

Center simulates smog

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Merced Sun-Star

By David Chircop <<mailto:davidc@mercedsun-star.com>>

CASTLE - Local students now have a hands-on opportunity to learn one of the most important issues facing the Central Valley: How weather conditions and human activity affect air quality.

Featuring a simulation program that allows users to adjust temperature, wind, population and levels of automobile and industry pollution, a new permanent exhibit at the Challenger Learning Center helps to simplify the complex.

"We wanted something that was interactive and that would engage the young people coming to the center," said Anthony Presto, a public education representative with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The one-of-a-kind display, which was recently donated to the center, acquaints students with variables that contribute to the Valley's notoriously polluted air.

The display includes a range of different colors that light up, depending on air quality on any particular day.

The color-coded air quality index is one of the most important pieces of the display students can familiarize themselves with, said Presto.

Children can reduce their exposure to dangerous pollution by paying attention to the index and taking it easier when playing outside when pollution levels are high.

The index, which rates levels of ozone and other common air pollutants, also includes information on health risks people face under different conditions.

Two weeks ago the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition began flying different colored flags at several locations around both counties to alert people to the quality of air every day.

On Monday, the index was set at yellow which means the air quality was acceptable for most people, but some pollutants may still pose a health for some very sensitive groups.

Jay Hawkes, corporate secretary and volunteer with the Challenger Learning Center Foundation, demonstrated the simulation program Monday afternoon, adjusting the weather and the amount of consumer and industrial pollution in the model.

By adding a low inversion zone, eliminating wind and increasing the temperature, population and automobile traffic, Hawkes showed how the air quality was negatively impacted.

Hawkes, who holds a Ph.D. in physical chemistry from Columbia University in New York, and who was later trained in micro-biology, said she was able to learn from the simulator.

For example, she was surprised to see that higher winds actually reduced levels of pollution.

"I thought the wind would stir stuff up," she said.

According to Valley Air, wind can stir up harmful particulate matter, but it generally reduces levels of the corrosive gas, ozone.

While the program doesn't purport to be a precise forecaster for air quality, it includes enough tools to give children a basic cause and effect understanding of weather, human activity and air pollution.

The simulator can be accessed at: www.smogcity.com.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency also has interactive programs available for elementary school-aged children and parents at: www.epa.gov/airnow/ then click Air Quality Index for Kids on the lower right side of the page.

For more information about the exhibit, call the Castle Challenger Learning Center at 726-0296.

Tallow plant damaged in blaze

Sunday, February 22, Modesto Bee

By VINCENT ESCAMILLA, BEE STAFF WRITER

An ordinary training day for several Modesto firefighters turned out to be on-the-job experience when the Modesto Tallow Co. caught fire Saturday afternoon.

The fire, which officials believe started after airborne debris accumulated in a light fixture, caused \$50,000 in damage.

Three people working in the plant at the time were evacuated unharmed, and the Crows Landing Road facility was closed, an official said.

Thirteen firefighters were practicing helicopter drills at Bellenita Park on the west side, about a five-minute drive from the plant, when they noticed smoke around 4:15 p.m., Battalion Chief Hugo Patino said.

The training scenario was a major car accident in which Medi-Flight was needed.

When the training crew got to the plant site, joining an engine that had arrived earlier, firefighters climbed on the roof and used a power saw with a metal blade to cut into air ducts, Patino said.

That's where they found the fire. It then took 20 to 30 minutes to get to the hot spots and extinguish the blaze, Patino said.

Dust in the plant, coupled with a mercury-vapor light fixture and built-up material in the air ducts, caused the fire, Patino said.

The fire department will return to the plant today to clean up the scene and double-check to make sure everything at the plant is in order.

The tallow company has turned livestock carcasses into ink, glue and other products in south Modesto for 85 years. The plant often is the subject of odor complaints from its neighbors in the Shackelford area.

Autos responsible for valley pollution

Tuesday, February 24, Modesto Bee, Opinions

I'd like to agree with the letter "It's the automobile, stupid," (Feb. 1). Although I understand that the population is growing and is in need of a place to build homes, it does seem incredibly ridiculous how fast they are taking over our land. Besides the fact that it feels like there is more housing than land now, there are at least three cars per family. It's disgusting coming from the Bay Area into the valley with our still, brown cloud covering us. The majority of people would rather drive than walk a few blocks or so, which contributes not only to the air problem, but our generation's weight problems also. Leland Morse was right, the farmers cannot take even half of the responsibility for our air quality. It's at least an equal share with the suburbs.

SAMANTHA MCGINNIS

Oakdale