

Heavy-duty diesel trucks eligible for incentive program

BY ROXANA SAMANO

Turlock Journal, Saturday, July 12, 2008

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District was recently awarded \$40.5 million from California Proposition 1B for a new grant incentive program targeting diesel engines used for goods movement.

The incentive program provides financial incentives to quickly reduce air pollution emissions and health risk from freight movement along California's trade corridors. Incentives will provide owners of equipment used in freight movement to upgrade to cleaner technologies through truck replacement, engine replacement, or retrofit. Projects funded under this program must achieve emission reductions not required by law or regulation.

"The program targets equipment that moves through the state of California," Brian Dodds, senior air quality specialist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District, said. "Our district decided to focus specifically on truck project due to the tremendous amount of truck traffic."

The incentive program will be used to replace or retrofit Class 8 diesel truck and engines used specifically for goods movement.

"With 95 million miles traveled each day through the Valley, mainly along the Highway 99 and Interstate 5 corridors, these funds will serve much-needed purpose in helping clean up diesel exhaust emission," Seyed Sadredin, Air District's executive director and air pollution control officer, said.

The three categories of funding available are: \$50,000 to replace a 2003 or older truck with a new truck that meets 2007 emission standards; \$20,000 to repower a 2003 or older engine with a new engine that meets 2007 standards; or \$5,000 to retrofit a 2006 or older truck with an ARB-verified level 3 diesel particulate filter.

In order to be eligible, applicants must operate a Class 8 on-road diesel truck greater than 33,000 Gross Weight Vehicle Rate, used to transport goods; have a valid California registration for the last two years (base plate or IRP); and travel at least 50 percent in the state's major trade corridors over the last two years (Central Valley, Bay Area, Los Angeles/Inland Empire or San Diego/border).

"The goal of this program is to reduce emission especially with diesel truck and have a corresponding benefit to air pollution issues in the Valley and improve public health to those who live here," Dodds said.

Applications for this program will be accepted until 1 p.m. on Sept. 5. Once all applications have been received projects will be ranked using ARB guidelines. Applicants must obtain approval and have a signed, executed contract from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District before new truck, new engine, or retrofit device purchase or installation. Any new truck, new engine, or retrofit device purchased or installed before contract execution is ineligible.

For more information on the incentive program, program applications and program guidelines, visit the "Grants and Incentives" section at www.valleyair.org or e-mail weberip@valleyair.org.

To contact Roxana Samano e-mail rsamano@turlockjournal.com or call 634-9141 ext. 2041.

County flag program warns of bad air

Turlock Unified one of seven districts that does not participate

BY CHERIE DAVIS

Saturday, July 12, 2008

The Central Valley receives high marks from school personnel, parents and students for its innovative air quality flags program that alerts area residents to risky air conditions. Yet three years after its debut in 2005, approximately 85 or 35 percent of the 245 schools within Stanislaus County do not participate in this free program.

"This is a great program," said Jay Simmonds, spokesperson for the Ceres Unified School District, which flies the colored flags in all 18 elementary, middle, and high schools within its district. "This is a great way to let people in the schools and in the community know about the quality of air each day, so they can plan their activities accordingly."

Each morning, school district personnel raise a colored flag at 160 participating Stanislaus county schools to signal how healthy the air is that day: Green for "good," yellow for "moderate," orange for "unhealthy for sensitive people," and red for "unhealthy for everyone."

School personnel limit, or sometimes even cancel outdoor activities on poor air quality days, generally following typical rainy day scheduling procedures. Instead, schools may provide alternative indoor activities to protect students and employees from polluted outdoor air.

The flag colors correspond to the colors of the Air Quality Index of the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which provides the daily air quality forecast to participating schools and area residents.

"Our facilities people raise the air quality flags right along with the U.S. and California flags each morning," aid Simmonds. "We typically take them down late in the day, when our after-school activities are over."

The air quality flags are provided free from area nonprofit groups. The Stanislaus Asthma Coalition provides free sets of flags for schools within Stanislaus County. The American Lung Association of California provides air quality flags for schools and businesses in San Joaquin, Madera, Fresno, Kings, and Kern counties.

"The flags program is one of the best ways we know to notify and protect the public from poor air quality," said Anthony Presto, spokesperson for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District northern region, which includes Stanislaus County.

Particulate matter and ozone are air pollutants that can constrict breathing passages, forcing the body to work harder to get oxygen. These pollutants can cause other health problems as well, such as aggravated respiratory disease, lung damage, wheezing, dry throat, headache, nausea, increased fatigue, weakened athletic performance and more.

California's rash of wildfires in recent weeks has increased air pollution in and around the Valley, causing significant health problems for area residents. The fires have also rekindled interest in the schools air quality flags programs for community residents who pass by the schools.

"When I go by schools with air quality flags, I make a mental note about the air and my activities for the day," said John Sims, Turlock Unified School District president. "I think this is a pretty handy way to readily communicate important information, placed right in the front for all to see."

However, Turlock Unified School District is one of seven districts in the county not participating in the air quality flags program, according to the Stanislaus Asthma Coalition which coordinates the program.

Others school districts not participating in the air quality flags program includes: Denair Unified School District, Chatom Union School District, Hickman School District, Hughson Unified School District, Keyes Union School District, and Riverbank Unified School District. Sierra View Elementary is the only participating school in the Oakdale Joint Union School District.

"I brought the flag program to the attention of the district a few years ago, but there were some concerns about the forecast the day before," said Sims. The San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District provides the air quality forecast on its Web site at 4:30 p.m. for the following day.

"There was concern about getting a more accurate forecast early in the morning and getting this information to principals and teachers," Sims said.

Instead of using the flag system, Roger Smith, Facilities Manager and Safety Coordinator for the Turlock Unified Schools District, provides air quality information by e-mail to designated personnel at each school site within its district. These site designees relay the information to

faculty, staff and students within each of Turlock's 17 schools. Activities at each site are modified according to the information provided by Smith.

Smith explained the process in which he extrapolates data regarding current conditions and readings posted on the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control Web site.

"If it's a green day, there's no advisory and everything is assumed to be clear and fine," said Smith. "But for other readings indicating poor air quality, especially orange or red, there's a tremendous difference in the Air Pollution Control District's monitors that are located close to each other."

A 2 p.m. reading on July 8 of the air quality index on www.valleyair.org, indicated an air quality index of 83 for Modesto, 143 for Turlock, and 82 for Merced. To compensate for this difference, Smith explained that he averaged the readings for the three areas to arrive at his air quality report to schools within his district.

"I was aware that (Smith) got a forecast," said Sims when informed of the district's process. "I was not aware he was averaging the pollution control district's readings. Personally, I would feel more comfortable to defer to experts in the field."

Anthony Presto acknowledged the variations in air quality readings by proximate locations, but said that the site monitors were just one of several data sources used to develop the daily air quality forecasts.

"Population, geography, industrial air pollutants, wind patterns-there's a lot of information we take into account in developing our forecasts," said Presto. "We have specialized staff, actually they're called 'atmospheric scientists' that work on developing the forecast.

"I would discourage relying too much on any one indicator."

Smith expressed concern about the possibility of changing conditions, and the need to change flags during the day to indicate current conditions.

"While extremely rare, it has happened that conditions change significantly from the forecast," said Presto. "I think this has happened once this year, once last year, and only one other time before that. In those instances, we call, fax and e-mail this information immediately to the schools, media and others on contact lists. In general, we tend to err on the side of caution in instances where there might be the possibility of changing conditions."

"While Roger's process may not be unreasonable, we might consider whether this is the best way to communicate air quality information to staff and students and even the general community. The question is whether it's the role of the schools to educate the community as well," said Sims.

"I'm glad the (Turlock Unified School) district is taking an active role in alerting staff and students about air quality issues," he said.

"My interest in this issue, and the flags program, comes from a sense of civic obligation to community. The flags may not be a perfect system, but they may be the best system to alert the public.

"The former superintendent wasn't supportive of the flags program," said Sims, who said he would discuss the program with Dr. Sonny Da Marto, the new superintendent of the Turlock Unified School District.

"I would like the district to participate in the flag program, at least for some consistency with the other schools in the area. Information is power, so people can take action."

To contact Cherie Davis, e-mail cdavis@turlockjournal.com or call 634-9141.

Winds may ease unhealthy air Health advisory remains in effect

By Keith Reid

Record, July 11, 2008

An incoming Delta breeze promises cooler temperatures in San Joaquin County this weekend, but maybe more importantly, the winds should help push the choking wildfire smoke out of the Valley, forecasters say.

The breeze will be especially welcome after air quality suffered from a southbound wind Thursday that pushed smoke from Sacramento County into San Joaquin County.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District forecasters said Thursday's air quality was downgraded from "unhealthy for sensitive groups" to "unhealthy" by late afternoon.

The smoke was thick enough to stifle temperatures by 2 or 3 degrees.

"The air quality has just deteriorated," forecaster Shawn Ferreria said. "Visibility early Thursday was seven miles, and by the afternoon, it was down to three miles."

Forecasts for today call for "unhealthy" air quality as well. The San Joaquin County Public Health Department issued an advisory Thursday, asking people to continue to be aware that those with health problems should continue to stay indoors.

Thursday temperatures reached a high of 103 degrees.

The Delta breeze coming in from the Pacific Ocean is expected to help temperatures drop into the high 90s over the weekend.

By Wednesday, temperatures could continue to fall, National Weather Service meteorologist Felix Garcia said.

When bad air is worse

By Chris Bowman
cbowman

Modesto Bee, Sunday, July 13, 2008

When smoke in fire-besieged California is at its worst, the public often doesn't get to see just how bad it is.

Hourly air pollution readings on the Internet suddenly go blank for long stretches of the day. Worse, they show levels known to kill people with heart or lung disease. Smoke this bad also doesn't figure into the color-coded Air Quality Index that helps millions plan their day.

The high-end measurements are real, but state and local air officials frequently exclude the data as invalid because of a quirk in federal rules.

The results can be misleading data on the true nature of the air people breathe when multiple fires foul the skies. That happened at least twice during the recent spate of major fires that choked the Sacramento Valley and Sierra foothills.

These are among the undisclosed shortcomings of air pollution reports, according to smog officials interviewed by The Bee last week, when pollution peaked in the Sacramento region.

California Air Resources Board officials acknowledged that the exclusions of extreme smoke episodes can distort air quality data, making conditions appear better than they are. Regulators do, however, consider those unreported readings in drafting public health advisories, said Jeff Cook, who coordinates the air board's "emergency response" in smoke-choked areas.

"This is an unusual situation, and we want to see as much of the data as we possibly can," Cook said Friday.

People who rely on the news media or local air districts' Web pages for the daily pollution readings or AQI, however, are unknowingly getting an incomplete picture at a time when health risks are the most extreme.

Such was the case last week in the Sierra foothills communities of Quincy and Paradise, northeast of Sacramento.

The air board's Web site, under a database known as AQMIS, shows maximum AQI levels in Quincy on Thursday and Friday as 218 and 290, respectively.

That's within the red-colored "very unhealthy" range, meaning people with heart or lung disease, the elderly and children should avoid all outdoor activity, and everyone else should avoid prolonged exertion.

Had air officials included the worst pollution episodes on those days, Quincy residents would have learned that the air actually was more dangerous.

From 3 p.m. Thursday to 6 a.m. Friday, particle pollution from the Canyon Complex fire reached concentrations of 434 to 500 on the AQI, said Joe Fish, deputy air pollution control officer for the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District.

"Quincy just got hammered," Fish said.

At those levels, air is considered "hazardous" – color-coded maroon – meaning people with heart or lung disease are at risk of dying, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which devised the AQI. All other adults "should avoid all physical activity outdoors," and children "should remain indoors." Fortunately, most Quincy residents were presumably indoors and asleep when smoke was thickest.

Fish said he had never seen pollution levels stay so high for so long in wildfires.

He nonetheless "got rid" of the data because of technical anomalies: A newly installed air monitor in Quincy was registering the wrong year on the sampling dates, he said.

In addition, Fish said EPA pollution reporting protocols required him and any other air pollution control official in the state to scrub the data as invalid.

"That doesn't necessarily mean data was wrong or inaccurate," Fish said. "When you monitor (air quality), the EPA is very, very picky."

Officials monitoring smoke from the fire near Paradise also are excluding many of the highest pollution readings from the public database because smoke that thick begins to clog monitors.

"Some of the numbers that we're seeing that will probably be thrown out are 600, 700, 800," said Bob McLaughlin, assistant chief of the Butte County Air Quality Management District. Those concentrations all fall well within the "hazardous" range.

Accuracy isn't the issue, McLaughlin said.

"We think those numbers are real numbers – and they are pretty close to what's going on," he said.

Cook, who manages quality control of pollution data at the state air board, agrees that readings from monitors with reduced air flow are accurate and said the data should be included in public air quality reports.

"We want to see that data for the public health advisories," Cook said.

The air flow problem with the samplers generally occurs when they pick up thick smoke from nearby fires, according to David Gobeli of Met One Instruments Inc. in Grants Pass, Ore., which supplies most of California's pollution monitors.

The model, BAM-1020, is designed to operate at more common particle pollution levels, below 100 on the AQI. At 300 and above, smoke tends to clog filters and cut the flow of air into the instrument, Gobeli said.

Outside of the EPA-specified flow range, the devices can't separate larger dust particles from smaller ones that are of greater health concern, such as from auto exhaust and wildfires.

That's important for consistency in the EPA's enforcement of national clean-air standards for particle pollution.

With wildfire smoke, however, virtually all particles picked up by monitors are the smaller ones, no matter the flow rate, Cook said.

"I don't think we are compromising our ability to make health determinations," he said.

Fiscalini plan to turn methane into energy runs into air problems

By JOHN HOLLAND

Modesto Bee, Saturday, Jul. 12, 2008

John Fiscalini has spent about \$3 million on a system that can turn cow manure into electricity for his cheese plant west of Modesto.

Now he wonders if he will get to use it.

Air quality officials say these systems, although worthwhile for the environmental benefits they bring, can be polluters themselves if not designed right.

At issue is nitrogen oxide, a smog component emitted when methane gas is extracted from the manure and burned in an engine to generate electricity.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has set a strict limit of 9 parts per million for new engines.

Fiscalini, whose system is close to completion, said none of the available engines can meet the standard. He said the one he ordered has advanced emission controls, but it still could violate the rule during the 60-day testing period.

"There's certainly a likelihood that two months after I start up, I have to shut down because I don't meet the number they have given me," he said.

The system at Fiscalini Cheese Co., a 3,000-cow operation, will be the first in Stanislaus County. There are 13 others in the state.

Dave Warner, director of permit services for the district, said it is studying why new engines are having trouble meeting the 9 ppm standard. But that limit has to stay in place, he said, as part of the effort to clean up the valley's air, which is hazardous to people with asthma and other ailments.

"Nitrogen oxides in the San Joaquin Valley do affect the health of the residents," he said.

Dairy industry people say the tough standard is slowing the spread of an energy source that has environmental virtues far outweighing the nitrogen oxide issue.

One involves climate change. Methane usually wafts from manure pits into the atmosphere, where it is believed to contribute to the buildup of gases causing global warming. If it is captured and burned to make power, it breaks down into components much less damaging.

Advocates say the systems also reduce reliance on fossil fuels, which are linked to climate change and valley air pollution. And by consuming much of the cattle waste, they help dairy farmers protect streams and groundwater.

California has the potential for perhaps 250 megawatts of power from dairy manure, said Allen Dusault, a program director with Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco group working on the issue.

That is a tiny part of the state's demand -- close to 50,000 megawatts at the peak of this week's heat wave -- but it's worthwhile because of the side benefits, he said.

The California Energy Commission has provided grants for the projects, including \$720,000 to Fiscalini, as part of the push for climate-friendly energy sources.

"These dairies are doing things right," Dusault said. "They are doing what the state is asking them to do."

At just under 1 megawatt, Fiscalini's system will supply electricity for the cheese plant and surplus power for sale to the Modesto Irrigation District, at a price still being negotiated. The engine also will produce waste heat, which will heat water for cleaning the barns.

Warner, with the air district, agreed that preventing climate change is worthwhile, but he said that can be done via a range of projects around the world.

Nitrogen oxide, on the other hand, is a direct threat to the people living where the methane burners operate, he said.

Under pressure from the state and federal government, the district is requiring the "best available control technology" on new emitters.

An engine believed capable of meeting the 9 ppm standard was installed in 2006 at Joseph Gallo Farms, an Atwater-area cheese producer that built the first manure-to-energy system in the north valley two years earlier.

The engine has fallen short of the standard, Warner said, but it has permission to continue operating while the district checks the problem. One possibility is that impurities in the methane are interfering with the emission controls, he said. The study is expected to take a few months.

"We think that in the end they will be able to fix the issues that keep them from operating at 9 ppm all the time," Warner said.

Carl Morris, general manager at Joseph Gallo, said he has no problem with the district putting tough rules on this pollutant, as long as there are engines capable of complying.

"You look at a day like this, and you can't blame them," he said Thursday, when heat and smoke aggravated the usual smog. "They're very concerned about air quality in the valley."

It's hot - but not for long

Heat expected to slowly ease off through weekend

By Alex Breitler

The Record, July 10, 2008

STOCKTON - If you can tell the difference between Wednesday's 107 degrees and today's projected 105 degrees, get ready for some sweet relief.

If not, you've got another day or so to endure.

Stockton on Wednesday tied its record-high temperature for the date, set in 1961. But that's expected to be the worst of our weeklong heat wave.

Temperatures today should begin a gradual decline that will leave us in the upper 90s this weekend and mid-90s early next week, forecasters said.

Air pollution improved a bit Wednesday, but smoke is expected to linger throughout the weekend, the National Weather Service reported. The smoke actually filters the sun and keeps us a bit cooler during the day, but it traps heat at night and makes for an uncomfortable evening.

"It acts kind of like a blanket, a low deck of clouds," Weather Service forecaster George Cline said. "It's a pretty important factor, especially when we're considering excessive heat warnings. There's no relief overnight."

Visibility ranged from three to five miles Wednesday, considerably better than two weeks ago when lightning first sparked hundreds of blazes throughout Northern California.

Wednesday's air quality was considered unhealthy only for sensitive groups in San Joaquin County, a better outcome than had been expected by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Slight improvement was expected today, though residents still are urged to take air quality into consideration when planning outdoor activities.

Once again, areas of the foothills proved hotter than the Valley floor Wednesday. Copperopolis hit 108 degrees Wednesday, reaching the century mark as early as 10:30 a.m., according to Weather Service data.

One weather station in Angels Camp reported 111-degree temperatures just shy of 4 p.m. And Yosemite Valley, at 4,200 feet in the Sierra Nevada, hit 105 degrees.

The higher temperatures also have been challenging for operators of the state's electricity power grid, trying to keep up with the demand of millions of whirring air conditioners.

Officials at the California Independent System Operator have urged residents - and business and industry - to voluntarily reduce their energy use this week.

Whether you live in Murphys or Manteca, there's nothing pleasant about five days of temperatures at more than 100 degrees. But some perspective might be helpful: Just two summers ago, also in July, Stockton endured 12 consecutive days of triple-digit heat.

Moist air expected to keep temps below 100

By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, The Fresno Bee, Monday, July 14, 2008

A respite from triple-digit heat is expected to continue for a couple more days, but the danger of thunderstorms in the tinder-dry Sierra Nevada has firefighters on their toes.

National Weather Service forecasters expect afternoon highs to remain below 100 degrees today and Tuesday as low pressure draws moist air from Mexico into the mountains.

"We don't see any change in pattern over the next two days," said Carlos Molina, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford. "On Wednesday, the wind may change to out of the West and deflect that moisture into Arizona and Utah."

"The moist air keeps us slightly cooler, but once we get drier air and have high pressure settle in, it will allow the temperatures to reach up into the 100s again," Molina said.

The forecast calls for the mercury to reach 95 degrees today and Tuesday in Merced and 97 on Wednesday and Thursday.

The moisture also fuels afternoon thunderstorms like the ones that blossomed this weekend over the mountains in Tulare and Kern counties. That storm touched off flash floods that hampered fire crews battling the Piute fire in the Sequoia National Forest near Lake Isabella.

The fire has burned more than 37,000 acres since it started two weeks ago.

Fire commanders said a flash flood in Erskine Creek prompted an evacuation recommendation Sunday for some residents near Lake Isabella and forced nearly 60 firefighters to higher ground.

The flood blocked the firefighters from returning to the fire's command post Saturday night and created concerns over weakened trees and washed-out roads in the area.

Fire spokesman Jim Whittington said Sunday the water is at least 2 feet deep in Erskine Creek Canyon and could get worse.

Officials expect water, mud and rocks from a rain-swollen creek to cross one of Lake Isabella's main thoroughfares.

They also warned of possible flash floods on Kelso Valley Road and Thompson Creek east of the lake.

Whittington says at least 2 inches of rain fell on the fire, which contributed to the flooding by burning vegetation that would normally absorb some of the water.

By Sunday, nearly 1,600 people were working on the Piute fire and managed to cut lines around 46% of its perimeter. Full containment is expected by July 20.

A flash flood watch remained in effect through Sunday night in the fire area, but thunderstorms developed as far north as Yosemite.

In Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, Saturday's storm brought little lightning activity compared to the previous two days.

Dave Bartlett, the parks' fire management officer, said Sunday that "dry lightning" Thursday and Friday sparked only a few small fires.

"We have a couple of single-tree fires at high elevations," Bartlett said.

"They don't have any ground fuel under them, so we're just letting them do what Mother Nature intended."

Smoke from the Piute fire and others burning around the state continues to settle in the Valley.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is predicting the air quality to be moderate today in Merced, Madera and Kings counties, and unhealthy for sensitive groups in Fresno and Tulare counties.

"We expect the dirty air to stay," Molina said.

"If we did get some rain on the Valley floor, it would clean out the air, but that's not likely."

Valley's heat wave subsides

Temperatures forecast to stay below 100 for rest of week

BY GERALD CARROLL

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, July 14, 2008

The heat wave is over, at least for now, forecasters say.

Sunday's top temperature in Visalia at the airport was 97 degrees, the National Weather Service reported, and forecasts have temperatures hovering near, but not above, the 100-degree mark for the rest of the week.

The high-pressure dome that had been holding in the heat - and the smoke from California wildfires - has weakened, said forecaster Daniel Harty of the National Weather Service field office in Hanford.

"An upper-level disturbance has brought in some clouds, especially over the Porterville area," Harty said. Thunderstorms struck in the southern Sierra and Kern County desert region Sunday, but cleared off.

And, though none of that moisture was expected to get into the Central Valley, the influx of those clouds has led to the cooling trend, Hart said.

With the cooling came a letup in air-pollution-levels, as air masses in the Valley have begun shifting.

Particulate levels are projected to drop slightly today, according to measurements from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, but Tulare County retains a rating of orange, or "unhealthy for sensitive groups."

Clean air's payoff may be death to some Valley farms

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Monday, July 14, 2008

A classic baseball story illustrates the damage that rabid environmentalism has done to production agriculture.

It tells about the team manager who went in to play after his regular third baseman committed a series of costly errors. He did little better, and after a disastrous half inning in the field he returned to the dugout, telling his third baseman: "You've got third base so messed up nobody can play it."

That's where many in agriculture believe extreme environmentalism has led agriculture today. They feel the processes, tools and traditional practices involved in agricultural production have become so complicated, unrealistic and misdirected that nobody can deal with them.

Instead of counting on them for help and direction in the production of food for a hungry world, farmers are stumbling over them, guarding against them and where they can't dodge them, being put out of business by them.

Court-ordered directions to the California Department of Pesticide Regulation provide a painful example. They deal with VOCs, volatile organic compounds, which are often released to the atmosphere during the application of agricultural chemicals.

In Ventura County, the order to reduce the VOC level may lead strawberry growers to abandon as much as 5,000 acres.

That represents a financial loss to them and the county of an estimated \$100 million. If the acres go, so do as many as 10,000 farm worker jobs.

The regulations were imposed first there because the county represents a notoriously dirty air basin, and because healthy strawberry growth relies on soil fumigants, a group of chemicals purported to be among the most consistent to release VOCs.

But next year, the real bombshell is scheduled to explode when the regulations start to apply to the Central Valley air basin. Fumigants will not be the only category of agricultural chemicals monitored. Several other workhorse compounds will be under scrutiny as well.

For example, gibberellin, the hormone used universally by table grape growers to cause berry size increase, will be measured. It is thought to be a significant contributor to increased VOC release levels.

The area under the microscope in the Central Valley is expected to include as much as 25,000 acres, and many thousands of farm worker jobs if agricultural operations have to be shut down to maintain clean air.

Opposing clean air is an unpopular position, but that's not where farmers are coming from.

They are not convinced that the findings reported by environmentalists, even those who are judges, are correct. They suspect that some bad data have been introduced, perhaps inadvertently.

The one step that might help farmers avoid disaster is a hearing in Sacramento Superior Court July 18. It will rule on a suit by the Ventura County Agricultural Association that challenges and seeks to invalidate the regulations that limit the VOC output.

More than the weather will be heating up in July. The VOC issue affects too many people, too many businesses, too many communities to be accepted without widespread discussion and reflection.

Cordiality and common sense have typified the approach by the Department of Pesticide Regulation throughout the effort to enforce restrictions not of its own making.

That doesn't make the rulings any less unwelcome or irritating to farmers who must comply.

Third base definitely is messed up, but worse than that, for some farmers the game might be over.

Don Curlee is a freelance writer who specializes in agricultural issues.

Waiting for the smoke to clear

Steve Rubenstein, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Saturday, July 12, 2008

The air quality outlook for Northern California:

Bay Area: Smoke from hundreds of wildfires has hung over the Bay Area for nearly a week, but air quality will improve over the next couple of days, said analysts with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. Even so, air pollution levels will reach the moderate range in parts of the

North Bay, East Bay and Santa Clara Valley, they said. Along the coast and the bay, air quality will be good.

Sacramento area: The air is getting better, sort of - on Saturday it will be only "unhealthy" instead of the "very unhealthy" level reached Thursday, the Sacramento Regional Air Quality Resource said.

Lake Tahoe: The area will be less than pristine, with "widespread smoky conditions" continuing to affect all of Placer County and pollution levels expected to be moderate to "hazardous."

Monterey: Air quality has been good, even though the Basin Complex Fire continues to rage, according to air quality experts there. But southerly winds predicted for this weekend could blow the smoke north, into Monterey and Carmel.

Butte County: At the site of the still-raging Butte Lightning Complex wildfire, air quality ranges from "unhealthy" to "very unhealthy" to "hazardous," and the entire county remains a good place for weekend wanderers to steer clear of.

Big Sur highway reopens, people return to Paradise

By SCOTT LINDLAW Associated Press Writer

Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley News, Monday, July 14, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO—More Californians returned Monday to homes they fled when wildfires threatened and a scenic coastal highway was open to traffic again as a slight improvement in weather eased the burden on firefighters.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said 288 blazes were still active around the state, most of them in the mountains ringing the northern edge of the Central Valley.

Most of those areas did not get any of the weekend rainfall that caused a huge mudslide on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, at a spot that was stripped of vegetation by wildfires last year. The mud closed a highway and forced occupants of 50 homes to leave, but state officials said the highway was reopened early Monday.

However, cool, moist air flowed inland from the Pacific early Monday in the area of Big Sur. Residents driven away by flames just days ago were returning to their homes, said Paul Van Gerwen, a battalion chief for the forestry and fire protection department, or CalFire.

And state authorities had reopened the last piece of scenic Highway 1 near Big Sur that had been closed because of the fires, he said. The California Highway Patrol was urging drivers to be careful because fire crews were still using the highway.

A large cleanup effort was underway in the Big Sur region Monday morning and most restaurants and hotels were back in businesses.

The Big Sur fire was 61 percent contained after destroying 27 homes. Nearly 2,300 firefighters were still at work on the Big Sur fire, and officials expect to have it fully contained by July 30.

There was also no rain during the weekend in Butte County, north of Sacramento, where thousands of homes were threatened as recently as Friday.

Still, firefighters and homeowners got some relief Sunday as moist air and calmer wind helped progress against the flames, and Monday's temperatures were expected to be in the upper 80s, an improvement over last week's readings above 100 degrees.

Thousands of people evacuated from their homes twice during the last month had started returning to the Butte County town of Paradise for the first time since July 8. About 300 homes remained threatened in and around the town Monday, down from 3,800 homes on Friday, and officials said the fire was 55 percent contained.

An evacuation order was lifted Sunday for the nearby town of Concow, one ridge away from Paradise, Butte County and fire officials said.

Fifty homes were destroyed and one person was apparently killed in the area last week when flames jumped a containment line.

The Butte County blazes were among hundreds of wildfires that have blackened nearly 1,300 square miles and destroyed about 100 homes across California since an enormous lightning storm ignited most of them three weeks ago.

Just to the south, a pair of blazes in the Sierra Nevada foothills west of Lake Tahoe were sending plumes of smoke toward the alpine resort area. [Air quality was so bad it prompted the cancellation of the annual Donner Lake Triathlon.](#)

Southeast of the Tahoe region, on the eastern slopes of the Sierra, severe thunderstorms Saturday set off a mudslide 300 yards wide and up to 3 feet deep, said Carma Roper, spokeswoman for the Inyo County Sheriff's Department.

The mud oozed across California Highway 395, and residents of more than 50 homes were evacuated. A nearby school was opened as a shelter.

Fires were not active in that section of California, but the mudslide struck an area where wildfires last year damaged about 50 homes.

In Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County, firefighters continued to make headway against a blaze in the Santa Ynez Mountains. Crews had contained 90 percent of the fire and expect to complete the containment lines on Wednesday, U.S. Forest Service spokesman David Daniels said.

Fifty-five homes remained under evacuation warning. "We're starting to get close," Daniels said.

In Washington state, 200 residents from Spokane Valley who were forced to evacuate Friday were allowed to return to their homes. Firefighters were mopping up the fire that burned 1.5 square miles and reported it 60 percent contained.

Elsewhere in eastern Washington, a blaze driven by gusty wind raced across 31 square miles of brush and grass southeast of Soap Lake, said Gary Garnant, public information officer for the Grant County Department of Emergency Management. Several outbuildings were destroyed and firefighters were working to protect 10 rural homes that were threatened, Garnant said.

Cleanup after mudslide on fire-scarred land

By SCOTT LINDLAW Associated Press Writers
Tri Valley Herald, Monday, July 14, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO—A large cleanup effort was under way Monday, after a weekend mudslide on fire-scarred land forced residents in an eastern Sierra Nevada town to evacuate their homes.

The mudslide, in an area that was devastated by wildfires last year, damaged about 50 homes and caused the temporary closure of a main road in the town of Independence, about 90 miles east of Fresno. Severe thunderstorms Saturday set off the slide 300 yards wide and up to three feet deep, said Carma Roper, spokeswoman for the Inyo County Sheriff's Department.

The mud oozed across California Highway 395, prompting a detour, and some mud came within a half mile of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which supplies much of Los Angeles' water.

On Monday morning, the California Highway Patrol had reopened one lane, escorting vehicles through the affected mile-and-a-half stretch of highway.

The rain also caused some problems for the area around the Piute Fire, which has charred the Sequoia National Forest for the past three weeks. The moisture helped calm the flames, but contributed to flooding in Lake Isabella, located in a canyon in the southern Sierra Nevada.

While officials planned to lift the last of the fire evacuations related to that blaze, evacuation orders remained for 75 Lake Isabella homes threatened by flooding.

The Piute fire was 68 percent contained after burning 57 square miles.

Milder weather around the state also allowed officials to lift evacuation orders in the fire-ravaged Butte County towns of Paradise and Concow and reopen the Pacific Coast Highway near another large blaze at Big Sur ahead of schedule.

The fires in Butte County, which burned 83 square miles and destroyed 50 homes in the area, weren't threatening any homes Monday morning, but firefighters were watching for flare-ups as hotter weather was expected to return in the afternoon. The blaze was about 70 percent contained, officials said.

"There's still fire activity and there's still firefighters doing a lot of work, but the winds have not picked up. The last few days have been very very good for firefighters, they've been able to get a handle fire because of that," said John Welsh, a spokesman for the state fire department in Butte County.

At least one person was found dead after the blaze swept through Concow. Officials have not released the person's identity, and the cause of death had not been determined.

On the Central California coast, a massive fire in the Los Padres National Forest was about 61 percent contained after scorching 187 square miles. The improved conditions allowed officials to reopen the highway Sunday night, and businesses were back open after nearly three weeks of evacuations.

Farther south, another wildfire in Los Padres forest near Santa Barbara County also saw progress with more favorable weather. Fire crews had contained 90 percent of the fire and expect to complete the containment lines on Wednesday, U.S. Forest Service spokesman David Daniels said.

Fifty-five homes remained under evacuation warning. "We're starting to get close," Daniels said.

A pair of blazes burning in the foothills west of Lake Tahoe were sending plumes of smoke toward the alpine resort area. The soot was sporadic, but air quality was so bad it prompted the cancellation of the annual Donner Lake Triathlon.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said 288 blazes were still burning around the state, most of them in the mountains ringing the northern edge of the Central Valley.

So far this fire season, flames have blackened nearly 1,300 square miles and destroy about 100 homes across California. Most of the blazes were sparked by a June 21 lightning storm across the northern part of the state.

California blaze roars in 'perfect storm'

By Emily Bazar

USA TODAY, Monday, July 14, 2008

[Scorching heat and whipping winds kept stoking wildfires across California on Wednesday, forcing thousands of people to flee their homes and spewing smoke into already polluted skies.](#)

From Santa Barbara County to the Oregon border, 323 fires continued to rage, down from a peak of 1,781. The fires, which began in June, have burned 675,631 acres, a figure that threatens to topple a record set in 1936, when 756,696 acres burned during the entire fire season.

"This is definitely unprecedented to have this many fires this early in the season," said Daniel Berlant, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as CAL FIRE. "It's the perfect storm. The conditions are extremely dry. Then you add higher temperatures early in the season and wind and lightning."

Much of Central and Northern California is sweltering under record or near-record temperatures. Forecasters predict a high of up to 112 degrees in Redding today, said Felix Garcia of the National Weather Service. The mercury is expected to hit 105 degrees in Sacramento, and temperatures will remain unusually high until the weekend, he said.

"Every little spark is able to grow into a large-acre fire" in that heat, Berlant said.

Wind has fanned the flames, particularly in Northern California's Butte County, which includes the communities of Concow and Paradise.

A major fire there was nearly contained when wind started gusting early Tuesday morning, said Fred Orsborn, CAL FIRE spokesman.

About 40 houses were destroyed in Concow, he said. In Paradise, about 8,000 people have been evacuated from their homes.

Mary Johnston, 22, who lives near Concow with her father and two children, burst into tears when she saw a photo of her charred house in a newspaper.

"I'm going nuts. Everything's gone," she told the Associated Press. "It's been so trying, especially with my kids. They don't even know what's going on. It's kind of hard telling them everything's gone, all your toys."

On the Central Coast, the blaze that threatens Big Sur is 27% contained, but crews are making progress, said Kristy Bryner of the Forest Service.

The progress is slow. Firefighters project that they won't contain the fire until July 30, she said.

Californians are bracing for more polluted air, which has kept them indoors and limited physical activities.

Smoke means more dangerous particulate matter in the air, and high temperatures worsen ozone pollution, said Dimitri Stanich, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

Bakersfield, Fresno, Modesto and other cities were forecast to have ozone in the "very unhealthy range" Wednesday, he said. That means the air is unhealthy for the general population, not just people with underlying health problems such as asthma. High ozone levels can cause irritated eyes, headache and chest congestion.

"What we're seeing here now has gone on for two weeks, and we have no end in sight," Stanich said. "We need to protect ourselves."

In the Sacramento region, people are being asked to drive less because of high ozone levels, said Christina Ragsdale of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District.

Usually, officials suggest walking or biking to work as alternatives, but people can't do that because "walking or biking outdoors could be hazardous," Ragsdale said. "We're asking people to modify their driving and basically stay indoors."

She said swimming pools have closed and athletes are taking their sports indoors.

The same is happening in Fresno, said Joanie Ballantyne, administrator of the Safe Harbor Adult Day Health Care Center.

About 150 seniors had to be taken to a nearby community center Wednesday after their air conditioner broke. Area seniors suffer from dehydration, sore eyes, dry noses and lethargy because of the pollution, she said.

Ballantyne said her own throat has gotten hoarse. "Even though there's no fire here in Fresno, you can feel, smell the fire in the air," she says. "It's just not a good situation all around."

Contributing: Gwen Purdom and Doyle Rice

Heavy rains complicate Calif. firefighting efforts

Associated Press

LA Daily Times, Monday, July 14, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO - Violent thunderstorms brought rain bursts that modestly helped firefighting efforts Sunday, but the downpours also triggered mudslides that complicated California's unfolding wildfire disaster.

"If it isn't fire, it's flood. If it isn't fire or flood, it's the mud," said Christina Lilienthal, an interagency fire spokeswoman. A "horrendous" amount of precipitation in the Sequoia National Forest dampened the ground, but also caused a creek to flood, cutting off a firefighting crew's escape route when a road washed out, she said.

The firefighters didn't need the escape route, because fires burning nearby did not threaten them. They moved to higher ground as a precaution against the rising waters, Lilienthal said.

But the 59 firefighters could not reach their camp Saturday evening, stranding them in the field overnight, Lilienthal said. They reopened the road Sunday afternoon, amid new threats of erratic winds and falling trees weakened by the soft ground.

A huge mudslide in an area that was devastated by wildfires last year damaged about 50 homes and caused the temporary closure of a main road in the California town of Independence on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada. Severe thunderstorms Saturday set off the mudslide 300 yards wide and up to three feet deep, said Carma Roper, spokeswoman for the Inyo County Sheriff's Department.

The mud oozed across California Highway 395, prompting a detour, and some mud came within a half mile of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which supplies much of Los Angeles' water.

Residents of more than 50 homes were evacuated and could not return to their properties, she said. Officials were using a nearby school as a shelter. The rain did nothing to help fires, which were not burning in that easternmost corner of California.

And no rain fell on most of the other California fires. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said 288 blazes were still burning around the state, most of them in the mountains ringing the northern edge of the Central Valley.

There was no precipitation in Butte County, north of Sacramento, where thousands of homes were threatened as recently as Friday. But firefighters and homeowners got some relief Sunday morning as moist air and calmer winds helped progress in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Thousands of people evacuated from their homes twice during the last month began returning to Paradise for the first time since Tuesday.

About 300 homes remained threatened in and around the town, down from 3,800 homes on Friday, and officials said the fire was 55 percent contained.

An evacuation order was lifted on Sunday for the nearby town of Concow, one ridge away from Paradise and prone to strong winds, Butte County and fire officials said.

Fifty homes were destroyed and one person was apparently killed in the area last week when wind-propelled flames jumped a containment line. The person's charred remains were found Friday in a burned-out home; the cause of death hadn't been determined.

The Butte County blazes were among hundreds of wildfires to blacken nearly 1,300 square miles and destroy about 100 homes across California since an enormous lightning storm ignited most of them three weeks ago.

Just to the south, a pair of blazes burning in the foothills west of Lake Tahoe were sending plumes of smoke toward the alpine resort area. The soot was sporadic, but air quality was so bad it prompted the cancellation of the annual Donner Lake Triathlon.

Residents in the tourist town of Big Sur, driven away by flames just days ago, were returning to their homes, said Paul Van Gerwen, a CalFire battalion chief stationed in the area.

"They're in a cleanup period," Van Gerwen said. "Many businesses and homeowners are getting the (fire-retardant) gels off their structures, cleaning up roadways, driveways, the debris that falls from trees. They're trying to get over the emotional state of the evacuation."

On Sunday morning, state authorities reopened the last piece of scenic Highway 1 near Big Sur that had been closed because of the fires, he said.

The fire was 61 percent contained after destroying 26 homes, and all evacuations near the town of Big Sur were lifted, he said.

At the so-called Gap fire in Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County, firefighters continued to make headway against a blaze that has raged through the Santa Ynez Mountains.

As of Sunday morning, fire crews had contained 85 percent of the fire and expect to complete the containment lines on Wednesday, U.S. Forest Service spokesman David Daniels said. Fifty-five homes remained under evacuation warning. "We're starting to get close," he said.

In far Northern California, the Trinity County Sheriff's Department ordered evacuations in sparsely populated communities in the mountains west of Redding.

Isolated thunderstorms were expected across parts of Southern California and flash flood watches were in effect Sunday for the Antelope Valley and the mountains of Santa Barbara, Ventura and Los Angeles counties, said Steven Van Horn, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Oxnard.

The moisture from the south was starting to move up the state and isolated storms were expected over the mountains farther to the north.

But Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service, said more than patchy rain was needed to douse California's unprecedented early fire season, especially in the north.

"Rain might slow it for an hour," Kirchner said. "But really, the most helpful thing is high humidity - that's what slows fires' spread, makes the fire more approachable."

Yet the forecasts in the central and northern parts of the state called only for hot and dry conditions, he said.

"The weather just isn't giving us a break," Kirchner said.

Regional News Briefs

From staff and news services

LA Daily Times, Sunday, July 13, 2008

AREAWIDE

AQMD to help school bus fleets get greener

The South Coast Air Quality Management District has announced plans to provide more than \$67 million to school districts wanting to replace older diesel buses with vehicles that run on compressed natural gas.

The agency's governing board approved the program with a unanimous vote Friday.

The money comes from Proposition 1B, which won voter approval in November 2006 for transportation and infrastructure projects.

The agency will make \$47.4 million available for diesel school bus replacements and another \$20 million for retrofits. Money is also included to help pay for the necessary fueling infrastructure.

The AQMD said the initiative will help replace buses made from 1977 to 1986 with new compressed natural gas models, and retrofit diesel buses made in 1994 and later with particulate traps.

The deadline for applications is Aug.29. For more information, link to www.aqmd.gov/.

Rain helps dampen flames, but spurs mud, flood woes

By Scott Lindlaw, The Associated Press

LA Daily Times, Sunday, July 13, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO - Violent thunderstorms brought rain bursts that modestly helped firefighting efforts Sunday, but the downpours also triggered mudslides that complicated California's unfolding wildfire disaster.

"If it isn't fire, it's flood. If it isn't fire or flood, it's the mud," said Christina Lilienthal, an interagency fire spokeswoman. A "horrendous" amount of precipitation in the Sequoia National Forest dampened the ground, but also caused a creek to flood, cutting off a firefighting crew's escape route when a road washed out, she said.

They were not in danger from the fires and moved to higher ground as a precaution against the rising waters, Lilienthal said.

But the 59 firefighters could not reach their camp Saturday evening, stranding them in the field overnight, Lilienthal said.

No rain fell on most of the other California fires. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said 288 blazes were still burning around the state, most of them in the mountains ringing the northern edge of the Central Valley.

There was no precipitation in Butte County, north of Sacramento, where thousands of homes were threatened as recently as Friday. But firefighters and homeowners got some relief Sunday morning as moist air and calmer winds helped progress in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Thousands of people evacuated from their homes twice during the last month began returning to Paradise for the first time since Tuesday.

About 300 homes remained threatened in and around the town, down from 3,800 homes on Friday, and officials said the fire was 55 percent contained.

An evacuation order was lifted on Sunday for the town of Concow, one ridge away from Paradise and prone to strong winds, Butte County and fire officials said.

Fifty homes were destroyed and one person was apparently killed in the area last week when wind-propelled flames jumped a containment line. The person's charred remains were found Friday in a burned-out home.

The Butte County blazes were among hundreds of wildfires to blacken nearly 1,200 square miles and destroy about 100 homes across California since an enormous lightning storm ignited most of them three weeks ago.

Just to the south, a pair of blazes burning in the foothills west of Lake Tahoe were sending plumes of smoke toward the alpine resort area. The air quality was so bad it prompted the cancellation of the annual Donner Lake Triathlon.

Residents of Big Sur, driven away by flames just days ago, were returning to their homes, said Paul Van Gerwen, a CalFire battalion chief stationed in the area.

On Sunday morning, state authorities reopened the last piece of scenic Highway 1 near Big Sur, he said.

The fire was 61 percent contained after destroying 26 homes, and all evacuations near the town of Big Sur were lifted, he said.

At the Gap Fire in Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County, firefighters continued to make headway against a blaze that has raged through the Santa Ynez Mountains.

Heavy Calif. rains dampen ground, strand fire crew

USA TODAY, Monday, July 14, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Violent thunderstorms brought rain bursts that modestly helped firefighting efforts Sunday, but the downpours also triggered mudslides that complicated California's unfolding wildfire disaster.

"If it isn't fire, it's flood. If it isn't fire or flood, it's the mud," said Christina Lilienthal, an interagency fire spokeswoman. A "horrendous" amount of precipitation in the Sequoia National Forest dampened the ground, but also caused a creek to flood, cutting off a firefighting crew's escape route when a road washed out, she said.

The firefighters did not need the escape route, because fires burning nearby did not threaten them. They moved to higher ground as a precaution against the rising waters, Lilienthal said.

A huge mudslide in an area that was devastated by wildfires last year damaged about 50 homes and caused the temporary closure of a main road in the California town of Independence on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Severe thunderstorms Saturday set off the mudslide, which was 300 yards (274 meters) wide and up to three feet (90 centimeters) deep, said Carma Roper, spokeswoman for the Inyo County Sheriff's Department.

The mud oozed across California Highway 395, prompting a detour, and some mud reached the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Residents of more than 50 homes were evacuated, she said. The rain did nothing to help with the fires, which were not burning in that easternmost corner of California.

And no rain fell on most of the other California fires. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said 288 blazes were still burning around the state, most in the mountains ringing the northern edge of the Central Valley.

There was no rain in Butte County, north of Sacramento, where thousands of homes were threatened as recently as Friday. But moist air and calmer winds Sunday morning helped firefighting efforts in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Thousands of people who were evacuated from their homes twice in the past month began returning to Paradise for the first time since Tuesday.

About 300 homes remained threatened in and around the town, down from 3,800 homes on Friday, and officials said the fire was 55% contained.

An evacuation order was lifted on Sunday for the nearby town of Concow, one ridge away from Paradise and prone to strong winds, Butte County and fire officials said.

Fifty homes were destroyed and one person was apparently killed in the area last week when wind-propelled flames jumped a containment line. The person's charred remains were found Friday in a burned-out home; the cause of death had not been determined.

The Butte County blazes were among hundreds of wildfires to blacken nearly 1,200 square miles (3,100 square kilometers) and destroy about 100 homes across California since an enormous lightning storm ignited most of them three weeks ago.

[Just to the south, a pair of blazes burning in the foothills west of Lake Tahoe were sending plumes of smoke toward the alpine resort area. The soot was sporadic, but air quality was so bad it prompted the cancellation of the annual Donner Lake Triathlon.](#)

Residents in the tourist town of Big Sur, driven away by flames just days ago, were returning to their homes and cleaning up, said Paul Van Gerwen, a CalFire battalion chief stationed in the area.

On Sunday morning, state authorities reopened the last piece of scenic Highway 1 near Big Sur that had been closed because of the fires, he said.

The fire was 61% contained after destroying 26 homes, and all evacuations near the town of Big Sur were lifted, he said.

Firefighters continued to make progress against a fire that has raged through the Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County. As of Sunday morning, fire crews had contained 85% of the fire and expected to complete the containment lines on Wednesday, U.S. Forest Service spokesman David Daniels said. Fifty-five homes remained under evacuation warning.

In far Northern California, the Trinity County Sheriff's Department ordered evacuations in sparsely populated communities in the mountains west of Redding.

Isolated thunderstorms were expected across parts of Southern California, said Steven Van Horn, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Oxnard. The moisture from the south was starting to move up the state and isolated storms were expected over the mountains farther to the north.

But Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service, said more than patchy rain was needed to douse California's unprecedented early fire season, especially in the north.

In Washington state, 200 residents from Spokane Valley who were forced to evacuate Friday were allowed to return to their homes as firefighters mopped up a fire that burned 1.5 square miles (3.9 square kilometers).

State weighs 'Pay As You Drive' insurance

By John Simerman

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, July 12, 2008

Would you cut back on driving if your insurance company charged by the mile, and maybe by the way you handle your ride?

Some state lawmakers and regulators are betting many Californians will.

Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner is moving swiftly on regulations for a "Pay as You Drive" system that lets carriers grant discounts to drivers who volunteer for mileage verification, with lower rates for fewer miles.

The big question: How would the companies check it, and what else might they track?

Several insurance companies favor in-car wireless devices to collect and transmit data. And some have urged the state to let them factor in driving behavior — speed, acceleration and braking, time of day — when setting rates.

The issue has chiseled an odd political split. Environmental groups have lined up with insurance companies in support of a bill to allow pricing based on voluntary mileage verification, while the prospect of insurers gauging not just miles, but mileage "quality," has some consumer and privacy rights groups howling.

Their fears include industry abuses, hackers and the likelihood that driver records will wind up in court. The Times last year reported that toll officials regularly turn over FasTrak data under subpoena in divorce cases, lawsuits and criminal investigations.

The pay-as-you-drive concept is not new. Progressive Insurance offers discounts in four states to thousands of drivers who agree to link their rates to mileage, speed, time, hard acceleration and braking. A palm-sized device transmits the data daily by cell network. Drivers can check their behavior and potential savings online.

"Mileage by itself is mildly predictive (of risk). But driving behavior is even more so," said Richard Hutchinson, a Progressive manager who heads the program. "It introduces empowerment ... and we're seeing indications of people changing behavior."

For the idea to take hold in California, the state must craft new regulations. Prop. 103, which voters passed in 1988, mandates that insurers price automobile policies primarily by driving record, miles driven and years of driving experience, in that order. The insurance commissioner can specify other factors linked to risk. Gender, marital status and type of vehicle are among 16 other factors in play. Stops, starts and other behind-the-wheel behavior are not. Last week, Poizner's office put out a call seeking evidence that ties those factors to risk.

Supporters say a mileage-based program will make rates fairer, [reduce pollution](#) and accidents, and help the state adhere to the second big factor under Prop. 103, instead of leaning on unreliable driver estimates and smog-check odometer readings that come too infrequently.

The Department of Insurance plans to issue draft regulations as early as next month. Separately, Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, this year introduced a bill to allow different pricing

for drivers who opt for mileage verification. AB2800 passed 72-2 in the Assembly and awaits Senate action.

"We're definitely making this a high priority," Poizner told the Times. "If we can reduce the total miles driven in the state, the highways will become safer, the environment will be cleaner, and total energy consumption will go down. There's a whole bunch of really positive public policy reasons why I want to get these regulations done as quickly as possible." Poizner said he wants a voluntary system for both insurance companies and drivers.

But one UC Berkeley scholar says a voluntary program will fall short. Aaron Edlin, a law and economics professor, said insurers have long resisted tying mileage to rates because it amounts to a "drastic change" in their business model. Most pay-as-you-drive consumers will drive less and save, meaning less revenue. And while accident claims also will drop, the benefit largely goes to other drivers, said Edlin, who favors a mandate.

"Insurance companies have some limited incentive to adopt pay-as-you drive insurance — if they want to be a niche company and specialize in serving low mileage drivers," Edlin said. "However, they don't have nearly the incentive that they should have."

[Based on data from a pilot project in Texas, California could cut 55 million tons of carbon dioxide between 2009 and 2020 — akin to curbing 10 million cars — if 30 percent of drivers volunteer, according to Environmental Defense Fund economist James Fine.](#) A Brookings Institution study estimated that pay-as-you-drive would reduce vehicle miles by 8 percent and save most households an average of \$270 per car.

"Transportation is a huge part of California's greenhouse-gas emissions. That's something that pay-as-you-drive insurance puts in control of the people who are driving, in a way that gets them to actually benefit financially from making the right decision," said Lauren Navarro, climate policy analyst for the Environmental Defense Fund.

Privacy and consumer advocates complain about a lack of safeguards in Huffman's bill and perhaps heavy incentives for drivers to place a "black box" in their cars. If insurers can track time or location, they argue, would they charge graveyard-shift workers more, or those who drive or park in bad neighborhoods? Could they use aggressive driving to block claims? Advocates favor a simpler system — preferably a human eye reading an odometer.

"The mileage data is not as disconcerting as the other stuff. The other data opens a Pandora's box for what it can be used for," said Carmen Balber of Consumer Watchdog, the group founded by Prop. 103 author Harvey Rosenfield. "Insurance companies have made clear they don't care about mileage. They just want to get in our cars."

One privacy advocate said it's not enough to limit the data insurers can use to set rates; regulators need to limit what they can collect.

"It doesn't matter how many rules you have. These kinds of databases tend to be targets for legal subpoenas," said Peter Eckersley, staff technologist for the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "The question of whether your religious or political affiliation or sexual affiliation can be judged by the places you drive — those are things people might not like being transmitted into big databases."

Poizner, a Republican, said he will let insurers choose how to verify miles, and he's open to considering stops, starts and other gauges of driver behavior as rate factors. But he insists he will bar technology such as GPS.

"That creates too many privacy problems. I don't support at all the tracking of the exact location of where drivers are going, period," he said. "We're never going to get close to what I think creates the major privacy issue."

Several insurance companies say onboard devices make the most sense and cite privacy laws barring them from sharing customer data.

"You can't sell it. There are strict limitations. That has proven to be a strong protector of privacy," said Sam Sorich, president of the Association of California Insurance Companies. Huffman noted that the program will be voluntary for drivers: "Nobody's going to be forced to do any of this."

Hutchinson, of Progressive, said no data from its pay-as-you-drive program have been subpoenaed, but "we all know it's going to happen at some point. Our position is the data belongs to the consumer and we only release it with their permission. However, subject to a court order, there's not much we can do." In any case, the company does not track driver location, he said.

"We can, and we've elected not to. For a lot of consumers, that would make them very nervous about all this," he said.

Marcy Greenhut of Berkeley likes the sound of pay-as-you-drive. She mostly cycles or takes public transportation, and she has seen consumers drive less as gas prices have skyrocketed. Better to feel the pinch of every mile, she said.

"Anything that can incentivize people to think twice before they drive, to put a little more thoughtfulness into our routine, I'm in favor of."

Dallas landfill wants to ramp up methane process

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, July 13, 2008

DALLAS—City officials in Dallas plan to have the state's first landfill that speeds production of methane gas through biotechnology, then captures it for conversion into natural gas to be used in homes.

If successful, the McCommas landfill would turn banana peels, milk cartons and newspapers into a series of energy-producing compost piles that could fuel up to 16,000 homes.

The process also could extend the life of the landfill, perhaps up to 100 years through faster decomposition.

McCommas wouldn't be the first landfill to capture methane gas and reuse it, but it would be the first to speed the production of methane.

The process involves burying several layers of pipe across a 30-acre trench, or "cell." One series of pipes will pump in water and landfill liquid, known as leachate. The moisture will saturate the trash, making a better food source for the naturally occurring organisms that turn the trash into gas.

As gas is produced, a second series of pipes will extract it using vacuum pressure. It will then be sent to an onsite processing plant where carbon dioxide will be separated from methane. The methane then will be transferred to an Atmos Energy pipeline.

There are plans for seven such cells, with construction of the first scheduled to start in October.

"Even though it looks like we're just burying trash, it's really a huge science project," Ron Smith, assistant director of the city's sanitation department, said in Sunday's editions of The Dallas Morning News. "It's probably going to end up being the largest in the country."

The system can produce methane gas at two to three times the rate of a traditional landfill and could generate \$30,000 to \$50,000 a month for the city.

McCommas currently captures about 2.5 million cubic feet of methane a day, which is piped to an onsite plant operated by an independent company, Dallas Clean Energy. Some of the city's estimates show that by 2012, output could reach 20 million cubic feet per day.

Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Willie Kelley said his agency is planning to teach other cities and landfill owners about the Dallas plan at a September conference.

"This is energy. You want to capture it," he said.

Court rejects Bush's signature air pollution rule

By MATT APUZZO Associated Press Writer
Contra Costa Times, Friday, July 11, 2008

WASHINGTON—A federal appeals court unanimously struck down a signature component of President Bush's clean air policies Friday, dealing a blow to environmental groups and likely delaying further action until the next administration.

The regulation, known as the Clean Air Interstate Rule, required 28 mostly Eastern states to reduce smog-forming and soot-producing emissions that can travel long distances in the wind.

The Environmental Protection Agency predicted it would prevent about 17,000 premature deaths a year.

North Carolina and some electric power producers opposed aspects of the regulation and President Bush found himself with unusual allies.

"This is the rare case where environmental groups went to court alongside the Bush administration," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, a group that has criticized other Bush administration policies.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled Friday that the EPA overstepped its authority by instituting the rule. It said the Clean Air Act did not give the EPA the authority to change pollution standards the way it did. Citing "more than several fatal flaws," the court scrapped the entire regulation.

["This is without a doubt the worst news of the year when it comes to air pollution," O'Donnell said.](#)

The EPA said the rule would dramatically reduce sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions, saving as much as \$100 billion in health benefits.

Besides the reduction in premature deaths, the EPA also said the rule would have prevented millions of lost work and school days and tens of thousands of nonfatal heart attacks.

The ruling was somewhat of a surprise, even to North Carolina and industry groups, which challenged aspects of the law.

While North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper said he was glad the court agreed "we need tougher rules to clean up and protect the air we breathe," his spokeswoman, Noelle Talley, said the attorney general's office disagreed that the entire rule needed to be scrapped.

William M. Bumpers, an attorney representing Entergy Corp., said a few electric companies flatly opposed the regulation but most generally favored it because it included cap-and-trade provisions. Such provisions allow companies that exceed emissions caps to buy credits from companies that do not.

"The power-generating industry had already invested billions and billions of dollars in anticipation of the trading market," Bumpers said. "They're not happy with this development."

The EPA said it was reviewing the 60-page opinion and would issue a response later Friday. The Bush administration can appeal the decision but environmental groups called for Congress and the EPA to quickly begin working on a new law or replacement regulation.

White House rejects regulating greenhouse gases

By DINA CAPPIELLO, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle, N.Y. Times, Washington Post and other papers, Friday, July 11, 2008

WASHINGTON, (AP) --The Bush administration, dismissing the recommendations of its top experts, rejected regulating the greenhouse gases blamed for global warming Friday, saying it would cripple the U.S. economy.

In a 588-page federal notice, the Environmental Protection Agency made no finding on whether global warming poses a threat to people's health or welfare, reversing an earlier conclusion at the

insistence of the White House and officially kicking any decision on a solution to the next president and Congress.

The White House on Thursday rejected the EPA's suggestion three weeks earlier that the 1970 Clean Air Act can be both workable and effective for addressing global climate change. The EPA said Friday that law is "ill-suited" for dealing with global warming.

"If our nation is truly serious about regulating greenhouse gases, the Clean Air Act is the wrong tool for the job," EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson told reporters. "It is really at the feet of Congress."

White House press secretary Dana Perino said that President Bush is committed to further reductions but that there is a "right way and a wrong way to deal with climate change."

The wrong way is "to sharply increase gasoline prices, home heating bills and the cost of energy for American businesses," she said. "The right way, as the president has proposed, is to invest in new technologies."

At the just concluded G-8 summit at Toyako, Japan, Bush and other world leaders called for a voluntary 50 percent reduction in greenhouse gases worldwide by 2050 but offered no specifics on how to do it.

In a setback for Bush, the Supreme Court ruled last year that the government had the authority under the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse gases as a pollutant. Bush has consistently opposed doing that.

Congress hasn't found the will to do much about the problem either. Supporters of regulating greenhouse gases could get only 48 votes in the 100-member Senate last month. The House has held several hearings on the problem but no votes on any bill addressing it. Both major presidential candidates, Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama, have endorsed variations of the approach rejected by the Senate.

In its voluminous document, the EPA laid out a buffet of options on how to reduce greenhouse gases from cars, ships, trains, power plants, factories and refineries. On Friday, Johnson called the proposals drafted by his staff as "putting a square peg into a round hole" and he said moving forward would be irresponsible.

"One point is clear: The potential regulation of greenhouse gases under any portion of the Clean Air Act could result in unprecedented expansion of EPA authority that would have a profound effect on virtually every sector of the economy and touch every household in the land," Johnson wrote in the document's preface Friday.

Attorneys general from several states called the administration's findings inadequate.

"While we appreciate the effort that EPA staff made in putting together today's documents, the time has long passed for open-ended pondering — what we need now is action," said Attorney General Martha Coakley of Massachusetts, which initiated the Supreme Court case.

The EPA said it had encountered resistance from the Agriculture, Commerce, Energy and Transportation departments, as well as the White House, that made it "impossible" to respond in a timely fashion to the Supreme Court decision.

"Our agencies have serious concerns with this suggestion because it does not fairly recognize the enormous — and, we believe, insurmountable — burdens, difficulties, and costs, and likely limited benefits, of using the Clean Air Act" to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, the secretaries of the four agencies wrote to the White House on Wednesday.

Discussing the benefits from reducing greenhouse gases, the EPA said doing nothing more than increasing fuel efficiency standards under last year's energy bill will reduce the harmful effects of global warming by \$340 billion to \$830 billion over the next three decades.

In a May draft of Friday's notice, the EPA had put the benefits to society of further reducing greenhouse gases at \$2 trillion.

Friday's action caps months of often tense negotiations between EPA scientists and the White House over how to address global warming under the major federal air pollution law. It ended with the White House and other agencies citing "extraordinary circumstances" and refusing to review the draft forwarded in June by EPA scientists.

The document released Friday is much more cautious than a determination made in December by the agency that found greenhouse gases endangered welfare, and it also appears to counteract findings of drafts released in May and June that found the Clean Air Act could be an effective tool for reducing greenhouse gases.

"EPA's approach to this has been completely thrown out by the White House, which is only attempting to stall any kind of cleanup," said Frank O'Donnell, "president of Clean Air Watch, an environmental advocacy group. "It sounds like the Bush administration is trying to ignore the Supreme Court and to pretend it doesn't exist."

Rep. Edward Markey, chairman of the House Select Committee on Global Warming, called the administration's findings "the bureaucratic equivalent of saying that the dog ate your homework."

"The White House has taken an earnest attempt by their own climate experts to respond to the Supreme Court's mandate to address global warming pollution and turned it into a Frankenstein's monster," said Markey, D-Mass.

Industry groups still expressed concern Friday over some of the suggestions included in the document, which will be the basis for a future action rule under a new president more inclined to take tougher action to address global warming.

"Our point on this is that EPA has set forth a road map which literally throws the entire way which we manage the environment and economy in complete turmoil," said Bill Kovacs, vice president of the Environment, Technology and Regulatory Affairs Division at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Two decisions halt Bush clean-air efforts

Felicity Barringer, New York Times
Saturday, July 12, 2008

Any major steps by the Bush administration to control air pollution or reduce greenhouse gases came to a dead end Friday - the combined result of a federal court ruling and a decision by the head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

In the morning, a federal appeals court struck down the cornerstone of the Bush administration's strategy to control industrial air pollution by agreeing with arguments by the utility industry that the EPA had exceeded its authority when it established the Clean Air Interstate Rule in 2005. The court, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, said the rule, which set new requirements for major pollutants, had "fatal flaws."

A few hours later, the EPA chief rejected any obligation to regulate greenhouse gases under existing law, saying to do so would involve an "unprecedented expansion" of the agency's authority that would have "a profound effect on virtually every sector of the economy," touching "every household in the land."

Taken together, the two developments make clear that any significant new effort to fight air pollution will fall to the next president.

The comments by EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson reinforced a message the Bush administration has been sending for months: It does not intend to put mandatory controls on the emissions that cause climate change.

John Walke, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, a leading environmental group, said, "As a result of today, July 11, the Bush administration has failed to achieve a single ounce in reductions of smog, soot, mercury or global warming pollution from power plants."

Johnson's comments appeared as a preface to a report by the EPA staff sketching out how the emission of greenhouse gases, particularly by vehicles, might be handled under the Clean Air Act. The report was intended to address a Supreme Court directive that the agency decide whether greenhouse gases threaten people's health or welfare. In effect, Johnson was simultaneously publishing the policy analysis of his scientific and legal experts and repudiating its conclusions.

The Clean Air Interstate Rule, which covered states in the eastern half of the country, set new requirements for controls on major pollutants emitted by industry, particularly the electric utilities. At its most stringent, it would have required, beginning in 2015, 70 percent reductions in sulfur dioxide and 60 percent reductions in nitrogen oxide.

The court ruling, combined with a court decision this year striking down an EPA rule controlling mercury emissions from power plants, means that virtually all new controls on the electric utility industry by the Bush administration have no force.

Court Rejects Clean Air Rules

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the N.Y. Times and other papers, Sat., July 12, 2008

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal appeals court unanimously struck down a major component of President Bush's clean air policies on Friday, effectively delaying further action on reducing smog and soot-producing emissions until the next administration takes office.

North Carolina and some electric power producers opposed aspects of the regulation, known as the Clean Air Interstate Rule, creating a rare instance in which President Bush found himself allied with environmental advocates.

The act required 28 states, largely on the East Coast, to reduce the pollutants that can travel long distances in the wind, which the Environmental Protection Agency predicted it would prevent about 17,000 premature deaths a year.

"This the rare case where environmental groups went to court alongside the Bush administration," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, a group that has criticized other Bush administration policies.

The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled that the environmental agency overstepped its authority by instituting the rule. It said the Clean Air Act did not give the E.P.A. the authority to change pollution standards the way it did. Citing "more than several fatal flaws," the court scrapped the entire regulation.

"This is without a doubt the worst news of the year when it comes to air pollution," Mr. O'Donnell said.

The environmental agency said the rule would have drastically reduced sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions, saving up to \$100 billion in health benefits by preventing tens of thousands of heart attacks millions as well as lost work and school days.

While the Bush administration could appeal the decision, environmental groups called for Congress and the E.P.A. to quickly begin working on a new law or a replacement regulation.

The ruling was somewhat of a surprise, even to industry groups that had challenged aspects of the law. William M. Bumpers, a lawyer representing Entergy Corp., said a few electric companies flatly opposed the regulation but most generally favored it because it included cap-and-trade provisions that allow them to exceed emissions caps to buy credits from those who do.

"The power-generating industry had already invested billions and billions of dollars in anticipation of the trading market," Mr. Bumpers said. "They're not happy with this development."

Judges Toss EPA Rule To Reduce Smog, Soot It Was Agency's Most Aggressive Air Measure

By Del Quentin Wilber and Marc Kaufman
Washington Post, Saturday, July 12, 2008

A federal appeals court yesterday threw out a major component of the Bush administration's effort to reduce unhealthy levels of soot and smog in Eastern and Midwestern states, a decision that environmental groups worry will delay action on air pollution well into the next administration.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit ruled unanimously that the Environmental Protection Agency overstepped its authority in instituting a rule that would have established a cap-and-trade system for soot and smog.

The court ruling came on the same day that the administration said it would take no steps under the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming, even though the EPA formally announced that it would seek public comment on the issue.

The Clean Air Interstate Rule (CAIR) rejected by the court does not apply to greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

The rule represented the Bush administration's most aggressive action to clean the air over the next two decades. The EPA estimated that the rule would help prevent 17,000 premature deaths and reduce levels of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides by as much as 70 percent by 2025. An unusual alliance of power companies and environmental groups supported the measure.

But the judges found that the EPA had committed "more than several fatal flaws" in creating the measure, which was challenged by several power companies and the state of North Carolina for a variety of contrasting reasons.

"No amount of tinkering with the rule or revising of the explanations will transform CAIR, as written, into an acceptable rule," according to the unanimous 60-page opinion issued by the D.C. Circuit's chief judge, David B. Sentelle, and Judges Judith W. Rogers and Janice Rogers Brown.

EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson said in a conference call with reporters that "we are extremely disappointed in the court's decision because it's overturning one of the most protective [air pollution] rules in our nation's history. . . . We'll wait and see what our next steps are."

Environmental groups said the decision will delay efforts to reduce harmful air pollution and will leave tough decisions to be made by the next president and Congress.

"This is probably the biggest air-quality setback ever suffered by the EPA under any administration," said John Walke, clean air director and senior attorney for the National Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group.

Lawmakers who support tougher air pollution standards said the decision should help their efforts to pass legislation.

"Our air isn't getting any healthier as we battle new clean air regulations in the courts and Congress continues to stall in passing strong clean air legislation," Sen. Thomas R. Carper (D-Del.), chairman of the Senate clean air and nuclear safety subcommittee, said in a statement.

Carper has introduced legislation setting limits on soot and smog that would be stricter than those in the Bush rule.

The interstate rule was one of the administration's signature air pollution policies. It would have required 28 states and the District of Columbia to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide from power plants.

It took a regional approach to the issue and established a cap-and-trade system that would have allowed utilities to sell and buy pollution credits as long as total industry emissions remained below a preset cap.

Environmental groups said the rule would have been particularly helpful in the D.C. region. Much of the area's air pollution on summer days arrives from coal-fired power plants and industry farther west.

While several environmental groups criticized the rule for not setting more aggressive pollution limits, they nevertheless welcomed the measure, saying it was the best they could expect from the administration.

Many power companies also supported the rule because it was not as costly as some proposals pending in Congress. Even North Carolina-based Duke Energy, one of the companies that challenged the measure, said in a statement that it did not intend to have it overturned.

William M. Bumpers, an attorney with Baker Botts LLP, said most of the 20 or so electric companies that his firm represents supported the rule. Some made large investments to upgrade their coal-fired plants, assuming the rule would remain, he said. With the rule vacated, he said, companies will have to rethink their plans.

"This is a train wreck for the EPA, and it's a train wreck for the environment," Bumpers said. "Companies have invested billions of dollars under this rule, and they're not very happy today."

However, not all power companies supported the EPA's action. Several, led by Duke Energy, filed court challenges, arguing that the agency had set pollution limits arbitrarily.

North Carolina attacked the plan from a different angle, saying the program was not tough enough because utilities would be allowed to pollute more by buying credits. Such utilities then would actually be dumping more soot and smog onto North Carolina communities, the state argued.

In agreeing with those arguments, the judges said the EPA's regional cap system "is fundamentally flawed" because it does not take into proper consideration state-specific emissions and needed reductions. It said the agency arbitrarily tied sulfur dioxide emissions to limits passed by Congress in 1990 legislation that addressed acid rain.

And, the judges wrote, the agency improperly set caps on nitrogen oxide by giving states with cleaner plants fewer pollution credits. Though the court said the "EPA's redistributive instinct may be laudatory," the agency doesn't have the authority to force one state to "share the burden of reducing" another's emissions.

"EPA must redo its analysis from the ground up," the judges wrote.

Truckers hope green options save green in wallet

By The Associated Press

In the N.Y. Times and other papers, Sunday, July 13, 2008

MILTON, Pa. (AP) -- To cool off inside his cab, Ken Kafer hooks up his rig to a contraption that looks like a giant exhaust pipe for a clothes dryer.

Besides air conditioning, the yellow hose funnels TV and even Internet connections through a window into his cab at a truck stop. The best part, Kafer says, is that he doesn't need to keep his diesel engine on.

So-called "electrified truck stops," along with on-board tools such as auxiliary power units, have drawn interest from some truckers in part to reduce pollution and engine grind from idling and abide by a growing number of anti-idling guidelines nationwide. But lately, drivers like Kafer have increasingly turned to them to also save money with fuel prices at record highs.

"I'm saving fuel, engine wear, and I'm getting all the comforts that I need," said Kafer, 42, of Hubert, N.C., during a break at a truck stop in the central Pennsylvania town of Milton on a recent Iowa-to-New York run.

Jim Runk, president of the Pennsylvania Motor Trucking Association, said many truckers are using such options now because fuel prices are at a point where "they just can't put up with it."

Environmentalists have long been critical of the pollution emitted by diesel engines, with tractor-trailers among the most common and plentiful source of soot.

A report from the Clean Air Task Force, an advocacy group, estimated in 2005 that 21,000 Americans' lives were shortened by particle emissions from diesel engines.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2001 established new rules, including the introduction of cleaner highway diesel fuel in 2006 and requirements for manufacturing truck engines starting in 2007.

Once fully enacted, the rules could lead to a reduction in 2.6 million tons of smog-causing nitrogen oxide emissions and prevent 8,300 premature deaths, the EPA has said.

After initial resistance from the industry, most truckers are on board with the changes. There's additional impetus these days, with diesel prices pushing \$4.70 per gallon.

Many companies have turned to installing auxiliary power units, which allow drivers to have heat or air conditioning inside the cab during rest breaks without having to run the engine -- using just a fraction of the fuel used otherwise.

Trucker Marlin Burkholder, 45, of Richfield, said he doesn't go on overnight runs for his company, H.F. Campbell & Son Inc., in Millerstown. He will, though, use the auxiliary power unit to keep the cab comfortable while reading or napping if he has to wait for a load.

"We just switch that on, it keeps the truck comfortable and it keeps idling time down," Burkholder said during a recent stop while transporting bananas between Harrisburg and Wilmington, Del.

But the units can be costly. Burkholder's boss, company president Frank Campbell, had each of his 50-plus trucks outfitted with the roughly \$8,000 power units within the last two years, hoping in part to save on gas.

"With the price of fuel going out of this world, it affects what you do," Campbell said. "If you're not staying even, you're losing ground."

The electrified truck stops, such as the one operated by IdleAire Technologies Corp. in Milton, allow drivers to connect to the odd-looking power hookups while keeping their engines off.

Driver Chris D'Ambrosio, 30, of Dallas paid about \$2 an hour for heating, air conditioning and Internet service while on a break with his wife during a recent run. D'Ambrosio said the service helps with his fuel bill hovering around \$6,000 a month -- and it has an added health benefit.

"I've gotten to the point where I can't be around idling trucks because it affects my sleep patterns," he said.

IdleAire has more than 8,500 spaces in 34 states. It estimates that it has eliminated more than 722 million pounds of diesel emissions since its inception in 2000.

"It's freedom of choice for America's professional drivers who want to improve their lives, their health and their performance behind the wheel," said John Airhart, an IdleAire supervisor in Milton.

Still, there are questions about the company's future after Tennessee-based IdleAire filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in May.

The company has said it has no current plans to close locations, though spokesman John Doty said IdleAire could be sold, with the next owners making the ultimate decisions.

The EPA has mandated that tractor-trailer rigs and other heavy-duty trucks and buses built starting in 2007 run on less-polluting diesel engines. Guidelines, though, don't cover engines built before then, and some engines can run for a million miles.

That means it may take decades for the entire on-road diesel fleet to be overhauled to the cleaner standards, said Conrad Schneider of the Clean Air Task Force. He has called for more funding to help truckers retrofit their engines with pollution-reducing filters, or requirements that call for filters to be installed during engine overhauls.

Eric Cheung, a senior attorney with the Clean Air Council in Philadelphia, tries to spread the retrofitting message to area trucking companies as part of the "Philadelphia Diesel Difference" campaign, coordinated by the council and the city.

That message, though, doesn't resonate with truckers as much as talk about idle-reducing strategies, he said.

"The problem is, with the actual straightforward technology to reduce emissions ... that doesn't help in fuel savings."

Working hours to shift for Olympics

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, July 13, 2008

[BEIJING—Public institutions in Beijing will soon start work an hour later than normal in a plan to ease traffic congestion during the Olympic Games, state media said Monday.](#)

Working hours in Beijing will change from July 20 in a bid to spread out morning traffic by staggering office openings and to reduce pollution, the China Daily newspaper said.

The government also is encouraging people to work flexible hours or work from home if possible, it said.

Working hours for companies will be set from 9 a.m to 5 p.m. Public institutions will begin work at 9:30 a.m., one hour later than normal. Shopping malls will open no earlier than 10 a.m. and stay open longer, until 10 p.m. or even later.

Schools, administrative bodies and essential service sectors are exempt from the changes, the paper said.

Beijing has announced a string of temporary measures to control its air pollution before the games start Aug. 8.

Also on July 20, cars with odd and even number plates will only be allowed on the roads on alternate days. Drivers violating the rule will be fined \$15.

Beijing has spent more than \$15 billion on anti-pollution measures for the Olympics, such as relocating factories and expanding its subway network, the China Daily said.

Developing nations reject G-8 climate plan

USA TODAY, Monday, July 14, 2008

TOYAKO, Japan (AP) — China, India and other energy-guzzling developing nations on Wednesday rejected key elements of a global warming strategy embraced by President Bush and leaders of wealthy nations. And the U.N's top climate official dismissed the G-8 goals as insignificant.

The sharp criticism emerged at the close of a summit here of the Group of Eight industrial powers that was dominated by the issue of how to address the warming Earth. The G-8 leaders invited their counterparts from fast-growing, pollution-emitting nations to sideline talks on the topic, but the session merely showcased a widening rift over the best approach.

It was the final G-8 summit of Bush's presidency and he said "significant progress" had been made on fighting global warming when the leaders agreed to slash greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2050 and to insist that developing nations be part of any new international agreement.

"In order to address climate change, all major economies must be at the table, and that's what took place," Bush said before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington.

[The "major economies" are the world's 16 largest-emitting nations, accounting for 80% of the world's air pollution.](#) The expanded meeting that included all of them was the first time their leaders had sat down together for climate discussions.

But it ended with only a vague reference in their final declaration to a long-term goal for reducing global emissions and a pledge for rich and poor countries to work together. Only a few of the emerging powers — Indonesia, Australia and South Korea — agreed to back the 50% by 2050 reduction target.

The five main developing nations — China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, who together represent 42% of the world's population — issued a statement explaining their split with the G-8 over its emissions-reduction goals. They said they rejected the notion that all should share in the 50-percent target, since it is wealthier countries that have created most of the environmental up to now.

"It is essential that developed countries take the lead in achieving ambitious and absolute greenhouse gas emissions reductions," said the statement.

Chinese President Hu Jintao went a step further in separate remarks. While acknowledging that developing nations must act, he said "developed countries should make explicit commitments to continue to take the lead in emissions reduction."

"China's central task now is to develop the economy and make life better for the people," he said. "... China's per capita emission is relatively low."

Yvo de Boer, who leads United Nations negotiations to forge a new climate change treaty, also challenged Bush's optimistic assessment of the meetings.

"I don't find the outcome very significant," de Boer told The Associated Press in an interview in the Netherlands. He said the target for reducing carbon emissions by 2050 mentioned no base line, was not legally binding and was open to vastly different interpretations.

Bush called the gathering in this resort city on the mountainous northern Japanese island of Hokkaido "very productive" on a range of issues. But he returned home with a mixed bag, reflecting a president with fewer than 200 days left in his term, low approval ratings at home and waning influence abroad.

The G-8 countries — the U.S., Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Canada — pledged to follow through on commitments made earlier to increase global economic aid to Africa by \$50 billion from the 2005 level by 2010, with half of it to go to Africa. Bush had complained that G-8 partners were not living up to a pledge they originally made at the 2006 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland.

He also won support for a deal for using international food reserves to help the poorest countries cope with soaring grain prices.

And summit partners heeded Bush's plea to do more to help fight AIDS, malaria and infectious childhood diseases, particularly in Africa.

Bush also played a big role in getting a strong G-8 statement designed to increase pressure on negotiators to resume long-stalled global talks to ease trade barriers.

On Zimbabwe, G-8 participants rejected the legitimacy of Robert Mugabe's presidential election in what has been branded a sham by the international community. They proposed a special UN envoy and said they would take financial and other steps against those "responsible for violence." But the statement stopped short of endorsing the U.S.-sponsored resolution now before the U.N. Security Council that proposes to sanction Zimbabwe and freeze the assets of Mugabe.

The summit participants did little that would help bring down record oil and gasoline prices in the short or immediate-term, nor to support the tumbling U.S. dollar, a six-year slide that has hurt most of their economies as well. Then again, Bush didn't ask for their help in propping up the dollar, despite repeating his support-for-a-strong-dollar mantra.

Bush also struck out a few times on the sidelines of the summit.

He was rebuffed by Russia's new president, Dmitry Medvedev, in his efforts to win Moscow's support — or at least neutrality — on his proposal to base parts of a U.S. missile-defense system in nations of Eastern Europe that used to be part of the Soviet bloc.

They met for an hour and vowed closer cooperation on a range of issues. But Medvedev later told reporters that his chat with Bush yielded "no particular progress" on issues dividing the countries, particularly the missile shield. "We will be studying countermeasures," if the U.S. goes ahead with such plans, Medvedev said without elaborating.

"We will continue to have a dialogue with the Russians on this matter," said White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Bush did score a few wins in the climate-control debate. In addition to drawing reluctant developing nations into the process, he got fellow G-8 participants to pledge to annually dedicate \$10 billion to technology research and development.

[Tracy Press editorial, Friday, July 11, 2008:](#)

Bring trains back to Tracy.

We heard a lot of good things at Friday's groundbreaking at the Bow Tie — "green" design elements, transportation planning, downtown development, even public art.

We didn't hear the word "train" too often, but the station architect Eli Naor did say this: "We can build all the train stations you want, but somebody needs to bring trains to the neighborhood."

Tracy's new public transportation station will be both a glance at the past and a glimpse of the future. The past is Tracy's history as a railroad town, our *raison d'être*, starting in 1878. The Central Pacific Railroad laid track from Martinez to a junction that became a railroad center, named for railroad man Lathrop J. Tracy.

The present, of course, is the 6,000-square-foot, \$12.3 million station to be built at Central and Sixth streets. It's expected to open in August 2009 as a transit hub in the cultural heart of town for city buses, taxis and commuter vans, with meeting rooms, offices, parking and an outdoor plaza.

But no trains — which brings us to the future. The city took an important step in 2006 by buying Union Pacific land and then using state grants and money from Measure K, San Joaquin County's transportation tax, to build the station.

Next comes the era of linking the station to other yet-to-be-built local stations and to mass transit — the Altamont Commuter Express, BART, future high-speed rail service, even light rail.

Mayor Brent Ives, who recently chaired the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission, which oversees the ACE system, describes the "delicate tapestry" of the area's cities, counties and big players in regional transportation, with Union Pacific — owner of the region's rail tracks — at the center.

He sees opportunities for Tracy to push for federal money to build its own high-speed alignment over (or even through) the Altamont Pass. Thus, the transit hub in downtown Tracy is a "catalyst project," he said, which is part of a long-term strategy for future rail.

It's a worthy goal for an old railroad town.

Let's get to work on a transportation master plan and, while we're at it, scrap the proposed slogan for the city — "Think Inside the Triangle."

We're way beyond that.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, July 13, 2008:](#)

Bill to increase vehicle fees is fair way to share cost of cleaning air 'Mobile sources' are by far the largest contributors to the Valley's foul air.

Valley drivers would pay a little more to operate their vehicles if a bill now in the Legislature is passed and signed. That's a bitter pill to swallow in a time when gasoline costs \$4.50 a gallon

and is headed higher. But it's a necessary expense if we are to address the Valley's poor air quality.

Assembly Bill 2522 would authorize the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District to increase its annual surcharge on vehicle licensing fees to a maximum of \$30. It's now at \$7. The district would be free to raise the fees incrementally, a little at a time, or move all at once to the \$30 maximum.

The money would be used to pay for programs to improve air quality in the Valley, for years one of the worst air basins in the country.

Much of the money raised by the surcharge would be used to retrofit or replace older diesel engines in use in the eight-county air district. Some of it could be used to get "gross polluters," the oldest and dirtiest cars and trucks, off the roads altogether.

So-called "mobile sources" -- cars and trucks, mostly -- are by far the largest contributors to the Valley's foul air. And diesel engines, which spew tons of particulate matter into the air each day, are the single biggest culprit.

We're responsible for our bad air. It's our cars and trucks that are polluting Valley skies. That makes a fee on each vehicle an eminently fair way to help pay for cleaning up our air.

AB 2522, sponsored by Fresno Democrat Juan Arambula, would help us reach compliance with state and federal air-quality standards. Moreover, cleaner air will save lives and millions of dollars.

It costs us all more than \$3 billion a year in added health costs due to bad air. Thousands suffer from asthma and other conditions that are caused or exacerbated by dirty air, and hundreds die prematurely each year.

An extra \$23 a year doesn't seem like too high a price to pay to address those frightening numbers.

The measure has attracted a wide range of supporters, including many from both the agricultural industry and environmental advocates, two groups that are not accustomed to being on the same side.

Ag interests have argued that many, if not most, of the measures taken so far to clean up the air have fallen principally on the backs of farmers and related businesses. Their complaint is valid. Most of the initial legislative efforts were aimed at agriculture.

But spreading the burden of paying for cleaner air has always been a goal of clean-air advocates. No part of the economy or the community is blameless when it comes to our bad air, and no part should be excused from bearing a share of the cost. AB 2522 is an equitable approach to sharing the pain.

[N.Y. Times editorial, Sunday, July 13, 2008:](#)

Posturing and Abdication

The Bush administration made clear on Friday that it will do virtually nothing to regulate the greenhouse gases that cause global warming. With no shame and no apology, it stuck a thumb in the eye of the Supreme Court, repudiated its own scientists and exposed the hollowness of Mr. Bush's claims to have seen the light on climate change.

That is the import of an announcement by Stephen Johnson, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, that the E.P.A. will continue to delay a decision on whether global warming threatens human health and welfare and requires regulations to address it. Mr. Johnson said his agency would seek further public comment on the matter, a process that will almost certainly stretch beyond the end of Mr. Bush's term.

The urgent problem of global warming demands urgent action. And the Supreme Court surely expected a speedier response when — 15 months ago — it ordered the E.P.A. to determine

whether greenhouse gas pollution from vehicles (and, by extension, other sources) endangers human welfare and, if so, to issue regulations to limit emissions.

Mr. Bush initially promised to comply, and last December, a task force of agency scientists concluded that emissions do indeed endanger public welfare, that the E.P.A. is required to issue regulations, and that while remedial action could cost industry billions of dollars, the public welfare and the economy as a whole will benefit.

The agency sent its findings to the White House. The details of what happened next are not clear. But investigations by Senator Barbara Boxer and Representative Edward Markey have established that the White House, prodded by Vice President Dick Cheney's office, decided to ignore the findings — refusing at first to even open the e-mail containing them and then asking Mr. Johnson to devise another response that would relieve the administration of taking prompt action.

Along the way, the administration engaged in what Senator Boxer has aptly called a “master plan” to ensure that the E.P.A.'s response to the Supreme Court's decision would be as weak as possible.

This campaign of obfuscation and intimidation included doctoring Congressional testimony on the health effects of climate change; ordering the E.P.A. to recompute its numbers to minimize the economic benefits of curbing carbon dioxide; and promoting the fiction that the modest fuel-economy improvements in last year's energy bill would solve the problem of carbon dioxide emissions from automobiles.

All this is unfortunate but not surprising. Mr. Bush spent years denying there was a climate change problem. And while he no longer denies the science, he still insists on putting the concerns of industry over the needs of the planet.

We were skeptical last week when Mr. Bush joined other world leaders in a pledge to halve global greenhouse gas emissions by the middle of the century. We worried that without nearer-term targets there would be too little pressure on governments to act. Now we have no doubt that he was merely posturing. The next president, armed with the E.P.A.'s findings, can and must do better.

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Sat., July 12, 2008:](#)

Now's the time to improve Fresno bus service

I recently helped promote the Air Pollution Control District's Healthy Air Living (HAL) Week by handing out HAL pledge forms at work. Several co-workers told me that they would like to ride the bus, but they don't because the bus stops are too far apart and/or the buses don't run often enough.

During HAL Week, I rode my bike to work in the cool of the morning, planning to ride the bus home at the end of the day. When the bus pulled up, its bike rack was already full. Since the next bus wasn't coming for another half hour and there was no guarantee that there would be room for my bike, I rode my bike home in the 109-degree heat and unhealthy air.

With gas prices at an all-time high and so much attention focused on air quality, the time is ripe for the city to actively promote riding the bus. Now is the time to entice new riders with more frequent buses and more bus stops. Let's hope the city of Fresno seizes this golden opportunity to reduce traffic congestion and help clean up our air.

Connie Young, Fresno

Help with carpools

The air quality in our Valley is a serious problem, and I hope the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will help us in more concrete ways than the online "Healthy Air Living" pledge.

I live in northeast Fresno, but work in a smaller community about 30 miles to the south. I have carpooled for many years. It has always been very challenging to find convenient, safe places to park our cars when it is not our turn to drive.

My last carpool partner lived in northwest Fresno, so we wanted to meet halfway between our homes near Freeway 41. Sounds easy right? Not so. If we parked in shopping center lots that had many empty stalls all day, we risked having our cars towed.

We finally found a curb that did not have "No Parking" signs, and had enough space for three cars to park. Luckily we arrived early enough to secure a space each morning. My challenge to the air district board is to form partnerships with businesses to allow carpoolers to park their cars in lots near freeway onramps. Help the citizens of the Valley do what's necessary to clean up our air.

Clariss Morris, Fresno

[In the Hanford Sentinel, Commentary, Saturday, July 12, 2008:](#)

Another View: Better living through \$8 gas

By Joel Stein, Special to the Los Angeles Times

I love \$4 gas. It makes me appreciate freedom. I watch as the dollars spin and think, "You, Triceratops, did not get squished by an asteroid in vain. You got squished for a \$60 drive to Vegas."

So I didn't go to Wednesday's [MoveOn.org](#) protests against high gas prices, which included one at the most expensive gas station in the Los Angeles area, the Union 76 in Beverly Hills. MoveOn's news release explained: "We want to make sure the world knows that Beverly Hills residents are fed up with gas prices and want a president in the White House who will bring the cost of gas down." MoveOn always understands the problems plaguing Americans, such as the cost of gas in Beverly Hills. If the group succeeds on this issue, I hope it will next tackle the onerous two-year contract on the new iPhone and how late heirloom tomatoes arrived this year.

If MoveOn and Barack Obama really were going to confront America bravely with hard, necessary truths, they would tell us how great \$4 gas has been for us. With public transit use nationally at a 50-year high, traffic dropped 2.1 percent in the first four months of this year across the country. That mileage reduction -- along with people driving smaller cars, and more slowly, to save gas -- could mean that 12,000 fewer people will die in traffic accidents this year, according to a study by professors Michael Morrissey at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and David C. Grabowski at Harvard Medical School. [Air pollution](#) has been reduced enough, according to economics professor J. Paul Leigh at the University of California, Davis, to prevent 2,200 respiratory-related deaths over the past year. Less eating out and more walking and biking could mean a 10 percent reduction in obesity, according to Charles Courtemanche, an assistant economics professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. And, apparently, higher gas prices also keep econ professors employed.

Yes, it's easy for me to revel in \$4 gas because I'm rich. And because my wife and I own a Mini Cooper and a Prius. And because I work at home. And because some of the mutual funds I own contain a fair amount of Exxon Mobil stock. And because I'm brave enough to ignore the manufacturer's suggestion to use high-octane gas.

Cheap gas is unfair. Driving creates huge social costs in the form of traffic, health-damaging pollution and global warming that aren't suffered solely by the person buying the gasoline. Governments usually set up idiotic systems to offset such social costs (emissions trading, ethanol subsidies, taco truck regulations) instead of forcing individuals to pay for their own mess by adding a tax to remedy the imbalance. That kind of tax -- the most fair kind, really -- is called a Pigovian tax, and its use is why gas costs \$8 to \$10 a gallon in Europe, where they have fewer road deaths even though they drive like complete idiots.

If the U.S. were to jack up gas taxes slowly until we're in the \$8 range, life would be better. We not only would be safer and have reduced greenhouse-gas emissions, but we probably would be happier too. Studies show that the only thing that consistently increases personal happiness is social interaction; high gas prices have led to real estate prices falling faster in suburbs and exurbs than in cities, so we soon might have more content downtown-dwellers. Those same studies show that the thing that makes people least happy is commuting, and telecommuting is way up this year. We could use the tax revenue to fund public transportation. And we would go back to the days when driving a car was a way to show people what a rich jerk you were. In other words, we no longer would need SUVs for that.

Sure, \$8 gas is unfair to poor people, but so is all of capitalism. Rich people get more of the globe's resources. No one has a right to cheap gas any more than he has a right to other things needed for a full and productive life, like an iPhone or a weekly newspaper column where you can tick people off.

We spent 50 years using government money to build the freeways that led to the driving-centric, mall-rat lifestyle I grew up with, so it surely will take decades more to restructure our society into something better. And as bummed as I am to pay a lot for gas, it's a fair price for improving society. I also think government should look into some kind of heavy taxation on Facebook usage.

Stein is a columnist for the Times.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses California is in alert for more fires to come. For more information on this or other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

CALIFORNIA EN ALERTA POR LOS INCENDIOS

LA OFERTA, Friday, 11 July 2008

Más de 10,000 personas han sido evacuadas en los últimos días en el norte de California a causa de los incendios, avivados por los fuertes vientos y elevadas temperaturas de la zona, según las autoridades locales.

Las evacuaciones afectan especialmente a localidades del condado de Butte, situado a unos 120 kilómetros al norte de Sacramento, donde el fuego ha arrasado unas 20,000 hectáreas y ha destruido unas 60 viviendas, además de causar 16 heridos, informa la página web del condado.

El fuego en esta zona boscosa, cuya intensidad ha aumentado significativamente en las últimas 48 horas, amenaza ahora a las comunidades de Jarbo Gap, Yankee Hill y Big Bend, después de que las llamas se hayan desplazado hacia el sur.

En el último aviso emitido por la oficina del sheriff del condado de Butte, se alerta a la población de las residencias cercanas de la necesidad de evacuar inmediatamente sus viviendas. El fuego ha obligado también a cerrar todas las carreteras cercanas y parcialmente la autopista 70, que conecta varias poblaciones de la zona.

Miles de residentes de Concow en el norte de California recibieron una orden de evacuación tras el recrudecimiento de uno de los más de 300 incendios que arden en este estado, donde volvieron a subir las temperaturas.

Según el Departamento de Incendios de California, hasta el momento el fuego ha calcinado 255,000 hectáreas de matorral y bosque en todo el territorio y más de 100 edificaciones fueron pasto de las llamas desde el inicio del verano.

Los meteorólogos avisaron de la posibilidad de que al calor se sume la disminución de la humedad del océano por el efecto de vientos que soplarán desde el interior y frenarán las corrientes de aire marinas. Asimismo, no se descartaron que durante la semana se produzcan nuevas tormentas con aparato eléctrico, fuente del origen de parte de los más de 1,700 incendios que se declararon en California desde el 21 de junio. Las tareas de extinción

avanzaron particularmente en los incendios más importantes del estado, en los condados de Monterey y Santa Bárbara.

La prioridad para las autoridades del estado es acabar con el incendio conocido como "GAP Fire", que afecta al condado de Santa Bárbara, concretamente a la zona de las montañas de Santa Ynez, y ya calcinó cerca de 4,000 hectáreas desde el pasado 1 de julio.

El terreno agreste complica aun más los trabajos a los bomberos que tienen bajo control un 35% del frente del fuego que se sospecha fue provocado. Las llamas amenazan la localidad de La Goleta, en el área próxima a la costa del Pacífico.

El otro gran frente de fuego, el mayor en tamaño, se encuentra en el norte del Estado, en la zona turística de Big Sur, donde han ardido hasta el momento 31,000 hectáreas en un paraje natural.

La ardua tarea por parte de los bomberos es increíble debido a que arriesgan sus vidas realizando un gran esfuerzo y labor por luchar a apagar y controlar el fuego evitando mayores desastres ocasionados por los incendios en diferentes partes de California. EFE

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses fire squadrons' advance in the control of fires in California.](#)

Avanzan cuadrillas en control de incendios en California

El aire húmedo y la disminución en la velocidad de los vientos permitieron el sábado que los bomberos avanzaran en el control de los mortíferos incendios forestales al pie de la Sierra Nevada.

Terra, Monday, July 14, 2008

Se trata de los incendios más recientes en una temporada sin precedentes que ha convertido en zona de desastre un área extensa de [California](#).

Miles de personas desalojadas de sus hogares en dos ocasiones durante el último mes comenzaron a regresar a Paradise por primera ocasión desde el martes. Unas 300 casas seguían amenazadas en el poblado y en los alrededores, hecho que marcó una disminución respecto de las 3.800 viviendas que estaban en riesgo el viernes.

Las autoridades informaron que el fuego está controlado en un 55%.

"Por primera vez logramos un auténtico avance", dijo Kim Sone, vocera del Departamento Forestal y de Prevención de Incendios en [California](#). "Hay más recursos y personal para controlar el incendio y las condiciones meteorológicas han cambiado. Tenemos una humedad relativamente buena, y los vientos están amainando".

Una orden de desalojo seguía en efecto para el poblado cercano de Concow, donde 50 casas fueron arrasadas y una persona habría muerto esta semana después de que las llamas avivadas por el viento saltaron una brecha cortafuego.

El cadáver calcinado de la persona se encontró el viernes en una casa incendiada. La persona no ha sido identificada ni se ha determinado la causa del deceso.

El incendio en el condado de Butte es uno de cientos que han requemado más de 1.200 millas cuadradas y han destruido unas 100 residencias en [California](#), luego que una inusitada tormenta eléctrica provocó la mayoría de los siniestros hace tres semanas.

Terra/AP

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the Pope will ask to bring attention to climate change. States that humanity has to rediscover our responsibilities and ethics in order to make changes in our lives.](#)

Papa pedirá atención sobre cambio climático

También pretende reconciliarse con las víctimas de los abusos sexuales

Víctor L. Simpson/Associated Press

La Opinión, Sunday, July 13, 2008

A BORDO DEL AVIÓN PAPAL .— El papa Benedicto XVI anunció el sábado que planea concientizar sobre el cambio climático durante un peregrinaje de 10 días en Australia.

El Pontífice también dijo a los reporteros mientras volaba hacia Sydney que trabajará para "calmar y reconciliarse con las víctimas" de abusos sexuales por parte del clero católico, "tal y como hice en los Estados Unidos" este año.

Menos de un hora después de la partida de Roma, el Papa visitó a los periodistas en la parte trasera del avión y conversó con ellos durante unos 15 minutos. Cinco periodistas le hicieron preguntas que ya habían sido enviadas al Vaticano esta semana.

Uno de ellos le preguntó sobre el cambio climático después de que se tocara el tema en la cumbre de Japón de países industrializados que forman el Grupo G-8.

El Pontífice contestó que existe una necesidad de "concientizar". "Tenemos que impulsar el redescubrimiento de nuestra responsabilidad y encontrar una vía ética de cambiar nuestra forma de vida", señaló el Papa.

Benedicto XVI añadió que los políticos y expertos han de ser "capaces de responder al enorme desafío. ecológico y trabajar para superarlo".

"Tenemos nuestras responsabilidades hacia la Creación", dijo el Papa, aunque remarcó que él no tiene ninguna intención de hablar sobre las cuestiones técnicas o políticas que rodean al cambio climático.

El pontífice también señaló que tocaría el problema de los abusos sexuales cometidos por representantes de la Iglesia Católica.

Benedicto XVI insistió en que el abuso "es incompatible con la conducta" que se espera de un hombre religioso. Al inicio de su peregrinación, el Papa dijo estar "profundamente avergonzado" por el escándalo y prometió trabajar para que los pedófilos no se conviertan en sacerdotes.

El Papa admitió en el avión que la Iglesia en Occidente está "en crisis" pero resaltó que no está en declive. "Soy optimista" respecto a su futuro, señaló.

La visita a Australia es la más prolongada en los tres años de papado de Benedicto XVI. Miles de feligreses le están esperando en Sydney.

Aunque parece gozar de buena salud, sus ayudantes prefirieron no arriesgarse y cancelaron varias visitas para dar al pontífice, que ya tiene 81 años, el mayor descanso posible.

Las actividades en Australia giran en torno a la XXIII Jornada Mundial de la Juventud que incluye una vigilia ante una multitud de jóvenes y una misa a la intemperie. El pontífice regresará el lunes 21.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses firefighters fight against 322 fires in California.](#)

Bomberos prosiguen lucha contra 322 incendios en California

Hoy Internet, 11 de julio, 2008

LOS ANGELES, 11 julio 2008 (AFP) - Los bomberos seguían hoy luchando contra un incendio que amenaza una ciudad en la costa norte de California (oeste), mientras otros cientos de focos centran la atención de equipos que ahora cuentan con condiciones favorables para contenerlos.

Mientras 322 incendios siguen activos, los bomberos han focalizado sus esfuerzos en las 19.800 hectáreas que se están quemando cerca de la ciudad del norte de California Paradise, 144 km al norte de Sacramento.

La llamas han destruido 50 residencias y están amenazando 3.800 casas en Paradise y sus alrededores, a donde fueron desplazados 3.100 bomberos, según cifras del Departamento de Protección Forestal y de Incendios de California (CALFIRE).

"Los vientos se han debilitado, lo cual ha ayudado, pero las temperaturas en los frentes de fuego están por los 40 grados y hay baja humedad, por lo tanto las condiciones del clima siguen siendo muy difíciles", dijo la portavoz de CALFIRE, Sarah Saarloos.

"El clima es lo que mueve el incendio, por lo que debemos mantenernos vigilantes", agregó

El incendio cerca de Paradise, que ha sido contenido en un 50%, es uno de los que empezó el 20 de junio, cuando se produjo una tormenta eléctrica sin lluvia al norte del estado que encendió las llamas en boques secos tras el segundo año de sequía récord en el estado.

Casi 1.800 incendios quemaron varias zonas de California desde junio, lo cual obligó al desplazamiento de 19.900 bomberos a la región, un número que se ha mantenido hasta la fecha, mientras los recursos estatales y federales se esfuman ante los costos de detener este siniestro en extensiones de terreno tan inmensas y esparcidas.

Las autoridades indicaron que se registraron progresos contra los otros dos incendios que amenazaban zonas residenciales cerca de Santa Barbara, 165 km al norte de Los Angeles, y Big Sur, un paraíso turístico a 193 km al sur de San Francisco.

California suele ser presa de grandes incendios por su clima seco y la construcción de urbanizaciones en zonas boscosas. En octubre de 2007 una devastadora "tormenta de fuego" dejó un saldo de ocho muertos, 2.000 casas reducidas a cenizas, 640.000 personas evacuadas y pérdidas por más de 1.000 millones de dólares.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses high prices in fuel are forcing many to find alternative methods of transportation, fuel and energy.](#)

Altos precios de combustibles obligan a mirar hacia energías alternativas

Reuters

El Periódico de México, Sunday, July 13, 2008

Londres. Con el precio del petróleo en cifras récord, los automovilistas consideran seriamente optar por combustibles alternativos, como los vehículos eléctricos. Pero los expertos afirman que tomará de cinco a 10 años para que estas alternativas se asienten, dado el reto para la capacidad de una industria automotriz que agrega 65 millones de autos nuevos anuales a la flota existente de mil millones.

Mientras tanto, los fabricantes de automóviles y autopartes, las compañías petrolíferas y los generadores de electricidad inclusive se preguntan qué camino tomarán los conductores y qué tecnología ganará. Estados Unidos cuenta con un parque vehicular en circulación que supera los 240 millones de unidades, en tanto México con unos 15 millones, en su mayoría modelos atrasados.

"Todavía no sabemos si será una tecnología eléctrica a base de una batería o los biocombustibles sustentables lo que tendrá éxito", dijo James Smith, presidente de Shell UK Ltd., hablando en un seminario sobre cambio climático organizado por Reuters. "Los problemas estratégicos a los que nos enfrentamos son muy significativos," agregó.

Una gama de opciones surgirá a medida que los automovilistas elijan entre autos eléctricos "que se enchufan", "híbridos" a gasolina y electricidad, o simplemente modelos más reducidos y eficientes a nafta y diesel. Y también a medida que los gobiernos, preocupados por el calentamiento global y por la seguridad energética den más o menos apoyo a los biocombustibles.

Los vehículos híbridos, que tienen tanto un motor convencional de combustión interna como un motor y batería eléctricos, ya son populares. Toyota Motor Corp ha vendido 1.5 millones de híbridos Prius desde 1997 y quiere que para 2011 los híbridos alcancen un décimo de sus ventas totales.

En un híbrido, la batería eléctrica y el motor secundan al sistema de parada y arranque automático para uso urbano, mientras que el motor a gasolina permite realizar trayectos más largos, reduciendo en conjunto el uso de energía y las emisiones de carbono.

Los híbridos representaron el 3 por ciento de las ventas de automóviles en Estados Unidos en 2007. Los fabricantes absorben gran parte de los 5.00 dólares de costo adicional del motor, dejando el precio de calle solo 1.000 o 2.000 dólares más alto.

Los híbridos podrían estar 'muy presentes' en la industria automotriz en cinco años, precisó Vlatko Vlatkovic, director de investigaciones sobre electrificación en GE, que tiene mucho por ganar de la electrificación generalizada del transporte vial.

Paul Nieuwenhuis, investigador automotriz de la Universidad de Cardiff en Gales, dijo que era probable que los híbridos como el Prius pronto sean reemplazados por híbridos con enchufe, que tendrán la opción extra de abastecerse de la red de suministro eléctrico.

EEM

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses microbes produce biofuel. Diverse institutes and companies participate in the race to find microorganisms that produce biofuel in an efficient manner.](#)

Microbios productores de biocombustibles

Diversas instituciones y compañías participan en la carrera por conseguir microorganismos que produzcan biocombustibles de manera eficiente.

Neo Fronteras, Monday, July 14, 2008

¿Pueden ser los microorganismos la solución a los problemas energéticos? Antes de que los seres pluricelulares aparecieran sobre la Tierra los microorganismos reinaron sobre este planeta durante miles de millones de años. Más tarde, y durante millones de años, estos organismos, junto con otros que formaban el plancton marino, dieron lugar al petróleo que ahora consumimos.

Ese petróleo ha constituido la fuente de energía barata sobre la que se ha asentado el desarrollo industrial y tecnológico del último siglo y lo estamos agotando a un ritmo muy rápido. Las reservas de petróleo son cada día más escasas y más caras de explotar y necesitamos, por tanto, nuevas fuentes de energía.

Ahora algunos investigadores se fijan en los microorganismos como fuente de energía. Tienen la habilidad de vivir a partir de diferentes fuentes de alimentos y de producir diferentes subproductos susceptibles de ser explotados energéticamente.

Recientemente ha habido muchos resultados en este sentido. Algunos, por ejemplo, se basan en el uso de algas para la producción de un sucedáneo del petróleo.

Aunque todo esto no es nuevo, cuando fermentamos un producto azucarado para producir alcohol ya estamos usando levaduras para producir de bioetanol. Pero la eficacia de estos métodos tradicionales está en entredicho y hace falta más investigación al respecto, sin contar con los posibles problemas ecológicos que pueda acarrear su producción.

Investigadores de Biodesign Institute han publicado en Nature Reviews Microbiology un artículo sobre los pasos que se podrían dar al respecto. Según ellos las bacterias y arqueas son la mejor esperanza para producir energía de forma renovable en grandes cantidades de tal modo que no compita con la producción de alimentos o se destruya en medio ambiente.

Hay dos aproximaciones al problema. Una consiste en usar microbios para convertir biomasa en combustible. Para esta vía hay diferentes clases de microorganismos que pueden hacer esto en ausencia de oxígeno y que producen metano, hidrógeno o directamente electricidad.

La segunda aproximación consiste en usar algas o bacterias que capturan la luz del sol y la transforman en energía produciendo biomasa.

Estas dos líneas de investigación se podrían beneficiar de los recientes avances en genética y técnicas de biología molecular para incrementar el rendimiento.

Las bacterias cuentan además con una gran diversidad genética y de especies que puede ser explotada. Hasta ahora se dispone de 75 genomas secuenciados de microorganismos

susceptibles de ser utilizados para esta tarea y que están a disposición de la comunidad científica. Este conjunto incluye 21 genomas de arqueas metanógenas (productoras de metano), 24 de bacterias productoras de hidrógeno o electricidad y 30 genomas de cianobacterias fotosintéticas susceptibles de producir biodiesel. Se espera secuenciar muchos más genomas en el próximo futuro.

Un ejemplo puede ser *Synechocystis sp.*, que es una bacteria fotosintética cuyo genoma fue publicado en 1995. Tiene la particularidad de cargar su membrana celular con grandes cantidades de lípidos que le harían una buena candidata para la producción de biodiesel.

Esta institución trabaja ahora junto a la petrolera BP en el desarrollo de estas tecnologías.

Pero en esta carrera por conseguir biocombustibles realmente alternativos y rentables hay muchos jugadores.

En Virginia Tech están investigando con un microorganismo procedente de una región volcánica para producir hidrógeno, en lo que puede ser un buen ejemplo del tipo de investigación que se viene haciendo durante los últimos tiempos. Esta arquea termófila metaboliza la celulosa produciendo hidrógeno en el proceso. El hidrógeno puede ser empleado más tarde como combustible o para producir electricidad de manera sencilla.

Encontraron esta arquea (*Desulfurococcus fermentans*) en la caldera Uzon de la península Kamchatka, que se encuentra en una remota región de Siberia. Vive de la degradación de los restos vegetales a alta temperatura (80 - 82 grados centígrados) que caen en la caldera volcánica

El hidrógeno bloquea el crecimiento de la mayoría de las especies de arqueas, pero no en este caso. Los investigadores no saben todavía por qué.

La habilidad de efectuar este trabajo a alta temperatura es una gran ventaja, pues en un reactor industrial la alta temperatura impediría el crecimiento de otras bacterias indeseables que lo pudieran contaminar.

Ahora los científicos involucrados en el descubrimiento pretenden secuenciar el genoma de esta arquea. En esta investigación está también implicado el Joint Genome Institute que depende del departamento de Energía de EEUU.

Todavía no sabemos cómo terminará esta carrera en pos de la perfecta producción de bioenergía, pero parece prometedor. De momento es solamente materia de investigación y habrá que esperar para ver las aplicaciones industriales.