

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Wednesday, June 25, 2008:](#)

Our View: Healthy Air Living time

Valley air pollution district launches new, more aggressive educational effort.

Spare the Air days have had their day. Now it's time for Healthy Air Living. The Valley air district is about to embark on a new, more aggressive effort to get residents to make the sort of lifestyle changes we must have in order to have cleaner air to breathe.

The new program will kick off with Healthy Air Living Week, July 7 to 13.

It's not that Spare the Air was a failure. That program did a great deal to create awareness of the scope and difficulty involved in cleaning the Valley's polluted air. But it was, in the words of the air district's director, "episodic" in nature, tied to the very worst air days in the region.

Healthy Air Living, by contrast, will seek to promote changes in everyday behavior.

Its major goals:

Reduce the number of vehicle miles traveled through the Valley each day. The district will issue a challenge to Valley residents, business and other organizations to "Commute green in the San Joaquin," by encouraging the use of mass transit, car and van pools and greater reliance on bicycles, electric scooters, walking and telecommuting.

Reduce emissions from equipment and other operations.

Reduce emissions when air quality is poor. An example might be shifting employee schedules so more work is performed in the early morning and evening, when the air quality is better, and reducing activity when pollution peaks.

Encourage more use of alternative fuels and equipment, raise energy efficiency.

There's something for everyone, including a contest for children to create art for a calendar to be distributed next year to Valley schools. Businesses and individuals will be asked to pledge changes in their behavior, and by doing so will get a chance to win a Toyota Prius hybrid car.

One new wrinkle is a focus on faith-based organizations, a resource that hasn't been effectively tapped in the clean air effort.

There has been progress in cleaning the Valley's air, but it's not enough. We won't get to the point of having clean air without major changes in the way we live, work and play. Mostly that means getting out of our cars, at least some of the time, and using them more efficiently when we must drive.

But that's not all. It means continuing to eschew wood fires on bad air days in the winter, being careful about storing paint and other materials that give off smog-forming chemicals, using propane or natural gas for barbecues.

It means planning our communities with air quality in mind -- reducing sprawl and making neighborhoods less dependent on vehicles. It means improving mass transit and building alternatives to vehicle travel, such as high-speed rail.

It means thinking harder about the effects we have on our environment and then acting on that knowledge. It means "Healthy Air Living." Start now, and don't stop.

Officials warn of poor Central Valley air due to wildfires

S.F. Chronicle and Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Fresno, CA (AP) -- Wildfires raging across California are being blamed for unhealthy air quality throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

The heavy smoke and particulate pollution prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a warning on Tuesday morning declaring the air in the central region "unhealthy for everybody."

Delta breezes are being blamed for pushing smoke from fires in Napa and Solano counties into the San Joaquin Valley.

Officials are urging residents with asthma and other respiratory ailments to stay indoors and limit outdoor activity. Exposure to particulate pollution can cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis.

Fires blow smoky air into San Joaquin Valley; conditions bad for everyone, officials say

By Ken Carlson

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Because of the wildfires in Northern California, area residents were breathing unhealthy air Tuesday and conditions are expected to be the same today.

The smoke drifting into the valley caused air quality officials to update the air pollution rating from unhealthy for sensitive groups to unhealthy for everyone in Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties.

When the pollution is this bad, everyone may begin to experience health effects, and sensitive groups, including senior citizens, young children and people with chronic health conditions, may experience more serious health problems, according to health experts.

Merced County had the worst air pollution in the eight-county area covered by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The level of air pollution was third-highest in Stanislaus County.

Double whammy

The wildfires are creating two types of air pollution. One is the tiny particles that are so small they can get deep into the lungs. The fires also are sending emissions into the air that react with sunlight to form ozone.

Excessive ozone has a corrosive effect on the lungs.

"Unfortunately, we have also seen our ozone levels perk up in the last few days," said Shawn Ferreria, a senior air quality specialist for the valley air district. Merced County has recorded the highest ozone readings in the valley this week.

The valley is getting smoke from all directions because of fires in Tuolumne, Calaveras, Mariposa, Monterey, Napa, Solano and other counties in Northern California, plus a grass fire that has burned 800 acres north of Grayson in western Stanislaus County. The 10 to 15 mph wind forecast for today won't rid the valley of smoke; the conditions are expected to persist until the fires are put out, Ferreria said.

To make matters worse, a ridge of high pressure building over California is expected to bring warmer weather and stagnant air Friday and through the weekend, Ferreria said. That could keep the air quality in the unhealthy range and could push it toward "very unhealthy" in some parts of the valley, he said.

Very unhealthy air has occurred a few times in the southern part of the valley since the air district was created in 1990. It triggers a health warning that everyone may experience more serious health effects.

Exposure to particle pollution can cause serious health problems by aggravating lung disease, causing asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, and increasing the risk of respiratory infections. Short-term exposure to particle pollution has been linked to heart attacks and arrhythmia, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Stay inside, reduce activity

Residents are advised to use caution until the smoky conditions are alleviated. Everyone should reduce exposure and strenuous activities, and that advice especially applies to older adults and children.

The valley district uses an air quality index (AQI) to report daily air pollution. It's based on a calculation of five major pollutants: ozone, particles, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide.

On Tuesday, Stanislaus County had an air quality index of 176 and the same is forecast for today, mainly because of particle pollution. An AQI from 151 to 200 is considered unhealthy; 201 to 300 is very unhealthy and above 301 is hazardous.

Merced County had an AQI of 187 on Tuesday and 185 is forecast for today. Air district officials said the high AQI in Merced County is partly because of stricter health standards for ozone pollution that went into effect in May.

Health officials have wondered whether the smoky air would send people to emergency rooms with breathing problems or other health issues. But no hospitals have reported an increase in patients.

"The number of people coming in has been consistent for the past few days," said Catherine Larsen, spokeswoman for Memorial Medical Center in Modesto. "Our emergency department has been monitoring it pretty closely because they were concerned with that as well."

Susan Mendieta, a spokeswoman for Oak Valley Hospital District in Oakdale, said she checked with the district's community health centers and the hospital emergency room, and no one reported a spike in patients.

"What we are hoping is that people are heeding the warnings and being cautious, and taking the steps of staying indoors and drinking lots of fluids," she said.

No relief for S.J. county residents

Smoke envelops the Valley for a second straight day, and fires are so widespread, wind shifts won't help

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

Stockton Record, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

STOCKTON — Runners walked to the finish line and parents pulled their children from outdoor summer camps on Tuesday as an acrid shroud of smoke enveloped San Joaquin County for the second straight day.

Don't expect any improvement today, the National Weather Service warned, even if the winds shift.

"There are so many fires that it doesn't matter which way the wind blows," said Johnnie Powell, a

weather service meteorologist in Sacramento. "That's the problem. If it switched the other way, then you'd get smoke from the mountains."

Delta breezes from the west normally cool down county residents and push nasty pollutants farther south in the San Joaquin Valley, where the air is typically dirtier.

This time, however, the cleansing breeze is poisoned with smoke from a blaze northeast of Napa. The smoke wafted into the northern San Joaquin Valley on Sunday and Monday, and by Tuesday afternoon, it had spread all over the flatlands.

"We're looking worse. Air quality is definitely deteriorating," said Shawn Ferreria, a specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The air quality is some of the worst San Joaquin County has seen in at least the past two years, he said. Levels of tiny particulate matter - the most dangerous form of pollution - are 10 times or more what they would normally be this time of year and are well above federal standards.

That prompted officials to issue a red alert Tuesday throughout the Valley. While many health advisories apply only to senior citizens, children or those with existing health problems, a red alert is for everyone.

Even the healthiest among us may have breathing problems.

That's why a group of stroller-pushing moms who gather at Legion Park most mornings for a cardiovascular workout decided to slow it down a bit, said organizer Leigh Hobson. Their 45-minute run turned into a walk.

They also canceled a play date that had been planned for Tuesday.

"Everyone understands. We're just hoping things get better," said Hobson, whose son suffers from asthma and had fits of coughing on Tuesday.

Summertime programs for children were not canceled but in some cases were moved indoors.

Instead of swimming or maybe playing tennis, kids at Stockton's Summer Discovery Camp found themselves playing indoor games at the Oak Park Senior Center, said Sue Christy, a spokeswoman with the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

Lodi's Summer Safari Day Camp at Lodi Lake marched on as scheduled, but some parents arrived early to pick up their children, while others kept their kids home all day.

"The parents are making those decisions," city spokesman Jeff Hood said.

Tiny particulate matter, known as PM2.5, is typically a greater problem during the winter, when residents from Stockton to Bakersfield light up their wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

The particles are so small that they lodge deep in the lungs and cannot be exhaled. They aggravate asthma and can trigger nonfatal heart attacks.

Just last month, state officials said an estimated 2,000 to 2,900 people in the Valley die prematurely each year due to PM2.5.

Another hazardous pollutant, ozone, has crept up in recent days as the Valley haze bakes under a hot sun.

Smoky skies will stay with us until the winds die or the fires are squashed, Powell said. Firefighters have said lightning strikes last weekend sparked about 800 blazes statewide, including a 600-acre fire in the Stanislaus National Forest that could spew smoke into the Valley should the winds shift.

"Usually it's just one or two big fires, and if the wind blows in the right direction, you can get away from it," meteorologist Powell said.

This time, he said, there's nowhere to run.

Oliver fire still roams free

By DJ Becker

Madera Tribune, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

OAKHURST - The Oliver fire is continuing to burn in the rugged terrain and thick pine woodlands above the Ponderosa Basin. The wildland fire, one of more than 800 set by nearly 8,000 "dry lightning" strikes in the northern half of the state, has consumed more than 1,000 acres and was zero percent contained as of Tuesday afternoon, according to fire officials.

No injuries or structure fire damage have been reported.

While calm wind conditions are helping in fire suppression efforts, a weather and temperature inversion is causing the heavy smoke from the multiple area fires to remain trapped on the ground.

Dense smoke blanketed Oakhurst and surrounding valleys Tuesday, creating conditions of limited visibility on roadways. Smoke from the fires was reaching the valley floor as far south as the intersection of state routes 145 and 41, and was affecting air quality in Madera County and northeast Fresno County.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a warning Tuesday morning that declared air in the central region "unhealthy for everybody." The district urged residents with asthma and other respiratory ailments to stay indoors and limit outdoor activity.

Convoys of fire engines, support vehicle and fire-fighting equipment could be seen heading north on SR 41. A steady line of recreational vehicles, cars and pickup trucks pulling campers and boats were moving southbound on SR 41, away from the smoke and fire.

Fire information officer Sue Exline of the Sierra National Forest said the Oliver fire could be burning for another week or more depending on weather conditions.

The fires began Saturday, in road-less remote areas of heavy brush and pine woodlands in areas above Oakhurst and Mariposa.

"About five residents have been evacuated, but the majority of the (Ponderosa Basin) residents are not threatened at this time," Exline said.

"We have been very fortunate to not have any wind on this fire. If we had wind-driven fire it would be an entirely different situation. It's what we call a vegetation and topography driven fire - very steep slopes, with a lot of pine trees and very flammable brush and thick under growth," Exline said.

Wind conditions were light, about 2 to 5 mph with temperatures in the 90s.

Exline said the fire had burned within about 300 yards of a few homes on the north side of the Ponderosa Basin, and bulldozers had removed the fuel, and stopped the forward movement of the fire in those areas last night.

Residents voluntarily evacuated from the north end of the Ponderosa Basin subdivision, just below the current fire lines.

"People that live in the mountains live with these conditions. Having defensible space (100 feet completely cleared around their house) is the one way to be sure their house is protected," Exline said.

According to fire service information, the weekend weather forecast indicated the possibility of higher winds and more lightning strikes.

"It's really critical we get these fires boxed in with (bulldozer fire) lines and hold (the fires) where they are, so they won't be a threat to the community," Exline said.

Lodi area likely to endure smoke for a while

By News-Sentinel Staff

Lodi News Sentinel, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Another day passed Tuesday as smoke remained in Lodi and throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

That brown haze, caused by a number of fires burning in Northern California, isn't expected to go anywhere in the immediate future, if wind forecasts hold up.

The heavy smoke and particulate pollution prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a warning on Tuesday morning declaring the air in the central region "unhealthy for everybody."

Officials are urging residents with asthma and other respiratory ailments to stay indoors and limit outdoor activity. Exposure to particulate pollution can cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis.

Despite the warnings, several local baseball teams kept to their schedules Tuesday playing in the haze.

Firefighters did make progress overnight on the blazes, including one in Napa and Solano counties that is likely causing to most of Lodi's haze.

But winds are expected to remain as they have — about 8 to 10 mph from the west — until Thursday night, according to private forecasting firm AccuWeather.com. As of late Tuesday afternoon, the forecasting service was predicting the wind to shift to the south around 9 or 10 p.m. Thursday.

The National Weather Service was predicting smoke to remain until 11 p.m. Thursday.

A wind shift would move the smoke out of the valley, bringing in southern air from the less smoky half of the state.

Fire control is also a factor in the amount of smoke drifting through the air, and by Tuesday morning the "Wild Fire" near Fairfield had been 80 percent contained. By 7:30 p.m. the fire had burned 4,089 acres, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL Fire) and is being fought by 540 firefighters.

Heat, fires stir mix for unhealthy air

By Joe Johnson

Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

As the heat continues to rise in the Central Valley and fires burn across California, air-pollution officials warn that local residents may be at risk as summer winds blow harmful chemicals through the area. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is warning that monitoring stations throughout the Valley are picking up increasing levels of particulate matter, or air pollutants, wafting through the breeze, caused by the many fires occurring all across the state.

"We're also having problems with increasing ozone levels," said Shawn Ferreria, senior air quality specialist with the control district. "Unfortunately, with all of the particulate matter being released from the fire and the (noxious fumes) trapped in the bowl we have here in the Valley, you add a little sun and the area just fills up with emissions."

A control district monitoring station in Corcoran detected moderate levels of particulate matter yesterday afternoon, while the level of ozone in the air was enough to be qualified as "unhealthy for sensitive groups," according to Ferreria. However, preliminary reports this morning show that the level of particulate matter in Kings County has nearly doubled in the past 24 hours, inching the area closer to what officials call the "red category."

"What happened is that smoke emissions are starting to fan out over the whole Valley," Ferreria said. "If it continues, you'll be able to see or smell the smoke around you when you go outside. I biked to work this morning and a couple times I could even notice it. It's getting down to the Valley floor now."

"We need things to come together. We need winds and we need vertical dispersions to flush the Valley out, but we are being overwhelmed by these fires. We'd be in a moderate quality position without the fires right now, but with so much going on right now, we run the risk of having long-term poor air quality."

Officials are reporting that more than 800 fires were burning across California on Monday, especially in the northern regions, where a recent storm with numerous ground lightning strikes sparked several blazes.

"We are seeing late-summer fire behavior, and here it is only June," Kings County Fire Chief Jim Kilner said. "Normally the coastal regions are the last areas of the state to dry out and see fires, and already we are fighting them there. It's scary stuff. Our brush is tinder dry, we are running out on a lot of calls, and it's getting really bad."

The northern regions of the state are also where most of the wind entering the Central Valley is coming from.

"The prevailing winds lately are just the normal flow related to geography, heading out of the northeast and draining out of the mountains and the foothills," local meteorologist Jim Bentzien said. "Unfortunately, we don't see any forecasting changes in the future."

The National Weather Service Center in Hanford is reporting no chances of rain in the near future, with temperatures to remain in the mid 90s and increasing steadily as the weekend approaches.

The control district warns that serious health problems can result from the harmful pollutants in the air, including aggravated lung disease, asthma attacks and acute bronchitis. This particulate matter can also increase the risk of respiratory infections and cause severe damage to people with heart disease, even with just short-term exposure.

People are advised to limit their exposure to the harmful air by remaining indoors to avoid prolonged exposure, and to avoid strenuous activities or heavy exertion wherever possible.

But Ferreria maintains that people should be cautious, not panicked.

Air warning will be in effect again Wednesday

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

A warning first issued Monday for unhealthy air in Tulare County and the rest of the Central Valley will remain in effect today.

The warning - in its third day - by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also affects Kings, Fresno, Tuolumne, Merced, Mariposa, Madera and Kern counties.

It stems from hundreds of lightning-caused fires that broke out over the weekend in the Northern California, Napa Valley and Santa Clara areas, and about 40 fires still burned Tuesday evening, said Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the Pollution Control District.

Smoke and ash particulate blowing south could adversely affect people with lung and heart problems as well as some other conditions.

Officials warn that elderly people and children should avoid prolonged exposure to the poor air and avoid strenuous activities or heavy exertion.

"It is a concern, and things may get worse before they get better," Ferreria said. "But, people should just try to stay alert and keep up-to-date on what is happening. The more information you have, the better."

The health cautionary statement issued by the control district will remain in effect until all fires are extinguished. Updates on current local air status can also be checked at the Hanford National Weather Service Center's official Web site.

Breathing un-easy: Officials warn of disastrous health effects from fires

By MADDALENA JACKSON, The Sacramento Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

As the Central Valley and Northern California areas settled into what promises to be a week of hazy air, more attention was being paid to what that could mean in terms of health.

"There are almost 1,000 fires in Northern California," said Daniel Berlant of Cal Fire. The smoke "is a combination of all these fires." He checked his numbers. "983 fires." Air quality is determined by forcing air through a very fine mesh and trapping tiny particles that contribute to the murk.

If the filters straining Sacramento Valley air looked like dirty shirts, everyone could breathe a sigh of relief. But when they look like they fell in the mud, it's time to worry about breathing at all.

"During the San Diego fire, they'd come back just black to the point where they just couldn't hold any more particulate matter," said Gennet Paauwe, spokeswoman for the California Air Resources Board. "That's a reflection of what you're breathing into your lungs." Jeff Cook, Air Resources emergency response coordinator, expressed "no doubt" that if one looked at the filters under current conditions, "you would see very dark brown, which is typical of high concentration." It is too early to know the full extent of health effects from smoke in the Valley

Bart Ostro, chief of air pollution epidemiology within the state's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, expects a repeat of the 2006 fire season, when data showed increases in asthma attacks and what looked like increases in hospitalization for heart disease. "It's likely that we'd see something pretty similar," he said

Most of the hospitals in the Sacramento region reported no increase in the number of patients complaining of air-related problems on Tuesday. Mercy San Juan Hospital reported that about two dozen people had complained of health problems from the hazy air, although details were not available.

Smoke is what happens when a fire doesn't burn perfectly, spitting out miniscule particles of soot, toxins, and metals that could hide easily in the end of a human hair. Smoldering fires are the worst.

When we take a breath of smoky air, large particles attempt to turn the corners of our airways and thud into the walls, unable to overcome their own inertia. Smaller particles swirl in as a mist, settling onto any surface they touch. Mid-size particles, able to navigate the tortuous paths of the lungs, go deep into our airways and settle there.

Our bodies try to evict the dirt, sending us into fits of coughing and sneezing, as we blow our noses and reflexively swallow to clear our lungs of invaders.

Particles too deep in our lungs to catch a ride up to the throat and then on to the stomach on the cleansing elevator of mucus meet the body's predators.

These cells, called macrophages, police the lungs for bacteria and harmful objects. Drawn to the area by chemical distress calls or already on the scene, macrophages defeat harmful particles by swallowing them whole.

But things can easily go wrong. And it isn't always known how or why.

Particles and heart and lung conditions go hand in hand, explained Kent Pinkerton, director of the UC Davis Center for Health and the Environment.

Researchers try to correlate particle concentration with observed changes like hospital or emergency room admissions or the number of asthmatics, Pinkerton said

"A lot of our work is really driven by looking at what happens in the human population, and yet you know there really isn't any mechanism to define what is occurring." There are many possible causes of damage toxic particles that kill macrophages and damage cells and DNA, particles so fine that they sink into the walls of the lung, others that set off chain reactions that scar and inflame the respiratory system and yet others that trigger responses in the brain that can affect the heart or trigger asthma attacks.

Ostro, of Environmental Health Hazards Assessment, said short-term exposure to smoke inhalation can result in heart attack, increased bronchitis, reduced lung function and other physical problems, in addition to work and school time lost.

"The more serious effects are on people who already have pre-existing conditions," Ostro added.

Asthma is another serious condition potentially caused or aggravated by smoke. Asthma is a general label for three symptoms occurring simultaneously swelling airways, tightening muscles around the lungs, and extra fluids in the airways all shrinking the area available for breathing.

"I think the safety alerts (about how to avoid smoke-related problems) are very logical, very appropriate for those who may be very young, advanced in age, or have existing respiratory or cardiovascular conditions," Pinkerton said.

Experts advocate caution, but not panic.

"It's really important to keep in mind that the majority of us who are exposed to smoke particles will do just fine," Pinkerton said. "We might experience mild wheezing, mild chest tightness certainly if we are exercising

It's those people who are very exquisitely sensitive where it might be enough to put them into the hospital."

Fires continue to burn across Mariposa County, state The blazes will probably not be contained until early next week.

By LOUIS GALVAN, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Eight homes were evacuated Tuesday as blazes that have consumed about 1,800 acres in Mariposa County ran ahead of a small army of firefighters.

Other homeowners have been given notice to prepare to evacuate.

Meanwhile, smoke has caused air quality to deteriorate across the San Joaquin Valley.

Firefighters don't expect to contain the fires -- caused by lightning Saturday -- until Monday or Tuesday, said Trudy Tucker, a public affairs specialist for the Bass Lake Ranger station. That means more days of smoke settling in the Oakhurst and Ahwahnee areas -- and warnings of bad air.

For today, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District forecast predicts an Air Quality Index of 160, or "unhealthy," in Fresno County. The district predicts an Air Quality Index of 185 for Merced County.

That's a huge change from Sunday, when the index was 54, or "moderate," but just four points over the "good" range. By Monday, the index had climbed to 142, or "unhealthy for sensitive groups." Tuesday's reading was tentatively gauged at an "unhealthy" 161.

The electrical storm unleashed nearly 8,000 lightning strikes that set more than 800 wildfires across Northern California -- a rare example of "dry lightning" that brought little or no rain but plenty of sparks to the state's parched forests and grasslands.

The weekend storm was unusual not only because it generated so many lightning strikes over a large geographical area, but also because it struck so early in the season and moved in from the Pacific Ocean.

Such storms usually don't arrive until late July or August and typically form southeast of California.

Thousands of firefighters battled the blazes Tuesday from the ground and air. The fires have scorched tens of thousands of acres and forced hundreds of residents to flee their homes, though few buildings have been destroyed, said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Even before the lightning struck, California had already seen an unusually large number of destructive wildfires that had burned nearly 90,000 acres, compared with 42,000 acres during the same period last year, according to Cal Fire officials. The fire season typically does not peak until late summer or early fall.

"This doesn't bode well for the fire season," said Ken Clark, a meteorologist in Southern California with AccuWeather.com.

There were more than a dozen lightning strikes across southern Mariposa County in the Sierra National Forest. Fires there include the Oliver fire in the Ponderosa Basin, which has burned about 1,300 acres; the Silver Knob fire near Cedar Brook, which has burned about 400 acres; and the Westfall fire near Fish Camp, which has burned about 50 acres.

The Mariposa fires have put about 150 structures at risk, mainly in the Ponderosa Basin area, although none has been reported damaged, Tucker said.

The spreading Oliver Fire forced evacuations Tuesday afternoon at eight homes in the Ponderosa Basin in Mariposa County. The homes were on Aurora Court, on the north side of Chowchilla Mountain road, a National Forest Service spokesman said. By 6 p.m., the blaze was reported to be 15 percent contained.

Light winds have allowed firefighters to make progress fighting the fires, officials said. The Westfall fire was reported about 50 percent contained, Tucker said.

Meanwhile, she said, about 400 people are battling the blazes in an effort that includes 11 crews with 20 people each, 50 engines, two helicopters, two air tankers, one air spotter and eight bulldozers.

All roads and trails in the area are open, with the exception of Chowchilla Mountain Road, which is open to residents only. That road is closed from Wawona to Ponderosa Basin.

The poor air quality is likely to persist in the Valley until the fires are extinguished, the air district says.

On Monday, Stockton bore the brunt of the smoke, with a large part of it coming from a six-square-mile fire in Napa and Solano counties.

On Tuesday, however, the burden was more widespread.

"Now, with the way the wind flow is, it's smeared that smoke all over the Valley," said Shawn Ferreria, senior air quality specialist in the district's Fresno office.

Clean-air advocates work on building political muscle

Tired of standing on the sidelines, some of those fighting to clean up the Valley air are vying to have a voice in the future.

By LESLIE ALBRECHT

Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Merced's political winds are shifting, and clean air advocates are the ones blowing in the change.

Melissa Kelly-Ortega, a program associate with the Merced-Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, is one of nine applicants vying for a slot on the city's Planning Commission. Her candidacy marks the increased political muscle that clean-air advocates have flexed lately.

Last fall, Asthma Coalition board chairwoman Alicia Bohlke planned to run for Merced City Council on an air quality platform, but a last-minute health problem kept her from entering the race. In June's Merced County District 2 Supervisor contest, candidate John Alexander listed the environment and health care among his top concerns.

Now Kelly-Ortega says if she gets appointed to the Planning Commission -- the seven-member citizen panel that makes land-use decisions -- she'll push for transit-oriented development and "green" building design.

Taken together, these candidates represent the growing political momentum of Merced residents who say they want environmentally friendly development that doesn't sacrifice air quality for the sake of jobs.

But Asthma Coalition program manager Mary-Michal Rawling says the trend isn't part of a planned strategy. The Asthma Coalition started 11 years ago as a group of nurses and health care professionals concerned about a rise in asthma cases. Since then, the coalition has worked to educate the public about asthma.

With Merced's air quality consistently ranking among the poorest in the nation, more and more people are becoming aware of the issue, said Rawling. Getting involved in local politics is a natural extension of the coalition's awareness-raising efforts, she said.

"People realized, as they dug deeper into the roots of the issue, that all solutions start with policy-makers," said Rawling.

Alexander calls the trend the wave of the future. He said clean air drives Merced's economic development as much as jobs, housing, services and education.

"To get people to come here, you've got to be able to say we've got great schools and that you can breath the air here," said Alexander.

Local voters don't seem to feel the same way. Alexander finished last in the District 2 race, getting 302 votes.

"Based on the election results, I don't know that the vast majority of the population is ready to move in that direction yet, but we're certainly not going away," said Alexander. "Those numbers will grow as time progresses."

Alexander said he sees clean-air advocates such as Kelly-Ortega as a rebel voice in local politics, fighting against a "progress for progress' sake" mentality.

It's up to the City Council to decide whether the Planning Commission needs that voice. The council will vote on who will fill the commission's open seat at its July 7 meeting.

Last year, the City Council appointed three Planning Commissioners: Richard Cervantes, a welder with Wickum Construction; Carole McCoy, a real estate broker; and Tena Williams, a counselor at the Central California Women's Facility.

Smoky Bay Area skies predicted for rest of week

By William Brand and Denis Cuff - Oakland Tribune
in the Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Smoke from wild fires continues to seep into the Bay Area causing gray skies, diminished air quality and cutting off scenic views — but creating spectacular sunsets. The National Weather Service says we'd better get used to it: the air's going to stay smoky for the rest of the week.

While air quality remains generally healthy in the Bay Area, air quality inland in the San Joaquin Valley is bordering on awful.

If you live in the San Joaquin Valley, this is not the time for hard exercise outdoors.

"Honestly, we're getting smoke blowing in from all directions," said Shawn Ferreria, senior air quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "We're surrounded by fires in any direction. To the south there's the Indians fire near Santa Barbara, to the north the fires in Napa and further north. We've even got fires in the Sierra to the east." Smoke that blew into the Bay Area comes into the valley from the west, pushed by offshore sea breezes that keep San Francisco relatively smoke free, he added.

On a scale of one to 10, with one being the best air quality and 10 the worst, Ferreria put the air quality Tuesday at an 8. "It's moving closer to a nine," he said. "For me a 10 would be really unhealthy air over the entire area.

"The worst areas are in the northern parts of the air district, Stockton, Modesto and Turlock," Ferreria said. The valley air board's forecast predicted a particulate level of 155, unhealthy air, for San Joaquin County Tuesday and a particulate level of 147 for Sanislaus County to the south.

Visibility was increasingly restricted in the valley with the Stockton airport reporting three miles visibility and haze. It wasn't much better in Concord. Visibility was three miles in mid-afternoon and there was smoke all day. Mount Diablo, a landmark in Contra Costa was invisible from the I-680 freeway and was wreathed in haze to viewers a mile away.

In Livermore, the airport tower reported haze and smoke with visibility at five miles. Closer to the bay and ocean, things were better: Visibility at Oakland International was six miles with smoke visible. However the East Bay hills were just dimly visible from the I-80 freeway.

San Francisco International reported visibility at 6 miles at 10 a.m. At 3 p.m., there was no visible smoke and visibility was greater than 10 miles.

Smoke levels are elevated throughout the Bay Area, but the soot concentrations are the highest in the Napa Valley, Benicia, eastern and Central Contra Costa County, Livermore and Santa Clara valleys, pollution regulators said.

Benicia had the highest fine soot readings in the Bay Area Monday with a peak particulate reading of 123, exceeding the 24-hour health standard for fine particles called PM 2.5. Earlier this morning, Benicia again had the dirtiest air measurements in the region, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District reported. Other Bay Area reporting stations showed lower particulate levels, all still in the healthy range.

A mild temperature inversion is trapping the smoke near the ground in some places in the Bay Area, said Ralph Boorman, a spokesman for the air quality district.

The big Napa County fire is the cause of some of the smoke, but, "there are many fires burning, so it's hard to say which one is affecting people in a specific area," Boorman said.

Unhealthy beauty

By Glenn Moore

Tracy Press, Tuesday, June 24, 2008

Wildfires raging across California are being blamed for unhealthy air quality throughout the San Joaquin Valley, including Tracy.

The heavy smoke and particulate pollution prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a warning this morning declaring the air in the central region "unhealthy for everybody."

Delta breezes are being blamed for pushing smoke from fires in Napa and Solano counties into the San Joaquin Valley.

Officials urge residents with asthma and other respiratory ailments to stay indoors and limit outdoor activity. Exposure to particulate pollution can cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis.

Blame lightning-caused fires for the Valley's brown air

By Maddalena Jackson and Dorothy Korber

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, June 24, 2008

The parched bowl of the Sacramento Valley is filling with smoke – and no immediate relief is on the hazy horizon.

With hundreds of wildfires triggered by the weekend's lightning swarm, a brown curtain hangs over the Sacramento region – even though there are no fires in the immediate vicinity.

Until a strong cleansing breeze arrives, smoke will continue to trickle downhill, drifting through communities and settling thickly into the lower elevations like acrid molasses.

"It's going to look about the same this whole week," said Felix Garcia, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service. Fortunately, he said, weather models show a stronger flow on the horizon, "so hopefully next week we might have better visibility, clear skies and less smoke."

Until then, there's no choice but to breathe the smoke-filled air.

"There's a little bit of wind, but mostly it's just mixing," said Christina Ragsdale, spokeswoman for the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District. With no winds forecast for the next few days, "it's just going to get worse before it gets better," Ragsdale said.

As of this morning, several fires throughout Northern California continue to burn.

The Wild fire, northeast of Napa, has burned 4,089 acres and is 80 percent contained, according to an online update posted on the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday.

The Nevada County Fairgrounds in Grass Valley closed Tuesday morning to walkers and bicyclists because of a fire command post that has been established on the grounds.

The U.S. Forest Service has set up a command post and fire camp at the fairgrounds for approximately two weeks because of 25 fires started by lightning in the Tahoe National Forest.

People attending the Music in the Mountains concerts are being asked to use the front parking lot rather than the south parking area, said Sandy Woods, deputy manager of the fairgrounds.

While the camp is set up, the Gate 4 entrance and parking lot will be restricted to authorized fire personnel only, and access to South Park will be completely restricted, Woods said.

The restrictions are for public safety because of the large number of resources utilizing the fire camp, she said.

The main office will remain open during normal business hours. Limited RV camping is available by calling the office at (530) 273-6217, where further information regarding the fairgrounds closures is also available.

Updated fire information may be obtained by calling the Tahoe National Forest fire information line at (530) 478-6101.

U.S. Forest Service officials have set up two complexes, with public information numbers, to manage Tahoe National Forest fires.

For updates on Placer County fires within the Tahoe National Forest, call (530) 367-6223, 367-6224 or 367-6226, said Melissa Hallas, a forest information officer. For updates on fires burning with the Tahoe National Forest primarily in Sierra and Nevada counties, call (530) 478-6101 or 478-6105.

Updated information is also available at www.fs.fed.us/r5/tahoe.

Of 25 lightning-caused fires started Saturday in the forest, less than 2,000 acres were still burning in the Yuba Complex on Tuesday, Hallas said.

The largest fire in the American River Complex was 1,000 acres Tuesday, she said.

Additional resources have been ordered and some are arriving to assist with the suppression efforts, Ann Westling, senior public information officer, said in a news release.

While no evacuations are in effect, contingency plans have been developed for possible evacuations, Westling said.

The north and middle forks of the American River continue to have significant fire activity and, while Mosquito Ridge Road is open, caution should be taken because of fire equipment still in the area, she said.

Bowman Lake Road and Washington Road are closed except to residents, property owners and those with prior reservations at Pine Air and River Rest campgrounds. Identification is required to use the roads.

Gas prices make manual mowers popular picks

Many homeowners decide the reel mower is best option for the environment, pocketbook

By James Hannah, Associated Press

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

When Eric King moved from his apartment in Pittsburgh to a single-family home with a lawn, he bought a manual lawn mower instead of the usual gas-powered kind.

He figures he's putting money in his pocket and saving trips to the filling station.

He's got plenty of company. Sales of manual, or push reel, mowers with the cartwheeling blades are on the rise this year.

Officials attribute the surge to increased environmental concerns because of emissions from gas-powered mowers, the faltering economy that makes the generally less expensive push reels more attractive, and \$4-a-gallon gasoline.

"With the way gas prices are going through the roof and are going to stay there or increase even further, that was the main reason I considered one," said King, 29. "I don't consider myself an environmentalist; I consider myself an economist."

American Lawn Mower Co., a Shelbyville, Ind., manufacturer of manual and electric lawn mowers, says sales are up 60 percent to 70 percent over last year.

"It's unbelievable," said Teri McClain, inside sales administrator. "I think gas prices are playing a part in this."

Bud Schemper, manager of Schemper's Hardware in Ripon, agrees. He said he's seen a little more interest in electric and push mowers.

"It's more a green thing," he said. "It's been that way for the last six or eight months."

McClain estimates that about 300,000 push reel mowers are sold annually in the United States. That's about the same as the number of electric mowers that are sold. Though growing, sales of both still are dwarfed by the roughly 6 million typical gas-powered, walk-behind mowers purchased every year.

Kushmila Kumar, department lead at Orchard Supply Hardware on Oakdale Road in Modesto, said gas mowers are still the big seller. In the past month, it has sold 15 or 20 compared with one or two each of the push and electric mowers.

"If you're looking at older buyers, they don't want to use a push mower," she said. "It's too hard."

Push reel mowers have evolved from those heavy iron beasts of the past into lighter (19 to 34 pounds), easier-to-push models with widths up to 20 inches and cutting heights that can be adjusted quickly.

Accessories include grass catchers and sharpening kits.

Prices for push reel mowers usually range from nearly \$100 to \$250. Web sites show electric mowers selling for about \$145 to \$430. Walk-behind gas-powered mowers usually cost \$150 to \$400. The nonriding, self-propelled variety can go from \$200 to \$900.

Clean Air Gardening, a Dallas retailer that sells push reel and electric lawn mowers as well as composters, rain barrels and organic fertilizers, said sales are up 27 percent this year, and sales of electric mowers made by Towson, Md.-based Black & Decker Corp. have increased more than 20 percent this year.

"We're not keeping up with the demand," said Joseph Newland, group product manager for the company's outdoor division.

People Powered Machines, an Ipswich, Mass.-based Internet store, has seen a 25 percent rise in the sale of push reel and electric lawn mowers this year.

"The increasing price of gasoline is one of the bigger factors," said spokesman David Temple.

That might be true if you've got a huge area to mow. But Darell Clark, owner of Modesto's Modern Saw and Lawn Mower Shop, said if your home is on an average-sized lot, he doubts gas prices are a prime motivator for the switch.

"It takes a third of a gallon of gas to mow your lawn," he said. "So, if you buy five gallons, you've got enough to last awhile. It's not taking the toll as with cars."

New L.A. import coming - food scraps

BY JAMES GELUSO, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

A local composting facility that's been the target of neighborhood complaints and government chastisement is about to take food waste from Los Angeles under a pilot program in that city.

The food scraps from about 8,700 households will cross the mountains and end up at Community Recycling on Bear Mountain Boulevard near Arvin, according to the *L.A. Daily News*.

The company already accepts greenwaste from Los Angeles as well as unsellable produce from more than 1,000 grocery stores. The plant matter is turned into compost. Some is spread on farm fields in Kern County; some is sold under a variety of brand names.

Neighbors have complained about smells from the facility and Community Recycling has been in trouble with Kern County for how it managed some waste.

It was unclear Tuesday how much more composting will go on because of the Los Angeles program.

The L.A. Daily News projected that households could recycle eight to 20 pounds of food waste each week. That would come to about 61 tons a week of food waste from the program, which is slated to begin in September and last a year.

That could be just a small addition to the facility's incoming waste. A 2004 *Californian* story said the facility receives a couple of tons of waste each week from each store.

Community Recycling manager David Baldwin was not available for comment Tuesday afternoon.

Kern County will examine the importation of food waste, said Brian Pitts, the county's chief of environmental health.

"At first blush it appears this is within the permit," he said.

He said the county will look to see whether the food waste would increase the size of the operation beyond the scope of its permit.

But the state limits the amount of control the county can exert over composters such as Community Recycling, Pitts said.

The company already has a full solid waste composting permit, which allows it to take just about any organic waste short of animal carcasses, he said.

"We can't just unilaterally decide we don't like their permit anymore," he said.

The company had a problem last year with plastic and other materials being spread with the compost on its fields, but Pitts said he believes the company has largely dealt with those issues.

The company also was ordered last year to clean up a 48,000-ton pile of waste wallboard, and was fined \$35,000 when it missed a deadline to clean it up.

White House Refused to Open Pollutants E-Mail

By Felicity Barringer

N.Y. Times, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

The White House in December refused to accept the Environmental Protection Agency's conclusion that greenhouse gases are pollutants that must be controlled, telling agency officials that an e-mail message containing the document would not be opened, senior E.P.A. officials said last week.

The document, which ended up in e-mail limbo, without official status, was the E.P.A.'s answer to a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that required it to determine whether greenhouse gases represent a danger to health or the environment, the officials said.

This week, more than six months later, the E.P.A. is set to respond to that order by releasing a watered-down version of the original proposal that offers no conclusion. Instead, the document reviews the legal and economic issues presented by declaring greenhouse gases a pollutant.

Over the past five days, the officials said, the White House successfully put pressure on the E.P.A. to eliminate large sections of the original analysis that supported regulation, including a finding that tough regulation of motor vehicle emissions could produce \$500 billion to \$2 trillion in economic benefits over the next 32 years. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter.

Both documents, as prepared by the E.P.A., "showed that the Clean Air Act can work for certain sectors of the economy, to reduce greenhouse gases," one of the senior E.P.A. officials said. "That's not what the administration wants to show. They want to show that the Clean Air Act can't work."

The Bush administration's climate-change policies have been evolving over the past two years. It now accepts the work of government scientists studying global warming, such as last week's review forecasting more drenching rains, parching droughts and intense hurricanes as global temperatures warm.

But no administration decisions have supported the regulation of greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act or other environmental laws.

Tony Fratto, a White House spokesman, refused to comment on discussions between the White House and the Environmental Protection Agency. Asked about changes in the original report, Mr. Fratto said, "It's the E.P.A. that determines what analysis it wants to make available" in its documents.

The new document, a road map laying out the issues involved in regulation, is to be signed by Stephen L. Johnson, the agency's administrator, and published as early as Wednesday.

The derailment of the original E.P.A. report was first made known in March by Representative Henry A. Waxman, Democrat of California, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. The refusal to open the e-mail has not been made public.

In early December, the E.P.A.'s draft finding that greenhouse gases endanger the environment used Energy Department data from 2007 to conclude that it would be cost effective to require the nation's motor vehicle fleet to average 37.7 miles per gallon in 2018, according to government officials familiar with the document.

About 10 days after the finding was left unopened by officials at the Office of Management and Budget, Congress passed and President Bush signed a new energy bill mandating an increase in average fuel-economy standards to 35 miles per gallon by 2020. The day the law was signed, the E.P.A. administrator rejected the unanimous recommendation of his staff and denied California a waiver needed to regulate vehicle emissions of greenhouse gases in the state, saying the new law's approach was preferable and climate change required global, not regional, solutions.

California's regulations would have imposed tougher standards.

The Transportation Department made its own fuel-economy proposals public almost two months ago; they were based on the assumption that gasoline would range from \$2.26 per gallon in 2016 to \$2.51 per gallon in 2030, and set a maximum average standard of 35 miles per gallon in 2020.

The White House, which did not oppose the Transportation Department proposals, has become more outspoken on the need for a comprehensive approach to greenhouse gases, specifically rejecting possible controls deriving from older environmental laws.

In a speech in April, Mr. Bush called for an end to the growth of greenhouse gases by 2025 — a timetable slower than many scientists say is required. His chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality, James Connaughton, said a "train wreck" would result if regulations to control greenhouse gases were authorized piecemeal under laws like the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act.

White House pressure to ignore or edit the E.P.A.'s climate-change findings led to the resignation of one agency official earlier this month: Jason Burnett, the associate deputy administrator. Mr. Burnett, a political appointee with broad authority over climate-change regulations, said in an interview that he had resigned because "no more constructive work could be done" on the agency's response to the Supreme Court.

He added, "The next administration will have to face what this one did not."

The House Select Committee for Energy Independence and Global Warming, led by Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, has been seeking the discarded E.P.A. finding on the dangers of climate change.

After reading it last week, Mr. Markey's office sent a letter to Mr. Bush saying, "E.P.A. Administrator Stephen Johnson determined that man-made global warming is unequivocal, the evidence is compelling and robust, and the administration must act to prevent harm rather than wait for harm to occur."

Simultaneously, Mr. Waxman's committee is weighing its response to the White House's refusal to turn over subpoenaed documents relating to the E.P.A.'s handling of recent climate-change and air-pollution decisions. The White House, which has turned over other material to the committee, last week asserted a claim of executive privilege over the remaining documents.

In an interview on Sunday, Mr. Fratto, the White House spokesman, said the committee chairmen did not understand the legal precedent underlying executive privilege. "There is a long legal history supporting the principle that the president should have the candid advice of his advisers," Mr. Fratto said.

Highway a Health Risk, Protesters Say Students, Parents of School Next to Proposed Road Ask Governor to Halt Construction

By Katherine Shaver

Washington Post, Wednesday, June 25, 2008

Parents and students at a Silver Spring elementary school adjacent to the intercounty connector's route called on Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley yesterday to stop building the six-lane highway until the state better studies its potential health impact on people nearby.

The 18.8-mile toll highway between Gaithersburg and Laurel is planned to run about 100 yards from Dr. Charles R. Drew Elementary School's playing fields, protest organizers said. About three dozen parents and students who gathered at the school said the state hasn't done enough to ensure that children, particularly those who suffer from asthma and other breathing problems, will be safe so close to a highway.

Parents said they became concerned about the connector's proximity and its potential health effects after anti-highway activists held a meeting at the school in January.

"I always thought it was the government's role to protect the public's health and protect children," said Tiffin Shewmake, whose 9-year-old son attends Drew Elementary and has asthma. "I don't think that's really true anymore."

Benjamin Gitterman, a District-based pediatrician who specializes in environmental health, said asthma, which is the most common chronic illness in children, would only worsen near the connector.

"The vulnerability of children to air pollution cannot be overstated," Gitterman said.

Christine Hansen, a spokeswoman for O'Malley (D), said the governor has no plans to stop construction.

"The governor appreciates their concerns," Hansen said, "but the ICC has been debated for some time now and is moving forward in the most environmentally sensitive way possible."

Construction on the \$2.4 billion road began last fall. It is scheduled to open in segments between 2010 and 2012.

Particulate matter, especially prevalent in the exhaust of diesel trucks, has been linked to aggravated asthma, decreased lung function and premature death for people with heart or lung disease and is especially dangerous for children and the elderly, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Valerie Burnette Edgar, a spokeswoman for the Maryland State Highway Administration, said the state met federal requirements in its study showing that the highway would meet federal pollution limits. She noted that a federal judge upheld that study in November when he rejected two lawsuits aimed at stopping the highway on environmental and health grounds.

She said a sound barrier would separate Drew Elementary from the road.

Debating Coal's Cost in Rural Va.

Utility's Plans for Plant Meet Opposition in Fuel-Rich Region

By David A. Fahrenthold

Washington Post, Wednesday, June 25, 2008; B01

WISE, Va., June 24 -- *This is one in a series of occasional reports about regional energy issues.*

If it were possible to build a coal-fueled power plant in Virginia without controversy, it would happen here. In the state's Appalachian southwest, there is coal in the hills, coal in the rail cars, and coal in family histories that stretch back to picks and shovels.

Apparently, it's not possible.

"I am opposed to this plant," Wise County resident Jaculyn Hanrahan told the Virginia Air Pollution Control Board on Tuesday. "Because I am opposed to respiratory illness, smog, neurotoxins and acid rain."

Dominion Virginia Power wants to build a large coal-fired plant in a mountain hollow here to meet statewide demand pushed upward by Northern Virginia's air conditioners, laptop computers and other electrical devices.

The utility has been met by strong opposition, however, fed by a region-wide hostility to new power projects and a national backlash against the greenhouse-gas emissions associated with coal. On Tuesday, people in a high school auditorium argued a question that would have seemed ridiculous to their grandparents: Should coal be burned for power in Virginia coalfields?

"This plant will be the greatest thing to come to Wise County in our lifetimes," said Gerald Collins, a local mining engineer. "I don't want to pay a higher cost for electricity just because somebody thinks that coal is dirty."

Dominion's proposal calls for a 585-megawatt plant, big enough to power 146,000 homes, to be built on an old strip-mine site in this hilly region near the Kentucky border.

The plant has been approved by the Virginia State Corporation Commission, the state's utility regulator. Now it faces a major hurdle: requesting a pair of air-pollution permits from the air pollution control board. That board heard testimony Tuesday, and could announce its decision as early as today.

The Dominion plant's fuel would come largely from Appalachia, but most of its electricity would not stay in that area.

Instead, Dominion officials said much of the electrical power would be sent more than 375 miles away, to highly wired Northern Virginia. The company's demand for electricity is expected to grow 20 percent in 10 years, with much of that coming from the Washington area.

Dominion officials said there is no feasible way to meet the demand without burning fuel to produce energy. By comparison, it might take 875 wind turbines, at a much greater cost, to provide the same amount of power as this single coal plant.

"You just wouldn't be able to do enough wind to meet our energy supply" needs, said Pamela Faggert, Dominion's chief environmental officer. Dominion plans to lessen the environmental impact by someday adding technology that captures greenhouse gases before they escape, Faggert said, adding that those technologies do not yet exist on a commercial scale.

Dominion's choice has put it in the middle of a national debate. On one side, power companies say that coal, which provides about half the power in the United States, is a plentiful and logical fuel source.

Some environmental groups have vowed to fight proposed coal plants.

"These things are very, very large contributors to exactly the problem that everybody says they want to fix," said Bruce Nilles, who leads the Sierra Club's national campaign against coal. The problem is climate change, he said, and coal plants are major sources of heat-trapping gases.

There are at least 41 coal-fired projects in development nationwide, but experts said that the pace of new proposals has slowed because of growing opposition.

"It's basically, if not stopped dead in its tracks, pretty much close to it," said Richard Cortright, a managing director in the utility-analysis group at Standard and Poor's. "Do you want to start a plant in that atmosphere, not knowing what might come down the pike?"

The Wise County debate is among a number of fights over energy in the mid-Atlantic region, including disputes over power-transmission lines planned in parts of Maryland and Virginia. In all the battles, power companies say the electricity is needed; opponents say the environmental costs are too high.

"Natural visibility is 100 miles. We're probably seeing 10 miles," said Catharine Gilliam, of the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association. She was gazing at the Swift Run overlook in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park and seeing only two mountain ridges instead of the many that are there. She said the haze was caused, in part, by power plants, something a new Dominion plant would only exacerbate.

"Any amount [of pollution] is going to add and make this worse," she said. Her group wants Dominion to change the plant's design.

Activists also say the Dominion plant would spew toxic mercury that could end up in streams and the Chesapeake Bay. They also say that it would drive up demand for destructive mountaintop-removal coal mines.

Dominion officials have defended their proposal, saying they will use technologies that keep pollution at a minimum. On the issue of national parks, they say the plant's impacts would fall within federal guidelines.

On Tuesday, Dominion seemed to have significant support in Wise.

"Coal is southwest Virginia. Coal is the Appalachians," said Donnie Rife, chairman of nearby Dickenson County's board of supervisors. Rife, like other local officials, said the plant would provide jobs and tax revenue to a rural area that is short of both. "I don't have any idea in the world why people down in this area would complain about this," he said.

Sara Bailey of Arlington then appeared at the microphone. Bailey, who made the long drive in a fuel-efficient hybrid Toyota Prius, said she was speaking for other Northern Virginia residents in asking the board to reject Dominion's proposed plant.

"I hope that you will think carefully about the future of our state and what we are leaving as our legacy," she said.

Branson says airlines should pay tax on emissions

By Eliane Engeler, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, June 24, 2008

GENEVA, Switzerland (AP) --Virgin Group chairman Richard Branson told a forum on climate change Tuesday that aviation is a dirty business and that airlines should be willing to pay for the damage they cause to the environment.

The airline industry has been reluctant to support carbon-emission taxes but Branson said at the Global Humanitarian Forum that he was willing to pay carbon-emissions taxes on his aviation business.

"If you run a dirty business — an airline business, a shipping business, ... coal business, you should pay for the privilege because you are doing damage," Branson said.

The head of the forum, former U.N. chief Kofi Annan, also pushed for what he called "climate justice," with polluters paying for the damage they cause.

"We must recognize that the polluter must pay, and not the poor and vulnerable," Annan said. "We must have climate justice."

Low-cost airlines last week called on the European Union to reject a plan that would force air carriers to trade pollution allowances, saying it risks turning potential environmental benefits into punitive fees for air carriers and passengers.

The two-day meeting of the new humanitarian forum brings together aid agencies, governments and the private sector to address the "human face of climate change."

Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom suggested the proceeds of aviation taxes on carbon emissions be transferred to small nations to put in place measures for adapting to climate change.

The Maldives, which consist of 1,200 islands in the Indian Ocean, have said they risk losing their entire territory to rising sea levels if global warming continues unabated.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Wednesday, June, 25, 2008:](#)

Time to weigh in on our future

Not happy with the way your City Council or Board of Supervisors is managing the area's transportation grid? Frustrated with their inconsistent approach to fighting sprawl?

It's not often that government asks the rest of us to weigh in on our own future. But that's precisely what the Kern Regional Blueprint Project is inviting people to do this week.

Not happy with the way your City Council or Board of Supervisors is managing growth? Worried about air quality and transportation? Wondering what other realistic options might be out there? Register your feelings when the Kern Council of Governments convenes the Blueprint summit Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. at the DoubleTree Hotel in Bakersfield.

With Kern County expected to hit 2.1 million residents in the next half-century, it's incumbent upon us all to establish priorities -- and make sure elected officials are clearly aware of them.

Those officials will be there, too -- or at least they're supposed to be. All 63 elected city councilmembers from Kern County's 11 incorporated cities, along with the five county supervisors have been invited to attend the three-hour meeting -- part of a valleywide and statewide effort to tap citizens for their thoughts and ideas.

This is not a group sing. Tortured renditions of "Kumbaya" are not on the agenda. This is about providing guidance to the elected men and women who ultimately make our planning decisions -- guidance that must be consistent from town to town.

"Working collaboratively is more important than it's ever been," said Darrel Hildebrand, assistant director of the Kern Council of Governments. "We're coming to a critical mass. The compounding nature of the decisions we're making is becoming more important every day."

Subjects on the table -- interrelated topics all -- include transportation, housing, land use, farmland and open space preservation, water, the economy and quality of life issues.

Robert Grow, the Salt Lake City-based founding chairman emeritus of Envision Utah, a public-private partnership that analyzes options for regional growth, will be Thursday's keynote speaker.

He notes that Salt Lake City is one of the most conservative places in the country. Yet the Utah capital city has built 92 miles of commuter rail as well as a popular light rail system. "One out of every four workers in downtown Salt Lake City arrives on a train," he told *The Californian* Tuesday.

An efficient public transportation system "means couples could shed a car," he said. "It means older people can get around" after they've given up driving.

Grow says he's not trying to sell Kern County on light rail, however. "I'm an advocate for whatever your region is doing, what your people decide is best for what they want to achieve."

And determining that is what the Blueprint is all about.