

Valley can't get a break Air district officials say heat, pollution so bad it's best to stay indoors By Amee M. Thompson Visalia Times Delta Staff writer, June 4, 2003

Between a hot weather forecast and air quality already reaching unhealthy levels, the great indoors might be the best place to be this summer. Today is expected to be another three-digit day, with the mercury rising to 101 degrees, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is forecasting that the air will be unhealthy in Tulare County. "Just looking at the temperatures [being forecast over the next couple of months], we're pretty much expecting [them] to be above normal," said Carlos Molina, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford. "It looks like it will be a hot summer." This past week, Visalia has been experiencing temperatures 10 degrees above average for this time of year, Molina said. Normally it would have been in the upper 80s Tuesday, but the temperature got all the way up to 101, he said. AccuWeather measured Visalia's high as 102. Although a slight cool-down will put Visalia at 94 degrees on Saturday, by Wednesday of next week the triple digits will return, Molina said. Not only does the heat mean that more sunscreen and water may be needed, but it also means that more care will need to be taken when it comes to the air. The air district called for two health advisories in May in Fresno and Kern counties, said Janis Parker, spokeswoman for the air district. Health advisories warn that the ozone level is too high for people sensitive to poor air quality and asks that people not do any strenuous exercise outside between the hours of 3-7 p.m. "It's not typical [for this time of year], but Mother Nature is not typical," Parker said. Ozone, the chief ingredient in smog, is a corrosive gas that forms when pollutants from cars and other sources cook in sunlight and high temperatures. The invisible gas can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems. The air has already violated the long-term or eight-hour federal health standard a dozen times this year. The Los Angeles-area South Coast Basin has violated the long-term federal health standard 16 times. On Friday, the air district's Spare the Air season will begin. That's when the district will begin announcing Spare the Air days to encourage people to walk, carpool, ride the bus or walk instead of driving in an attempt to keep the ozone level from reaching the unhealthy state. "Plan your errands so you can do them all at once rather than intermittently," Parker said. "We ask people to make some behavior choices to not increase the air pollution level on Spare the Air days." And with temperatures reaching the century mark almost a month ahead of normal, it might be wise to find everyday practices to help with the air pollution, Parker said. Things such as using alternative transportation or, when barbecuing, using charcoal briquettes starter or an electric igniter, she said. "Just be more conscious of what you buy and how that affects the air," Parker said. The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Fresno suffers heat, spike in ozone level

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

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By late morning Tuesday, Fresno had reached 91 degrees -- the highest

temperature you could expect on average days in early June. But this is no average June. The mercury climbed to 103 Tuesday afternoon in Fresno.

Smog was not far behind.

By noon, two pollution monitors showed Fresno's air violated the one-hour federal health standard for ozone, the main gas in corrosive smog hanging in the San Joaquin Valley.

Smog levels, however, didn't reach the extremes necessary to warrant health advisories, which are called when ozone peaks at 145 parts per billion or higher for an hour. Once a health advisory is issued, school districts must cancel outdoor recesses and sporting events, and adults are advised to halt vigorous outdoor activities.

Students at Jefferson Elementary in Fresno were kept indoors during lunch and recesses because of the polluted air, said Fresno Unified School District spokeswoman Susan Bedi, adding that principals decide when air pollution has reached dangerous levels. Children were allowed outside long enough to get a drink of water and use the restrooms, but they then returned to their classrooms.

Tuesday was the second consecutive 100-degree-plus day for much of the Valley, and the air turned bad in Fresno earlier than it did Monday.

But meteorologists had some good news: Tuesday may have been the worst heat of the week.

The temperature today will remain in the 100-degree range, but it probably won't be as hot as Tuesday, the National Weather Service's Hanford office reported.

"The forecast is 101 for Fresno" on Wednesday, said meteorologist Modesto Vasquez. "Thursday and Friday should be about 99. We're seeing a slight cooling. But it's only 1 or 2 degrees."

The nighttime temperatures are around 70 degrees, which is 11 degrees higher than the early June average. It's hot.

That heat, plus sunshine, plus emissions from cars and other sources incubates ozone, an invisible gas that hangs in a haze of dust and other particles. The haze is known as smog, a lung irritant known to cause asthma attacks and lung problems.

The Valley on Tuesday apparently recorded its fourth violation of the one-hour ozone health standard. Two more heavily populated metropolitan areas, Los Angeles and Houston, have more violations so far this year -- Los Angeles with 12 and Houston with 10.

Two Fresno monitors Tuesday recorded levels higher than 125 parts per billion of ozone, the threshold for violations for one-hour readings. State Air Resources Board officials review such high readings and decide whether a violation has occurred.

"But the plume was moving away from Fresno to the south," said spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The levels seem to be going down."

A light breeze moved the smog plume toward Parlier in southeast Fresno County, but officials said they did not think the pollution would move quickly enough to trigger a health alert or a violation.

The four one-hour violations place the Valley among the three worst air basins nationally, but hot weather and bad air are not uncommon in June. Meteorologist Vasquez said it seems worse this year because the Valley had cooler-than-average weather until just a few weeks ago

The big target

Latest air quality bills would go after the worst offenders -- vehicles.

Fresno Bee Editorial

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One of the objections heard from several quarters to legislation aimed at cleaning up the Valley's filthy air has been the complaint that one or another sector of the local economy is being singled out. Farmers feel put upon, homeowners gnash their teeth over restrictions proposed for fireplaces, yard care companies cry doom at the thought of a ban on leaf blowers.

All of them point to the big offender -- so-called "mobile sources of emissions," mostly gas- and diesel-powered vehicles -- and wonder aloud why we aren't addressing them. Good point.

And now we are. Today the state Senate is scheduled to consider two more bills -- Senate Bill 708 and SB 709 -- in the package of 10 offered by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter.

SB 708 would, among other things, make it easier to get "gross polluting" vehicles off the roads. Such cars and trucks can spew as much as 100 times the pollution emitted by well-tuned vehicles. The bill would allow counties to monitor and cite such vehicles, first with a "fix-it" ticket, then with increasingly stiff penalties for scofflaws.

SB 709 would give the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District greater power to order and fund air quality improvements in the Valley. The air district would have the authority to require businesses with 100 or more employees to establish ride-share programs, a power already possessed by the South Coast air district. SB 709 would also enable the Valley district to help local farmers and business owners meet the requirements of all these new air quality measures.

Both measures will help, at least incrementally, to improve the Valley's poor air quality. They deserve quick approval by the Senate, and then by the Assembly. The sooner the governor signs these bills into law, the sooner we'll start to breathe better.

There is a setback looming for this effort that must be noted. One of the 10 Florez bills would put a bond measure on the state ballot to help pay for many of the changes we need. In the current state budget climate, there is an

understandable reluctance growing among legislators to add any more to California's existing debt burden.

We may have to live with that fiscal reality for now, but when things get better, fixing the Valley's air should be at the top of the list for new funding.

With high temps forecast, area's summer air problems under way

By MARK GROSSITHE FRESNO BEE, re-published in the Modesto Bee, June 4, 2003

You might breathe pollution today that cars and trucks created Monday. And, if the air doesn't move around much today, you might breathe more of it Thursday.

Pollution apparently doesn't go away in the valley's stagnant smog clouds, which probably will fill the air this week. With several days of temperatures above the mid-90s expected, Monday's pollution might haunt you all week.

"The levels can build from day to day, adding more emissions," said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Ozone can float around for days."

Ozone, the chief ingredient in smog, is the corrosive gas that forms when pollutants from cars and other sources cook in sunlight and hot weather.

The ozone level was unhealthy Monday for everyone. Ozone can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems.

"It could cool down slightly by the weekend," said Weather Service meteorologist Jim Bagnall. "But just a couple of degrees. Normally, we would be in the low 90s, so this is hotter than usual."

That means the valley's notorious summer smog problem has begun. The air here already has violated the eight-hour federal health standard a dozen times this year, and summer won't start for almost three weeks.

Calm, hot days turn vehicle emissions into smog, and the valley's bowl shape holds the bad air until a weather system ventilates things.

Ozone isn't indestructible, though. It breaks down when it encounters barriers, such as trees or buildings.

Oddly, it also is destroyed by vehicle emissions after sundown. The reason: Without sunlight, the chemical reaction to form ozone cannot take place. Chemicals in vehicle emissions after dark break down ozone.

"You can form a pretty high concentration after a few days," Shipp said.

After dark, some ozone drifts above the tree tops, reaching the Sierra Nevada. This bad air makes Sequoia National Park, east of Fresno, the worst national park in the West for ozone pollution.

"This is one contest I don't like winning," said Anne Esperanza, Sequoia air quality specialist. "The levels drop a bit at night, but they're still higher here than most places in the valley."