

Awareness helps cut no-burn days

BY STACEY SHEPARD, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, March 1, 2007

As of today, you're free to burn.

The air regulation that prohibits wood burning on bad air days between November and February has ended.

The season saw a significant decline in no-burn days for Kern County. Wood burning was prohibited on eight days this season compared with 16 days last season.

Officials with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said the decline was a result of compliance and weather patterns.

"We're finding most people are aware of the rule now," said Brenda Turner, a spokeswoman for the district.

Because more people are following the rule and not burning when it's prohibited, most no-burn periods lasted just one day this season. When burning continues through no-burn days it creates a bad air quality forecast for the next day, resulting in another no-burn day being declared.

For example, last season there was a weeklong stretch of no-burn days in December.

Weather patterns also play a role in the number of no-burn days each season, according to Shawn Ferreria, an atmospheric scientist for the air district.

This season, high pressure air tended to be stronger in the northern parts of the valley, which is why Fresno and Stanislaus counties saw more no-burn days than in the previous season, he said. Strong pressure does not allow air to mix and disperse, causing particles to linger in the air.

That may also explain the increase in days when burning was voluntarily discouraged this season.

A voluntary no-burn day is called when the air quality is expected to be bad for some, but not all groups. Because there was better air dispersion in Kern this season, some days that normally would have been declared no-burn ended up being discouraged days, Ferreria said.

Officials: Air improves with no-burn days

Fireplaces create up to one-third of winter pollution

By Greg Ubbelohde, Staff writer
Visalia Times Delta Thursday, March 1, 2007

Valley residents are breathing slightly cleaner air thanks to the "Check Before You Burn" program that ended Wednesday, air quality officials say.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said there's been a small but measurable decrease in the amount of pollution in the air since the program was launched in 2003.

"I don't think that's a coincidence," said Janelle Schneider, spokeswoman for the air district.

The program is designed to reduce winter-season air pollution by discouraging or prohibiting residents from using fireplaces that burn wood, pellets or manufactured logs. Such fires generate up to one-third of all winter air pollution, Schneider said in a statement.

The "Check Before You Burn" season runs from Nov. 1 to Feb. 28 and works as follows:

- There are no restrictions on burn days.
- When the air-quality index reaches 101 -- a level unhealthy for those sensitive to air quality -- the air board recommends that no burning take place.
- When the air-quality index reaches 151, burning is prohibited.

On days when it's illegal to burn, residents caught with smoke coming from their chimneys face a minimum fine of \$50. There was only one violation this year in Tulare County, down from 20 the previous year.

The program may also be responsible for a reduction in the number of no-burn days, officials said. Tulare County had three this year, down from nine the year before.

"For the past three years, the district has made great progress in reducing the wintertime air pollution," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air board. "We give a lot of credit ... to the fireplace rule and excellent response by residents."

Mayfield's deciding vote cast at last moment, and is not meant to last forever

By Jeff Jardine

Modesto Bee, Thursday, March 1, 2007

In this strange world of politics, big decisions seldom are made on the spur of the moment.

They're researched, thought out, lobbied and frequently bought and paid for.

Which makes Tom Mayfield's call Tuesday one of the more unique ones the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors has seen in a long, long time.

In a decision that waffled somewhere between a coin-flip and pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, Mayfield voted to give PCCP West Park LLC one year of exclusive negotiating rights with the county to develop the former Crows Landing Naval Air Station.

"That's about the way it was," Mayfield said Wednesday. "Push the 'A' button or the 'B' button."

Mayfield claimed that until the very moment Board Chairman Bill O'Brien called for a vote on whether to accept the West Park proposal, he wasn't sure how he'd vote. Dissatisfied with the other proposal, by Ross Perot Jr.'s Hillwood, Mayfield saw only two options: Support West Park or say no to both and wait for a better plan to surface.

"I darn near didn't vote for either one of them," he said.

His "aye" for West Park, you could argue, turned out to be the decider in a rare 3-2 board vote.

Mayfield ultimately decided the ambitious West Park plan would be better over the long haul because it would involve fewer long hauls, as in trucks.

West Park's proposed rail link to the Port of Oakland, he said, would keep trucks off the road and reduce air pollution. It also would create jobs in the valley, meaning workers wouldn't have to commute to the Bay Area every day, another major cause of air pollution.

As a longtime member of the valley's air pollution board, and with the kind of growth the state projects for the valley over the next 30 years, Mayfield felt West Park offered the better option - if just barely.

If within a year West Park can't get the bonds to fund its project, he said, he has no problem voting against it and going back to square one.

"You and I both know nothing's going to happen out there for two or three or five years," Mayfield said. "The developer doesn't matter. Let (West Park) go for the rail. If they don't get the bond, we start over. Anything they do out there is years away, no matter if it's West Park or Hillwood."

Mayfield didn't like the Hillwood plan because he doesn't believe the company would stick to the base's 1,527-acre footprint. He said Hillwood made the same claim in developing a property in Southern California, but then purchased additional land around it to build homes.

As the day of decision loomed, the spin and pressure from both groups became intense. And therein lies the political irony of Mayfield's vote on an issue that has been pressure-treated for months.

West Park, led by Sacramento developer Gerry Kamilos, contributed \$28,362 to the California Taxpayer Protection Committee. That third-party group spent more than \$34,000 to fund a hit mailer on Gary Lopez, who opposed incumbent Supervisor Jeff Grover in the November election.

Grover claims he didn't know the source of the funding, and County Counsel Mick Krausnick said the contribution did not create a conflict of interest.

Grover voted for West Park's plan Tuesday.

And West Park can be thankful Supervisor Dick Monteith is a forgiving soul. The company donated \$5,000 to a group that produced a hit mailer against him during his campaign against Janice Keating. Yet Monteith made the motion to vote for the West Park plan, seconded by Grover.

Meanwhile, Supervisor Jim DeMartini - who also produced a hit piece against Lopez to benefit Grover - had the harshest words against Kamilos' plan, calling it a "Trojan horse" designed to build more housing. He voted against it, as did O'Brien.

But neither of them entered the building Tuesday still wondering how they'd vote.

That distinction belonged to Mayfield, who said his snap decision came down to the political pressure of improving air quality rather than anything either development group spun. A rancher from Hughson, Mayfield said he listened as Marie Assali, a nut processor and county Planning Commission member, spoke in favor of the West Park plan because it would give growers a less expensive way to get their products to market. He also heard from the Farm Bureau, which refused to endorse either plan.

Ultimately, he voted to give West Park 12 months to get its financing in order. If the group returns a year from now wanting to finance its plan on the back of a huge housing development, his decision won't be a spur-of-the-moment one.

"I'm going to vote no, no, no," Mayfield said. "This is how it is."

County to step into Allensworth dairy dispute

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2007

Kings County supervisors are poised to step into a Tulare County dispute involving dairy cows, a state historical site and the California legislature.

At Tuesday's regular board meeting, supervisors decided to take a stance against a proposed law that would ban any dairies within five miles of Col. Allensworth State Historic Park.

The park, commemorating a historic black experiment in self-sufficiency, is northwest of Delano in Tulare County.

The law was introduced in the California Assembly last week in response to a January decision by Tulare County to give tentative approval to two proposed mega-dairies next to the park.

Historical preservation groups and others have protested, saying the smell of the dairy and other potential environmental problems could drive visitors away and spell the demise of the tiny park, which sees a few thousand visitors a year.

If approved, the dairies would bring 9,000 cows to within one mile of the park boundary, according to published reports.

Supervisors declined Tuesday to take a position on the merits of locating a dairy there. Instead, they attacked the idea of a state law specifically targeting a local land use planning decision.

"It's the greatest slap in the face to the local people ...," said District 3 Supervisor Tony Oliveira, who had asked to have the item placed on the agenda.

"If it were law, it affects all of us," said Alene Taylor, district 5 supervisor.

Oliveira and Supervisor Jon Rachford were critical of Nicole Parra and Dean Florez, who were among several state legislators signing on as co-authors of the bill.

The two Democrats represent Kings County, Parra in the Assembly and Florez in the Senate.

Oliveira said he was "surprised" by Parra's support for the bill. Parra couldn't be reached Tuesday in Sacramento despite repeated phone calls.

Florez, calling himself a "big supporter" of buffers around dairies, said it was "inappropriate" to locate a dairy next to Allensworth.

Supervisors will likely vote next week on a resolution condemning the bill.

"This is a taking without compensation," Oliveira said.

Transportation projects funded

Carpool lanes, rural road in capital area will get bond money.

By Tony Bizjak - Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, March 1, 2007

California's large urban areas, including Sacramento, won big Wednesday in statewide competition for the first wave of transportation bond money.

Convening in Irvine under an intense political spotlight, California Transportation Commission members spread \$4.5 billion in voter-approved "corridor mobility" funds among some 50 projects -- what state officials called the largest outlay of transportation money in years.

Much of it went to new carpool lanes on freeways in Los Angeles, San Diego, the Bay Area and Sacramento.

A surprise addition was \$22 million to widen and straighten a small but key rural road in eastern Sacramento County -- White Rock Road between Sunrise Boulevard and Prairie City Road.

CTC Executive Director John Barna said the White Rock Road project won last-minute funding after Sacramento officials made a persuasive pitch that the road will take cars off congested Highway 50.

Widening of White Rock Road to four lanes, will begin by 2011, said county transportation head Tom Zlotkowski. It could become the first section of the region's long-discussed beltway from Elk Grove to El Dorado Hills.

Commuters who now "slug it out on Highway 50, will be able to take White Rock and get where they are going a little faster and safer," Zlotkowski said.

The Sacramento region placed several other projects on the funding list, including a carpool lane project on Highway 50 in El Dorado County, and another on 50 in Sacramento County between Sunrise Boulevard and Watt Avenue.

Placer County won funding for several linked freeway widening projects on I-80 through the notorious Roseville bottleneck between the Sacramento County line and the Highway 65 junction.

Widening began recently on a section of that freeway, with additional widening expected in 2008 and 2009.

A plan to build a Highway 65 bypass around the city of Lincoln also won state funding Wednesday.

Sacramento officials, however, failed to land funds for carpool lanes on I-80 from Longview Drive to the Sacramento River. Barna said that project could qualify later this year when more bond funds are disbursed.

Nevada County officials won financing to widen Highway 49 in the La Barr Meadows area south of Grass Valley.

Overall, the San Francisco Bay Area scored the bulk of Northern California's congestion-relief funds, mostly for carpool lanes. Another \$175 million was set aside for a fourth bore at the Caldecott Tunnel on Highway 24.

In Southern California, Los Angeles scored a major win by landing the largest sum for a single project -- \$730 million for carpool lanes on the northbound 405 freeway between Interstate 10 and Highway 101.

Los Angeles leaders, angered that the 405 project was left off an earlier funding list, had threatened to scuttle the entire CTC project list in the state Legislature.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the CTC list was "balanced."

"Because of our combined efforts, traffic congestion will be eased, air quality will be improved and most importantly, state government will continue to work for the people of California," he said.

The contested \$4.5 billion represents the first disbursement from the \$19.9 billion Proposition 1B state transportation infrastructure bond act approved by voters in November.

The initial money was designated in the bond act for congestion relief and for better connections on rural highways. Funded projects are required to begin construction by 2012. CTC officials said they hope many of the projects will get going several years sooner than that.

The CTC will forward its project list to the state Legislature, which is expected to determine how much to allocate to the program in the next few years of state budgets.

Later bond funding rounds will focus on freight movement, public transit, highway rehabilitation, local streets and port improvements and air quality.

EPA sues Cemex over air quality

Victorville plant controls cited

BY JUDY O'ROURKE, Staff Writer

LA Daily News Thursday, March 1, 2007

SANTA CLARITA - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has lodged a lawsuit against Cemex in federal court in Riverside claiming the company -- which plans an aggregate quarry on the outskirts of Santa Clarita -- failed to adopt proper measures to cut air pollution at its Victorville cement plant, one of the largest of its kind in the country.

In a complaint filed Monday, the Department of Justice accuses Cemex of failing to install the protective devices despite spending millions to renovate the facility during the past decade.

"What the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency wants is that Cemex install proper air pollution controls that could reduce nitrogen oxide emissions in the general Victorville area," agency spokesman Francisco Arcaute said. "That's why we've taken these legal steps."

At the plant, rocks are pulverized to make cement, which is the binding agent in concrete used to build homes, roads and bridges.

The lawsuit says Cemex California LLC made major improvements in 1997 and 2000 without getting permits required by the Clean Air Act, a measure the federal government adopted in 1990 to set limits on emissions. The company also failed to install high-tech emissions controls that would limit pollutants such as nitrogen oxide, which cause smog and trigger breathing difficulties in children and the elderly.

Cemex declined calls Wednesday seeking comment.

The company's Web site says the \$190million expansion helped the plant lower allowable emissions substantially while increasing production.

"The final design selected meets the best available control technology for reducing air emissions," the site says. "Also, state-of-the-art combustion controls were chosen to reduce nitrogen oxides (NOx), carbon monoxide (CO), sulfur dioxide (SO2) and volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions."

The EPA says Victorville's air doesn't meet federal standards for ozone or particulate matter, but it would not comment on the role Cemex plays in perpetuating the problem.

"The facility is a 'major' source of air pollution, however, under the Clean Air Act," Arcaute said.

Should the EPA prevail in court, Cemex could face fines of up to \$27,500 a day for violations that occurred from January 1997 to March 2004, and up to \$32,500 a day for violations after March.

The complaint does not suggest a specific penalty, and the EPA declined to comment on when the violations began or what date penalties might begin accruing.

The EPA had cited Cemex for the Victorville violation in September 2005, but the parties have been unable to resolve their differences in the interim. A branch of the agency that oversees the Midwest cited a Cemex facility in Fairborn, Ohio, in the past year or so, Arcaute said.

The plant operations differ from the quarry proposed by Cemex in Soledad Canyon, which is on hold for now. The site - where Cemex planned to extract 56.1million tons of sand and gravel during a 20-year span - is outside Santa Clarita city limits between Canyon Country and Agua Dulce, but no processing plant was to be built there.

Cemex officials said recently they will try to negotiate a compromise with the city of Santa Clarita in lieu of opening the mine in 2008. In a show of good faith, the city disbanded its approximately \$8million campaign -- which had gained traction nationwide -- to scale down or block the mine.

Four months before joining forces with Cemex in February, the city bonded with environmental groups and others to notify the mining giant its air-quality violations were under the newly formed group's microscope. The United National Alliance sent a letter to Gilberto Perez, president of Cemex-U.S. Operations, noting 72,067 air-quality citations levied against Cemex, and a city report says Cemex has been fined \$4.5million for violations of state and federal water and air-quality requirements in at least eight states.

At the time, Cemex countered the group's action, saying it was based on failed legal or public cases against the company and that it reeked of sour grapes.

Both the city of Victorville and the agency that regulates air-quality standards for the Victorville region say Cemex has been a good neighbor in that community.

"In terms of any kind of major violations, I can't think of anything major or outstanding," said Eldon Heaston, executive director of the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District. "They usually are in compliance."

Victorville also had no complaints, city spokeswoman Yvonne Hester said.

The Mojave Desert district oversees a 22,000-mile territory in the desert portions of San Bernardino County and eastern Riverside County, home to Victoville, Barstow, 29 Palms and Apple Valley. The agency recognized Cemex for helping to prevent or control air pollution in the community.

Plant Proposal Irks 'Brockovich' Town

In the S.F. Chronicle, N.Y. Times and other papers, Thursday, March 1, 2007

San Bernardino, Calif. (AP) -- A plant that would convert sewage sludge to compost may be built outside the desert town of Hinkley, whose troubles from pollution were made famous by the movie "Erin Brockovich."

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday in favor of building the plant eight miles outside of Hinkley. Plans call for processing 400,000 tons of sludge each year.

Residents of Hinkley and nearby communities said they were afraid it would produce odor and bacteria-laden dust that could sicken them.

"You tell me that if your kids and your family lived downwind of this thing that you wouldn't be standing where I'm standing," Hinkley resident Norman Diaz said.

About 120 people, including schoolchildren wearing anti-sludge T-shirts, attended the meeting.

Nursery Products LLC, based in Apple Valley, said its plant would be safe and would use only treated sewage.

"Biosolids are not raw sewage," said David Hagopian, an attorney for the company. "The bottom line is that composting biosolids is safe. We're far away from people, and communities and from industry."

Hinkley was featured in the 2000 film "Erin Brockovich," starring Julia Roberts. The movie portrayed the legal fight of attorney Ed Masry and his assistant, Brockovich, against Pacific Gas & Electric Co. They

won a \$333 million settlement on behalf of more than 600 Hinkley residents who claimed the utility's tanks leaked carcinogenic poisons into groundwater.

Brockovich did not attend the supervisors' meeting, but an aide read a statement by her.

"Citizens in this area already have compromised immune systems," the statement read. "They moved to a town with open land and open air hoping to have a safe place for their children to visit. Please put yourself in their shoes."

Diaz said Hinkley residents cannot afford to sue to block the project.

"We've spent all our money," he said.

Study Tracks Exposure to Diesel Fumes

By Anthony DePalma

N.Y. Times, Thursday, March 1, 2007

Commuters on average spend 6 percent of their day getting back and forth to work, but their time spent in buses, trains and cars accounts for more than half their daily exposure to harmful diesel fumes that can shorten lives and cause disease, according to a new study by the environmental group Clean Air Task Force. The study, released yesterday in Washington, found that pollution levels in four cities, including New York, were four to eight times higher inside cars, buses and trains than in the outdoor air. Very fine particles, like those in diesel exhaust, are believed to shorten the lives of 70,000 Americans a year. The group said using ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel and installing easily available filters can reduce pollution from diesel engines by 90 percent.

Power Plant Emissions May Be Harmful, Agency Says

Warnings Advised in Alexandria; Bike Trail Is in Affected Area

By Annie Gowen, Washington Post Staff Writer

Washington Post, Thursday, March 1, 2007

A federal health agency has warned that sulfur dioxide emissions from the troubled Mirant power plant in Alexandria -- which sits next to a popular regional bike trail -- could be a public health concern and a hazard to asthmatics and others.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry said in a recent letter that emissions from the plant could be harmful to some nearby residents, and that the city should consider ways to send out "health messages" about the danger of some air pollutants.

William Cibulas Jr., the director of the agency's Division of Health Assessment and Consultation, wrote to the Alexandria Health Department that a preliminary review of air dispersal monitoring showed a "hazard to vulnerable populations" from sulfur dioxide emissions. However, he noted, more study is needed before a final conclusion is reached.

The aging plant supplies power throughout the region, including to the District's central business corridor and many federal institutions. It sits on the banks of the Potomac River just north of the city's busy Old Town area and next to the popular Mount Vernon jogging and biking trail -- used by more than 1 million people yearly. It is one of five coal-fired power plants that contribute to poor regional air quality, environmental experts say.

"The greatest concern is the recreation path. . . . That's a regional resource, and people come from all over to use that pathway," said Rebecca Bascom, a professor of medicine at the Penn State College of Medicine who advises the city on air quality matters. "They use it jogging and walking briskly . . . and these are the conditions that maximize the harm these pollutants do the body."

The city has begun examining ways to warn residents of the potential risk, officials said.

Cibulas went on to note, however, that there is "significant uncertainty" with the data and that more study is needed to conclusively determine that a public health hazard exists. Mirant is conducting a more extensive air modeling study that began last summer and will take a year to complete.

Debra Bolton, a vice president and assistant general counsel for the Atlanta-based energy corporation, said that the plant had made "significant progress" in reducing sulfur dioxide and other harmful emissions. Its year-long study would give the federal agency the kind of data it needs "to make an informed analysis of any potential risk to health" from the plant, Bolton said.

The plant was shuttered during summer 2005 for environmental violations but reopened with stricter environmental controls. Although it has long been the bane of Alexandria officials and nearby residents -- who say it emits a sooty substance that coats their windows and walls -- it has the backing of the Energy Department and other federal agencies, which have made it clear in a series of rulings that its operation is necessary for the security of the region's power grid.

Nonetheless, the city vows to continue its fight to close the plant.

Alexandria Mayor William D. Euille (D) called the letter "one more piece of strong evidence" that the plant is putting people at risk. He said the city will "continue to pursue all available options" to shut it down.

SDGE, 3 Workers Are Indicted Again

Charges concern asbestos removal

By Anne Krueger, Union-Tribune Staff Writer
San Diego Union-Tribune, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2007

San Diego Gas & Electric Co. and three workers were indicted yesterday for a second time on charges of violating safety standards while removing asbestos from pipes at a 16-acre Lemon Grove site.

A previous five-count indictment against the utility, two employees and a contractor was dismissed by a federal judge in November.

Attorneys for SDG&E said they had not seen the new indictment. They were jubilant when the previous case was dismissed and said they will work to get the new charges thrown out.

"We're confident we're going to win the case again," said SDG&E attorney Greg Vega. "This is really a waste of the taxpayers' money."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Melanie Pierson said the previous indictment was dismissed because U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw ruled it didn't contain the proper language regarding testing for asbestos. The new indictment added wording to correct that, she said.

The indictment, which essentially mirrors the previous charges, names SDG&E, along with employees Jacquelyn McHugh, a supervisor in the environmental department, and David Williamson, an environmental specialist. Kyle Rhuebottom, the project superintendent for contractor IT Corp., also was charged.

SDG&E faces up to a \$2.5 million fine if found guilty. The workers face a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each charge.

The utility and workers are expected to be arraigned March 9.

In a statement yesterday, SDG&E said that it followed proper testing procedures and that extensive tests showed no asbestos in the air or soil at the site.

"We will vigorously defend our company, and we stand firmly behind our employees involved in the project," the statement said.

The site at the border of Lemon Grove and San Diego's Encanto neighborhood housed SDG&E's Encanto Gas Holder Facility. In 2000, the utility began clearing the land, including 9.3 miles of pipe coated with asbestos, to sell the property to a developer.

Asbestos is not a risk when intact but can be hazardous - and is subject to government regulation - when it crumbles and becomes airborne. Prosecutors allege that SDG&E and its workers tried to save time and money by telling government inspectors that the pipes did not pose a risk.

A state agency found in 2004 that the land was free of hazardous asbestos and could be developed.

The county filed a civil lawsuit in August 2005 against Sempra Energy, SDG&E's parent company, alleging improper removal, but dropped it in March so it would not interfere with the federal prosecution.

In October 2006, Lemon Grove approved a 78-home project called Citrus Heights for the site, over the objections of residents who believe asbestos remains there.

[Editorial in the Tulare Advance Register, Thursday, March 1, 2007:](#)

Yokohl plan bears watching

Yokohl Ranch, the huge development proposed for the Yokohl Valley, is bound to appear intimidating at first glance.

The development would create an entire city in the middle of the Sierra foothills. That's a dramatic prospect.

There are dozens of things that need to be worked out for this to occur, and the county needs to protect its interests in the areas of traffic, air quality, water supply and quality, land use, etc.

Despite the huge impact it would have on the area, there might be advantages to this development. But the county will need to be aggressive and vigilant in protecting local interests.

Yokohl Ranch would be a planned unit development on 36,000 acres of rangeland in the Sierra foothills east of Exeter. The Boswell Co. owns the land and runs about 10,000 head of cattle in the Valley.

Boswell proposes building a planned, self-contained community over the next 20 to 30 years that would eventually include: 10,000 homes; a population of 50,000 people; a couple of resorts, including one oriented toward sports such as golf and tennis and another oriented toward riding, hiking and backpacking; schools, shopping and commercial centers; and its own public safety services.

Boswell said it would continue to use most of its land for ranching, and leave about 70 percent of its land as open space.

The company said it will supply the water for this development, taken from its extensive water rights throughout California. Boswell said Yokohl Ranch would provide for its own services -- utilities, public safety, infrastructure such as roads and water system -- and would even provide for schools, health care and support services.

Even if Boswell can keep all those promises, this is a project that bears close watching over the years ahead. Even if Yokohl Ranch does provide for its own water and services, and even if it does not cost Tulare County a dime from its general fund, the effect on the county and on the city of Visalia of 50,000 people will be considerable.

Those 50,000 will also bring their traffic, their garbage and sewage, their need for recreation and jobs and commerce. They will also bring their property and sales tax dollars, their businesses, their talents and a stable base as property owners.

Also, development in the foothills spares prime ag land. As long as proper environmental controls are observed, urban development in the foothills can actually be less intrusive than ranching.

Land-use planners around the state say that mega-developments such as Yokohl Ranch have merit. Tulare County, for instance, is projected to double in population over the next 40 years, from about 350,000 to about 700,000 people. Those people will have to go somewhere.

The San Joaquin Valley is one of the last relatively undeveloped areas in California, so that is where growth will occur.

Better that it occur on a large scale under a coherent plan that can be managed rather than in bits at a time where one piece of a community is built, then another, and things such as roads, schools and public safety take place later.

That is why Los Angeles entrepreneur Quay Hays proposes building a new city in Kings County that would eventually contain 150,000 people.

Similar mega-projects are being proposed in California in other areas that were previously considered uninhabitable.

The reason for these monster projects: The larger the scale, the easier it is to plan and build.

That is all very well as long as the planning and building takes place under strong controls by the county. The county also ought to insist this project include diversity in terms of affordable housing and services. And it must make sure it takes place within the county's growth plans.

Yokohl Ranch might be a great asset for Tulare County. It also might be a disaster. Or it might never be built. The outcome will depend on how closely we all pay attention to it and insist on the standards this county values.

[Modesto Bee, Guest Commentary, Thursday, March 1, 2007:](#)

Global-warming debate is over -- or is it?

By E Thomas McClanahan - McClatchy Newspapers

While it lasted, the global-warming debate was an entertaining free-for-all. Then last month the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change came out with its latest report. It was if someone had pounded a gavel. No more discussion, please. This case is closed.

Those of you still skeptical that human activity is the prime cause of global warming -- well, we've put up with your annoying behavior long enough. Go to your room. Be quiet. What's the matter with you anyway? People began comparing misguided skeptics to Holocaust deniers. Al Gore was a bit less direct. His choice of words: "global warming deniers."

A San Diego Union-Tribune media columnist, Carol Goodhue, said the controversy no longer deserved balanced coverage in the newspaper.

"Sometimes the facts are so overwhelming on one side that it's unfair and inaccurate to give equal weight to both sides," she wrote last week. "This is one of those times."

Heidi Cullen of the Weather Channel said TV weathercasters who displayed disbelief in human-caused warming should have their professional certification yanked.

I'm no scientist, and I'll acknowledge human activity may have played a role in the one-degree increase in global temperatures measured over the last century. But how significant was that role? And are other factors, such as solar activity, more dominant? I doubt that climate scientists, for all their professed certainty, know either, at least with enough certainty to justify demands that the activity causing the warming -- economic growth -- be squashed flat.

Severe limits on greenhouse gas emissions, which many propose, would undermine the economic future for millions of people.

Nor is the global-warming consensus as rock solid as some would have us believe. Last April, 60 Canadian scientists sent a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, urging a fresh look at the science backing up the Kyoto global-warming treaty.

"Observational evidence does not support today's computer climate models," the scientists wrote, "so there is little reason to trust model predictions of the future. Yet this is precisely what the United Nations did in creating and promoting Kyoto and still does in the alarmist forecasts on which Canada's climate policies are based."

Even the U.N. intergovernmental panel backed away from earlier predictions that the sea level would rise by 3 feet by the end of the century. The new prediction: 17 inches.

Like manias in financial markets, there are manias in environmental fears.

In the late 1960s, the great fear was overpopulation. "The battle to feed all humanity is over," declared the ecologist Paul Ehrlich, author of "The Population Bomb." "In the 1970s the world will undergo famines -- hundreds of millions of people will starve to death."

A few years later, the reigning fear was global cooling. Many became concerned about a disturbing trend in falling temperatures, beginning around 1940.

That trend reversed, obviously. But environmentalists have been predicting disasters of one sort or another -- often in a bullying tone of closed-minded finality -- for more than a generation. They see their attitude as "progressive" in some way, and science-based.

But the scientific mind is not incurious in the manner of, say, Heidi Cullen. The scientific impulse is to see settled beliefs as potential targets of opportunity.

For centuries, global temperature trends have ebbed and flowed in cycles some scientists now link to solar activity. From 200 B.C. to A.D. 600, temperatures trended upward. From 600 to 900, the trend was down, then up again until 1300. What became known as the Little Ice Age ran from 1300 to 1850. These shifts had little to do with greenhouse gases.

Oops, sorry. I forgot the debate's over.

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, March 1, 2007:](#)

Educate public about ACE train

In response to the article, "Panel eyes ACE rail expansion (Feb. 9, Page B-1): When the plan was discussed in 2000 to extend the rail service between Stockton and the Bay Area, it sounded like it was going to move forward quickly. Then there was delay after delay, and financing continues to be the major holdup. The real issue is whether or not people will use the service if it becomes a reality.

It will help with traffic congestion, alleviate a stressful commute and reduce air pollution. People who ride the Altamont Commuter Express train need to know how the ACE train schedule works and what their options are when they arrive at their destination. We should get the facts out there so commuters can make a commitment to use the ACE train. Get the commitment and move forward with the plan; the financing will follow.

JOHN D. BURLESON JR., Ripon