

Corcoran live fire training a rare event in Central Valley

By Joe Johnson

Hanford Sentinel, Sunday, Feb. 1, 2009

Thick clouds of smoke rose above Corcoran on Monday afternoon as firefighters from across the county scrambled to put out a residential fire.

But what appeared to be business as usual for the Kings County Fire Department was actually a day-long training session on Corcoran's west side, a project two years in the making.

"Fire departments around the Valley are having a hard time getting this kind of training," Fire Engineer Jason Mustain said. "What happened was that five years ago, the state started requiring us to get all of the asbestos out of a house before we did a training burn. That was a major, major cost for us and it put a big standstill on any live fire training we could do."

Monday's training exercise was a joint venture between Corcoran, the Kings County Fire Department, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, Chemical Waste Management, Leon Environmental and Parc Environmental that allows burning to go on without environmental impact while saving fire agencies the cost of asbestos removal.

Firefighters gathered as early as 8 a.m. at the intersection of James and Brokaw avenues on the western outskirts of Corcoran, where a condemned building sat ready to burn.

"We have to do this to train our guys," county Fire Marshal Mike Virden said. "No matter how realistic a simulation you build, it is not the same as a real fire. You need to be there to learn the true signs, to monitor thermal balance, to watch for flashover. There are things you get in a real fire that never happen in a burn simulator."

From the city's perspective, these controlled burns allow substandard buildings that sit condemned throughout the city to be removed with little cost to the property owner.

"Usually, we give people a year to either tear the house down or fix it up," Corcoran building official Kevin Tromberg said. "Many of the people don't have the money, though. So, with this program, they can temporarily sign over the property to us, and we will pay the bills to handle the environmental issues, since we can get these services donated to us or performed at a reduced rate.

"Then, once the demolition is done, the homeowner can make small payments over a course of several years to the city at no interest."

Tromberg, who helped start the program along with Mustain, said the two years of work were mostly spent trying to get city and government officials to sign off on the plan and arrange contracts with the different agencies involved.

"We have a provision in our rules for open-air burning that allows public officials to conduct fire-training methods as long as they have an approved fire suppression training plan," said Daniel Martinez, a spokesman with the Air Pollution Control District. "This is really a challenge for the people involved, because they have to get all of the asbestos out of a building and get approval for the burn. It's a tough project."

Officials with Parc Environmental volunteered to remove the asbestos from the building, while Leon Environmental did the testing to locate it. Chemical Waste Management in Kettleman City offered to dispose of the asbestos as soon as it had been removed. All of this work would have cost the Fire Department well over \$4,000 to do on their own.

"The city gets rid of a problem structure, a neighborhood gets cleaned up and we get the kind of training we really need," Kings County Fire Chief Jim Kilner said. "It is win-win [situation]. I used to be the training chief here for 15 years. We did these kinds of burns all the time. Now it's a real rarity."

Battalion Chief Clay Smith said in the last five years he's been training firefighters, Monday's burn was only the fourth live-burn training the Fire Department could arrange.

"If you've never been into a real fire, then you don't know how to understand the signs," Virden said. "If you can't recognize the signs, then you can't be aggressive, you won't know how to advance. It's not just putting wet stuff on red stuff, as we used to say. There's a science to it and these buildings are laboratories for firefighters."

Firefighters were trained in hose management, fire safety, how to suppress flames without damaging the structure, keeping the smoke layer at a desired level and fire behavior patterns.

Rooms within the structure are emptied out and fire starters are put in place. Different materials are used to simulate different types of fire using all natural materials, like pallets and paper. After several controlled burns are complete, a final fire is set so the firefighters can experience a full-scale exterior fire suppression.

City officials said they hope to hold these kinds of training events several times a year, with more than just the fire department in attendance.

Smog: Reporting on hazardous cow gas

By Mark Grossi, FresnoBee.com, Friday, Jan. 30, 2009

Time to straighten out a misunderstanding that I have cultivated here.

When I wrote last week that San Joaquin Valley dairies are already regulated, I was speaking in reference to the Clean Air Act. I was correcting a misunderstanding from an Associated Press story about an EPA exemption for animal feeding operations.

The exemption from the Bush administration creates a loophole for dairies, hog farms and other animal operations from reporting on releases of hazardous gases.

These releases are not covered under the Clean Air Act. They're apparently connected to the Superfund law. And the exemption could affect Valley dairies.

So, the Valley does have an interest in how an environmental lawsuit plays out over this exemption.

Confused yet? Maybe a little? Read on.

This is what EPA calls this whole reporting process:

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980 (CERCLA), as amended, and the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA), also known as Title III of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act.

Right.

Apparently dairies have been responsible for reporting ammonia emissions more than 100 pounds. There are tons of ammonia going into the air daily, but the air district is not responsible for tracking that stuff. EPA is.

So, have dairies been reporting these plumes to the authorities? That's the first question I'll ask in my next phone call to EPA. If you already have the answer to this question, by all means, comment on this blog item.

Who are these people regulating our air?

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Jan. 31, 2009

They approved the limits on fireplace burning. They vote on regulations for smokestacks, flares and farms. And they'll soon consider a rule aimed at reducing the driving done by employees of large companies.

They're the members of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Governing Board, a board you may not know much about but that will increasingly decide on matters that affect your life and how much pollution you emit.

In coming years, to meet ever-stricter national standards for air pollution, the district must enact rules that will bring down emissions even more.

Having regulated industrial and commercial pollution for nearly two decades, the district is now contemplating more rules that target the general public's activity.

The board doesn't draft pollution rules but does vote on them, and provide leadership and direction to district staff.

And they often come under criticism.

Environmentalists and health groups have routinely accused board members of being too cozy with industry, particularly agriculture, and unwilling to pass tough regulations to reduce pollution from these sources.

Likewise, farmers and businesses often show up to board meetings to protest the burdensome costs of regulations.

Until recently, it was comprised of eight county supervisors — one from each county in the district — and three city council representatives — one each from a city in the northern, central and southern parts of the valley.

To diversify the board, state legislation in 2007 expanded membership from 11 to 15, adding seats for a medical doctor and scientist with experience in air pollution plus two more city council members. Not all positions have been filled.

The board currently consists of eight supervisors, one city council member, a doctor and a scientist. Four city seats remain empty but are expected to be filled in the next few months.

Here's a look at the board members, their backgrounds, professions and elected positions:

WILLIAM O'BRIEN

Stanislaus County supervisor

Director/officer/vice president of O'Brien's Market Inc.

Income:

- Salary and dividends of \$10,000 to \$100,000 as director/officer of O'Brien's Market Inc., three retail grocery store locations in Modesto and Riverbank
- \$10,000 to \$100,000 from Unified Western Grocers for advertising rebates paid to O'Brien's Market

Gifts:

- \$143.22, food and beverage, Gallo Center for the Arts

TONY BARBA

Kings County supervisor

Retired California Highway Patrol officer (income not required to be reported)

JACK STEVEN WORTHLEY

Tulare County supervisor

Former corporate counsel for Sequoia Forest Industries from 1988 to 1995. Currently maintains a private practice with an emphasis in wills, trusts and probate.

Income:

- Reported \$10,000 to \$100,000 in income from sole proprietorship of J. Steve Worthley, Attorney at Law
- Salary of \$500 to \$1,000 from air district Governing Board

- Salary of \$1,000 to \$10,000 from State of California Commission on State Mandates
- Spouse's income: Monson-Sultana Elementary School technology director, \$10,000 to \$100,000.

JUDITH G. CASE

Fresno County supervisor

Case and her husband, Fred McNairy, operate a cattle ranch and bed and breakfast. She also has a nursing degree and works occasionally at a local hospital.

Income:

- Gross income of \$10,000 to \$100,000 from Case McNairy Ranch (cattle ranch and bed & breakfast)
- Gross income more than \$100,000 from Fred H. McNairy, CPA, an accounting firm. Clients who were a source of more than \$10,000 in income: Van G. Trucking Inc., Indart Enterprises, LP, Barr Packing Company, Madeline Chooljian
- Salary of \$10,000 to \$100,000 as administrative director at Saint Agnes Medical Center

Gifts:

- \$240, honorary membership, The Downtown Club
- \$20, fruit basket, Fresno County Farm Bureau
- \$8, book, Fresno County Library
- \$16.95, book, Public Strategies Group
- \$32, book, Gary MacDonald Homes Inc.
- \$25, book, UC Cooperative Extension
- \$180, campus parking pass, Fresno State
- \$50, sports and parking tickets, Fresno City College
- \$353, fair and grandstand tickets, The Big Fresno Fair
- \$53.93, book, Pop Laval Foundation
- \$25, gift basket, Fresno Deputy Sheriff's Association
- \$150, holiday decorations and candy, Fresno Area Construction Team
- \$20, Circuit City gift certificate, Ron & Delores McKelroy
- \$20, business card holder, Brandywine Global
- \$30, See's candy, Building Industry Association of San Joaquin Valley
- \$8, baklava, Fresno Catering Service
- \$150, flowers, Granville Homes
- \$30, gift basket, Dirk Poeschel Land Development Services
- \$50, wine, E&J Gallo Winery
- \$20, pistachios, Ben A. From
- \$40, fruit basket, Serimian Packing Company

CHRIS T. VIERRA

Ceres City Council member

Managing principal in civil engineering firm

Income:

- Salary of more than \$100,000 from Stantec Consulting
(Vierra is now employed by Thompson-Hysell Engineers)

LEROY ORNELLAS*

San Joaquin County supervisor

Owner of Ornellas Dairy in Tracy

Income:

- Gross income of more than \$100,000 from Ornellas Dairy. Clients who were a source of more than \$10,000 in income: Dairy Farmers of America, Hilmar Cheese Co., Escalon Livestock, Fran Borges, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Shareholder in Ornellas Trucking Inc.

Gross income of more than \$100,000. Clients who were a source of more than \$10,000 in income: Mancuso Trucking Inc.

- Spouse's income: \$10,000 to \$100,000 as a loan officer at Uncle Credit Union in Livermore

* The Economic Interest Statement for Ornellas provided by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reflects information from 2006, not 2007.

MICHAEL G. NELSON

Merced County supervisor

Independent environmental consultant

Income:

- Gross income of \$10,000 to \$100,000 from Nelson Environmental

Gifts:

- \$214.23, Tony Bennett concert tickets and dinner, AT&T
- \$67.29, crystal hat, California State Association of Counties
- \$533.46, executive committee retreat, California State Association of Counties

JOHN TELLES, M.D.

Cardiologist with Cardiovascular Associates in Fresno

Income:

- Gross income from ownership interest in Cardiovascular Associates over \$100,000, salary as medical doctor at the practice of more than \$100,000

RAY WATSON

Kern County supervisor

President of Uniglobe Golden Empire Travel Inc. in Bakersfield

Income:

- Gross income of \$10,000 to \$100,000 from ownership interest in Uniglobe. Clients who were a source of more than \$10,000 in income: Rain for Rent, Ivanhoe Energy, Salter Labs, Aera Energy

RONN DOMINICI

Madera County supervisor

Retired California Highway Patrol officer

Income:

- Income of \$10,000 to \$100,000 from Public Employees Retirement System
- Salary of \$10,000 to \$100,000 as Madera supervisor

Gifts:

- \$125, sports tickets and parking, Tribal Chairman Picayune
- \$75, dinner, Public Agency Retirement Services
- \$113, San Francisco Giants tickets, Ranchwood Homes
- \$75, dinner, Chevron Energy Solutions Company

HENRY JAY FORMAN

Professor of biochemistry, University of California, Merced

Income:

- Salary of more than \$100,000 from UC Merced
- Received \$500 to \$1,000 Distinguished Scientist Award from Sigma Xi, UC Merced Chapter

Source: Some information comes from the Economic Interest Statements that all elected and appointed California officials must file annually with the state Fair Political Practices Commission.

In most cases, the information was taken from forms submitted in 2008 that account for 2007. Individuals are not required to report income from government positions.

Air district governing board members are paid \$100 for each regular or sub-committee meeting they attend, up to \$3,600 a year.

Rule may require companies to curb employee driving

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009

If you drive to work, your employer may start enticing you to consider a car pool or bus pass.

By next year, San Joaquin Valley air regulators plan to require businesses with more than 100 employees to implement "trip reduction" programs, aimed at cutting the amount employees drive to, from and during work.

Companies will have to show reduced vehicle emissions or reduced numbers of people driving alone to work, or face penalties under a current draft of the rule.

But before you groan at the thought of the coffee-breath infused small talk while sharing a ride with your coworkers each morning, the rule may include a few perks.

Because it puts the burden on companies to get employees to reduce their driving, employers will likely turn to incentive programs, ranging from tax breaks and flat-out cash to flexible scheduling or telecommuting.

They will also be encouraged to provide more on-site services to employees, such as an ATM machine, postal service, dry cleaning and order-in lunches to reduce driving done during lunch breaks.

Putting its plans into practice, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District already gives employees \$50 if they use alternative transportation for at least 10 one-way trips to and from work during a two-week period. The agency also offers cash advances and payment for order-in lunches through payroll deductions.

"What we've found is if you can offer those kinds of conveniences, people don't feel compelled to drive their own cars and leave at lunch to do their own errands," said Scott Nester, the district's

director of planning. "It just makes life easier for employees if they can get those things done on-site."

The district highlighted programs at other local companies as examples of what employers can do, too. Chevron and Aera operate on a "9/80" work schedule, where employees put in 80 hours of work in nine days and get every other Friday off.

A number of other incentive programs — though perhaps not all as appealing — could be implemented at companies, said Linda Urata, rideshare coordinator for Kern Council of Governments.

Federal tax benefits allow pre-tax deductions for the purchase of bus passes or bikes. Companies that subsidize employee parking expenses could give employees who don't drive to work the subsidy as cash. Carpools may be rewarded with better parking spaces.

How much the rule will cost business to provide incentives and report and track employee transportation is not yet known.

Roughly 356 businesses in Kern County employ more than 100 people in one location, according to the Kern Economic Development Corp.

Urata said a similar rule in the Los Angeles air basin has required some companies to add a position devoted to overseeing the trip reduction program, or contract with a consulting service to meet the requirements. In fact the rule spurred the growth of many small consulting companies specializing in trip reduction, she said.

She suspects the local rule will have similar impacts.

The impact on employers is something business groups will watch closely.

"This has to be done in a way where we're not mandating employers to do a million and one things but where we're encouraging them to do the right thing," said Nick Ortiz, government affairs manager for the Greater Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce.

The air district says the costs to business won't be known until a more detailed draft of the rule is prepared. It will hold a series of meetings to get input on the rule in coming months.

Central Valley GOP leaders target pesticide rules

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Jan. 30, 2009

SACRAMENTO - Bugs have invaded state budget talks as debate heats up about clean-air rules farmers must follow when spraying for pests.

Environmentalists say GOP leaders Mike Villines of Clovis and Dave Cogdill of Modesto are seeking to weaken regulations that are critical to cleaning the polluted air in their Valley districts.

The demands are part of a long-running push by Republicans to get concessions on a host of environmental regulations in return for supporting a state budget deal that could include tax or fee hikes.

Cogdill said environmentalists are trying to "stop all business and industry." The GOP pesticide proposal would simply put into law a recent court decision, he said, "so we don't have to keep fighting the battle over and over again."

The minority GOP enjoys rare leverage at budget time. State spending plans require a two-thirds majority vote, meaning a handful of Republicans must sign on.

Clean-air activists say the pesticide regulations should not be part of budget talks, which are taking place behind closed doors with no public involvement.

"What [Villines and Cogdill] have put on the chopping block will have serious health implications for residents of the San Joaquin Valley," said Sarah Sharpe, environmental health director for

Fresno Metro Ministry, a faith-based group that advocates for clean air. "There's no place for these conversations in the budget."

Lawmakers and Gov. Schwarzenegger are struggling to close a \$42 billion budget shortfall through June 2010.

The pesticide rule in question concerns smog-making gases, called volatile organic compounds or VOCs, emitted by pesticides. Pesticides contribute to about 6% of the smog problem in the Valley, the most recent state figures show.

The Valley's bad air has created numerous public health problems, including high asthma rates.

In 2006, a federal judge ruled that the state Department of Pesticide Regulation ignored clean air laws for pesticides. The judge ordered regulations that would cut pesticide emissions in the Valley by 20% from 1991 levels.

But in August, the department won an appeal to overturn the ruling. Officials are now finalizing new regulations that call for a smaller decrease - a 12% cut from 1990 levels.

Republicans are seeking to put that figure in statute, according to language of a proposal circulating in the Capitol. And the proposal would loosen rules in Ventura County to allow for more emissions than what the pesticide department is calling for.

The proposal appears aimed at undermining efforts by environmental groups to re-establish the stricter limits - either through regulations or in court.

"We're going to do everything in our power to stop [the Department of Pesticide Regulation's] misguided regulations and Republicans' attempt to further steal public health protections from rural residents," said Brent Newell, legal director for the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment.

The rules target "fumigants," pesticides that are injected into the soil to kill pests and disease. The department says the looser limit will still "meet our obligation to reduce pesticide emissions, but do so in a way that avoids placing an unreasonable or disproportionate burden on fumigant pesticide users," according to regulatory documents.

Farmers fear the stricter limit could force some growers to stop using pesticides in years when the region approaches the emissions limit. As a result, "we are not going to be able to farm the same amount of acres. We are not going to be able to produce the same amount of food," said Barry Bedwell, president of the Fresno-based Grape and Tree Fruit League.

The department's proposal would set allowable emissions at 18.1 tons per day, 2.1 tons less stringent than what environmentalists want. In recent years, pesticide VOC emissions have ranged from 17.3 tons per day to 21.4 tons, according to the pesticide department.

Estimated annual average emissions from all sources was 380 tons per day in 2006, according to the state Air Resources Board.

Arguments begin today in suit over AQMD pollution credits

The case against South Coast Air Quality Management District alleges that the air-pollution control agency issued invalid emission credits to businesses and public facilities.

By Catherine Ho

L.A. Times, Monday, February 2, 2009

A federal district judge will hear arguments today over whether an air-pollution control agency issued invalid emission credits to businesses and public facilities in one of California's most polluted regions.

The case against South Coast Air Quality Management District -- the air pollution control agency for Orange County and parts of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties -- was

brought by four environmental groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, which argue that credits issued by the district over the last 19 years violate Clean Air Act provisions.

The AQMD has come under fire for its credit system before. In July 2008, a judge ruled that it could not sell credits to power plants without first doing a more thorough environmental analysis. In November, a judge in a separate case temporarily revoked an AQMD rule that had allowed the district to issue credits to public-service facilities and private businesses that produce less than four tons of emissions each year. The AQMD was ordered to undertake an environmental review of the practice.

Now environmentalists want a ruling on whether such a credit system can be used in any circumstance.

The district has argued that its program allows businesses to upgrade and modernize equipment without having to purchase credits on the market, where they can cost millions of dollars. Without the AQMD credits, hundreds of businesses have been unable to install equipment, some of which is meant to lower emissions, said Sam Atwood, AQMD spokesman.

"You have hundreds of businesses and public facilities whose plans to replace aging equipment, expand or modernize have come to a screeching halt for an indefinite period," Atwood said.

The district recently met with 200 business representatives from Southern California to discuss the credit freeze that is putting many of their projects in limbo.

In areas where pollution levels do not meet federal air quality standards, federal law requires developers building or modifying their facilities to first obtain emission-reduction credits, or offsets, from facilities that are shutting down or that emit less than federal limits. The credits are meant to allow a region to develop industrially without increasing its net amount of air pollution.

The district had collected credits from shut-down facilities and distributed them free to public facilities such as schools, hospitals and sewage treatment plants, as well as to private businesses that produced less than four tons of emissions each year.

Because of the moratorium on the credits, the Los Angeles County Sanitation District has postponed plans to replace old boilers at its Palos Verdes landfill with a fuel-cell battery, which would be a lower-emission way to convert landfill methane gas into electricity, said Greg Adams, assistant departmental engineer at the sanitation district. The \$1.8-million market price for credits has halted the project, Adams said.

"You'd think everyone would jump on board with this overall emission-lowering system," he said. "But we can't build the new, cleaner system without having credits. So we continue to operate the older, dirtier power plant like we did before, to nobody's benefit."

Adams added that many of the 3,500 gas stations in the four-county area are vying for permits to install tighter controls on their gas nozzles that would better prevent gasoline vapors from escaping into the air. As a result, the stations will continue operating with their existing systems and ultimately contribute to worsening air quality in the region, he said.

But the environmental groups suing AQMD say the district should not be distributing credits that it cannot prove were collected in a valid way. The credits introduced "unlawful pollution" into the South Coast basin, the suit alleged. The Clean Air Act requires that such credits be "real, surplus, enforceable, quantifiable and permanent."

David Pettit, attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said his organization and the other plaintiffs want to stop what he calls the "misuse of credits" to allow more-polluting power plants and refineries in the South Coast basin, and help the district figure out how many legitimate credits it has.

"We're trying to clean up the district's books, to try to make sure those credits are dealt with consistently with the Clean Air Act," Pettit said.

Wood fires banned for 24 hours

By Denis Cuff
Contra Costa Times, Friday, Jan. 30, 2009

The Bay Area's air pollution district today issued a Spare the Air alert banning wood fires for the next 24 hours because of predictions of unhealthy air.

Wood fires in fireplaces and stoves are prohibited from noon today until noon Saturday in the nine counties in the Bay Area. Violators can be fined by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Smoke from wood-burning fires is linked to illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and lung disease, and is especially harmful for children and the elderly.

New bus service connects southern Pa. to Md.

The Associated Press
Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2009

BALTIMORE—Southern Pennsylvania commuters who travel down Interstate 83 into Maryland can now take advantage of a bus line connecting York and Shrewsbury to Baltimore's light rail system.

York County's public transportation system, rabbittransit, will run six round trips each weekday between York and Shrewsbury, Pa., and the Timonium and Hunt Valley area.

The rabbitEXPRESS service is aimed primarily at York County residents who work in Maryland, but rabbittransit Executive Director Richard Farr says Marylanders could take advantage of the service, too.

The cost of the trip will be \$5 each way, but monthly passes are available at a discount of about \$64 off the daily rate.

The three-year demonstration project funded by the federal government's Congestion Mitigation Air Quality fund is starting as budget problems prompt Maryland to shed commuter routes.

Pa. judge tosses state mercury pollution rule

The Associated Press
Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, January 30, 2009

HARRISBURG, Pa.—A judge has thrown out Pennsylvania's rule that requires coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury emissions.

Commonwealth Court Judge Dan Pellegrini says the rule is unlawful, invalid and unenforceable.

The two-year-old rule was challenged by Allentown-based PPL Corp., which has several coal-fired power plants in the state.

PPL argued that Pennsylvania cannot enforce its mercury rule because it is based on a federal mercury rule that a judge struck down last year.

Under Pennsylvania's rule, the state's three dozen coal-fired plants had until 2015 to reduce their mercury emissions by 90 percent over 1999's emission levels.

Federal officials say children and fetuses are particularly vulnerable to the toxic metal.

Obama urged not to backburner climate change

By Angela Charlton - Associated Press Writer
Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, January 30, 2009

DAVOS, Switzerland—Don't put off action on global warming just because times are lean—that's the message Al Gore, world environmental leaders and U.S. executives sent Friday to President Barack Obama.

Worries are mounting that economic troubles are sapping momentum, in the U.S. Congress and in other world capitals, for costly investment in clean energy and cutting carbon emissions.

"The oceans are being choked off of oxygen. They are dying as a result of this process we are seeing before our eyes the melting of the polar ice cap," Gore said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "The assumption that we can continue on this path is an assumption that is collapsing."

Many countries are looking to Obama for aggressive action after frustration at the Bush administration's refusal to sign international pacts on reducing emissions of carbon, blamed for global warming.

Gore, U.N. climate chief Yvo de Boer and executives were discussing the fate of a U.N. meeting in Copenhagen this December aiming for a global agreement on reducing emissions. Questions remain over the new U.S. government's position on the Copenhagen meeting, which is seen as crucial.

"We need an agreement this year, not next year or some other time," Gore said.

Still, Gore expressed optimism in Obama, calling him "the greenest person in the room" for making environmental funding a big chunk of the \$819 billion economic stimulus bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives this week.

But he and other panelists acknowledged that the financial crisis will be a key challenge. Governments could shy from forcing polluting industries to pay for their carbon emissions or using taxpayer money for expensive new clean energy investments—even if they prove more efficient in the long term.

"Undeniably the financial crisis is making things more difficult," U.N. climate chief Yvo de Boer, told Associated Press Television News. "There is a shortage of finance, you see that many renewable energy projects are being put on the back burner."

But he added, "If you look at the economic recovery packages of the European Union, the United States, Japan, China—they are all using this as an opportunity to change the direction of economic growth, and that I find encouraging."

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who will host the Copenhagen meeting, urged countries to agree to reduce global emissions by 50 percent by 2050, and said industrialized countries should reduce by 80 percent.

"We have to be vigilant so that the crisis does not derail this," he told the AP.

The onus is not only on Obama. Climate negotiators are looking anxiously at developing giants and heavy emitters China and India. And Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin disappointed some activists with his non-committal stance on climate change in his keynote address at the Davos forum.

Media magnate Rupert Murdoch, chief executive of News Corp., joined the call to ensure that investment in clean energy doesn't collapse.

"There's a real risk that the alternative energy industry could die again," he said later. "I really hope that the new president will not let that happen."

The head of the New York Stock Exchange, Duncan Niederauer, agreed.

"We've got to stay the course on energy efficiency," he said. "It's time we get serious about it and push it through."

China blames pollution for surge in birth defects

The government's acknowledgment of the problem is a victory for environmentalists, who say the rate of defects is highest in coal-producing regions.

By Barbara Demick

L.A. Times, Monday, February 2, 2009

Reporting from Beijing -- Chinese officials told the state media that birth defects are increasing at an alarming rate and that a major reason was degradation of the environment.

"The number of newborns with birth defects is constantly increasing in both urban and rural areas," Jiang Fan, vice minister of the National Population and Family Planning Commission, was quoted by the China Daily's weekend edition as saying in a recent conference.

Environmentalists say that the leading culprit is China's dependence on coal and that birth defects are highest in coal-producing regions such as Shanxi and Inner Mongolia.

Although Jiang did not give out new figures at last month's conference, a study by the commission released in 2007 found that birth defects had increased nearly 40% from 2001 to 2006, coinciding with the country's explosive economic growth.

The government's acknowledgment was a victory for environmentalists, some of whom have faced arrest and harassment for trying to publicize the relationship between pollution and disease.

"So many people are wondering why, when our lives are supposed to be getting better, there are more and more babies born with birth defects and couples who are infertile," said Huo Daishan, an environmental activist from Henan province who has been fighting against printing, paper manufacturing and chemical dye factories whose pollution he believes has caused disease clusters along the Huai River.

Greenpeace China has been campaigning against pollution from coal.

"The statement from the National Population and Family Planning Commission once again proved that coal burning is not only a climate killer, but one of the major health hazards in China," Greenpeace China said in a statement Sunday.

Experts say it is extremely difficult to quantify the relationship between pollution and birth defects, particularly in China, where the government has until recently tried to downplay the environmental costs of economic growth.

Columbia University's Center for Children's Environmental Health in October released the results of a six-year study in the central Chinese city of Chongqing showing that pollution from a coal-fired power plant affected the birth weight, height and motor development skills of babies born nearby.

"It was clear that the pollutants caused damage to the DNA," said Tang Deliang, a coauthor of the study. Tang applauded the government's efforts to pay more attention to the problem. "This was something that people were strictly forbidden to talk about in the past."

According to the government, the most common birth defects are cleft palate, neural tube defects, extra fingers or toes, and congenital heart disease. Researchers have said the sharp increase in birth defects is partially due to better reporting because more babies are born in hospitals nowadays rather than at home.

The World Health Organization puts the worldwide average rate of birth defects at 3% to 5%. But it is difficult to compare between countries because some measures include only physical defects detected at birth, and others include developmental delays that emerge later. As part of its population control measures, Chinese officials are more insistent on abortions if birth defects are suspected.

At the conference last month, family planning minister Li Bin was quoted as saying that a baby with birth defects is born in China every 30 seconds.

Ask AP: Road salt and health

Associated Press

In Merced Sun-Star, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Friday, Jan. 30, 2009

I live in a state that uses ice-melting salts on the roads during winter snows. When the roads dry, vehicles whip up clouds of this salt dust and it enters my car's heating system where I breathe it in. Are there any adverse health effects from breathing in this salt dust?

Dallin Katt
Burlington, Wis.

There is very little research on the health effects of inhaling road salt.

Generally, road-salt dust would fall into a larger category of air pollution known as particulate matter. That includes dust stirred up by highway traffic and released into the air by industries such as rock quarrying and gravel mining.

If inhaled, these particles can irritate airways and aggravate asthma.

In 1999, the Colorado towns of Basalt, Aspen and Minturn asked the state's Transportation Department to stop spraying magnesium chloride deicer on roadways after about 10 residents complained of respiratory problems, including asthma. But a study by the health department found deicers actually generate less particulate matter than the other common melting agent, sand.

A fuller answer to the question depends on what type of salt is being used, and what other ingredients it includes.

Some road salts can include heavy metals. Others are mixed with chemicals to prevent corrosion and clumping. The health effects of these chemicals are difficult to determine, because it would depend on their concentration in the salt and how often they were inhaled. However, the levels found in road salt are unlikely to pose a significant health risk.

The primary health concern stemming from the use of road salt has been contamination of drinking water supplies, according to studies. Runoff from roadways and unlined storage piles can taint underground water supplies. If consumed, the salt-laden water can contribute to high blood pressure and pose a risk to those with the condition, much like eating too much table salt.

These risks, however, are likely outweighed by the risks of driving on slick roads.

*Dina Cappiello, AP Environment Writer
Washington*

[N.Y. Times editorial, Sat., Jan. 31, 2009:](#)

The Next Step on Warming

It seemed that every chance he got, President Bush ignored or flat out refused to address the problem of climate change. So we were greatly encouraged by President Obama's swift announcement that he is likely to approve California's request to regulate greenhouse gases from vehicles — a request the Bush administration denied.

The logical next step would be for Mr. Obama to quickly address the Supreme Court's 2007 decision ordering the Environmental Protection Agency to examine the effects of greenhouse gases and to regulate them if necessary. Mr. Bush dodged that one, too.

The court instructed the agency to first determine whether global warming pollution threatened public health and welfare — known as an “endangerment finding” under the Clean Air Act — and, if so, to devise emissions standards for vehicles.

Lisa Jackson, the agency's new administrator, said in a memo to her employees last week that she intended to honor her “obligation to address climate change under the Clean Air Act.” But there is resistance from some members of Congress and parts of the business community who fear that regulating vehicle emissions of greenhouse gases will lead to economy-wide controls on greenhouse gases from all sources, including industry.

Stephen Johnson, Mr. Bush's E.P.A. administrator, initially tried to do the right thing. He ordered his staff to write an endangerment finding and craft regulations limiting greenhouse gas emissions

from vehicles. In December 2007, he sent the entire package to the White House, which not only chose to ignore the findings but refused to open the e-mail message that contained them.

Mr. Johnson then ordered up a laborious public rule-making process that essentially went nowhere and allowed Mr. Bush to retire to Texas without having done much of anything. Ms. Jackson is eager to get the process back on track.

Nobody, including the administrator, is under any illusions that the E.P.A. alone can solve climate change. Congress will have to take ownership of the issue by authorizing major public investments in clean-energy technologies and by putting a price on greenhouse-gas emissions in order to unlock private investment.

But smart regulation can begin to advance the ball. For starters, it would force industry to look for ways to make cars that are much more fuel-efficient. It would help goad Congress into action. It is also, as the Supreme Court has pointed out, the law.

[L.A. Daily News Editorial, Sunday, Feb. 1, 2009:](#)

Speed it up: MTA aid for cyclists in slow lane

In a city clogged with traffic and plagued with air pollution, we should celebrate people who choose to commute by bicycle. And, if at all possible, we should make their trip a little easier. After all, that's one less car to clog up the 405.

So Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials ought to be commended for adding new bike lockers at subway stations and taking out some seats on trains to make space for bicyclists during rush hours. These changes should make it easier for people to integrate a bicycle into their commute.

As it is now, cyclists who ride to stations often can't stash their bikes in a secure place. And they're not supposed to take bikes on the subway during rush hour.

While that policy isn't really enforced by security, the dirty looks from fellow riders competing with a bike to cram into a crowded train are enough to dissuade cyclists from trying. And Orange Line buses only have three bike racks. So if the rack is full, cyclists have to wait for the next bus.

These inconveniences discourage regular bicycle commuters and they scare off people who might be willing to try riding to the station instead of driving.

But what's unfortunate about this cyclist-aid program is that the MTA's good plans to install bike lockers are moving at a bureaucratically glacial speed. They won't be complete for five years!

The MTA board budgeted \$500,000 for the bike storage containers - \$100,000 each year for the next five years. They'll install 80 lockers in the San Fernando Valley before the summer. Great, but there is already a list of 200 cyclists citywide who hope to snag a locker.

There is a wide-open window of opportunity right now to boost the regular ranks of public transportation users, thanks to the state of the economy. MTA board members should seize the moment (not the half-decade) and accelerate the funding to get lockers installed sooner. The next spike in gasoline prices is right around the corner, and the MTA should be ready to accommodate new transit and bicycle commuters when that happens.

One or two frustrating experiences can sour a person on mass transit for good. But with convenient bike storage units available and space on subway for two-wheeled commuters, some Angelenos will be more willing to ditch their cars and the habit could stick once gas prices dip.

C'mon, MTA. Speed it up.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorials, Friday, Jan. 30, 2009:](#)

Our View: Don't use crisis to gut smog rules

If California Republicans hope to shed their reputation as the Scorched Earth Party, they won't do it by gutting environmental rules as a condition for a state budget deal.

With California just days away from running out of money, Republicans are quietly insisting that Democrats and the governor weaken state rules to allow greater diesel pollution from construction equipment, more use of pesticides by farmers and more greenhouse gas emissions from development projects.

Many of these changes are being sought by construction contractors, farm businesses and developers who have contributed big bucks to the Republican Party and GOP lawmakers in recent years.

Apparently, these industries are willing to let the state descend into insolvency, unable to sell bonds for highway and flood control projects, unless they can get regulatory relief they couldn't get through a normal public process.

Consider just one of the rollbacks the GOP seeks -- a delay in state rules requiring construction companies to reduce diesel pollution from bulldozers and other equipment.

The California Air Resources Board enacted these regulations in 2007 after dozens of public hearings.

Because of the rules, many construction companies have already invested in cleaner construction equipment, which could go a long way toward protecting public health.

Now, at the 11th hour, Republicans want to use a closed-door process to gain regulatory relief for construction companies that, instead of investing in cleaner equipment, have put their money into a lobbying campaign.

If they are successful, they'll undermine California's efforts to meet clean air standards while putting proactive construction firms at a competitive disadvantage.

It's shameful that businesses that have so much to gain from state construction bonds would be using their leverage with Republicans in this way.

At a time when Californians need them to step up for the state's interests, they are again fouling the air for a handful of special interests.

Our View: Obituary for urban sprawl

Majority at San Joaquin Valley Blueprint forum support most far-reaching scenario.

Change is hard to contemplate for most of us, but sometimes the argument is so compelling, we take the plunge. That's what happened at a public forum on the future of urban planning in the Valley in Fresno on Monday.

At the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Project's public summit, about 53 percent of the nearly 600 people in attendance choose the most far-reaching scenario as their recommendation for adoption by officials in each of the eight Valley counties. That's a hopeful and gratifying commitment.

The choices posed at the summit recommended urban densities -- the average number of people and homes permitted per acre. Currently, the Valley average is about 13 people, or four homes, per acre. The attendees at the summit chose the highest density among several choices -- 31 people per acre, or about 10 homes -- as the goal for the Valley by 2050.

That sounds like a lot -- and it is, set against the pattern of sprawling suburbs that has characterized the Valley for decades. But it isn't that much compared to cities all over North America.

Moreover, there are compelling reasons why the status quo in development is no longer sustainable.

Sprawl erodes the capacity of agriculture, the Valley's economic base, by paving over productive farmland.

It exacerbates traffic congestion by imposing longer commutes on increasingly crowded roads and highways.

All that traffic further pollutes the Valley's air.

It makes public services such as safety, water and sewer more costly at a time when we cannot afford those costs.

It ignores growing demand for a more urban lifestyle among many.

Increasing urban densities doesn't mean packing people cheek-by-jowl in sardine-can urban slums. Modern urban apartment and condominium designs are attractive and comfortable for a wide range of consumers, from young professionals who want to be close to jobs, recreation and entertainment, to retired empty-nesters who want to move down in home size, but still want services and amenities nearby.

Ed Thompson, state director for American Farmland Trust, put it this way Monday: "Once people get over the fact that this doesn't mean 20 stories of gulag blocks, there will be great support."

That support will be needed. The next step in the blueprint process is submitting the summit's consensus to a panel comprising two elected officials from each of the eight Valley counties. Getting them to look past the status quo will be difficult. Many county leaders up and down the Valley have already expressed their skepticism about what looks to them like radical change.

Officials in Merced County were among the first to get onboard with the Valley Blueprint concept.

But it isn't radical. Whatever standard is adopted in the blueprint won't be binding on counties -- though it could be tied to state transportation funds in the future.

And we're talking about an average here. Urban development in downtown Merced, for instance especially when the high-speed rail station is built, could yield densities far greater than 31 people per acre -- leaving the rest of the county with room to develop at lower levels.

In any case, the age of sprawl is over. Increased densities are inevitable. Our goal should be to make them happen in as smooth and appealing a fashion as possible. We should plan our way into that future rather than stumble into it.

[Modesto Bee, Commentary, Sunday, February 1, 2009](#)

The regional university plan creates a long peninsula of development; guess what will happen around it

By Terry Davis

Would a new private university benefit the region? No doubt, but there are also benefits in doing responsible growth. The suburban sprawl model we followed for nearly two generations is finally in retreat. It thrived on developing cheap land beyond the urban fringe, burdening society with the high costs of ever-expanding road systems, and stretching utilities and services to meet sprawl's endless appetite for farmland and natural habitat.

The side effects included long and stressful commutes, polluted air and high greenhouse gas emissions. Today we recognize that our future lies with more compact and transit-friendly development, coupled with conservation of open space. When it comes to the Regional University project, the last thing we need is to take a step backward toward "leapfrog" development and runaway sprawl.

A visitor to the site of the proposed project may have difficulty picturing a campus, a 3,232-unit subdivision and 22 acres of shopping centers in this remote spot. There is no development of any kind in the vicinity – no improved roads, no utilities – just open land as far as the eye can see. That did not deter Placer 2780, a real estate investment partnership controlled by Angelo Tsakopoulos, from buying up most of the area. By donating a university site, his long-range plans to develop here are coming to fruition.

The project's distinctive long and narrow shape is no accident. The 1,157-acre project was pieced together from portions of many parcels that in aggregate total 3,026 acres. The result is to stretch development from east to west away from Roseville, knifing deeply into agricultural land, with a uniquely sprawl-inducing effect. It is not hard to anticipate what's in store for the land adjacent to this urban peninsula.

One justification for the university's location is that it is compatible with the area's development Blueprint. Created by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments to limit driving miles and encourage compact growth, the Blueprint's map offers a long-term development scenario for the region. While the Blueprint is undeniably a worthy effort, it has been criticized for providing too large a growth footprint. Regardless, it maps 40 years of growth; it was never intended to give license to local governments to ignore their responsibilities to develop in a logical, orderly manner.

Better management of growth is a key factor in meeting California's goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Signed by the governor, Senate Bill 375 links future transportation funding to new development that is directed toward existing urban areas and transportation corridors that offer opportunities to use public transit. The Regional University, disconnected from existing development, far from a major transportation corridor and designed as an urban peninsula, takes us in the opposite direction. A university in this location demands too much: The sacrifice of our goal of creating a healthier environment.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009:](#)

Better solution to air pollution: no-mow days

I may be redundant; however, when I continually see articles full of inaccurate information, I must voice my opinion. Even though I have addressed this issue previously, prior to this diatribe I researched my topic -- i.e., wood burning to provide heat and the amount of 2.5 pm it produces.

I visited several websites and this is what I found:

- * 352,732 tons of PM 2.5 is produced in California annually.
- * 63 percent, or 222,926 tons, is created by a category listed as "miscellaneous," which is made up of farming, (fertilizing, tilling, harvesting and burning), forest fires, repair shops and hospitals.
- * 16 percent, or 57,883 tons, is created by factories.
- * 11 percent, or 39,741 tons, is created by fuel burning (boilers, industrial furnaces, burning oil, coal, gas, fireplaces, wood stoves and residential furnaces).
- * 8 percent, or 29,394 tons, is created by vehicles.
- * 7 percent, or 2,788 tons, is created by power plants.

Giving those figures, my opinion is supported that prohibiting fireplace burning is like taking a willow switch on a bear hunt.

This Naziesque agenda is set up to address the group least likely to complain and with the least amount of political clout. And to top it all off, it sets neighbor against neighbor by suggesting "you tip."

A better solution would be "no gardener day" -- a day where no leaf blower, lawn mower, weed-eater or hedge trimmer powered by a two-cycle motor could be used.

The "no-burn" regulation is vague and just blowing smoke to justify one more unnecessary government bureaucracy.

Trudi Williams, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times, Monday, Feb. 2, 2009:](#)

Too many fires

Duraflame has filed a lawsuit because it claims information showing that its logs burn cleaner than regular wood was ignored by the Air Quality District.

My lungs do not know the difference between the toxins in wood versus those of Duraflame. Both produce the same asthmatic symptoms. Duraflame shares much of the blame for promoting a culture of fire place burning 24/7. People use to mostly burn on cold winter days.

Now its not only 24/7, but it can be 365 days a year. If you can't sleep and its 2 am, throw a log on the fire and watch a movie. If you are taking a day off work, stay home and have a fire burning all day. I knew there was trouble brewing when my neighbor started using his fireplace in July.

The temperature had been over a 100 and just as a cooling fog rolled in the fire started. He told me that he liked fires because it reminded him of childhood camp fires.

Another neighbor burns in the summer at 5 am for the "cozy" feeling as she reads. So, thanks to Duraflame, we can have around the clock pollution.

Suzanne Angioli, Walnut Creek

[Sacramento Bee, Letter to the Editor, Monday, February 2, 2009](#)

Lovin' smog, stalling a budget

Re "Narrow interests top GOP's agenda" (Editorial, Jan. 28): An entrenched minority in the state Legislature wants to gut the state's environmental laws in exchange for its support for a new state budget.

But going green will help pull us out of the red.

To cite one example, regulations that would cut toxic emissions from construction equipment are on the negotiating table. That equipment is responsible for soot and smog that damages our lungs; the resulting sickness makes us less productive at work. Overall, the regulations would save the state \$18 billion to \$26 billion in health care costs and increase productivity over the next decade. Protecting the environment also saves lives.

The construction industry wants to delay implementing the rules for a year. Air Resources Board data say such a delay may result in an estimated 360 premature deaths and 220 hospitalizations for heart and lung disease.

This is the ransom legislators are demanding by holding our state's budget hostage. We cannot afford such shortsighted leadership. The governor and other state lawmakers must stand strong and preserve our health, our environment and our economy.

Don Anair, Berkeley
Union of Concerned Scientists

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, Jan 30, 2009:](#)

Thanks for cleaner air

I appreciate and support the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's efforts to improve winter air quality by implementing tighter rules for residential wood burning. Thanks to these new rules, there is a marked improvement in air quality in my neighborhood this winter.

Because of the Air District's efforts, I have experienced fewer days this winter when wood smoke settles in my yard and accumulates in the garage. There have been fewer days when I have to run the heating system longer (or at least the fan-only setting) to filter out the secondhand wood smoke from the neighborhood that somehow gets into the house.

Finally, I want to thank my neighbors, who follow the rules and refrain from wood burning on residential no-burn days.

Diane Merrill, Fresno