

Mild Valley weather brews record clean-air year

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

In the Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and others, Friday, July 30, 2010

If the San Joaquin Valley violated the federal ozone standard every day for the rest of the summer, this still would be the cleanest season on record.

Cool weather in spring and early summer is the most obvious reason, but there is more to it than pleasant temperatures, say air quality experts.

It's all the stuff you can't see high above -- winds, air temperatures and chemistry. In April, May and half of June, the Valley was a 25,000-square-mile mixing bowl, creating poor conditions for formation of ozone, the main ingredient in smog.

The result was dramatic. There were only five bad-air days in April and May -- compared to an average of 20 for the same period over the previous three years.

Over the last 19 years, the Valley has averaged 136 bad days per year. Last year, the Valley's total of 98 violations was a record low.

This year, the total probably won't get beyond 95 -- all because of pleasant weather.

"Temperature may be the thing you notice," said Roger Atkinson, an environmental and chemistry professor at the University of California at Riverside. "But it's the whole picture. There's a change in several variables," including ozone concentrations.

Local air officials say they think their smog reduction campaign may be having an effect, too. Regulations have been expanded in the last several years, officials said.

And the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has been widely promoting lifestyle changes, such as combining errands to cut down on driving.

The air quality also might have been affected by a reduction in truck traffic, due to the faltering economy over the past year.

But even with the change in weather and pollution reduction, the Valley continues to have one of the country's most tenacious smog problems. The pollution damages lung tissue and contributes to the Valley's childhood asthma rates, which are among the highest in the state.

The often-stagnant hot weather and the mountains work together to trap pollutants in the Valley for lengthy stretches during summer.

Ozone forms on hot, sunny days when oxides of nitrogen from vehicles bake together with reactive organic gases or vapors from gasoline, paints and animal waste.

This formula also turns the air corrosive in many other parts of the state, including the South Coast Air Basin, Sacramento, the eastern desert communities and San Diego.

"California historically has been a victim of its own geography and meteorology," said Dimitri Stanich, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board. "But this year we have not had a lot of the peak heat we normally see."

The lower temperatures earlier this summer were accompanied by breezes, which often can interrupt the chemical reaction that forms ozone. Even if ozone forms, it will break apart when a breeze pushes the plume into almost any surface, such as a tree or building.

Yet even in a year like this, the Valley will have at least 39 bad days by the end of July. South Coast Air Basin probably will lead the nation with 65. Another notorious smog hot spot, Houston, will have fewer than 25.

The overall improvement has been accompanied by a change in the Valley's smog hot spot as well. Arvin, a small Kern County community that often leads the nation in ozone violations, is not the worst place in the Valley this summer.

Instead, Ash Mountain, the south entrance to Sequoia National Park, leads the region in violations with 27. Arvin has 21.

One reason might be that the pollution has been rising as the breezes pass through the Valley.

Shawn Ferreria, senior air quality specialist with the Valley air district, said the Ash Mountain monitor is perched above the Valley floor.

"It's interesting to see it play out," he said. "The readings rise as [pollution] rises through the foothills."

Air district report examined by Florez at hearing

By Jeff Goodman, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, July 30, 2010

Officials on both sides of the debate over open-field burning in the San Joaquin Valley said they were encouraged by a hearing in Sacramento earlier this week.

The meeting was called by State Sen. Dean Florez to challenge the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on its recent report, which claims that disposal of agricultural waste in more environmentally friendly ways is not economically feasible for certain area farmers.

How the report's statistical data were compiled was a focal point of the hearing.

Florez, D-Shafter, was somewhat surprised when Valley Air District executive director Seyed Sadredin presented him with new data that were closer to the numbers calculated by Florez's staff.

"We had to, on the spot, change our approach because they conceded some of the very points we were trying to make," said Mark Arax, senior policy director for Florez. "But the second report has serious flaws as well."

Florez advocated for a complete burn ban -- the goal of a 2003 Senate bill -- with exemptions for individual farms on a case-by-case basis, Arax said.

Sadredin, meanwhile, said he suggested financial assistance for farmers to help them get rid of waste without contributing to the region's poor air quality.

"We both want to work toward 100 percent elimination of ag burning," Sadredin said. "I got a sense that there was some understanding."

Still, the legal effects of the hearing remain unclear. The California Air Resources Board, which approved of the local air district's recommended exemptions a few months ago, can affect policy change by removing its concurrence. It has a review meeting scheduled for September.

"The air board just trusted the air district's report," Arax said. "Now the ARB has to go back and take a look and do its own study to determine what farmers should be exempted."

Walmart review sheds further light on proposal

By Kendall Wright
Patterson Irrigator, Friday, July 30, 2010

A proposal to open a Walmart in Patterson could mean more jobs and plenty of taxable revenue to add to the city's coffers, at the risk of shuttering a couple of local grocery stores and a downtown pharmacy, among other consequences, a draft environmental study shows.

The state-mandated review of the massive retailer's 158,000-square-foot planned supercenter at the southwest corner of Sperry and Ward avenues was released Thursday, July 22, simultaneously initiating a 45-day period for people to take a look at the report and offer comments.

Throughout the lengthy, 700-page report, increases in noise and traffic near the store topped the relatively minimal list of environmental impacts a Walmart could cause the community, along with a minor anticipated impact on several types of local businesses, according to the report. Benefits of the new retail addition listed the generation of considerable tax revenue, the creation of hundreds of jobs and a convenience to shoppers.

"I have no idea how the community will respond to this yet, but I'm sure the study will bring forth a lot of people on both sides who are vocal about this project," said Bryan Whitemyer, interim city manager. "I think it's great that people will have the opportunity to really scrutinize all the aspects of the project and open the doors for a good public discussion about whether this store is right for our community."

Upon completion, the study found that Walmart would be able to generate a sizeable amount of tax revenue that could be added to the city's general fund. Each year, the store is estimated to generate about \$751,000 in sales tax and \$63,000 in costs to the city, creating an annual surplus of \$688,000 for the city's general fund in all.

An estimated 300 jobs would be created with the opening of the new store, as well, the fiscal analysis cites. As of May, full-time workers at California Walmart stores received an average hourly wage of \$12.25 per hour, with the option of benefits, a Walmart official confirmed.

"The people in Patterson have seemed very excited for all the benefits, job opportunities and local shopping this store could bring," said Amelia Neufeld, a spokeswoman for Walmart.

Some local businesses, however — like grocery stores and pharmacies — might suffer with a Walmart nearby, according to an analysis in the report about urban decay.

The study found that while it's unlikely any grocery stores or general merchandise stores would have to close, it is likely they would suffer financially, as Walmart would be in direct competition.

Most of the community's pharmacies, such as Walgreens and CVS, should also fare OK, but the study found there would be a greater difficulty for the smaller downtown pharmacies to stay in business, such as Patterson Family Pharmacy.

As with any new store, the opening of a Walmart would mean some inevitable increases in traffic and noise. Some proposed measures to deal with increased traffic call for intersection improvements to install an eastbound turn lane at the corner of Sperry Avenue and Highway 33, as well as more turn lanes at the American Eagle and Ward avenues intersection. Walmart would pay all costs associated with the street improvements.

More noise caused by traffic would be unavoidable with the 24-hour store, the study shows. Some suggested ways to remedy the noise increase included the construction of a 10-foot high noise barrier near Ward and Las Palmas avenues, limiting the PA system volume to ambient levels in outdoor sales area, and prohibiting street sweepers, forklifts and mechanical landscape equipment to operate between 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m.

The environmental report also looked at aesthetics, [air quality](#), water quality and public services already in place in the community, as well as what the store would mean for the land that surrounds it and the hazardous materials it could create.

People can comment on the draft EIR until Sept. 7. Once comments and proposals for changes are received, the plan will go before the city planning commission for assessment and then head to the City Council.

If approved, the store could open in 2012.

Carbon legislation loses steam

Cap and trade boosters may regroup for another attempt later this year

By Wes Sander, staff writer

The Capital Press, Sat., July 31, 2010

While Senate Democrats have introduced a stripped-down energy bill because they didn't have support for a cap and trade system, supporters may try to get a more comprehensive measure through Congress this year.

President Barack Obama, while criticized by environmentalists for not having pushed it hard enough, said this week he continues to support a price on carbon emissions, despite the concept having dwindled in popularity to the point that the latest Senate bill omits any climate-oriented proposals at all.

On July 27, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., introduced a bill that lacked both a cap and trade proposal and a renewable-energy standard. Instead it addresses energy efficiency and mitigation of the Gulf oil spill.

The bill expands the liabilities and financial burdens on oil companies, creates incentives for making homes efficient and increases conservation funding.

Meanwhile Rep. Henry Waxman -- the California Democrat and energy committee chair who co-authored the bill narrowly approved by the House of Representatives last year -- has said he will try to insert a cap and trade provision into a reconciliation between Senate and House bills this year.

Sen. John Kerry, who recently proposed legislation that included a scaled-down version of cap and trade, said after Reid introduced his bill that he'll likewise continue pushing for a comprehensive bill.

Most observers have yet to give the effort much of a chance.

"The major thing would be the outcome of the election," said Rick Krause, senior director of Congressional relations with the American Farm Bureau Federation.

If Democrats lose seats in the November elections, those voted out may feel little inhibition in pushing for unpopular climate measures, Krause said.

"I would say it probably won't happen," he said. "But by the same token, we've got an eye out. The possibility for mischief is there."

A cap and trade system would limit the pollutants an operation could emit, but allow emitters to purchase carbon offsets to help meet those targets. An offset is a unit of carbon savings produced through emissions-reduction practices, including reduced tillage and other carbon-sequestering projects on farmland.

While many producers of orchard and row crops find relief in the fact that cap and trade seems dead for now, some in agriculture consider it a setback.

It was a disappointment to California dairy operators, who see opportunity for profit by selling power produced from methane digesters.

Cap and trade "is something we have to have," said Michael Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairymen in the dairy-rich San Joaquin Valley. "You've got to be able to pay for infrastructure for these digesters."

That's because investment and financing depends on the promise of strong markets for renewable power and carbon offsets that a national cap and trade system would provide, Marsh said.

Marsh agrees passage of the concept appears unlikely if a reconciliation effort fails this year.

"It's going to be tougher in the next Congress to get (a bill) out," Marsh said.

There currently exist few ways for specialty-crop producers to capitalize on a carbon market, and growers have expressed little faith that carbon-sequestration techniques would be developed soon, despite legislative proposals to charge USDA with boosting their development.

Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, says producers can't afford more costs while air, water and labor rules have made compliance ever more expensive.

"Right now we can't afford to hurt business any more than we're doing," Cunha said.

The Farm Bureau says cap and trade would increase fuel, transportation and other input costs.

But the National Farmers Union says it supports cap and trade. Although it would cost industry in the short term, studies have shown cap and trade would prove profitable in the long run.

NFU said that aside from cap and trade, a renewable energy standard of 25 percent -- meaning utilities would be required to produce 25 percent of the energy they sell from non-emitting sources -- could help drive the market for on-farm power.

But Reid's proposal likewise omits that standard, and no Senate bill has proposed one greater than 15 percent.

Even if Congress doesn't pass legislation imposing carbon caps, the Environmental Protection Agency is set to begin regulating carbon dioxide next year. A Supreme Court decision gave the agency the authority to regulate those emissions under the Clean Air Act.

EPA's rules would come without the softening measures that legislation could offer, including renewable-energy incentives or a cap-and-trade system, observers say.

Krause of American Farm Bureau says the industry will support efforts next year to pre-empt EPA rules.

"It's a lot easier to stop these regulations before they get going in the first place," Krause said.