately up to the supervisors, so why bother?)

Sure, the four challengers and three incumbents angling for three available spots on the Wasco City Council dais have other things to debate: potholes, crime, code enforcement and their relative willingness to be responsive.

They can talk about the Wasco Housing Authority, which was the subject of controversy 15 months ago after the City Council, citing a lack of communication, fired five housing board commissioners (and was criticized by the Kern County grand jury last February for acting too hastily).

But, in what some might see as a microcosm of the valley's ever-intensifying rural-suburban boundary, the big issue is generally thought to be dairies.

The characters are many and diverse, from the 77-year-old two-time former councilman to the Pepperdine-educated, 28-year-old transplant.

"If we get dairies, the builders aren't going to come here," says Larry Pearson, one of the incumbents up for re-election. "I'm not going to sit in my back yard to barbecue and swat flies and expect (economic development in Wasco).

"The people are 90 percent for a buffer -- or at least they're 90 percent for no dairies."

Joel Ackerknecht begs to differ.

"Dairies can be managed," says Ackerknecht, a Northern California native who met his future wife, Kim Portwood, at Pepperdine University and is now ranch manager of her father's well-established Wasco company, Portwood Farms.

"Ten-thousand cows in a relatively small area can be too much," Ackerknecht says. "We need to do the scientific research. This (Measure U) is kind of a feel-good referendum."

Ackerknecht, who takes over as president of the Wasco Chamber of Commerce next year, rejects the idea that dairies will hurt Wasco's prospects for residential growth.

"I don't see that happening," he says. "People who are looking for good value in a house are going to come. Look at Hanford's growth (despite the presence of dairies). In Chino, residential development forced the dairies out," not the other way around.

But fellow challenger Tilo Cortez Jr., a 32-year-old Wasco mortgage broker, says it's the biggest issue in the election, and for good reason.

"We're in a critical stage; we're in a fork in the road, and dairies are a big part of it," he says. "We're in a place where we can really take some positive steps. ... But we can't approach things haphazardly, and that means we look at the dairies" critically.

Many see agriculture, a familiar presence, and the dairy industry, a relative newcomer, at least on the scale Kern County is starting to see, as two distinct enterprises.

"A dairy is not the same as an almond orchard," says Mike White, a Wasco insurance agent who was on the City Council from 1992 to 2000 and hopes to return. "It's not the life I grew up with."

But the bigger issues for him, as well as incumbents Danny Espitia and Paul Neufeld, are the same bread-and-butter issues as always, the things that play as big in Walla Walla and Wilmington as in Wasco: noisy neighbors, messy alleys and council members' availability.

To 77-year-old Otis R. Johnson, who had two stints on the Wasco City Council in the late 1970s and '80s and wants another crack at it, it's still about being stingy with the public's money. That, and asphalt.

"We need the streets fixed up," Johnson says. "That's what the people want."

Some truths are universal.