

Valley's status quo targeted

Partnership releases first of annual reports aimed at fixing problems in region

BY STEVEN MAYER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Oct. 9, 2007

It's no secret that the San Joaquin Valley lags behind the state in almost everything, from per capita income and university education levels to air quality and high school graduation rates.

Now a collaboration of hundreds of community, business and political leaders from across the valley is saying in no uncertain terms the status quo is not good enough.

On Monday, the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley -- made up of valley residents and eight Cabinet secretaries from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration -- released the first in a series of planned annual reports designed to identify the valley's problems and find ways to fix them.

"The status quo is not serving anyone particularly well," said Ashley Swearengin, the secretariat or lead executive of the partnership.

"We're working with what we've got," she said of the partnership. "And what we've got is a number of community leaders willing to make a tremendous commitment of time and energy toward the betterment of the valley. I don't think this could happen anywhere else in the state."

The partnership was formed by executive order in 2005. Its initial charge was to develop a set of recommendations to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for the residents of the San Joaquin Valley. Last year the governor and legislature provided \$5 million to begin the effort of implementing the plans.

The undertaking is huge, so ambitious it seems hardly possible. But organizers have assigned their goals to 10 separate work groups to make the effort manageable.

The topic areas include air quality; economic development; energy; health and human services; higher education and work force development; K-12 education; land use; and transportation.

The partnership consolidated the recommendations of the 10 work groups into six major recommendations:

- Grow a diversified, globally competitive economy supported by a highly skilled work force.
- Create a model K-12 public education system.
- Implement an integrated framework for sustainable growth.
- Build a 21st-century transportation system.
- Attain clean air standards.

It's still early in the 10-year plan, but Swearengin said participants have already jumped at opportunities to get the wheels rolling.

Like getting \$1 billion from last year's transportation bond dedicated to Highway 99, she said. Or nailing down a grant for \$5 million for a medical school at UC Merced; and establishing a regional vision for the support of a high-speed rail system.

Cleaning up the valley's air, building an educated and skilled work force and developing an efficient and clean transportation system are tall orders all by themselves.

Skeptics will ask whether the partnerships goals aren't just pipe dreams.

"We've gotten over that first hump of skepticism," Swearengin said. "People are very optimistic.

"Even as we were planning, we've been in the implementation mode since Day One," she added. "It's like building the airplane while in flight."

The partnership's goals

The valley's per capita personal income is about \$12,000 less than the state income rate. Goal: Meet or exceed state rate by 2016.

The valley's unemployment rate typically soars 3 to 4 percentage points higher than the average rate for the state. Goal: Achieve or improve upon state rate by 2016.

High school graduation rates in Kern and some other valley counties remain below state averages. Goal: Achieve or improve upon state average by 2016.

The percentage of families living below the poverty level is higher in valley counties than it is in the state as a whole. Kern's poverty rate is nearly 75 percent higher than the state. Goal: Achieve or improve upon state rate by 2016.

Only about 16 percent of valley residents over age 25 have a university degree. Statewide, that indicator is nearly 30 percent. Goal: Increase college graduation rate by 20 percent by 2016.

The valley's air has become infamous for its unhealthful qualities. Goal: Achieve EPA ozone standards by 2013.

One way of showing the efficiency of urban development is by charting the number of people per acre living on urban land. Urban areas in Kern and Tulare counties have significantly lower density levels than other valley counties. Goal: Increase density by 15 percent in three-quarters of communities by 2010.

Source: Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley

For more information about the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley or to read its 2007 annual report, go to www.sjvpartnership.org.

Tiny farming town has worst air quality

By Sonya Geis, Washington Post

In the Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

ARVIN -- This small farming community at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley has a distinction that often brings tears to the eyes of its residents. It is the smoggiest place in the United States.

Arvin averages 73 "bad air days" per year, more than any other city in the country. On those days, to drive over a mountain pass and into the city is to cross a brown line into a smelly, stinging haze. Schools hold recess in the gym. Wheezing children crowd the waiting room at the health clinic.

It is worse here than in Los Angeles, which averages one dangerously smoggy day per year. That occurs when the amount of ozone in the air surpasses federal standards of 0.08 parts per million. Those with means in Arvin sometimes drive the 100 miles into Los Angeles to breathe good air.

Most of the smog in Arvin is not home-grown. The city has one shabby main street and no major industry besides farming. Most of its 13,000 residents are Mexican farmworkers who pick cotton, grapes and oranges. One in three lives below the poverty line.

Arvin's air pollution comes from a stream of big rigs using Interstate 5 to the west. Smog also blows in from the Bay Area and Los Angeles. The bad air gets trapped in the San Joaquin Valley and drifts into Arvin.

"We basically have a bowl here that is made up of the mountains," said Seyed Sadredein, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District. "With the way the meteorology behaves, it's like we have a lid on that bowl all the time."

Scientists have linked ozone pollution to respiratory ailments. In Kern County, which includes Arvin, nearly one in six children has asthma, an incidence 44 percent higher than the national rate.

Ana Maria Corona feels the smog as a sickening pain. Before she moved from Los Angeles to Arvin in 2003, Corona had been hospitalized for asthma once. Since then, she has been in the

hospital seven times and had emergency treatment for asthma at a clinic more times than she can count. She has been on antibiotics for airway infections five times since January.

"My job is inside," Corona said, referring to the day care service she runs in her home. "I would try to get something different, but I can't go outside." Corona said she would like to move but cannot afford to do so.

The area's geography and weather patterns make a quick cleanup impossible, Sadredein said.

The pollution control district came under fire from environmentalists after it voted in April to request an extension from the federal government on its deadline for cleaner air. The Environmental Protection Agency had told the district to clean up by 2013, but it will take until 2024, Sadredein said.

The EPA did not consider meteorology when it set a target date, Sadredein said. Because pollutants can't blow away, "to meet this new standard we have to be the cleanest place on Earth."

Moreover, he said, "we looked at every possibility and found out even if money were no object, the technology does not exist today to meet the standard in the valley."

Raji Brar got elected to the district this year because she was outraged by that attitude. "It's so political, more than it's the technology," she said. "If you're told that your engine is OK for another 20 years, you're not going to change the technology. Necessity is the mother of invention."

At the Arvin Community Health Center, physician Ronnie Pasillao judges air quality by looking at the waiting room. "Usually we know when we get slammed with lots of patients in the morning -- OK, we're having a bad air day," he said. Most of the patients have coughs, wheezing, itchy skin or lung infections.

On a recent weekday, one of those patients was 21-month-old Diana Parra. She has had trouble breathing since she was born, her mother, Ana Parra, said in Spanish. The girl's pediatrician blames air pollution.

"We have thought about moving, but it's very difficult," Ana Parra said. "You would have to start from zero and build your life again. We just can't."

Mild summer brings less smog to San Francisco area

in the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

OAKLAND, Calif. — Mild summer temperatures produced lower smog levels in the San Francisco Bay area.

Ozone levels were over the federal health limit for only one day so far this year and officials don't expect that to occur again before the smog season ends Oct. 12.

Ozone can irritate lungs and eyes and ailments such as asthma. Last year, when heat waves struck, ozone in the nine counties surrounding San Francisco was over the limit for 12 days, the highest since 1998.

"We're very pleased with the good numbers," said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "But it shows that meteorology plays a role in air quality. You never know what the weather will bring."

Cooler temperatures also brought nearly \$4 million in savings for two days of free public transit that weren't needed. Officials are deciding whether to roll over the money to free rides for next year or do something else, said John Goodwin, spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Elsewhere, the Sacramento Metropolitan Area had 18 unhealthy smog days this year, compared to 42 last year, according to preliminary figures from the California Air Resources Board.

State figures show the number of air violations days dropped from 86 to 78 in the South Coast air district in the Los Angeles air basin, and from 86 to 64 days in the [San Joaquin Valley air basin](#).

Farming isn't for those in search of the simple life

Agency listing underscores complexity of ag regulations

By Reed Fujii - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Tuesday, October 09, 2007

If you think farming is the simple life, have another thought.

A new listing of federal, state and local agencies that farmers in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties may have to deal with runs 46 pages.

Agricultural regulation is rife with laws on top of laws, a multitude of agencies and armies of bureaucrats that often the result in more confusion and frustration than effective regulation, a farm labor expert said.

"It's a little bit like instead of scraping off the bad paint, it's like putting another layer on and another layer on and another layer on," said Gregory Billikopf, a labor management adviser with University of California Cooperative Extension, which issued the agency list.

The publication, Agencies and Agriculture 2007, is to serve area farmers as a directory of public agencies involved with farming. It was last updated in 1993.

"It is not as bad as it looks," Billikopf said Monday from his office in Modesto. Many of the listings include university agricultural programs and nonprofit groups, such as the California Farm Bureau Federation, Community Alliance with Family Farmers and National Farm Worker Ministry.

Still, a quick scan provides some idea of the regulatory burden faced by farmers.

Employment issues might be addressed by the Hour and Wage Division of U.S. Department of Labor, its Occupational Health and Safety Administration, Cal-OSHA (the state version) and California Employment Development Department, not mention the Social Security Administration, Internal Revenue Service and state Franchise Tax Board.

Environmental issues might fall to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state Department of Pesticide Regulation, Department of Water Resources and regional San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, just to name a few.

It quickly turns into a muddle, said Joe Valente, president of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau and manager for Kautz Farms in Lodi.

"We find out each agency has different opinions and different regulations and they don't always work," he said Monday by telephone.

For example, he said federal OSHA rules require notification if a worker injured on the job is hospitalized for 24 hours. Cal-OSHA calls for notification after eight hours of hospitalization.

And that just one example of a tangle of rules that changes over time as well.

"How do you keep up with all of this, whether it's federal or state or county?" Valente asked.

Billikopf noted that all employers must post federal minimum wages, even though they are lower and superseded by the higher California minimum wage, which must also be posted.

"You can be fined if you don't have the federal minimum-wage poster up."

"It truly is a disaster, in terms of regulations," Billikopf said. "Sometimes I get invited to other countries to give talks. I take a look at their labor code. I say the labor code is a disaster, it's terrible. There is only one place in the world that it's worse. And that's in the United States."

While that may help lighten the mood among the farm adviser's foreign hosts, it's no joke to Gerald L. Barton, a Ripon walnut grower.

"I guess my greatest concern is that in a world economy, when we're competing with other countries that don't begin to have 46 pages of people that regulate agriculture, we're at a disadvantage," he said. "We have a lot of plusses here, but overregulation is something that can kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

Acid rain case settled for \$4.6 billion

By LARA JAKES JORDAN , Associated Press Writer
in the Modesto Bee, S.F. Chronicle, L.A. Times, Contra Costa Times and the Merced Sun-Star,
Tuesday, October 9, 2007

WASHINGTON — A major power generator agreed in a court settlement Tuesday to spend \$4.6 billion to reduce chemical emissions blamed for spreading smog and acid rain across the Northeast.

Ending a prolonged legal battle with the government over air pollution, American Electric Power Co. agreed to major reduction in emissions at its power plants, a move that government lawyers said could save \$32 billion in annual health costs to treat lung problems caused by the pollution.

AEP said it had already committed to spending at least \$5 billion in so-called scrubbers and other tools to reduce emissions. Failure to comply could result in daily penalties of hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to the government attorneys, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the settlement. They also described the \$4.6 billion figure as conservative.

The settlement was unsealed in front of U.S. District Judge Edmund Sargus in Columbus, Ohio, where AEP is based and where a liability trial against the company had been scheduled to start Tuesday. The Justice Department and the Environmental Protection Agency were announcing the agreement in Washington later in the morning.

AEP's chairman, president and CEO, Michael Morris, called the settlement "an excellent outcome for our shareholders." Under the settlement's terms, AEP also will spend \$60 million in cleanup and mitigation costs to help heal polluted parkland and waterways.

"It eliminates the potentially significant financial risk of pursuing the litigation to its conclusion while still achieving the environmental improvements that both we and the government want," Morris said in a statement.

The EPA, a dozen environmental groups and eight states - Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont - brought the lawsuit against AEP in 1999 during the Clinton administration. They accused the energy company of rebuilding coal-fired power plants without installing pollution controls as required under the Clean Air Act.

In all, the government brought eight lawsuits against polluters accused of violating the Clean Air Act. Four are still ongoing, and AEP was considered the largest polluter of the bunch, government attorneys said.

The settlement marks one of the largest government fines in an environmental case. By contrast, Exxon Mobil Corp. estimates it has paid \$3.5 billion in cleanup costs, government settlements, fines and compensation for the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. The company is fighting an additional \$2.5 billion in criminal punitive fines.

The settlement sends a clear message that protecting public health means cutting emissions from coal-fired power plants, said Sandy Buchanan, executive director of Ohio Citizen Action, one of the groups that brought the 1999 lawsuit.

"Citizens of the five states and our downwind neighbors have just won an unprecedented public health victory," Buchanan said. "We regret that it took eight years and a legal two-by-four to get AEP's attention."

Environmentalists blame acid rain caused by coal-fired power plants for plaguing the Northeast over the last quarter-century, including damage that has eaten away at the Statue of Liberty and the Adirondacks mountain range in upstate New York. Smog and acid rain have been linked to sulfates and nitrates that are products of coal-fired plants.

AEP has more than 5 million customers in 11 states. It has agreed to clean up 46 coal-fired operations in 16 of the plants in its eastern system - a group likely to include at least nine plants in Ohio, Indiana, Virginia and West Virginia.

AEP has maintained that the work in at least some of its plants was routine maintenance that didn't fall under federal requirements for pollution controls.

The settlement requires AEP to:

- Spend \$4.6 billion on so-called scrubbers and other pollution controls to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide, which cause acid rain and smog.

- Cut nitrogen oxide emissions by 69 percent by 2016, and reduce sulfur dioxide emissions by 79 percent by 2018.

- Pay civil fines of \$15 million.

- Pay \$60 million in mitigation measures. The money includes \$21 million to reduce emissions from barges and trucks in the Ohio River Valley; \$24 million for projects to conserve energy and produce alternative energy; and \$3 million for the Chesapeake Bay, \$2 million for Shenandoah National Park and \$10 million to acquire ecologically sensitive lands in Appalachia.

AEP said it had not violated the Clean Air Act. The company had opposed the \$15 million civil penalty but did not have to admit guilt as part of the settlement, a spokesman said.

Big Utility Says It Will Settle 8-Year-Old Pollution Suit

By MATTHEW L. WALD and STEPHANIE SAUL
N.Y. Times, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

WASHINGTON, Oct. 8 — American Electric Power, one of the nation's largest utilities, is expected to announce that it has reached an agreement to settle a long-running lawsuit over emissions from its coal-fired power plants.

The suit was filed eight years ago by the Environmental Protection Agency, 8 states and 14 environmental organizations.

The company will spend more than \$1 billion on improvements to its plants over the next 12 years, will pay a civil penalty of \$15 million and will spend another \$60 million on environmental mitigation, a spokesman, Pat D. Hemlepp, confirmed Monday night, after The Associated Press carried a report on the settlement. A.E.P. will not admit to any wrongdoing, Mr. Hemlepp said.

The agreement, to be filed on Tuesday in Federal District Court in Columbus, Ohio, before Judge Edmund A. Sargus Jr., would settle a suit brought by the federal government in 1999. That suit,

and similar ones filed against other companies, argued that A.E.P. had violated a provision of the Clean Air Act called new source review.

Under that clause, a company undertaking major work on old power plants activates a requirement that the plants be brought up to current pollution standards. But A.E.P. argued that its work was maintenance and not covered by the provision.

As part of the settlement, Mr. Hemlepp said, the government agreed to allow A.E.P. to make "efficiency improvements" on other old plants without coming under the new source review provisions. That work includes replacing turbine blades to allow the plants to produce more electricity on the same amount of fuel. The company has held off on such changes because of regulatory uncertainty, he said.

He said the company had agreed to install devices that reduce emissions of sulfur, which causes acid rain, and of nitrogen oxides, which contribute to smog, at each of two twin coal burners in Rockport, in southern Indiana, one in 2017 and the other in 2019. It will also install antipollution equipment at a plant in Clinch River, Va., he said. The total value of the projects, in today's dollars, is \$1.6 billion, he said.

In addition, he said, the company had agreed to operate nitrogen oxide removal plants, in a process called selective catalytic reduction, year-round at three coal stations that already have the equipment but now use it only in summer smog season. Those are Mountaineer and Amos, both in West Virginia, and Muskingum River, in Ohio.

That will begin in 2008, he said, but added that "existing environmental regulations would have required us to do that by 2009 anyway."
A.E.P. operates in 11 states.

The Associated Press, citing unnamed sources, said the company would pay \$4.6 billion to reduce pollution. Mr. Hemlepp said that figure took into account money spent on projects that were completed, under way or had already been announced.

The announcement on the Rockport project, he said, was unusual for the company because it does not generally announce work that is a decade away.

The lawsuit against A.E.P. was part of a large enforcement action by the E.P.A. and the Justice Department that began in 1999. The government accused A.E.P. and six other giant electric companies in the Midwest and the South of defying antipollution regulations and illegally contaminating the air breathed by millions of Americans.

In the suits, the government said the companies wanted to prolong the lives of old plants without modernizing them.

"We were adamant at the time that we had not violated the provisions. That is still strongly our position," Mr. Hemlepp, the company spokesman, said last night.

Decision time approaching on green measures

Over a dozen bills await governor's signature as end of legislative session nears

By Paul Rogers, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Try-Valley Herald, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

Environmentalists and industry officials alike are holding their breath, waiting for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to act on a stack of environmental bills in the next few days that would do

everything from require green building standards on new homes and commercial buildings to banning a controversial type of chemicals in children's toys.

Schwarzenegger has until Sunday to sign or veto all the bills that the state Legislature sent him this year.

As in years past, Schwarzenegger is keeping both supporters and opponents of many of the top environmental issues guessing right until the end. His actions are harder to predict than previous governors, they say.

"Arnold is a celebrity. He loves some of these environmental issues," said John White, executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, an environmental group in Sacramento.

"He has great command of the subjects in a speech-making kind of way. Environmentalists see him, unlike with (former Gov.) Pete Wilson, as 'there's always a chance with Arnold that you might get a bill signed.' He is a centrist."

Last year Schwarzenegger won worldwide attention for signing Assembly Bill 32, a law requiring California to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent by 2020. An end run around the Bush administration, that measure was opposed by the state's oil industry, utilities and other business groups.

Yet he also disappointed environmentalists by vetoing a bill that would have set a \$30 fee on shipping containers coming into Los Angeles and Long Beach to fund programs to clean up diesel smog. The trucks and ships in the ports make them the largest stationary source of diesel pollution in California, linked to severe respiratory problems in thousands of people.

This year, there are roughly 15 bills on environmental issues that have reached the governor's desk.

"We hope that the governor is going to want to reinforce his environmental reputation by signing some of these key bills," said Bill Magavern, a lobbyist for the Sierra Club.

The bills include the following:

-AB1108, by Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco, which would ban chemicals called phthalates in toys and child care products designed for children under 3.

-AB821, by Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, would ban lead bullets for hunters in the range of the California condor, which extends roughly from the Bay Area to Los Angeles.

-AB1470, by Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, would create a \$250 million annual subsidy for solar hot water heaters with the goal of installing 200,000 by 2017.

Auditors rebuke air district for grants

By Denis Cuff, STAFF WRITER

Try-Valley Herald, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

The Bay Area's clean air agency awarded \$257,000 in grants to buy two new natural gas school buses to replace old diesel ones that belched soot as they carried Walnut Creek and Lamorinda students to sports games and field trips.

Good for the air. Good for the environment. Good for the students, school and pollution officials agreed.

But two years later, state auditors have rebuked the air district for the grant.

They said it didn't reduce air pollution enough.

Auditors checked six grants by the Bay Area agency to reduce diesel pollution and concluded five were ineligible because they did not meet a state cost-efficiency standard — based on dollars spent to remove each ton of soot particles.

Among those was money for the two new natural buses for the Acalanes Union High School District, and an Oakland garbage truck, auditors said.

The audit has spurred the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to tighten controls and add five people to watch over its \$43 million annual clean air grant and incentives program, which has grown rapidly.

The audit has also drawn more attention to the \$140 million a year in state Carl Moyer funds, which are paid out by local air districts statewide to owners of diesel trucks, buses, boats, ferries, plows and other equipment to clean up or upgrade.

"We believe our Carl Moyer program has been very effective in reducing diesel particulates and the health risks they present to the public," said Mark Ross, chairman of the Bay Area air pollution board.

"But some mistakes were made. Money was not spent appropriately. We're putting in place measures to correct that."

The district gets about \$16 million a year from the 8-year-old Moyer program, named after a scientist who collaborated with truckers, regulators and others to plan ways to cut diesel emissions.

In their first extensive review of Moyer programs in several air districts around the state, the California Air Resources handed out its harshest criticism to the nine-county Bay Area district.

The state auditors said the Bay Area pollution agency had many errors, omissions and gaps in its records and review of the grant applications.

"This led CARB to conclude that their overall Carl Moyer program operation is deficient, and there is a general misunderstanding of some of the minimal program requirements," the auditors wrote in a 29-page report this summer.

State grant money was spent too slowly and some grant recipients weren't required to put up some of their own money, the auditors said.

The air district also overestimated the air quality benefits of some projects.

Of most concern, the auditors said, the Bay Area district funded ineligible projects as a local match required to get the state Moyer funds.

The five ineligible projects amounted to some \$350,000 or more in misallocated money, the auditors estimated.

"Due to the high percentage of misspent funds among the sample of projects reviewed, CARB believes the total amount of misspent funds will be significantly higher," the auditors said.

Air district officials defended the new buses and other projects as effective in cleaning the air.

"We feel they were good projects," said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the air district. "But they should have been paid for with another pot of money, given the information we have now."

At CARB's request, the air district made an after-the-fact reallocation of grant money.

The district paid for the ineligible projects with other district clean air funds appropriate for those projects, officials said.

The Carl Moyer money was then reallocated to replace diesel engines in a construction company scraper.

In the end, "the public got the air quality benefits," said Jack Broadbent, the Bay Area air district's chief executive officer.

Broadbent said his agency had relied on CARB employees' verbal interpretation of eligibility guidelines.

"We relied on verbal understandings," he said. "Now we write everything down."

Last Tuesday, Broadbent and Ross traveled to Sacramento to present changes in their grant program to CARB leaders. One environmentalist said the Bay Area district must do more to deliver diesel reduction projects quickly and get more diesel equipment owners to seek the Moyer grants.

"The grants tend to go to the same large companies because they have the most savvy and they know about the program," said Diane Bailey, a scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "If you get more applicants, you can get cost-effective projects."

The district also should do more to get applications from small truckers who haul freight from the Port of Oakland through West Oakland neighborhoods burdened by truck pollution, Bailey said.

Broadbent agreed more applications would strengthen the program. He said his district is determined to interest more truckers, bus operators and other diesel equipment owners to seek grants.

Broadbent said air district grants and incentives are becoming more important as a way to cut diesel as well as global warming gases.

Because diesel engines can last decades, owners have little incentive to upgrade or replace them without a little help, he said.

"We will continue to write and enforce pollution rules, but we're also going to use incentives to encourage voluntary pollution reductions," Broadbent said. "It's going to take both."

Be green: Start Composting

By Alex Breitler - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Tuesday, October 9, 2007

Apple peels from the kitchen, shredded newspaper from the house and leaves from the backyard are among the secret ingredients that make Lee Miller's garden so grand.

He piles them all together, feeds them with air, water and soil, and invisible microorganisms do the rest of the work.

In a few months, Miller has wheelbarrows full of rich compost that he uses to plant flowers and veggies. He's been composting for 35 years at his rural home east of Stockton.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first in a monthly series on how to reduce your impact on the environment.

"Compost is a gardener's gold," Miller said.

City dwellers can try composting, too. And fall is a great time to start. How better to deal with those autumn leaves?

The basics

- Get a compost bin. You can find one at hardware stores or online for less than \$100. If you don't have the green, make your own bin with plastic, wire or wooden pallets. You want a bin about 3 feet long, 3 feet wide and 3 feet high.
- Gather DRY leaves, prunings or shredded paper. These are "brown" materials. You'll also need lots of "green" materials like freshly cut grass or fruit and vegetable scraps.
- Put your bin in an area with filtered sunlight and lots of shade — under a tree works well. Add 6 inches of the "brown" material and add water. Add 2 inches of "green" material, and scatter a thin layer of soil on top. Add more water. Repeat this process until your bin is full. The last layer should be "brown" material.
- Every seven to 10 days, turn and mix the pile, and add water so that the material is like a moist sponge. If the pile feels warm, composting is taking place. Temperatures inside can reach 140 degrees as biochemical reactions occur.
- As the pile shrinks over time, add more material. Within three or four months, the pile will consist of dark, crumbly compost that can be used as soil in your yard or garden.

What are the cons to composting?

- Some people say it smells. This might be because you've added too much water, or there's too much nitrogen.
- Neighbors might consider it unsightly. Place the bin in a less obvious spot.
- Leave out meat, bones, oily foods and dairy products; these might attract flies and rodents.

I just leave my leaves on the ground, or put them in the trash.

- Fall leaves can smother a lawn and kill the grass. Allowing haulers to take your leaves away causes [air pollution](#), and the leaves might take up lots of room in landfills. Burning them also [contributes to the San Joaquin Valley's poor air quality](#).

What else can I throw in the pile?

- brown materials: These are carbon-rich and provide energy for microbes. Consider using straw, coffee filters, bread, egg shells, lint, sawdust and hair.
- green materials: These are nitrogen-rich and provide protein. Try green weeds or leaves, coffee grounds and barnyard manure.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, Tuesday, October 9, 2007](#)

Local approach for regional issues just makes sense

A regional partnership formed to address the historic neglect of valley needs and interests continues its work, and in the process may offer us an alternative model of governance that might work a great deal better than the dysfunctional system in place in Sacramento.

The California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, which held its annual meeting last week, already has achieved some impressive results, pulling in millions in funding for job training efforts and helping to secure \$1 billion of state bond money as a down payment on improvements to the crumbling Highway 99, the main transportation artery of the valley.

The 30 members of the partnership -- state and local officials, business leaders, civic group representatives and activists of various stripes -- are broken into committees to address broad issues such as job creation, transportation, air quality, water problems and others.

The upshot of their work to this point is a 10-year plan to improve the economy of the valley, its environment and to address the many quality of life issues that face us.

By contrast, the people elected to address those very issues in Sacramento continue to dither and posture, spending their time on re-election efforts, campaign fund raising, rewarding their special interest backers with lucrative legislation and wallowing in petty squabbles.

Perhaps it's time to devolve most of the power vested in the governor's office and the Legislature onto a series of regional agencies -- covering multiple counties with shared interests and needs -- and leave Sacramento with a stripped-down agenda.

We have long argued for more regional efforts to address our problems. Many -- if not most -- of the issues we face cut across the artificial lines of cities and counties. Water and air, transportation, economic development -- all these have impacts without regard to local boundaries, and ought to be addressed accordingly.

There are a number of gratifying examples of regional cooperation under way, beyond the work of the partnership. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spans eight counties. The San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Planning Process covers the same turf and is affiliated with the Great Valley Center in Modesto, another leader in regionalism's rise.

In Stanislaus County, the nine mayors and some county supervisors have been meeting to try to better coordinate land-use planning. Dire money shortages are forcing rural fire districts to talk about working more closely together, possibly even consolidating.

Not all of our officials believe in regional approaches, but there are some promising signs of what they can do. We ought to go with what works.

Our Point

The San Joaquin Valley partnership underscores the potential for regional cooperation and action; perhaps the politicians in Sacramento can learn from what's going on here.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Tuesday, October 9, 2007](#)

When you move into the country, be prepared to adapt

By MARCIA BOER

The Salida Hulling Association is a cooperative, owned by member growers. It is another aspect of farming, and a way for growers to control their product. It is not a processing facility. It is the first step after harvest, for the removal of hulls and shells. Nuts are then sent to other facilities for slicing, dicing, flavoring, etc., and then on, eventually, for distribution to consumers.

I understand the opposition to the huller relocating to Dakota Avenue and Highway 132 (Maze Boulevard), but I don't understand how families can move into an agricultural area, have their ranchette and then try to control the area around them. They moved into an active farming area, but they don't want any changes.

Farming is a living, breathing entity, and as such it is always changing.

The huller proposal has been addressed at many meetings. The planning commission has approved the location. Still, the neighbors are not happy, and they filed an appeal to the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors.

Dakota Avenue is a county road that feeds onto Highway 132. It already has a lot of traffic. Do the opponents believe that country roads should be used only by the people living along them? Aren't public roads free for anyone to travel?

Trucks from other hulling facilities already travel this road. These include almond and walnut hullers. Hullers should be located near the orchards where the nuts are grown; that only makes sense economically.

If we could limit the traffic on a road based on our likes and dislikes, and our perception of what amount of traffic would be allowable, we would all live on private lanes.

Hulling almonds is not a year-round operation. Our harvest period usually lasts for no more than 90 days, depending on the weather. Salida Hulling studied several sites and chose this one.

Like it or not, we do not live in a static environment. Our rural neighborhood is experiencing growth, like all others. As more and more families move into our farming areas, we have to adapt, often to meet the ever-increasing restrictions on our businesses. We deal with dust control permits and plans. We upgrade our equipment to [meet air pollution control requirements](#). We change our methods of farming to conserve water.

We adapt to survive. If we do not or cannot adapt, we sell to someone who will.

Ranchette owners also need to be prepared to adapt to changes in the farming area where they choose to live.

Boer's farming family grows almonds, but is not a member of Salida Hulling Association. E-mail her at columns@modbee.com.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Oct. 9, 2007:](#)

Regulating dairies

Fresno County Supervisor Henry Perea's commentary Oct. 4 regarding the need for stronger county regulation of mega-dairies was well thought-out and clear. If Fresno County wants to protect its groundwater and air quality, new and stricter regulations are needed.

On Sept. 20, the chair of the Fresno County Planning Commission, without asking for clarification of an issue regarding wastewater lagoon liners, chose to substitute the county staff's recommendations with the less stringent standard favored by the dairy representatives. This was done despite the efforts of two commissioners to adopt the staff recommendations, and the fact that the state Regional Water Quality Control Board has found the old lagoon-liner standard to be inadequate.

I commend Supervisor Perea for advocating that Fresno County must require higher standards than currently exist for mega-dairies if it wants to protect the groundwater quality and respiratory health of its citizens. Furthermore, if local political leaders cannot protect our water and air, how can Fresno attract the upscale businesses so often spoken of by these same people?

Those who desire clean water and healthy air should attend the Fresno County Board of Supervisors meeting on Oct. 23, and support Supervisor Perea's advocacy on our behalf.

Robert Merrill, Fresno

[Modesto Bee, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, October 9, 2007](#)

Dirty trucks coming from Mexico

American trucking businesses are getting %*#@'d, period! I understand that there are funds available to replace "dirty trucks." OK. Then I hear that President Bush's administration has opened up U.S. highways and roads to trucks and drivers from Mexico.

Talk about your dirty trucks. Are these trucks even inspected? Are they required to pay registration fees? Are the drivers trained and qualified to drive in the United States? Can they

read the road signs? Not to mention, more air pollution, more accidents, more traffic and more wear and tear on our highways and roads. Who will pay? U.S. citizens in the form of higher taxes.

Does the Bush administration even listen to the voices of the American voters? This problem needs to be corrected now.

KEN KUNDE, Manteca