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SCITECH

THE BATTALION

Tuesday, March 25, 2003

Gridlock science

A&M professor uses physics to model traffic flows

By Adam Reed THE BATTALION

It's 5 p.m. It's been a long day for students and employees, and now they are just trying to get home. Traffic, however, is at a standstill. Drivers get nearer to the bottleneck, yet discover that there is no car wreck, no construction — nothing to cause the slowdown at all. Sound familiar?

Texas A&M nuclear engineering professor Paul Nelson hopes to use his expertise in kinetic equations to end the frustration experienced during just such days of unexplained traffic delays.

Nelson uses kinetic equations in the classroom to describe how atomic particles interact with each other on a molecular level in a nuclear reactor. He has used these

same formulas to create a model of how traffic flows in the real world. "Vehicles move in response to their drivers,"

NELSON

Nelson said. "So, in kinetic equations, if we replace the atomic particles with individual drivers, then we can get a statistical description of the drivers and their responses to other drivers and vehicles."

Nelson discussed his findings in a session, 'Mathematical Models for Traffic Flow: Phantom Jams and Real Data," at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Denver in February. Nelson's research creates some interesting possibilities for the average motorist. A realistic traffic model would enable researchers to predict delays, allowing them to recomend alternate routes for drivers. They could also use Nelson's

research to develop technological advances or suggest highway construction plans to make driving as efficient as possible.

To determine how reliable models such as these actually are, Nelson has singled out other kinetic models that attempt to describe traffic flow. Nelson said the Prigogine-Herman model, developed by Nobel Prize-winners Ilya Prigogine and Robert Herman, can replicate the flow of real traffic but cannot supply sufficiently realistic predictions for drivers to use in everyday driving.

"In stop-and-go traffic, for instance, the Prigogine-Herman model would predict that cars in stop mode were actually stopped," Nelson said. "But we know that that's not really the case — the cars usually just slow down before speeding up again."

Other complicated models also fail the test known as Occam's razor, said Nelson in an interview with Science News Online. Occam's razor says that the simplest theory that explains an occurrence is the best theory. Nelson said complex models "clearly can be tuned to produce about any effect one wishes to produce," and therefore may not explain traffic as much as one might think.

"Of course, we'll never be able to make 100 percent accurate predictions because there are always unforeseen circumstances in traffic," Nelson said. "But we can hope to be right more often than we're

A perfect answer may not be available for Nelson's ongoing research at A&M and the efforts of his colleagues abroad, but their work does promise many improvements for kinetic models and, in effect, highways worldwide.

Hopefully one day soon, the term "rush hour traffic" will be all but forgotten, and commuters will enjoy as much freedom on their drive to work as they would a peaceful drive in the country.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Bioterrorism systems tested in Oklahoma

GOLDSBY, Okla. (AP) - A crop-duster sprayed a harmless substance above a field of cattle and oil pumps Monday in a test to see if weather radar systems could detect a bioterrorist attack.

It was the first spray of a three-week Army test over central Oklahoma. The plane will make 261 runs, dropping grain alcohol, clay dust and a mix of water and polyethylene glycol a common ingredient in lotions and mascara.

The harmless materials were chosen to produce a mist resembling the airborne particles that might be produced by a bioterrorism attack.

The test, taking place in charged in scandal Oklahoma because of the state's advanced weather radar system, will help Army and Environmental Protection Agency scientists determine how well radar can detect such toxic materials.

The new system would keep

track of small planes and tiny puffs of particles that typical radars ignore. It will take weeks to analyze the data and determine how successful the test was, Army officials said.

The goal is to develop computer technology for a nationwide bioterrorism detection system, said Robert Lyons, with the Army's nuclear, biological and chemical detection program. The government hopes to install high-tech software in about 150 radar stations across the country.

The EPA has conducted similar tests in Maryland, Utah and Florida since early 2001, before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

US Technologies CEO

NEW YORK (AP) - The chief executive of U.S. Technologies was charged Monday with misusing \$15 million entrusted to him by investors, including funneling some of the money into a trust fund for his children.

A federal grand jury handed up a 22-count indictment charging C. Gregory Earls, 58, with multiple counts of securities, mail and wire fraud.

The indictment says Earls controlled an investment company called USV Partners and claimed he would use investors' money to buy shares of U.S. Technologies. Instead, he allegedly used it for the trust fund and to repay investors from other business ventures.

It also says Earls stole \$1.3 million from investors, claiming he would finance an Internet company but pocketing the money for himself.

The new indictment encompasses allegations first made by federal prosecutors December, but adds new charges related to the alleged Internet scheme.

"Innocent investors entrusted tens of thousands of dollars to Earls," U.S. Attorney James Comey said of the scandal. "The indictment alleges Earls repaid that trust with a naked theft of investors' money."

THE TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY STUDENT MEDIA BOARD IS ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR

Editor THE BATTALION

Summer 2003

Fall 2003 May 26 through Aug. 13, 2003)

Qualifications for editor in chief of The Battalion are:

- Be a Texas A&M student in good standing with the University and enrolled in at least six credit hours (4 if a graduate student) during the term of office (unless fewer credits are required to
- Have at least a 2.00 cumulative grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) and at least a 2.00 grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) in the semester immediately prior to the appointment, the semester of appointment and semester during the term of office. In order for this provision to be met, at least six hours (4 if a graduate student) must have been taken for
- Have completed JOUR 301 (Mass Communication, Law and Society), or equivalent;
- · Have at least one year experience in a responsible editorial position on The Battalion or comparable daily college newspaper,
 – OR –

Have at least one year editorial experience on a commercial newspaper

Have completed at least 12 hours journalism, including JOUR 203 and 303 (Media Writing I and II), and JOUR 304 (Editing for the Mass Media), or equivalent.

Editor AGGIELAND

Qualifications for editor in chief of the Aggieland yearbook are:

- Be a Texas A&M student in good standing with the University and enrolled in at least six credit hours (4 if a graduate student) during the term of office (unless fewer credits are required to
- Have at least a 2.00 cumulative grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) and at least a 2.00 grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) in the semester immediately prior to the appointment, the semester of appointment and semester during the term of office. In order for this provision to be met, at least six hours (4 if a graduate student) must have been taken for that semester,
- Have completed JOUR 210 (Graphics) and JOUR 301 (Mass Communication, Law and Society), or equivalent;
- Have demonstrated ability in writing through university coursework or equivalent experience;
- Have at least one year experience in a responsible position on the Aggieland or comparable college yearbook.

Application forms should be picked up and returned to Dell Bomnskie, Student Media business coordinator, in Room 011A Reed McDonald Building. Deadline for submitting application: noon Wednesday, April 2, 2004. Applicants will be interviewed during the Student Media Board Meeting beginning at 9:30 a.m. Friday, April 4, 2003, in room 221F Reed McDonald.

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