

Air quality warnings sounded this winter

Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, January 15, 2003

It's not unusual for the San Joaquin Valley to have a "spare the air" day during the summer.

But for the first time ever, the regional air district warned people this week to limit their exposure to the air during the winter.

The warnings were made Monday and Tuesday for Fresno and Clovis.

The warnings came about partly because of a large fire there and partly because of new air pollution monitoring equipment used by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"We're reporting more accurately what the picture has always been," said spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

Specifically, the air district is now monitoring air pollution that's known as "PM 2.5."

Those are tiny air pollution particles measuring less than 2.5 microns, or about 1/28th the diameter of a human hair.

"This is the stuff that gets in your blood. This is the stuff that causes heart attacks," said Merced Bello.

The Central Valley is plagued by particulate pollution in the winter months. The pollution originates from dust, diesel engines and wood burning. In summer months the Valley is plagued by smog, or ozone pollution.

Merced County Supervisor Jerry O'Banion sits on the regional air district board.

He said Tuesday he supports the stepped-up efforts at monitoring the PM 2.5 pollution.

"I think we do need to start getting more information on the 2.5," he said.

Smoke, fog a sooty concoction

Hazardous mix will hang in Fresno air for a few days.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, January 15, 2003

The dangerous soot plumes from a still-burning woodpile fire are caught in a soggy blanket of Fresno fog, keeping schoolchildren indoors and causing air officials to continue warning the public.

The prognosis for the rest of the week is not good. Fog is expected to settle into the San Joaquin Valley for a few days, and the 4-day-old southwest Fresno fire shows no signs of relenting.

"It's going to take a long time to pull the piles apart and put out this fire -- maybe a week," interim Fresno Fire Chief Joel Aranaz said.

Aranaz said firefighters are wrestling with a way to best approach the fire, which is buried deep in a 20- to 30-foot-high pile of wood and other debris stretched over about 3 acres. Firefighters' attempts to reach the fire Tuesday were ineffective, officials said.

Aranaz said he will meet with state officials and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to discuss the best way to attack the fire.

The fire continues to spew microscopic particles into the fog, which suspends them in the air and creates a breathing hazard for some people.

Though the particles did not appear to be causing the same huge spikes recorded on pollution monitors Monday, school leaders were taking no chances.

The Fresno Unified School District, the fourth-largest district in the state, canceled sports and outdoor activities Tuesday and today. Baseball and track practice had begun, and soccer season is under way.

"When you can smell or taste the smoke in the air, you know it's bad," Fresno Unified spokeswoman Jill Marmolejo said.

The smell of smoke hung in the moist air Tuesday over many parts of Fresno. People in Clovis noticed.

Light wind is moving the smoke around, said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. People might smell it for a while, and then it moves to another part of the city.

"If you smell it, you should be cautious about exercising outside," Shipp said. "Exercise aggravates its effects."

The air district again advised people not to light fires in their fireplaces today. People also were warned that the air could remain unhealthful, even though Fresno's two particle state-of-the-art monitors didn't show large spikes Tuesday.

"It just means the spike could be taking place somewhere else," Shipp said.

The pollutant of concern is PM2.5, particulate matter 2.5 microns wide, about 1/28th the width of a human hair. The measurement is new, and the district has only two monitoring sites for it thus far.

The district's older monitors show a smaller increase in particles, but they did not show unhealthful air. But officials said they have warned people about smoke hazards from fires in the past, even though they have not had precise PM2.5 measurements.

Particles 2.5 microns wide and smaller can easily evade the body's defenses and lodge in the lungs, triggering asthma attacks and heart problems as well as other lung diseases.

Children, the elderly and people with sensitive lungs are the most vulnerable, health officials say. But people with healthy lungs can be affected as well.

Unlike ozone, the summertime pollutant, particles can penetrate into buildings, especially during episodes such as the one in Fresno.

In other parts of the Valley, such as Visalia, readings for PM2.5 were well within the healthy limit. But the woodpile fire sent Fresno's two monitors reading several times higher than the federal health standard Monday, officials said.

At the site of the fire Tuesday, firefighters briefly worked to pull apart the 2- to 3-acre pile, which is part of Archie Crippin Excavation at Nielsen and Marks avenues. But crews stopped because they were not reaching the fire in the pile, officials said.

Aranaz said California Industrial Waste Management officials may have a better approach today.

The owner of the Crippin site has received two notices of violations from the air district, officials said. A possible fine could range from \$1,000 to \$50,000.

The fire began at 3 a.m. Saturday by spontaneous combustion. The decomposing wood, moisture and oxygen combined in just the right way to spark the fire.

The flames Tuesday were more visible than on Monday, Aranaz said. He said the pile could be harboring paint, metal and tires, which make a fire "dirty" with contaminants.

"We discussed moving dirt over the top of the pile to smother the fire," Aranaz said. "But the piles are just too high to do it."

Valley health troubles detailed

Environment, lack of insurance cited as factors in report.

By Barbara Anderson, The Fresno Bee, January 15, 2003

People living in the Central Valley are more likely to die of stroke, have asthma attacks and be without access to a doctor than people living in other regions of the state, according to a report issued today.

The Valley falls behind in a variety of health indicators -- from chronic diseases to infant mortality -- according to the health-access report by the Modesto-based Great Valley Center.

Poverty, the environment and a large uninsured population are factors in the local unhealthy outcomes, the report's authors said.

According to the report, more than 26,000 children younger than age 5 -- about 6% -- are without health insurance. Slightly more than one in four Valley children are living in poverty -- the highest rate of childhood poverty in California.

The report provides a snapshot of a medically underserved area, said Dr. Robert Ross, president and chief executive officer of The California Endowment, an organization for improving access to affordable health care. "The Central Valley is as impoverished a region as any place in the country," Ross said.

"There is a demonstrable relationship between economic well-being and health," said Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center, a nonprofit public-policy support organization.

The Great Valley Center commissioned researchers at the University of California at San Francisco, and the California Department of Health Services to evaluate public health and access to care in the Valley. The Central Valley is made up of counties from Shasta to the north, Fresno at the center and Kern to the south.

Researchers compared health indicators in the three regions of the Central Valley to those in Los Angeles, San Francisco and statewide.

Among findings in the Great Valley Center report:

The Central Valley has the highest childhood asthma rate in the state at 11%; and Fresno County, at 16.4%, eclipses all other California counties.

The Valley has the second-highest rate of death from stroke at 67 per 100,000, behind only Los Angeles' rate of 69.

Out of every 1,000 live births, 6.5 infants die in the Valley -- the highest infant mortality rate in the state. Statewide the rate is 5.5 infant deaths per 1,000.

Compounding health problems for Valley residents: a lack of doctors.

The Valley has 58 primary-care doctors for every 100,000 people compared to a statewide rate of 67 per 100,000. All but two Valley counties -- Sacramento and Yolo -- are considered primary-care shortage areas by federal standards.

In Visalia, it's a daily struggle for Family Health Care Network staff to find specialists for patients, said Chief Executive Harry Foster.

Visalia has fewer than 10 general surgeons to serve a population area of about 200,000, he said. "We should have 20 -- we have seven. That creates a huge access problem for people needing that kind of care."

Finding doctors willing to accept patients with Medi-Cal is another obstacle to access.

Foster said proposed cuts to the state Medi-Cal health insurance budget would reduce physician reimbursement and exacerbate the access problem.

Other barriers: shortages of physicians fluent in languages other than English; and spotty or nonexistent transportation for patients who must travel from rural areas to see doctors.

The report recommends community leaders invest in everything from preventive care to improve the economy to reduce poverty.

Also, leaders should make land use and transportation choices to reduce air pollution, it says.

None of the 23 health outcomes in the report exists in a vacuum, Whiteside said. It's impossible to talk about the Valley's high rates of asthma, for instance, without including air quality in the discussion, she said.

The report was funded in part by grants from The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, "First 5 Tulare County" (a Proposition 10 commission), as well as the Great Valley Center.

The full report can be reviewed at www.greatvalley.org <<http://www.greatvalley.org>>.

Electric Patrol

Reedley police test-drive electric cars as they look to get rid of gas burners.

By Donald E. Coleman, The Fresno Bee, January 15, 2003

REEDLEY -- The Reedley Police Department's newest line of vehicles won't be used in any high-speed chases, but the cars' versatility promises payoffs in other areas.

"We use them for patrolling the parks, the high school campus and our rail trail," said Sgt. Todd Lowery of seven electric vehicles the city received to test-drive for a year. "They're easy to maneuver, and they're street-legal on roads where the speed limit is 25 mph or less."

The vehicles look like golf carts and have a top speed of 24 mph.

"When you're doing 24, it feels like you're flying," Lowery said, laughing.

Reedley got the electric cars for a one-year test period through a grant from the Pathway Research Corp. and General Motors. The city is one of several around the Valley moving toward alternative vehicles to help reduce air pollution in the nation's worst air basin.

"We're all pitching in," said Don Pauley, city manager in Kingsburg, which is leasing an electric Toyota RAV4 sport utility vehicle. "Our goal is to experiment and eventually divest ourselves of the gas-powered vehicles."

Pauley said the RAV4, which is being used by building officials, was acquired through a \$9,000 grant from the California Air Resources Board and \$3,000 from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

On Monday, the city received a "fancy golf cart" similar to those in Reedley, Pauley said. It came from grants provided by the federal government and DaimlerChrysler. Several cities received them.

Kingsburg is using that vehicle for maintenance of the city's parks.

"They have a lot of utility," Pauley said. "If they're successful, we'll buy more."

Pauley said while the city would like to replace all of its gas-powered vehicles, that would be nearly impossible because the largest fleet belongs to the police department. He said the electric vehicles just wouldn't be practical.

"They can't be used in a high-speed chase," Pauley said, laughing.

Reedley does manage to use some of its electric vehicles for police patrols.

On the first day the vehicles were used, Lowery said, officers patrolling the 2.4-mile paved "rails to trails" path issued a citation to a man who had been drinking and urinating in public.

"We can use them on special details like drug busts or burglaries," Lowery said. "They're electric and quiet. We can sneak up on people. It's like bike patrol, only faster."

The Reedley vehicles are equipped with six batteries and can be charged through regular household current. They have headlights, windshield wipers, horns and even cup holders.

When fully charged, they can run eight to 10 hours, Lowery said.

While the police department is using four of the golf-cartlike vehicles, they're letting the city's public works and parks and recreation departments use the other three.

One is used at the city's waste-water-treatment plant, mostly for collecting water samples, said Andrew Benelli, city engineer.

Another is used in reading commercial water meters.

"We used trucks before," Benelli said. "These are much more maneuverable and they save gas."

Community Services Director Joel Glick said their one electric vehicle is primarily used at the community center and in the park.

Besides Reedley and Kingsburg, Selma uses an electric trolley provided by the Fresno County Rural Transit Agency, and Sanger has a 23-passenger electric bus from the same agency.

Kern County, Tulare and the Tulare Office of Education are also members of the zero-emissions club.

"They're environmentally friendly," Lowery said of the electric cars. "That's important to the city. That's why we pushed for them."

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee, January 15, 2003:](#)

Start with those 'unhealthy' fireplaces to clean Valley air

By Ara Zaratzian
Clovis

It is encouraging to learn that proposals are being considered to regulate the quality of air in the San Joaquin Valley.

I happen to live between two houses whose owners prefer to use their fireplaces to heat their homes on an ongoing basis during the winter months. When my centralized heat comes on, it draws in the air outside along with the smoke from their fireplaces and other nearby homes.

This creates an unhealthy and malodorous atmosphere inside my house and causes a reluctance to breathe in this foul air, which is most difficult to do.

Personally, I enjoy fireplaces. However, it's not a practical way to heat a home when only one room is enjoying the heat while the rest of the rooms are cold. Then one must bite the bullet and turn on the gas to heat the rest of the house. This is not a cost-effective strategy and defeats the purpose of saving on heating bills.

We rejoiced when smoking was banned in public places. We need to rejoice when fireplaces are banned in densely populated areas, followed by a requirement that diesel trucks be made cleaner. When a few of these hazards are removed, then we can all breathe a little easier, making the Valley a healthier place to live.

[Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, January 15, 2003:](#)

Manage ag land loss wisely

Editor: It is projected that the San Joaquin Valley will add about 10 million more people to its population over the next 30 years, requiring the use of about 1 million additional agricultural acres which will result in over a billion dollar loss from the Valley's agricultural economy. This sounds like a terrible thing to happen, but if it is managed properly it can be very good for the Valley.

Everyone needs to accept the fact that biology is busy here in America. Our country's population is growing and California, in particular the San Joaquin Valley, will be a large part of this overall growth. California has close to 27.7 million agricultural acres. Losing 1 million from the almost 10 million agricultural acres here in the valley in order to help inhabit another 10 million people isn't so bad, especially if the selection of the land were to be properly selected, which most likely will happen. Agricultural land with drainage problems and any pollutants (chemical and dust particulates) that surround the Valley's cities could very well make up the bulk of the loss.

The Valley's agricultural economy is about \$14 billion annually. The future loss of the agricultural dollars, a little over \$1 billion, due to the loss of the agricultural land will turn out to be a mere

drop in a bucket compared to the gain in business here in the Valley over the next 30 years with the addition of 10 million people.

If the landowners are handled fairly, and the Valley is managed with strong state leadership that sounds a clear and loud message for the direction of the Valley, while also having effective crime and pollution controls at the forefront of both state and local policies, in due time the San Joaquin Valley may very well turn out to be the crown jewel of the country. It will be a flourishing economic machine without the pollution normally associated with such activity. Everything coming in will be brought on line under new codes and policies. Over time the standard of living here in the Valley may very well be right up there with some of the highest in the country. And in the future the Valley will certainly pose to the country as a model for future economic growth.

Stephen Cooper

Merced

[Letter to the Editor, The Record, January 15, 2003:](#)

Losing freedoms, happiness

What freedom do we have?

They want us to use our cars certain days. Every high school is mobbed by cars in the parking lots. They want us to take showers no more than five minutes in length. They don't want us to use our fireplaces because of pollution. Where do they get all this nonsense?

I'm 77 and, years ago, that's all we had -- wood stoves, fireplaces and dirt roads.

They blame farmers for plowing their orchards and farms that produce our food. What is this world coming to if they can fine people for using their fireplaces? And if they can't afford to pay, are they going to put them in jail? If they do, at least they will be warm and have free food. Why don't they let us live happy for the rest of our lives? We don't have too many years left.

By Manuel Freitas

Stockton

**SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY UNIFIED
AIR POLLUTION CONTROL DISTRICT
MEDIA RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

January 14, 2003

Contact: Janis B. Parker

Public Education

Phone: (559) 230-5800

After-hours pager: (559) 446-7580

Valley Air District issues another cautionary advisory

Fresno, CA –Levels of fine airborne particles are at unhealthy levels in some areas of Fresno/Clovis. This prompted Air Pollution Control Officer David L. Crow to extend the cautionary advisory for the Fresno/Clovis metropolitan area. The fire in southwest Fresno that continues to burn and smolder led the Air District to extend the cautionary advisory at least through 3 p.m Wednesday, January 15.

The Air District will continue to monitor meteorological conditions and emissions each day. "There is a chance we could continue to issue these advisories until the fire is extinguished," said Mr. Crow. "We have not the significant peaks in particulate matter pollution at our Fresno monitoring stations today that we saw yesterday. However, we know that there are localized pockets where smoke is creating unhealthy breathing conditions. We continue to urge residents to be aware of conditions in their area."

Residents in the Fresno/Clovis areas should adhere to the following protective measures during the duration of the advisory.

- All residents are encouraged to avoid and/or limit strenuous outdoor physical activities which may increase the breathing rate.
- If possible, try to remain indoors until the episode has passed.
- Recirculate indoor air.

(more)

- Do not smoke, and avoid places where others are smoking.

Schools are encouraged to discontinue sustained rigorous outdoor exercise/practice or games for the duration of the advisory.

PM is a mixture of pollutants, including microscopic pieces of soot, ash, salts, nitrates and smoke particles. Breathing the particles can reduce lung function, especially in children; aggravate heart and lung conditions such as asthma, emphysema and bronchitis; increase the risk of heart attacks; irritate throats and sinuses; and trigger headaches and allergies.

Please notify your audience of the prevailing air quality conditions and possible health effects. For the daily air quality forecast, residents may call 1-800-SMOG-INFO (766-4463). The information is updated daily at 4 p.m. for that evening and the following day.