

Breathe easy: Make back-to-school asthma, allergy plans

BY EMILY HAGEDORN, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Aug. 16, 2008

To some parents, back-to-school time means buying their kids new backpacks and talking to teachers about class expectations.

For Yvonne Contreras, it means making sure her daughter is carrying an inhaler and informing teachers about asthma.

"If she gets sick, that's an automatic asthma attack," the Bakersfield mom said.

Close quarters, the easy spreading of germs, physical activity and other environmental factors make going back to school a bad time for allergies and asthma, said some local experts.

It's also a good time for parents to make sure their asthmatic and allergic children are up-to-date on their medications and have a plan if something happens, said Sharon Borradori, associate director of programs at the Kern County branch of the American Lung Association.

"The more it's under control, the less ... it's going to bug them," she said.

Contreras has learned how much asthma can interfere with 11-year-old Daisy's schooling.

The chronic condition, which is caused by inflammation of the airways, made Daisy miss roughly 50 days each year during second, third and fourth grade.

To help keep her in school, Contreras gives her teachers a plan: If Daisy suffers symptoms, let her use her inhaler. If that doesn't work, call Contreras and she'll bring more treatment.

And if that doesn't stop an attack, Contreras will bring her to the hospital.

Teachers, coaches and school nurses should also know an asthmatic child's triggers, such as physical activity or animal dander, Borradori said.

In terms of food allergies, parents should inform teachers and other parents of the allergy to cut down on the food being brought into class, said Dr. Sameer Gupta, allergist and immunologist with Kern County's Kaiser Permanente. They should also make sure the child has access to an epinephrine shot in case of accidental exposure.

Along with school time, early fall also coincides with the beginning of the viral cold season, which can aggravate asthmatics.

"If the child gets a cold during the start of school, look very closely for signs of asthma," Gupta said.

Almond harvesting and the county fair, which happen around this time of year, stir up dust — another possible trigger.

And as always, bad air quality can impact anyone's health.

If the air quality becomes unhealthy, parents should ask schools to curtail outdoor recess and gym class, Borradori said.

Look for "air quality flags"

Some local schools fly "air quality flags." The flag's color corresponds to the current air quality.

Green: healthy. There should be no limitations on outdoor activity.

Yellow: moderate. Extremely sensitive people, especially those with respiratory diseases such as asthma, should consider limiting outdoor exertion.

Orange: unhealthy for sensitive groups. Sensitive people, such as those with asthma, should limit prolonged outdoor activity.

Red: unhealthy. Everyone should limit prolonged exertion outdoors, and sensitive groups should stay inside.

Sources: American Lung Association and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Stricter wood-burning rules sought

By KEN CARLSON

Modesto Bee, Saturday, August 16, 2008

THE ISSUE: The valley air district wants to impose tighter restrictions on wood-burning fireplaces and stoves.

WHAT IT MEANS: Far lower concentrations of pollution could trigger "no burn" days.

WHAT'S NEXT: The air district is discussing the regulations at workshops this week. The schedule: - 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in Stockton, in the San Joaquin County Council of Governments boardroom, 555 E. Weber Ave. - 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in Modesto, at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District office, 4800 Enterprise Way.

New clean air rules would put tighter restrictions on Northern San Joaquin Valley residents who like to stoke their fireplaces during colder months.

Since 2003, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has banned wood burning on days when unhealthy levels of particle pollution are predicted. The regulations are enforced Nov. 1 through the end of February.

The new policy would lower the pollution threshold for calling "no burn" days by more than 50 percent. It comes as the eight-county air district tries to meet tighter federal standards on particle pollution that were adopted in 2006.

The tighter rules could be imposed in November. The policy would exempt homes in rural areas where natural gas hookups are not available.

Residents can be fined \$50 for first-time violations and face bigger fines for subsequent violations.

The air district will hold workshops in Modesto and Stockton this week to discuss the regulations and receive comments from the public.

According to district officials, the regulations would prevent Stanislaus County residents from using their fireplaces about 12 days a year. Under the present regulations, the county had three "no burn" days in 2005-06, nine in 2006-07 and one in 2007-08.

San Joaquin County is expected to have nine "no burn" days a year, compared with none last winter and one each in 2006-07 and 2005-06; Merced County is expected to have 12, compared with none last winter and two each in 2006-07 and 2005-06.

"Wood smoke does have a significant impact on regional air quality," said Scott Nester, planning director for the air district. "Even when the air quality is relatively good throughout the valley, you can have pockets of wood smoke in neighborhoods."

Wood-burning fireplaces emit carbon monoxide and tiny particles that linger in the air. When inhaled, the smallest particles can be absorbed in the bloodstream or embed in the lungs.

Studies have tied the pollution to asthma attacks, chronic bronchitis, lung cancer, irregular heartbeat and decreased lung function in children.

The district credits the fireplace restrictions with improving air quality in the valley. The tighter rules should help the air basin attain standards for tiny particle pollution by 2015. If the standard is not attained, the threshold for calling "no burn" days could be lowered further, a district staff report says.

Modesto resident Duwayne Stenger said he's against placing more restrictions on fireplaces.

"I think it is a problem for the people on fixed incomes who try to burn wood to heat their houses," he said. "The PG&E gas is expensive, and they are trying to make ends meet."

The district has offered financial incentives through Operation Clean Air for people to replace wood-burning fireplaces, stoves and inserts with cleaner gas devices. From Feb. 1 through April 30, valley

residents were offered vouchers giving \$350 discounts toward the purchase of a gas unit. About 600 wood-burning units were replaced.

"What we are seeing is that folks have shifted away from wood burning," Nester said. "They found they didn't need it as much during the winter months."

For more details on the fireplace regulations, go to www.valleyair.org. On the left side of the page, click on "public meetings," then "workshops & hearings" and then "Rule 4901 (Wood burning fireplaces and wood burning heaters)."

The district will receive written comments on the fireplace rules until Aug. 28. Email comments to jessica.hafer@valleyair.org or address comments to Jessica Hafer, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, 93726.

Stricter wood-burning rules sought

By Ken Carlson, The Modesto Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Aug. 18, 2008

New clean air rules would put tighter restrictions on Northern San Joaquin Valley residents who like to stoke their fireplaces during colder months.

Since 2003, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has banned wood burning on days when unhealthy levels of particle pollution are predicted. The regulations are enforced Nov. 1 through the end of February.

The new policy would lower the pollution threshold for calling "no burn" days by more than 50 percent. It comes as the eight-county air district tries to meet tighter federal standards on particle pollution that were adopted in 2006.

The tighter rules could be imposed in November. The policy would exempt homes in rural areas where natural gas hookups are not available.

Residents can be fined \$50 for first-time violations and face bigger fines for subsequent violations.

The air district will hold workshops in Modesto and Stockton this week to discuss the regulations and receive comments from the public.

According to district officials, the regulations would prevent Stanislaus County residents from using their fireplaces about 12 days a year. Under the present regulations, the county had three "no burn" days in 2005-06, nine in 2006-07 and one in 2007-08.

San Joaquin County is expected to have nine "no burn" days a year, compared with none last winter and one each in 2006-07 and 2005-06; Merced County is expected to have 12, compared with none last winter and two each in 2006-07 and 2005-06.

"Wood smoke does have a significant impact on regional air quality," said Scott Nester, planning director for the air district. "Even when the air quality is relatively good throughout the valley, you can have pockets of wood smoke in neighborhoods."

Wood-burning fireplaces emit carbon monoxide and tiny particles that linger in the air. When inhaled, the smallest particles can be absorbed in the bloodstream or embed in the lungs.

Studies have tied the pollution to asthma attacks, chronic bronchitis, lung cancer, irregular heartbeat and decreased lung function in children.

The district credits the fireplace restrictions with improving air quality in the valley. The tighter rules should help the air basin attain standards for tiny particle pollution by 2015. If the standard is not attained, the threshold for calling "no burn" days could be lowered further, a district staff report says.

Modesto resident Duwayne Stenger said he's against placing more restrictions on fireplaces.

"I think it is a problem for the people on fixed incomes who try to burn wood to heat their houses," he said. "The PG&E gas is expensive, and they are trying to make ends meet."

The district has offered financial incentives through Operation Clean Air for people to replace wood-burning fireplaces, stoves and inserts with cleaner gas devices. From Feb. 1 through April 30, valley residents were offered vouchers giving \$350 discounts toward the purchase of a gas unit. About 600 wood-burning units were replaced.

"What we are seeing is that folks have shifted away from wood burning," Nester said. "They found they didn't need it as much during the winter months."

For more details on the fireplace regulations, go to www.valleyair.org. On the left side of the page, click on "public meetings," then "workshops & hearings" and then "Rule 4901 (Wood burning fireplaces and wood burning heaters)."

The district will receive written comments on the fireplace rules until Aug. 28. Email comments to jessica.hafer@valleyair.org or address comments to Jessica Hafer, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, 93726.

Air quality hits unhealthy levels

In the Sacramento Bee, Modesto Bee and Hanford Sentinel, Friday and Saturday, Aug. 15 & 16, 2008

FRESNO (AP) -- Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley was predicted to be at its unhealthiest level in a month Friday as 104-degree heat and stagnant air combine to trap pollution. Air officials issued a "very unhealthy" forecast for Fresno County, while the air in Merced, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties earns an only slightly better "unhealthy" rating.

Fresno's air quality index rating, a measure of ozone, particle pollution, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, was 203 Friday. When values reach 201, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issues an alert that even healthy people might experience serious effects.

People are advised to avoid outdoor activity from 11 a.m. until 8 p.m., peak ozone hours. Levels were expected to decline after this weekend, when high temperatures were forecast to dip back into the upper 90s.

Heat wave brings grimy air into San Joaquin Valley

By HANNAH FRANKLIN, The Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Aug, 15, 2008

FRESNO — A dangerous mix of heat, pollution and stagnant air has settled over the San Joaquin Valley, pushing air quality to very unhealthy levels.

On Thursday, Fresno and Visalia opened cooling centers, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a "health cautionary statement" urging everyone to avoid outdoor activities during peak ozone hours — 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The air-quality index reached a very unhealthy 201 in Fresno on Thursday afternoon, the district said, and it's expected to reach 203 today.

The forecast for today in Merced is 151, which is in the unhealthy category.

It's the first time since July 9 that the index has climbed over 200 in Fresno, said Gary Arcemont, senior air quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Part of the problem is a high-pressure system stretching along the West Coast — acting as a lid on top of the Valley's bowl-like shape, Arcemont said.

"When we have low pressure, the pollutants tend to be blown away a little more readily, and when we have the high, the lid gets stronger and stronger," Arcemont said.

And that traps pollutants like fuel emissions and dairy byproducts.

Mix in heat and sunshine, and the result is ozone.

Among ozone health risks are coughing, difficulty breathing, asthma and lung damage.

Dr. John D. Gasman, a pulmonologist at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Fresno, recommends that on days with high heat and bad air quality, individuals bundle their trips and refrain from exercising during the afternoon.

"It's amazing when I see people jogging at three in the afternoon in Fresno," Gasman said. "It's not healthy from a heat or air-quality standpoint." The high in Fresno reached 106 degrees Thursday, and it is forecast to be 106 today, too.

In Merced, Thursday's high was 105, the same as it's expected to reach today.

Fresno activates its 10 cooling centers when the National Weather Service projects temperatures of 105 degrees or higher. Until this week, that hadn't happened since early July.

"We've been very fortunate this summer. It's been remarkably comfortable," said Patti Miller, a city spokeswoman.

The highs are expected to climb above 100 every day until Sunday, when a high of 98 is forecast in Fresno. The high-pressure system is expected to weaken Sunday, bringing the cooler temperatures, according to the National Weather Service.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Control District predicts the air quality will begin to improve Monday and Tuesday.

Air quality warnings across SJ Valley Friday

In the S.F. Chronicle, Friday, August 15, 2008

Fresno, CA (AP) -- Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is predicted to be at its most unhealthy level in a month Friday as 104-degree heat and stagnant air combine to trap pollution.

Air officials have issued a "very unhealthy" forecast for Fresno County, while the air in Merced, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties earns an only slightly better "unhealthy" rating.

Fresno's air quality index rating, a measure of ozone, particle pollution, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, is 203 Friday. When values reach 201, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District issues an alert that even healthy people might experience serious effects.

People are advised avoid outdoor activity from 11 a.m. until 8 p.m., peak ozone hours.

Air quality hits unhealthy levels

Coalinga Record, Saturday, Aug. 16, 2008

FRESNO (AP) -- Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley was predicted to be at its unhealthiest level in a month Friday as 104-degree heat and stagnant air combine to trap pollution. Air officials issued a "very unhealthy" forecast for Fresno County, while the air in Merced, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties earns an only slightly better "unhealthy" rating.

Fresno's air quality index rating, a measure of ozone, particle pollution, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, was 203 Friday. When values reach 201, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issues an alert that even healthy people might experience serious effects.

People are advised to avoid outdoor activity from 11 a.m. until 8 p.m., peak ozone hours. Levels were expected to decline after this weekend, when high temperatures were forecast to dip back into the upper 90s.

Cities, groups, people express concerns over West Park

Written by James Leonard

Patterson Irrigator, Friday, Aug. 15, 2008

Patricia Snoke is certain of it.

Her great-grandmother, Ellen O'Connell Bird Niddrie, was buried in the 1800s along with son Joseph Bird in a pioneer cemetery under or adjacent to the former Crows Landing Naval Airfield.

If the cemetery exists — as Snoke and other longtime West Side residents have claimed — it sits well within the boundaries of a proposed 7.5-square-mile industrial park, and that has her more than a little anxious.

So Snoke took advantage of the 45-day period for public review of the Notice of Preparation of PCCP West Park's draft environmental impact report, a document that outlined the proposed project in great detail.

Snoke was one of 32 residents, organizations and government bodies that submitted formal comments by Monday's deadline. The concerns raised in those letters will help determine what should be examined in the draft environmental impact report, which officials hope will be completed sometime next spring.

The most common concerns raised in the 32 letters included the familiar topics of increased traffic, decreased air quality, loss of farmland and the quantity and quality of water needed for such a massive project.

But perhaps none of the comments were as personal as Snoke's. She said her family knows that their ancestors were buried there, and she wants to make sure they're not disturbed.

"I have a feeling (the cemetery is) in an alfalfa field, which is fine with me," Snoke said. "I just don't want them going out there and digging up my family or repaving over it."

West Park developer Gerry Kamilos said the impact report will include an archaeological study, and part of that study will determine whether this cemetery exists. If it does, more studying will be done to determine its historical significance and how best to deal with the site.

If the environmental impact report is to gain approval, it must answer numerous concerns from such bodies as the state departments of Conservation and Transportation, the California Farm Bureau Federation and the cities of Patterson, Gustine, Turlock and Ceres, among others.

"Basically, we're looking at the traffic — truck, auto and rail — coming into the area and how it's going to impact the community of Gustine and what mitigation measures they'd propose to offset those impacts," Gustine community development director Jake Rasper said. "And the big issue of air quality in the valley is always a concern."

Keith Boggs, Stanislaus County's deputy executive officer of economic development and its project manager for West Park, said one of the biggest hurdles the project must overcome is the water.

"You must identify water quality and quantity and sustainability," Boggs said. "If you don't, you're done."

West Park, which would be built in and around the 1,527-acre county-owned former U.S. Navy airfield in Crows Landing, would include an inland port that would be linked to the Port of Oakland by a short-haul rail line.

Proponents say the project would provide 37,000 jobs. Opponents, like the West Side-Patterson Alliance for the Community and the Environment (WS-PACE), worry about the impact that such a huge project could have on the West Side.

"We do not like the rail proposal at all, and we're hoping to get rid of it," said WS-PACE president Ron Swift. "And we are still anxious to limit the industrial development to the original size of the base."

In the letters regarding the project, some groups stated concerns specific to their own interests:

- The Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department wants to continue the emergency vehicle training it currently does at the site, and it said a new sheriff's substation should be included in the development to ensure future public safety.
- The Newman-Crows Landing School District expressed concerns about its already crowded schools being overburdened when the new jobs created by the industrial park lead to an increase in population.

- The Patterson Vegetable Co., located at Las Palmas Avenue and First Street, said it was worried about the impact that a possible railway underpass on Las Palmas — which might be needed to limit traffic congestion caused by increased railroad use — could have on its business and its employees, especially concerning access to the facility.

Starting Monday, Boggs will join representatives from the county and from West Park to begin analyzing the issues that must be included in the environmental impact report and how to address them. Boggs said he's hopeful that by the second quarter of 2009, a draft impact report will be complete.

At that time, another 45-day public comment period will begin, and people will have a chance to inspect the environmental impact report in full and raise concerns again. As part of the final impact report, each of those comments must be responded to in writing.

Kamilos said Thursday that he had read through about 90 percent of the letters that had been submitted and that he hadn't seen any "fatal flaw" comments that might not be able to be answered sufficiently.

He said he was encouraged by the number of responses and the amount of detail included in them.

"I think this shows that the process is working," Kamilos said. "And I think all the letters and responses are going to be very helpful to ensure that the environmental analysis is of the highest quality."

Port funds could be diverted

Cargo container fees intended to clean up local pollution could be shared with the Central Valley and other areas under a proposal by the Schwarzenegger administration.

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Thursday, August 14, 2008

SACRAMENTO -- -- Money collected in Los Angeles County to clean up its polluted ports would be shared with the Central Valley under a proposal by the Schwarzenegger administration that is drawing opposition from Southern California leaders.

Sponsors of legislation that would charge shippers about \$60 a container in the ports of Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland had intended to use the money in areas close to those cities' ports to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

But after the bill passed both legislative houses, aides to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed last-minute changes that would funnel some of the money to a statewide transportation fund and the California Air Resources Board, which could use it in areas such as the Central Valley, which suffers poor air quality from traffic, agriculture and other sources.

"Do we believe the Central Valley has huge problems that need help? Yes," said state Sen. Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach), author of SB 974. "Do we believe that emasculating this bill to meet those needs will meet anyone's needs? No."

Lowenthal said he hoped for a compromise, but vowed to fight the changes even if it meant risking a veto by putting the bill, as passed, on the governor's desk.

"Their amendments go further than we are willing to go," he said. "It puts the bill in jeopardy."

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry said he had been pushing the governor to make sure the fees helped the whole state.

"Pollution doesn't stop at the port," Autry said. "Most of those trucks will be loaded and drive right through the San Joaquin Valley."

L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa wants the money to stay where it is generated, said Matt Szabo, a spokesman.

"Any amendments to the legislation must preserve local control over container fees and ensure that the revenue is dedicated to the region where it is collected," Szabo said.

A Schwarzenegger spokeswoman declined to discuss specific proposals. "It is not a practice of ours to negotiate legislation in the media," said Rachel Cameron. "However, I want to stress that our office has been working with the senator for nearly a year."

"It's very troubling," Tim Carmichael, senior policy director for the Coalition for Clean Air, said of the proposed amendments.

The two sides are scheduled to meet today.

On Wednesday, the Senate went through 382 bills and resolutions, deferring action on many of them but approving others as it hopes to wrap up action by the end of this month.

The Senate approved a measure by Assemblywoman Fiona Ma (D-San Francisco) that would require public exhibits that display plasticized human bodies to get permission from the next of kin.

AB 1519 was approved on a 24-10 vote. "It's a matter of decency," said Sen. Ellen Corbett (D-San Leandro).

Sen. George Runner (R-Lancaster) opposed the bill. "This is a disservice to the citizens of California who now have to go to another state to see this kind of display," he said.

The Senate also voted to approve a requirement that patients be given a physical exam before elective surgery.

Assemblywoman Wilmer Amina Carter (D-Rialto) said she wrote AB 2968 in response to the 2007 death of Donda West, the mother of the Grammy-winning rap musician Kanye West, from complications related to cosmetic surgery. "I think this bill will save lives," Carter said. "If this had been the law, the surgeon would not have allowed her to have surgery."

Finally, the Assembly passed a measure that would fine drivers \$20 for typing, reading or sending text messages while driving. The vote on SB 28 by Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto) split along party lines. Democrats said text-messaging is as much a distraction as using a cellphone, which was outlawed in the state last month. Minority Republicans rejected the measure as government interference.

New research pinpoints free radicals as culprit in polluted air

By Jane Liaw

Modesto Bee, Monday, August 18, 2008

While scientists have known that breathing bad air such as Sacramento sometimes experiences is harmful, they have never pinpointed what it is in fine particles that causes conditions usually associated with smoking such as lung disease.

Now a piece of the pollution puzzle has snapped into place with new findings from Louisiana State University.

Led by chemist H. Barry Dellinger, LSU researchers have discovered that free radicals, similar to those in cigarettes, exist in polluted air. Furthermore, they found that free radicals often persist for days or even indefinitely.

Kent Pinkerton, director of the University of California, Davis, Center for Health and the Environment, said the LSU study is significant in changing scientific perceptions of free radicals as being short-lived.

"If certain forms of free radicals are actually persistent, that increases chances they may interact with biological cells to create damage," Pinkerton said.

Even a day of air that meets federal standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency exposes people to as many harmful free radicals as smoking one cigarette, the researchers learned. But breathing heavily polluted air could expose a person to 100 cigarettes' worth of free radicals in one day, researchers said.

LSU researcher Dellinger said this is the first time that free radicals have been proved to exist in fine airborne particles, and the first time that scientists have seen them persist in air for days or even

indefinitely. Particles that contain metals such as copper or iron are most likely to have persistent free radicals, Dellinger said.

Free radicals are atoms, molecules and ions with unpaired electrons that form during combustion and other chemical processes. Because they seek electrons, they are usually unstable and highly reactive. When they enter the body and come into contact with cell membranes, they undergo reactions and cause these membranes to become leaky, Pinkerton said.

Damage can reach a point at which it is irreversible and leads to cell death. A cascade of events takes place that under normal circumstances help remove dead cells from the body, but when the process gets out of control, injury occurs, according to Pinkerton.

The LSU research suggests that free radicals in airborne fine particles may cause diseases like asthma and heart disease. The discovery may also help explain why nonsmokers get tobacco-related diseases such as lung cancer, Dellinger said.

Sacramento is not the only place where free radicals are a concern. "There will always be some particles present in air, regardless of where you're at," Pinkerton said.

However, with air quality often poor, the Sacramento region may present greater exposure to free radicals than other places.

"There are many instances where if we have a bad air quality day, that concentration in air could be similar to a home where smoking is taking place," Pinkerton said.

Dellinger used the technique called electron paramagnetic resonance to determine free radicals existed in air particles. As he measured each sample, he found free radicals every time, at concentrations varying from the equivalent of smoking one cigarette per day to smoking 100 cigarettes per day.

Dellinger presented his team's findings Sunday at the American Chemical Society meeting.

Now that his team has proved persistent free radicals exist in polluted air, Dellinger believes the next step is a large study of the human health effects from exposure to free radicals. Though many studies have shown fine particles cause deaths, there has been little success correlating particle components with effects, he said.

"Now we have something we can measure," Dellinger said.

Worry over tactics grows after firefighter deaths

By MARCUS WOHLSEN

Washington Post, Friday, August 15, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO -- When a firefighting helicopter went down in Northern California last week, killing nine and injuring four, the mountain crash site was so remote that it could only be reached by air or a full day's hike.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, fighting the stubborn wildfire in an area nowhere near homes or businesses was necessary because massive plumes of smoke were threatening the health of residents across the region.

But in a summer when a staggering number of wildfires are costing millions to fight, not everyone agrees that sending firefighters to backcountry blazes that pose no obvious threat to lives or property is the right approach.

"Sending them to put out a fire in the wilderness is both overkill and unnecessary," said Timothy Ingalsbee, a veteran firefighter and executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology. "Firefighters are being ordered to take significant risks of their lives, health and safety that are incommensurate with ... the benefits of suppression."

Before the crash, most of the men who died had spent the day cutting fire lines in the Trinity Alps Wilderness, a protected area where under normal conditions federal law forbids all forms of mechanical transportation.

The blaze they were battling was part of a larger series of fires sparked across the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in late June.

By late July, fire had crept close enough to the nearby community of Junction City to force residents to evacuate. By Aug. 5, the day of the crash, all evacuation orders had been lifted for nearly a week.

Still, authorities believed that smoke pouring from blazes that had consumed 135 square miles posed a serious enough health hazard to keep firefighters on the front lines.

Furthermore, a decision had been made early on to bring the battle against the fires to the wilderness, based on experience that blazes in that part of the state grew large if not beaten down, said Kent Romney, a Shasta-Trinity National Forest spokesman.

"Those that are in wilderness areas tend to move out of wilderness areas," Romney said.

Some critics of federal wildfire-fighting policies aren't convinced.

Environmentalists have long argued that overzealous firefighting efforts fueled by media-driven hysteria are thwarting natural processes that have evolved over millennia to create a symbiotic relationship between forest ecosystems and wildfire.

Refusing to allow nature to run its course when homes and lives aren't threatened, they argue, creates an unnatural buildup of forest fuels that lead to more severe fires in the future.

A better strategy would depend on controlled burns set in the offseason to create buffer zones around communities that might otherwise be threatened, said Rich Fairbanks, a California wildfire expert with the nonprofit Wilderness Society.

"We ought to be treating these forests in the winter and the spring, not in August," Fairbanks said. "Why are you letting random events dictate how you manage these forests?"

Still, in the case of the wildfires plaguing far Northern California this summer, even Fairbanks believes the unusually harsh conditions compared with other years gave fire officials no choice but to fight them on every front.

From his home in southern Oregon, he said, he could see heavy smoke from the blazes drifting north day after day. And on the day after the crash, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued a state of emergency for neighboring Humboldt County because of "unprecedented smoke conditions."

The assessment that the scope of this year's fires made an aggressive posture the only choice was shared by the head of the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, which includes California. In early July, chief forester Randy Moore issued a decision not to allow any wildfires in national forests to burn unchecked and to prohibit prescribed burns until the wildfire threat diminished.

Nevertheless, other agencies showed signs of employing a different strategy.

On Thursday, officials pulled crews off of a remote fire burning in Kings Canyon National Park after seven firefighters suffered minor injuries while working in steep terrain. Park spokeswoman Deb Schweizer said the fire, smaller than 1 square mile, posed no threat and has not created enough smoke to hurt [air quality](#) in the region.

"It's certainly not worth people getting hurt over," Schweizer said. Fire officials plan to continue flying over the blaze to map its spread.

Electric bikes selling briskly as gas prices climb

By DAN STRUMPF - AP Business Writer

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, August 15, 2008

NEW YORK - When Honora Wolfe and her husband moved to the outskirts of Boulder, Colo., she wanted an environmentally friendly way to commute to her job as a bookshop owner in the city.

Wolfe, 60, found her solution about a month ago: an electric bicycle. It gets her to work quickly, is easy on her arthritis and is better for the environment than a car.

"I'm not out to win any races," she said. "I want to get a little fresh air and exercise, and cut my carbon footprint, and spend less money on gas. And where I live, I can ride my bike seven months out of the year."

The surging cost of gasoline and a desire for a greener commute are turning more people to electric bikes as an unconventional form of transportation. They function like a typical two-wheeler but with a battery-powered assist, and bike dealers, riders and experts say they are flying off the racks.

Official sales figures are hard to pin down, but the Gluskin-Townley Group, which does market research for the National Bicycle Dealers Association, estimates 10,000 electric bikes were sold in the U.S. in 2007, up from 6,000 in 2006.

Bert Cebular, who owns the electric bike and scooter dealership NYCeWheels in New York, said his sales are up about 50 percent so far this year over last. Amazon.com Inc. says sales of electric bikes surged more than 6,000 percent in July from a year earlier, in part because of its expanded offerings.

"The electric bikes are the next big thing," said Frank Jamerson, a former General Motors Corp. executive turned electric vehicle guru.

They're even more popular in Europe, where Sophie Nenner, who opened a Paris bike store in 2005, says motorists boxed in by traffic jams are looking for an alternative for short journeys that doesn't involve navigating overcrowded transport systems.

Industry associations estimate 89,000 electric bikes were sold in the Netherlands last year, while 60,000 power-assisted bikes were sold in Germany.

The principle behind electric bikes is akin to that behind hybrid cars: Combine the conventional technology-in this case, old-fashioned pedaling-with a battery-powered motor.

The net result is a vehicle that rides a bit like a scooter, with some legwork required. Most models have a motorcycle-like throttle that gives a boost while going up hills or accelerating from a stop. On some models, the motor kicks in automatically and adjusts its torque based on how hard the rider pedals.

Although regulations vary by state, federal law classifies electric bikes as bicycles, and no license or registration is required as long as they don't go faster than 20 mph and their power doesn't exceed 750 watts.

Price largely determines weight, quality and battery type. A few hundred dollars gets you an IZIP mountain bike from Amazon with a heavy lead-acid battery. For \$1,400, you can buy a 250-watt folding bike powered by a more-powerful, longer-lasting nickel-metal hydride battery like those in a camera or a Toyota Prius. At the high end, \$2,525 buys an extra-light 350-watt model sporting a lightweight lithium-ion battery similar to a laptop's.

Most models can go at least 20 miles before plugging in to recharge. Although the cost of electricity can vary, fully recharging the battery on a typical model costs less than a dime.

Joe Conforti, a commercial film director from New York, uses a four-year-old model designed by former auto titan Lee Iacocca in the 1990s for running errands or getting to social occasions.

"It's really nice," said Conforti, who is eagerly looking to upgrade to a newer, more powerful ride. "If you've got a date, you go to meet friends-you go out on a (conventional) bike, you're gonna sweat up. You go out in an electric bike, it's great it's terrific, you're not gonna sweat up and you ride home fine."

Bike dealers said the growing demand goes beyond just the uptick in gas prices, but also because of word of mouth. Cebular said business at his store and on his Web site has been booming.

"Fifty percent of that increase is probably because of gas prices, and the rest is that there's just more bikes out there," said Cebular, who has run his shop on Manhattan's Upper East Side for seven years.

Improved technology also has made electric bikes more popular, Cebular said.

"When I started, there was only one bike that had a nickel-metal hydride battery-everything else was lead-acid and was 80 or 90 pounds," he said. "That's a huge improvement."

Jay Townley, a partner at Gluskin-Townley, said the latest electric bikes are sleeker, better looking and hide their often-clunky batteries better than ever. That goes a long way to attract baby boomers and other mainstream customers.

"The new designs that we've seen in the marketplace are going to inure to the benefit of the electric bike companies," he said.

Ultra Motor, an England-based electric bike and scooter company, is betting big that it can capitalize on what it seems as a growing market for attractive-looking two-wheelers designed specifically for U.S. commuters. The company on Tuesday unveiled its "A2B" model, a slick, low-riding electric bike.

Ultra Motor took a conventional bicycle and redesigned it with fatter wheels, a lower center of gravity and a thick shaft designed to hide the lithium-ion battery inside, U.S. Chief Executive Chris Deyo said. The result is a cross between a motorcycle and a mountain bike.

The company already has signed up 75 dealers nationwide to sell the \$2,500 bike starting next month.

"A year ago, when you mentioned the word electric bike, people looked at you and they really weren't sure what it was," Deyo said. "Today, what we're finding is we're actually having dealers call us seeking an electric bike to meet the demand."

Jamerson, the former GM executive who has become a staunch advocate for electric transportation, believes this is only the beginning for electric bikes. He retired from GM in 1993 after helping develop the company's EV1 electric car, and he's been an avid follower of alternative transportation ever since.

The EV1 project, though widely seen as a spectacular failure, helped convince Jamerson of the value of electric transportation. Given soaring fuel prices and thinning patience with foreign dependence on oil, Americans are ready to embrace electric vehicles, he said.

"Did you know there are 70 million electric bikes on the road today in China, and they are selling at the rate of 2.6 million electric bikes a year?" he said. "The public at large needs to understand that it is the right thing to do to move to electric transportation, and electric bikes and electric scooters will allow you to do that, to get that familiarity."

As for Wolfe, she could not be happier with her bike, a 48-pound mountain bike with a lithium-ion-powered assist made by California-based IZIP. A self-described "tree-hugger for decades," she drives her Honda Insight hybrid car or rides the bus when she's not using her bike to get to work.

It's part of her own personal campaign to reduce her carbon footprint. She also powers her home with help from a set of rooftop solar panels, and a geothermal furnace heats and cools it.

The furnace, she adds, even heats her water. Just one more way to reduce emissions, she said.

"Even my 92-year-old mother has a Prius," she said. "So I come by my green credentials genetically."

Pollution concerns cease in Beijing

By Tini Tran, Associated Press Writer
USA TODAY, Friday, August 15, 2008

BEIJING - Pollution concerns evaporated Friday under a picture-perfect canopy of blue skies and white clouds on the first day of the Olympic Games' signature track-and-field events.

Heavy showers that drenched the city on Thursday cleared away much of the pollution, giving Beijing its first genuinely sunny day since the opening ceremony kicked off a week ago. Temperatures hovered around a comfortable 28 degrees Celsius (82 Fahrenheit) with little humidity and a light breeze.

The heavy haze, along with the heat and humidity, that had shrouded the city for days disappeared, giving spectators and athletes alike a clear view from the 91,000-seat Birds Nest stadium.

Air quality levels reflected the crystalline skies. Beijing's official air pollution index was at 17 - the lowest recorded since the city undertook drastic measures starting in July to curb emissions of major pollution.

"First day I can breathe freely, it's great," said Australia's Tamsin Lewis, the world indoor 800-meters champion, who qualified for the semifinals during the morning. "One of my competitors walking out said it reminded her of Melbourne for the Commonwealth Games, so there you go."

The city's [air pollution](#) has been the focus of major concern for months leading up to the Games. Beijing typically has air that is two to three times dirtier than most Western countries. In a major bid to clear up the skies, city officials shut down scores of factories, stopped all construction and removed 2 million vehicles from the road for a two-month period.

The efforts have seen mixed results. Since the measures began in July, Beijing had only a handful of days where the level of particulate matter - tiny dust particles that are the worst pollutant - fell within the range of what the WHO considers healthy.

The Associated Press has been taking independent air samples from the Olympic Green, the primary sports thoroughfare, since mid-July. Readings taken between 3 and 4 p.m. on Friday showed 42 micrograms of particulate matter per cubic meter, down from 97 on Thursday. It was well below the high during the games of 604, set on Sunday.

Health experts say that breathing polluted air can affect respiratory functions and particularly worsen problems for those with asthma or allergies. The biggest concern has been whether the performances of outdoor endurance athletes, who would be exposed to dirty air for more than one hour, would be adversely affected.

Athletes, including world-renowned distance runner Haile Gebrselassie, an asthmatic who holds the world record in the marathon, opted out of some competitions over concerns about Beijing's smog and heat. Instead of running the marathon, he will compete in the 10,000 meters.

Athletes from the U.S. and several other countries chose to train far outside Beijing, in some cases in neighboring Korea or Japan to avoid being exposed to the air pollution.

"I would suggest that in the long endurance outdoor sports, you can see an impact. These athletes are talking about seconds apart. Long-term exposure in these conditions, it can certainly take seconds off," said Peter Dingle, associate professor in health and environment, at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia.

But on Friday, none of those scenarios materialized for the athletes competing in front of an appreciative crowd.

"I was expecting the worst and we put measures in place if it was necessary. But it hasn't been an issue, not since I've been here," said Kylie Wheeler of Australia, who is competing in the two-day women's heptathlon. Half of the events are held before noon while the remainder will take place after sundown to avoid the midday heat.

Wheeler said the haze in recent days has not been a problem during actual training: "It's visible. You can see it, but it doesn't bother me," she said.

British runner Tyrone Edgar, who qualified in the men's 100 meters with the fastest time, said he didn't worry about pollution because it would affect everyone equally. "We were all going to be in the same situation so it doesn't matter at all," he said.

Friday's weather left everyone feeling upbeat.

Nataliia Dobrynska, of Ukraine, who won her qualifying heat in the 100-meter hurdles, proclaimed: "It's the Olympics. It's a happy day. Smog? No problem."

Fewer Americans hit the road in June

By Joan Lowy, Associated Press Writer
USA TODAY, Thursday, August 14, 2008

WASHINGTON - The summer vacation season began this year with Americans behind the wheel less. In all, we drove 12.2 billion fewer miles in June than a year earlier, the biggest monthly decrease in a downward trend that began in November.

That decrease, reported by the Federal Highway Administration, coincided with the national average price for unleaded gasoline hitting \$4 a gallon for the first time on June 8. It peaked in mid-July at \$4.11 and was down to \$3.78 on Wednesday, according to AAA.

"Clearly, more Americans chose to stay close to home in June than in previous years," Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said Wednesday.

Overall, Americans drove 53.2 billion fewer miles from November through June than they did over the same eight-month period a year earlier, according to the highway agency's latest monthly report on driving. That's a larger decline than the 49.3 billion fewer miles driven by Americans over the entire decade of the 1970s, a period marked by oil embargoes and gas lines, the agency said.

Travel Industry Association spokeswoman Cathy Keefe said the June driving decline "is not surprising, given the environment that we were in." But she predicted the recent drop in gas prices to below \$4 a gallon in many parts of the country will have travelers on the road again.

"I think people have started to take the increase in gas prices somewhat more in stride," Keefe said. The trade association is anticipating only a 1.2% decline in all forms of business and leisure travel this year.

Some of the biggest declines in June, compared with a year ago, were in such popular vacation states as Maine, down 7%, and Florida, down 6%. Western states with wide-open spaces were also part of the trend - down 7.7% in Idaho, 6.9% in Utah, 6.8% in Washington, 6.7% in Nevada, 6.2% in Kansas and 6.1% in Alaska.

The June driving data, collected by more than 4,000 automatic traffic recorders operated around-the-clock by state highway agencies, were supported by an AARP telephone survey of people age 50 and over in which 67% said they have cut back on their driving because of high gas prices.

MONEY MATTERS: [Calif. sues EPA over auto emissions](#)

Four in 10 said they have used public transportation, and walked or ridden a bicycle more frequently since gas prices have risen, according to the AARP poll, which was being released Wednesday.

Elinor Ginzler, AARP's senior vice president for livable communities, said she's concerned that communities don't have adequate sidewalks, bus shelters, bike lanes and public transportation options as more people look for other means to get around.

"More Americans age 50-plus are trying to leave their cars behind but face obstacles as soon as they walk out the door, climb on their bikes or head for the bus," Ginzler said.

AARP polled 1,006 people nationally between July 9 and July 15. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Gas consumption was down, too. The highway administration said motorists consumed 400 million fewer gallons of gasoline and 318 million fewer gallons of diesel in the first quarter of 2008 than in the same period in 2007.

Rocky Twyman - a choir director from Rockville, Md., who has traveled to gas stations across the country leading prayers for cheaper gasoline - held a victory celebration Wednesday at a Washington Shell station to thank God for lowering prices.

"So many people are being hurt by these high gas prices and it just caught America by surprise, they just weren't ready for these adjustments that need to be made," Twyman said.

The driving drop was not all bad, however.

"There is at least one silver lining in what's otherwise fairly painful news and that is that less driving means [less air pollution](#) and fewer global warming emissions," said Frank O'Donnell of the environmental group Clean Air Watch. Emissions from cars and trucks, along with power plants, are the top sources of air pollution, he said.

'Dead Zones' Appear In Waters Worldwide New Study Estimates More Than 400

By Joel Achenbach

Washington Post Staff, Friday, August 15, 2008; A02

In the latest sign of trouble in the planet's chemistry, the number of oxygen-starved "dead zones" in coastal waters around the world has roughly doubled every decade since the 1960s, killing fish, crabs and massive amounts of marine life at the base of the food chain, according to a study released yesterday.

"These zones are popping up all over," said Robert Diaz, a professor at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science who led the study, published online by the journal *Science*.

Diaz and co-author Rutger Rosenberg of the University of Goteborg in Sweden counted more than 400 dead zones globally, ranging from expansive ones in the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Mexico to small ones that episodically appear in river estuaries. Collectively, they cover about 95,000 square miles.

Low oxygen, known as hypoxia, is in significant measure a downstream effect of chemical fertilizers used in agriculture. Air pollution, including smog from automobiles, is another factor. The nitrogen from the fertilizer and the pollution feeds the growth of algae in coastal waters, particularly during summer.

The result is feast-then-famine: The algae eventually die and sink to the bottom, where the organic matter decays in a process that robs the bottom waters of oxygen. The ensuing die-off of marine life cuts down on the productivity of commercial fisheries. The "biomass" missing because of depleted oxygen in the Chesapeake Bay, Diaz estimated, is enough to feed half the number of crabs that are commercially harvested in a typical year.

Hypoxia has been seen for decades in such places as the Chesapeake, Lake Erie, the Gulf of Mexico and Long Island Sound, but Diaz's comprehensive survey of the scientific literature and government reports has identified many new zones, including in the Florida Keys, Puget Sound and tidal creeks in the Carolinas.

"We're saying that hypoxia is now everywhere, it seems," Diaz said. "Human activities really screwed up oxygen conditions in our coastal areas."

A few hypoxic ecosystems have improved in recent years because of better management of pollutants. The Indian River in Florida has shown signs of recovery. Dead zones in New York's Hudson River and East River have disappeared, the study found. Globally, however, only 4 percent of the dead zones are improving.

The study is the latest alarm sounded by scientists and environmentalists about deteriorating oceans and watersheds. Douglas N. Rader, chief ocean scientist for the Environmental Defense Fund, said the chaos in the planet's nitrogen cycle is not only creating dead zones but also inciting the spread of toxic organisms, such as the pfiesteria that has appeared in recent years in the Chesapeake.

"The next big challenge, after global warming, is going to be addressing the massive upset of the world's nitrogen cycle," Rader said.

Earlier this week, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences published online a study warning of "mass extinction in the oceans with unknown ecological and evolutionary consequences."

The author, Jeremy Jackson, a professor at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, contends that global warming, overfishing, invasive species, habitat destruction and agricultural runoff are creating oceans crammed with algae and jellyfish -- a process he calls "the rise of slime."

"We have utterly failed to appreciate the magnitude of the problem," Jackson said yesterday. "The oceans are out of sight and out of mind."

[Fresno Bee, Editorial, Saturday, Aug. 16, 2008:](#)

State's port fees must be shared fairly

Goods movement affects air quality all over California, not just at ports.

A bill that would charge fees on container cargos shipped in and out of California ports and use the money to mitigate air quality problems associated with the movement of goods has passed the Legislature. That's good.

But the bill would take all the money raised by the fees and spend it in the immediate areas of the ports. That's bad. Some of that money should be spent in the Valley and elsewhere in the state.

State Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, author of SB 974, has objected to changes sought by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and pushed by Fresno Mayor Alan Autry. But Schwarzenegger promised to veto any legislation that doesn't spread the money around fairly -- and he made that promise weeks ago, before his famous vow to veto any bill that arrives on his desk before a budget deal.

Southern California leaders have complained about "last-minute changes" in the legislation sought by Schwarzenegger and Autry. In fact, the amendments seeking a wider distribution of the revenue were offered some time ago. Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Rachel Cameron said, "Our office has been working with the senator for nearly a year."

The scramble for the container fee revenue is reminiscent of the recent fight over funds from Proposition 1B, in which Southern California interests sought to hog the bulk of the money.

L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa wants the container fee money to stay where it is generated, according to a spokesman: "Any amendments to the legislation must preserve local control over container fees and ensure that the revenue is dedicated to the region where it is collected."

Fine. Then fees paid, for instance, by Valley growers shipping produce out of the ports should stay in the Valley. They can't have it both ways.

Schwarzenegger has long sought money for air quality improvements along so-called "goods movement" corridors. The means for moving goods in and out of ports -- trains pulled by diesel locomotives and diesel trucks, for the most part -- are among the most egregious sources of air pollution in the state. And the impact of that pollution is felt most profoundly in the Valley, where geography and climate conspire to create damaging and sometimes dangerous air, and then hold it in place for long periods.

The air quality issues in California's ports are very real, and we fully support the fee mechanism to fund improvements. But the notion that those problems are unique to the port areas is absurd. American export goods move to the ports from all over the country, and imports reverse the course. A huge volume of that pollution-generating traffic passes through the Valley on Highway 99 and Interstate 5.

Fairness demands that the whole problem be addressed with any container fee revenue, not just those impacts in the immediate area of the ports.

[Fresno Bee, Editorial, Friday, Aug. 15, 2008:](#)

Rail bill must move forward

Governor should sign measure so new version gets on the ballot in time.

A measure to strengthen the high-speed rail bond initiative on the November ballot finally passed the state Assembly, but it won't be going to the governor's desk right away. That's because Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is holding firm to his pledge to veto any bill that comes to him before the Legislature passes a budget.

He means to keep that pledge in this case even though he's on the record in strong support of high-speed rail.

"The governor will continue to work with the Legislature to get the improved high-speed rail language on the ballot," Schwarzenegger spokesman Aaron McLear told the Associated Press on Monday, when AB 3034 was still hung up in the Assembly. "There will be one high-speed rail initiative on the ballot, and the governor will be out campaigning for that."

Except he won't make an exception to his pledge for this crucial bill. We think he ought to rethink that position, and soon.

AB 3034, by Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani, D-Stockton, makes several changes in the original Proposition 1, the \$9.9 billion high-speed rail bond. There would be a greater level of accountability, and the authority that will build the rail system must come up with an updated business plan that includes new ridership estimates and expected sources of federal and private funding that will be needed, along with the state bond funds, to construct the project.

The bill would also make it possible for funds to be spent on segments of the proposed system other than the "spine," the Los Angeles to San Francisco corridor through the Valley.

Those are all changes the governor demanded. The Legislature has obliged -- haltingly, and much later than it might have acted -- but the bill is ready now. Galgiani has held it up so it won't face a veto threat, but it could move quickly if the governor signals he is willing to sign it.

Because of deadlines for ballot language, the original Proposition 1 would likely be scrubbed and replaced by Proposition 1a, reflecting the changes in AB 3034. But that has to happen soon. The official deadline is Saturday, though rail backers believe there could be a window of up to two weeks to make the change.

The high-speed rail system is one of the most important public works projects ever proposed in California, a state once noted for its ability to think big and act wisely to protect the opportunities and prosperity of future generations. The benefits would be enormous: Tens of thousands of new, high-paying jobs, economic development in ancillary industries, cleaner air, less reliance on oil for fuel, and a faster, cheaper way for business people, families and tourists to get around the Golden State.

High-speed rail makes sense in every direction, and that's why it's important for the governor to do the right thing, and move this process along. We understand -- and share -- his anger and frustration with the dysfunctional budget process, but that can't be allowed to torpedo other worthy efforts.

[Fresno Bee, Commentary, Sunday, Aug. 17, 2008:](#)

VALLEY'S TOP 10: Things we should hide if scientists perfect invisibility

10. The Valley's dirty air.
9. Fresno County's budget deficit.
8. Salvage yards along Highway 99.
7. Nasty, mosquito-loving pools at foreclosed homes.
6. Homeless people -- out of sight ...
5. Ugly gray jail buildings in downtown Fresno.
4. The Valley's many poverty pockets.
3. Restaurants that serve a 1,400-calorie kids meal.
2. Fresno State's Title IX record.
1. Downtown lake -- wait, that's already invisible.

[Tri-Valley Herald, Commentary, Friday, August 15, 2008](#)

Bush administration's threat to the environment

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION would love to make some important changes to the Endangered Species Act that would not benefit endangered species nor help the environment.

Those changes, which would be the biggest overhaul of the act since 1986, would allow federal agencies to dodge independent reviews from government scientists and decide for themselves whether projects such as highways, dams and mines - those approved and funded by the government - would harm endangered animals and plants.

In addition, the draft rules would bar federal agencies from assessing the emissions from projects that contribute to global warming and its effect on species and habitats.

The Interior Department and developers have pushed for this, claiming that going through the process that's been in place for 35 years has taken too long, thus pushing up project costs.

Also, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne says the changes were needed because the Endangered Species Act could be used as a "back door" to regulate gases blamed for global warming. So the question is should we risk the environment to help meet a quota? We think not.

Essentially, these changes would tilt the playing field toward developers. As the law stands, federal agencies are required to consult with experts at the Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service, depending on if a project is on land or water, to determine if construction would potentially harm endangered species or habitat.

These experts tend to favor the 1,353 animals and plants in the United States listed as threatened or endangered, and further analysis is usually required.

The Interior Department claims there's no need for such consultations since federal agencies have developed enough expertise to review their own construction and development projects.

But this opens Pandora's Box in a big way. Each federal agency is on its own, and who's to say that it's not open to bias and influence to rubber-stamp projects that could be worth millions to a developer.

Such agencies could ignore the advice of their "experts" and decide to move forward if the circumstances are questionable regarding harm to animals, plants and the environment.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has conducted more than 300,000 consultations between 1998 and 2002, and the National Marine Fisheries Service performs about 1,300 reviews each year. Those reviews have saved bald eagles, grizzly bears, Florida panthers and countless others from going further down the road toward extinction. There are many reviews, and they take time, but they definitely serve a purpose.

However, in this case, since it's merely a new regulation, the Bush administration doesn't need the approval of Congress to impose these rules. When the rules are formally proposed, there will be a 60-day public comment period before being finalized by the Interior Department. The new administration and Congress can freeze the regulations or reverse course, but that could take months.

The way we see it, the Bush administration wins, developers win, some federal agencies win, and the ones who are defenseless lose. January can't come soon enough.

[Merced Sun-Star, Commentary, Monday, Aug. 18, 2008:](#)

Fakery in Games makes plain China's contempt for reality

By GLENN GARVIN, McClatchy Newspapers

Time to clear the air: That's not smog hovering over Beijing, swallowing entire office buildings like a mighty python. It's just "a funny mist," says the city's environmental chief, who insists that the Chinese government has eliminated air pollution in the capital. And he's right: By moving its monitoring stations as far as 40 miles from the city center, Beijing's air-quality reports read like Irving Berlin lyrics: Blue skies, smilin' at me. Nothin' but blue skies do I see ...

If Berlin ought to be the official balladeer of the Beijing Olympics, the official currency should be the \$3 bill. That's as in the phrase "phony as ..." From Spielbergian digitized fireworks to Milli Vanilli-esque lip syncing to let's-pretend newscasts, these Olympics have been the biggest public exercise in media-inspired fakery since Orson Welles' Martians terrorized New Jersey.

That cute-as-a-button little girl who sang during the Opening Ceremony? Actually, the voice belonged to another kid, whose big nose and crooked teeth were deemed unsuitable for the TV cameras. Those crowds of noisy fans in yellow T-shirts, banging inflatable batons? Government shills, "cheer squads" recruited to fill all the empty seats left by no-show tourists.

And the stunning display of opening-night fireworks that seemed to show a series of Godzilla-size footprints approaching Beijing? Computerized special effects inserted into the television broadcast. A reporter for The Oregonian in Portland, watching with a crowd in Tiananmen Square when the real fireworks went off, wrote that they saw only "two tiny flare-like blasts pop in the sky, followed by a lot of nothing."

Literally nothing at the Olympics is too important or too trivial for the Chinese to counterfeit. On the high end is free speech. China's totalitarian government swore it would permit protests and demonstrations

during the Games, albeit only at three designated parks distant from Olympic venues. But apparently there's been a sudden burst of public contentment just in time for the Olympics; the parks are deserted, and Chinese authorities can't remember if they've issued any permits for demonstrations.

Then there's the matter of those statues of mice with big black ears and white gloves, hoisting the Olympic torch. They sure look like the Rodent King of Orlando, which might raise some uncomfortable questions about international trademark infringement. But a Chinese government spokesman told the Japanese newspaper Daily Yomiuri that only a fool would fail to notice the differences between Mickey and the Beijing mice: "They have square holes in their ears. They are not copies."

The dubious mice are part of a long-standing tradition of ripping off American intellectual property for commercial gain, a problem that's by no means limited to China. Years ago, when I was a foreign correspondent, I listened in amazement to a Nicaraguan radio station that played not only a Miami station's jingles - including its call letters and frequency, both incorrect - but also the patter of its disc jockeys. The mice aren't even the most extreme example of Chinese piracy - that would surely be the Beijing fast-food chain MFC, where the Big-Macs-'n'-Extra-Crispy menu reads like the illicit love child of Ronald McDonald and Colonel Sanders.

But much of the rest of the Olympic fakery reflects less venality than a willful contempt for reality, a belief that the world can be remade with airbrushes and Photoshop. The Chinese, from the beginning, saw the Olympics as an exercise in image control, to the point that they originally hired Steven Spielberg to help oversee the production.

Increasingly queasy about the thin line between showman and propagandist, Spielberg quit earlier this year. But he must have felt a certain professional admiration as he watched the opening-night fireworks. Chinese special-effects artists spent almost a year (and who knows how many millions of dollars) creating the 55-second sequence, even adding fake smog and camera-shake. They judged their work a masterpiece of deception. "Most of the audience thought it was filmed live, so that was 'mission accomplished,'" effects chief Gao Xiaolong told The Beijing Times.

Gao was referring not to those thousands of people in Tiananmen Square who saw a couple of flares pop but to the hundreds of millions who watched on television around the world. Leni Riefenstahl, the German filmmaker and friend of Hitler, may have been the first to couple the Olympics and mass media for propaganda purposes, but the marriage was mostly barren until TV came along.

Somewhere close to a billion people may have been watching the Opening Ceremonies. And while journalists keep referring to the Olympics as "China's coming-out party," the Beijing regime may be even more interested in using the Games to legitimize and strengthen its internal grip. The largest single TV audience for the Olympics is in China itself, where by some estimates 840 million people were watching.

But presenting the Olympics as a chamber-of-commerce postcard to the rest of the world is also important to the Chinese - and they've certainly not been hindered much by NBC, eager to protect its \$900 million investment in the Games.

Most of what passes for political and cultural analysis in NBC's coverage has been provided by Joshua Cooper Ramo, whom the network incessantly bills as a former Time magazine correspondent and editor. That's accurate but less interesting, or relevant, than his current job: running the Beijing office of Henry Kissinger's consulting company, helping foreign corporations strike business deals with China. Small wonder that Ramo took no notice when the opening-night parade recounting China's history passed completely over the Mao Zedong era and its 10 million or so corpses.

Such tactful omissions have been common in NBC's coverage, from failing to tell viewers about the little girl's lip-syncing to not mentioning that many events labeled "live" were actually only live when they were taped several hours earlier. And NBC mentioned the computerized tinkering with the fireworks only obliquely. Bob Costas said the fireworks were "almost like cinema in real time." Hey, that's almost like real news coverage.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses Governor Schwarzenegger announces in Colorado his plans against air pollution. Along with Bill Ritter, they've unveiled a new program for the automotive](#)

industry that is the beginning of the reduction of air pollution. For more information on this and other Spanish clips, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Schwarzenegger devela hoy en Colorado planes contra la contaminación

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, August 18, 2008

El gobernador, Arnold Schwarzenegger y su colega de Colorado, Bill Ritter presentan hoy en Denver, Colorado un nuevo programa para la industria automotriz, encaminado hacia la reducción de la contaminación del aire.

El gobernador de California adelantó que la industria presentará un portal de Internet que tiene una Eco-Calculadora para que los conductores conozcan la cantidad de contaminación que pueden generar sus vehículos.

La referida página contendrá asimismo recomendaciones de expertos y empresas para una experiencia de Eco-Manejo, que incluye información de vehículos menos contaminantes y prácticas para reducir el consumo de combustibles.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the new toxic tour that educates Los Angeles visitors. This tour takes tourist to the most contaminated places in the Los Angeles area.

Pasea la suciedad de Los Ángeles

Un "tour tóxico" educa a los visitantes

AFP

La Opinion, Friday, August 15, 2008

LOS ANGELES, California - Esta ciudad es conocida por ofrecer paseos por las mansiones donde viven las estrellas de Hollywood, o incluso por los escenarios reales de crímenes famosos, pero ahora sumó a su oferta turística un circuito por los puntos más contaminados de la gran ciudad de California.

Injusticias contra el medio ambiente

Unos kilómetros más lejos de las rutas turísticas de Beverly Hills y Hollywood, Robert Cabrales se apronta para recibir a un grupo de visitantes a las puertas de un autobús que promete mostrar los "sucios secretos" de la ciudad.

Bajo la organización del grupo Comunidades por un Ambiente Mejor (CBECAL, por sus siglas en inglés), el "Tour Tóxico" lleva a los ecoturistas por parajes urbanos para contemplar y oler los lugares más contaminados de Los Ángeles.

"El objetivo es mostrarle a la gente que aquí está pasando algo, mostrarle los sucios secretos que la gran mayoría de la gente desconoce" de la ciudad que es sede de la meca del entretenimiento en el mundo, dijo Cabrales.

"Cuando hablamos de turismo y la gente viene a visitar Los Ángeles, no van a los lugares desagradables", explicó.

El programa lanzado en 2007 ofrece varios tour al mes para personas con conciencia ambiental, entre las cuales destacan estudiantes, activistas e incluso funcionarios públicos.

La idea central de pasear a los turistas por el "circuito tóxico" es que se den cuenta de "las injusticias contra el ambiente" en la segunda ciudad más poblada de Estados Unidos, donde la mayoría de los pobres viven en sitios industriales con niveles de contaminación altísimos y por ende castigados con enfermedades respiratorias y cáncer.

El autobús de Cabrales incluye una parada en "La Montana", una inmensa extensión de terreno donde reposaron por años los escombros del terremoto de 1994, muy cerca de un grupo de viviendas habitadas por personas que aún hoy sufren enfermedades respiratorias.

Pasaron 10 años para que la comunidad lograra que levantaran esos escombros del barrio y parte del éxito de su lucha se debió a una grave crisis de asma de uno de los concejales municipales.

El "pueblo del asma"

Otra parada obligada de este paseo es "Huntington Park", bautizada por el guía Cabrales como "El pueblo del asma", donde un porcentaje alto de la población infantil padece de esta afección respiratoria.

Este barrio está enclavado en la zona industrial de Vernon, al sudeste del centro de Los Ángeles.

Más al sur, el tour se detiene en el colegio Suva Elementary School en el barrio Bell Gardens, escenario de un escándalo de salud pública causado por una planta de cromo que estaba allí.

Entre 1987 y 1988, de 11 estudiantes de Suva que quedaron embarazadas siete sufrieron abortos, cuatro de éstos por malformaciones del feto.

Preocupados por este índice de abortos, las autoridades del colegio impulsaron una investigación que llevó al descubrimiento de altos índices de aborto y cáncer entre su comunidad.

Los estudios del aire revelaron gran cantidad de componentes químicos del cromo en la atmósfera y también que una de las chimeneas de la planta apuntaba precisamente al patio del instituto educativo.

Cuando el paseo se acerca a su final, se observa una calle residencial que podría ser cualquier parte de Estados Unidos si no fuera por las torres metálicas que se levantan justo detrás de las casas: es una refinería de petróleo.

Para uno de los turistas, Patrick Becknell, un músico de 23 años, esta etapa del tour es la más chocante.

"La yuxtaposición de una refinería y un barrio residencial me impactó", dijo Becknell a la *Agence France Presse*.

"Si los turistas o habitantes de Los Ángeles vieran lo que vimos, creo que tendrían un mejor sentido de la realidad, y sobre todo de lo que es capaz de hacer una acción coordinada en los barrios" a favor de la preservación ambiental, afirmó el joven.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses new controls in the US-Mexico boarder to help reduce air pollution.](#)

Proponen controlar la contaminación en toda la frontera

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Friday, August 15, 2008

La conferencia de los diez gobernadores de la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México propuso dividir la zona limítrofe entre los dos países en diez zonas o distritos para controlar la contaminación del aire.

Un funcionario de medio ambiente de México que presentó la propuesta, dijo que la distritación fronteriza ayudará también a administrar mejor los recursos del agua en la región.

México ha reducido la contaminación al mejorar la producción de combustibles, y tiene monitoreo permanente en más de una docena de ciudades.

El proyecto fronterizo permitiría a México por lo menos duplicar sus esfuerzos de control a la contaminación.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses studies confirm that air pollution has an affect on heart attacks.](#)

Confirman que contaminación del aire genera afecciones cardiacas

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Thursday, August 14, 2008

Una investigación de la Universidad del Sur de California confirmó que la contaminación del aire genera afecciones cardiacas en las personas.

El análisis a publicarse esta quincena en anales especializados, dice que moléculas de óxido en la contaminación dañan las células, causan inflamación pulmonar y generan en cascada problemas al sistema cardiovascular.

El estudio también destacó que el deterioro que la contaminación causa a los humanos es tanto a corto como a la largo plazo.