

Smog's nothing to play with

Valley schools must scramble to get students out of the bad air when alerts hit late in the day.

By Barbara Anderson, The Fresno Bee, *August 18, 2002*

The high school tennis team is batting balls back and forth, mopping their brows between serves, when the command is issued: "Everybody off the court."

Doug Semmen sees the bewilderment on the girls' faces. They are only 10 minutes into the afternoon practice. But Semmen doesn't budge: "We're done."

It's 3:40 p.m. Tuesday, and the Hoover High School athletic director had just opened an e-mail message from Fresno Unified School District officials ordering him to get athletes inside on this 106-degree day to protect them from breathing hazardous smog.

Just looking out the window was enough to alarm most people, but it wasn't until mid- to late afternoon that high school educators received the official word: The air was too dangerous for children to be outside.

By state law, they had to get students inside and stop outdoor athletic practices in Fresno, Clovis, Parlier, Reedley and as far south as Edison near Bakersfield, where ozone levels were deemed unhealthy.

Yet because the Valley's ozone peak comes late in the day -- usually between 3 and 7 p.m. -- officials scramble to notify people who are already out in the bad air.

Schools have little time to prepare. Elementary students are on their way home from school and athletes are on the practice fields by the time the warning goes out.

And no one checks to make sure the health advisory's edicts are being implemented. School districts -- their principals, coaches and teachers -- are on the honor system.

Smog alerts aren't declared until ozone levels reach 150 parts per billion -- a level that takes time to build in the Valley. Ozone formation increases throughout the day, and people often are breathing air that exceeds federal health standards, but it doesn't hit a zenith and reach smog alert levels until the hottest part of the day.

On Monday, one of five days when health advisories were called last week, the public didn't learn of the deteriorating air quality until about 4 p.m., when a smog spike triggered a health advisory.

Worried about the short notice to the public, pollution meteorologists decided Tuesday to take an unprecedented step and predict a smog episode. They sent out warnings by noon.

But the bad-air news didn't spread much faster than the stagnant air creating the smog inversion.

"We sent out an advisory to all the schools," says Jill Marmolejo, a Fresno Unified spokeswoman. It wasn't until late in the afternoon, however, that some principals and coaches saw the e-mail message. Some athletes were suited up and warming up by the time the health warning made it to the tennis court or football field.

And if it's difficult to get the message through to schools, what about the rest of the public in the Valley's 56 cities? The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also contacts television and radio stations, but state and local air officials agree the system is imperfect.

"Short of an air raid alarm, this is the best way to do it," said air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

It's up to school districts to abide by the state-mandated health advisories. Neither the air pollution district nor the California Air Resources Board, or CARB, police them. CARB created the smog-alert regulation; the local pollution control district sends out the health advisories.

"We don't enforce," says Valley pollution control officer David Crow. "It's mandatory that we advise them of the alert."

Crow says he believes school districts are doing a good job to minimize risks from ozone exposure. "I couldn't say that a couple of years ago," he says.

"We love these kids," says Bill Engel, athletic director at Edison High School in Fresno. "We're not going to do anything to jeopardize them."

Engel says the air looked so foul when he got to school Wednesday morning that he called a school district official and was told to assume it was a bad-air day. He hadn't checked his e-mail, however, until he was asked about it at 4 p.m. An e-mail confirmed the air was too dirty for outdoor activities. Engel already had told the football coach that players could stretch outside. They were to be inside for the rest of practice.

Research shows that breathing ozone can, in the short term, cause shortness of breath and trigger asthma attacks. Long-term exposure -- even at levels below a health alert -- may cause scarring of the lungs, birth defects and other chronic health problems.

How unhealthy was the air during the string of Valley smog episodes from Aug. 9 through Wednesday?

The state considers ozone above 90 ppb to be unhealthy. The 150 ppb that triggers a smog alert is 66.7% higher.

When state air resource officials set the smog alert level at 150 ppb in 1990 (advisories had been at 200 ppb), they said they wanted to provide better health protection for vulnerable people. It was meant to especially protect "young children and healthy adults who exercise vigorously during high pollution levels."

A person exercising can breathe as much as 20 times more air than a person at rest. They also tend to breathe through their mouths, which bypasses the nose -- the body's hair-lined air filter.

Some school principals don't wait for official health advisories from the air district to modify activities on hot, hazy days.

For instance, principals are notified by the district on "Spare the Air" days. These are days that air district meteorologists predict will be polluted but not up to the 150 ppb needed to issue a health warning. Principals have discretion to change activity schedules around the heat and smog on "Spare the Air" days.

At Jane Addams Elementary in west Fresno, students spent the lunch hour Wednesday squirming inside the cafeteria instead of running on the playground.

Principal Teresa Calderon wasn't told she had to reduce physical activity -- the formal health advisory wouldn't go into effect until 3 p.m. after the end of the school day. But Calderon decided before school started that the air quality was too poor and the temperature too hot for outdoor recess.

"If it's going to be 100 degrees by lunch time, we don't need the kids out there," she said.

Another motivation: "We have parents who say, 'Please don't let my child out.'"

Esther Flores called the school Wednesday to find out whether her son, Bobby Flores, 7, would be playing outside.

"When it's like 95 degrees and up, I'd rather my children stay indoors," she said. "Because of the pollution, you can get sick."

At ozone levels of 150 ppb, someone with asthma, chronic bronchitis or emphysema is "likely to end up in the hospital or in an emergency room," says Ira Tager, principal investigator of the Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environmental Study and a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley School of Public Health.

Even a healthy person can't escape, he says. "Clearly, when the levels go up like that, many people will find it irritating, if nothing else."

Ozone is a corrosive gas that irritates the lungs and eyes. It's sometimes described as a lung sunburn. Scientists know it causes inflammation in the lungs and kills cells. But symptoms of the chemical burn can vary. One person may gasp for air and cough or rub stinging eyes. Another may feel little or no discomfort.

Symptoms from breathing ozone also can lessen -- and even stop -- as exposure is repeated. After five days of ozone spikes, such as those seen in the Valley this past week, some people may no longer need to cough or blink back tears as they might have on the first day.

The disappearance of symptoms doesn't mean "they have developed resistance to ozone," according to a federal Environmental Protection Agency fact sheet on ozone and health. "In fact, scientists have found that ozone continues to cause lung damage even when the symptoms have disappeared," the EPA says.

It's breathing bad air over and over that concerns scientists. Levels don't have to reach the 150 ppb mark to be a long-term health threat, especially if the exposure to ozone is repeated over a period of time.

As of Thursday, the Valley had exceeded the 84 ppb federal eight-hour health standard for ozone on 78 occasions this year; it overshot the 124 ppb federal one-hour limit 17 times.

Several studies show long-term exposure to ozone is particularly dangerous for children. Researchers say it appears to stunt lung development, may cause athletic children to develop asthma and has been linked to birth defects involving the heart.

Telephones at the pulmonary clinic at Children's Hospital Central California in Madera rang more than usual this past week with complaints of coughing and wheezing.

Even patients whose asthma has been under control were having problems and needed to increase their medications, said Dr. Reddivalam Sudhakar.

"If the asthma is not under control to start with and if they get exposed to these levels [of smog] on a daily basis, they probably would be more symptomatic," Sudhakar says. If their asthma is under control, there might be a little flare-up but not severe. But we tell them not to take any chances and to stay indoors."

Common sense is one way the public can protect itself during smog episodes, since most people don't have an ozone monitor at their home, says Richard Bode, chief of the health and exposure assessment branch of the California Air Resources Board.

"If you've had a health advisory in your area on one day and the forecast is for hot weather the next day, take care of your activities in the morning," he said. "The damage occurs at even low levels of activity, so it's best to be inside in the afternoon."

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Valley's canopy of smog to keep hanging on Some relief should arrive by Tuesday.

By Lisa Aleman-Padilla, The Fresno Bee, August 17, 2002

August's string of triple-digit temperatures isn't likely to end this weekend, courtesy of a high-pressure system expected to hover over the Valley until Monday.

By Tuesday, temperatures should reach nearly normal seasonal levels with a high of 95 and a low in the mid-60s to low 70s, said David Spector, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford.

A cooling trend could be just what the Valley needs to rid itself of smoggy skies that have plagued the region for days. Ozone production thrives when days are long and hot, conditions that have been the rule for eight days.

Over this period, ozone has reached its highest levels since August 1998. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued health advisories recommending that the elderly, pregnant women and people with lung disorders restrict outside activities.

Barbecuing, driving and using gasoline-powered equipment also have been discouraged through "Spare the Air Day" advisories.

Friday, Fresno resident David Harper said city of Fresno employees were operating gas-powered lawn mowers, leaf blowers and other small equipment near his home, although Friday was designated a "Spare the Air Day."

Hilary Kimber, city parks supervisor, said because of a tight schedule, city maintenance departments cannot afford to skip a day of mowing.

"We double up on driving, but as far as small equipment, we don't have electric or battery-powered gang mowers," she said.

Though "Spare the Air Days" have been in effect all week, Josette Merced Bello, spokeswoman for the air district, said one would not be issued today.

"Air quality is improving somewhat," she said.

Possible reasons for the improvement are the reduction in emissions normally experienced on weekends when work commutes are down. Cloudiness caused by the McNally fire in Sequoia National Forest also is creating a barrier, slowing ozone buildup, she said.

Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist with the air district, said the hot air that has hung over the Valley this week is beginning to show signs of moving away.

"It's only slight right now, but it looks like dispersion is starting to improve," he said, crediting the arrival of marine air from the north and an increase in westerly winds.

Six years ago, Valley residents endured an almost identical weather pattern. Beginning Aug. 9, 1996, nine consecutive days averaging 106 degrees struck Fresno. Relief finally came Aug. 18, when the high reached only 96.

This month's heat wave even began on the same date, Aug. 9. But if this weekend's forecast holds true, maintaining the 103-degree average through Sunday, the 1996 pattern could be surpassed.

Merced County's air quality improves, expected to get better

By [Mike Jensen](#), Merced Sun-Star, August 17, 2002

Merced County's air quality improved significantly Friday and is expected to continue improving today and Sunday.

Wildfire smoke, high temperatures and a temperature inversion this week contributed to the worst Central Valley air pollution this year.

A gray haze from the 134,000-acre McNally Fire continued to blanket the Valley Friday. But the amount of invisible ozone, considered more unhealthy than the smoke, had dropped significantly Friday.

"We are getting better," said Charlie Goldberg, a spokesman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Slightly cooler temperatures and a breeze are expected to help reduce air pollution and haze over the weekend, he said.

Friday, Merced County's Air Quality Index reached 64 and was also expected to be 64 today. A 64 is considered "moderate" air quality, and only extremely sensitive children and the elderly are encouraged to stay indoors.

Thursday, the AQI in Merced County reached 201, considered "very unhealthy." Wednesday the AQI reached 156, considered "unhealthy."

Merced County residents were warned to "limit their exposure" to the air on both days.

Farther south in the Valley, air officials asked school districts in Clovis, Fresno and Bakersfield to keep children indoors.

[Modesto Bee, Community Briefing, August 16, 2002](#)

UPDATE

Evins granted permit

Charles Evins II, owner of Evins Funeral Home on Seventh Street in Modesto, has received a permit to build and operate the city's first crematorium. Crematorium emissions contain small amounts of hazardous air pollutants, such as volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides, both of which mix with sunlight to create smog. People at a private school, near the funeral home between L and M streets at the west edge of downtown, wanted to stop the crematorium from being approved. Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the district had no reason not to approve the permit. -- Melanie Turner

[Fresno Bee Editorial, August 18, 2002](#)

Douse the fires

Agricultural burning is a relic that we no longer can afford.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board is looking for ways to mitigate the damage to our air caused by the burning of agricultural waste. A better idea is to phase out agricultural burning.

This region never will be serious about fighting air pollution as long as farmers are allowed to burn their agricultural waste. This is only one source of air pollution, of course, and every resident of this Valley must play a role in cleaning up the air we breathe.

A strong agricultural economy is crucial to the Valley, and we don't expect farmers to be able to stop burning cold turkey. But the agricultural community must take a leadership role in developing a reasonable timetable for phasing out farm burning. It's time to start discussing ways to end ag burning, while still protecting this important Valley industry.

On Thursday, the Valley's air board approved a plan that would allow more burn days, but could reduce pollution because the burning would be under more favorable weather conditions. It also would set up an automated telephone and Internet system to quickly approve ag burning requests.

But such a plan, which also would have to be approved by the state Air Resources Board, delays the inevitability of ending agricultural burning altogether. That mindset needs to change. This region must stop needlessly putting pollutants of all types into the air.

It's not only agricultural burning. We all contribute to the problem when we drive our cars, use conventional wood-burning fireplaces in the winter and refuse to carpool or consider bus transportation.

Everyone wants cleaner air -- as long as we aren't inconvenienced by the cleanup measures.

Of course, it's a bit inconvenient when we have to cough and wheeze all day or when we have to take our infant children to the hospital because of an asthma attack.

We must get serious about this problem. Phasing out agricultural burning will help.

[Guest opinion piece, Visalia Times Delta, August 19, 2002](#)

Corps of Engineers says the plow is a polluter

Another California farmer is taking a case to the U.S. Supreme Court challenging the over-regulation of farming practices by non-elected agents of the federal government.

The grievance is against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has tried to penalize farmer and land developer Angelo Tsakopoulos for deep plowing thousands of acres of rangeland at his Borden Ranch near Galt in Sacramento County to make it suitable for trees and vines.

The Corps of Engineers contends that the deep plowing destroyed vernal pools and interfered with natural drainage. In doing so, the federal agency has cited the Clean Water Act and its protection of navigable water.

The Pacific Legal Foundation, which is part of the team of attorney's representing Tsakopoulos, points out that any water on the property in question was certainly not navigable. It explains also that the plowing did not contribute to the kind of pollution that is covered by the Clean Water Act.

The public-service legal agency in Sacramento sees the case as defense of a person's right to own and reasonably use private property "against the action of a federal agency that has lost all sense of self-restraint"

As a spokesman for Pacific Legal Foundation said: "To many of us, the image of the farmer at his plow is right up there with motherhood and ice cream as a symbol of all American wholesomeness. ... Incredible as it might seem, the Corps has officially branded the plow as a polluter."

The land in question, near the county line between Sacramento and San Joaquin County in the rolling foothills east of Galt, has been in continuous agricultural production for a century.

Tsakopoulos's contention and that of the Pacific Legal Foundation is that neither he nor other farmers should have to seek the permission of an agency of the federal government to "bust sod."

Busting sod by deep plowing or ripping is a common practice in many parts of agriculturally rich California. The process employs some of the largest crawler tractors ever made to pull shanks that extend as far as 8 feet into the ground.

As the equipment moves across fields, it breaks up hard layers of soil below the surface, allowing deep-rooted crops to penetrate. It also provides drainage that is necessary for irrigation.

From one end of the state to the other, deep plowing has led the way to profitable production of higher value crops, enhancing the income of several counties.

Experts say the presence of vernal pools often indicates the poor drainage conditions that exist beneath the soil's surface, marking property as unsuitable for profitable agricultural production.

The appeal to the Supreme Court supports the right of landowners to improve their property. That seems so basic you'd expect a branch of the U.S. Army to defend it, not attack it.

Don Curlee is a free-lance writer who specializes in agricultural issues. Write to him at Don Curlee-Public Relations, 457 Armstrong Ave., Clovis, CA 93612.

[Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, August 15, 2002](#)

No choking and croaking

Editor: I too agree with you about the EPA allowing more power plants to be built in the San

Joaquin Valley. I live by Highway 99 and we get plenty of dirty air. We don't need any more from anywhere.

Why should the Valley be dumped on? Why not in the mountains or desert? Unless we citizens speak up to our governor and congressman, we will be choking and croaking. Please get some backbone and do something to save yourselves and the children. I did.

Lota Motherwell

Atwater

[Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, August 18, 2002](#)

Hey, why not a tank?

Since most of the SUV owners out there are obviously laboring under the delusion that "bigger is better," perhaps you might consider trading in your Denalis, Suburbans, Navigators, etc. for war surplus armored personnel carriers or even battle tanks.

The advantages would be threefold and obvious:

The increased fuel cost would put more money into circulation and could perhaps bolster the economy.

Drivers of such vehicles would never have to be inconvenienced by being stuck behind standard-sized cars or motorcycles since they could simply blow them off the road with their onboard machine guns and cannons -- or if they were low on ammunition, they could simply drive over them.

The armor plating on these military vehicles would protect the operator from rock-throwing peasants.

Fuel efficiency and water quality be damned. Full speed ahead.

DAVE FAUSKIN

Modesto

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee:](#)

Cleaning up Valley's air everyone's duty -- almost

By Larry Paquette, Fresno, August 19, 2002

I was heartened to read "Sweet smell of responsibility," The Bee's editorial Aug. 16 regarding clean air. You discuss the pending stricter smog inspection requirements expected from the Bay Area, but more importantly, the need to eliminate agricultural exemptions to clean air requirements. You correctly point out that everyone needs to share responsibility for cleaning our air.

I almost choked on my coffee when I turned to page B5 of the same section, where the headline, "Valley board OKs instant approval for ag burning." The story tells of the plan in the works to increase the number of burn days allowed for agriculture. It appears the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the organization promoting this plan, is a misnomer at best, and sad joke at worst.

It is actions like this that convince me that air quality improvements remain an elusive goal, not taken seriously, in the Central Valley.

Schools and bad air

By Carrie Zulewski, Fresno, August 18, 2002

We are being told over and over that the San Joaquin Valley has the worst air quality. Currently, we are in the middle of a bad-air onslaught, including a state-mandated health advisory.

What is it going to take for the Fresno Unified board to change its calendar and let our children attend school in June when the air is better and keep them out of school in August? I attended a board meeting last year where the trustees and Dr. Santiago Wood were presented with thousands of signatures from people that want to have school start after Labor Day. I read where Dr. Wood himself was wanting to leave this area because of asthma-related suffering.

At the meeting, I heard first hand from doctors that our kids were in danger with this poor air quality. Couple this with the lack of our school nurses, and we have a plan for disaster. Let's take a vote of the taxpayers of what our school calendar should be. Hands down, we will start school after Labor Day, as does most of the country.

Air problem

By Harald Frieser, Fresno, August 17, 2002

"If Smog Check II is good, it ought to apply to everybody."

Your Aug. 7 article's quote of Sen. Jim Costa's assessment seems to describe the problems of our environmental efforts better than he himself may have realized. How successful can local air pollution control districts be if they lack the authority or support of the federal government?

I refer here to the hundreds of "apportioned" trucks running through our Valley. If our strict local smog checks apply only to locally registered cars and trucks, their additional costs will tend to make local truckers less competitive, and more and more freight will be moved by "apportioned" trucks that may be registered as far away as Iowa or New Hampshire.

Dan Walters (also Aug. 7) described the problem vividly for the Long Beach area. The proposal is to fine terminals that allow trucks to idle for more than 30 minutes. Here again, since local control does not extend over trucks coming from elsewhere, we look for a local whipping boy.

Sen. Costa might have said that smog checks should apply not only to locally registered vehicles but to all commercial vehicles that drive through threatened districts as well. But that would require federal action, and the government has not shown an inclination to act other than to impose stiff sanctions on local government and businesses.