

Fresno Bee commentary, Wed., July 9, 2008:

PETER E. WEBER: Healthy living in San Joaquin Valley

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is launching a program this week that will give us all an opportunity to reconcile our concerns about the Valley's air quality with our willingness to do something about it.

The program is called Healthy Air Living. It's designed to encourage all of us to take actions that will improve the quality of air we breathe.

In a July 2007 report, The Public Policy Institute of California gave us some revealing survey data. While 35% of all Californians think regional air pollution is a big problem, that number jumps up to 56% for Valley residents and 64% for South Valley residents.

While 25% of Californians say regional air pollution is a very serious health threat, that number jumps up to 35% for Valley residents and 42% for South Valley residents.

Forty-six percent of Valley residents report that they or a family member suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems.

With this high level of concern, one would think Valley residents would be willing to take some personal responsibility to remedy the situation, but survey data shows that to be the exception rather than the rule. Our concerns seem to run just deep enough to cause us to point fingers at others, but not to look in the mirror.

It's true that diesel trucks are the largest source of emissions, but we could park every truck outside the Valley and still not get our emissions to acceptable levels.

We all have to do our part. Yet many of us still passionately resist the thought of higher density housing. Carpooling is unpopular with most Valley residents, as are most forms of mass transit. "That's not California living," is one of the refrains I often hear, "certainly not Valley living."

But think about it. What is it that we like about Valley living? We like the rural, small-town feel of our towns and cities; agriculture at our doorstep; the fact that we are not as congested as the state's north and south; the image of healthy outdoor living.

How do we prevent becoming the next San Fernando Valley? How do we absorb our projected growth without choking? What can we do to more closely reconcile the image of healthy outdoor living with reality? How do we preserve our rich agricultural land, knowing there are only five regions on earth that have the climate to produce the crops we grow?

The long-term answer is to fix our jobs to housing imbalances and find more efficient ways to use our land as well as more resource-efficient ways of moving goods and people. In the short term, we need to make accommodations that will help us get to the long term in better health than would otherwise be the case.

Before I get to that, let me say that the second refrain I hear often is that we don't want government to micromanage our lives -- tell us how big a lot we can live on, how to get to work or what kind of lawnmower to use. I'm sympathetic to that point of view, which is why I think it's important that we take the initiative ourselves. If enough of us make the right choices, we'll have a lot less government interference in our lives.

Healthy Air Living offers us a menu of ideas that we can choose to adopt ourselves -- and they're making it fun and potentially profitable. Go to www.healthyairliving.com and you'll find that you can participate in a drawing for a Toyota hybrid.

If you win, you'll be environmentally cool and, at today's gas prices, economically brilliant. The deal is that you have to sign a pledge to do a few things for at least one week in July. You can sign up as an individual, or as an employee of a participating business or member of a participating congregation.

Here's a sampling of some things you can do as an individual to qualify: Carpool to work at least three days for a week; avoid using gas-powered lawn equipment; walk your child to school; avoid drive-throughs. The list for individuals offers 25 "menu" ideas, and enables you to add your own ideas. The Web site has similar lists for businesses and congregations.

The notion is to get us to try some of these practices. Maybe they won't be as painful as we think, and hopefully they'll be habit-forming. They certainly will give us all an opportunity to reconcile our concerns about air quality with some helpful actions.

Peter E. Weber is the convener of the air quality work group with the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley.

Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Wednesday, July 9, 2008:

Make the daily ride safer for clean-air commuters

We're in the midst of Healthy Air Week, a seven-day recognition of the community's ongoing quest for healthy lungs and civic responsibility.

Among other things, Central Valley residents are being asked to consider carpooling, walking or biking to work.

Walking would seem the most ideal of those options, because it promotes physical fitness and requires no special equipment, and almost everyone is capable of giving it a shot. Sidewalks and crosswalks make walking to work reasonably safe, but distance makes it impractical for the vast majority.

That leaves bicycling as the best option for those interested in sparing the air and simultaneously improving their physical conditioning.

But the hazards and hassles of crosstown cycling can be discouraging. Healthy Air Week seems like a good time for local government to look at major cycling commute routes and try to improve their safety and convenience.

A few suggestions:

- **Make stoplights bike-friendly.** Tweak traffic signals so cyclists can trigger green lights more easily. Bakersfield has some intersections where the wire sensors imbedded in the pavement near intersections are not sensitive enough to detect a bike. To help trigger a green, cyclists should position their bikes directly over one of the saw cuts usually visible at these intersections. But if sensors don't seem to respond, alert the city via e-mail (traffic@ci.bakersfield.ca.us) or phone (326-3724).

Of course, cyclists can always punch the pedestrian crossing button if there's a nearby crosswalk, but that sometimes takes some maneuvering.

- **Sweep up the glass.** Road maintenance departments should remain vigilant in keeping bike lanes and road shoulders maintained and free of debris. Many times cyclists have to venture into the path of traffic to avoid riding through broken glass or hitting potholes.
- **Maximize visibility.** A few places on the Kern River bike path are downright dangerous. At the top of the list: The blind corner on the east side of the Highway 99 undercrossing, just west of Beach Park's skateboard park. Cyclists can't see what might be coming, and if a rider

strays over the center line, collisions can -- and do -- ensue. The westbound downhill adds speed to that dangerous equation. That spot, and a few others, can use safety mirrors.

- **Keep building bike lanes.** Narrow shoulders intimidate would-be cyclists. Cities must be willing to accommodate bikes as best they can by laying out generous bike lanes when they design roads, and they must be prepared to extend, enhance and beautify bike routes like the Kern River bike trail.
- **Educate the public.** The California Vehicle Code states that "Every person riding a bicycle upon a highway has all the rights and is subject to all the provisions applicable to the driver of a vehicle." But most bike commuters have experienced motorists who don't seem to know (or accept) that.

Cyclists must ride in the same direction as vehicular traffic, not the opposite direction. They must be prepared to move one lane to the left (cautiously) as they approach certain intersections in order to allow cars to make right turns -- and to protect themselves from right-turning cars. But not all motorists (or cyclists) understand those and other practices.

If local and regional authorities, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, are going to encourage lifestyle changes that promote healthy air, they must be willing to protect the individuals who are willing to try.

Do you have additional suggestions to promote clean-air commuting? E-mail us at opinion@bakersfield.com.

San Joaquin Valley heat short of forecast, but air still unhealthy

By ROSALIO AHUMADA and JOHN HOLLAND

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

There was plenty of oppressive heat Tuesday, but Stanislaus County residents and health officials caught a slight break when it fell short of the 110-degree forecast for the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

Modesto's high temperature reached 104 degrees, according to the Modesto Irrigation District. The heat index, which combines heat and humidity, made it feel a still-dangerous 107 degrees.

The same is expected today.

"We're still in the same area of the heat index as we were on Monday," said Gary Hinshaw, assistant director of Stanislaus County's emergency services. "The heat index hasn't gone into the extreme danger zone."

He said Stanislaus County emergency dispatchers didn't receive many calls for help related to the heat Tuesday, and "it appears most people have been taking care of themselves."

Also spared from problems were livestock and utility companies, although air quality was unhealthy or very unhealthy in most of the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

Stanislaus County's Office of Emergency Services will continue to monitor the heat the rest of the week as more of the same is expected through Saturday.

"We hope this weather breaks by then," said Hinshaw.

Weather service forecaster Karl Swanberg said the high was expected to reach 111 degrees at Modesto Airport today, but the haze of smoke covering the valley could reduce that number just a bit, as it did Tuesday.

"It's probably taken a degree or two off, depending on how much smoke you have," Swanberg said. "107 (the high at the airport) is hot, no matter how you slice it."

Hinshaw cautioned residents to be on alert today, and check on elderly neighbors and those who might be susceptible to extreme heat.

"They are on the front line," Hinshaw said of residents. "They know better than we do."

Cool air and bad air

Cooling centers throughout Stanislaus and Merced counties will be open today.

On Tuesday, about 60 people went to the cooling center at The Salvation Army day shelter at Ninth and D streets in Modesto, said Maj. Darvin Carpenter of The Salvation Army.

"Some stayed all day, some of them were there for just part of the day," Carpenter said. "Even though it's hot, (the cooling center) wasn't stuffed."

He said the center has plenty of space for anyone who wants to cool off with refreshments and snacks, and maybe enjoy a movie or TV.

Two elderly women went to the center because their air conditioning wasn't working, Carpenter said. The majority of people there were homeless, while others sought refuge in Modesto parks.

"I drove around about 12:30 p.m. today and I saw some homeless people laying in the shade under the trees," Carpenter said. "I just wanted to see where were they going if they weren't coming to the shelter."

For the second time since the wildfires began 2½ weeks ago, the air quality in Stanislaus County on Tuesday was in the very unhealthy range, and that's also the forecast for today. The huge amount of nitrogen oxide produced by the wildfires is creating harmful levels of ozone in the Northern San Joaquin Valley. Residents are advised to stay indoors.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is forecasting unhealthy air today in San Joaquin and Merced counties.

[The bad air led to cancellation of the air district's Bike to Work Day, which was scheduled for Modesto today](#) to highlight a clean commuting alternative. The activity, part of the Healthy Air Living events this week, could be rescheduled for later in the summer, the district said.

Breathe Easy

By Glenn Moore

Tracy Press, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

A blood red moon rose Monday night through the veil of smoke as seen from Grant Line Road. The photo was taken at 11:00 pm and by 11:30 the moon was almost completely shrouded by the low hanging smoke from wildfires burning through California. The ashen sky is expected to linger throughout the valley with the high temperatures. Glenn Moore/Tracy Press

While heat baked the Central Valley, fires from the coast and in Northern California continued to make healthy breathing a questionable affair.

According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the air in San Joaquin County was "unhealthy" Tuesday and will likely be so again today.

Fires burning in Big Sur and Butte County are major contributors to the hazy skies over Tracy and Mountain House, as firefighters continue the battle against blazes sparked by a dry lightning storm weeks ago.

Those who have asthma or other conditions that make them sensitive to dirty air are advised to curtail outdoor activities until conditions improve.

Dawn of a scorching week

Valley bakes under smoky, unhealthy air with no relief from triple-digit temps likely before Monday.

By Denny Boyles

The Fresno Bee Wed., July 9, 2008

A summer day in the Valley turned dangerous Tuesday as heat and smoke created unhealthy conditions that aren't likely to improve today.

A high of 109 prompted the opening of cooling centers in Fresno, Clovis and other Valley cities. With a forecast high of 109 again today, officials said the centers will likely open again.

The National Weather Service issued a heat advisory effective from 2 p.m. today until 8 p.m. Thursday. The warning said that the heat index -- which combines the air temperature and humidity readings -- could reach 110 in urban areas.

Temperature records for the date were broken in five cities Tuesday. Among them was Sacramento, where the temperature reached 108, breaking the previous high of 104 degrees set in 1997. Stockton recorded 105 and Modesto 107, both breaking records for July 8 set in 2006.

Extreme heat wasn't the only concern. Energy regulators were watching the forecasts closely, concerned that rising temperatures could translate into power shortages.

Officials from the Valley air district watched the forecasts as well and issued a health warning urging residents to consider the poor air quality before going outside. Shawn Ferreria, a senior air quality specialist, said the warning came as smoke from California wildfires drifted into the area.

"It's a double whammy," Ferreria said. "On top of the particulate matter, we are also having an ozone problem. Without these wildfires, we'd have some air quality issues, but not to this degree."

The air on Tuesday in Fresno was considered very unhealthy for all residents, with an Air Quality Index of 201, a category last seen June 27 when wildfires were burning across the state.

"You put all of those ingredients in the pot of air held in by our inversion layer, cook it in this heat and the result is this poor air," Ferreria said.

Ferreria said those with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctor's advice for dealing with episodes of poor air quality.

Officials at Community Medical Centers said they had not seen an unusual number of air-related illnesses.

But two people were hospitalized with heat-related illnesses Tuesday afternoon after an air conditioning compressor broke down at The Californian hotel on Van Ness Avenue in downtown Fresno, reducing cooling by 50% and raising temperatures inside the multistory building above 85 degrees.

City officials sent Fire Department personnel to assess the health of the 250 residents and set up a cooling center inside. An air-conditioned city bus was also dispatched to be used as a temporary cooling center outside the hotel.

As the temperatures rose, so did concerns that the electrical demand could outpace supplies.

Despite the soaring temperatures, California's power grid was able to handle the energy demand, said Kristina Osborn, a spokeswoman for the California Independent System Operator, the agency that monitors the state's power grid.

Electricity use peaked Tuesday afternoon at about 44,700 megawatts, short of the agency's projections and well short of the record set in the July 2006 heat wave. A megawatt is enough electricity for about 750 homes.

The grid monitor asked utility consumers to reduce power use in the late afternoon when air conditioners drive electricity use to the highest point of the day.

No blackouts were expected, but grid monitors are concerned that some transmission lines could be in danger from hundreds of wildfires burning across California or that a power plant could be forced to shut down unexpectedly.

The smoke is expected to linger through at least today, when the forecast calls for patchy smoke and heat, with a high of 109 and an overnight low of 79. Thursday's high also is expected to reach 109, with clearing skies and an overnight low of 76. On Friday, expect a possible high of 105.

Heather Heinks, a spokeswoman for the city of Fresno, said cooling centers would remain open at least through Thursday.

"The forecast is stifling," Heinks said. "Until that changes, the centers will remain open."

Tuesday was just the second official cooling center day of the year, Heinks said. On the first, June 20, 511 residents sought shelter from the heat.

Beat the heat

Record temperatures, smoky skies expected to smother Valley residents through the week

Sun-Star news services

Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

A summer day in the Valley turned dangerous on Tuesday as heat and smoke created unhealthy conditions that aren't likely to improve today.

Today was predicted to be even hotter throughout the Central Valley.

The National Weather Service issued a heat advisory effective from 2 p.m. today until 8 p.m. Thursday.

The warning said that the heat index -- which combines the air temperature and humidity readings -- could reach 110 in urban areas.

Officials from the Valley Air District watched the forecasts as well, and issued a health warning urging residents to consider the poor air quality before going outside.

Shawn Ferreria, a senior air quality specialist, said the warning came as smoke from California wildfires drifted into the area.

"It's a double whammy," Ferreria said. "On top of the particulate matter, we are also having an ozone problem. Without these wildfires, we'd have some air quality issues, but not to this degree."

The air on Tuesday was considered very unhealthy for all residents, with an Air Quality Index of 201, a category last seen on June 27 when wildfires were burning across the state.

"You put all of those ingredients in the pot of air held in by our inversion layer, cook it in this heat and the result is this poor air," Ferreria said.

Ferreria said those with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctor's advice for dealing with episodes of poor air quality.

Temperature records for the date were broken across the Valley on Tuesday. In Merced, the temperature reached 108, tying a record for the date set in 1921. Stockton recorded 105 and Modesto 107, both breaking records for July 8 set in 2006. The temperature in Fresno hit 109 Tuesday afternoon. In Sacramento the temperature reached 108, breaking the previous high of 104 degrees set in 1997.

Forecasters expect today's high in Merced to reach 108 degrees, peaking at 109 on Thursday. Air quality is expected to be in the unhealthy range. The UV index reading is expected to hit in the "very high" and "extreme" categories, meaning skin damage is likely for those exposed to the sun.

Despite the soaring temperatures, California's power grid was able to handle the energy demand, said Kristina Osborn, a spokeswoman for the California Independent System Operator, the agency that monitors the state's power grid.

Electricity use peaked Tuesday afternoon at about 44,700 megawatts, short of the agency's projections and well short of the record set in July 2006. A megawatt is enough electricity for about 750 homes.

The Independent System Operator asked utility consumers to continue reducing power use in the late afternoons, when air conditioners drive electricity use to the highest point of the day.

No blackouts were expected, but grid monitors are concerned that some transmission lines could be in danger from the hundreds of wildfires burning across California or that a power plant could be forced to shut down unexpectedly.

"If something breaks, that has the potential to really put us behind the eight ball," said Gregg Fishman, a spokesman for the Independent System Operator.

Smoke from the wildfires could help keep temperatures a few degrees lower in some areas, even as it increases health risks. At night, the smoke acts like a blanket, holding in the heat, said National Weather Service forecaster George Cline.

State agencies were prepared to open cooling centers if needed. State officials also were checking regularly for heat problems at hospitals and centers serving the elderly and those with disabilities.

Officials urged those unable to get to cooling centers to visit libraries or malls to stay cool.

No immediate health-related problems had been reported, said Tina Walker, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Emergency Services.

The Fresno Bee and Associated Press contributed to this story.

Visalia transit bus rides are free all day Friday

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, July 8, 2008

Area residents can ride free of charge on any fixed-route Visalia City Coach transit bus all day Friday [July 11] in a summertime "Try Transit Day," officials reported.

The effort is part of the overall Healthy Air Living Week, which started Monday and runs through Sunday. The sponsoring agency is the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

For information on Friday's free service, call 713-4532.

Visalia to offer free bus rides

BY GERALD CARROLL

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Sharon Youngblood of Visalia is looking forward to Friday's "Try Transit Day" program in which all fixed-route buses in the Visalia City Coach system can be ridden for free.

"Free? I had no idea. I'm ready for that," Youngblood, 58, said Monday as she awaited a connection at the Transit Center at Oak Avenue and Bridge Street. "More people should take the bus anyway."

The free bus rides will be offered 6:15 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday. "Try Transit" days also occur in May each year.

Ridership up

Youngblood, who does not own a car, said she has noticed that Visalia transit ridership has risen as gasoline prices have surged.

Riders also are being lured with fare reductions, including one paid for with a four-year grant. For six months new riders can get "Hop Passes" for \$15 instead

of the usual \$30.

"I just found out about a half-price deal for July and I'm taking advantage of that," Youngblood said.

Visalia City Councilwoman Amy Shuklian also is looking forward to Friday's free rides.

"It's a great opportunity for anyone who has never tried the bus," she said.

Project postponed

City officials also had planned to mark Healthy Air Living Week by replacing vandalism-damaged trees on Main Street. But high temperatures likely will postpone the activity for a few days, said Brian Kempf of the Urban Tree Foundation.

Cooling center now available at the Visalia Transit Center

BY DAVID CASTELLON

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, July 8, 2008

It isn't easy for Ruben Garcia to get to the Visalia Transit Center.

Medical problems force him to use a walker, and asthma aggravated by bad Valley air makes it slow going to get from the room he rents to downtown.

But with the mercury in Visalia hitting 105 degrees Monday, according to Accuweather, Garcia, 62, didn't want to be anywhere else - particularly in his room, which doesn't have air conditioning.

He was one of a steady stream of people who came Monday afternoon to the Transit Center, which Visalia officials designated Monday as the city's "cooling center."

What that means is anybody can go there and literally "chill out" in the air conditioned building to escape the heat, said Visalia Fire Department Battalion Chief Charlie Norman.

"Our criteria is 105 [degrees]. Anything over 105 or dangerously close to 105, that's when we open up," he said.

As such, the center likely will remain open as a cooling center for the next few days, as the high pressure system causing the state's heat wave is expected to stick around, said Dan Harty, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Hanford.

"It's just a very warm bubble of air over us," he said Monday. "It's moving in as we speak, and it's going to be strengthening mid-week."

That means hotter temperatures that could hit 108 degrees on Wednesday and not drop below 102 until after Saturday, according to Accuweather forecasts.

Later in the week, city officials will decide how long to keep the Transit Center open as a cooling center, Norman said.

As for the heat wave, this is no record setter, Harty said. "It is the Valley and it is July, and it normally gets pretty hot."

And while "normal" is around the mid-90s, "We typically have days above a hundred," he said.

Harty added that some of the normally hotter parts of the Valley, including Wasco and Coalinga, could hit 110 degrees this week.

There was a steady stream of people coming in and out of the Transit Center Monday, said J. Delgado, a security guard there.

While some, Garcia among them, left home and came here, many were bus riders who just didn't want to wait outside in the heat for their buses.

"I'd be waiting out there, but it's too hot," said Sophia Canales, 27, of Visalia. "It's a blessing to have the cool here."

Sitting in the Transit Center on her way home to Goshen, Marci Peña, 32, said, "It's pretty hot. I came in here to cool down."

Peña said she was pleasantly surprised that the bad air accompanying the heat wave wasn't aggravating her asthma.

But she may be in the minority, as the high pressure system that is trapping the heat here also "pushes down" pollutants in the air, making things hard for people with respiratory and heart conditions, said Jennifer Ridgway, an air quality specialist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

To make matters worse, ash, smoke and other pollutants from numerous wildfires to the north are further worsening the air here.

Garcia said his doctor told him his asthma was so aggravated that he'll have to start using an inhaler again.

In these conditions, Ridgway said, it's important to avoid exertion outdoors.

Better yet, she suggested, stay indoors, preferably with the air conditioning running, as the systems can filter some of the harmful particles in the air.

Dirty air looms as heat persists

Experts say heat wave will keep skies smoky until at least Sunday

BY GERALD CARROLL

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Two simple words: Stay indoors.

Temperatures hit 108 degrees Tuesday in Visalia and are expected to rise even higher today and Thursday before this major, pollution-intensifying heat wave subsides, experts say.

"There's no cooling in sight until Sunday," said Gary Sanger of the National Weather Service office in Hanford. "There's a lower-level inversion [layer] that is just like putting a lid on the entire Central Valley."

That "lid" will not only keep temperatures flaring over 100 degrees this week, but it also will essentially bottle up the smoke that has been drifting over the south Valley from Northern California wildfires.

Brenda Turner of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which issued a "health cautionary statement" Tuesday, said such smoky air can cause problems for even the healthiest people.

"Heart attacks can result if people exert themselves in air this bad, no matter their condition," Turner said.

The district's warning will remain in effect until fires are extinguished in the state, said district spokeswoman Janelle Schneider.

That might take some time, as CAL FIRE reported 323 active wildfires in the state on Tuesday. And there is no way to determine which specific areas in the Valley will be most affected by the "erratic nature of the smoke," said senior air-quality specialist Shawn Ferreira.

Medical experts advised people to stay indoors whenever possible - especially those with asthma or severe allergies. Even people without such medical problems may experience shortness of breath, as well as a sore throat and eye irritation.

"For the next two days, these air conditions will be most severe," said Dr. Praveen Buddiga of the Baz Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center, which has offices in Visalia and Fresno. "Whether asthma or allergies, it is best to stay indoors with air conditioning that filters the air."

New warning on wildfire smoke

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, July 8, 2008

The Valley air board issued a renewed warning today about the danger of smoke returning to area skies from continuing wildfires in the northern part of the state.

"(The Valley) could potentially be affected at any given time," Shawn Ferreria of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said.

Smoke, which covered Valley skies week before last is returning, air district and weather forecasters said.

The danger arises from small particles created by fire debris and carried into the air. Air district officials said they can aggravate lung disease, cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis and increase the risk of respiratory infections for people with heart disease.

More hot weather expected for Northern California

AP State

In the Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Forecasters are predicting another day of sizzling temperatures across Northern California.

The National Weather Service says a high-pressure ridge settling in the region will bring at least another day of record-setting temperatures.

Some Bay Area cities saw record high temperatures Tuesday.

Gilroy hit 103, while in San Rafael it was 102.

Further inland, it didn't hit a record high in Livermore but it was still exceptionally hot at 109 degrees.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has declared another Spare the Air advisory for Wednesday because of the heat and smoke in the air from fires burning across the region.

The higher temperatures are also driving up demand for electricity, prompting officials at California Independent System Operator to urge people to cut down on their energy use.

High temperature records fall around Bay Area

Jill Tucker and John Coté, Staff Writers

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

San Francisco -- How hot was it? Hot enough to fry a record. High temperature marks for July 8 fell in four cities around the Bay Area Tuesday, and with little relief in sight for the next couple of days in inland areas, more records are likely to be toast too.

At 101 in Napa and 103 in Gilroy, grapes and garlic sizzled in the record heat, eclipsing records set in 1985 and 1989, respectively.

San Rafael, 102, shattered its previous record of 96 set in 1985.

And nearby, "the thriving metropolis of Kentfield reached 103," beating a 102-degree record set in 1985, said National Weather Service forecaster Diana Henderson.

In Livermore, it might have felt like record heat - and it was "officially God-awful warm" at 109 degrees, Henderson said - but it wasn't hot enough for bragging rights.

Between Pleasanton and Fremont, it was so hot the Altamont Commuter Express train tracks bent in the heat, causing at least two-hour delays during the evening commute so that repairs could be made.

It was warm in Concord, too - 106 degrees. It hit 106 in Morgan Hill, 101 at Mineta San Jose International Airport and a Death Valley-like 112 at Lake Berryessa.

Cities closer to the ocean and those ringing the bay were up to 30 degrees cooler, reminding San Franciscans - who took off their sweaters for the 80-degree day - why they live in the city by the bay.

But Concord, Livermore, Sacramento and Modesto can take heart - the forecast calls for 124 degrees today in Death Valley.

The National Weather Service issued excessive heat warnings until Friday for much of the South Bay and most of the inland areas of the East Bay and North Bay. A less-severe heat advisory was declared for East Bay towns near the bay, along with the Peninsula and San Francisco.

That's enough to call this a heat wave - "as good a name as any" for the current conditions, Henderson said.

Given that it's summer, hot weather is to be expected, but not usually this early in the season, Henderson said. This is August or September weather.

"That's what is getting people's attention," she said.

Mount Diablo State Park closed because of extreme fire danger, and the park may be off-limits to visitors today as well. Park officials said they would check conditions and decide by 8 a.m.

Little relief is expected before Friday inland, even at night. The predicted low temperature for Livermore overnight was 68 degrees. Many towns will be over the 100-degree mark until Friday, when the mercury is expected to plunge into the upper 90s.

Daytime cooling stations opened in several counties.

"As long as the need is there for the community and the heat is so extreme, they'll be open," said Paula Toynbee, an Office of Emergency Services spokeswoman for Solano County, where cooling centers have opened in the cities of Vacaville, Fairfield and Dixon.

The heat wave is expected to tax the state's capacity to supply electricity. The California Independent System Operator, which operates the state's power grid, has declared a flex alert through Thursday, urging consumers to reduce their energy use during peak hours in the late afternoon.

Smoke from the hundreds of wildfires burning in California, along with ozone pollution piling up because of a lack of wind, prompted the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to declare a Spare the Air advisory for the third day in a row for today.

Children, older adults and people with respiratory problems should limit outdoor activity, the agency said. It urged people to limit driving, but noted that unlike in past years' Spare the Air days, public transit will not be free.

Caution advised for poor air quality, high heat

By Ramona Frances

Madera Tribune Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Smoke from continuing wildfires is prompting Valley Air District officials to issue a cautionary health alert that is expected to remain in effect until fires are extinguished.

Meanwhile temperatures are expected to climb close to 110 degrees today in Madera County and parts of the San Joaquin Valley, according to the National Weather Service, which has issued a heat advisory for the area. State officials are urging energy conservation to avoid blackouts.

The California Independent System Operator, the agency that monitors the state's power grid, told the Associated Press that peak energy demand could approach the record set in July 2006. The agency projected peak use Tuesday of nearly 49,000 megawatts, just shy of the 50,270 megawatt record. A megawatt is enough electricity for about 750 homes.

The grid monitor reportedly asked utility consumers to reduce power use in the late afternoon when air conditioners drive electricity use the highest point of the day. No blackouts were expected, but grid monitors are concerned that some transmission lines could be in danger from the hundreds of wildfires burning across California or that a power plant could be forced to shut down unexpectedly.

"If something breaks, that has the potential to really put us behind the eight ball," said Gregg Fishman, a spokesman for the Independent System Operator.

Air quality concerns

Shawn Ferreria, senior air quality specialist, said changes in the air at any time due to the erratic nature of smoke are affecting areas of the eight-county air basin. Monitored counties include Madera, Fresno, Merced, Kern, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Kings and Tulare.

When asked to identify the source of atmospheric smoke noticed by many on Tuesday, Ferreria said the biggest player now is the Piute Fire of Kern County burning south of Madera County.

Third-straight Spare the Air Day, first time since 2006

From Staff Reports - Oakland Tribune

Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has declared today another Spare the Air Day and forecasts unhealthy air for much of the Bay Area.

It will be the third straight Spare the Air Day in the Bay Area and once again there will be no free transit.

"The current air-quality situation is unprecedented," Air District Executive Officer Jack Broadbent said. "We have experienced days of high smog, but the combination of smoke (from fires in Northern California) and ozone in the air is creating uniquely unhealthy conditions," he said.

Air board spokeswoman Lisa Ferano said it is the first time there have been three straight Spare the Air Days since 2006.

A combination of light winds and hot temperatures will continue to create high levels of ozone in the Bay Area.

Elevated levels of particulate matter due to wildfire smoke will also affect much of the nine-county region-comprising Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, southwestern Solano and southern Sonoma counties.

Children, the elderly and residents with pre-existing respiratory conditions such as asthma are advised to limit outdoor exertion. Everyone should avoid vigorous outdoor exercise. For more wildfire safety tips, see www.sparetheair.org.

Air board to restrict fireplace use on bad air days

By Denis Cuff - Contra Costa Times
Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

A clash between the public's right to breathe clean air and individuals' rights to burn wood in fireplaces comes to a showdown today when the Bay Area's air pollution board is expected to ban wood fires on bad air nights.

The rule also would limit the visibility of smoke from chimneys year round in an effort to protect people from odors, eye irritation, and respiratory problems aggravated by burning of wet wood, plastic or trash.

Adoption of the rule is likely after the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board holds a final public hearing on one of the district's most contentious proposals in decades.

During 16 public meetings and workshops over 18 months, most speakers have supported the rule to protect the public from fine soot particles. Soot can irritate lungs and throats and, according to many health studies, spur asthma attacks and a variety of lung and health problems — even premature death among the elderly.

But some have condemned the rule as an unwarranted invasion in people's freedoms at home.

Air board members said it was time to limit wood-burning fireplaces and stoves.

"We need this rule because some people are getting thick smoke from their neighbors on bad air days, and when they call us to complain, we basically have no resource. It's legal to burn on the worst air days," said Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman on the air pollution board. "If an oil refinery three miles away generated the complaints (that) we get in some neighborhoods about wood smoke, the public wouldn't tolerate it."

Air quality regulators say they are not banning fireplaces, but barring use of them and wood stoves on Spare the Air nights in winter when cold, windless weather traps smoke close to the ground and produces unhealthy air quality. This happened nearly 30 nights in 2006 in the Bay Area.

The air district would rely heavily on public complaints to finger violators. First-time offenders would receive a written warning. Second-time offenders would be issued \$100 tickets they could either pay or avoid by attending a smoke education class.

A similar penalty would be handed to those who repeatedly violated a new year-round limit on the visibility of smoke from chimneys on any night. A chimney belching a continuous flow of thick smoke would likely flunk the test, officials said.

One Sonoma County resident said her family ended up paying \$7,000 to install gas stoves in two neighbors' homes because it was the only way to stop the irritating wood smoke from a fireplace in one house and a wood stove in the other.

"We had no idea how hard it would be to breath," Lia Gaertner wrote in urging the air board to adopt the smoke rule. "We understand each citizen's right to have a fire in their fireplace or woodstove, but we think there is such a high cost in the whole neighborhood's health."

Pollution regulators in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys have adopted rules barring wood burning on bad air nights.

Hearing

A public hearing on a rule regulating wood-burning fireplaces and stoves begins 11 a.m. today at the Bay Area Air Quality District Management District, 939 Ellis St. San Francisco. For more on the rule, view www.baaqmd.gov/

ELEMENTS OF WOOD SMOKE RULE

- Bars wood fires in fireplaces, stoves and fire pits on Spare the Air nights. Homes with no other heating options are exempt.
- Limit visibility of smoke emissions from chimneys.
- Bar installation of open-hearth fireplaces and non-EPA-certified wood stoves in new homes.
- Requires moisture content label on commercially sold firewood.

Cheney's Staff Cut Testimony On Warming Health Threats at Issue, Ex-EPA Official Says

By Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post Staff Writer
Washington Post Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Members of Vice President Cheney's staff censored congressional testimony by a top federal official about health threats posed by global warming, a former Environmental Protection Agency official said yesterday.

In a letter to Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), former EPA deputy associate administrator Jason K. Burnett said an official from Cheney's office ordered last October that six pages be edited out of the testimony of Julie L. Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gerberding had planned to say that the "CDC considers climate change a serious public health concern."

Boxer, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, said the administration sought the changes for fear that Gerberding's testimony could trigger new controls under the Clean Air Act that would regulate greenhouse-gas emissions from burning fossil fuels. The White House has opposed mandatory limits and has insisted that voluntary measures and increased research are the best ways to address the issue.

"The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the Office of the Vice President (OVP) were seeking deletions to the CDC testimony," Burnett, 31, a Stanford-trained economist and a Democrat, wrote in response to an inquiry from Boxer's committee. "CEQ requested that I work with CDC to remove from the testimony any discussion of the human health consequences of climate change."

Several media outlets, including The Washington Post, reported at the time of Gerberding's testimony that the administration had revised her proposed remarks. White House officials justified the changes by citing doubts about the scientific basis of her testimony.

Burnett -- a grandson of high-tech entrepreneur David Packard and a member of the Packard Foundation's board of trustees -- has given more than \$129,000 to Democratic campaigns in recent years, including \$3,600 to presidential candidate Barack Obama (Ill.). He did not identify who in the vice president's office had called him.

"I'm not interested in pointing fingers at any individual," he said at a news conference with Boxer, adding that he is focused on how the government will address climate change in response to a Supreme Court decision last year requiring the EPA to deal with rising carbon dioxide emissions. "I'm interested in helping inform the next administration to help make those decisions, while recognizing Congress could act to pass a better law."

Boxer demanded that, in light of Burnett's allegations, EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson turn over "every document related to the agency's finding that global warming poses a danger to the public" -- a determination the EPA reached late last year in a document that has never been made public. On that basis, the senator said, the agency must issue regulations to limit the emissions.

The White House declined to open the EPA e-mail containing that finding, which Burnett sent on Dec. 5, leaving the recommendation in limbo. Burnett was responsible for climate change issues at EPA.

Ex-EPA aide tells of White House censorship

Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington Bureau
Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Washington - -- Democrats have long alleged that Vice President Dick Cheney played a key backstage role in thwarting U.S. efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions, but they have had little evidence. Until now.

Jason Burnett, a senior official with the Environmental Protection Agency who resigned June 9, charges that Cheney's office urged him to delete or water down testimony to Congress by top administration officials on the impacts of global warming.

Burnett also said the White House blocked an effort by the EPA to issue an endangerment finding, a conclusion that climate change is a threat to the public. Under a Supreme Court ruling last year, the finding would have forced the administration to cut emissions.

California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, who held a news conference with Burnett on Tuesday, said the revelations show that the White House conspired to muzzle its own scientists' findings on climate change to delay action on regulations.

"We now know that this censorship was not haphazard - it was part of a master plan," Boxer said.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto said he couldn't comment on the charges because they concern internal deliberations. But he added there would be nothing wrong with Cheney's office or other administration officials offering their views.

"There's nothing unusual about that, and it's no different than in any other administration," Fratto said.

The new revelations put a damper on the announcement by the White House that President Bush had joined other world leaders at the Group of Eight summit in Japan on Tuesday in a nonbinding agreement to seek a goal of cutting carbon emissions in half by 2050.

Burnett said an official in Cheney's office - he declined to name the person - asked him to change a sentence in testimony being prepared for EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson, Burnett's boss, to deliver to a Senate committee Jan. 24, 2008, that read, "greenhouse gas emissions harm the environment." Burnett said he replied that if Cheney's office wanted to change the language, they'd have to contact Johnson himself.

The language stayed in.

First to challenge climate policy

Burnett is the first high-level EPA official to publicly challenge the White House's climate policy. But his background suggests he was an unusual choice by Johnson for the inner circle at EPA.

Burnett, 31, was trained at Stanford University in environmental economics and has taught there. Since 1999, he has given about \$125,000 in campaign contributions to Democrats, including former Vice President Al Gore in 2000 and current candidate Sen. Barack Obama, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Since leaving the EPA last month, he had endorsed Obama and announced plans to return to Northern California to campaign for him.

But Burnett has not always been a favorite of environmentalists, either. In 2001, he was co-author of a paper that argued that a Clinton administration rule tightening arsenic standards for drinking water did not justify its costs. While at EPA's Office of Air and Radiation between 2004 and 2006, he was involved in drafting mercury regulations that critics called weak and that a federal appeals court struck down this year.

Burnett left the EPA for a think tank in 2006 but was invited back by Johnson in June 2007 to serve as an associate deputy administrator to respond to the Supreme Court's Massachusetts vs. EPA decision, which required the agency to decide whether climate change was a threat to the public health and welfare. He left this time, he said, after concluding, "there wasn't more productive work to be done" on climate change.

Burnett said he spent months in meetings with EPA scientists and lawyers, including several meetings with senior officials at the White House. He said everyone involved understood the stakes: Making an endangerment finding would require EPA, under the Clean Air Act, to regulate emissions.

In October, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Julie Gerberding was scheduled to testify before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Burnett said he was asked by Cheney's office and the White House Council on Environmental Quality to "work with CDC to remove from the testimony any discussion of the human health consequences of climate change." He was told deleting the sections would help keep options open for Johnson on whether to make an endangerment finding.

Burnett refused, saying the testimony was accurate. But Office of Management and Budget officials later deleted six of 12 pages of her testimony, including sections suggesting climate change could lead to a rise in infectious diseases, air pollution, food and water scarcity and extreme weather events.

Still, Burnett said Johnson ultimately asked his staff to draft a provisional finding that climate change could endanger human health.

Burnett said he vetted the finding with top OMB officials and sent a copy to the White House in December. But just after he sent it, the White House called EPA asking that the document not be sent. When Burnett said it was already e-mailed, the White House asked him to send a follow-up saying the document was sent in error. He refused.

Bettina Poirier, staff director and chief counsel for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, said there's a reason the White House didn't want to open the e-mail. Once opened, it would become part of the public record. Boxer said she plans to hold a committee vote as soon as next week to subpoena the document.

Told to retract document

Burnett said he was told to retract the document because a bill to raise fuel efficiency standards for vehicles, which was moving through Congress at the time, would make the endangerment finding moot. But he said that logic was flawed.

"The energy bill did not change the science, it did not change the law," Burnett said, adding, "EPA still has a responsibility to respond to the Supreme Court."

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar insists that Johnson is following the high court's decision. He said the EPA chief will unveil on Friday a so-called advance notice of proposed rule-making, which allows public comment on the issue of endangerment. Shradar said the agency will also look at whether the Clean Air Act is the best law to regulate carbon.

Boxer said she sees an effort to delay a decision, forcing the next administration to deal with global warming.

"History will judge this Bush administration harshly for recklessly covering up a real threat to the people they are supposed to protect," she said.

Designing Cars for Low-Carbon Chic

By SIMON MARKS

N.Y. Times, Wed., July 9, 2008

PARIS — As governments seek to cut carbon emissions through regulation and consumers react to rising fuel prices, automakers and designers are mapping out a new generation of lighter, sleeker vehicles that could give a radical new look to urban streets.

Toyota has already set a benchmark for low emissions and fuel economy. Its Prius model, introduced in 1997, pioneered new technologies, including the first fully integrated hybrid engine, able to switch between gasoline and battery power, and electronic and computerized controls replacing heavy hydraulic systems.

Toyota has been followed by another Japanese company, Honda, with a Civic hybrid, and a string of releases or planned models from European and American competitors. Carmakers are now racing to design more innovative bodies incorporating advanced aerodynamics and light, biodegradable plastic components. They are also trying to second-guess the kind of styling that the next generation of car buyers will want.

Gilles Vidal, designer of a recent "green" concept car, the C-Cactus, for the French automaker PSA Peugeot Citroën, said, "To make a real environmental effort, you need to work on all of the possible factors — materials, optimization of processes, simplifying, going back to essentials."

Students at Créapôle, a leading industry-sponsored design school in Paris, are among those working with manufacturers to develop new designs and technologies that could become auto industry standards.

Alec Moran, a final-year master's student at the school, said that instead of selling cars based on the size of the engine, the car's relationship with its surroundings and how it interacts with people should be increasingly important.

"We are trying to develop the aesthetic element of the shape and interior comfort while assimilating the car's essence to the cultural needs of a particular social group," he said.

The evolution in fuel economy is continuing. For example, Ford fitted its EcoBoost engine this year to the new Lincoln MKS and Ford Flex models. The motor combines direct injection for

higher fuel efficiency with additional turbo-charged power generated by using waste exhaust gas energy.

Guy Negre, a motor engineer and founder of MDI Enterprises, a company that studies new technologies and production concepts to reduce the environmental impact of carbon dioxide, invented a compressed-air engine in 1996. The engine emits one-third the carbon dioxide of conventional motors of the same size. Cold air, compressed in tanks to 300 times atmospheric pressure, is heated and fed into the cylinders of a piston engine. No combustion takes place, meaning there is no pollution, although the energy needed to compress the air may still come from polluting oil- or coal-burning power stations.

“Obviously, we are obliged to make changes to the design in relation to the requirements and specifics of new technologies,” Mr. Negre said. “The weight, for example, is extremely important for many reasons. The heavier a vehicle is, the more energy is needed to power it and the more it pollutes.”

Mr. Negre’s engine will be offered as an option in Tata Motor’s new production model, the Nano, next year. The Nano, a minicar with an ultralow price tag, was introduced in January and is primarily aimed at the Indian market. Mr. Negre said a full tank of compressed air would cost about \$3 and provide about 200 kilometers, or 125 miles, of driving. The tank could be filled by gas station compressors used for inflating tires, or a built-in compressor powered by plugging in to an electrical outlet, he said.

Designers at automakers like Chrysler, Toyota and Citroën are already adapting to changing customer needs and perceptions. The Citroën C-Cactus, a retro take on the legendary 2CV, is designed for a post-SUV urban world where small is beautiful and low environmental impact is a top priority.

Maria Mack, a senior design specialist in Brussels for Toyota, said, “From the very first stage of design, the project leader responsible for a particular vehicle sets environmental impact reduction targets.”

The C-Cactus is an example of how manufacturers are experimenting to reduce the industry’s total carbon footprint, including production and driving emissions. Besides choosing a hybrid engine, Mr. Vidal, its designer, said, he halved the weight of the car and simplified everything that could be simplified to cut energy consumption.

Olivier Frémont, head of Créapôle’s department of transport design, said: “Four or five years ago much of our design work was focused on the Chinese and emerging markets. But in the last three years or so trends have radically changed as designers have become much more ecologically minded.”

He added, “We are regularly looking to simplify the vehicle whether it be outside or inside,” and he said that “we are coming back to basic questions of what is actually useful inside the vehicle, what we actually need.”

Mr. Moran, the Créapôle student, has designed a car that addresses two main issues: the escalation of oil prices and the need to minimize environmental impacts. His car runs on an electric motor using a lithium-ion battery, substantially lighter than traditional lead-acid batteries. It has a chassis made of bamboo, reinforced with spiders’ silk and plant resin.

Car companies like Mazda are looking to bioplastics for the fenders and dashboards of future models. Mazda says that the plastic will be made from cellulosic biomass produced from inedible vegetation like plant waste and wood shavings. Toyota’s concept car, the COM BP, an electric vehicle, also uses bioplastics for some of its body parts, including the hood, pillars and roof.

Mr. Moran said his car was designed for people he likes to call “No-Nos” — those who reject mainstream consumerism and popular advertising.

“ ‘No-Nos’ are a growing minority of people who care a great deal about their carbon footprint,” Mr. Moran said. “Aesthetically conventional but technically advanced,” he said, his target buyers would be “activist consumers who are both thoughtful and introspective.”

Cyril Randuineau, another master's student at the school, spent some time at Toyota's main design center in Tokyo, where he studied cultural trends and noticed that many Japanese people had small garages and tended to travel in groups.

His response was to design a car with a miniaturized hybrid engine to maximize passenger space within a small frame, and a molded cocoonlike interior where driver and passengers could relax in comfort when stationary.

He has also designed a car for an emerging African market that he hopes will take off in the future. He says that rising oil prices will open up the market for exciting new technologies using electricity and solar power, all of which will change the shape and functions of the car.

“It's uncertain that this type of car would actually have mass appeal,” Mr. Moran said. “The aim of this project is really to throw the idea out there.”

Nissan plans electric cars in Portugal

By Yuri Kageyama, Associated Press
San Diego Union-Tribune Wed., July 8, 2008

TOKYO – Automakers Nissan and Renault will sell electric vehicles in Portugal in 2011 and the allied companies have partnered with the government in an attempt to create a national network of charging stations.

Nissan has said it will sell electric cars globally in 2012, but the technology is still being developed. On Wednesday, Carlos Ghosn, chief executive of the French and Japanese automakers, and Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates said they would work together to raise awareness about the vehicles and try to make them easier to fuel.

Nissan has aggressively pursued deals with cities and governments on electric vehicles, as soaring gas prices and worries about global warming make the green technology more appealing.

Tokyo-based Nissan Motor Co. and partner Renault SA have previously announced deals with Project Better Place, based in Palo Alto, Calif., which promotes electric vehicles, to mass market electric vehicles in Israel and Denmark in 2011.

While other car manufacturers concentrate on fuel cells and hybrids, Nissan is going all out on electric vehicles, promising to sell them globally in 2012, with the first models arriving in Japan and the U.S. in 2010.

“We are feeling more strongly than ever that we must speed up our development of electric vehicles,” said Nissan Senior Vice President Minoru Shinohara.

Nissan is also in talks with parking lot and railway companies to set up recharging stations, he told The Associated Press at the company's Tokyo headquarters Wednesday.

The lack of charging stations has made electric cars impractical in the broader market. Skeptics say electric vehicles will stay niche for some time.

Combined with high costs and other technological hurdles, electric vehicles for the broader public are still experimental.

Proponents say tax breaks, preferential highways lanes and other incentives would boost the appeal.

"It's still a very new technology and so much remains to be seen," said Yasuaki Iwamoto, auto analyst with Okasan Securities Co. "It's unlikely people are suddenly going to switch in big numbers from gas-engine vehicles."

Portugal is a global leader in promoting renewable energy, including wind and solar power.

"This agreement with Renault-Nissan will place Portugal also on the front line in terms of sustainable mobility with zero-emission vehicles," Socrates said. "Promoting electric cars in Portugal will reduce our dependence on imported oil and will contribute to a cleaner environment."

Shinohara said Japanese urbanites drive about 12 miles a day – so the limited range of electric vehicles isn't a problem for daily grocery shopping and other errands.

Nissan has not yet given details of the electric vehicle it has in the works.

Fuji Heavy Industries, which makes Subaru cars, and Mitsubishi Motors Corp. plan to offer electric vehicles in Japan next year. Mitsubishi's electric vehicle travels 99 miles on a single charge, while Subaru's goes 50 miles.

Mitsubishi plans to sell its electric vehicle in Europe in 2010, while tests are planned for the U.S. for 2009. Subaru has not decided on overseas sales plans for its electric vehicle.

Masahiko Otsuka, president of Automotive Energy Supply Corp., a joint venture between Nissan and Japanese electronics maker NEC Corp. to produce batteries for electric vehicles, said Nissan has a history dating back to 1992 of testing lithium-ion batteries for cars.

Lithium-ion batteries are now more common in laptops and other gadgets but can pack more power than the kind of batteries in the gas-electric hybrids made by Toyota Motor Corp.

All major automakers are pushing new technology. Honda Motor Co. is leasing a fuel-cell vehicle in California which emits only water. U.S. automaker General Motors Corp. is developing an electric vehicle called the Chevrolet Volt, which it hopes to launch in 2010. Ford Motor Co. has a demonstration fleet of 20 plug-ins.

Bush: 'Significant progress' on climate change

By DEB RIECHMANN - Associated Press Writer
Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, July 9, 2008

TOYAKO, Japan—President Bush hailed the move by G-8 leaders to coalesce behind a strategy for a global climate-change accord, saying Wednesday "significant progress" was made. But environmentalists and the U.N.'s top climate official disputed his claims.

"I don't find the outcome very significant," Yvo de Boer, who head the United Nations-led global negotiations to forge a new climate change treaty, told The Associated Press in telephone interview from his home in the Netherlands.

De Boer said the summit's vague pledge to work toward slashing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2050 mentioned no baseline, did not appear to be legally binding and was open to vastly different interpretations. He praised China's President Hu Jintao for acknowledging that developing countries must act on climate change even if Beijing rejects specific national targets.

Environmentalists also argued the goal of cutting greenhouse gases by 50 percent did not go far enough and amounted to political window-dressing.

"To be meaningful and credible, a long-term goal must have a base year, it must be underpinned by ambitious midterm targets and actions," said Marthinus van Schalkwyk, South African Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, who called the G-8 statement an "empty slogan."

It was Bush's final summit with leaders of the world's richest democracies, and he gave reporters a sunny view of its accomplishments before flying home to Washington.

His main demand on a climate change accord is that eight poor but energy-guzzling nations be included in some requirements along with the major industrialized democracies that make up the Group of Eight. "That's what took place today," Bush said, referring to the embrace of this idea by fellow G-8 leaders.

The G-8 nations are the U.S., Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, Japan and Russia.

But the five key developing nations at an expanded meeting on climate on the sidelines of the summit—China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa—issued a statement rejecting the notion that all share in the 50-percent reduction goal. "It is essential that developed countries take the lead in achieving ambitious and absolute greenhouse gas emissions reductions," said the statement.

"We're not in complete convergence yet," acknowledged Jim Connaughton, one of Bush's top environmental advisers.

It was, nevertheless, the first time that the G-8 heads of state sat down to talk about global warming at the same table with the eight emerging economies that, with them, are responsible for spewing 80 percent of the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Bush heartily backed the broad emissions-reduction goal stated by his summit partners. This position represents quite a progression for a president who in his first term disputed scientists' assertions about global warming.

"We made clear, and the other nations agreed, that they must also participate in an ambitious goal," Bush said, "with an interim goal, with interim plans to enable the world to successfully address climate change. And we made significant progress toward a comprehensive approach."

In a statement that Bush read to reporters here, he reiterated his position that further progress will likely hinge on further development of clean energy technologies. Developing nations, he said, will need assistance so they can become "good stewards of the environment."

The president praised his fellow summit leaders for their work, not only on climate change but also on advancing the so-called Doha Round of negotiations on opening markets to free trade and on their cooperation with U.S. efforts to help poor nations combat disease and food shortages.

The president headed home with a mixed scorecard.

He ran into opposition to talk of trade sanctions against President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe for an election that Bush has labeled a "sham" balloting. And he made no headway in resolving differences with Russia over U.S. plans to put a missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said in a separate talk with reporters that that American defense system "deeply distresses" Moscow and he accused Washington of engaging in "halfhearted negotiations that have come to nothing."

Bush held one-on-one talks with several other world leaders while in Japan for four days, including China's President Hu Jintao, whom he assured he was excited about going to the Beijing Olympics later this summer. Hu told Bush he was grateful that he hadn't politicized the event because of China's crackdown in Tibet.

In an early morning meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Bush defended a languishing deal his administration negotiated to sell India nuclear fuel and technology. The deal, which would reverse three decades of U.S. policy by allowing the sale of atomic fuel and technology to India, faces significant opposition on both sides.

Bush took no questions from reporters at the closing of the meeting. Nor did he address criticisms that emerged about the G-8's climate positions.

He said he and his summit partners had "served both our interests as Americans, and we've served the interests of the world."

Bush was instrumental in broadening the global warming discussions beyond the G-8 membership. But he won't be in office long enough to see the next chapter of the contentious climate change debate play out.

The discussion on global warming is a run-up to U.N.-led efforts to craft a new climate change accord at a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009. That new accord would succeed the Kyoto Protocol that starts to expire in 2012.

Texas oilman T. Boone Pickens wants to supplant oil with wind

By Dan Reed

USA TODAY, Wednesday, July 09, 2008

SWEETWATER, Texas — Get ready, America, T. Boone Pickens is coming to your living room.

The legendary Texas oilman, corporate raider, shareholder-rights crusader, philanthropist and deep-pocketed moneyman for conservative politicians and causes, wants to drive the USA's political and economic agenda.

"We're paying \$700 billion a year for foreign oil. It's breaking us as a nation, and I want to elevate that question to the presidential debate, to make it the No. 1 issue of the campaign this year," Pickens says.

Today, Pickens will take the wraps off what he's calling the Pickens Plan for cutting the USA's demand for foreign oil by more than a third in less than a decade. To promote it, he is bankrolling what his aides say will be the biggest public policy ad campaign ever. The website, pickensplan.com, goes live today.

Jay Rosser, Pickens' ever-present public relations man, promises that Pickens' face will be seen on Americans' televisions this fall almost as frequently as John McCain's and Barack Obama's.

"Neither presidential candidate is talking about solving the oil problem. So we're going to make 'em talk about it," Pickens says.

"Nixon said in 1970 that we were importing 20% of our oil and that by 1980 it would be 0%. That didn't happen," Pickens says. "It went to 42% in 1991 with the Gulf War. It's just under 70% now. Where do you think we're going to be in 10 years when our economy is busted and we're importing 80% of our oil?"

Finding solutions to other major issues, including health care, are important, he concedes. But "If you don't solve the energy problem, it's going to break us before we even get to solving health care and some of these other important issues." And it has to be done with the same sense of

urgency that President Eisenhower had when he pushed the rapid development of the interstate highway system during the Cold War.

Of course, Pickens also has a particular solution in mind.

Wind. And natural gas.

Last week, Pickens loaded up his \$60 million, top-of-the-line Gulfstream G550 corporate jet with reporters and a few associates from his Dallas-based BP Capital energy hedge fund and related companies and flew here to illustrate just how big — and achievable — his vision is.

There's not much to Sweetwater except for wild grasses, scraggy mesquite trees and rattlesnakes (Sweetwater hosts its famous Rattlesnake Roundup each spring). The gently rolling terrain and vegetation make it ideal for raising cattle, which is what its first settlers did in the 19th century, and what their descendants do today. A regional oil boom in the 1950s and 1960s poured money into the area's economy, as have two oil revivals since: one in the 1980s and one now.

But the exciting new industry in town is wind energy. You can drive for 150 miles along Interstate 20 and never be out of sight of a giant wind turbine, claims Sweetwater Mayor Greg Wortham, who does double duty as executive director of the West Texas Wind Energy Consortium.

Were it a country all by itself, Nolan County, Texas, would rank sixth on the list of wind-energy-producing nations, says Wortham. Year-round wind conditions, the terrain, low land prices and a small population make it an ideal location for wind farms. It already produces more wind-generated electricity in a year than all of California. And the business is growing so fast that he struggles to define it by numbers. By year's end, there'll be more than 1,500 turbines in Nolan County, representing a \$5 billion investment. In the multicounty Rolling Plains region, there are already 2,000 operating turbines.

Add those operating further west, the Permian Basin region around Midland and Odessa, and the entire area has more than 3,000 turbines operating, producing about 6,000 megawatts of electricity — about equal to the power produced by two to three nuclear power plants.

Growth potential

The growth potential is, well, electrifying.

New turbine towers are going up at a rate of three to four a day in the Sweetwater area, Wortham says. "It depends on the (Texas) Public Utility Commission, but the number could be 20,000 ultimately," Wortham says.

Pickens, who over the past two years has become the USA's biggest wind-power booster, is quick to note that "there could be lots of Sweetwaters out there," especially in the nation's midsection, where winds are ideal for power generation.

Indeed, though Sweetwater is a windy place, plenty of locations farther north in the Great Plains are even better suited to wind farming. One is about 250 miles north of Sweetwater, near Pampa, northeast of Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle. That's where Pickens is building what would be the world's largest wind farm, four times larger than the current titleholder near here. So far, he has spent \$2 billion on the project, including a record purchase of nearly 700 wind turbines this year from General Electric. He expects to spend up to \$10 billion on the project and to begin generating electricity in 2011.

Though Pickens doesn't own a single wind turbine in the Sweetwater area, Wortham was eager to play host to the oil baron and the reporters traveling with him. Sweetwater, he says, is proof that wind power has much more potential than its many skeptics believe.

"People hear about the 8-foot-tall wind turbines at Logan airport in Boston or the five turbines at Atlantic City and think 'interesting,' " Wortham says. "But they don't see how we can get to the 300,000-megawatt-production level" established by the Bush administration as a national goal for 2030. "Once you come to Sweetwater, you see that it can be done, and be done pretty easily, not only here, but ... anywhere there are prime wind conditions. None of this existed seven years

ago. Now, we produce enough electricity in this one county to power a large city, and we do it cheaply and cleanly."

Getting lots more electricity with wind is only half of the Pickens Plan. Increasing wind-power production by itself won't reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil because most of that oil is consumed as gasoline.

The key, Pickens says, is that wind energy can be used as a substitute for natural gas now burned to generate electricity. That, in turn, will make far more natural gas available for use as a transportation fuel. Pickens' plan is to produce enough wind power within 10 years to divert 20% of the natural gas now used to fuel power plants for use in cars and trucks. That's much more aggressive a growth plan for the development of wind energy than envisioned by the Department of Energy, which doesn't expect the USA to be getting 20% of its total energy needs from wind until at least 2030.

Pickens foresees as many as a third of the vehicles running on natural gas within only a few years. Julius Pretterebner, director of the Global Oil Group at Cambridge Energy Research Associates, says getting 15% to 20% of the USA's cars to run on natural gas — in some cases, in mixtures with other fuels in dual-fuel vehicles — by 2020 would be an outstanding achievement, and doing that will require federal support to expand the necessary infrastructure.

Powering vehicles with compressed or liquefied natural gas, CNG or LNG, has been Pickens' pet project since the late 1980s. Yet the concept has been very slow to catch on.

Distribution is a major problem. CNG drivers can, like Pickens, install inexpensive equipment to fill up at their homes. But with fewer than 800 natural gas filling stations around the USA, drivers can't count on being able to fill up wherever they go. So, for the most part, CNG, or LNG, has remained limited to fleet operators, such as local bus companies or big-city police departments.

And that's where David Friedman, research director in the vehicles program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, says most natural-gas-powered vehicles will continue to be operated because of the distribution problem, the lack of vehicles made specifically to run on CNG, and the cost of converting conventional vehicles to run on CNG.

"I honestly think (natural gas') role will be in medium- to heavy-duty vehicles and fleets — and as a stepping stone to hydrogen fuel-cell-powered vehicles in the future," Friedman says. Only one car, a version of the Honda Civic, is available from the factory ready for CNG fuel, he says, and only at a significant premium over the price of a conventionally fueled version.

If you build it ...

Pickens aims to shout down the skeptics by taking his case to the people via his TV ad campaign. If the nation is to break its addiction to foreign oil, a network of CNG stations could be built along interstates and in major cities for a relatively small investment, he says. Some gasoline retailers have told him they would add CNG pumps to their stations once they're certain there'll be enough vehicles capable of running on natural gas to justify costs.

Washington, Pickens adds, can encourage the move to natural-gas-powered vehicles by providing modest economic incentives for fuel retailers to invest in CNG pumps at their stations, for automakers to build CNG-powered cars and for individuals to convert their existing vehicles to CNG use. And it should continue to provide tax incentives for another 10 years to encourage wind energy's rapid development as part of an overall plan to wean the nation from foreign oil, he says.

"It certainly would be cheaper than what they're doing already for nuclear," Pickens adds. But he's also in favor of developing more nuclear energy, and every form of alternative energy to reduce oil imports. "Try everything. Do everything. Nuclear. Biomass. Coal. Solar. You name it. I support them all," he says. "But there's only one energy source that can dramatically reduce the amount of oil we have to import each year, and that's (natural) gas."

Pickens is an outspoken believer in the so-called peak oil theory that holds that maximum world production has peaked at about 85 million barrels a day — vs. current demand of about 86 million barrels a day — and will never rise much above that even with lots of new drilling and production.

"Even people who continue driving gasoline-powered cars and trucks will benefit" from his plan, he says.

Critics could easily accuse Pickens of advocating a major new public policy initiative that will line his own pockets. He is, after all, a big player in both the wind power and natural gas businesses. Pickens says while his hedge fund will earn money for its investors, earning more money personally is meaningless: "I'm 80 years old and have \$4 billion. I don't need any more money."

He's more concerned that his efforts to make reducing foreign oil dependency the No. 1 issue on the national agenda will be dismissed by the public and, therefore, by Washington. So he says he's carefully steering his plan clear of partisan bickering.

He's already enlisted an unlikely supporter: the Sierra Club. "I will be in the front row of the chorus cheering" him on, says Carl Pope, its executive director, who flew with Pickens to Sweetwater.

Pope sees wind and solar energy as inexpensive sources of power that, along with other non-carbon forms, can be pooled to greatly reduce the need for oil- and coal-fired electric-generating plants.

"When it's cloudy in Dallas and the wind's not blowing in Sweetwater, but the sun's blazing in the (Western) deserts, solar energy can run all those air conditioners in Dallas. When it's windy in Sweetwater and cloudy in the desert, wind energy from Sweetwater can heat homes in Chicago.

"Mr. Pickens and I probably don't see eye-to-eye on some other matters," Pope concedes. "But he's right on this one."

Setting goals, clearing roadblocks

Washington's role, Pope said, should be in setting the goal and clearing roadblocks such as the patchwork of state, regional and federal regulations that block the creation of a true national grid that can shift electricity from anywhere in the country to anywhere that it's needed.

Getting support from groups and people not ordinarily aligned with his conservative political views is important to Pickens. A lifelong Republican, he'll vote for McCain. But he's not involved with McCain's campaign, largely to keep his plan from being dismissed as mere campaign rhetoric.

"This has to be a bipartisan effort," says the man who four years ago offered \$1 million to anyone who could disprove the charges made against Democrat nominee Sen. John Kerry by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

"This is not about Republicans vs. Democrats," Pickens says. "This is about saving our country from the ruination of spending \$700 billion a year on oil imports. Ninety days after the oil hits our shores, it's all burned up, and we've got nothing to show for it. But they (foreign oil producers) still have our money. It's killing our economy."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Wed., July 9, 2008:](#)

State must do better about buying fuel for its fleet in bulk No central database exists to track fuel purchases for government.

Even with gasoline at \$4.50 a gallon, the state is moving like a dinosaur when it comes to adjusting to the high cost of fuel. California runs a fleet of 50,000 state-owned vehicles, but there is no system for tracking fuel purchases. That means the state is doing little to maximize its vast purchasing power.

State vehicles and their fuel purchases are spread among 100 agencies, according to a Sacramento Bee investigation, yet there's no central database to track those purchases.

Less than 40% of the fuel used comes from bulk supplies the state purchases at a discount. Sixty percent comes from commercial pumps, where state workers purchase gasoline and diesel with credit cards known as the Voyager cards.

In 2007, these types of purchases cost taxpayers nearly \$100 million. How well are state workers shopping around for gas? How much could be saved if more state vehicles were fueled at state fueling stations? It's hard to know. The Department of General Services doesn't have the information to answer those questions.

That must change, and quickly.

State officials say some improvements are on the way. By 2010, a new state law will require better fuel efficiency for some state-owned vehicles, along with a tracking system for mileage.

So far, however, there is no plan to increase the state's purchases of bulk fuels, including alternative fuels such as biodiesel.

The fuel purchasing policies of the DGS and other state agencies are in direct conflict with other state policies, including a 2006 law that requires the state to reduce greenhouse gases by 20%.

As the California Air Resources Board said in a recent implementation plan for that law, "Myriad opportunities exist for California state government to operate more efficiently. These opportunities will not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also will produce savings for California taxpayers."

State government must get a handle on the way it spends tax money on fuel. So far, our leaders in Sacramento don't seem all that concerned about the price of gas. Maybe they would if those dollars were coming out of their pockets.

[Merced Sun-Star, Editorial, Wednesday, July 9, 2008:](#)

Our View: High-speed future is here

Rail proposal is antidote for rising gas prices, dirty air, stagnant economy in California.

High-speed rail won the pole position on the November ballot -- it was named Proposition 1 when the secretary of state assigned numbers to the 11 initiatives voters will consider. That's no guarantee of victory, but the momentum is clearly building.

The proposal to build an 800-mile system of 200-mph trains linking Southern and Northern California, by way of the Valley, has made a great deal of sense throughout its two-decade gestation. Proposition 1, the \$9.95 billion bond measure, is the necessary first step.

High-speed rail will be an engine of economic development that we badly need in this state, creating tens of thousands of jobs in both its construction and its operation.

It will have a dramatic impact on our environment, removing thousands of cars from California's highways. Less congestion will make the remaining vehicles more efficient for those that remain on the road. Conservative estimates suggest millions of barrels of oil could be saved annually, and as much as 22 billion pounds of carbon dioxide kept out of the atmosphere.

The rail system would also reduce the need for many short- and medium-haul airline flights, which pollute the atmosphere at an astonishing rate.

Now, with gasoline at \$4.50 a gallon and rising, high-speed rail is no longer just a good idea. It's imperative.

Enthusiasm for passenger rail travel is growing rapidly in California and the nation. Ridership on Amtrak is increasing, even with the shortcomings of the underfunded system. In fiscal year 2007, 25 million passengers traveled on Amtrak trains, a record that is sure to be surpassed when this year's numbers are tallied. Locally, ridership on Amtrak's San Joaquin line rose 21.2 percent in May, compared with May 2007.

Congress is getting on board. Next year's transportation bill could include as much as \$60 billion for high-speed rail projects. Because California is well ahead of the rest of the nation, it's reasonable to expect a good share of that money would be added to the funds from the bond measure -- if it passes in November.

The numbers all add up on high-speed rail. It's much more efficient than driving or flying. It's a job producer. It will help clean the air. It will connect the Valley to the rest of the state in a way that's never been done before. It's more comfortable and less stressful than dealing with crowded airports or congested highways.

There are broader themes to the high-speed rail debate. Opponents of the proposal seem to believe that the price of gasoline will be coming back down soon. It may dip some, but never to the comfortable levels of past decades.

Airlines are in crisis. Fares and other charges are going through the roof, and that's not going to get any better. In addition to all its environmental advantages, high-speed rail offers a cheaper alternative to air travel, with less hassle.

Opponents of high-speed rail act as if the alternative to high-speed rail and its cost is to do nothing. That's absurd, as absurd as the notion that we just need to build more freeways and expand airports, and keep burning all that cheap fuel. Not only would that make air quality problems worse in the state, it would be much more expensive than building high-speed rail -- and it wouldn't work.

California needs to focus on the 21st century, not dwell on the solutions of the past. What once served us well is no longer sufficient. Advocates of high-speed rail -- people who believe in California's future -- have a selling job to do with voters. Let's get it started.

[Merced Sun-Star, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, July 9, 2008:](#)

Keep children indoors

Editor: We would like to publicly thank our child's preschool center for taking the air quality forecasts seriously last week.

When the air outside was unhealthy to breathe, Gateway Educare went to a "rainy day schedule" and kept the children indoors.

Numerous studies show both the short-term and long-term health effects of breathing ultra-fine particulate matter such as smoke and diesel exhaust, but many times people tend to overlook the importance of avoiding outdoor activities on days when the air quality is "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" (an orange flag day) and "Unhealthy for Everyone" (a red flag day).

Children breathe at a faster rate than adults and therefore breathe in more pollution than adults do per minute.

We need to remember children under 18 are still growing; their lungs are still developing and are considered a "sensitive" group.

Therefore, outdoor activities should be postponed or canceled, and alternatives to exercising outdoors will have to be found until the pollution clears.

The air district and other entities recommend residents avoid going outdoors on bad air days. We are very thankful that Gateway Educare takes that advice seriously and protects our children from the negative effects of breathing bad air!

If you would like to learn more about the negative health effects of breathing bad air, please log on to this site: www.arb.ca.gov/research/chs.

JAIME AND MELISSA ORTEGA, Merced