

Old smog builds problems

Toxins apparently don't go away as heat wave bakes stagnant Valley air.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Tuesday, June 3, 2003, 4:35 AM)

You might breathe pollution today that cars and trucks created Monday. And, if the air doesn't move around much today, you might breathe more of it Wednesday and Thursday.

Pollution apparently doesn't go away in the Valley's stagnant smog clouds, which probably will fill the air this week. With six days of 100-degree-plus weather forecast, Monday's pollution might haunt you all week.

"The levels can build from day to day, adding more emissions," said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Ozone can float around for days."

Ozone, the chief ingredient in smog, is the corrosive gas that forms when pollutants from cars and other sources cook in sunlight and hot weather.

The sunny Valley hit 102 on Monday and should hover around 100 through Sunday, according to the National Weather Service.

The ozone level was unhealthy Monday for everyone. Ozone can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems.

Today, officials suspect ozone pollution could climb higher because of the buildup from Monday. And Wednesday and Thursday could be a real challenge.

As the June heat wave continues, the ozone problem follows.

"It could cool down slightly by the weekend," said Weather Service meteorologist Jim Bagnall. "But just a couple of degrees. Normally, we would be in the low 90s, so this is hotter than usual."

That means the Valley's notorious summer smog problem has begun. The air here has already violated the long-term or eight-hour federal health standard a dozen times this year, and summer won't start for almost three weeks.

But it's a tough time all over California. The Los Angeles-area South Coast Basin -- where motorists drive more than 300 million miles daily -- has violated the long-term federal health standard 16 times.

By comparison, Valley motorists drive fewer than 80 million miles each day. But calm, hot days turn emissions into smog, and the Valley's bowl shape holds the bad air until a weather system ventilates things.

Ozone isn't indestructible, though. It breaks down when it encounters barriers, such as trees or buildings.

Oddly, it also is destroyed by vehicle emissions after sundown. The reason: Without sunlight, the chemical reaction to form ozone cannot take place. Chemicals in vehicle emissions after dark break down ozone.

If the weather doesn't scour out the vehicle emissions, they again begin cooking into smog when daylight returns.

"You can form a pretty high concentration after a few days," Shipp said.

But, even after dark, some ozone drifts above the tree tops, reaching the nearby Sierra Nevada. This bad air makes Sequoia National Park, east of Fresno, the worst national park in the West for ozone pollution.

The monitoring site at Ash Mountain in the park has recorded two violations of the long-term health standard this year. The state Air Resources Board shows the Ash Mountain site last year had more long-term violations than any other spot in the Valley.

"This is one contest I don't like winning," said Anne Esperanza, Sequoia air quality specialist. "The levels drop a bit at night, but they're still higher here than most places in the Valley."

Air Quality Declines As Valley Heat Rises

KCRA, Channel 3 (Sacramento, Stockton, Modesto), Monday at 6pm

With three consecutive days of triple-digit temperatures expected, valley residents took refuge Monday in air-conditioned homes and cool waterways.

Air conditioning repairmen were being called out in force, with some working from 6 a.m. to midnight.

Health officials recommend that residents be wary of heat stroke possibilities and advise staying hydrated by drinking plenty of water.

And pollution is leaving its mark across the San Joaquin Valley.

"Pollution is just horrible, just horrible here. If (you have) bad lungs, this valley is not a good place to live," Gould Medical Group's Dr. James Lehr said.

One of the problems is smog that drifts from the San Francisco Bay area, and another is emissions from the growing number of commuters in the valley.

When temperatures soar, air quality is at its worse, according to air quality officials.

"As it gets warmer, air quality is greatly affected because it's the sunlight that cooks chemicals in the air," San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokesman Anthony Presto said.

The level of pollution, the temperature and the lack of air circulation all made Monday an unhealthy air quality day for sensitive groups. For the elderly, heat and pollution are a bad mix.

Lehr said he's definitely seeing more patients.

"We're seeing much more asthma in young people. (The) asthma we're seeing is much more severe. People with chronic lung disease, who smoke, are suffering horribly too," Lehr said.

For now, air experts urge people to help cut back on pollution whenever they can, particularly on "spare the air" days, which are warmer days in the summer.

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The "spare the air day" campaign kicks off this Friday. The program, which runs from June through September, encourages everyone to help cut down on pollution by carpooling or using mass transportation.

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Thinking 'sustainable' is the key to a better future

By Joan Poss

Fresno

(Published Tuesday, June 3, 2003, 4:30 AM)

In our "Last Gasp," we could think about mowing the lawn twice a month instead of every week. According to Real Money (June/July 2002, www.realmoney.org), "Each year, aging gas-powered lawn care equipment spews thousands of tons of polluting chemicals and particles into the air. Nearly 5% of all air pollution in the United States is produced by lawn and garden equipment. And that's not even taking into account the toxic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides we spray on our lawns, not to mention the water we waste on non-native grass and flower species.

"In one hour of operation, the average gas mower emits the same amount of climate-changing hydrocarbons as a 1992 Ford Explorer driven over 23,000 miles."

Those who wish to go semi-sustainable, besides mowing less, could leave grass clippings, a good source of nitrogen, on the lawn. Those who compost the organic waste can add half an inch of compost to the lawn each year rather than using chemical fertilizers that end up in our groundwater.

Those who hire garden help would give people who work for them a slight reprieve from toxic fumes. Help establish a sustainable garden, and our air and our health would improve.

What if everyone began to think sustainable? I think we'd begin to see all kinds of positive changes in our community.

Stop the growth

By Debbie Archer

North Fork

(Published Tuesday, June 3, 2003, 4:30 AM)

Everyone seems to have their own solution to cleaning up the Valley's bad air, from banning fireplaces to stopping the farmers from using their tractors. Why not start with the most obvious: overpopulation?

Stop trying to bring more people to this already overcrowded area. Put a halt to new housing construction until the problem is fixed. Clovis is planning on building hundreds of new houses, which will bring thousands of people to the area.

It does not take a genius to figure it out. More people means more cars on the roads. The streets in Clovis and Fresno cannot handle the traffic they have now. Each car on the road contributes to the bad air. And they are trying to lure more people to the already overcrowded area?