

Stockton City Hall to operate on modified schedule

The Associated Press

In the Lodi News, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Sun., Dec. 27, 2009

STOCKTON, Calif.—Stockton City Hall will operate on a modified schedule when it reopens after a long holiday closure.

City Hall is scheduled to reopen Jan. 4 after furloughs and the holidays kept it closed for nearly two weeks.

When the building does open it again, it will be closed every other Friday, though it will operate on extended hours Monday through Thursday.

The new hours come after the City Council last month approved a schedule in which many employees will work 80 hours every nine days.

The schedule change is in response to a proposed rule by San Joaquin air quality regulators that would require large employers to reduce the number of trips employees would have to make to work.

Bah Humbug! Christmas is a no-burn day

Bakersfield Californian, Fri., Dec. 25, 2009

We're Scrooged! Christmas Day is a no-burn day in the valley air basin portion of Kern County and in five other counties because of deteriorating air quality, the San Joaquin Valley Air District announced.

The curtailment applies to burning wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs. There are exceptions if wood burning is the residence's sole source of heat; if the residence doesn't have access to natural-gas service; or the residence is heated with propane or LPG.

Gas fireplaces may be used at any time.

Fines for first-time violations start at \$50.

The daily wood-burning status by county is available by 4 p.m. each day at www.valleyair.org or 800-SMOG-INFO.

Wood-burning banned today, no Yule log fires

By Laurel Rosenhall, Staff Writer

The Sacramento Bee, Fri., Dec. 25, 2009

Thinking about relaxing in front of a Yule log today? You better reach for the remote control -- not the matches.

Wood burning is banned in much of Northern California today because of forecasts for a high level of fine particle pollution. Today it is illegal to burn any solid fuel, including wood, manufactured logs and pellets, according to the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, which regulates burning in Sacramento, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Folsom, Galt, Isleton and Rancho Cordova.

The Valley Air District also issued a wood-burning prohibition that effects most of the Central Valley including San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Madera, Fresno and Kings counties. And the Bay Area Air Quality Management District did the same, banning wood fires in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, as well as parts of Sonoma and Solano counties.

The bans effect fireplaces, wood burning stoves, outdoor fire pits and any other device that burns solid fuel. Exceptions are allowed in homes where wood-burning is the only source of heat. Devices that burn natural gas or propane are allowed. People who violate the rules face a \$50 fine if they're caught.

Local governments restrict burning because research shows that long-term exposure to particle pollution is linked with serious health problems including asthma and heart attacks, according to the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District. New studies also show that breathing wood smoke can lower children's IQ because it decreases memory, the district reports on its web site.

On days burning is allowed, officials recommend people use manufactured fire logs (such as Duraflame) because they make fewer emissions.

No-burn rules in effect today

The Modesto Bee, Fri., Dec. 25, 2009

Douse that yule log. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has designated today as a no-burn day because of unhealthy levels of emissions rising in the air above San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties. "We're asking valley residents to take their own health, and their neighbors', into consideration when they think about building a fire this weekend," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director. First-time fines for breaking a no-burn order start at \$50. There are exemptions for residences in which wood burning is the sole heat source, or in which homes do not have access to natural gas. The district's daily wood-burning status is available at valleyair.org, or by calling 800-766-4463.

Christmas burning ban imposed around Bay Area

The Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee, Thurs., Dec. 24, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO -- San Francisco Bay area residents won't be celebrating Christmas around a Yule log, or they could face fines.

Bay Area air officials are issuing a Spare the Air alert for Friday, banning open fires that burn wood or any other solid fuels. Homes without a heat source other than woodstoves or fireplaces are exempt.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District says it's issuing the alert because of forecasts for low winds, which can trap smoke close to the ground. It warns that those with respiratory conditions, such as asthma or lung disease, could be affected.

The burning ban covers Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, as well as parts of Sonoma and Solano counties.

First-time violators will get a warning; a second offense could result in a \$400 fine.

San Leandro OKs plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

By Jason Sweeney, The Oakland Tribune

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Mon., Dec. 28, 2009

SAN LEANDRO — The city is moving forward with a plan to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent from 2005 emissions levels by a target date of 2020.

The effort, called the Climate Action Plan, states that "global warming is unequivocal and primarily human induced." It lists several threats posed by that warming and presents a blueprint for action.

The City Council approved the plan last week, changing the wording regarding "point of sale" requirements for home sales, as requested by real estate agents. The point-of-sale provision in the plan would have required that newly sold homes meet energy efficiency upgrades, such as adding weather-stripping and energy-efficient light bulbs.

Seven real estate agents and a member of the San Leandro Chamber of Commerce spoke against the point-of-sale provision at Monday's council meeting, while two speakers spoke in favor of adopting the plan as it had been proposed.

Sierra Club representative Arthur Boone also urged the council to take creative action to reduce greenhouse gases, such as planting 10,000 trees.

The real estate agents argued that the point-of-sale provision would raise home prices and both lower and complicate sales during a foreclosure crisis in the city. Instead, they asked the council to provide the public with education on energy efficiency rather than impose mandatory action.

David Stark of the Bay East Association of Realtors told the council that he supported the Climate Action Plan, except for three words: point-of-sale. He said not only would those words decrease sales, they would cost the city revenue because of the cost of enforcement.

Janet Palma, a real estate agent who lives in town, accused the agents of engaging in "fear tactics" and said requiring such things as weatherstripping, insulation and low-flow shower heads was inexpensive and not a burden.

The council voted unanimously to approve the plan, but with revisions that replaced the point-of-sale requirements with recommended standards designed to facilitate reductions in energy use.

"It was an important milestone for the city," senior planner Sally Barros said of the approval. "It's a good thing to have as we move into the new decade."

The Climate Action Plan was produced with \$40,000 in funding from a grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and matching funds from the city.

With the plan approved, the city now will move into the implementation stage. Barros said costs of implementation mostly would be funded through grants from the state and federal government.

She said one of the first steps in implementation will be do-it-yourself classes on how to make homes energy efficient, to be offered to city residents possibly in the summer. Low-interest loans for conducting energy audits of homes also will be made available, possibly by summer, Barros said.

Mercury pollution increases in Illinois

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Mon., Dec. 28, 2009

CHICAGO—Mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants is increasing in Illinois—despite a decline in such pollution nationwide.

That's according to a Chicago Tribune analysis of newly released federal data on industrial pollution. The analysis found that the amount of mercury blown into the air by Illinois' coal plants increased by 7 percent last year. Mercury emissions from all U.S. power plants declined by 4 percent.

The Tribune reports that Michigan was the only state with a larger increase, while Texas tied Illinois for second.

In the Chicago area, mercury emissions rose at three coal-fired power plants while it dropped at two others. Midwest Generation owns all five plants. Company spokesman Doug McFarlan says pollution should drop overall this year because of the mercury-scrubbing equipment Midwest Generation has installed.

Animal welfare victories prompt farmers' PR moves

By Tracie Cone, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, USA Today and other papers, Fri., Dec. 25, 2009

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—Consumers have been led for years to believe California cows are happy, which is why many were sickened when images surfaced of a washed-up milker, too weak to stagger to slaughter, rolled, pushed and run over by a forklift operator.

The suffering cow covertly taped by the Humane Society of the U.S. prompted the biggest beef recall in U.S. history and contributed to sweeping legislation over the past 13 months designed to improve the lives of farm animals. But more important for farmers, it awakened the masses to the stark reality for many animals raised for food.

This October, as the animal protection organization taped workers at a Vermont veal slaughterhouse kicking and shocking day-old calves, the National Milk Producers Federation began urging dairy operators to participate in a new standard-of-care program it is launching in January.

The federation figures self-imposed regulations are better than having the Humane Society of the U.S. force them on the industry through referendums like the one it championed in California that banned cramped cages for chickens, pigs and veal calves.

"Clearly the animal rights community is much more emboldened and aggressive than they have been in the past," said federation spokesman Chris Galen. "We need to play offense."

The protocols in the National Dairy Farm Program are a check list for everything from providing clean drinking water, to foot care to euthanasia. The idea is that milk processors whose dairy operators are shown to follow the guidelines will be able to assure restaurants and supermarket chains that their products are cruelty free, something consumers are becoming conditioned to demand.

After watching the Humane Society shepherd laws in six states to keep animals out of cramped cages, dairy marketing officials are preparing for scrutiny. They believe the Humane Society-led ban this year on tail docking at dairies in California, the nation's No. 1 dairy state, signaled a new focus on the milk industry.

"All of these things are harbingers of a different environment," Galen said. "A whole variety of things are changing in society."

That change has come over several years on multiple fronts: food movements that encourage consumers to connect with local farmers; authors such as Michael Pollan who write about the politics and processes of factory farming and food safety issues; and a Humane Society president, Wayne Pacelle, who believes that the collective level of suffering among the nation's 10 billion farm animals exceeds all others.

The organization stops short of calling for the elimination of factory farms. "It's not a matter of creating Old McDonald's-type conditions," said Paul Shapiro, who heads the nonprofit's End Factory Farming campaign. "Our goal is to reduce the suffering these animals endure."

California's Proposition 2, the 2008 ballot initiative that by 2015 will free egg-laying chickens from their cages, marked the animal protection group's most public and successful foray from its historic campaigns to stop the clubbing of baby seals in Canada and dog fighting and puppy mills in the U.S.

The landslide victory came despite threats of higher prices—anywhere from a penny an egg more to 25 percent more per carton.

The animal welfare group has convinced some of the country's largest users—fast food restaurants such as Wendy's, Burger King, Starbucks and Dennys, and retailers such as Safeway and Costco—to make at least a gradual switch to cage-free eggs. Red Robin will go totally cage free by the end of 2010.

When the International House of Pancakes refused in September, the Humane Society unleashed 11 million letter-writing members and recorded a commercial with HBO's Bill Maher, who dubbed the California-based chain the "International House of Pain." By December, IHOP promised to "begin testing" the use of cage-free eggs.

A staff of 30 attorneys—up from three when Wayne Pacelle took the helm five years ago—file lawsuits against factory farming operations they believe operate outside of the law on everything from pollution to potential price fixing.

In an effort to make factory farming less appealing, they petitioned the EPA in September to force emissions from the manure at confined animals operations such as dairies to comply with the Clean Air Act.

The clout amassed by the organization with a \$157 million annual budget means it sometimes can score victories without mounting a fight. In Michigan, lawmakers and the agriculture industry agreed this year to Prop 2-type legislation when the Humane Society threatened a statewide initiative. Maine passed a similar bill. And in March, the Obama Administration outlawed the using of downer cows for food, a direct result of the cow and the forklift.

The society now is gearing up in Ohio for a November 2010 initiative similar to Prop 2. Pacelle said the agriculture industry "dug in its heels" and decided to fight rather than negotiate.

Until now, farmers have been on the defensive, arguing in costly elections that they are not as they have been portrayed, and that the videos showing abuse are isolated incidents.

Then in October United Egg Producers paid for journalists from across the country to travel to Colorado to tour an egg farm and discuss post-Prop 2 legislation and "the ethics of large scale animal agriculture."

Dairymen also aren't waiting for the Humane Society's next move.

In November, the California Milk Advisory Board released 15 mini-documentaries on its Web site, seen 95,000 times so far, showing the lives of farmers. As the sun rises, multigenerational dairymen in idyllic settings talk about the affection they have for cows and the family members with whom they work.

"Each one is ... dispelling the myth that California farms are run by cold, uncaring 'corporations,'" said Michael Freeman, the board's vice president of advertising.

Mexico wants binding climate accord at 2010 summit

The Associated Press

In the Washington Post, Thurs., Dec. 24, 2009

MEXICO CITY -- Mexico will push for a binding international agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions when it hosts the next climate change summit in Mexico City in the coming year.

Mexico seeks to accomplish what the recent Copenhagen conference failed to do - get developed and poorer nations to agree to a 50 percent emissions cut by 2050, as compared to 2000 levels, according to a statement issued by the Environment Department Thursday.

A historic U.N. climate conference ended earlier this month with only a nonbinding accord - after two weeks of debate and frustration - that was short on concrete steps against global warming.

The agreement brokered by U.S. President Barack Obama with China and others set up the first significant program of climate aid to poorer nations. Although it urged deeper cuts in emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases blamed for global warming, it did not require them.

Critics are now calling the accord window dressing to cover deep divisions between China and the U.S. and poor and developed countries and say that the conference was a failure.

Mexico's statement Thursday did not say how it would resolve the fractious debate and acknowledged it is "a big challenge for the country." A formal date for the 2010 conference has yet to be set.

Mexico has long cast itself as a bridge between developed nations - it is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - and smaller, poorer countries.

The Mexican government says environmental degradation, pollution and consumption of nonrenewable resources costs the country about 7.8 percent of its economic output annually.

Air pollution, water depletion, deforestation cost the country 872 billion pesos (\$67.6 billion) in 2007, the most recent year for which data was available, according to a report published Thursday by the National Statistics, Geography and Information Institute.

The country's GDP was about 11.17 billion pesos (\$866 million) in 2007.

The biggest costs involved air pollution (about 4.5 percent of GDP) and oil and gas consumption, equivalent to about 1.5 percent of GDP.

The biggest sources of pollution and energy consumption came from households, transportation, mining and agriculture.

Mexico spent only about 0.7 of its GDP to offset the environmental costs through conservation, reducing emissions and other measures, and the department said such spending would have to be almost 10 times greater to truly affect the damage.

EPA levies \$3M in fines in 2009 in Northwest

Capital Press, Thurs., Dec. 24, 2009

BOISE, Idaho (AP) -- Companies, state agencies and cities in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington agreed to spend nearly \$75 million to clean up or control pollution during fiscal year 2009, an increase of nearly \$20 million from 2008.

Lauris Davies, the Environmental Protection Agency's deputy director of compliance and enforcement in Seattle, released figures Wednesday for the four states.

Companies and state agencies in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska paid just over \$3 million in penalties.

The totals went down slightly when compared to the past two years. Total penalties were \$3.1 million last year and \$4.1 million in 2007.

The EPA said nationwide, companies violating environmental laws will spend more than \$5 billion to reduce pollution, down from a record \$11 billion last year. The companies paid \$90.1 million in penalties.

Where There's Smoke ... There's a Trade-In

By Abby Goodnough, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Thursday, Dec. 24, 2009

KEENE, N.H. — The wood stove was blazing in Rosemary Urato's living room on Christmas Eve, giving off a hypnotic glow and only a hint of smoky smell. It is brand new and cleaner than its predecessor, which was dispatched to a scrapyards last month.

There it joined dozens of others — sooty Tempwoods and All Nighters, squat Vermont Castings and Fishers etched with pines — recently discarded by Keene residents. In return, the state gave the residents \$1,000 toward the cost of a new stove that meets current emissions requirements.

"The old one was a little scary," said Steve Perkins, Ms. Urato's landlord.

A spin on the federal Cash for Clunkers program, which helped people trade gas guzzlers for more efficient vehicles, the program is a small step toward clearing the air in rural New England, a tradition-bound region that has clung to its wood stoves for sentimental reasons even as much of the country has declared them passé. It aims to replace 100 old stoves in Keene, population 23,000, by February.

Because the town sits in a valley, fine-particle pollution — the kind that wood smoke creates — gets trapped near the ground on cold, calm days. An air monitor regularly detects worrisome levels that could ultimately violate federal standards, triggering tough restrictions on wood burning.

Such restrictions could extend to periodic bans on burning wood or manufactured logs in fireplaces, too, as the San Francisco Bay Area has done. The agency that monitors air quality there said it would ban wood fires on Christmas because of predictions for cold, still weather. Residents who want to watch a burning Yule log will have to resort to television.

Keene is among some 35 communities nationwide that have offered exchange programs in recent years, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which estimates that more than 7,500 wood stoves and fireplaces have been replaced as a result.

In Keene, the cash-for-wood-clunkers program has drawn about 70 takers, and, among some residents, a flinty response — and a sense that they know better than bureaucrats, whom some suspect of exaggerating the risk posed by old stoves.

Deb Ferguson, a real estate agent who said she burned four cords of wood each winter in her old Tempwood stove, went to a meeting about the program but it left her wary.

"Don't get me wrong — I love a good coupon," Ms. Ferguson said, sitting at her kitchen table in a toasty home across from a horse farm. "But there's too much government bureaucracy around it."

In particular, she said she doubted one thing officials at the meeting said: that an old stove can emit as much pollution as seven diesel buses.

"I was like, 'How the heck do you know that?'" Ms. Ferguson said. "There are days when I'll go outside and say, 'That smells horrible,' but honestly I think there are a lot of bigger trees they should be barking up."

In Northern California, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District has relied on neighbors to report violators, as well as the so-called fireplace police — teams of inspectors who fan across the region on ban days looking for chimney smoke. People caught burning wood get a warning for the first violation and a \$400 fine for the second. Last winter, the district got more than 1,400 complaints from the nine counties it monitors.

There are some 10 million wood stoves in use in the United States, according to the E.P.A., and while the agency has set new emissions limits for those made after 1990, most are older.

Those stoves use more wood and emit up to 10 times more particle pollution than newer ones, according to the E.P.A.

In California, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District has imposed wood-burning bans on 14 days so far since November 2008. People who rely exclusively on wood heat are exempt, but one of them, Sandy Clark of Woodacre, Calif., said she felt singled out nonetheless.

“I get nasty notes from someone here in town on my woodpile,” Mrs. Clark, 65, said. “There is one woman who walks up and down the street looking for smoke in people’s chimneys. She has her own spies — kids and other women who walk around with notebooks, looking for smoke.”

In Vermont, more than 200 wood stoves were turned in this year under a program that provided vouchers worth \$450, said Heidi Hales, the state official who oversaw it.

A program, in Libby, Mont., helped replace more than 1,000 old stoves from 2005 to 2007. Afterward, a study by the University of Montana found that outdoor particulate pollution decreased by 30 percent and indoor pollution by 70 percent.

A climate-change bill before Congress would authorize \$20 million over five years for a national wood stove exchange program, but the bill’s fate is uncertain.

In the meantime, said Alison Simcox, who studies air quality for the New England region of the E.P.A., the economic downturn has kept such programs from spreading at the state and county level. “Everybody likes the idea,” Ms. Simcox said. “But we’re not going to see a lot of it with the recession.”

Gary Goodemote, one of four stove dealers participating in the Keene exchange program, said substitutes cost from \$1,500 for the most basic new stove to \$4,000 for top-of-the-line pellet stoves, which burn compressed wood pellets and are cleaner.

Mr. Goodemote said that although oil prices had dropped this year, many homeowners were still buying stoves out of fear that prices would spike again.

New Englanders, he said, treat their old stoves like cherished friends.

And, he added, “they can’t imagine their old friend going onto the scrap heap.”

For Caring Consumers, the Gift of Carbon Dioxide

By Mireya Navarro, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Thursday, Dec. 24, 2009

What says holiday cheer better than a ton of carbon dioxide?

Rebecca Young of Mountain View, Calif., recently opened her mail to find a gift from an old friend in New York City.

“Carbon reduction certificate,” it read. It is good for three tons of carbon emissions that will be “retired” in her name so that no power plant will ever release them into the atmosphere.

To some people, the certificate may be as welcome as a lump of coal. But Ms. Young, a marketing manager for the environmental Web site Carew.com, was delighted.

“I don’t need stuff,” said Ms. Young, 37, the mother of 3-year-old twins. “And as someone who cares about the environment, I thought it was a very kind gesture. It obviously showed that he knew me.”

Carbon reduction certificates are the latest hot eco-gift, suitable for the environmentally aware, hard-to-shop-for loved one who already has an adopted humpback whale or some symbolic rainforest acreage.

They are sold by the Adirondack Council, a nonprofit group that watches over New York's 9,300-square-mile Adirondack Park and sells \$25 certificates for carbon emissions that it obtained at carbon trading auctions.

The auctions are held four times a year by the only cap and trade program for carbon dioxide operating in the country, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Popularly known as RGGI (pronounced Reggie), the program sets a ceiling on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants in New York and nine other Northeastern states to combat global warming. (Carbon dioxide is the dominant heat-trapping gas linked to climate change.)

Under the state-regulated system, a utility must buy and hold permits, or "allowances" — one per ton of carbon dioxide — that are equal to its monitored emissions. It can resell any allowances it doesn't need when it lowers its emissions, or buy leftover ones from other companies if it exceeds its cap. The auctions where allowances are bought and sold are open to the public and require a minimum purchase of 1,000 allowances. The price fluctuates from about \$2 to \$3.50 apiece.

Last year, the Adirondack Council began bidding at the auctions and selling certificates for the allowances it retired from the market. Each certificate represents three allowances and sells for \$25 through the council's Web site at www.adirondackcouncil.org.

Unlike a so-called carbon offset, the group said, the carbon certificate is a reliable way to counter emissions.

In purchasing an offset, a person pays a fee to cancel out the emissions generated by, say, air travel. The money, in theory, goes to a program that reduces emissions elsewhere by using measures like tree planting. But there is often no way to verify whether a tree was planted, much less whether emissions were reduced.

When a consumer buys a carbon certificate, said John F. Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondacks Council, "you know you're preventing three tons of smokestack pollution."

Still, even some people buying the carbon certificates are not entirely sold on cap-and-trade programs as the best mechanism for curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

Dawn Rawls of Del Mar, Calif., who had just purchased some certificates as Christmas gifts for relatives, said the payment approach "doesn't emphasize enough that we have to work harder to reduce our carbon footprint."

This is the second year that the Adirondack Council has promoted the certificates for the holidays. It is believed to be the nation's only organization routinely "retiring" carbon allowances, albeit in small amounts — 10,000 one-ton allowances so far out of 170 million that have been traded at the RGGI auctions, which began in the fall of 2008.

The certificates are akin to the sulfur dioxide allowances that several nonprofit organizations around the country started buying in the 1990s from the federal acid rain program. Alan Chartock, president and chief executive of WAMC Northeast Public Radio in Albany, said his station offered 600 carbon certificates donated by the council for a minimum of \$100 per certificate during a fund drive earlier this year.

He said he was "astounded" by the response. "We were inundated with telephone calls," he said. "Some people wanted one for each grandchild."

Mr. Chartock said the certificates drew donations of up to \$1,000 each and were just as popular as conventional items like CD recordings of interviews with the singers James Taylor and Pete Seeger. (The station received pledges for another 278 carbon dioxide certificates during a second fund-raiser in the summer.)

"The appeal is fear," he said. "People are really concerned about what's happening in the planet."

But are givers concerned that the gift could be misinterpreted or even offend someone? That the environmental message relayed is not so much "Because you care," as, "Here, to make up for your big fat carbon footprint"?

"If it helps any, I also sent her a box of maple candy from a small farm in the Adirondacks," said Joseph Sanlei, who mailed the certificate to Ms. Young in California.

Mr. Sanlei, an anthropologist and auxiliary sergeant with the New York Police Department, said that carbon dioxide is a highly appropriate gift for Ms. Young, who attended Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. "I'm sure she hopes that the children inherit a better world," he said.

And as a bonus, he said, "I didn't have to explain it."

In Del Mar, Mrs. Rawls was filling stockings this week with eight carbon certificates she had bought.

She said her two grown daughters have grown accustomed to their parents' environmental and philanthropic gifts. Over the years, she said, she has given them retired sulfur dioxide allowances, acres of threatened rainforest adopted on their behalf and, as the main present, donations to a cause or charity of their choice.

"They're all self-sufficient now, so we figure that if they need something, they'll buy it for themselves," Mrs. Rawls said.

The apples do not fall far from the tree. Her daughters' gifts to her, which have already arrived, are a favorite fruitcake that will be eaten rather than disposed of and a wreath of living succulent flora that Mrs. Rawls planned to replant.

[Sacramento Bee Editorial, Mon., Dec. 28, 2009](#)

Can green goals coexist in desert?

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers set an ambitious goal for California to produce 33 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources by 2020.

With more than 20 million acres of desert, California has tremendous potential for solar and wind energy. To meet the "33 by 2020 goal," the California Energy Commission estimates that 100,000 to 160,000 acres of desert will be needed to build utility-scale projects.

The challenge will be to find places that don't undermine this great natural resource - with sand dunes, volcanic craters, mountain ranges and extraordinary wildlife (including desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and fringe-toed lizards) and plant diversity (including Joshua tree forests and cactus gardens).

Is it possible to develop renewable energy and preserve natural values in the California desert? Yes, but the details have divided environmentalists and others with stakes in the debate.

Recently, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., jumped into the fray. The bulk of California desert - 80 percent - is under federal control, managed primarily by the Bureau of Land Management. Cooperation between the federal government and the state is critical in identifying conservation areas and development areas.

In a March 3 letter, Feinstein wrote that while she strongly supports renewable energy, "many of the sites now being considered for leases are completely inappropriate and will lead to the wholesale destruction of some of the most pristine areas in the desert."

That was a game changer. She drafted a bill that would create two national monuments in the triangle between the existing Mojave National Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park. In its original form, it would have halted 19 solar projects.

After meeting with various stakeholders, however, she changed the boundaries.

Feinstein believes that creation of a 941,000-acre Mojave Trails National Monument and a 134,000-acre Sand to Snow National Monument would halt development of only five solar projects. Under her bill, solar developers who lost proposals would get "right of first refusal" to viable BLM sites. Fifty solar-development proposals currently in the pipeline would be unaffected.

Her bill also requires the evaluation of 3 million acres of military land in the California desert for potential solar development. That's a move in the right direction.

The reality is that solar plants are land-intensive. A 550 megawatt solar plant, generating power for 400,000 homes, would require bulldozing 6,000 acres. Siting is important.

Feinstein's bill still can be fine-tuned. It has had the good effect of speeding up a federal state process to map areas for renewable project development and areas for long-term natural resource conservation - which should be a "win-win" for energy and conservation. Ironically, by taking a million acres of land off the table, Feinstein has stepped up action to find viable sites. To meet the "33 by 2020" goal, speed is of the essence.

[Sacramento Bee Commentary, Wed., Dec. 26, 2009](#)

Caltrans works hard to stay efficient

I would like to clarify a few points made in "Caltrans ripped for idle vehicles" (Page A1, Dec. 19) regarding Caltrans vehicles expenditures.

Caltrans runs its own assembly shop in Sacramento to provide the trucks and other heavy equipment needed to maintain the state's nearly 15,000 miles of highway. We have found that it is more cost-effective to order the chassis and other components needed to assemble the trucks than to order them completely assembled from a manufacturer.

By managing our own production facility, we can ensure that the components comply with the same specifications whether the vehicle will be used in Redding or San Diego.

The department ensures that vehicles are in place when needed at the lowest cost possible to the taxpayers. This includes negotiating warranties that do not start until the vehicles go into service, not when they are delivered to our lot. However, factors outside of our control, such as delays in shipping from manufacturers, can set back our production schedule.

As the state sought to reduce its production of greenhouse gases, new standards were set for the emissions of state vehicles. To ensure that Caltrans met the Dec. 31 implementation deadline, the department shifted resources to retrofit vehicles with new pollution-control devices to comply with the state's new air regulations. This decision was aimed at not only reducing emissions but also complying with the law and avoiding the \$1,000-per-day fine for not meeting the retrofit deadline.

Caltrans has done its best to keep up with the demanding production schedule. Over the last two years, Caltrans workers have managed to assemble and ship more than 2,200 vehicles across the state, vehicles that the public relies on the most. These are the snowplows that clear the highway after a winter storm and the vehicles that are designed to protect highway workers while they work to maintain roadways – usually inches from speeding traffic.

Also, Caltrans is reducing its fleet by another 426 vehicles.

Can Caltrans work harder to be even better stewards of taxpayer money? The answer is a resounding "yes."

The department will move the idle vehicles into service. In light of an ever-challenging state budget situation, Caltrans will also continue to review its expenditures in other areas, including its participation at national conferences, to ensure that any cost to the taxpayers will not outweigh the financial returns to the state.

Randy Iwasaki is the director of Caltrans.

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times, Sat., Dec. 26, 2009:](#)

Ban wood burning

Your editorial, "Bay Area air regulators should drop mandatory no-burn night," posted Dec. 15, rails against mandatory no-burn orders on winter Spare the Air days but misses the central point.

Your emphasis should be on the health consequences of wood burning in the densely-populated Bay Area. If you really cared about your readers and Bay Area citizens, you would be advocating for a complete ban on wood burning fireplaces and stoves, with an exception for stoves that are the sole source of home heat.

Instead of a snarky compulsory vs. voluntary editorial, you would discuss the health consequences of breathing smoke and the benefit to all of eliminating wood burning sourced pollution.

The current regulation may be the regulatory equivalent of a Rube Goldberg contraption, but this is because air board did not make protecting health the number one consideration. You would be doing a real public service to urge the board to do the right thing for our health and ban wood burning in the Bay Area.

Carol Evans, Walnut Creek

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times. Sun., Dec. 27, 2009:](#)

No "progress"

In that no progress was made in Copenhagen, great progress was made for the American people. Now that the "inconvenient truth" of global warming has been exposed for the rip-off that it is, we won't have to borrow more money from China to pay off Gabon or Zimbabwe. Great progress indeed.

While silly Bay Area Air Quality board members debate our fireplaces and local land use issues, the threads continue to unravel. The solution is, of course, to disband all of these onerous agencies once and for all.

They occupy our toilets, light sockets, barbecues and hearths in a never ending quest for disruptive power and unconstitutional infringements on our rights.

Ken Yeager wants more public input, but knows the outcomes in advance. They will never yield to the will of the people in civil discourse, because they are fascists to the core.

The Copenhagen room was filled with Marxists hell bent on the collapse of the United States. We seem to have our own homegrown versions working on the California Global Warming Solutions Act. Its very title proves what silly fools they are.

Bob Armstrong, Clayton

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Mon., Dec. 28, 2009:](#)

Rules are still harsh

The Bee's headline Dec. 16 declared "Air District's commute plan drops fines -- Valley air officials won't penalize businesses." It was the most erroneous headline since Chicago Daily Tribune heralded "Dewey Defeats Truman!"

Under the new rule, any employer with 100 employees must register with the District in 180 days or face a \$1,000 per day fine. If an employee-commute plan is twice rejected, or an employer fails to compile a "mandatory employee commute survey," it's a potential \$10,000 per day fine. These fine levels aren't imaginary, they are statutory.

The district claimed our local employers were lucky to not face the fines applied in Los Angeles. An LA employer pays \$60 per employee to avoid that district's commute rule. Here, an employer of 100 faces a \$7,000 fine if they are a week late in their filings. It's a \$10,000 per day fine if they are negligent. Do the math and decide which air district is harsher on its employers.

The following day, The Bee reported that the district adopted the commute rules. It also reported that Fresno ranked second to the last in a ranking of 101 regions that are "best cities for business." Perhaps there's a connection.

Jeff Reid, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sun., Dec. 27, 2009:](#)

Cemex for cleaner air?

As the front-page picture on Dec. 15 showed, the High Sierra stood out in sharp relief in the clear air after the rain. I was pleased to read in another publication that the proposed aggregate mine on Jesse Morrow Mountain, with the blasting, hauling and crushing, will actually reduce air pollution and presumably gift us with many more such beautiful views.

Way to go Cemex!

Kay Barnes, Sanger