

UPDATE: Lion Fire in Sequoia spreads to 16,000 acres; containment at 15 percent

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, July 28, 2011

Smoke from the 16,350-acre Lion Fire can be seen as far away as the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada and as close as the Tulare County foothills. The wildland fire is being managed as an ecological burn to reduce 90-year-old forest debris, said Denise Alonzo, spokeswoman for the Sequoia National Forest.

As of Thursday morning, containment was at 15 percent.

"This is in the back country," Alonzo said. "There are no roads, no designated campgrounds."

The Sequoia National Forest and Sequoia National Park are working together to prevent future out-of-control wildfires and protect resources, she said.

The Lion Fire, which began July 8 near Lion Meadow in the Golden Trout Wilderness part of the Sequoia National Forest, reached Sequoia National Park on Monday in the backcountry of Mineral King, south of Farewell Gap.

Fire containment began Tuesday, said Deb Sweizer, fire information officer. The Lion Fire was 10 percent contained Wednesday morning with 160 firefighters and two helicopters working on the fire.

By not using aerial flame retardants and not dipping into some water sources, officials are protecting Golden trout, Mountain yellow-legged frogs and Spotted owls, she said.

On Tuesday, firefighters created fire breaks around the historic Quinn Patrol Cabin on Quinn's Peak near Soda Butte. The cabin built in 1906 was used by the United States Cavalry when Sequoia National Park was newly formed.

No buildings have burned, she said.

Fresno activist to lead air quality coalition

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Wed., July 27, 2011

Kevin Hall, who began a push to reform the Valley air board more than a decade ago, will now lead the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, group officials announced Wednesday.

Hall, 52, of Fresno will take over Monday as executive director of the air advocacy coalition, which includes 70 community, medical, environmental and health groups. He replaces Catherine Garoupa White, who is leaving to attend graduate school. She led the organization for two years.

The coalition, which Hall helped create in 2003, played a role in passing a state law that added a medical health expert and a scientist to the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Activists said the board's members – county supervisors and city council members – favored businesses and needed other voices to represent the public.

Hall moved beyond air-quality work, becoming a political organizer for Service International Employees Union's United Health Care Workers-West and later a political consultant.

He said that in his new role with the coalition he will continue to push for air district governing board members who recognize climate change as a challenge: "We must consider a new model of governance to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions – they're simply not up to the task."

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air district, said the coalition made a good choice in appointing Hall.

"Although Mr. Hall has been absent from the air-quality scene, we hope his appointment will promote a more strategic approach to air-quality activism in the Valley," he said.

Poll: Californians favor more alternative energy

By Kelly Zito, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, July 28, 2011

Eight in 10 Californians favor tougher fuel efficiency standards for cars, federal funding for solar and wind power and curbs on heat-trapping emissions from factories and power plants, a new public opinion poll has found.

And even with the anemic economy, most state residents say policymakers must act now to head off the more damaging impacts of climate change.

"At a time when the economy continues to be a question mark for the average Californian, they remain steadfast in their belief that the state needs to be a leader in climate change policy and in changing the way we use energy," said Mark Baldassare, president and chief executive of the Public Policy Institute of California.

The San Francisco think tank on Wednesday released its 11th annual statewide survey on Californians' attitudes about the environment. The findings, gleaned from 2,500 phone interviews between July 5 and July 19, largely tracked those of previous years, with one exception: Support for building nuclear power plants in California dropped 14 points since last summer, to 30 percent. Researchers say the recent nuclear crisis in Japan pushed the support level to its lowest since the institute began asking the question.

Consistent views

On most other issues tied to energy and the environment, Californians' views remained consistent.

A majority - 61 percent - say the effects of climate change are already being felt in their communities, forcing the need for state and federal actions to slash greenhouse gases. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points.

Among the most popular tactics are increasing gas mileage, with 84 percent in favor; increasing government spending on renewable energy sources, with 80 percent in favor; and further regulation of air pollution from refineries, power plants and manufacturing facilities, with 79 percent in favor.

Groups that promote such policies see a crystal clear mandate in the report's figures.

Wake-up call

"This poll says that Californians want to move forward with clean energy," said Dan Jacobson, legislative director for Environment California in Sacramento. "This should be a wake-up call for state legislators who should be moving as fast as humanly possible on clean energy and clean air."

Indeed, the study also found that 2 in 3 residents stand behind California's largest and most ambitious climate-change policy to date, AB32. Passed in 2006, the law requires the state to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

That said, voters were split on the best way to reach that goal. Fifty-four percent of respondents support a cap-and-trade system, in which the state would set a ceiling on the greenhouse gases that can be discharged, and the emitters would buy and sell the rights to release the gases. The policy would also set a hard, declining limit on the total emissions that could be produced.

On the other hand, 60 percent favor a straight-out carbon tax, a fee levied on companies that produce greenhouse gases. The idea there is to deter emitters with higher expenses.

Renewable sources

Another tool in the state's arsenal - increasing the proportion of energy supply from renewable sources, such as wind, solar and geothermal - also did well in the poll, with 77 percent in favor. That support dropped somewhat, however, when interviewers asked whether renewable energy is worth higher electricity bills. Just under half, 46 percent, favor alternative energy sources if it means paying more.

To some of the state's biggest manufacturers, that statistic only hints at the wider economic consequences of shifting to renewable energy sources, which they say are far more expensive than traditional fuels such as coal and natural gas.

"California already has far more renewable power than any other state in the country," said Gino DiCaro, spokesman for the California Manufacturers and Technology Association. "There's no reason to drive our energy rates even higher and make California businesses less competitive and increase the costs of consumer goods."

Poll: Support drops for nuclear power in Calif.

By Don Thompson, Associated Press

In the San Diego Tribune & other papers Wed., July 27, 2011

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Californians' support for building more nuclear power plants has eroded since Japan's nuclear crisis, with less than one-third of adults now in favor, according to a poll released Wednesday.

The survey by the Public Policy Institute of California found 65 percent of adults oppose more nuclear plants while 30 percent are in favor. The number supporting more nuclear power dropped 14 percentage points from the same poll a year ago and marks the lowest level of support since the institute began asking the question in 2001.

Meanwhile, support for oil drilling off California's coast increased 12 percentage points in the last year as gasoline prices rose and memories have dimmed of the disastrous BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Of those surveyed, 46 percent backed more offshore drilling, up from 34 percent a year ago when workers finally capped the Gulf oil well.

The poll found a partisan and geographic split, with twice as many Republicans as Democrats in favor of drilling. Fifty-four percent of inland residents supported seeking more offshore oil, compared with 42 percent who live along the coast.

"A year has passed, and attention has now focused on the failure of the nuclear power plant and less attention on the offshore oil problems," said Mark Baldassare, the institute's president and

chief executive officer. "We're talking about energy proposals that can swing within a range, and are subject to a wide partisan divide in which Democrats are much more likely to oppose than Republicans."

By comparison, Baldassare said support for increasing renewable energy and fuel-efficiency standards for automobiles has remained consistently high across political, regional and demographic boundaries.

Overall, the poll found 84 percent supported raising fuel economy standards, including 90 percent of Democrats, 81 percent of independents and 76 percent of Republicans.

Similarly, 80 percent backed more federal money to develop renewable energy from the sun, wind and hydrogen, with support spanning party, regional and demographic lines.

Nearly as many - 77 percent - favored California's requirement that one-third of the state's electric power come from renewable sources by 2020. But support dropped to 46 percent when residents were asked if they would still be in favor if it meant an increase in their electricity bills.

"I think that reflects an underlying concern about the economy today and people's financial condition," Baldassare said.

Despite respondents' financial concerns, a majority said the state should not delay its efforts on developing renewable energy sources and believe doing so will create more jobs, he said.

The Public Policy Institute interviewed 2,504 California adults by telephone in six languages from July 5-19. The poll has a sampling error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points. Among its other findings:

- Most Californians believe climate change threatens the state's future, with 47 percent calling it a very serious threat and 28 percent viewing it as somewhat serious. But there is a partisan split, with 82 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of independents perceiving climate change to be a serious threat, compared with 45 percent of Republicans.

- 57 percent say the state should take its own steps to combat climate change instead of waiting for the federal government.

- 61 percent say the effects of climate change already are being felt, up 7 percentage points from a year ago but more in line with findings from earlier years. Another 22 percent say it will begin having an effect sometime in the future, while 12 percent say there will never be an impact.

- 58 percent think the state should act now to reduce emissions that promote global warming, while 38 percent say the state should wait until the economy improves; 47 percent say the state's efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions will create more jobs, while 23 percent say it will lead to job losses.

- Pollsters found a racial split about the perceived dangers of climate change. Fewer than half of whites were very worried, while blacks and Hispanics were more likely to be very concerned about each of the possible effects, including wildfire, drought and increased air pollution.

- Blacks and Hispanics also were more likely to perceive regional air pollution as a major problem and to see air quality as worse today than a decade ago.

The racial divide is partly a result of geography, Baldassare said. Air pollution remains California's paramount environmental problem, and it is most pronounced in Los Angeles and the Central Valley, home to many blacks and Latinos. It is also worst in industrial and agricultural areas that have a disproportionate minority population.