

Blaze spikes pollution levels

Debris at woodpile in western Fresno could burn another week.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, January 14, 2003

Firefighters may need a week to snuff out a woodpile fire that is spewing a pall of smoke into Fresno's sky and causing pollution monitors to climb several times higher than healthy levels.

Local air officials are warning the public, saying residents with sensitive lungs should seek medical attention if they begin suffering breathing difficulties.

Schools should consider keeping children indoors today, officials said.

Microscopic soot and ash particles from the fire can penetrate homes, schools and businesses, and they can easily evade the body's defenses to lodge deep in human lungs. But officials said indoors is better

than outdoors.

"People should be cautious about their activities over the next few days," said Josette Merced Bello, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The increased particulate level is connected to the fire."

The fire started Saturday in a 2- to 3-acre pile of woody debris on the western edge of Fresno. It is producing tiny specks known as PM2.5. The specks are 2.5 microns wide or smaller, meaning they are about 1/28th the width of a human hair or smaller.

City fire officials estimated it would take two to seven days to pull apart the piles of debris and completely douse the fire. Officials said the blaze started by itself as the natural forces of decomposing wood, moisture and oxygen combined. It is called spontaneous combustion, and the resulting fire is difficult to put out because it is buried in the woodpile.

As the fire kicked up Monday, monitor readings jumped to 260 micrograms of particles per cubic meter for one hour at Fremont Elementary School, 1005 W. Weldon Ave. The number is four times higher than the federal health standard, which is figured on a 24-hour basis.

The reading at First Street and Shields Avenue was 228 micrograms late in the afternoon.

Fresno respiratory therapist Kevin Hamilton says he expects the smoke hanging over Fresno to result in busy hospital emergency rooms and packed doctors' offices in the next few days.

"Based on the research, I would anticipate we'll have a spike to ER visits related to heart problems and respiratory problems," says Hamilton, who is an asthma educator for Community Medical Centers.

Hamilton says air-pollution research suggests respiratory and cardiac problems peak about three to five days after people are exposed to an increase in particulates. The number of medical visits returns to normal about 12 to 15 days later.

The burn highlights a crack in the system of tracking pollutants. PM2.5 measurements are new, so the state has not yet announced a level at which mandatory health advisories are issued and children must be kept indoors at schools.

Though the fire was accidental, air officials say they have issued one notice of violation to the owner of Archie Crippen Excavation, a wood salvage collection site at Nielsen and Marks avenues, for improper handling of the material.

Another notice may be issued if officials decide a more severe penalty is warranted.

A possible fine could be as little as \$1,000 or as much as \$50,000. Settlements on such violations are customarily negotiated. Officials added that Crippen Excavation does not have a history of violations for fire problems.

The fire is buried inside a 20- to 30-foot-tall pile of woody debris, which was collected from demolished homes with the idea of selling it for biofuel to power plants.

Firefighters spent several hours Saturday stopping the fire, but it flared again.

Interim Fresno Fire Chief Joel Aranaz toured the site Monday to assess the blaze.

"It's going to take us two to seven days to pull apart the piles to get to the seat of the problem," he said. "We want to get it out as quickly as we can."

Staff writer Barbara Anderson contributed to this story.

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News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley, Bakersfield Californian, Monday January 13, 2003, 09:15:05 AM

FRESNO, Calif.(AP) - A California Energy Commission spokesman said San Joaquin Valley and federal officials need to settle a dispute over air pollution reduction before state officials will recommend a \$550 million power plant that would supply one-third of Central California's electricity needs.

"We can't recommend (approval) at this time," commission spokesman Chris Davis said. "Air quality is at the heart of it."

Calpine Corp. plans to build a new natural gas-fired power plant in Fresno County, but the Environmental Protection Agency says it's not sure if it can sign off on the project because the agency isn't sure if San Joaquin Valley air regulators are doing enough to cut pollution in its progress plan.

"We don't have a problem with Calpine's project; there could be many ways to make it work," said Matt Haber, an EPA senior energy adviser. "But we've been clear about what we want from the (San Joaquin) Valley Air Pollution Control District."

The valley, which ranks among the three dirtiest air basins in the country, already faces federal deadlines and possibly a delay in billions of federal road-building dollars over missed deadlines.

Calpine officials said they don't think the lack of a recommendation will stop the project.

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee, January 14, 2003](#)

Driving them away

By Jon Schwabenland
Fresno

We've done it again. Our glorious state has chased another business firm from our borders. Now Mount Vernon Mills is to close with the loss of 215 jobs to Fresno County.

As its vice president said, "California's utility costs are four times higher during summer peak usage than their other facilities. Rising worker compensation rates and **strict environmental regulations** are also partly to blame. In a word, the situation for manufacturers in California is hostile ... it's as though the state does not want manufacturers."

At the same time, Gov. Gray Davis in his State of the State speech said that creating jobs is his No. 1 priority for California. I don't get it.

Some hope

By Sam Reeves

Fresno

"Last Gasp" brilliantly frames the critical state that air quality has reached in Fresno and the Central Valley. The graphics, photographs and stories were most instructive. I salute the journalists and staff of The Bee for helping to make a difference by bringing this critical issue before a wider audience.

Cleaning up our air is a problem for which a solution embraces at a minimum political legislation, economic incentives and personal volunteerism. Fortunately, there are some bright spots on the horizon.

The recently passed auto emissions laws, AB 1493 under Sen. John Burton's leadership with the newly elected Congressman Dennis Cardoza casting the majority vote, could do a great deal to ensure that in the future all could be breathing cleaner and healthier air. Stopping the effects of sprawl in the Valley and encouraging smart growth also can help. The recent proposal from the Environmental Protection Agency to cut pollution from non-auto diesel engines, such as those found on farms and construction sites, will also do much to clean up our air.

Many more changes and focused commitment will be needed to turn this situation around. But it's that spirit of change and commitment that has made the Central Valley a great place to live. If we work together in making tough choices, we can mitigate this problem. Our children and grandchildren will be the beneficiaries.