

Wood burning program on break

Stockton Record, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

A program that restricts residential wood burning on days with poor air quality has ended for the season, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said Monday.

In San Joaquin County, wood burning was not prohibited this season, though it was discouraged six times, the district said.

In 2006-07, one prohibition was issued in the county, and burning was discouraged 22 times.

Officials said the number of restrictions up and down the Valley dropped by half this year. They attributed that to residents decreasing the amount of smoke emitted during the winter.

The district also works with residents to replace older, dirty wood-burning stoves. Information: www.valleyair.org or (209) 557-6400.

Tulare County project debated

Early study sees high impact from Yokohl Ranch.

By Erik Lacayo / The Fresno Bee

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

EXETER -- A large-scale community proposed for Tulare County's foothills could have a significant impact on the environment, according to an early study of the project.

If approved, a 10,000-home town would be developed east of Exeter within the 36,000-acre Yokohl Ranch, owned by J.G. Boswell Co.

County planning officials were at the Exeter Senior Center on Monday to receive written public concerns as they begin to draft an environmental impact report, a process required under the California Environmental Quality Act.

The county recently released an initial study on the Yokohl Ranch project, which highlights possible environmental impacts that need to be addressed in the environmental impact report.

Air quality and biological, cultural and agricultural resources are some of the environmental factors that could be significantly affected, according to the project's initial study.

Drafting a more specific environmental impact report could take about one year, said William Hayter, assistant director of Tulare County Resource Management Agency.

"A project of this size will have a very thorough and big document," Hayter said.

Hayter said J.G. Boswell Co. will have to show it can avoid significant environmental impacts or be able to mitigate those impacts.

Representatives from J.G. Boswell did not attend Monday, Hayter said.

Dozens of visitors viewed diagrams of the proposed development and submitted written testimony to county officials.

Alfred Pietroforte of Visalia said he was concerned the development would ruin the scenic Yokohl Valley.

"It's one of the most beautiful and energized areas around here," he said.

The influx of cars would trap pollution inside Yokohl Valley, and officials haven't explained where the water for the community will come from, Pietroforte said.

Kenneth Woodrow, tribal chairman of the Wuksachi tribe, said he was concerned about the project's impact on Rocky Hill, an area within Yokohl Valley. Woodrow said the area is full of ancient Wuksachi burial sites.

"It's one of our very special sacred areas," he said. "We need to protect these areas."

Woodrow, who lives in Salinas, said tribal officials have met with representatives of J.G. Boswell Co. and are hopeful they can work together to protect the burial sites.

Greg Kirkpatrick, a former Visalia City Council member, was recruiting members Monday for a group called the Committee to Save Yokohl Valley.

"It's wrong on so many levels," he said about the project.

Information available about the project isn't very detailed, Kirkpatrick said.

Some attending Monday grumbled they didn't have a chance to voice their concerns to county officials at the event advertised as a "public scoping meeting."

Hayter said the event was meant more as a "public presentation" and the county will hold a public hearing once a draft of the environmental impact report is complete.

The Yokohl Ranch project, which would be built in stages over 20 to 30 years, is still in the early planning process.

"This is new to Tulare County," Hayter said.

"It's kind of like Tulare County was one of the last places to be discovered [for large development]. We knew it would come sooner or later."

Oil and gas prices gush to record highs

Californians pay an average of \$3.47 per gallon at stations around the state

BY HILLARY S. MEEKS AND KIMBERLINA ROCHA

Tulare Advance Register Tues., March 4, 2008

Three Rivers resident Steve Rothenberg offered a dire prediction Monday as he pumped \$3.59-a-gallon gasoline at a Visalia station.

"We're going to go to \$4 a gallon here by summer," he said at the Shell station at Campus Avenue and Demaree Street.

The average price of gas in the Visalia/Tulare area was \$3.54 Monday, up 34 cents from last month.

"[The increase is] like three pennies a day for the last week or two," said Jeffrey Spring, spokesman for the Automobile Club of Southern California. "That's a significant climb."

The national average for gasoline is \$3.17. The state average is \$3.47.

There's no way of knowing whether \$4-a-gallon gas will become a reality, said Susanne Garfield, spokeswoman for the California Energy Commission.

Why are gas prices going up?

The rising prices of crude oil is one factor in the gas-price increase, Garfield said. The market price for a barrel of crude oil closed at \$102.45 Monday, she said.

Crude oil is traded internationally, including growing markets such as China and India.

"Oil companies will sell the product where they get the most money," Garfield said. "And the demand is increasing."

Another factor in the gas-price increase: In accordance with state [air-quality laws](#), California uses two types of fuel, one for winter and another for summer. The switch from the winter blend to summer blend drives gas prices up, Garfield said.

"[The summer blend is] more complex to manufacture and a little bit more expensive to make," she said.

Gas prices can be expected to rise another 10 cents to 15 cents, she said.

What people think is behind the gas-price hike

Rothenberg said his white Ford 150 truck is used for work purposes only. He blames the cost increase on people who sell, and drive, gas-guzzlers.

"You don't need an eight-cylinder vehicle to take the kids to school or drop them off at soccer," he said. "... The Bush administration has done little to make the auto industry accountable for gas consumption."

Visalia resident Stacy McCoy sells Avon products and pays for her own gas to make a living. She said the war in Iraq has caused oil prices to rise.

"The president isn't pulling our troops out of Iraq, so they're not going to lower the barrels of oil," she said. "Meanwhile, he's a rich Texan oil man."

But Visalia resident Jim Putnam blames environmentalists for the price at the pump.

"It's stupid people who won't let us drill for oil in Alaska," he said. "It's the environmentalists who are the problem; it's not the oil companies."

Regardless of the cause, some motorists feel the price increase more than others.

Myra Navarro expects to give birth next week and is looking to save money wherever she can.

"I've been trying to cut back on driving," she said from the ARCO station at Mooney Boulevard and Caldwell Avenue, where regular gas sold for \$3.31 a gallon. "If the [gas prices] go higher, I guess I'll have to go less places."

Propane prices

The price of propane also is on the rise.

In the last year, propane prices increased by 51 percent, according to the Energy Information Administration. Although propane is produced from both crude oil refining and natural gas processing, its price is influenced mainly by the cost of crude oil, according to the administration's Web site. Propane competes mostly with crude oil-based fuels, the site explains.

Forty percent of the propane consumed in the United States is residential, with most used for heating purposes.

Five percent of propane is used agriculturally for crop drying and weed control and as fuel for farm equipment and irrigation pumps, according to the Energy Information Administration. Most usage takes place in the fall.

State scrambles to fund global warming fight

Matthew Yi, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau <mailto:myi@sfchronicle.com>
S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Sacramento -- California's landmark legislation to fight global warming has been on the books for more than a year, but it still lacks stable, long-term funding to help meet its ambitious goal to limit greenhouse gas emissions.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's latest budget proposal calls for a stopgap, two-year effort that relies on borrowing money from a state beverage container recycling fund to run the program.

On Monday, members of a joint legislative committee raised questions about funding for AB32, the high-profile measure that seeks to cut the state's carbon emissions by about a third by 2020.

"Borrowing from (the recycling fund) ... perpetuates a pattern of the state solving its financial problems by borrowing and moving money around," said Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, who co-chaired the hearing by the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources and the Senate Alternative Energy subcommittee.

The measure has received international acclaim and has given Schwarzenegger political capital around the world for signing it into law in 2006. It probably will require sweeping changes in what vehicles

Californians drive, what fuels they pump and how energy and manufacturing plants operate in the state.

While passing AB32 was a major coup for Schwarzenegger and the Democrats who backed it, figuring out how to meet the measure's goals remains a daunting task.

Deciding who will pay for administering the new programs and regulations could prove to be especially difficult with the state's softening economy, which has helped push California to a looming \$8 billion budget deficit in the next fiscal year.

Governor wants to borrow

Schwarzenegger wants to temporarily pay for AB32 by borrowing from the state's recycling fund, which receives money from fees collected from the sale of beverage cans and bottles. The fund is supposed to be used to repay consumers who recycle those bottles and cans.

But the governor wants to use \$32 million of that money to help pay for AB32-related spending in the 2008-09 fiscal year, which begins July 1, and an additional \$35 million in the following fiscal year. The fund eventually would be repaid with interest.

The governor's plan to borrow from the recycling fund is unacceptable, said Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland.

"The administration is punting yet again on finding a reliable funding source for arguably one of the most important pieces of legislation the governor has signed to date," he said in a written statement. "Taking money from the state's recycling fund is shortsighted, and I plan on discussing all funding options as part of the budget process."

Finding a dedicated source of money to meet the legal obligations of the global warming measure is essential, said Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, who chairs the Assembly Committee on Budget.

"The bottom line for us is that we want to have stable funding for AB32 and during the budget (negotiation) process we'll just look at the different alternatives on how to get there," Laird said. "I'd like to make sure that there's something coming out of this budget that works for AB32."

But Mary Nichols, Schwarzenegger's appointee as chair of the California Air Resources Board, argued that it doesn't make sense to start looking at how to raise the money for AB32 before having a blueprint for what programs and regulations would be needed to meet the measure's goals.

"The Air Resources Board is committed to developing a funding plan, including a fee on carbon emissions, that would cover the cost of administering the program," she said in an interview with The Chronicle.

"But we can't do that in a responsible way until we develop the plan, because we need the plan to provide the technical basis for assessing the fee."

The air board, which is charged with implementing the carbon emissions reductions plan, is working on an exhaustive blueprint on how to curb carbon emissions in California. A draft of the proposals, called a scoping plan, is scheduled to be released in June. The air board must complete the plan by January.

At Monday's hearing, Nichols said her agency has been moving swiftly to figure out all aspects of making the goals of AB32 a reality, hiring more than 100 engineers, scientists and lawyers.

But when it comes to paying for AB32, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office has charged that the Schwarzenegger administration continues to "put off difficult decisions on AB32's long-term funding."

A case for fee structure

The legislative analyst argues that the major sources of carbon emissions already are known and a fee structure can be developed now to help pay the startup costs of implementing AB32. Those fees can be revised later, after the air board's scoping plan is completed.

At least one environmental group thinks it's reasonable to start generating funds now with new fees on certain industries that are known polluters.

"We've got refineries, power plants and cement plants that are emitting greenhouse gases now," said Bill Magavern, director of Sierra Club, California. "So let's start charging those polluters now, instead of borrowing from (another fund) that would have to be paid back with interest later."

But deciding on fees that are appropriate and fair is not an easy task, said Catherine Reheis-Boyd, chief operating officer of the Western States Petroleum Association.

"To just slap a fee hither and yon at this point in time I don't think is how you want to establish a long-term funding for this program," she said.

PG&E taps cows for clean power

A new project will turn manure into energy for 50,000 customers

By Janis Mara, Staff Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, Mar. 4, 2008

A project that will light the homes of some 50,000 Pacific Gas & Electric customers with clean energy courtesy of California's cows is scheduled to go into effect today.

PG&E partner BioEnergy Solutions of Bakersfield will generate as much as 3 billion cubic feet of methane annually from cow manure, powering homes in Northern and Central California. State officials, including the secretary of the Department of Food and Agriculture, are expected to join company executives in Riverdale today for a ceremony marking the program's debut.

"We're thrilled to partner with PG&E on this project," said David Albers, president of BioEnergy Solutions and the owner of Vintage Dairy, whose 5,000 cows are tasked with providing the project's core product.

Those hardworking cows will provide enough methane to power 1,200 homes as part of the project's initial stages, Albers said. Eventually, the project will expand to include more of the state's 1.7 million cows and provide energy for some 50,000 homes.

PG&E heralded the project as the first such venture in California to deliver pipeline-quality, renewable natural gas to a utility. Currently, around 24 dairy farms in Northern California are using biogas created from their cows' manure to power their dairies, similar to how many California homeowners and businesses use solar panels to provide juice for their homes.

But the BioEnergy Solutions cow manure has an even larger destiny -- powering the homes of thousands of PG&E customers.

"Since California is the nation's largest dairy producer and also the largest energy consumer, this innovation holds significant promise," said Jennifer Zerwer of PG&E.

PG&E is under a state mandate to produce 20 percent of its electricity from renewable sources such as wind and solar energy by 2010, known as the Renewable Portfolio Standard. Currently, the utility gets 12 percent of its energy from such sources.

Traditionally, utilities have gotten their energy from sources such as coal-burning plants, but coal-fired energy generation spews toxic and greenhouse gas emissions including mercury and lead into the air, according to the California Energy Commission.

Not only does the BioEnergy project provide energy with fewer greenhouse gas emissions, it will also reduce the amount of methane in the state's atmosphere. Methane gas is 20 times more endangering to the atmosphere than carbon dioxide, Zerwer said.

The natural gas production starts with the cows. Next, the manure is collected in a digester as big as five football fields and three stories deep, Albers said.

"We draw the gas out with pumps and take out the hydrogen sulfide," the chemical that creates the substance's well-known, if not well-loved, aroma. Carbon dioxide is also removed and the methane gas goes to PG&E, which converts it to electricity.

Biogas from sources such as the Riverdale facility costs an estimated 13 cents a kilowatt hour, according to the California Energy Commission. Class 5 wind energy costs around 7 cents a kilowatt hour and photovoltaic solar costs about 46 cents a kilowatt hour.

"This is a novel idea, a new technology we've been excited about since we first signed the contracts in 2007," Zerwer said. "It's thrilling to see it go from a concept to reality and have the gas flowing."

Ethanol decision may be delayed again

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel Mon., March 3, 2008

The Hanford City Council had been scheduled to make a decision on the Great Valley Ethanol plant proposal Tuesday, after delaying the action Feb. 5.

But staff will be recommending that the council postpone the action until March 18.

Also, company officials said over the weekend that the company would not receive federal or state subsidies that are meant for ethanol blenders, despite popular perceptions.

The Bakersfield company plans to build a corn ethanol plant in south Hanford, where it would produce 63 million gallons per year of grain ethanol. The company is working on a similar project in Wasco.

Although once approved, the earlier city decision on the project has been challenged by a group of neighbors fearing pollution, and environmental advocates who cry foul over the economic and environmental viability of ethanol.

An appeal hearing held last month was marked by a sharp philosophical disagreement over whether ethanol is truly green. The opponents bashed ethanol for its impact on air, water and land, while the supporters argued that ethanol is an important first step in building a system that moves away from dependence on foreign oil.

In reaction to some of the issues raised in a recent Sentinel article, Edward Settle, president/CEO of Great Valley Ethanol said the ethanol produced by his company wouldn't only be used to replace MTBE, but also to serve California's growing E85 demand. He had previously said the company's ethanol is used for replacement of the oxygenate being phased out.

Settle has also stated the company would not receive a subsidy under the American Jobs Creation Act (51 cents per gallon federal tax credit) and another 9 cents for state tax credits.

Agency wants to improve air near port Programs, which aim to reduce diesel fumes, receive funds to help halt West Oakland pollution

By Barbara Grady, Staff Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Some "first steps" in cleaning the air wafting from the Port of Oakland into West Oakland were announced Monday when the Bay Area Air Quality District awarded \$3.4 million to two programs that reduce diesel fumes at the port.

One program involves installing electric power hookups at two berths at the port so that ships can turn off their diesel engines while unloading cargo. The second involves retrofitting 75 trucks that regularly drive in and out of the port with filters to collect diesel particulates from exhaust pipes.

"What this project represents is a first step to clean up diesel particulate pollution," said Jack Broadbent, executive officer of the air quality district.

"West Oakland is downwind from the port and its truck traffic," he said. The two programs "will reduce what we believe is a significant health threat" in West Oakland.

The neighborhood adjacent to the sprawling port and underneath the maze of highways driven by Bay Area commuters every day is thought to have very poor air quality. The state has found that asthma rates among children there are higher than in most parts of the state. Hospital visits by children suffering asthma attacks are five times as great per capita in West Oakland than the state average for childhood hospital visits for asthma.

But 75 trucks represent about 4 percent of the truck traffic driving in and out of the port on a regular basis, and 2,000 trucks regularly appear at the port.

There will be a much larger effort to retrofit trucks and reduce diesel emissions, said Omar Benjamin, port executive director.

He said the Port of Oakland plans to match the air quality district spending on the program so that \$6.8 million will be spent on reducing diesel emissions. The aim is to meet a state goal of an 85 percent reduction in the diesel particulate health risk by 2020.

A neighborhood leader said the two programs will help, but they must expand to truly change air quality.

"We don't know the number of kids missing school because of asthma or the number of older people dying from cancer from carcinogens that can be traced to the air," said Brian Beveridge. The West Oakland resident is co-chairman of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, a neighborhood group that has been pressing for action to clean up the emissions.

The state has found that air inside West Oakland homes has high levels of diesel particulates, Beveridge added.

Most of the trucks at the port are independently owned and operated. Selected truckers will each receive half of the cost of retrofitting, while the owner must pay the other half, Benjamin said.

Beveridge said that whether retrofitting 75 trucks will make a difference in neighborhood air quality depends on where these 75 trucks are based.

He asked, do they come from Tracy or are they the trucks parked on 18th Street overnight?

Benjamin would not specify how the 75 trucks would be chosen.

"We are hopeful that this is part of a bigger plan," Beveridge said, "a very aggressive plan to retrofit 1,000 trucks by the next year or so."

EPA unions accuse Bush appointees of abusing nature and trust

By ERICA WERNER, AP

Capital Press Ag Weekly, Washington Post, Monday, March 3, 2008

WASHINGTON (AP) - Unionized EPA workers are withdrawing from a cooperation agreement with the political appointees who supervise them over controversies including the agency's refusal to let California regulate greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks.

Nineteen union local presidents representing more than 10,000 Environmental Protection Agency employees signed a letter to Administrator Stephen L. Johnson last Friday accusing him of "abuses of our good nature and trust."

Under Johnson's leadership EPA has ignored jointly developed principles of scientific integrity "whenever political direction from other federal entities or private sector interests so direct," the unions charged.

Asked for comment, EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said only: "As a 27-year career EPA scientist, the administrator values the expertise and advice of his staff and will do so through his time in leadership."

The letter cited the California greenhouse gas waiver denial and several other issues, including mercury emissions from power plants. The Bush administration recently lost a court case for not sufficiently weighing the health impact of its proposal for reducing mercury pollution.

"EPA boasts of the principles of scientific integrity before the Congress and the public as an example of EPA's dedication to using only good science in its decision-making, but refuses to agree to an adjudication process for resolving disputes arising from alleged violations," says the letter, released Monday by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The union locals involved represent the vast majority of EPA workers around the country. Signers included William Evans, president of the EPA headquarters chapter of the National Treasury Employees Union.

Evans said that the purpose of the Clinton-era National Labor-Management Partnership Council was for senior agency officials and workers to deal with workplace and other issues before the decision stage.

Instead, "what we found is decisions are being made and they're being presented to us," said Evans.

The union leaders told Johnson they'd be suspending involvement in the partnership council "until we receive from you a clear commitment and specific direction."

The move follows a letter by a smaller group of union officers in January protesting Johnson's decision on the California waiver.

Fuel cells make power for homes in Japan

By YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

Modesto Bee, Contra Costa Times, USA Today and other papers, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

HIRATSUKA, Japan — Masanori Naruse jogs every day, collects miniature cars and feeds birds in his backyard, but he's proudest of the way his home and 2,200 others in Japan get electricity and heat water - with power generated by a hydrogen fuel cell.

The technology - which draws energy from the chemical reaction when hydrogen combines with oxygen to form water - is more commonly seen in futuristic cars with tanks of hydrogen instead of gasoline, whose combustion is a key culprit in pollution and global warming.

Developers say fuel cells for homes produce one-third less of the pollution that causes global warming than conventional electricity generation does.

"I was a bit worried in the beginning whether it was going to inconvenience my family or I wouldn't be able to take a bath," said the 45-year-old Japanese businessman, who lives with his wife, Tomoko, and two children, 12 and 9. But, as head of a construction company, he was naturally interested in new technology for homes.

Tomoko Naruse, 40, initially worried the thing would explode, given all she had heard about the dangers of hydrogen.

"Actually, you forget it's even there," her husband said.

Their plain gray fuel cell is about the size of a suitcase and sits just outside their door next to a tank that turns out to be a water heater. In the process of producing electricity, the fuel cell gives off enough warmth to heat water for the home.

The oxygen that the fuel cell uses comes from the air. The hydrogen is extracted from natural gas by a device called a reformer in the same box as the fuel cell. But a byproduct of that process is poisonous carbon monoxide. So another machine in the gray box adds oxygen to the carbon monoxide to create carbon dioxide, which - though it contributes to global warming - is not poisonous.

The entire process produces less greenhouse gas per watt than traditional generation. And no energy is wasted transporting the electricity where it's actually going to be used.

Nearly every home in Japanese cities is supplied with natural gas for cooking or heating, which could make it relatively easy to spread fuel cell technology there. The potential for widespread use of fuel cells in bigger or more sparsely settled countries is less certain. Many American homes don't have gas service, for example.

"There are not any real show-stoppers for this technology being used in the U.S.," said electrical engineering professor Roger Dougal at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, S.C.

Dougal said fuel cells are no more hazardous than any stove or water heater. Their major drawback is cost.

"Ultimately, I expect that some fraction of homes will use this technology, but it will be a very long time before a sizable fraction does," he said in an e-mail.

Naruse is paying \$9,500 for a 10-year lease on a test fuel cell for his home southwest of Tokyo from Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. Matsushita, which sells Panasonic brand products, plans to offer fuel cells commercially in 2009.

Other Japanese companies working on fuel cells for homes include Toyota Motor Corp., which is developing fuel-cell vehicles, and electronics maker Toshiba Corp. Automaker Honda Motor Co. is working with Plug Power Inc., a fuel cell company in the U.S., to test a home fuel cell generator that also provides hydrogen as fuel for fuel cell vehicles.

Honda hopes domestic use of fuel cell generators will help make fuel cell vehicles become more widespread because owners can refuel at home. It plans to start marketing the FCX Clarity fuel cell vehicle this year in California; it will lease for about \$600 a month.

Fuel cells are expensive in part because they don't last very long. The latest model from Matsushita, for example, lasts about three years.

But the technology is improving. Matsushita says the savings from using fuel cell-generated power will vary by household and climate, but it promises a cost drop of about \$50 a month.

Naruse's family - with three TV sets, a dishwasher, clothes washer, dryer, personal computer and air conditioner - saves about \$95 a month. At the same time, conventionally generated electricity remains available to them, should the power generated by their fuel cell run low.

The Japanese government is so bullish on the technology it has earmarked \$309 million a year for fuel cell development and plans for 10 million homes - about one-fourth of Japanese households - to be powered by fuel cells by 2020.

Professor Bruce Rittman, director for the Center for Environmental Biotechnology at Arizona State University, says the biggest benefit of fuel cell technology is that it emits only water - when there's a clean source of hydrogen.

"Fuel cells are wonderful devices because they provide combustionless, pollution-free electricity," he said.

Tomoko Naruse said she might never have chosen a fuel cell if her husband hadn't insisted.

But she is happy her children are proud of it because they are learning about the threat of global warming in school.

"I think my children are thinking about the future," she said.

Immune Systems Increasingly On Attack

By Rob Stein

Washington Post and Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

First, asthma cases shot up, along with hay fever and other common allergic reactions, such as eczema. Then, pediatricians started seeing more children with food allergies. Now, experts are increasingly convinced that a suspected jump in lupus, multiple sclerosis and other afflictions caused by misfiring immune systems is real.

Though the data are stronger for some diseases than others, and part of the increase may reflect better diagnoses, experts estimate that many allergies and immune-system diseases have doubled, tripled or even quadrupled in the last few decades, depending on the ailment and

country. Some studies now indicate that more than half of the U.S. population has at least one allergy.

The cause remains the focus of intense debate and study, but some researchers suspect the concurrent trends all may have a common explanation rooted in aspects of modern living -- including the "hygiene hypothesis" that blames growing up in increasingly sterile homes, changes in diet, [air pollution](#), and possibly even obesity and increasingly sedentary lifestyles.

"We have dramatically changed our lives in the last 50 years," said Fernando Martinez, who studies allergies at the University of Arizona. "We are exposed to more products. We have people with different backgrounds being exposed to different environments. We have made our lives more antiseptic, especially early in life. Our immune systems may grow differently as a result. And we may be paying a price for that."

Along with a flurry of research to confirm and explain the trends, scientists have also begun testing possible remedies. Some are feeding high-risk children gradually larger amounts of allergy-inducing foods, hoping to train the immune system not to overreact. Others are testing benign bacteria or parts of bacteria. Still others have patients with MS, colitis and related ailments swallow harmless parasitic worms to try to calm their bodies' misdirected defenses.

"If you look at the incidence of these diseases, a lot of them began to emerge and become much more common after parasitic worm diseases were eliminated from our environment," said Robert Summers of the University of Iowa, who is experimenting with whipworms. "We believe they have a profound symbiotic effect on developing and maintaining the immune system."

Although hay fever, eczema, asthma and food allergies seem quite different, they are all "allergic diseases" because they are caused by the immune system responding to substances that are ordinarily benign, such as pollen or peanuts. Autoimmune diseases also result from the body's defense mechanisms malfunctioning. But in these diseases, which include lupus, MS, Type 1 diabetes and inflammatory bowel disease, the immune system attacks parts of the body such as nerves, the pancreas or digestive tract.

"Overall, there is very little doubt that we have seen significant increases," said Syed Hasan Arshad of the David Hide Asthma and Allergy Centre in England, who focuses on food allergies. "You can call it an epidemic. We're talking about millions of people and huge implications, both for health costs and quality of life. People miss work. Severe asthma can kill. Peanut allergies can kill. It does have huge implications all around. If it keeps increasing, where will it end?"

One reason that many researchers suspect something about modern living is to blame is that the increases show up largely in highly developed countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere, and have only started to rise in other countries as they have become more developed.

"It's striking," said William Cookson of the Imperial College in London.

The leading theory to explain the phenomenon holds that as modern medicine beats back bacterial, viral and parasitic diseases that have long plagued humanity, immune systems may fail to learn how to differentiate between real threats and benign invaders, such as ragweed pollen or food. Or perhaps because they are not busy fighting real threats, they overreact or even turn on the body's own tissues.

"Our immune systems are much less busy," said Jean-Francois Bach of the French Academy of Sciences, "and so have much more strong responses to much weaker stimuli, triggering allergies and autoimmune diseases."

Several lines of evidence support the theory. Children raised with pets or older siblings are less likely to develop allergies, possibly because they are exposed to more microbes. But perhaps the strongest evidence comes from studies comparing thousands of people who grew up on farms in Europe to those who lived in less rural settings. Those reared on farms were one-tenth as likely to develop diseases such as asthma and hay fever.

"The data are very strong," said Erika von Mutius of the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. "If kids have all sorts of exposures on the farm by being in the stables a lot, close to the animals and the grasses, and drinking cow's milk from their own farm, that seems to confer protection."

The theory has also gained support from a variety of animal studies. One, for example, found that rats bred in a sterile laboratory had far more sensitive immune systems than those reared in the wild, where they were exposed to infections, microorganisms and parasites.

"It's sort of a smoking gun of the hygiene hypothesis," said William Parker of Duke University.

Researchers believe the lack of exposure to potential threats early in life leaves the immune system with fewer command-and-control cells known as regulatory T cells, making the system more likely to overreact or run wild.

"If you live in a very clean society, you're not going to have a lot of regulatory T cells," Parker said.

While the evidence for the hygiene theory is accumulating, many say it remains far from proven.

"That theory is so full of holes that it's clearly not the whole story," said Robert Wood of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

It does not explain, for example, the rise in asthma, since that disease occurs much more commonly in poor, inner-city areas where children are exposed to more cockroaches and rodents that may trigger it, Wood and others said.

Several alternative theories have been presented. [Some researchers blame exposure to fine particles in air pollution, which may give the immune system more of a hair trigger, especially in genetically predisposed individuals.](#) Others say obesity and a sedentary lifestyle may play a role. Still others wonder whether eating more processed food or foods processed in different ways, or changes in the balance of certain vitamins that can affect the immune system, such as vitamins C and E and fish oil, are a factor.

"Cleaning up the food we eat has actually changed what we're eating," said Thomas Platts-Mills of the University of Virginia.

But many researchers believe the hygiene hypothesis is the strongest, and that the reason one person develops asthma instead of hay fever or eczema or lupus or MS is because of a genetic predisposition.

"We believe it's about half and half," Cookson said. "You need environmental factors and you need genetic susceptibility as well."

Some researchers have begun to try to identify specific genes that may be involved, as well as specific components of bacteria or other pathogens that might be used to train immune systems to respond appropriately.

"If we could mimic what is happening in these farm environments, we could protect children and prevent asthma, allergies and other diseases," von Mutius said.

Some researchers are trying to help people who are at risk for allergies or already ill with autoimmune diseases.

With new research suggesting that food allergies may be occurring earlier in life and lasting longer, several small studies have been done or are underway in which children at risk for milk, egg and peanut allergies are given increasing amounts of those foods, beginning with tiny doses, to try to train the immune system.

"I'm very encouraged," said Wesley Burks, a professor of pediatrics at Duke who has done some of the studies. "I'm hopeful that in five years, there may be some type of therapy from this."

Another promising line of research involves giving patients microscopic parasitic worms to try to tamp down the immune system.

"We've seen rather dramatic improvements in patients' conditions," said Summers of the University of Iowa, who has treated more than 100 people with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis by giving them parasitic worms that infect pigs but are harmless to humans. "We're not claiming that this is a cure, but we saw a very dramatic improvement. Some patients went into complete remission."

Doctors in Argentina reported last year that MS patients who had intestinal parasites fared better than those who did not, and researchers at the University of Wisconsin are planning to launch another study as early as next month testing pig worms in 20 patients with the disease.

"We hope to show whether this treatment has promise and is worth exploring further in a larger study," said John O. Fleming, a professor of neurology who is leading the effort.

Bay Area can say it's greenest in the country

By Janis Mara, Staff Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Who's the greenest of them all? If a new national survey is any indication, it's the Bay Area.

San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley made the top 10 of a national survey by Popular Science magazine rating the country's 50 most environmentally friendly cities. Concord and Fremont made the top 50 -- numbers 43 and 44, respectively -- as did 13 California cities, enough to turn other states green with envy.

The survey combined data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Geographic Society's Green Guide, which collected survey data and government statistics for American cities with more than 100,000 people in categories including air quality, electricity use and transportation habits.

Portland, Ore., grabbed the top spot, while San Francisco was No. 2.

California dominated the survey with 13 cities on the list. New York came in second with four cities on the list.

"I'm not surprised," said Sean Randolph, chief executive of the San Francisco-based Bay Area Council Economic Institute. "California has always been more environmentally attuned than other states, and the Bay Area has always been the most environmentally attuned region in the state.

"It's brought a lot of money into the Bay Area," said Randolph. "The Bay Area attracted about a billion dollars last year for research in alternative energy technology."

As examples, Randolph pointed to a \$500 million grant from BP Oil for developing biofuels given to UC Berkeley, as well as a \$125 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to UC Berkeley and other entities. Venture capital money invested in green technology is another example, he said.

"The Bay Area's cities scored high largely because our investments in public transit enable more of us to get around without driving, creating far less unhealthy pollution," said Emily Rusch, an advocate with California Public Interest Research Group.

On a 1-to-10 scale, San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley each scored 8 or more for widespread public transportation and air quality. AC Transit's fleet of three hydrogen buses took the spotlight in an accompanying case study of how green cities got that way.

"This designation reflects Oakland's commitment to be a sustainable model city," said Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums. "Through the tremendous dedication and efforts of community partners and city government working together, we are advancing efforts to curb global climate change and oil dependence, reach our zero waste goal and become a leader in green jobs creation."

The survey gave points to cities for the number of buildings certified by the U.S. Green Building Council, as well as their recycling programs. Cities also scored points for getting their electricity from renewable sources such as wind, solar, biomass and hydroelectric power, as well as for offering incentives for residents to invest in their own power sources, such as solar roofs.

California has a head start in this area, having passed legislation in 2004 and 2006 aimed at creating 1 million solar roofs in the state by 2018. Also, utilities such as Pacific Gas & Electric are under a mandate to get 20 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2010. And AB32, passed in 2006, aims to slash state greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2020.

Like Randolph, Adam Gottlieb of the California Energy Commission wasn't surprised by the news.

"Popular Science has acknowledged what we've known all along," Gottlieb said. "We're (California) bold, we're daring, we're innovative. Let's tell Portland to watch its back, because we're gaining on it."

Sunkist To Convert Leftovers To Ethanol

Valley Voice Newspaper, Monday, March 03, 2008

Tipton - Sunkist is negotiating with a company that plans to make biofuel from waste citrus peel - a byproduct of the Tipton orange and lemon juicing plant in Tulare County.

"We're pretty far along," with the plan, says Ted Leaman, vice president of Sunkist's Juice and Oil business.

"We've tested the waste peel and it looks like it will work" in the undisclosed process that will turn a waste product into one of several biofuels being used as a transportation fuel.

"We are particularly happy about the plan to make the ethanol from a waste product," says Sunkist President Tim Lindgren, "instead of a food crop that competes with our growers" - a product like corn that is used to make most of the nation's ethanol.

Leaman says it could be about another month or so before the company would be named, but that it has a track record that looks good, he says. The company would be using new technology not used in the Florida process that converts orange peel to ethanol. "Another reason we are so excited," about the project, he says.

Leaman says the company would set up a cogeneration plant on site that could make electricity as well as convert the waste peels to biofuel. The company would likely make more electricity than could be used on site.

Sunkist has 296 acres along Highway 99 and the existing juice plant, built in 1981, sits on just 17 acres.

A new Sunkist lemon juicing plant will add to the volume of peel produced at the existing orange juice plant in Tipton said to be the most advanced on the West Coast. The lemon operation is expected to begin processing next month with the closure of the Ontario plant and relocation of most of the equipment to the southern Tulare County plant site.

Most new equipment is being installed inside the large building on site although several new evaporators have been erected and 30 new employees are being trained to work at the lemon operation. In Ontario, the lemon peels were a disposal and transportation problem that actually cost the company money "to get rid of because the livestock industry that formerly consumed the waste has long left the area." Now the tons of sugar-laden waste will be conveyed from the juice plant next door to the energy plant helping to boost Sunkist's bottom line as a source of energy, notes Lindgren.

If the refinery is built, it would be the county's fourth ethanol plant either built or in the works - all on Highway 99. Like the proposed Visalia plant - the Tipton facility would not use corn which has skyrocketed in price, instead utilizing waste products and non- food plants as a feedstock considered to be the wave of the future in biofuels.

Research on squeezing ethanol from citrus peel has been going on for more than a decade through USDA and private firms concentrating on enzymes that could bring down the cost of

production. The work has been concentrated in Florida where most of the citrus crop goes to juice.

Corporate Office

Sunkist holds its annual meeting in Visalia Feb. 20 and Lindgren plans to update growers on the past year that turned out brighter than once expected after the freeze a year ago.

Asked if Sunkist had made any decision on the sale of its corporate office, Lindgren says they are still talking to several potential buyers but that no decision has been made. Lindgren has told the Voice that the company could choose to move its corporate office to the Valley if it sells off its Sherman Oaks facility to relocate in Bakersfield, Visalia or even Tipton.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Tuesday, March 4, 2008:](#)

Proposed Indian casino does not belong on Highway 99 Public should make concerns heard at upcoming hearing.

A hearing on the draft environmental impact statement for a new Indian casino proposed for Madera County will let the public comment on whether this mega-gambling site should be built on Highway 99 just north of Madera. We continue to oppose this project for two main reasons: It's an off-reservation casino and its Highway 99 location would soon make it a congested urban area.

We have long supported Indian gaming on tribal land in rural areas. But the proposal by the North Fork Rancheria of the Mono Indians does not meet that basic standard.

If the casino and resort are built on the 305-acre site, they will create urban traffic, air quality problems and stretch an inadequate infrastructure.

Highway 99 is a major north-south artery in this state and it would bring faraway traffic to the casino. While that would be good for casino operators, it would create many unintended problems for residents living throughout the region.

When voters approved expanded Indian gaming, they envisioned the gambling operations in rural areas and on land the tribes already owned.

As we have said previously, we are sympathetic to the plight of the North Fork tribe.

The North Fork tribe lost its original rancheria decades ago after the federal government terminated recognition of 41 California rancherias. The government years later settled a lawsuit by restoring the status of the tribes.

But in the case of North Fork, the rancheria was transferred to individuals and the tribe itself was "landless." The tribe later purchased about 60 acres near North Fork for housing and a community center.

That land isn't suitable for a casino, so the tribe went reservation shopping. Instead of finding land in a rural area that would meet the objections of most, the North Fork Rancheria decided to push for a Highway 99 casino.

No matter how the proponents dress up this project, it's still in the wrong place.

We hope the public hearing on March 12 is not just a sham to get the environmental study completed.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is on course to approve the project, should actually listen to opponents of this project. They are correct in their contention that this casino and resort shouldn't be built on Highway 99.

The North Fork Rancheria's proposal would be welcomed if it were in the proper location. It would generate much-needed jobs for the region and revenue for Madera County and the tribe.

But money and jobs don't magically make this a good location for a casino and 200-room hotel. This is a bad bet for the entire region.

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Mar. 04, 2008:](#)

Driving business away

Editor: Kenneth Brown Jr.'s letter (Feb. 23) really hit the nail on the head. Why is Merced driving businesses out of Merced and blocking others from coming here?

The Wal-Mart Distribution Center is the prime example. When I was in high school they taught us that the prevailing winds in this Valley blow north to south. Of course, 1935 was a long time ago, so the teachers probably didn't even know that pollutants and fumes could travel north, against the wind, to Golden Valley and other schools. Evidently, the semiprofessional Stop Wal-Mart Team from Florida has a new understanding of wind currents and prevailing winds in our Valley that differs from what we were taught. But they should explain this new theory to the farmers who still plant their new trees with a definite slant to the north.

It is pretty evident to me that the Florida Team is orchestrating the Wal-Mart opposition. For example: Protesters, including high school students, speaking and reading poems at City Council meetings. They really aren't concerned about Merced; their sole objective is to stop Wal-Mart. If a suitable location was available in Atwater, north of us, and Wal-Mart chose to move there, would that make Merced happy? Would the pollutants (and I'm not implying there will even be any) continue to move north against the wind? Or would the prevailing winds bring them right into our city of Merced?

The San Joaquin Valley could get as much as \$340 million in state funds (that's from us taxpayers) to take dirty diesel trucks off Highway 99. Wal-Mart has spent millions of its own dollars to replace or clean up their own trucks. Wal-Mart is paying a consultant \$300,000 to study how the project could affect air quality, traffic and neighbors.

The city might seek more environmental studies (peer review) cost to Wal-Mart, another \$18,800. Since Wal-Mart started work on the impact report in 2006 it has spent \$441,800 on various studies. Now the county has requested a similar peer review that will cost Wal-Mart another \$102,000. When Merced bleeds all the money it possibly can from Wal-Mart, and they finally build their distribution center and start employing people from our area, it will be interesting to see which way the wind blows. Will it blow north to the delta or continue to blow south like it always has?

William R. Elliott, Merced

[Letter to the Hanford Sentinel Mon., March 3, 2008](#)

I don't believe the hype

Editor: First, I want make it clear that I don't believe in the global warming hype, which is a very neat way to turn off our nation's economy while allowing the largest polluters, China and India, to opt out. Secondly I believe that the sun and Earth's erratic orbit have more control than so called greenhouse gases.

In Mr. Flores' letter he states "The only thing released is CO2 which is zero impact to the atmosphere." I find this extremely amusing in that our Attorney General "MoonBeam" Brown is suing the EPA on the premise that the state of California should be allowed to control the

emission of CO2 from motor vehicles. Now as Attorney General "Moonbeam" has little or no scientific background, I look for another reason and lo and behold from an article in the Sacramento Bee, it looks like Sacramento has a parcel of "green" legislation in the side curtains and is looking at this as a source of new revenue and to create more bureaucracy. Meanwhile the governor is proposing to "borrow" money to pay for implementing the states ambitious plans to roll back greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

The governor wants to borrow money from various funds filled by driver's license and vehicle registration fees, as well as to tap into recycling deposits, to help pay for 212 positions at a dozen state agencies. I would like to note that CARB was looking into regulating wineries' emissions before the hype about ethanol came along. I would venture to guess that an ethanol plant emits a lot of CO2 (tons) every day. Some other sources of CO2 are bakeries, breweries and wineries. And the funny thing is that recently released data shows that our temperatures worldwide were lower last year and we have record snow levels covering North America this winter.

John Bartlett
Hanford

[Letter to the Lodi News-Sentinel, Tuesday, March 4, 2008:](#)

Octane booster could help

In view of the serious problem this world has, namely global warming, I have a suggestion that just might help in resolving it.

For a few dollars, a customer can purchase a container called octane booster. One container can be added to a full tank of gasoline. The booster not only guarantees more miles per gallon of gasoline, it also lessens the amount of pollution - carbon monoxide - in the air.

Elin Terra, Lodi

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses a total of 19 delegates of EPA have all stated that they are against Stephen Johnson's decision to refuse the waiver to California and 16 other states. For more information on this clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Rechazan 10 mil empleados de la EPA política de su administrador contra California

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Tuesday, March 4, 2008

El sindicato que representa a unos diez mil empleados de la Agencia federal de Protección Ambiental, la EPA, por sus siglas en inglés, declaró que rechaza la política del administrador nacional de esa institución, Stephen Johnson contra California.

Un total de 19 delegaciones de la EPA, que significan todos los empleados, dijeron en carta conjunta estar en desacuerdo con la negativa de Johnson para que California y otros 16 estados activen sus propias leyes ambientales.

Es el segundo acto interno en contra del administrador nacional. La semana pasada circuló un memorando ejecutivo que mencionaba la renuncia del administrador.