

Smog levels spark health warnings

Hot weather: Temperatures in the Valley reach 106 degrees.

By Barbara Anderson and Matt Leedy

The Fresno Bee

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Dangerously high levels of smog forced air pollution officials to warn people living from Parlier to Bakersfield to halt vigorous outdoor activities Wednesday afternoon.

It was the first time in 18 years that a hazardous-air warning had to be called this early in the year. The last time the San Joaquin Valley hit such an early ozone peak was April 13, 1985. Smog typically plagues the Valley in summer and early fall.

Health advisories are called when ozone levels reach 145 parts per billion for an hour. Last year, the Valley had 11 such bad-air days -- the most since 1998, when 14 unsafe days were recorded.

Once meteorologists at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District record a smog peak, they must notify school districts to cancel outdoor recesses and sporting events. They also contact the media to alert the public.

The urgency of protecting people from smog episodes is well-documented. Shortness of breath and burning lungs are immediate health problems. Ozone also is a trigger for asthma attacks. Long-term exposure to ozone, a main ingredient in smog, can scar lungs and stunt lung development.

But the timing of the Valley's smog peaks often catches children and adults unaware while they play and work outside.

Wednesday's health advisories weren't called until 3:30 p.m. for the Arvin, Edison and foothill areas of Kern County. The health advisory for Parlier, Fowler, Sanger, Reedley and Orange Cove came an hour later. The health warnings remained in effect until 7 p.m.

By the time air pollution officials sounded the alerts, children were on their way home from school, and adults with outdoor jobs were completing a hot day at work.

At Muir Elementary School in Fresno's Tower District, a dozen children gathered under a tree, hoping for relief from the late afternoon heat that climbed to 105 degrees throughout the city.

Temperatures Wednesday were one degree shy of Fresno's hottest for May 28, according to the National Weather Service in Hanford.

Students and supervisors in the after-school program at Muir Elementary did not know about the day's air pollution hazards and instead focused their attention on staying cool.

Children threw cups of water on each other and crowded for space on a shaded picnic table. "We don't know any other place to go," said 9-year-old Shanda Ditto.

Air district officials say it's difficult to predict air quality 24 hours in advance for schools and other agencies, but they will monitor smog levels closely today.

"If we have to, we will notify the schools to keep the children inside," said spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. The district predicts unhealthy air quality from Madera County to Kern County today.

The public should be mindful of the air quality, Bello said. Even if smog levels don't reach levels high enough to prompt a health warning, "people are advised to reduce outside exertion between 3 and 7 p.m."

A combination of meteorological events caused the smog blanket. Ozone requires high temperatures to cook smog-forming chemicals that are emitted from tailpipes and other combustion sources. A high-pressure system and stagnant air that dominated the Valley prevented pollutants from escaping.

"A lot of ozone formation is temperature driven, and we're seeing some fairly high temperatures early in the season," Bello said.

Temperatures reached the triple digits in many Valley cities, including Lemoore and Coalinga at 106, Hanford and Visalia at 104, and Madera at 103.

But the weather itself isn't to blame for the Valley's pollution problems. Said Bello: "We wouldn't have a problem if there weren't emissions going into the air."

Higher-than-normal temperatures across California prompted the state's Independent System Operator to issue a Stage One electrical emergency as operating reserves dipped. Residents were asked to lessen the strain on the state's power grid by conserving energy and not using large electrical appliances until after 7 p.m.

The heat, if not the knowledge of poor air quality, kept many Fresno residents indoors.

Davinder Kumar, a part-time ice cream truck driver, said he didn't hit the streets until 5 p.m. "When it's too hot, people don't want to come out," he said.

Shortly after the air conditioning in her car broke, Anabelle Fernandez rushed her 5-year-old son and several of her nieces and nephews into the cool of an ice cream store. Fernandez and her family were headed to Fresno High School's graduation when they stopped at Baskin Robbins 31 Flavors on Palm Avenue.

"Just to cool them off," Fernandez said. "When the AC in the car broke I was like, 'Oh my gosh, we need to get some ice cream.' "

Kern gets early jump on air quality alerts

By MATT WEISER

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday May 28, 2003, 11:37:17 PM

Air quality officials issued a health advisory for Arvin, Edison and the Kern County foothills Wednesday afternoon due to high ozone levels, and they're predicting more bad air for today. It was the earliest such advisory issued since 1990, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The culprit, aside from all the vehicle and industrial pollution, is unusually hot temperatures soaring above 100 degrees in Bakersfield and other cities and a high-pressure condition over California keeping valley pollution even more confined than usual. The air district recorded a peak ozone concentration in Arvin Wednesday afternoon at 143 parts per billion, just below the alert level of 145. Arvin and Edison usually have higher smog readings than Bakersfield because they're at the southern tip of the valley where pollutants often pool. "It's close enough for us to err on the side of caution so we can get the word out," said air district meteorologist Evan Shipp. "It's unusual. This is one of the earliest events we've had like this." Residents in the advisory areas were urged to limit outdoor activities through 7 p.m. Schools were advised to discontinue all outdoor activities for the duration of the episode.

Ozone is produced when pollution from cars and industrial sources reacts with heat and sunlight. It is a lung irritant that can cause or aggravate heart or respiratory problems, and cause fatigue, headache, nausea, throat irritation, coughing and chest pain. Automobiles are the valley's biggest source of ozone-causing pollution.

Air quality is expected to be bad again today, with a prediction of 169 on the air quality index for the southern valley, or well into the unhealthy range. Residents are urged to take steps to minimize air pollution: avoid driving, combine trips, buy gas only in morning and evening hours, skip barbecuing and lawnmowing, and use public transit.

Officials are hesitant to predict whether Wednesday's advisory hints at a long summer of smog. But the air quality index has been much higher in recent days than last year at this time.

"It could be an anomaly because we're having hot temperatures pretty early in the year," said air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "It could, however, be a sign of things to come -- in other words, a tough ozone summer."

The National Weather Service predicted the temperature in Bakersfield will soar above 100 degrees again today. Other valley cities will also see triple-digits, the weather service predicted.

For more information, call the air district at 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org <<http://www.valleyair.org>>.

Air pollution officials issue local health advisory through 7 p.m.

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday May 28, 2003, 05:46:04 PM

Air pollution officials issued a health advisory for Arvin, Edison and the Kern County foothills this afternoon due to high ozone levels.

Residents in these areas are urged to limit outdoor activities between now and 7 p.m.

Schools in the advisory areas should discontinue all outdoor activities for the duration of the episode. Anyone scheduled to participate in such activities should make alternate plans to minimize exposure to smog by staying indoors. If outdoor activities can't be avoided, residents should avoid exerting themselves or increasing their breathing rates.

The advisory was prompted by a high-pressure system looming over California that has driven temperatures far above normal and caused ozone levels to soar into the unhealthy range. It is the earliest that such an advisory has been issued since 1990.

For more information, call the air district at 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org. <<http://www.valleyair.org>>

Early season air warning in San Joaquin Valley prompts concern

The Associated Press

Thursday May 29, 2003, 01:10:07 AM

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) - A hazardous-air warning issued Wednesday due to high levels of smog forced large numbers of San Joaquin Valley residents to halt vigorous outdoor activities. It's been 18 years since such an air pollution warning was called this early in the year, prompting concerns among air district officials who say they'll be monitoring smog levels closely over the next few days.

"If we have to, we will notify the schools to keep the children inside," said San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. Unhealthy air quality from Madera County to Kern County was predicted by district officials for Thursday.

The last time San Joaquin Valley experienced such an early ozone peak was 1985, when a warning was issued on April 13. Such high smog levels typically plague the Valley in summer and early fall.

Health advisories are called when ozone levels reach 145 parts per billion for an hour. Last year there were 11 such days in the Valley.

Once a smog peak is recorded, air district officials must notify school districts to cancel outdoor recesses and sporting events. Shortness of breath and burning lungs are immediate health problems.

Wednesday's health advisories were called at 3:30 p.m. for the Arvin, Edison and foothill areas of Kern County.

The health advisory for Parlier, Fowler, Sanger, Reedley and Orange Cove came an hour later and the warnings remained in effect until 7 p.m.

Ice cream truck driver Davinder Kumar didn't hit the streets until 5 p.m. It was simply too warm for him - and for his customers.

"When it's too hot, people don't want to come out," he said.

Anabelle Fernandez' car air conditioning broke down Wednesday, so she took her 5-year-old son and other children inside a local ice cream store.

"Just to cool them off," Fernandez said. "When the AC in the car broke I was like, 'Oh my gosh, we need to get some ice cream.' "

Information from: The Fresno Bee

Bullet rail may bypass Altamont

By Audrey Cooper

Record Staff Writer

Published Thursday, May 29, 2003

OAKLAND -- Bay Area transportation officials have decided against requesting a study of building a bullet-train system across the Altamont Pass and into Stockton.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission voted Wednesday against a proposal to request that the California High-Speed Rail Authority also study an Altamont Pass route during the ongoing environmental review.

Without such a study, it almost guaranteed that the backbone of the proposed high-speed rail system would avoid San Joaquin County. The current planned route takes trains traveling 200 mph from San Francisco into San Jose and across the Pacheco Pass before heading south at Merced to Southern California.

Environmentalists and some rail-advocacy groups had hoped the influential MTC, the Bay Area's transportation planning agency, would persuade the state's High-Speed Rail Authority to consider the Altamont route.

Instead, activists said they might be forced to take the issue to court.

"We're heading in that direction," said Stuart Flashman, an attorney for the Train Riders Association of California and the California Rail Foundation.

"They're heading toward a cliff because of the refusal to consider the Altamont alternative. I think my groups would rather see no project than a bad one that could kill high-speed rail for the foreseeable future," Flashman said.

Several rail and environmental organizations told MTC officials Wednesday that state law requires the High-Speed Rail Authority to examine alternate routes that may be more environmentally friendly.

A high-profile and controversial court battle could doom plans to build the 700-mile train system, which could carry travelers between San Francisco and Los Angeles in just over two hours. A \$10 billion bond measure that would fund the beginning phases of the train system is expected to go before voters in November 2004.

The ballot measure is key to whether a bullet train is ever built, but the state's fiscal crisis is expected to make the bond measure a tough sell. Add to that the controversy over the proposed route and the bond measure will likely be defeated, some transportation advocates say.

There is little chance the bullet train could run without a bond measure, because its estimated \$25 billion total construction cost is roughly equal to what the state Department of Transportation spends each decade on building new roads and highway rehabilitation.

Supporters of the current San Jose-to-Merced route say adding more studies would delay the environmental documents. Those delays could also doom the bond measure, they said.

Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the High-Speed Rail Authority, said the first draft of the environmental review is expected in August.

"I'm sure our engineers and consultants would love to study" alternative routes for several more years, he said.

"Unfortunately, we have limited time and very limited resources. We fully expect to get sued. That's why we have the best environmental attorneys in the state working for us," Morshed said.

Although the Altamont Pass route would save an estimated \$2 billion, the route has its flaws. Such a route would require partial reconstruction of the Dumbarton Bridge. Also, the Pacheco Pass route would have an estimated 1.1 million more riders each year, giving the system \$56 million more annually in ticket sales.

Although the MTC declined to request that the High-Speed Rail Authority study the Altamont Pass route, the commission did agree to study ways to link the East Bay to a high-speed rail system. The bond measure includes \$950 million for projects that would link up to the bullet train.

Eventually, the High-Speed Rail Authority plans to build extensions onto the backbone rail system. Those extensions are expected to include a Sacramento-to-Merced link that would pass through San Joaquin County. However, several local transportation officials -- including the San Joaquin Council of Governments -- have opposed the high-speed rail plans because of doubts that the state will have enough money to pay for the extensions.

Meanwhile, there is talk at the state Legislature about delaying the ballot measure until the state is in better financial shape.

Summer well on way as mercury tops 100

The Record

Published Thursday, May 29, 2003

A giant high-pressure system that hovered over Northern California on Wednesday blocked any cooling ocean breeze and pushed the thermometer to 101 degrees in Stockton, the hottest day so far this year.

The high temperature was reached at 5 p.m., and three hours later it was still in the 90s.

"We got pretty busy," said Loretta Hoyer, manager of the Cold Stone Creamery on Benjamin Holt Drive. "The line for ice cream has gone all the way to the front door since afternoon."

Relief, however, is on the way. Today's expected high is 89 degrees, with further cooling on Friday. For the weekend, temperatures are expected to inch back into the 90s.

Hot weather and the increased demand for electricity that accompanies it led managers of the state's power grid to declare a brief Stage 1 emergency Wednesday. The Independent System Operator said temperatures were 5 percent to 7 percent above forecasts, increasing customer demand to about 4,000 megawatts above the expected peak demand. No blackouts were expected.

[Fresno Bee editorial, May 29, 2003:](#)

Electrifying concept

Developer wants electric cars to be a part of Fresno's suburban future.

(Published Thursday, May 29, 2003, 4:19 AM)

The intensely debated Copper River Ranch project moved closer to reality last week, and that's news that meets with mixed reactions around the city and the region.

Opponents of the project call it yet another example of Fresno's northward sprawl, a pattern of many decades that has, among other things, been a major cause of increased air pollution hereabouts. Proponents cite the design of the project, one they say adheres closely to the principles of the "smart growth" movement, including denser residential development, more open space and attention to making neighborhoods comfortable for walking and cycling instead of driving.

In fact, one of the three builders involved in the project sweetened the air quality pot the other day. Gary McDonald said that he intends to "subsidize, or provide for as many people as possible, electric cars when they purchase one of our homes. We'll have electric outlets for them, not only for cars, but for mowers, front and back."

That's a rather dramatic offer, and one that could have pleasant consequences for residents of the new project, and for the rest of us, if it means reduced pollution from internal combustion vehicles.

Critics of the project are correct that outlying developments mean longer commutes, and even more driving if commercial and recreational amenities aren't located within easy walking distance, as is the case in far too many older suburban areas. All that driving, and the congestion it causes on streets and highways, has a terrible effect on air quality.

But if those problems can be mitigated, with better design, more compact neighborhoods and careful siting of commercial areas, then we're all better off. And if the air quality can be improved by using electric vehicles -- golf carts might do -- then it's worth pursuing. McDonald deserves credit for making such a pledge.

There are no perfect solutions. The policy debate that moved Copper River Ranch closer to reality also brought Fresno a new general plan that steers growth back toward the inner, older parts of the city, and that's good for our lungs.