

No sign of relief in the air as Valley sweats out August

By Lisa Aleman-Padilla, The Fresno Bee, August 13, 2002,

August's longer days and higher temperatures have air pollution officials forecasting a steady string of Spare the Air Days for Valley residents throughout the rest of the month.

"It looks like August is going to be a rough month for us," said Kelly Malay, air quality educator for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, who said 16 days have qualified so far this summer for the Spare the Air designation that encourages people to car pool and avoid activities that would create smog.

Smog levels throughout the Valley increased significantly about 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. Monday, prompting the air district to issue a health advisory for portions of Kern and Fresno counties until 7:30 p.m.

Health advisories are state-mandated public notifications aimed at children, the elderly, pregnant women, those with cardiopulmonary conditions such as asthma, and those who exercise vigorously outdoors. The advisories are a step beyond a Spare the Air Day declaration.

Malay said the district can issue warnings, but it is up to individuals and schools to adhere to them.

"We issue a notification, but what they do is beyond our control," she said.

Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman for the air district, said another health advisory could occur this afternoon because of the stagnant air, smog buildup and the continued triple-digit temperatures.

The poor air quality comes as many Valley high schools prepare for football season.

At Fresno's Hoover High School, practice began at 4 p.m. Monday and was expected to run until dark for the varsity team. Players arrived in full gear: thick shoulder pads, helmets and jerseys, and carrying large jugs of ice water.

They have already been practicing for a week in preparation for their first game of the season, Aug. 30, against Clovis West.

"We're drinking a lot of water, and we're taking a lot of breaks," said senior Ron Caldwell, 17, a varsity player for the Hoover Patriots.

Other team members said they try not to eat too close to practice; they also avoid sodas, and eat fruit and pasta to maintain their energy levels.

Hoover Athletic Director Doug Semmen said he and the coaches take the Valley's heat and poor air quality seriously. Team members are given water every 15 minutes as well as breaks, and are kept in the shade as much as possible.

"We take every precaution we can take," he said. "It's terrible air quality in the Valley. That's the reality."

Semmen said Hoover recently purchased a psychrometer that measures the temperature and humidity out on the field, allowing him and the team's certified trainers to know when it's too dangerous to continue practicing.

"If it gets in the danger zone, we'll be coming in for the day," he said.

He also said he believes air quality needs to be an issue with every Valley school, and it is better for school officials to err on the side of caution: "Everybody does respond differently. Here in the Valley, we have a lot of kids with asthma."

In fact, Semmen is also trying to get peak flow meters, which measure lung capacity, so he can monitor players' breathing function when they are out on the field.

At Hanford West High School, the Huskies also are getting ready for their first game of the season -- Sept. 6, against Taft Union High School.

Coach Justin Fowler said they are hydrating and cutting back on running. "If a kid says he needs water, he needs water," said Fowler, who said he does not subscribe to the old belief that water intake should be limited during practice.

He said a certified trainer is on the field at all times, and players with asthma are required to give their inhalers to the trainer so they are readily available.

"If any breathing problems develop, they are dealt with immediately," he said.

Despite the Valley's scorching temperatures, other areas are experiencing a fairly mild August, creating less of a strain on the state's power reserves.

"Forecasts are very high for the San Joaquin Valley, but coastal regions and the Los Angeles area are relatively cool," said Gregg Fishman, public information officer for the California Independent Systems Operator.

"We're not getting to the point where we see a statewide or regional heat wave."

Monday's forecast megawatt usage was expected to be 41,000 megawatts, but as of 2 p.m., the actual usage was a little lower.

"It's certainly high, but it's within our capability to provide," Fishman said.

"We should be OK through this week, but a rise in temperature in those cooler areas can affect the equation."

Fishman said the state's power situation improved this year because there was more snow and rainfall to generate hydroelectricity.

The state also added 4,500 megawatts to its system during the past 18 months. The addition can provide enough power for nearly 4 million homes.

"We think we're in pretty good shape for the rest of the summer," he said, though he cautioned the public to try to conserve energy -- especially between 4 and 7 p.m., peak usage hours.

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Burning fee said to fuel wildfires

Air board member revisits the issue

The Record, August 13, 2002

A fee charged to land owners who start preventive fires on their property actually is increasing fire danger in the San Joaquin Valley, according to a Valley air regulator.

Ronn Dominici, an Air Pollution Control District board member and Madera County supervisor, said a \$5-per-acre fee has convinced some landowners in the Sierra foothills not to start preventive fires, which clear out dense undergrowth that can fuel forest fires.

That dense undergrowth is a danger to Valley and foothill residents, Dominici said. Also, smoke from forest fires fueled by the undergrowth can settle into the Valley floor, where residents already breathe filthy air.

The fee was imposed last year after the state Air Resources Board passed new rules that required air districts to adopt smoke-management programs. The fee helps the air district pay for its smoke-management program.

Smoke is a form of particulate pollution, one of the Valley's biggest air problems. Tiny pieces of smoke, vapor or dust lodge in human lungs, causing breathing problems and even cancer.

No similar fee exists in the air districts that cover Amador and Calaveras counties, according to officials there.

The Valley has one of the worst particulate-pollution problems in the country. Less than 10 percent of the Valley's problem is attributed to fires, including preventive burning and farm-waste fires. The biggest causes are dust kicked up on unpaved roads and dust created by farming operations, according to air data.

Although the prescribed burns may be a small percentage of overall pollution, on some days they can be a significant contributors to poor air quality, air district officials said Monday.

Dominici said the Valley air board should exempt certain land owners from the fee or reduce the fee, an option for which he voted a year ago. The fee is assessed for each acre burned in excess of 40 acres. That can add up quickly for land owners with lots of acreage, he said.

"My vote was wrong, as far as I'm concerned. I think we should take another look at this and be fair about it," he said.

Air-quality inspector Ted Strauss said it's too early to tell for sure if the preventive-burning fee is discouraging some people from taking proper fire precautions.

Most land that needs preventive burning is owned by the government.

Agencies such as the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection haven't changed their methods, Strauss said.

The air district will discuss the preventive-burn fee, also known as the prescribed-burn fee, at its meeting Thursday. Information: 557-6400.

Traffic woes drive county, city meeting

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer, August 12, 2002

There was nothing but bad news at the first meeting between the planning commissions of the city of Bakersfield and the county of Kern.

During the next 20 years Bakersfield's streets and freeways will choke on ever-heavier traffic.

The city's residents will choke too -- on smog and dust from the cars.

Their ears will be cluttered by the growing rumble of the urbanizing city.

And as much as 59 square miles of the agricultural land that powered Kern County's economy for a century will be eaten up by homes, shopping centers, offices and industrial centers.

And there is no way to avoid it.

Neither commission was surprised by the news -- delivered in an environmental critique of an update to the city's 2010 General Plan.

Planning commissioners from both sides of the city limits watch Bakersfield inch toward urbanization every time they meet.

They know what's coming.

Monday's historic first meeting between the two commissions was hailed as a step toward greater communication on growth and development issues between the city and county.

But even plans to mitigate the city's growing problems -- by adding more freeways and attacking air pollution -- won't do enough to stop a significant drop in the quality of life here.

Members of the public called the environmental report a cop-out.

"As quality of life continues to degrade, we throw up our hands and say 'unavoidable impacts,'" said city resident Terrie Stoller. "We are repeating the scenario of Los Angeles in the last century without the benefit of an ocean breeze."

They urged planning commissioners -- and the city and county officials who are drafting the update of the general plan -- to find new ways to handle traffic, clean the air and protect farmland.

"If we don't get respect from the writers of this document, how can we expect respect from the other members of our community," said Peter Belluomini, with the Kern County Farm Bureau.

He called for farmland protections that would buffer farms from homes and keep the growing city from interfering with agricultural operations.

Members of the public, and several city of Bakersfield planning commissioners, said traffic is the root of many of the problems.

"I don't think the community wants to live with a lower level of (road) service or the lower air quality that goes with it," said Smart Growth Coalition spokeswoman Pauline Larwood.

"If there is an Achilles' heel of this whole project, it is that the transportation infrastructure is not there, nor will there be anytime soon."

Bakersfield Planning Commissioner Tom McGinnis said better bus and light rail systems must be developed

"It all boils down to one basic thing -- traffic," he said. "Our solution to our traffic problems and our air problems isn't to build more streets and freeways, it's to implement more mass transit."

Monday's meeting was only a part of a public comment on the environmental review of the Metropolitan Bakersfield 2010 General Plan update.

Members of the public can get the document from either the city or the county and comment on it in writing before Aug. 30.

All comments from the public will get a printed response in the final draft of the the environmental review before it is approved by the city and county.

When finished, it will be added to the full general plan as part of the update of the decade-old document.

As for the city and county planning commissions -- they plan to meet again.

"I would like to see an annual or semi-annual meeting between us," said Ron Sprague, chairman of the Bakersfield Planning Commission.

Central Valley in for a hot week

By Denis Bohannon, Hanford Sentinel Managing Editor

HANFORD - The heat is on.

Forecasters expect the San Joaquin Valley to bake this week with temperatures approaching 110 degrees.

Temperatures in Hanford reached 102 degrees.

The National Weather Service predicted today's highs would hit 104 in Hanford, and 106 in Fresno and Coalinga. Tuesday is expected to be hotter. The NWS forecast calls for the mercury to peak at 105 in Hanford, 107 in Fresno and 109 in Coalinga.

"We have a high pressure system here, and it brings mostly clear skies and good solid heating," said NWS meteorologist Gary Sanger. "In the afternoons, we are getting more sunlight because the sun's out for a longer period of time.

"The combination of the high sun angle and high pressure over the area is giving us the triple-digit heat."

It will cool off at night. Tonight's predicted low is 69 for Hanford, 74 for downtown Fresno. The extended forecast for Fresno calls for highs of 107 Wednesday and 104 in Thursday.

But Sanger says the high pressure system will weaken toward this weekend, cooling down the temperature to near normal. But that doesn't mean local folks can get away from the heat because the normal in Kings County is still in the mid 90s.

With the heat comes the usual poor air quality. Today's air quality forecast is 174 for ozone. Levels over 100 are considered "unhealthful." Sunday's readings peaked at 179.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared today the fourth Spare the Air Day in a row. People sensitive to poor air conditions were urged to use caution when taking part in strenuous outdoor activities.

During Spare The Air Days, Valley residents are asked to carpool, postpone yard work using gasoline-powered equipment and not use motor boats or off-road vehicles for the day. They are also asked not to use products with lots of volatile organic compounds in them. These include solvents, oil-based paints, household aerosol sprays and charcoal lighter fluid.

Visalia Times Delta Editorial and Point/Counterpoint, August 13, 2002

Car-free day could raise awareness

Tulare tried something the other day that Visalia might want to pay heed to: The city of Tulare asked residents to leave cars at home and use other means of transportation. The city offered free bus service. It also encouraged people to walk or ride bikes.

Granted, in many cases such gestures are more symbolic than effective. Even the few people who comply with the request return to their single-passenger vehicles the next day. The actual improvement in air quality is minimal.

Even considering that drawback, it would be worthwhile for the city of Visalia to consider some programs of that kind, even if they are gestures. The Great American Smokeout, as just one example, began as a single-day gesture, and look how much it has contributed to the decline in the number of cigarette smokers.

Attitude change is the objective. Getting people to think differently about using internal combustion-engine-powered vehicles represents the best hope for California's improving an air quality that is becoming nationally infamous.

When they think about it, most people would agree that limiting the use of personal vehicles is a good thing: It saves on fuel and lowers the national dependency on imported oil. It reduces emissions that contribute to air pollution. Even sharing rides is more thrifty than running one's car every day.

The advantages don't stop there: Riding a bike or walking are more healthy. Taking public transportation connects people. Not coping with traffic, parking and other hassles connected with cars leaves people less frazzled and frustrated.

So why don't we all leave the car at home and use other transportation more often? It might be a little like getting people to eat things that are healthy for them, to exercise or to pick up a book when professional wrestling is on television: By nature, humans seem inclined to avoid what is good for them.

That's why a concerted effort by the city of Visalia might be just the ticket. Build it up for a day in the fall when the weather is good and there are fewer excuses for avoiding exercise than now during summer's dog days. The clout of the city can push the event as a celebration. Reduced

bus fares would be a lure. Maybe downtown businesses could encourage the event with discount offers.

Improving the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley, of course, cannot be accomplished city by city. We are under no illusions that bank of smog will part and the Sierra Nevada would magically appear the day after the ride-free event.

What events of this kind will do, though, is raise awareness and consciousness. And maybe they will nudge some of us toward a change of habit that will save our lives.

Issue: The city of Tulare recently sponsored a car-free day. Our view: Such an event in Visalia might raise some awareness about the need to reduce air pollution. How to get involved: City Hall, 707 W. Acequia Ave., Visalia, CA 93291; fax: 713-4800.