

No-fires request extended one day

By Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, November 22, 2002

Smoke from Central Valley fireplaces and stoves is causing some of the worst winter air pollution seen in five years, according to a local air district spokeswoman.

That's in spite of a request for Valley residents to hold off on having fires this week.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on Thursday extended its request for residents not to have fires through Saturday morning, according to spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

Poor weather conditions are keeping smoke and small dust particles trapped in the Valley.

Monday, the air district had requested residents avoid fires this week because a temperature inversion is holding smoke and other soot pollution close to the Valley floor.

But Merced Bello said Thursday that the request has been largely ignored and pollution has only gotten worse over the week.

"This is exactly why we need mandatory limitations," she said.

In fact, next year the air district plans to enforce mandatory no-burn nights instead of the voluntary program that's now in place.

"If we went into a period like this next year, there would be mandatory restrictions," said Merced Bello.

The ban is not expected to apply to residents whose only source of heat is from a fireplace or stove.

The northern part of the Valley (Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties) on Monday had an Air Quality Index rating of 93. That's considered unhealthy for residents with respiratory illnesses who are sensitive to air pollution.

By Wednesday, the AQI peaked at 177, considered unhealthy for everybody. That peak occurred between 8 and 9 p.m. – the time residents were likely having fires, according to Merced Bello.

Today's AQI is expected to be 130 in the northern part of the Valley. That means residents who are sensitive to air pollution or have respiratory illnesses should limit their time outside.

Under new regulations expected to take effect next year, wood burning in fireplaces and stoves will likely be banned about 20 days per winter, air district officials have estimated.

Residents with new cleaner-burning stoves and fireplaces that have emissions control equipment should be affected less than five days of the winter, the officials say.

The Central Valley's air is already considered to be in "serious" non-attainment of federal health standards when it comes to fine airborne particulate matter.

In air quality terminology, the pollution is referred to as "PM10," particulate matter that's 10 or fewer microns in diameter. Ten microns is one sixth the diameter of a human hair.

Unlike visible dust that gets caught in the upper respiratory system, the tiny PM10 particles reach the lungs and in some cases even the bloodstream.

Weather, residents make for bad air mix

By Eric Firpo, Record Staff Writer, November 22, 2002

Particulate air pollution is even worse than predicted in the San Joaquin Valley this week, and air-quality officials blame the weather and the public for ignoring their requests to voluntarily abstain from using wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said airborne particles are on the rise in the Valley and are expected to reach especially unhealthy levels tonight.

The unhealthy rating means that sensitive children and adults should avoid activity outdoors, and everyone should minimize exertion outdoors.

The tiny particles in smoke can lodge deep in human lungs, causing irritation, asthma and a variety of other diseases.

The finest particles come from wood-burning fireplaces and stoves, air-district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said.

Which is why the district Monday issued a "Please don't light tonight request" asking Valley residents to refrain from burning wood.

The fog traps the smoke in the Valley and makes air pollution worse when wood is burned, she said, and aggravates respiratory problems such as asthma.

Curtailling the use of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves has been a struggle for the air district.

But mandatory restrictions are expected to go into effect next spring, Bello said.

The district was going to force wood-burning fireplace owners to install expensive inserts that filter pollutants, but a public outcry forced the district to back peddle on the insert.

Still, the use of such fireplaces will be regulated in the future. When new rules go into effect, those who violate them could incur fines, though that probably won't happen the first year of tougher rules.

And Bello said this week proves that voluntarily asking the public to stop using polluting fireplaces does little good, since warnings produced nothing but very high levels of airborne particulates.

"Clearly we need some regulation," Bello said. "The immediate impact is on your own neighbors and your own health."

Public input sought on new fireplace restrictions

MODESTO BEE STAFF REPORTS, November 22, 2002

The public is invited to help shape a new rule that will reduce pollution from fireplaces and wood stoves in the San Joaquin Valley.

In December, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will hold public meetings on coming fireplace restrictions. They are set for:

6:30 p.m. Dec. 3 in Fresno, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave.

2 p.m. Dec. 4 in Bakersfield, 2700 M St., Suite 275.

1:30 p.m. Dec. 5 in Modesto, 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130.

Modesto-area residents can "sit in" on the first two sessions via video teleconference at the office on Kiernan Avenue.

The district is looking at the following proposals:

Banning wood burning on days when airborne particles reach unhealthy levels. The district estimates there would be 20 no-burn days each winter.

Gas and propane devices would not be subject to the rule. Other cleaner burning technologies, such as those certified by the Environmental Protection Agency, may be exempt on some days.

The district is considering exemptions for homes where wood burning is the sole source of heat and exemptions for homes above 3,000 feet in elevation.

Limits on the number of wood-burning devices allowed in new housing developments.

A requirement that the owner remove, replace or retire older wood stoves before selling their property.

Comments on the draft plan are being accepted until 5:30 p.m. Dec. 20.

Public comments should be addressed to Tom Jordan. Comments may be submitted at the workshops; by telephone, 557-6400; fax, 557-6475; e-mail, tom.jordan@valleyair.org; or by regular mail. The address in Modesto is 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, 95356-9322.

More information is available on the valley air district's Web site, www.valleyair.org.

Valley air triggers pollution warning

By Glen Faison, Hanford Sentinel Executive Editor

HANFORD - The Valley's air quality hit unhealthy levels Wednesday night, prompting a call to avoid using wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a warning Wednesday afternoon projecting high levels of pollution. The warning came on the heels of a request by the district on Monday to avoid burning in fireplaces and stoves through Friday morning.

"We need Valley residents to do their part to protect the health of their families and their neighbors by not lighting their wood stoves tonight," said David L. Crow, the region's air pollution control officer, in issuing Wednesday's warning.

At the heart of the bad air is the season's weather.

"Meteorological conditions that foster unhealthy particulate matter pollution are as bad as they have been for the past five autumns," Air District Meteorologist Evan Shipp said in a prepared statement.

The projection for the smallest of these particles, 2.5 microns or smaller, was forecast to hit levels above 165 on the Air Quality Index. At these levels people with respiratory problems should avoid outdoor exertion. Even those without respiratory conditions could experience health problems.

Shipp said a strong high pressure ridge to the east is creating an inversion layer over the Valley that's the strongest the region has experienced in the past 10 autumns. He said these pollutants are being trapped at ground level because the winds haven't been strong enough to clear the air.

Particulate matter, or PM, is a mixture of pollutants, including microscopic pieces of soot, ash, salts, nitrates and smoke particles. Breathing the particles can reduce lung function, especially in children; aggravate heart and lung conditions such as asthma, emphysema and bronchitis; increase the risk of heart attacks; irritate throats and sinuses; and trigger headaches and allergies.

Wood smoke from residential fires produces up to 30 percent of these pollutants in urban areas. Wood smoke contains particles that are so tiny that they seep into homes despite closed doors and windows. Consequently, pollution levels inside a closed home can be up to 70 percent of the outdoor level.

Compliance with the no-burning request is voluntary. Those exempt from the request include those who rely on wood-burning devices as their only source of heat, and users of pellet or EPA-certified wood burning stoves or EPA-certified fireplace inserts.

Meanwhile the air district has scheduled a series of meetings early next month concerning a proposed rule aimed at cutting pollution from fireplaces and wood stoves used in the Valley.

Teleconferenced meetings on Rule 4901 are planned Dec. 3 at 6:30 p.m., Dec. 4 at 2 p.m., and Dec. 5 at 1:30 p.m. at each of the district's three regional offices. The nearest office is in Fresno, at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave. Comments on the proposed regulations may also be sent in writing to Tom Jordan, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, CA 93726 or by e-mail to .

The current residential wood-burning rule was adopted in 1993 to reduce PM emissions in the Valley. In February, the EPA ruled that the Valley's regulation does not fully comply with the Clean Air Act requirements for controlling residential wood burning. The proposed changes to the regulations include such things as mandatory curtailment, limiting the number of wood-burning devices allowed in new housing developments, and requiring retrofit or retirement of non-certified wood-burning equipment upon the sale of existing homes.

Dim outlook for Valley fireplaces

By Melinda Morales, Tulare Advance Register Staff writer

The soft crackling from a burning fireplace is as comforting as the warmth it generates, but it may also be a sound that soon will be extinct.

If rules proposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District take effect next year, burning wood may become a thing of the past.

"And that's what people say they like most about a fireplace," said Peggy Maurice, sales associate at Cameron Creek Ranch, the McMillin Homes subdivision on the corner of Court Street and Caldwell Avenue in Visalia. "The sound and the ambiance."

In fact, Maurice said she wouldn't be surprised if the percentage of homebuyers who choose not to have a fireplace built into their new home -- now about 40 percent -- increases if wood becomes a banned substance.

The proposed changes seek to prohibit wood burning on the most polluted nights. Those changes include:

- i Mandatory curtailment: The district would prohibit wood burning on days when airborne particulates reach unhealthy levels. The district estimates the restrictions would be in effect 20 days each winter in different areas in the Valley. Clean-burning technology, like gas and EPA-certified stoves, would be exempt.

- i Limits: Builders would be limited on how many wood-burning devices are allowed in new housing developments. This would include fireplaces, stoves and chimneys.

- i Retrofit: Homeowners would be required to retrofit their wood-burning equipment or block it up when they sell their home.

Charlie Goldberg, public-education specialist with the district in Fresno, said the amendments, if approved, likely won't be implemented until next summer.

"So what we're really talking about for consumers is the next burn season," he said.

And how will the district find and deal with violators?

"Enforcement is still up for discussion," Goldberg said. He said one method may be to have a toll-free hotline where residents can call in and report violators, similar to a system now in place for industrial polluters.

He said other jurisdictions, like Reno, that have implemented a hotline system had problems primarily in the first year of implementation that eventually worked themselves out.

"We anticipate a fairly easy adoption," he said.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the proposed changes, Bob Haun is doing a brisk business at Buck Stove Fan & Spa in Visalia. In business for 18 years, Haun said November is turning out to be his best month on record.

Haun sells fireplace inserts, gas logs, wood-burning and pellet stoves and all of the related accessories.

He said homes with masonry fireplaces can be retrofitted with costs ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.

He said a gas log can be the least expensive route costing from a couple hundred dollars to close to \$1,000. Gas logs come in a variety of styles and are made to resemble a stack of logs inside the fireplace.

They aren't terribly efficient, however.

"I don't sell these for heat, I sell them for atmosphere," he said.

Another option is a high-efficiency gas insert which Haun said can cost between \$600 and \$2,600. Fireplace inserts are heating units that retrofit into an existing fireplace.

They burn wood, gas or wood pellets and offer excellent efficiency.

Inserts utilize the existing chimney, though a flue liner or other modification may be necessary. Vent-free inserts require no chimney or flue modification. Many have blowers to circulate the heat.

At McMillin Homes, as with most builders, a standard fireplace set-up includes a gas pipe run to the fireplace, but the homeowner is responsible beyond that.

A sealed fireplace with no chimney and an instant-on switch is available as an upgrade.

Although fireplaces have the potential to go the way of the dinosaur with the proposed changes, Haun said he isn't worried.

"Until this becomes law, we don't know what will happen," he said.

Air quality changing Valley lives

By Juan Esparza Loera, Vida en el Valle, November 18, 2002

As recently as the 1970s, getting rid of your trash was not a complicated procedure in the San Joaquín Valley. You tossed the household trash into a steel barrel and set it afire when the barrel got full. That was standard procedure, whether you lived in a small town such as Earlimart or a city such as Fresno.

Today, Valley residents are paying the price for reckless practices of the past that have severe repercussions today and will continue into the future. And it isn't only our air quality that is taking a beating. Water is getting scarcer, and urban sprawl keeps chewing up farmland.

Last week's announcement of the creation of Clean Air Now, a private foundation dedicated to promoting cleaner air through education and funding of pilot projects, is only the latest in a series of wake-up calls for the Valley.

Up to 200,000 acres of farmland in west Fresno County could be retired from agriculture production under a proposal by the Westlands Water District. The reason: inadequate drainage that results in high salinity of land and an unstable supply of water.

Burning wood in our fireplaces could become a memory. The San Joaquín Valley Air Pollution Control District will ask residents to refrain from lighting wood-burning stoves and fireplaces whenever the air approaches unhealthy levels. The request is voluntary but will become mandatory next year, officials say.

Air pollution is responsible for 311 deaths a year in Fresno County, according to a report released in May by an environmental group.

Fresno County has the highest childhood asthma rate in the state, with as many as one of every seven children experiencing symptoms of the disease.

"It is life or death now. We have no choice," says Fred Ruiz, chairman of Dinuba-based Ruiz Food Products and a Clean Air Now board member.

Ruiz, a Valley resident for 50 years, remembers spending summers with his grandparents in Southern California. He would have to quit swimming because of allergies or asthma aggravated

by the area's bad air. Six years ago, he began to suffer similar reactions in the Valley. And his grandchildren are not immune, either.

"I think we have contributed to the problem more than we have contributed to a solution," Ruiz says.

No one favors bad air, but what sacrifices are we willing to make for cleaner air?

The biggest air polluters are vehicles. A quick but painful solution: Limit driving of personal vehicles to every other day.

As for water, Westlands seems to have a viable solution with its land retirement plan, despite short-term impacts that will be felt heavily in communities that are ag-dependent.

The Valley's population growth -- it more than doubled to 7.3 million within 40 years -- will put a squeeze on a limited water supply. But mention water meters in Fresno, and people react as if they will lose a birthright.

There is no more time for pointing fingers or excuses. Environmentalists, politicians, businesses and residents must help craft workable solutions.

Like the U.S. surgeon general's warning on tobacco products, we have been warned. The question is will we heed the warnings or continue along with business as usual?

Environmentally friendly plane engine debuts Tule River Aero and a French company join to produce a turbo-charged diesel motor.

By Terry Bergfalk, Special to the Fresno Bee, *November 22, 2002*

PORTERVILLE -- A new aircraft engine being used in a partnership including Tule River Aero Industries Inc. of Porterville and a French engine company could "revolutionize" the aviation world, said David Nenna, Tule River tribal administrator, as he introduced an airplane equipped with the engine.

Nenna spoke last week at the Porterville Airport, at the West Coast debut of the Cessna 182, powered by the new Jet A turbocharged diesel engine.

The aircraft is the first in the United States using the new engine.

The Tule River Tribal Council operates Tule River Aero Industries, an aircraft maintenance shop that retrofits private aircraft.

The company opened in October 2000 and employs 18 people, including three FAA-licensed mechanics and three aircraft inspectors.

The Porterville company is joining a partnership with SMA Engines Inc. of France and Riley Superskyrocket of Carlsbad to convert the Cessna 182 from a piston-type engine to the diesel engine upgrade.

Richard Honn, managing director of Riley Superskyrocket, explained the advantages of converting the propeller-driven airplane.

"This aircraft uses jet fuel, has a 40% gain in fuel efficiency and travels 10 knots faster than conventional-type aircraft at 10,000 feet," he said. "The emissions are lower in carbon dioxide, and the nitrogen oxide is handled through the exhaust burner, kind of like a catalytic converter on a car. It is ecologically friendly, California friendly and world friendly because you can get jet fuel everywhere."

By contrast, he said, aviation gas is dangerous to manufacture and takes high-octane fuel that is broken down further with acids, making it explosive.

"Oil companies lose money on it and would like to get rid of it," Honn said of aviation gasoline.

Honn's company modifies general aviation aircraft using the latest technology.

"The Europeans are way ahead of us on the switch to diesel, not only in aircraft but in cars as well," Honn added. "What they have been able to do is to control the nitrogen oxide emissions so now roughly two-thirds of their luxury fleet of cars and 50% of all cars have diesel engines."

Ronald Cotton, president and chief executive for Tule River Aero Industries, could only shake his head.

"It's amazing that you can come up with innovative technology like this for an old prop plane, the 182," he said. "It's probably one of the most revolutionary products to come along in aviation industry in my career of 37 years in the business."

The technology isn't exactly new, however. Thierry Saint Loup, a customer service supervisor for SMA, said: "The type of engine we are manufacturing in France that will be shipped to the U.S. for installation in the Cessna 182 is similar to that used in the Airbus and big Boeings. It was designed in 1996."

The conversion has advantages beyond being environmentally friendly, Saint Loup said.

"The new Cessna conversion is easier to fly. With the old engine, you needed three controls; now we have one. Compared to the piston engine, this turbo diesel engine has no spark plugs and no magnetos. It will need only a simple basic maintenance. It has a very quiet engine that should make residents surrounding an airport happy."

The cost to convert a Cessna is about \$80,000, Saint Loup said, which he said includes "everything new from the firewall to the propellers, including cowling, accessories, instruments, new upholstery, a computer system and sensors and labor."

To buy a converted airplane runs "about \$75,000 less than a new aircraft that costs between \$250,000 and \$350,000."

Honn said that the John Deere Corp. has ordered 60 of the converted aircraft to be used for agricultural mapping.

"A friend of mine has perfected a camera-mounted system that is fixed to the landing gear of the Cessna," he said.

"It gives the farmer information about whether the fertilizer and water usage is correct. ... The plane will work in conjunction with tractors equipped with GPS [Global Positioning System satellite technology] and tell the farmer if more water or fertilizer is needed."

Honn said the partnership hopes to start on that project at the end of the year. The process means aviation opportunities, and the orders more jobs at the Porterville company, Cotton said.

"We will need to bring our technical staff up to 50 people by next year," he said.

"This is the start of change not only in aviation but for cars, too, in California," Cotton said.

"With the use of cheaper fuel and little maintenance with a low noise level, this opens a lot of doors for aviation enthusiasts."