

It's too early to know, but indications are that the valley's air is improving with virus shutdown

By Steven Mayer

The Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, April 1, 2020

There's been plenty of bad news this March as social distancing and the governor's stay-at-home order have resulted in the closure of local businesses, the cancellation of sporting events and the postponement of concerts, theater dates and even children's play dates.

But isn't it possible that at least one thing is better? One big thing?

The short answer is ... maybe.

Valley air quality experts say it's too soon to know for sure, but there are indications that the valley's air is cleaner and healthier as many residents stay off the roads, opting for TV rather than catching a movie, eating in vs. eating out, and playing board games at home instead of attending basketball games elsewhere.

"It's really too early to tell," said Jaime Holt, chief communications officer at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district's scientists and technicians have only had about 2 1/2 weeks since California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued his stay-at-home order designed to slow the spread of COVID-19. That's not enough to gather quantifiable data and compare that data with similar months in previous years, Holt said.

But there are some hints that trends are moving in the right direction.

"We are beginning to see a bit of a drop in NOx emissions," Holt said of measurements taken from a roadside monitor on the south end of Fresno.

NOx, or oxides of nitrogen, have harmful direct effects on human health and are a problem pollutants year round. Vehicle NOx emissions have been regulated since the 1960s.

"Eighty percent of NOx comes from mobile sources," Holt said. Sources like "trucks, trains, off-road equipment, passenger vehicles, basically anything that has wheels."

As the volume of traffic has dropped — a Sacramento Bee review of Unacast data shows that, on average, Californians have reduced their miles traveled by nearly half — it is believed that air quality will benefit, as it has in China, Italy and other nations where shutdowns have been taken seriously.

Traffic counts are also expected, in time, from the Kern Council of Governments, which closely studies transportation throughout the county.

Rob Ball, director of planning at KernCOG, said in an email the agency's traffic counts are posted approximately one to two months after they are taken, so it is still early to know precisely how drivers in Kern responded to the Governor's stay at home order.

But Holt noted that the air district is seeing anecdotal evidence that points toward reductions in emissions.

"We think that probably, in time, we will see a reduction," she said.

With so much air displacement in March due to a string of low pressure systems that blew through the valley — air movement that tends to blow out pollution — it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of measured improvements in air quality.

"In addition, we're coming off of the cleanest winter on record," Holt said, a victory she attributed, at least in part, to tighter restrictions on wood burning in the valley and more residents buying into the noticeable benefits to the air they breathe.