

Smog-control official slams ag exemption

Costa concedes growers' clean-air exemption won't last

By Jake Henshaw
Times-Delta Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO -- With the San Joaquin Valley under the federal gun over air pollution -- especially from farming -- legislators Tuesday were told it's time for the state to take control of the issue.

Specifically, a state regional air-pollution official called on the Legislature to revoke agriculture's longstanding exemption from clean-air standards.

That would allow regional air boards to place farm equipment like diesel pumps and activities that stir up dust within the existing regulatory framework under local control.

Without state action, legislators were told the federal government is set to step in as early as November 2003 with initial sanctions that eventually could lead to a freeze on federal highway money.

"In light of the circumstance that the [agricultural] sources will get permitted either way [by federal or state agencies], it is strongly in California's interest to act," said Barbara Lee of the California Air Pollution Control Officers Association.

Sen. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who led the hearing Tuesday, agreed that the agriculture industry "must realize that the exemption is not going to last."

But he stressed that it's more important the state work with federal, agricultural, environmental, community and other interests to come up with a plan to phase in changes that otherwise could shock an already struggling farm economy.

He opposed trying to rush a hurry-up bill through the Legislature in the final couple of weeks of the current legislative session, as was suggested Tuesday.

Instead, Costa urged more carefully developed action next year. Even though a 2003 bill might not take effect until Jan 1, 2004 -- more than a month after the November deadline -- he argued that federal officials wouldn't crack down on the state if there is a consensus plan.

"They're not going to act when there are only 38 days [after the November deadline] left if everybody is in agreement," Costa said.

But Costa is being forced out of the Legislature at the end of this year because of term limits.

Sen. Charles Poochigian, R-Fresno, who will be back next year, agreed change is coming but said he wants to move slowly to be sure that any plan is fair and reasonable.

Poochigian said he wants regulators to do what they can to recognize that San Joaquin Valley farmers could end up with restrictions that similar farmers elsewhere may not face because of better air quality in their region.

"I hope that recognition, and I hope empathy, will be applied throughout the process if for no other reason than the economic status of this industry in this state that's already teetering on disaster," Poochigian said.

Dirty air keeps students indoors

Officials tell schools in three areas to stop afternoon activities.

By Mark Grossi and John Ellis
The Fresno Bee

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With lung-searing ozone climbing daily to dangerous levels, air officials Tuesday reacted quickly, calling a rare, early health advisory for three San Joaquin Valley areas to keep schoolchildren indoors in the afternoon.

Normally, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District waits until late afternoon to see whether smog is bad enough for the state-mandated advisory, but not Tuesday.

"It was pretty obvious things were not getting better," said district supervising meteorologist Evan Shipp. "It's not going to be much better [today]. It's possible we'll get another one."

As a matter of state law, schools in the affected areas -- Fresno-Clovis, Arvin-Edison and foothill communities in Kern County -- could not allow outdoor activities from 3 to 7 p.m. Tuesday.

The Clovis West band got the message. Band members would usually be marching outdoors, but Tuesday they were practicing inside.

The air district's advice to everyone else: Stay indoors if you can during the late afternoon this week. This smog episode, which coincides with a sweltering run of triple-digit temperatures, may not break until Thursday or Friday.

Many local residents weren't aware of the health advisories and couldn't cite scientific data. They just knew it was hot, the air was ugly and indoors was the best place to stay.

Chuck Miller, who has lived in Clovis for 17 years, went from his air-conditioned home to his air-conditioned car to his air-conditioned office. His time outside? "As little as possible."

Donna Vickers was shopping in Old Town Clovis, but was making it quick before heading home to air conditioning. A teacher, she had yard duty Tuesday. On Monday night, she prepared by making sure her hat was in the car. She slathered on the sunscreen, too.

Still, the nasty air brought on the allergies, making her eyes itch. It happens, she said, when the air is bad.

At River Park, Fresno resident Katie Sullivan dubbed it a movie, computer and video game day. She and her children had just seen a movie and were heading home. She stopped briefly in the heat at River Park farmers' market to buy some fresh fruit. Today, she's heading back to Huntington Lake, where the air is cooler -- and cleaner.

Conditions should improve by the end of the week, according to National Weather Service meteorologist Gary Sanger. The high temperature today is forecast at 104 in Fresno, and officials expect another bad-air day. But a slight cooling trend should begin by Thursday and Friday.

The heat wave is one big reason why the Valley has had four health advisories since Friday. Ozone, the chief ingredient of smog, forms best on hot, calm summer days when the sun cooks chemicals from combustion sources, such as vehicles.

Doctors say children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with lung problems should avoid the outdoors during intense episodes of smog, which also corrodes crops and other living things. Smog can make life miserable for asthmatics.

"It's bad," said Dr. Paul Baker, a pediatric physician at Kaiser Permanente. "Even people who've never had asthma are experiencing throat irritation, mild cough."

Still, Baker said he has seen no increase in pediatric lung disease and asthma patients, likely because many children with severe asthma have plans so parents know when and how much medicine to use.

"This is a common practice in the community to have these plans. They are recommended by the American Lung Association."

On bad air days like Tuesday, asthmatic children might use more medicine, often in higher doses, Baker said.

Clovis and Parlier, downwind of the Fresno metropolitan smog sources, seem to get the brunt of the ozone assault. On Monday, Clovis registered 128 parts per billion and Parlier 149 parts per billion. In Kern County, Arvin recorded 151 parts per billion.

The federal health standard is 124 parts per billion. State law requires the health advisory at 145 parts per billion.

The state health advisory is different from the local district's "Spare the Air Day" program, which calls for voluntary curtailment of activities that create smog. Both "Spare the Air" and the health advisory were called Tuesday.

The bad air doesn't just affect people. It drifts into farm fields where it reduce crop yields and, eventually, floats to the Sierra where pine trees and even giant sequoia seedlings are damaged.

The result: One monitoring station at Sequoia National Park had a higher smog reading Monday than downtown Los Angeles.

The Valley stands alongside Los Angeles and Houston as the three worst air basins in the country. Even so, the Valley has had only 16 violations of the one-hour smog standard this summer, compared to Los Angeles' 29.

But the Valley has also had 77 violations of the long-term, eight-hour standard, which shows residents are being exposed for long periods to smog levels beyond the human health standard.

Los Angeles has recorded only 70 such violations this year, according to the state's preliminary counts.

And a little of this ozone even gets indoors, said air district meteorologist Shipp.

"There are studies that show buildings do allow some ozone inside," Shipp said. "But if you have a good, air-conditioned building, you will be exposed to a great deal less ozone. Inside is going to be better than outside."

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Valley pollution raises red flag

By KERRY CAVANAUGH, Californian staff writer

For those who live in the San Joaquin Valley, the last four days have been filled with sickening amounts of ozone.

In fact, athletes, children and the elderly have been warned to stay indoors as ozone levels exceed national health standards.

Pollution has gotten so bad in Arvin, Edison and the foothill communities that air officials have sent out health warnings four of the last five days.

"At these kinds of levels you expect everyone to experience some health effects," San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District meteorologist Evan Shipp said.

Extreme heat, stagnant air flow and tons of pollution have created a four-day run of nasty ozone not seen since 1998.

What's worse, forecasts show the rest of August is going to be unusually hot with especially high ozone levels.

Ozone is a caustic agent that aggravates heart and respiratory problems. Recent studies indicate ozone decreases lung function and potentially causes asthma in active children living in smoggy areas.

The air district sent out Spare the Air notices the last seven days, warning people who may be sensitive to stay inside during the afternoon hours when ozone levels peak.

When air quality gets this bad, the district issues a state-mandated health advisory instructing schools to keep students inside.

As a result, Kern High School sports teams have been practicing before 10 a.m. and after 5 p.m., according to the school district.

Sports, playing and even swimming are best avoided when ozone is high, Air District public educator Kelly Malay said.

"I tell people anything that is increasing your breathing rate is increasing the pollution you're breathing into your lungs," Malay said.

Ozone is formed when two pollutants react in sunlight. The two pollutants are emitted from vehicle exhaust, factory smokestacks and burning.

The pollutants become trapped in the valley's bowl-like shape. The intense summer sunlight then cooks the pollutants into ozone.

A layer of warm air then acts as a cap, trapping ozone on the valley floor.

"Day by day you just keep seeing increasing levels (of ozone) because of the inversion cap," Shipp said.

The good news is that temperatures are expected to cool slightly by the end of the week, and ozone should decline a little, Shipp added.

In the valley, hot and icky

By HEIDI THOMAS
BEE STAFF WRITER

August's typical heat is percolating thermometers and mixing up a bad brew of air pollution throughout the valley and foothills.

And while many people heed common sense by staying indoors until evening, some don't know when to quit.

Eric Mild, head coach of the California State University, Stanislaus, men's soccer team, has his players practicing twice a day -- in the morning and in the heat of the afternoon.

"We give them lots of water breaks," Mild said. "And we let them sit in the shade for extended breaks to facilitate cooling down."

Tuesday afternoon, many of the soccer players sported red faces. But most shrugged off the ovenlike conditions.

"There's not much you can do about the heat," player Roman DuChateau said.

Tuesday's temperatures, while not the hottest of the summer, reached 98 degrees in downtown Modesto and 99 degrees at Modesto Airport.

The temperature reached 100 degrees in Merced, 99 in Turlock and Sonora, and 98 in Stockton.

Tuesday broke the three-day run of triple-digit temperatures at Modesto Airport, but valley residents can expect a high of 102 today. The heat wave is expected to relent by the weekend.

Stanislaus State soccer goalie Chris Poole said his hometown of Chicago can get just as hot, but here it's a dry heat, which makes it a little more bearable.

He just moved to Turlock to attend Stanislaus State, arriving right as the heat wave struck.

"It's not too bad," he said. "It's the air I'm not used to."

The air he referred to is the film that lingers just above the valley and obscures the foothills.

In the middle of August, that air can be dangerous.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared Tuesday a Spare the Air day. The air quality index reached the unhealthy range in Merced on Tuesday, and came close to unhealthy for Modesto and Turlock.

Today also is a Spare the Air day.

During such days, people with respiratory conditions and allergies are urged to limit time outside.

Other people can ease the poor air conditions by carpooling, using public transportation, combining errands that require an automobile, and keeping vehicles in good condition.

Although the poor air condition and high heat can be a dangerous combination, Memorial Medical Center in Modesto has not seen an increase in emergency room visits due to the weather, said Wendy Pinto, a representative for the hospital.

But, she said, it often takes three days for people to begin suffering ill effects of heatstroke. Symptoms of heatstroke can include dizziness or confusion, rapid heart rate, and red, hot skin.

Pinto said heatstroke can be avoided by drinking plenty of water, staying indoors where there is air conditioning and exercising in the early morning rather than in the heat of the afternoon.

This means anyone engaged in physical activity outdoors needs to be careful, including children.