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Editorials

Auto shop offers Earth Day lesson

HOT AIR: *Demonstration of alternative fumigation process is reminder to embrace change.*

When an event such as Earth Day focuses attention on the grab-bag of issues and ideals subsumed under “environmentalism,” it becomes difficult to identify a unifying theme. What common thread — beyond a general concern for the Earth — links campaigns against global warming, rainforest destruction, industrial agriculture, the World Trade Organization, international development banks, urban sprawl, hydropower dams, arid lands ranching, corporate subsidies, transgenic crops and meat consumption?

Here is one idea: All these campaigns urge us to think in new ways about matters we take for granted. They remind us that just because we’ve done something in a particular way for a long time — relied on copious application of toxic chemicals to boost crop production, for example, or spent millions of taxpayer dollars each year to prop up uneconomic industries — we need not regard that practice sacred or immutable.

On Wednesday, at a vermin-infested building at Camarillo Airport, Ventura County residents were offered a modest glimpse of how learning to tread more lightly upon the Earth often requires nothing more revolutionary than a willingness to try something new.

County School Superintendent Chuck Weis invited the public to witness a demonstration of an alternative fumigation technique, developed and patented by local entrepreneur David Hedman, founder and chief executive officer

of Camarillo-based Precision Environmental Inc. The company’s process uses hot air to rid structures of termites, mold spores, fungi, bacteria, even viruses. The broad range of pathogens and pests it neutralizes — and the company offers stacks of independent scientific reports to bolster its claims for the process — makes it a superior and less toxic alternative to chemical pesticides.

The process is deceptively simple: Special propane heaters are used to blow hot air into particular rooms or even entire buildings, raising the interior temperature to levels that are lethal to living organisms. One hour at 130 degrees will kill termites; an hour at 140 degrees will kill most bacteria, and an hour at 160 degrees will denature viruses and molds. None of these temperatures is high enough to damage the structure, and delicate equipment and furnishings can be protected with special blankets.

The technique addresses a host of problems traditional fumigation does not, including allergies, asthma and “sick building syndrome” caused by inhalation of chemicals outgassing from synthetic carpet, wallboard and other materials (the heat causes the fumes to evaporate more quickly). And it does this without the risk posed by the need to store, transport, apply and dissipate toxic gas, the usual method of fumigation.

The demonstration Wednesday at the Regional Occupation Program’s auto shop was intended to draw publicity, but it also offered a useful lesson worth repeating on Earth Day: Limiting the environmental damage so often caused by industrial civilization requires, first of all, a willingness to do things differently.