

Bakersfield residents embrace the perception of cool

By Steven Mayer, staff writer

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Maybe it's a form of self-defense. Maybe Bakersfield residents embrace a sense of optimism about the weather in order to survive emotionally when summer turns really ugly.

"Definitely have to say (this summer's) been cooler than usual -- but I'm not complaining," Cal State Bakersfield nursing student Sylvia Gonzalez wrote on Twitter.

"Absolutely cooler and better weather," echoed real estate professional Oscar Baltazar.

"Cooler for sure," said Rey Olea, another Bakersfield resident.

Almost to a person, people we asked said Bakersfield is enjoying a cooler than normal summer.

Apparently heat stroke does funny things to the brain.

Seriously, there may be good reason for the widespread perception of cool, experts say. Nevertheless, the statistics remain fairly stark.

"Basically it's been a pretty typical summer so far," said National Weather Service Meteorologist Brian Ochs. "Temperatures have been not much above or below normal."

June was a good example. The daily high temperature registered above normal on 15 of the month's 30 days, and cooler than normal the other 15. The overnight lows were almost as equally distributed, with average temperatures registering right at -- er, average.

July ended up exceeding normal temperatures -- which are based on a 30-year average -- but not by much, Ochs said. Daily high temperatures rose above normal 18 days last month and landed right at normal on four days. That left just nine days during which the high temperature remained below the norm.

Ochs said the perception that summer 2010 is cooler may be because we've seen only a moderate number of triple digit days. So far, Bakersfield residents have endured just 14 days that reached 100 degrees or higher, significantly fewer than the annual average of 38. Of course, August is not yet half over and triple digits in August and September are not unusual.

So far this month, the daily highs have again hovered very close to normal. But here's where August has shown some mercy: The overnight lows have registered below normal almost every night this month, another possible reason many locals are sounding downright giddy about the summer so far.

Then again, there's that optimism thing.

"Forget the stats," advised local artist Susan Reep. "We can be happier in our ignorance."

SUMMER AIR 'CLEANEST ON RECORD'

Historically, air quality in the San Joaquin Valley has been affected by weather patterns. Hot, stagnant weather has a tendency to trap dust and smog on this side of the Tehachapi Mountains. But officials with the valley air district say dramatic reductions in emissions from industry sources has contributed to what has been a great year for air quality.

In 2008, said air district spokeswoman Brenda Turner, the valley portion of Kern County experienced 41 "red days," meaning the Air Quality Index indicated "unhealthy" air for everyone on those days, with sensitive groups at risk of more serious effects. The high number of red days was attributed, in part, to the large number of wildfires that year.

Last year, the number of red days dropped to 21, Turner said. But here's the clincher: This year, there has been just one red day in Kern, and that was attributed to Fourth of July fireworks.

The weather this summer has helped, but there are other reasons for the improvement, said Seyed Sadredin, director of the air district.

"Emissions from businesses has been reduced by more than 80 percent since 1980," Sadredin said. "This summer has been the cleanest on record."

Sadredin said the reductions in smog-forming emissions and dust were primarily made in the oil industry, agriculture and manufacturing. But despite those improvements, tightening federal deadlines are looming that could result in huge penalties to businesses and industries valleywide.

This year, Sadredin said, the valley must not exceed the federal one-hour ozone standard, a standard that was exceeded dozens of times in years past.

"We're so close," he said. "Last year, we had three exceedances. So far this year, we haven't had any."

But a single violation during any one hour anywhere in the eight-county air district will result in \$29 million in federal penalties to valley businesses and industry, he said.

As a result, he is asking families during back-to-school week to reduce vehicle use.

Walking your kids to school will help, he said. Carpooling or biking to work will help.

Meanwhile, triple digits are expected in the southern valley by early next week, forecaster Ochs said, as a high-pressure ridge approaches from the desert Southwest.

Optimism should help. So will air conditioning.

Report: Prop. 23 supporters are major polluters

By Cathy Bussewitz, Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Modesto Bee and other papers, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2010

Sacramento, Calif. (AP) -- The Texas-based oil companies that are the primary backers of a November ballot effort to suspend California's global warming law are among the state's biggest polluters, according to a report issued Tuesday by two groups advocating for inner-city residents.

Valero Energy Corp. and Tesoro Corp. have contributed more than \$4.5 million to Proposition 23, which seeks to suspend a 2006 law intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Their contributions represent nearly 75 percent of the funding for the initiative.

If voters approve the proposition, the global warming law would not take effect until unemployment falls to 5.5 percent and stays there for a year. That has happened just three times during the past three decades, according to California Development Dept. statistics.

California's unemployment rate, now at 12.3 percent, has been above 12 percent for months.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency listed Valero's oil refinery in Benicia as the fourth largest emitter of toxic chemicals in the state in 2009. Tesoro's refinery in Martinez ranked eighth.

The report was released by the Oakland-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights which promotes alternatives to violence and incarceration in urban neighborhoods, and the California Environmental Justice Alliance, a group based in Huntington Park that advocates for policies protecting the environment in low-income neighborhoods.

It says that since 2008, Tesoro has been fined more than \$1.8 million by the Bay Area Air Quality Management Agency for violating air quality regulations. The violations included excessive emissions of carbon monoxide, particulate pollution, ammonia, sulfur dioxide and smog-forming pollutants.

The report also says Valero disclosed in January that it had 29 outstanding violation notices from the South Coast Air Management District and was pursuing a settlement.

"It shows that they're one of the biggest polluters in the state, and they're willing to spend millions of dollars at the ballot box instead of cleaning up their mess," said Steve Maviglio, spokesman for the "No on 23" campaign.

Bill Day, a spokesman for Valero, said that company's violations had since been resolved.

Lynn Westfall, spokesman for Tesoro, did not dispute the claims made in the report.

"We take environmental regulations very seriously, but we have to admit we were not perfect," Westfall said.

The proposition's supporters called the report a ploy designed to distract voters from the real issues of the campaign. Anita Mangels, spokeswoman for the "Yes on 23" campaign, said the 2006 global warming law, commonly referred to as AB32, would cost California businesses billions of dollars, leading to a loss of more than 1 million jobs.

"The two energy companies singled out for misplaced demonization are in fact major California employers that provide jobs and benefits for thousands of California workers and their families," Mangels said in a statement.

Studies have reached different conclusions about whether the law would lead to job losses in California or would end up promoting job growth over the long term by giving a boost to the green-technology industry.

Valero employs 1,600 workers in California with an annual payroll of \$122 million, Day said. Asked whether Valero would reduce the number of people it employs in California if AB32 went into effect, Day said the company has not looked into how the law would affect its payroll. But he said he is concerned about the economic impacts of the greenhouse gas emissions law.

"We're a major employer out there, and we're in the business of selling fuel," Day said. "And that's dependent on a strong economy."

Tesoro's Westfall said he believed the law would lead to higher gas prices, which could reduce demand for gas and potentially lead the company to close refineries.

The report's authors said the people who bear the biggest health burdens from oil refineries are people of color and those in low-income areas surrounding the refineries. It said Valero and Tesoro both operate refineries in Wilmington, a community in South Los Angeles where 85 percent of the residents are Hispanic and more than a quarter live below the poverty level.

"You can't talk about the issues of the environment and of air quality without talking about the issue of race and health," said San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat running for lieutenant governor. "These oil refineries and so much of our industrial base are primarily in areas with a concentration of people of color," he said in an interview.

Day disputed those claims and said Valero's refinery in Wilmington is located in an industrial, nonresidential neighborhood and its Benicia refinery is in an upscale area.

Newsom said that in 2008, San Francisco reduced its greenhouse gas emissions to 7 percent below 1990 levels, and that while doing so the city's economy grew.

"This is the sector of the economy that's growing, and we have the opportunity to capture the lion's share of that entrepreneurial investment," Newsom said.

Compromise on highway intersection may spare historic Valley Springs

Turn lanes could ease jams without roundabout, signal

By Dana M. Nichols, staff

Stockton Record, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2010

VALLEY SPRINGS - The heart of historic Valley Springs would remain largely untouched, and traffic improvements would be kept to the minimum necessary to reduce congestion, under a new proposal that emerged Tuesday for fixing the intersection of Highways 12 and 26.

Calaveras County officials and representatives from the California Department of Transportation have searched for more than a decade for ways to ease daily delays at the four-way stop sign in the center of Valley Springs. The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors studied two of the latest proposals Tuesday: a traffic light complete with wider approaches and left turn lanes at a cost of about \$4.1 million, or a roundabout that would cost \$2.5 million.

Supervisor Gary Tofanelli, who represents Valley Springs, said he didn't like either.

"I'm not in agreement with destroying the ambience of that downtown," Tofanelli said. His objections included the way the intersections would limit driveway access for businesses, and his belief that the intersections would force more traffic onto neighboring side streets.

Many Valley Springs-area residents voiced similar concerns.

"All you're creating is a concrete jungle in the middle of town that's going to accomplish nothing," Andy Ballantyne said.

If engineers come up with a project that wins support from local elected leaders and Caltrans officials, work could start a year from now, and the improved intersection could be open in January 2012, said Tom Garcia, director of the county's Public Works Department.

Matt Boyer is an engineering consultant with Dokken Engineering who helped prepare the proposals. Boyer told the board the designs were chosen to be acceptable to the California Department of Transportation, which has the final say on state highway projects, and to be eligible for federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding, which requires the improvements to reduce fuel use and pollution, in this case by reducing the time drivers spend waiting to get through the intersection.

Yet the faster traffic would mean widened highway approaches, loss of parking spaces and loss of at least one building close to the intersection.

At the same time, many residents have long hoped for a much more expensive project that would create a bypass to the south of downtown and avoid the need for the upgraded intersection.

Tofanelli urged engineers to plan improvements less than the full-blown intersection that would speed traffic at least for the next 10 years.

He suggested creating right-turn-only lanes from northbound 26 to eastbound 12, and from eastbound 12 to southbound 26. That and the addition of some left-turn bays on the three busiest sides of the intersection could reduce wait times without requiring a signal or a roundabout.

Boyer agreed that the concept would work, and said he even thought it might win Caltrans approval and qualify for the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding.

Supervisors Russ Thomas and Tom Tryon said they also supported Tofanelli's suggestion. The board directed Boyer and Public Works Department staff to come up with a "minimal" intersection improvement plan and to present it to Valley Springs residents sometime soon for comment.

That won applause from representatives from several factions within Valley Springs.

"You have just really given us some real hope for our town," said Colleen Platt, a member of MyValleySprings.com, a group that advocates on land use and planning issues.

