

Fire's smoke, ash casts shadow over Yosemite visitors

Bee News Services

In the Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Wed., July 30, 2008

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK -- The summer conditions are balmy, the accommodations lovely as ever. The only thing missing from this wild, idyllic landscape: the views.

Visitors seeking on Tuesday to photograph Yosemite National Park's famed peaks instead took shots of monoliths obscured by flying ash blowing in from Mariposa County's Telegraph fire.

The fire has shrouded one of California's most popular destinations in smoke, and risks marring business at the height of Yosemite's busiest season. The blaze is six miles from Yosemite's western entrance, said park spokeswoman Kari Cobb. It was eight to 10 miles away on Monday, she said.

While Mariposa County residents worried about their homes, some visitors fretted about disrupted vacations.

"It's the views that are really disappointing," said Karen Brown, a 45-year-old mother of two from Phoenix. "We do two major trips a year and this was one of them. It's not like we can shoot back here in a month."

Brown said her family was packing up a day early to avoid suffering from irritated eyes and sore throats. The children had been "using their imaginations to experience Yosemite," she said.

Still, many travelers said they were gladly staying put.

Patricio Aguirre, 48, from the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, smiled as his wife and children marveled, through a white haze, at Half Dome.

"It's a great shame because we know what's burning now won't regenerate for many years," Aguirre said, as he climbed into the family's rented minivan.

At summer's peak, as many as 4,000 visitors a day stream into the park, and rangers don't expect the fire will keep many away.

Officials with DNC Parks and Resorts at Yosemite, which manages restaurants and lodging in the park, said only about 2% of all overnight guests have asked for refunds since Saturday, when the transmission line that fed power to Yosemite was destroyed in the fire.

Hotels, stores and most restaurants in the park have remained open, but have been operating on generators. Tuesday, 245 guest rooms at the Yosemite Lodge at the Falls remained without power, and lodge staff were handing out flashlights and offering free hot showers at nearby Curry Village.

"We're seeing a few people departing maybe because they have health concerns about the air quality, but virtually everyone's staying in the park," said Kenny Karst, a spokesman for the concessionaire. "Our main message is we're open. The stables are open, we've got river rafting and we're leading all kinds of hikes and trips to the backcountry."

Conditions can change hourly, said Yosemite spokeswoman Cobb. While whiffs of smoke mixed with pine-scented air and haze obstructed tree tops on Monday, the smoky smell was gone and tree tops were clearly visible Tuesday, Cobb said in the afternoon.

Some Yosemite visitors traveled thousands of miles to be disappointed.

Marc Allard flew from Paris to see El Capitan, but found the iconic rock formation shrouded by a thick curtain of ashy haze on Monday.

"Everything is like a moonscape. Everything is so gray," he said.

But who knew four months ago, when Allard booked his trip, that there would be a wildfire raging nearby?

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he said, to be in the famed and usually picturesque Yosemite Valley. "We're happy anyway," Allard said, after snapping a few shots of the surrounding landscape.

News of the fire has generated calls from across the globe from tourists trying to decide whether to forgo a trip to Yosemite, one of the national park system's biggest draws. Last year, Yosemite had more than 3.6 million visitors, an increasing number of them foreigners.

Mariska Klooster and Dyon Offereng from the Netherlands only got as far as Mariposa, about 30 miles west of the park. Their tour was cancelled because the tour operator was forced to evacuate his home, Klooster said.

"We didn't get to see the things we wanted to see, like the Half Dome, El Capitan and the waterfalls," she said. "I guess we'll have to wait, maybe come back in a couple of years."

Not since the 1990's A-Rock fire, which burned 18,000 acres near the park's western entrance and destroyed dozens of homes, has there been such a disruption at the park.

Mariposa suffers a twinge of jealousy toward Yosemite Park is miles from flames but gets all the publicity, locals say.

By Eric Bailey and Maria L. LaGanga, staff writers
L.A. Times, Wed., July 30, 2008

MARIPOSA, CALIF -- . -- Residents to the world: What about us?

As the Telegraph fire raged through the wilderness for the fifth day Tuesday, amused locals wondered why Yosemite National Park was getting all the ink.

Sure, the park's famous vistas are obscured by smoke. And many hotel rooms there remained without power, but "it's Mariposa's fire," said Darci Bazinet, 35, who evacuated with her three children and four pets Saturday. "It's burning our houses. It's not in the national park."

The fire continued to burn Tuesday about 10 miles west of the park entrance on California Highway 140 and 20 miles from Yosemite Valley proper, with its breathtaking waterfalls and world-renowned granite walls.

Although headlines like the one on WNBC's website screamed "Yosemite Fire Burns Almost Out of Control," the 21 houses destroyed in the nearly 30,000-acre conflagration are in craggy canyons near the small towns of Mariposa and Midpines.

Capt. Cheryl Goetz of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said the big threats now are to Greeley Hill to the north and to El Portal, company town for the park's administrative offices and employees.

As nearly 3,500 firefighters battled the blaze -- only 15% contained and still threatening 4,000 structures -- Pacific Gas and Electric workers struggled for a second day to restore power to more than 1,000 customers.

On Monday, the utility trucked two generators to the area in an effort to bring power to 561 businesses and homes -- including those in Yosemite Valley -- that were affected when a major transmission line was damaged by the fire.

PG&E officials had hoped to have the generator running Monday night. But because of equipment problems, it was still not operating Tuesday afternoon, company spokeswoman Tamar Sarkissian said.

An additional 600 customers lost power when the company "de-energized" various distribution lines as a safety precaution for firefighters.

Fire officials on Tuesday cleared PG&E crews to begin checking out those lines, Sarkissian said, and power could be restored to those customers as early as today.

Clearing smoke allowed firefighters to take their battle to the air, and helicopters and planes spent the day dropping water and fire retardant, Telegraph fire spokeswoman Sarah Gibson said.

As a result, Highway 140 remained closed east of Midpines.

Bill Sigafoos enjoyed a precarious front-row seat for the aerial spectacle.

Skeptical of what he was hearing on the TV news, Sigafoos hiked in over the weekend to his backwoods dream house on eight acres, miles outside Mariposa.

"I wanted to see for myself," he said.

A 61-year-old Vietnam veteran retired from working life in Orange County, Sigafoos watched helicopters divebomb the blaze with water each afternoon as it reared up to attack his rural neighborhood.

"I saw a lot in Vietnam, but this aerial assault was second to none," he said.

"They dug in their heels and decided our homes, our little piece of the woods, wasn't going to burn," he said.

Figuring that the war was over after three days, Sigafoos hiked back out Tuesday to find his wife, Cheryle, "going ballistic" after three nights alone in an emergency shelter.

But as they checked into a Mariposa hotel for a shower and soft bed, the wind picked up.

Smoke began to billow. The firefighting helicopter fleet headed back into the battle.

"I thought everything was great. Now it doesn't look so good," he said. "All I can do is wait."

Fire near Yosemite park hurts tourist business

By GARANCE BURKE, Associated Press Writer
Tri-Valley Herald and Orange County Register, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif.—Vendors along one of the main roads leading to Yosemite National Park this summer were finally seeing business turn around following a rock slide that kept tour buses away for the previous two years.

That was before a massive wildfire closed the highway and sent towering plumes of smoke and ash over one of the nation's most celebrated wilderness areas.

"It's like we just get on our feet and they kick the stool out from under us," said Donna Santi, a gift shop clerk in Mariposa. "Still, the business will survive. We're more worried about the residents."

The fire raging since Friday has destroyed 25 homes and was only 15 percent contained late Tuesday.

Visitors seeking to photograph Yosemite National Park's famed peaks instead took shots of monoliths obscured by flying ash blowing in from the wildfire burning just 12 miles outside the park.

The haze has left one of California's most popular destinations shrouded in smoke at the height of Yosemite's busiest season.

"It's the views that are really disappointing," said Karen Brown, a 45-year-old mother of two from Phoenix. "We do two major trips a year and this was one of them. It's not like we can shoot back here in a month."

Brown said her family was packing up a day early to avoid suffering from irritated eyes and sore throats. The children had been "using their imaginations to experience Yosemite," she said, but ventured they would prefer clear views of Lake Tahoe.

Visitors seeking to enter the park from the west were turned around Tuesday, when authorities temporarily shut down a 10-mile stretch of Highway 140 to keep flames from leaping across the Merced River canyon.

The western gate itself remained open for residents of the nearby community of El Portal and visitors staying near the park entrance. Other entrances to the park also remained open, and many travelers said they were gladly staying put.

Patricio Aguirre, 48, visiting from Argentina, smiled as his wife and children marveled, through a white haze, at Half Dome's imposing shoulder.

"It's a great shame because we know what's burning now won't regenerate for many years," Aguirre said. "My children laugh at me, but I tell them they have to see the good in this. It's not every day one can see Yosemite burn."

Authorities said Tuesday the blaze had charred more than 46 square miles of steep, rugged terrain since a target shooter sparked the wildfire on Friday.

It has also forced the evacuation of 350 homes in the towns of Midpines and Coulterville, gateway communities whose businesses rely on tourist dollars to stay afloat.

At summer's peak, as many as 4,000 visitors a day stream into the park, and rangers expect the fire will keep very few people away.

Officials with DNC Parks and Resorts at Yosemite, which manages restaurants and lodging in the park, said only about 2 percent of all overnight guests have asked for refunds since Saturday, when the transmission line that fed power to Yosemite was destroyed in the fire.

Hotels, stores and most restaurants in the park have remained open, but have been operating on generators. On Tuesday, 245 guest rooms at the Yosemite Lodge at the Falls remained without power, and lodge staff were handing out flashlights and offering free hot showers at nearby Curry Village. Limited electricity was restored Tuesday afternoon in El Portal, near the park's western boundary.

"We're seeing a few people departing maybe because they have health concerns about the air quality, but virtually everyone's staying in the park," said Kenny Karst, a spokesman for the concessionaire. "Our main message is we're open. The stables are open, we've got river rafting, and we're leading all kinds of hikes and trips to the backcountry."

Meanwhile, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Tuesday announced a \$50,000 reward for information leading to the person who ignited a destructive wildfire last month.

The mid-June blaze destroyed 87 homes in and around the town of Paradise and charred more than 23,000 acres in Butte County, about 90 miles north of Sacramento. The fire contributed to at least one death, an elderly woman who suffered a heart attack while evacuating.

In Montana, crews on Tuesday dug in against a 5,900-acre wildfire threatening the ski town of Red Lodge, 60 miles southwest of Billings. The immediate threat to the town appeared to have eased, but flame-whipping winds were forecast to pick up overnight.

The fire remained about eight miles outside town and two miles from the Red Lodge Mountain Resort. Authorities had told residents of about 200 homes west of town that an evacuation order could come at any time.

Calif. AG cracks down on Nestle bottling plant

By Samantha Young, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee and Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

SACRAMENTO — Attorney General Jerry Brown on Tuesday said he will sue to block a proposed water-bottling operation in Northern California unless its effects on global warming are evaluated.

Nestle Waters North America wants to pump about 200 million gallons of water a year from three natural springs that supply McCloud, about 280 miles north of San Francisco. Brown's office said that's enough to fill 3.1 billion 8-ounce plastic water bottles.

The water would be bottled at a 350,000-square-foot facility on the outskirts of the former lumber town.

The Swiss-based company scaled back its plans in May after years of opposition from environmentalists and a group of McCloud residents. It originally sought to pump more than double the amount of water.

David Palais, Nestle's Northern California natural resource manager, said the company already was planning studies on air and water quality, hazardous materials, traffic conditions and climate change for a new environmental review of the bottling plant.

"We appreciate the attorney general's letter and share his commitment to ensuring that new projects in California do not negatively impact the environment," Palais said in a statement.

He said the company will conduct environmental studies over the next two or three years. Afterward, Siskiyou County will prepare a new environmental impact report for the project.

Brown said the company must put its revisions into a new contract with the town of McCloud. He wants proper study of the environmental consequences of the bottling operation, saying the previous draft review had "serious deficiencies."

He said it failed to include an examination of whether the operation will contribute to global warming through the production of plastic bottles, the operation's electrical demands and the diesel soot and greenhouse gas emissions produced by trucks traveling to and from the plant.

"It takes massive quantities of oil to produce plastic water bottles and to ship them in diesel trucks across the United States," Brown said in a statement. "Nestle will face swift legal challenge if it does not fully evaluate the environmental impact of diverting millions of gallons of spring water from the McCloud River into billions of plastic water bottles."

Environmentalists, businesses reach compromise

By Dennis Cauchon
USA TODAY, July 30, 2008

Governmental inaction is prompting environmental groups and big business to cut unprecedented deals to promote energy exploration and other development in return for major conservation initiatives.

The agreements preserve large amounts of undeveloped land, impose stricter environmental practices than required by law and generate big investments in alternative energy. The deals also clear the way for oil drilling, new power plants and large residential developments.

Experts say the move to private agreements reflects a loss of faith in the government's ability to handle some of the USA's most pressing environmental disputes. "I started off believing in regulation, but government agencies compromise and change rules," San Francisco environmental lawyer Clem Shute says. "These private deals are a pragmatic way to accomplish good things."

Steven Hayward, an environmental scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, says the agreements signal an era of "practical environmentalism." He says Congress has been in a stalemate for decades on major environmental legislation, especially on emerging issues such as land conservation, transportation and energy. That has forced businesses and environmental groups to reach out to each other, often after sparring a few rounds in court. Recent big deals:

- **Land use.** Tejon Ranch Co., owner of the largest tract of private property in California, signed a deal in June with five environmental groups to preserve 90% of the 422-square-mile property, located about 60 miles north of Los Angeles. The environmental groups agreed not to oppose the building of up to 26,000 homes on the remaining 10% of the company's land, a vast expanse of hills, valleys and canyons that is a home for the rare California condor.

- **Energy exploration.** Environmentalists agreed in April to support a Houston oil company's plan to expand drilling off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., where an oil spill in 1969 helped launch the environmental movement. In exchange, the firm agreed to end all offshore drilling there in 2022 and donate 3,900 acres for parks.

- **Green products.** The Sierra Club agreed in January to put the group's logo on a new line of environmentally sensitive cleaning products, called Green Works, manufactured by Clorox. In exchange, the Sierra Club will get a share of the sales. Many deals have brought opposition from some environmentalists worried that too much was sacrificed. The local Sierra Club in Traverse City, Mich., disbanded to protest the Clorox deal.

The two sides in the disputes often agree on complex trade-offs to avoid or end litigation. "We were overjoyed by what we got," says Susan Brown of Concerned Citizens of Platte County, Mo., which challenged Kansas City Power and Light's plan to build two coal-fired power plants. The utility agreed to build only one plant, clean up two others and invest in wind power. The firm is building the \$1 billion plant without facing lawsuits.

Beijing air improves with wind and rain

By HENRY SANDERSON, Associated Press Writer
In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

BEIJING, China (AP) --Environmental officials say their efforts are starting to clear the haze above Beijing, while strong wind and some rain have also raised hopes of blue skies when the Olympic Games start in just over a week.

The city has put in place a series of drastic pollution controls since July 20 that included pulling half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads, halting most construction and closing some factories in the capital and surrounding provinces.

But Beijing has been dogged in the last week by a persistent haze that cloaked the city, threatening assurances by Chinese authorities that skies will be clear when the games start on Aug. 8.

Tuesday's relatively clearer skies highlighted how much weather conditions play a part in the overall equation for curbing pollution. Winds and rain were a "major factor" in causing pollutants to dissipate, said spokeswoman Zhai Xiaohui with the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau.

The government has worked on cloud seeding to control rain, but has acknowledged the wind remains an unpredictable factor. A cold front pushing through northeastern China brought light rains and temporary relief from sweltering temperatures.

A top environmental official said Tuesday that the air in July had greatly improved when compared to the same month last year.

"After the adoption of these measures, we have seen visible improvements," Du Shaozhong, deputy director of Beijing's Environmental Protection Bureau, told a news conference.

There have been 25 days of clean air in July, two more than the same period last year, he said. Du did not say what constituted clean air, but said since July 1, major pollutants have been reduced by 15 to 20 percent.

Tian Jun, 26, who works in sales at a downtown hotel, said Beijing's air had improved overall in the last three to five years. The Olympics have helped because they enabled the government to move industries outside of the city and plant more trees, as well as limit the number of cars, he said.

"The government has done a good job," Tian said, standing outside a cafe with his friends. "It should continue after the Olympics."

But Frederick Szeto, a consultant from Hong Kong who has been in Beijing for nearly two months, said he doubted the restrictions could have already made such a difference.

"If this could last until fall, then that would be good," he said. "I think it's because it's rained, not because of the air quality."

The city's chronic air pollution has been a source of concern for Olympic organizers. The games will bring 10,500 athletes and hundreds of thousands of spectators to Beijing.

Highlighting Beijing's fears that air quality won't improve in time, Du said a contingency plan has been devised and could be implemented as part of last-minute emergency measures if needed. The official China Daily newspaper said Monday that Beijing could pull even more cars from the roads and shut down additional factories as part of last-ditch efforts.

The air pollution index for particulate matter, a major pollutant, dropped to 90 on Tuesday from 96 on Monday, after reaching 118 on Saturday, a level classified as unhealthy for sensitive groups.

An API below 50 is considered good air quality and between 51 to 100 is moderate, according to the Web site of the city's Environmental Protection Bureau. But critics say even moderate levels are still above the World Health Organization's guidelines for healthy air.

Beijing air pollution index shows improvement

By Tini Tran, Associated Press Writer
USA Today, July 30, 2008

BEIJING — Beijing's dirty air showed dramatic improvement Wednesday, with a city environmental official saying curbs on cars and factories are having the desired effect in cleaning up the air for next week's Olympics.

The air pollution index on Wednesday was 44, less than half of what it was a day earlier, and the lowest since July 20 when authorities began implementing a series of drastic measures to improve air quality ahead of the games.

The curbs included pulling half the city's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads, halting most construction and closing some factories in the capital and surrounding provinces.

"That's why we say the measures have been effective," Du Shaozhong, deputy director of Beijing's Environmental Protection Bureau, said in an interview with the Associated Press.

In the past 11 days, seven days have met the national standard for "good" air quality, while four did not, Du said. China considers any reading below 100 to signal "good" air quality, or a so-called "blue sky day."

The other days — from Thursday to Sunday — ranged from 110 to 118, levels classified as unhealthy for sensitive groups. On those days, high temperatures and a thick, grayish haze reduced Beijing's skyscrapers to ghostly outlines.

Du said a combination of heat, high humidity and little wind made it difficult to disperse airborne pollutants.

But a tropical storm that hit southeastern China earlier this week brought strong wind and some rain on Tuesday, lowering temperatures and helping clear up the skies.

The clearer skies highlighted how much weather conditions play a part in efforts to curb pollution. By Wednesday afternoon, much of the haze had returned.

Du said that if the air quality continues to be a problem in coming days, Beijing officials will consider contingency plans to expand the traffic and factory emission cutbacks already in place.

Additional measures could include taking more cars off the road and only allowing newer, cleaner vehicles.

Clean air for the games has been a sensitive point for Olympic organizers and the government.

The official Xinhua news agency in a commentary Wednesday downplayed fears about the pollution, and said talk by some athletes about bringing face masks to Beijing was the result of negative reporting by the western media.

The editorial also repeated official assertions that the recent string of hazy days were due to fog.

Some U.S. athletes are considering wearing masks. New Zealand's athletes have been issued face masks with team equipment. Team managers have advised athletes to wear masks around the Olympic village but not during competition.

Beijing in haze with games quickly approaching

By Jennifer Starks

Contra Costa Times, July 30, 2008

IT WAS A lazy Sunday afternoon when Nancy Gonsalves, the U.S. Olympic Committee's director of games preparation, stood before a small delegation of media at San Jose State and was asked about the conditions in Beijing.

"The grass is green," she said, "the flowers are blooming."

And the gray haze is still hanging over the city?

Gonsalves didn't address that, but from the looks of it, this is one unwelcome guest that simply refuses to leave.

Last week, Beijing unleashed its pollution-control measures, taking more than 1 million cars off the roads and shutting down nearly 100 local factories in an attempt to improve conditions.

But because the air quality has failed to reach the World Health Organization's standards in the days since, Olympic organizers are now considering a new set of emergency procedures. According to the China

Daily, all construction sites may be closed and additional cars could be forced into park if conditions don't improve 48 hours before the Games begin Aug. 8.

If that doesn't work, the United States Olympic Committee has some plans of its own. Each American athlete has the option to wear a special breathing mask, should the need arise.

"It's slightly more sophisticated than what you'd buy at your local hardware store before painting your house," USOC spokesman Darryl Seibel told the Associated Press. "The benefit for the athletes may be as much psychological as it is physiological. It's peace of mind for athletes who have other things to think about."

Mark Schubert, head coach of the U.S. swim team, said USA Swimming has asked for 50 masks, to be used mainly by the asthmatics on the team.

"We're pretty prepared for whatever the situation is," Schubert said.

So too is the U.S. synchronized swimming team. Team members ventured to Beijing in April for the "Good Luck Beijing" qualifying tournament to check out the Olympic venues and, as Northgate High School graduate Becky Kim noted, "get the jitters out." They also got a first-hand look at the murky air.

This time, they'll spend 10 days in South Korea to train before heading to the Olympics, minimizing their exposure to the pollution.

"

It's not the best, but we're prepared," Kim said. "We have our masks just in case we need them."

Sandra Fong, a member of the U.S. shooting team, doesn't plan to strap on a mask, but that doesn't mean she isn't worried about the environment she's about to enter.

"It's a concern," Fong said. "I wouldn't say it's the best air quality. I don't think it will enhance my performance, but we'll all just try to do our best in that environment."

For her part, Orinda native Heather Petri isn't all that worried. Indeed, her biggest concern earlier this week was making it through San Jose State's Team Processing Center and filling her cart with Olympic gear that fit just right.

"Once we get over there for the games, everyone's going to be competing in the same conditions," said Petri, a three-time Olympian with the women's water polo team. "Plus, we're indoors, so that's a good thing. It's not a big concern of ours. It's one of those external factors that's not under our control. We just want to enjoy the moment."

Senate Democrats call for EPA chief to resign

By dina Cappiello, Associated Press Writer

In the Modesto Bee and other papers, Wed., July 30, 2008

WASHINGTON—Four Democratic senators called Tuesday for Stephen Johnson to resign as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and asked Attorney General Michael Mukasey to begin an investigation into whether he lied in testimony to a Senate committee.

The senators, all members of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said Johnson—the first career scientist to head the agency—had repeatedly succumbed to political pressure on decisions vital to protecting health and the environment.

In a letter the senators sent to Mukasey on Tuesday, they also allege that Johnson made false statements before the committee in January when he said that he alone had decided California should not regulate the gases blamed for global warming from motor vehicles.

A former top EPA official told the committee earlier this month that the administrator initially decided to grant a partial waiver to the state, but later changed his mind under pressure from the White House.

"We have lost all confidence in Stephen Johnson's ability to carry out EPA's mission under the law," Environment Committee Chairwoman Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., told reporters.

Boxer was joined by Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., and Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., in calling for Johnson's resignation. They said Johnson should step down because he has ignored the advice of the agency's own scientists on the regulation of numerous air pollutants and stonewalled congressional oversight.

"Administrator Stephen Johnson is a failure," said Whitehouse. It would be "a disgrace to allow this administrator to slink off stage with the rest of the administration."

The four Democrats signed the letter to Mukasey.

Jonathan Shradar, Johnson's press secretary, said Tuesday that the administrator would "continue to lead this agency undistracted by the Boxer and Whitehouse show."

Responding to the allegations that Johnson made misleading statements, Shradar said: "He had a lot of input from a lot of different people. No he was not lying. Did the White House give input, I would imagine it did. But the decision was his and he made it alone."

Earlier this year, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, both environmental advocacy groups, pressed Johnson to step down.

Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe, the environment committee's top Republican, issued a brief rebuttal Tuesday, saying, "This is simply more election year politicking. Nothing more need be said."

4 Senate Dems urge EPA chief to resign

He's accused of misleading Congress

Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington Bureau
S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

Washington - -- Four Senate Democrats called on EPA chief Stephen Johnson to resign Tuesday, alleging that he gave misleading testimony to Congress and repeatedly bowed to pressure from the White House to avoid regulating greenhouse gases.

California Sen. Barbara Boxer, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and three other Democrats on the panel - Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Sen. Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey - also announced they are urging Attorney General Michael Mukasey to investigate whether Johnson made false statements to Congress. Mukasey's office said it was still reviewing the request late Tuesday.

The pressure on Johnson is part of an escalating battle between Democrats in Congress and the White House over climate change policy. Democrats are seizing on new evidence that Johnson overrode the opinions of Environmental Protection Agency scientists and reversed two of his own decisions at the request of the White House.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar fired back at Boxer for what he called a political attack. "Administrator Johnson's record is one of aggressive, health protective environmental standards. Sen. Boxer's record is one of press conferences and political tirades," Shradar said.

Democrats insist that Johnson misled Congress when he testified before Boxer's committee Jan. 24 about his decision to reject California's effort to set the nation's toughest limits on emissions from vehicles.

The EPA chief testified that he listened to all sides before deciding that California had failed to make its case.

"I made the decision. It was my decision. It was the right decision," Johnson said at the time.

But last week, a top Johnson aide contradicted his testimony. Former EPA deputy associate administrator Jason Burnett, who resigned last month in frustration with the administration's climate-change stance, testified that Johnson had initially supported granting at least a partial waiver after concluding that California met the legal criteria.

But Burnett said Johnson changed his stance when the White House made clear that President Bush opposed California setting its own fuel economy standards. "The administrator knew the president's preference for a single (national) standard," Burnett said.

Klobuchar said the testimony showed that Johnson not only overruled his own staff but also misled the public about who really made the decision. "If we can't trust the top EPA official to tell the truth to the American people, then he must go," she said.

The lawmakers also allege that Johnson yielded to White House influence in a recent EPA decision over whether climate change endangers human health. The decision was critical because if the agency had made such a finding, it would have been required to start regulating greenhouse gases.

In December, EPA officials sent an e-mail to the White House stating that Johnson supported the EPA staff's view that global warming threatens human health. "In sum, the Administrator is

proposing to find that elevated levels of [greenhouse gas] concentrations may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public welfare," the document read.

The White House refused to open the e-mail and later asked EPA officials to retract it. When Johnson recently announced that EPA was starting a new rule-making process to determine whether climate change poses a health risk, he never mentioned this previous finding.

Boxer said she was frustrated that EPA officials have stonewalled congressional inquiries into those recent decisions. Johnson refused to testify at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing this week about EPA's dealings with Congress. Last week, the White House released the e-mail with EPA's draft of the endangerment finding but would not allow senators to make copies. Lawmakers were allowed to read it only while being watched by two White House lawyers.

Boxer said the final straw was an e-mail sent to EPA staffers last month that directed them not to speak to the press, congressional investigators or to EPA's own inspector general, and to forward the inquiries to their superiors. Boxer said Johnson "has become a secretive and dangerous ally of polluters, and we cannot stand by and allow more damage to be done."

But the White House is standing behind Johnson. White House spokesman Trey Bohn said Johnson's critics are attacking him because they disagree with the administration's policies on energy and climate change.

"In every sense, administrator Johnson has cooperated fully with Congress, and the facts bear that out," Bohn said.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Wednesday there has been a noticeable reduction of air pollution in Beijing. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Se reduce la contaminación ambiental en Beijing

By TINI TRAN

El Nuevo Herald, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

La contaminación ambiental en Beijing se redujo notablemente el miércoles y un dirigente ambiental dijo que las restricciones a los automóviles y las fábricas contribuirán a limpiar el ambiente durante las olimpiadas.

El Índice de contaminación ambiental bajó a 44 el miércoles, menos de la mitad de un día antes, y el menor desde el 20 de julio cuando se pusieron en práctica varias medidas drásticas para mejorar la calidad del aire antes de los juegos.

Las medidas incluyeron el retiro de circulación de la mitad de los 3,3 millones de vehículos de la capital, la interrupción de la mayoría de las construcciones y el cierre de algunas fábricas en la ciudad y provincias circundantes.

"Las cifras diarias desde el 20 de julio demuestran una mejora en la calidad del aire. Reflejan los resultados desde que restringimos el tránsito y detuvimos la industria y la construcción", dijo Du Shaozhong, subdirector de la Oficina de Protección Ambiental de Beijing, en una entrevista con la AP. "Por eso decimos que las medidas han sido efectivas".

Du dijo que siete de los últimos 11 días han alcanzado el nivel nacional de "buena" calidad de aire, y cuatro no. Agregó que la combinación de calor, elevada humedad y escaso viento creó condiciones que dificultó la dispersión de los contaminantes en el aire.

Pero una tormenta tropical que se desencadenó en el sudeste de China esta semana desató intensos vientos y lluvias el martes, reduciendo las temperaturas y contribuyendo a aclarar el

ambiente. Esto pone de manifiesto la influencia de las condiciones climáticas sobre la contaminación.

Du dijo que si la calidad del aire vuelve a ser un problema en los próximos días, las autoridades municipales considerarían planes de contingencia para hacer más estrictas las restricciones a las emisiones de vehículos y fabricas.

"Si las condiciones climáticas no son normales, podemos intensificar las medidas y hacerlas cumplir más estrictamente", afirmó.

Un Índice por debajo de 50 es considerado bueno, y entre 51 y 100 es moderado, segan la oficina de Du. Pero los detractores dicen que los niveles llamados moderados están por encima de lo que la Organización Mundial de la Salud considera sano.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses truck drivers sue Long Beach and Los Angeles ports because of the ports new measure that would obligate owners of older diesel trucks to upgrade to newer models.](#)

Demandan camioneros a dos puertos de California

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, July 29, 2008

La Asociación Nacional de Camioneros demandó en una corte federal a los puertos de Long Beach y Los Ángeles por una medida que obligará a los propietarios de unidades de carga a cambiar motores viejos que consumen diesel por modelos más nuevo o menos contaminantes.

Según la referida asociación, el reglamento de eso puertos, los dos más grandes en el Pacífico estadounidense, sería una copia en reducción de una ley federal y afectaría principalmente a unos diez mil camioneros independientes, sin contratos de empresas de transporte.

Los alcaldes de Los Ángeles y Long Beach acordaron este año esa y otras medidas para reducir la contaminación en los puertos, que es la que más afecta la región.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses a regional plan to clean up air quality will that has now included 6 states and provinces of Canada could possibly obligate the state of California to reduce its environmental objectives in order to be in uniform with the rest of the region, according to environmentalists.](#)

Opinan activistas que plan regional ambiental retrasaría objetivos de California

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

Un plan para reducir la contaminación del aire que se amplió esta semana de seis estados del país a varias provincias de Canadá podría obligar a California a reducir sus objetivos ambientales para uniformarlos con los del resto de la región según ambientalistas.

Durante una reunión en San Diego, de representantes de distintos gobiernos, la Iniciativa de Cambio Climático del Oeste también se cuestionó si al uniformar límites tope a la contaminación en la región, pudiera obligarse a las empresas a mudarse a otros lugares.

La iniciativa busca reducir gradualmente la contaminación del aire en los próximos 13 años.

[Fresno Bee columnist, Wed., July 30, 2008:](#)

Wildfires show need to thin forests

By Bill McEwen / The Fresno Bee

The great treasures of the West are burning, and we're still tangled in decades-old arguments about thinning, logging and managing our forests.

Right now, the Telegraph fire is consuming large chunks of Mariposa County -- and continuing a California fire season that has seen nearly 13,000 firefighters called into action and more than 1 million acres burned.

You'd think that the experts would've figured out how to reduce fire danger by now. Instead we remain trapped in the paralyzing undergrowth of competing claims and agendas.

Anyone who had paid attention to the problem surely recognizes what occurs after every big wildfire. Fire-science experts say that overgrown forests must be thinned. Environmentalists say that thinning is really an excuse to engage in destructive logging. And then everybody heads to court.

Meanwhile, despite advances in firefighting tactics and technologies, the catastrophic wildfires rage on -- taking lives, destroying habitat and consuming billions of taxpayer dollars.

Adding to the challenge: global warming is turning our forests into tinderboxes while more people head to the foothills and mountains to live.

What's the answer?

Let's start with this: There are no simple solutions.

Several studies, for example, indicate that thinning forests without also burning brush and deadwood may fan fires instead of encouraging them to peter out.

Then let's admit this: Messing with nature has severe consequences.

In our attempt to save the forests by quickly putting out fires, we've created something dangerously unnatural -- large stands of big trees that have gone as long as 100 years without a major fire. In these instances, there are many more trees competing for the same amount of water, making them susceptible to pests and disease. When lightning strikes or someone leaves a campfire burning, what would've been a small fire a century ago turns into a firestorm.

That is what happened last year at Lake Tahoe, and Cal Fire officials say that the Telegraph fire has been fanned by "dry conditions and the fact the area has not burned in the past 100 years."

If you're wondering where the next big fire might hit, Thomas Bonnicksen, a forest science professor emeritus at Texas A&M University, pointed to the forests above Fresno.

"Your forests up there are just as thick as they were in San Bernardino," said Bonnicksen, who advised Congress after the devastating San Bernardino Mountains wildfires in 2003.

I've brought back Bonnicksen's prediction because federal authorities have delayed a major thinning project near Shaver Lake out of fear that the project would harm the weasel-like Pacific fisher. The project's goal is to restore the forest to what it was in 1850 -- before widespread fire suppression -- when small lightning fires cleared out small trees without killing big trees.

Maybe the thinning plan, with accommodations for the Pacific fisher, will be ready to go this fall, as federal officials hope. Maybe it won't. Cross your fingers that a fire doesn't start there because conditions are ripe for a big one.

Complicating things more: air quality now is factored into the firefighting equation. Earlier this month, a half dozen small fires in Yosemite National Park were snuffed out instead of being allowed to burn, as nature intended.

A park official said that Yosemite wanted to be "a good neighbor" by not adding more smoke to the unhealthy San Joaquin Valley air. While the intention was good and clean air is important, the decision was a mistake. Study after study has shown that natural thinning is best for a forest's health.

So, what's the answer?

Overgrown forests must be thinned because they're dangerous firetraps. But they must be thinned the right way-- with underbrush removed, erosion prevented and water quality maintained.

Environmentalists, loggers and government officials must be flexible and open to solutions. People who live in the foothills and the mountains must maintain firebreaks around their homes. And those who live in inaccessible terrain must accept the fact that they could lose everything.

Not that I expect a consensus to suddenly emerge. Years from now, wildfires -- and the debate about how to best prevent them -- will still be one of the West's hottest summer topics.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wed., July 30, 2008:](#)

District just guessing

The Bee's Mark Grossi informs us that the Valley Air Pollution Control District members will hold nine meetings in August [column July 23]. Why they would need nine meetings to discuss a foregone conclusion is beyond me. The goal seems to be 40 no-burn days in 2008, and the question is: Where do they get that figure? They call it an "educated estimate," which is no better than an educated guess.

Consider the facts. Any data the district has was obtained from the last census and was obsolete before the district was ever formed. Accordingly, the district has no idea as to how many fireplaces are in the area and how many are used regularly.

Further, the district does not inspect fireplaces and/or chimneys, does not conduct surveys and does not conduct laboratory tests.

I would venture to make an educated estimate that wood burning is responsible for a minimal amount of pollution compared with any other source. But be that as it may, I'll bet anyone that if our air this winter is as sweet as a baby's breath, there will be 40 no-burn days, because that's what the district wants. And what the district wants, the district gets.

Leonard E. Goldberg, Fresno