Mercury sets its sights on 110

No rolling blackouts expected, but all are advised to conserve.

By Erik Lacayo / The Fresno Bee
Wednesday, June 21, 2006

The first day of summer is expected to bring a 101-degree afternoon to Fresno - relatively cool compared with forecast temperatures through the weekend.

The National Weather Service says temperatures in the San Joaquin Valley will spike above 105 degrees by this weekend.

Jim Bagnall, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Hanford, said the temperature in Fresno and Madera is expected to hit 108 on Saturday and Sunday because of a high-pressure system over the western United States.

The southern San Joaquin Valley cities of Coalinga and Delano may hit 110, he said.

Bagnall said the last 110-degree day in Fresno was July 3, 2001.

The forecast high for Visalia and Merced is 106 for the weekend.

A low-pressure system from the Pacific Northwest will bring the temperature down to the low 100s by next Tuesday, Bagnall said.

"It will be a little relief, I guess," he said.

Al Galvez, a spokesman for Pacific Gas & Electric, said no rolling blackouts are planned because there is enough energy for the summer.

When temperatures are above 100 for three or more consecutive days, Galvez said, there is a higher chance equipment can break down, causing a blackout.

Galvez urges PG&E customers to conserve energy to give the system a chance to cool off.

"We can all conserve a little or lose power," he said.

Fresno Fire Department spokesman Ken Shockley said there is a correlation between the temperature and the number of calls received.

"It's not like this will be the first time it's 105," he said. "We encourage the firefighters to hydrate early and often."

Gary Arcemont, a meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said levels may reach the "unhealthy range" where all people can be at risk of health effects from poor air quality.

Today's air quality is expected to be "unhealthy for sensitive groups," such as people with lung disease, according to the district's air quality index.

"We're expecting the air quality to deteriorate," he said.

Heat wave ushers in summer

Warren Lutz - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

STOCKTON - For cement mason Juan Malagon, the choice is simple: drink or drop.

In other words, when you're outside working in the heat, your body either gets water or it shuts down.

"Don't drink a lot, just normal," advised Malagon, who was pouring concrete for new homes on the north side of town Tuesday. "That's really it."

Extra water is the entire Valley's prescription this week, when temperatures are expected to climb slowly to 108 degrees by Saturday. The high Tuesday was 97 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

Mother Nature's timing couldn't be better. The year's first heat wave fittingly begins today, the first day of summer.

Johnnie Powell, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento, said there were four simple ingredients behind the Valley's slow bake: "High pressure, no wind, no moisture and long days."

Most of Stockton's work force will be able to find refuge indoors. Not so for construction and road crews, whose work demands that they be able to withstand the elements.

For them, the searing heat can be dangerous.

From May to November last year, 13 Californians died of heat-related causes, prompting the state to come up with emergency regulations that require employers to provide adequate water, shade and rest to their workers.

Most of those deaths happened during the victim's first week on the job, when they were probably trying to impress their new bosses, said Tom Mitchell, an industrial hygienist with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health.

"People need a chance to acclimate to the heat," Mitchell said. "When they're first exposed, they're under more stress."

Earl Hutchinson, a foreman laying underground pipe as part of the Highway 99 widening project Tuesday, has seen the sun's evil side in action. He was working on another project last summer when two men passed out from 100-plus-degree heat.

Hutchinson advises his workers to drink less coffee and alcohol when they're not on the job, because both substances can dehydrate the body.

"We make sure we keep our fluid levels up," he said. "And we keep an eye on each other and make sure no one heats up."

Hot weather in the Valley is dangerous for another reason: It's the sun that cooks two of the Valley's biggest pollutants into a lung-crippling stew.

This happens when volatile organic compounds from the Valley's 1.5 million cows combine with the nitrogen oxides released by the engines of boats, cars and farm equipment to produce ozone, which can diminish lung capacity and even cause childhood asthma, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"When it's hotter out there, air pollution has an easier time forming, because there's more energy in the air," said Stephen Shaw, an air-quality specialist with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The lack of wind keeps the dirty air trapped in the Valley's bowllike structure, Shaw said.

"It just forms and sits, and forms and sits," he said.

The hot weather is expected to last until Monday or Tuesday, Powell said.

Powell added that Stockton residents won't catch any breaks from the Delta. Like an open window, the estuary that connects the Valley to the Pacific Ocean usually sends a cool breeze over the city during summer.

But right now, "there's nothing moving around," he said. "Even the trees look hot."

Bakersfield leads U.S. in growth

BY MORGAN STEGER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

Feeling cramped on the streets of Bakersfield? The number of people who call Bakersfield home is growing at the fastest rate in the nation among cities with more than 250,000 people, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures released today.

Additionally, Bakersfield is ranked No. 11 in growth among cities with 100,000 people or more.

The newest census figures, which measure the city's population as of July 2005, put Bakersfield's population at 295,536 people, with a population increase of 4.4 percent from July 2004 to July 2005.

Although newly released, the census figures don't account for more recent growth, which according to the California Department of Finance, places Bakersfield's population at 311,824, said John Malson, the department's research manager in charge of city estimates.

The population boom Bakersfield is experiencing is due in part to the high cost of housing in Southern California, said Darrel Hildebrand, assistant director of the Kern Council of Governments.

More affordable housing in Bakersfield and other San Joaquin Valley cities is drawing in Southern Californians at the same time that local birthrates are on the rise, making for a population boom, he said.

"We're not the little town we used to be," Hildebrand said.

The key to benefiting from population growth is careful planning and management, he said.

Among the challenges facing the city: developing neighborhoods that use land efficiently, thus reducing sprawl, fuel use and pollution, creating jobs that use local residents' skills and offering affordable housing, Hildebrand said.

Hildebrand pointed to Bakersfield's location along California's highways and byways as a prime depot to distribute goods around the state, saying the transportation of goods should be an area to look to for job growth potential.

"If we can get the kinds of jobs that the people who arrive here have the skills to work, if we can get that balance, that will be good," he said.

"We've certainly got to come up with more housing to house the folks and more jobs to employ the folks," he said.

Managing growth so the city's infrastructure is used to maximum efficiency is crucial, said John Fallgatter president of the Smart Growth Coalition of Kern County.

That means expanding concentrically, not "leapfrogging" out, which strains emergency services and costs taxpayers more money.

"We all know we're gonna grow, that's not the issue," he said. "We want to make sure we grow in a tax-efficient way."

For those nostalgic for Bakersfield's small-town days, there is no easy growth solution, said resident Cathy Smith, 49.

"I hate it, Bakersfield is getting so big," she said. "I don't have a solution to that."

TREE Lodi helps with beautification, education, preservation

By Jennifer Gokhman - News-Sentinel Staff Writer
Lodi News Sentinel, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

Almost 100 new trees have been planted in Lodi this year for the centennial celebration, with the help of TREE Lodi, a new nonprofit organization. Members don't plan on stopping there.

"We're ready to go on to big things," said Joyce Harmon, founder of the Lodi group.

Members of TREE Lodi helped with the initial planting of trees in February for Lodi's centennial celebration. Members from left are Andi Kutlik, Esther Milnes, Ray Fye, Rose Lazzaro, Steve Dutra and Joyce Harmon. (Courtesy photo <mailto:news@lodinews.com>)

Harmon, who has wanted to rid the city trees of parasitic mistletoe for the past few years, joined with other people in Lodi interested in keeping the urban forest going through preservation, planting and education.

The group of 10 consists of a horticulturist, a nursery owner and others who have experience with trees. Their goal is to help people learn to take care of the trees they have, learn which trees to plant and where and learn to recognize diseases, as well as beautify the city and improve quality of life.

Trees not only beautify and provide shade, but they help cut down pollution, which is vital to the Central Valley, said Richard Blackston, horticulturist. The Central Valley has some of the most polluted air in the country, he said. Harmon explained that every 40 trees planted can remove 80 pounds of air pollutant in a year.

She said that urban forestry is a new term to a lot of people.

"Think of it as a canopy over the city," she said. "It's not enough to be known as Tree City USA if we don't take care of what we have."

TREE Lodi, which is affiliated with the California ReLEAF organization, has only just begun with projects. The group helped plant the centennial trees and made sure they were planted correctly in parks throughout Lodi and next to Lodi Lake. The final six trees will be planted Dec. 6, when Lodi has its official centennial ceremony.

The group started last April, in response to Harmon's letters to the editor and an article about her efforts to raise awareness about mistletoe. Though the group has about 10 members now, Harmon hopes it will expand. The group is in need of people - or stewards - who would be willing to help teach people about tree maintenance. They don't need to have experience, as they will be trained.

"I was glad to find others who shared my concerns," Blackston said.

Their next project will begin in the fall, when they offer to help East Lodi residents plant trees and learn to maintain them. Those interested likely will be able to fill out an application. TREE Lodi will work with the Lodi Improvement Committee and property owners.

The important thing is that people take care of the trees, Blackston said. They often use too much water or not enough, prune incorrectly or not prune at all.

"You have to nurture them - shape them, direct them, like children," especially during the first few years, he said.

As trees grow, so does their canopy, and large valley oak trees planted in the space by the sidewalks make for shaded streets.

With pruning, the problem often is butchering a tree. When the branches are cut almost to the trunk, the tree is more vulnerable to rot and is likely to blow down in the wind. Other people just cut the top off the trees, which creates individual shrubs on top.

The right trees in the right spots lead to fewer problems. Some people put too large of trees near electrical wires, and the trees have to be trimmed often. Blackston, who used to be a contracted landscaper, suggests using smaller trees.

TREE Lodi also will be helping the city and schools to meet their needs, Blackston said. They have planted trees at some of the schools.

"We're trying to do whatever it takes to have a tree-friendly city," he added.

TREE Lodi meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at SSB Realty at 6:30 p.m. The next meeting will be Tuesday. For more information, call Joyce Harmon at 334-6668.

Go ahead and hack. It's our birthright.

Like it or not, smog is one of the defining features of Los Angeles. And like the ocean or the mountains, it shows no sign of ever going away.

By Rosie Mestel, Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Wedneday, June 21, 2006

In the late 1940s, a Caltech chemist took time off from studying the sweet taste of pineapples to chase down a certain home-grown stink: the bleachy, eye-smarting, lung-burning air that had started to envelop Los Angeles.

On the worst days, ladies had taken to carrying cloths to mop their tears, and drivers had to pull over because their eyes watered too badly to see. Rubber tires cracked, nylon stockings decayed and farmers reported spots on the leaves of their prized citrus, spinach and beets.

A host of measures - notably the closure of a much-vilified wartime rubber plant - had failed to solve the problem, and outraged Angelenos had been badgering the newly formed L.A. County Smoke and Fumes Commission for answers.

They didn't much care for what the chemist, Arie Haagen-Smit, had discovered: The principal culprit wasn't industry, but cars.

Haagen-Smit distilled down hundreds of cubic feet of air and identified the eye-smarting culprits. Then, following a hunch, he took components of car exhaust - nitrogen dioxide and hydrocarbons - and exposed them to light. The brew was uncannily similar to the junk in the air - and seemingly just as noxious.

Leaves of plants discolored when subjected to it. Officials found that it stung their eyes, and one enthusiastic air pollution officer inhaled so much "Haagen-smog" that he got bronchitis.

It was a eureka moment, right up there with the invention of the Richter scale.

Smog. It's as much a part of L.A. as celebrities, water-guzzling lawns and urban sprawl. Its light-reflecting particles give us those nice, blazing sunsets - the pretty "auburn sky" of Don Henley's song "Sunset Grill" - and impart a glow to the city that caused one New Yorker essayist to tear up from emotion, not pollution, at its memory. Even a cosmetics line and a rock band have taken their names from it.

Tourists as far back as the 1940s bought canisters of Genuine Los Angeles Smog (adorned with depictions of cars and a haze-shrouded City Hall) to mail to their nearest and dearest. Children of the '70s played an earnest Smog board game in which they got to be little red-tape bureaucrats, moving tokens and plastic smoke plumes while trying to clean a city's air.

Some of this was gallows humor, of course. Smog is nothing to take lightly - a fact that gets clearer each year as the ill effects of air pollution are better understood. Smog reduces lung capacity, and exacerbates asthma in children. Some elements of smog are carcinogenic, and no one knows how many people might die before their time from breathing it.

Its tendrils reach far beyond the city, as far east as Joshua Tree National Park, depositing nitrogen in the soil that encourages the growth of foreign weeds at the expense of native species.

Technically speaking, though, it's really not smog that we're talking about, points out Scott Dewey, a scholar and historian of foul air.

"It's a misnomer," Dewey says. The word "smog," coined in 1905, is a melding of the words "smoke" and "fog," and it refers more properly to the industrial emissions that killed 20 people (as well as sundry cats, dogs and canaries) in Donora, Pa., in 1948; and to the smoky, sulfurous coal-burning fog that killed an estimated 4,000 Londoners in 1952.

We never got much of that kind of smog, Dewey explains, because we didn't burn much dirty coal, relying instead on cleaner oil and gas as the population burgeoned. Nonetheless, the region has always been prone to dirty air, and with it has come a certain bewilderment.

In one episode during World War II, the Japanese were suspected of staging a chemical attack. During another, a Los Angeles official suggested that the stinging eyes experienced by Altadena protesters were "psychological." The official was invited by the Altadena Property Owners League to visit the city and "get lungs full of psychology."

Officials rode blimps over the city to see whether they could spot the source of the pollution, and I.A. Deutsch, air pollution control director with the county Health Department, repeatedly urged residents experiencing stinging eyes from "aerial sewage" to send postcards detailing their experiences to City Hall.

We now know that L.A.'s famous inversion layer is a root cause of the smog problem. Warm air routinely settles above the cooler air blowing in from the ocean - and thus the cooler air cannot rise to dissipate its contents. Any emissions from chimney and tailpipe are trapped within the lowest few thousand feet.

Pollution regulators tried a host of other measures before they went after the auto: controlling dust and fumes at smelting plants, banning backyard trash-burning, slashing smoke from factories and sulfur dioxide emissions from refineries.

The public, too, weighed in with suggestions: As far back as 1960, for example, crusty Caltech astronomer Fritz Zwicky made the case for carpooling. "It is obviously preposterous to allow a single individual to pollute the atmosphere at his pleasure," he wrote, adding that eradicating smog would show the Communists that America meant business.

Some tips from the public bordered on the absurd. One would have blasted holes through the San Gabriel Mountains and fanned the dirty air to the desert beyond. Another would have built a huge mirror to deflect sunlight upward, thus punching a hole through the inversion layer and permitting the smoggy air to dissipate.

Dewey's favorite was a proposal to puncture the inversion layer by deploying a host of helicopters to hover over the city, churning up the air with their propeller blades.

Anything, it seemed, but give up the automobile.

Eventually, though, controlling smog came down to controlling the car - and gaining a greater understanding of just what makes up L.A.'s smog. Evaporating organic chemicals (from gasoline, paint, solvents, car exhaust and even eucalyptus trees) join oxides of nitrogen (from vehicle exhaust and power plants), and the two over the day are buffeted eastward by the off-ocean wind. As they ride, they react in sunlight to form a soup of chemicals, including rubber-eroding ozone.

Also riding are tiny particles derived from such sources as dust, exhaust, ground-up tires, cooking and barbecues. As the day goes on, the air gets worse and moves inland, peaking in nastiness at Santa Clarita or Crestline and Lake Arrowhead, home of the nation's highest ozone levels.

We owe such understanding in part to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, whose spiffy Diamond Bar headquarters, right above the 60 Freeway, is slap in the middle of smogland. Guarding its air-testing labs are two decommissioned smog-monitoring machines that no one had the heart to throw out: a tin soldier-like contraption called the Cheney Autosampler Model 1 that was used to collect smog particles in the 1950s, and another with the look of a grandfather clock that once sampled sulfur dioxide.

Inside, fueled by coffee breaks at the district's Blue Skies Cafe, technicians toil year-round monitoring the Southland's air. A half-acre sea of benches is covered with automated machinery running tests around the clock. There are mass spectrometers, plastic bags and metal spheres filled with L.A. air samples, and a stack of brown envelopes holding collections of small particles.

A chemist is analyzing samples of minute particles: Peaks and troughs on a graph will tell him what toxic chemicals are present, and other tests will reveal what percentage came from vehicles, frying meat or even vegetation. It's a far cry from the early days of L.A. smog science, when ozone was tracked measuring scabs on bean plants or how long it took for a rubber band to crack.

"Ozone has gotten dramatically better since the late 1970s - the last five, six years have been kind of flat in terms of the trend," says Sam Atwood of the air-quality agency. "It's not getting worse, but it's certainly not improving at the same rapid rate that it was. Cars have cleaned up a tremendous amount. Today's new car is 1,000 times cleaner than cars in the 1960s. But we still have 10 million vehicles."

Today, the Southland still holds the nation's record for dirtiness despite recent, stiff competition from its closest contenders, Houston and the San Joaquin Valley. Yet the air we breathe today is much improved, even with the steadily growing population: L.A. hasn't had a Stage 1 smog alert since 2003.

The kind of air pollution we produce (derived from vehicle exhaust and other emissions that are simmered gently to maturity in the sunshine) is now typical in such cities as Denver, Bakersfield, Phoenix and Atlanta. Our city, it appears, may be in danger of losing a dubious distinction.

Yet Dewey thinks L.A. and smog will always be inextricably linked - in good ways as well as bad.

Despite our still-filthy air, he thinks L.A. has reason to be proud. The region was the first to present the problem of auto pollution to the world, and the first to show that city-by-city ordinances couldn't fix the problem. It was the training ground for a host of air pollution officers who fanned out to take key positions in the federal government and cities nationwide, and the 800-pound gorilla that showed the need for a Clean Air Act that the whole nation benefits from today.

"Los Angeles and Southern California should carry the stigma of smog. It is where it all began, it became notorious and it still is notorious," he says. But, Dewey adds, L.A.'s smog controllers "were the first to take it on, and they took it on with conviction. In a weird way, smog should almost be a badge of pride."

*

Bad air days -- 464 years of them

1542: Explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo christens San Pedro Bay "La Bahia de la Fumos" - Bay of Smokes - for the way smoke from Indians' fires hug the ground.

1868: The L.A. area's 5,000 residents are perplexed by "an atmosphere … so filled with smoke as to confine the vision within a small circumference."

1901: An episode of dirty air is mistaken for an eclipse of the sun.

1905: First recorded use of the word "smog," by physician Harold A. des Voeux, to describe London's bad air.

July 26, 1943: After a series of bad-air episodes, visibility in downtown L.A. is reduced to less than three blocks.

1950s: Smudge pots (fires used to keep fruit trees warm at night) are banned.

1955: Highest ozone level - 0.68 parts per million in downtown Los Angeles - reported in the Southland.

1956: The first air-quality monitoring stations are established; today the Air Quality Management District has 35.

1958: Backyard incinerators are banned.

1966: California is the first in the nation to set auto emission standards.

1974 Creation of Stage 1 (bad), 2 (worse) and 3 (gasp!) smog alert system.

1975: South Coast Air Basin has 118 Stage 1 smog alerts. Catalytic converters are required on new cars sold in California.

1977: The South Coast Air Quality Management District, or SCAQMD, is formed; it now regulates air quality in 10,743 square miles populated by more than 16 million.

1995: The South Coast air basin has 14 Stage 1 smog alerts.

1999, early 2000s: Ozone levels in Houston are worse than L.A's for several years running. L.A. recovers, and holds, its lead.

2006: The South Coast air basin has had no Stage 1 smog alerts since 2003, no Stage 2's since 1988, no Stage 3's since 1974.

Sources: SCAQMD, California Air Resources Board, "Don't Breathe the Air" by Scott Dewey, Times research

Report: Calif.'s global warming emissions surge

The Associated Press
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

California's global warming emissions leaped 85 percent between 1960 and 2001, according to a report by an environmental group.

The report released Tuesday by San Francisco-based Environment California said 61 percent of the increase was due to increased carbon dioxide emissions from vehicles. The remainder was from carbon dioxide emissions from natural gas used for heating and electricity, according to the report, which was based on data compiled by the U.S. Department of Energy.

The study concluded that California emitted 198.8 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 1960 and 368.7 million metric tons in 2001.

California ranked third in emissions behind Texas and Florida.

Environment California called for fast enactment of Assembly Bill 32, which would require caps on industry emissions. A Senate hearing on the bill, sponsored by Speaker Fabian Nunez and Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, is set for Tuesday.

But the California Chamber of Commerce released its own study on Tuesday, which concluded that the bill would increase the price of energy and cause companies to move jobs to developing countries with less stringent emission standards.

Biodiesel co-ops cropping up across Bay Area

By Julia Scott, Staff Writer
Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, June 20, 2006

HALF MOON BAY - When Anne Ryckebusch needs to add biodiesel to her Volkswagen Golf, all she has to do is back it into her driveway. Her home is the headquarters of a small Coastside biodiesel co-op. At $3.40 a gallon, it's comparable to the going rate for diesel.

Half Moon Bay's single pump station, a 250-gallon tank of treated vegetable oil that sits in Ryckebusch's garage, is an offshoot of a larger biodiesel co-op in Pacifica with 30 members; it was created after the closure of Highway 1 at Devil's Slide cut Coastside commuters off from each other.

Another biodiesel co-op was quietly established at a Mercedes-Benz garage in San Mateo two months ago. It already has 50 members.

Were it not for the odd, sweet smell of cooking oil that Ryckebusch's car emits,no one would ever guess that it is run on fryer oil - recycled vegetable oil or animal fat collected from restaurants

throughout the Bay Area, and converted into engine-friendly biodiesel by a local company through a simple glycerin extraction process. The resulting fuel can be used alone in any diesel engine without any further modification, or mixed in with regular diesel fuel.

The Bay Area's handful of co-ops and distributors are part of a growing grassroots movement of drivers who have embraced biodiesel as a low-emissions alternative to fossil fuels. Carbon monoxide emissions are 47 percent lower than regular diesel emissions, and total hydrocarbons are lowered by 67 percent.

Businesses, city governments, farmers and construction workers have also begun to use the fuel to cut costs.

"We went from eight to 30 members in the past year and a half," said Nancy Hall, an avid member of Pacifica's biodiesel co-op. "Now that our price is comparable (to regular diesel), people are looking at us differently. Suddenly, their ethics are affordable."

Since launching her biodiesel co-op in a garage in San Mateo, Janet Migliore said the side business has grown by word-of-mouth.

"I have hardcore people who won't use anything else," she said.

From now on, biodiesel users won't have to. In a testament to how widely available the fuel has become, Ryckebush will leave this week on a cross-country road trip to New Hampshire, stopping to fill up at biodiesel stations every 350 miles (her car gets 35-40 miles per gallon).

On a national scale, major biodiesel processors have proliferated alongside local grassroots co-ops. Newly built factories convert virgin soybean oil into biodiesel in an extraction process similar to that used for fryer oil; according to Biodiesel Magazine, 59 such plants presently exist in the U.S., mostly in the Midwest, where soybeans are grown. At least 65 more reportedly are in the works.

Between 2004 and 2005, American biodiesel production tripled to 75 million gallons, and is expected to double again in 2006 to 150 million gallons, according to the National Biodiesel Board, a trade organization.

At present, that's a fraction of the 55 to 60 billion gallons of petroleum U.S. consumers use every year. Nevertheless, the industry continues to attract major investors: In May, Chevron announced that it had taken a 22 percent share in a Texas-based biodiesel company, and that it plans to build what will be the nation's largest biodiesel plant. The company predicts it will eventually produce as much as 100 million gallons a year.

Several states also have taken steps to promote the use of biodiesel. Minnesota, Washington state and Louisiana all have passed laws mandating a minimum standard of blended use with diesel.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued an executive order establishing a target of 20 percent renewable fuel use (ethanol and biodiesel) by 2010 and San Francisco will use a minimum 20 percent biodiesel blend in its city workers' fleet by 2007.

San Mateo County currently has no such requirement, but Pacifica has plans to run its city vehicles entirely on biodiesel it will generate at its own waste water plant by the end of the year.

Environmental Groups Sue EPA Over Refinery Emission Standards

By Janet Wilson, Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

A coalition of national and community environmental groups has sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to overturn a new rule that allegedly allows refineries and other industrial plants to emit higher levels of noxious chemicals when starting up, shutting down and experiencing equipment malfunctions, without informing area residents.

The groups filed suit in the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C. late Monday. The new EPA rule took effect in April.

Jim Pew, an attorney with Earthjustice in Washington who is representing the groups, said that the new rule gives the EPA discretion in asking refineries and other plants for contingency plans for dealing with breakdowns and making those plans public.

Pew also said that under the rule, those plants would not be legally liable for failing to abide by their own plans.

"Previously each plant was required to submit a malfunction plan that was carefully reviewed and approved, and subject to enforcement action by the EPA or the public. That's all gone now," Pew said.

The lawsuit was filed partially in response to a breakdown in September in Wilmington when the Shell, Conoco-Phillips and Valero refineries emitted brown and yellow smoke for more than eight hours after an area power outage.

Jesse Marquez, head of the Coalition for a Safe Environment in Wilmington, one of the groups that filed suit, said a door-to-door survey of residents afterward found that more than 25% had experienced asthma attacks, congestion, burning eyes and other problems.

"This massive toxic release could have been avoided had the refineries been required to prepare an adequate contingency plan that included a backup power source during a blackout," the environmental groups said in a release. "Unfortunately, EPA's rules encourage such reckless lack of planning by exempting plants from toxic emission limits during malfunctions and allowing plant owners to keep their backup plans secret from the public."

Representatives of the refineries and the Western States Petroleum Assn. either could not be reached, or did not return phone calls seeking comment.

EPA spokesman John Millett said higher emissions during start-up, shutdown and malfunction of plants were unavoidable, just as cars emit more when they are started.

In response to the lawsuit, the EPA said that it would review the matter and "respond appropriately."

The agency said its new rule requires refineries and other industrial plants to develop plans that describe how they will operate to minimize emissions during periods of start-up, shutdown and malfunction. Industrial air pollution is heavily regulated in the United States, the EPA said.

In addition to the new rule, the agency added, the Clean Air Act and 96 additional rules require more than 170 different kinds of plants to eliminate 1.5 million tons of hazardous air pollutants per year.

Pang Mueller, a senior refinery unit manager at the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said that noxious sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and other substances were emitted from the refineries in Wilmington in September. But she said that the releases were necessary to avoid explosions at the plants when electricity was cut. She said emissions were from high smokestacks that carry fumes downwind, away from residents.

Editorial in the Merced Sun-Star, June 20, 2006

Our View: Precautions needed in summer heat

Triple-digits are around the corner and are going to be here for a while ... so take care

By midweek, Merced is likely to experience triple-digit temperatures. Some forecasts indicate Wednesday's temperature here could reach 104 degrees.

Many years the 100-plus temperatures begin in late May; this year we had several weeks' delightful respite from those conditions.

By any measure, 104 is plenty hot. While it's typical or customary for summer in the San Joaquin Valley, some precautions definitely are in order.

Most Mercedians are used to the dry, blast-furnace heat found when the mercury goes over 100 degrees, but even longtime local residents can get caught off-guard by a sudden spike in temperatures if they haven't taken precautions.

Dehydration and heatstroke are formidable foes and steps must be taken in advance to prevent them from occurring.

Number one, people need to make sure they consume plenty of fluids, especially water, and avoid sustained exposure to the hot midday and afternoon sun.

Many businesses adjust their hours in summer, with workers starting around daybreak and winding up their day by 2 p.m. rather than toughing it out to the customary 5 p.m. quitting time.

The same applies to yard chores. A walk, jog, or game of basketball may be more advisable in early evening hours, certainly not the middle of the afternoon when the temperature has peaked.

Special attention needs to be devoted to protecting youngsters and animals from summer heat in the Valley. It's especially critical that people and pets aren't left in hot cars, where temperatures can quickly climb many degrees above safe levels.

Another cautionary note is in order: Despite the strong temptation to escape the heat by cooling off in irrigation canals, these waterways should always be off-limits to people of all ages. They are deceptively dangerous.

Creeks and rivers still are running cold and swift, fed by mountain snowmelt, and present dangers of their own. Young children should never be left unattended in wading pools or swimming pools. Sunscreen should be applied liberally to avoid overexposure to the sun's harmful rays and hats also help prevent sunburn.

Another harmful byproduct of 100-plus temperatures is the tendency for air pollution to spike considerably. Those susceptible to poor air quality should take precautions to avoid being outside for extended periods of time when it's extra warm.

This could be the start to three or four months of hot weather and it's imperative people make the adjustments to deal comfortably with the heat.

Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, June 19, 2006

Editor: Did you know out of more than 83,000 cities in the USA, Merced is the sixth most polluted city? Or that pollution kills crops that cost over $150 million every year? That's why I urge you to lower pollution for all Mercedians.

Lower pollution would help healthy people and people with diseases. Picture this: A healthy child runs around on a local school playground; all of a sudden he stops, wheezing. Kids crowd him, he can't breathe, his teacher calls his mom and they go to the doctor. The child says to her, "Mom, my chest hurts," and he has a worried look on his face as the doctor looks at him. The doctor speaks to his mom, telling her that her son has asthma. Would you like that to happen to you or your child? Air pollution can cause healthy people chest pain, coughing or heart disease. Children are more at risk because their lungs are still developing. And if the elderly have an asthma attack, it could be deadly. Central Valley Air Quality Coalition said that more than 50,000 people in California are in hospitals every year because of asthma. Do you think we have a problem on our hands yet?

Pollution is bad for the air, our health and California's budget. California is known for its crops that spread food across the nation, and when the crops get hurt so does California's budget. Earth Justice, a nonprofit law firm dedicated to protecting the Earth, says that pollution damage costs more than $150 million every year. Another thing that's hurting us is hospital bills. Asthma

problems in the Valley cost more than $85 million every year. That's $230 million every year, and man, that's a lot.

Using vehicles wisely would help lower pollution. Hybrid cars are one example of a way we could lower pollution. I can see why people wouldn't want to buy a hybrid car. Hybrid cars cost more, they cost about $20,000, making it about $5,500 more than a regular car. On the other hand, hybrid cars can get really good mileage. The Honda Insight and the Toyota Prius both get the highest mileage of all hybrid cars with about 60 miles on both highway and in the city. Also, hybrid cars reduce smog by 90 percent. If you don't like the idea of hybrid cars, then would you like the idea of car-pooling and buses? If the city bought more buses, people would not have to always drive their high pollution cars to Subway and back.

I want to live in a city that doesn't have tufts of pollution coming out of our ears. In addition, I do not want to go to a school that you cannot go to recess because the air is too unhealthy. Therefore, isn't it time to do something about it? Let us stop being the sixth most polluted city. Do something about air pollution for the sake of Merced and its people. As I read in Time, "Don't blow it -- good planets are hard to find."

JAMIE HOORNAERT
Merced

Hanford Sentinel, Commentary, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

Guest column: Asthma quite common in Kings County children

Did you know that one in five children in Kings County has asthma? According to the California Department of Health Services, in 2003, the estimated number of children and adolescents (age 0-17 years) in Kings County who have ever been told by their doctor they have asthma was 21 percent, or one in five children. How does this compare to other surrounding counties?

In the 2003 CDHS survey, more than 42,000 California households in more than 40 counties participated in the survey looking at children and adolescents who have ever been diagnosed with asthma and children and adolescents who experienced an asthma attack within the past year, 2003. Among the counties surveyed, Kings County had the third highest lifetime asthma rates, followed closely behind San Joaquin and Butte counties.

"Lifetime Asthma" was defined as ever being told by a doctor they have asthma. What's even more surprising is that Kings County was even higher than its local surrounding counties, Tulare and Fresno. Although not far behind, in comparison to Tulare and Fresno counties, Kings County did better when it came to children and adolescents with lifetime asthma who experienced an asthma attack in 2003.

The rate for Kings County was 39.8 percent; Tulare County, 42.7 percent; and Fresno County, 42.8 percent.

What does all of this information tell us? One could assume the prevalence measured in this survey may result in an undercount of the number of children and youth with asthma, since some persons who have asthma may not have sought or received a physician's diagnosis. Despite many assumptions that could be made, one thing is clear -- asthma is a very common health problem for California's children and adolescents.

So what can Kings County do to improve the rate of asthma among children and adolescents? While asthma is quite common in children and adolescents, at this time there is no cure for this disease, so the burden of asthma needs to be focused on reducing the rate significantly through appropriate asthma management.

Persons with asthma can reduce their risk for asthma-related problems by working closely with their health care provider to manage their disease. There are four important areas both patient and provider should be working on: using objective measures of lung function to monitor severity of and control of the disease (example: doing in-office spirometry or a pulmonary function test); avoid environmental factors that bring on asthma episodes; use appropriate medication to

achieve long-term asthma management and control; and establish a provider-patient partnership for asthma management.

The Kings County Asthma Coalition is a local group of individuals whose focus it is to increase asthma awareness. Any member of the community can be a part of the coalition. It's also the main goal of the coalition to be a primary resource for asthma materials in Kings County and link together the patient, parent, provider and school when it comes to asthma management needs.

(Kim Scott, F.N.P., is Kings County Asthma Coalition director. Throughout the remainder of the year, the Kings County Asthma Coalition will be publishing articles in The Sentinel on asthma awareness as well as answer any questions you may have about asthma. If you would like to submit a question, e-mail kingscountyasthma@yahoo.com <mailto:kingscountyasthma@yahoo.com>.)