

Wheezing weather forecast

Monday might bring relief, end bad-air streak

By Amee M. Thompson, Visalia Times-Delta, August 16, 2002

Hack, wheeze and cough -- again.

Today is the eighth Spare the Air day in a row, marking the longest streak of bad air in the San Joaquin Valley since the Spare the Air program started in 1996, said Charlie Goldberg, marketing and education specialist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

And the streak might continue. The National Weather Service is forecasting temperatures of 102 for today and Saturday.

Sunday might be a little better, but things aren't really going to cool down until Monday, said Mike Sowko, a NWS meteorologist.

This bad-air streak is the result of the recent heat wave this part of the Valley has been experiencing.

Ground-level ozone, the primary component of smog, is an odorless, colorless gas produced when oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds are exposed to heat and sunlight.

Ozone can cause lung tissue to become swollen and inflamed; it can cause scarring in the lungs and limit the flow of oxygen to the rest of the body, according to the air pollution control district.

Living in areas with high ozone levels can lead to asthma in children who previously didn't suffer from the condition, according to a University of Southern California study.

Active children living in high ozone areas develop asthma at three times the rate of other children, according to the same study.

During this heat wave, not only is it hot but the warm air has been trapped here by an inversion layer, keeping all the pollutants here in the Valley, Goldberg said.

"That [inversion layer] will continue with the high temperatures," Sowko said. "That will break up possibly Sunday and for sure into next week."

Although the air might look bad because of smoke entering the Valley from the 135,000-acre McNally fire burning in Sequoia National Forest, that smoke isn't contributing to the smog, just bad visibility, Goldberg said.

Back in 1998, there were two streaks of bad air that lasted seven days each.

Although this streak is longer, the air pollution control district lowered the threshold for declaring Spare the Air days.

"We wanted to be a little more accurate," Goldberg said. "We knew that we would have more days, but we didn't want to call so many of them in a row."

The more often people hear that it is a Spare the Air day, the more they tune it out, he said.

But tuning it out might not be a good idea, especially for those who are sensitive to changes in the air quality.

"People who are particularly sensitive should seriously limit their exposure by staying indoors as much as possible," Goldberg said.

Even those who are not sensitive should refrain from exercising late in the day and should limit outdoor excursions, he said.

Side bar:

What to do Valley residents can help reduce and control air pollution by: Avoiding unnecessary vehicle use, including personal automobiles, watercraft and off-road vehicles If you have to drive, drive smart by accelerating gradually Use cruise control on the highway Obey the speed limit Combine errands into one trip Keep your car tuned and support the Smog Check Program Avoid topping off at the gas pump

Take the train for personal and business trips out of the area. Delay mowing the lawn. It's OK to barbecue, but don't use lighter fluid.

Dairy gets go-ahead from planners

Permit has been on hold three years while environmental-impact reports were studied.

By Amee M. Thompson, Tulare Advance-Register, August 16, 2002

Armed with an "exhaustive" environmental report and the approval of the Tulare County Planning Commission, Rob Hilarides will now take his request to build a new dairy to the county Board of Supervisors.

Wednesday the Planning Commission made its approval of Hilarides' dairy and cheesemaking operation final.

Hilarides wants to build and operate a 9,100-cow dairy at Road 188 and Avenue 242, just west of Lindsay. Hilarides will also build a farmstead cheesemaking facility on 1,428 acres where the Lindsay Olive Co. used to have its brine ponds.

"This is probably the most exhaustive environmental-impact report done on a dairy in Tulare County," said Michael Spata, an attorney with the county counsel's office. "[The report] is based on information from some of the most highly qualified experts. What is before you is a comprehensive treatment of the issues."

Commissioner Shirley Kirkpatrick said she is supportive of the project and the thoroughness of the environmental documents, but she sees a point when Tulare County will have enough cows.

"At some point we will reach the carrying capacity for dairies in this county and the industry has to realize that," Kirkpatrick said. "Hopefully, we will have enough information at that time to know we have reached that."

In the end, it came down to money and benefits over any possible negative effects.

"The economic and social impacts way outweigh any negative impacts this project may have,"

Commissioner Mark Fernandes said.

Wendy Bettencourt, who lives about a quarter mile east of the proposed dairy site, was disappointed with Wednesday's final decision. She said the opponents of the dairy will appeal the decision to the Board of Supervisors.

"There are people trying to get that area cleaned up," Bettencourt said. "Putting a dairy on top of that is not going to solve problems."

Bettencourt and her husband, Alan, have been speaking out about how the dairy will effect the air quality and groundwater for those surrounding it.

The seven-member commission voted 5-0 in favor of approval. Commissioner Ed Dias did not participate because of a conflict of interest. Dias is a sales consultant in the farm and land department of Pearson Reality, which has contributed to the Dairy Industries Alliance, a group supporting the permit. Commissioner Chris Kapheim was absent.

Dairy permits in Tulare County have been on hold for more than three years as the county has been sued, first by state Attorney General Bill Lockyer and then by the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment. Both took issue with the requirements for reporting the environmental effects that could be caused by dairies.

The board could see the Hilarides dairy permit on its calendar as early as 1:30 p.m. Sept. 17.

That brown haze masks bigger risk

It's invisible ozone that worries experts.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, August 16, 2002

Facing health warnings all week during the worst ozone episode in four years, San Joaquin Valley residents only need to gaze out the window to see how bad the air looks. But, oddly, it's not what you can see that can hurt you.

Ozone is invisible -- and it's the most dangerous thing in the air right now. So what is that brownish haze shrouding the sunrise?

It's a visible brew of whatever went into the air during a week of weather stagnation. It includes days-old soot from the McNally fire in Sequoia National Forest, chemical specks, dust and moisture.

It's ugly, but it's not above the health threshold for particle pollution, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It's nowhere near the danger of the ozone," said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist at the agency.

The ozone episode will likely continue today and into the weekend, forecasters said. Meteorologists had expected cooler air to move into the Valley by Saturday, but they have revised forecasts to show a slight cooling won't begin until early next week.

On Thursday, the haze obscured foothills and buildings even as colorless ozone spiked to dangerous levels again. Fresno recorded its seventh consecutive 100-degree-plus day.

The ozone episode, which started a week ago, is the worst since August 1998.

The air district stopped short of calling a health advisory Thursday, but the air violated the federal one-hour standard. The district had declared health advisories for five of the previous six days, meaning schools were required to stop outdoor activities between 3 and 7 p.m.

For today, air officials have called a "Spare the Air Day," a program of voluntary pollution reduction by businesses and residents. As they have throughout the week, air officials are urging people to cut down on pollution-causing activities such as using gasoline-powered mowers.

All the concern is focused on ozone, which can trigger asthma attacks and irritate other lung problems. Hot, sunny days bake chemicals emitted from vehicles and other sources to make ozone.

But the same conditions also trap particles and create the haze.

The main problem is a dome of hot air parked over the Valley. The air at 5,000 feet would normally be cool, but it has been monitored at 80 degrees this week. The warm layer, called an inversion, won't allow pollutants to escape.

And the Valley's topography, with tall mountains on three sides, creates a bowl to hold the air.

"We're just not getting any air movement," said Dan Gudgel, warming coordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

There's one other factor in the Valley's haze: The same chemicals that make ozone also can become tiny particles.

Some oxides of nitrogen, which come from vehicles and other combustion sources, will change into particles measured in microns, which are many times smaller than the width of a human hair. These tiny specks can evade the body's natural defenses and lodge deep in the lungs.

"This kind of particle formation can have many kinds of organic carbons in it," said Shipp. "I've checked our particulate readings and it is up, but it's not over the standard. Our problem right now is ozone."

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com or 441-6316.\

The following Associated Press story appeared in the Fresno Bee and Bakersfield Californian August 16:

Central Valley air officials propose new farm burn plan

By KIM BACA Associated Press Writer

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) - Farmers and ranchers wanting to burn agriculture waste or clear brush could receive instant approval under a proposal by regional air quality regulators.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board approved a plan Thursday that would allow more burn days and set up an automated telephone and Internet system to quickly approve agriculture and prescribed burning requests under good weather conditions.

The proposal now goes to the state Air Resources Board. If approved, the automated system may be running by January 2004, planning manager David Jones said.

Pollution district officials say the smoke management plan would help air quality by allowing smaller burns throughout the valley. The proposal also would streamline the burn approval process and allow farmers to get rid of agriculture waste more quickly. Currently, waste builds up over days or weeks up in regions that have been declared unsafe to burn.

"When you have a burn day, everyone wants to burn," said Ted Strauss, air quality inspector for the regional district. "It definitely fills up the valley with smoke and that's what we're trying to prevent with this new program."

While the San Joaquin Valley is one of the dirtiest air basins in the nation, state law allows agriculture and prescribed burning, said air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. Much of the valley's smog comes from cars, she said.

Under the smoke management plan, air officials will break up the valley control district's three regions into 92 smaller zones to better monitor pollution and make evaluations on how much burning should be allowed within the zone, Strauss said.

The 23,000-square mile valley control district includes San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties.

"It's a benefit for all of agriculture, who needs to burn can burn," said Manuel Cunha, a Fresno County citrus farmer who helped develop the plan.

Farmers and ranchers say burning is necessary to kill disease in trees or plants or clear underbrush to eliminate material for wildfires.

Agriculture groups burned an average of 746,810 acres a year between 1997 and 1999, compared with 17,808 acres of prescribed burns by state and federal officials, including the state Department of Forestry and Sierra National Forest.

Cunha said many farmers, however, are trying to reduce burn emissions by chipping, sending waste to a wood-burning power plant or placing waste back into the soil.

Some ranchers also are opting not to burn because they say they can't afford to pay a \$5 per acre fee for prescribed burns. The air control board is looking at ways to minimize the fees, which took effect this summer.

Sierra Club member Kevin Hall said he's skeptical the plan will control pollution levels.

"What we're doing is managing what is a continuing problem with open air burning of ag waste. We're not getting rid of it; they are just managing it a little better," he said.

District seeking to alter ag burns

By MELANIE TURNER, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, August 16, 2002

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has adopted a plan that could spread agricultural burning across more days in the eight-county district.

The plan, which the policy board approved 9-0, moves the district away from a system that designates each day as either a burn day or a no-burn day in three zones in the valley. The state is requiring the changes in hopes of lowering the health risks from open burning.

There is more burning in the valley than in any other air district in the state, district planning manager Dave Jones said.

"We don't expect a lot more agricultural burning," he said. "But we've got to manage this."

The new smoke-management plan would divide the district into smaller zones, based on meteorology and agricultural processes. Each zone would be given a daily smoke threshold based on atmospheric conditions, said Evan Shipp, a district meteorologist.

A computer program would help meteorologists determine how much smoke each zone can handle each day. Farmers would get permission to burn on a first-come basis. Those who do not get to burn one day would be given priority the next, Shipp said.

It is estimated that the system would be partly in place a year from now and fully implemented by early 2004, Jones said.

"I think the overall concept is very good," said Jan Ennenga, manager of the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau.

She said she hopes it will eliminate days when burning is banned in a large zone, but conditions are right in some areas.

Farmers now can go for weeks with no permitted burning, piling up brush as they wait. Then, on the first day burning is allowed, they all burn, filling the sky with smoke, officials said.

"What we're trying to avoid is just that," said Ted Strauss, supervising air quality inspector with the district. "We don't want to make a whole lot of smoke at one time. We want to spread it out."

"I think it provides much more science-based flexibility," Ennenga added.

The new system will be better for people's health, Strauss said.

Jones said while there will be burning most days under the new system, there will be situations when none is allowed. A good example, he said, is this week, when smoke and smog have made the air unhealthy.

Today will mark the eighth consecutive Spare the Air day in the valley. Offshore breezes began to offer relief Thursday, blowing out some of the smog that's been hanging around for days.

Wednesday saw some of the worst air in the northern valley in a long time. Merced hit 201 on the air quality index -- the worst category for air, or very unhealthy for everyone. That was the highest reading valleywide. Modesto hit 142, unhealthy for sensitive groups, the same day.

"I've never seen readings that high in the northern region," said Josette Merced Bello, spokeswoman for district.

Modesto's air quality improved to moderate Thursday, and Merced's improved to unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Today's forecast calls for moderate air quality in the northern region, which covers San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties, Merced Bello said.

The smoke-management plan will be forwarded to the California Air Resources Board for review and a decision.

Sweet smell of responsibility

Improving air quality requires everyone's cooperation.

It can be instructive to read an informed outsider's view of your region. As such, an editorial published Sunday by the San Francisco Chronicle turns a useful lens on the filthy air in the San Joaquin Valley.

The Valley routinely is smothered by smog. The pollution, exacerbated by climate and topography, harms residents' health and stunts industrial growth in a region shamed by double-digit joblessness and poverty rates.

The Chronicle concedes that Bay Area motorists, who are held to more relaxed vehicle emissions standards than most California drivers, help degrade the Valley's air. But the editorial puts most of the responsibility where it belongs: in the Valley's own lap. Agriculture, which long has enjoyed pollution exemptions, needs to live by air quality rules applied to other industries. Meanwhile, policy-makers and regulators -- local, state and federal -- need to quit dithering and get cleansing some of the grubbiest air in America.

As the Chronicle writes, the Bay Area is "a source of smog that blows through gaps in the Diablo range and into the Valley, totaling up to 27% of the smog at the north end."

"A pending state bill would require higher smog-check standards for Bay Area drivers to alleviate this problem. This is a sensible improvement that removes a favorite Valley gripe, blaming outsiders. But cleaner Bay Area vehicles won't solve the inland area's homegrown smog problems."

The newspaper notes that farming -- long a sacred cow in the battle to control pollution -- churns out a fifth of the smog-causing pollutants that choke the Valley. "(Farming) practices clearly need review by regulatory agencies to see if emissions and lung-harming dust can be moderated. The problem of dirty valley air is too huge to allow one major player to escape scrutiny."

We have the same view: Pollution exemptions, be they for farmers or Bay Area motorists, are inequitable and unsustainable. When it comes to the massive task of cleaning the second-worst air in the country -- only the Los Angeles basin chokes on more smog -- all groups and industries need to pull their weight.

Other solutions require hard choices and trade-offs. Because vehicles cause more than half of the smog in the Valley, the air cannot be cleaned without unclogging roads and shifting to growth and transportation policies that de-emphasize driving.

Meantime, the Chronicle found at least one refreshing current in the air: change.

"For the past 10 years, as the Valley's air soured, little was done," the paper wrote. "Beginning last year, a battery of lawsuits brought by environmentalists and civil rights groups prodded the slumbering federal EPA to oversee local policy-makers."

But even with the courts at work, the Valley won't clear the air without teamwork and oversight. Significant change will require cooperative determination from citizens, community watchdogs, elected policy-makers, regulators, farmers, industry and other interested parties.

As we have written repeatedly, the air is filthy and getting filthier, federal clean air deadlines are looming, and there is no time left for political submissiveness and a regulatory soft touch. At stake are the public health and economic viability of the California heartland.

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee, August 16, 2002:](#)

Yosemite plan

Jim Hood, Twain Harte

The Yosemite Fire Management Plan's four alternatives depend on: a) allowing and managing natural wildland fires, b) reducing fuel load with prescribed burns and c) thinning through bunching and felling small trees.

But the July 29 meeting brought out another constraint. Prescribed burns shall also conform to the California's air quality burn-day requirements. Burns usually require two consecutive burn days. So the whole prescribed burn concept is really not a viable solution to reducing the enormous fuel load.

Yosemite's 1990 fire management plan also proposed prescribed burns, but smoke complaints limited their implementation. So why should we locals put up with all that smoke and smell when logging (and its concurrent thinning) is a much better approach, even if logging profits aren't kept in Yosemite.

It turns out that the National Park Service can allow logging, but Yosemite Park cannot receive any of the profits. They go directly to Washington. Was that why logging was not included in the plan's four alternatives?

It's time that knowledgeable citizens send intelligent comments on the National Parks Fire Management Plans suggesting logging be substituted for prescribed burns. The comment period ends Aug. 27. The Yosemite address is: e-mail, YOSE_Planning@nps.gov.

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, August 16, 2002](#)

Politicians can't act as regulators

Editor's note: As you may imagine, the Sun-Star receives numerous press releases every day. The following is the text of a press release that was never written, never sent and never received.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District met in emergency session Thursday to discuss the quality of the air throughout the Valley this past week, and after lengthy discussion, the board voted unanimously to apologize to the 3.2 million Valley residents for the poor quality of the air they are being forced to breathe.

Several members of the board were distressed when they learned that school children in parts of the Valley have been asked to stay indoors because it is not safe to breathe the outdoor air. The board members said children should be able to play outside and breathe air that will not harm them.

Board members also noted that:

- * Large numbers of children in the Valley have asthma, and air quality is often to blame.
- * Polluted air takes an especially heavy toll on the elderly and the infirm.
- * Valley residents have had to spend significant amounts of money on devices that make it possible for them to breathe.
- * Polluted air takes a heavy toll on the Valley's primary industry, agriculture.

Board members agreed that various pollution sources – motor vehicles, agriculture and industry, among them – are responsible for polluting the air, but the board members also agreed that they must assume primary responsibility for the pollution. They said they have not accomplished the board's mission of improving the health and quality of life for all Valley residents.

The board agreed that the agency has fallen short because of policies it has adopted and not adopted.

They said they had not taken a firm enough stand against pollution, but had, instead, established a system to sell pollution permits. The board members also acknowledged that an elaborate system of 'credits' allows new polluters, such as power plants, to move into the Valley and add to the pollution.

The board members also confessed that they have failed to abide by the provisions of the Clean Air Act and have not fully cooperated with other agencies in an effort to clean up the Valley's air.

They also admitted that they have not been as aggressive as they should have been when new polluters want to move into the Valley. As an example, they cited their lack of vigorous opposition to new power plants in and near the Valley.

Finally, the board members, after sober deliberation, have submitted their resignations.

They believe that politicians such as themselves cannot function as regulators, because politicians instinctively seek compromise, not compliance.

The board members recommended that they be replaced by scientists, doctors and representatives of organizations such as the American Lung Association.

That, the board said, is the best hope for the future of the San Joaquin Valley and its 3.2 million citizens.

As we said, that press release was never written, never sent and never received.

But it should be.