SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SUN

June 2, 2005

Sprawl spurs increase in pollution

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Wednesday, June 01, 2005 - More people, more cars, more pollution, more houses and more conflicts with little critters getting squeezed out.

The "California 2025' report released Wednesday by the Public Policy Institute of California notes there is a collision of economic growth and environmental sensibilities "where new development impinges on precious remaining natural habitat on the urban fringe' while "regional planners struggle to meet state and federal air quality mandates in spite of rising car use.'

Inland Empire residents are painfully aware of the environmental costs of exploding population growth in the region.

Residents in Southern California inhale the dirtiest air in the nation. Business and housing projects are sometimes stalled by once-common creatures clinging to the same diminishing land coveted by developers and cities.

"We are kind of pushed up against the wall trying to eke out more controls. Cars are getting cleaner, but there's more of them,' said Tina Cherry, spokeswoman for the region's smog-fighting agency, the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Despite dramatic improvements in air quality for two decades, those gains stalled a few years ago and even started to backslide.

Inland Empire residents aren't optimistic, with 74 percent expecting the air to be worse in 2025, according to the report.

The worst polluters are diesel-powered trucks, trains and ships, but those are under the control of the federal government and beyond the reach of state and local regulators.

The economic future of much of San Bernardino County is hitched to new warehousing and shipping companies, the same businesses that rely most heavily on diesel.

That has regional activists frightened about the future, and the health of the usually low-income communities most affected by warehouses, freeways and rail yards.

"I think the direction we're going is really putting us on the road to disaster,' said Penny Newman, executive director of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, which has an office in San Bernardino. "We need to wean ourselves away from oil, and we decide goods movement is where we're going to put all our economic eggs.'

Related to growth in traffic woes are sprawling housing developments and business complexes that chew up land once used by plants and animals, which often end up on the endangered species list.

An increasingly popular way to try to protect rare species while accommodating growth is through habitat conservation plans. Such plans are designed to set aside land for plants and animals while allowing development to continue outside preserve areas.

The biggest habitat conservation plan in the country is the West Mojave Plan, designed to protect scores of species across 9.3million acres in the rapidly growing High Desert.

Similar efforts to create conservation areas for the Delhi sands flower-loving fly, the inch-long insect which has frustrated development in Colton, Rialto and Fontana, are also under way.

Relationships between cities and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

which enforces the Endangered Species Act, have warmed in recent years after a history of conflicts, said Ray Bragg, redevelopment director for the city of Fontana.

Not everyone agrees habitat conservation plans are an effective way to protect species, and some activists argue growth is not inevitable.

"The West Mojave Plan is one of the worst plans I've seen. It's a one-sided giveaway to developers,' said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which has an office in Joshua Tree.

He argued sprawl happens only because developers and politicians push projects to promote unbridled growth, while passing costs for roads, water and health effects onto the general public.

"Every time a child or a senior citizen gets asthma, we're paying these costs while the developers and politicians rake in the money,' he said.