

Unhealthy: Heat wave, ozone, fire foul Hanford air

By Seth Nidever, staff writer

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2010

Notice the bad air Monday? You weren't alone. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District called it "unhealthy for sensitive groups" in Kings County, meaning children, the elderly and those with breathing problems. The district predicted similar conditions for the next few days.

The main culprit is a fall heat wave that is cooking the entire state on the heels of a mild summer.

Hanford reached 99 degrees on Monday. Today's high temp may climb to 102, with more triple-digit warmth on Wednesday. After that, the National Weather Service predicts a slow cooling off to a 90-degree maximum on Sunday.

The normal high is 87.

It could be summer's last gasp stretching into fall. But it's not just heat affecting local conditions.

A large forest fire burning at the edge of Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks, dubbed the Sheep Fire, has grown rapidly in the last few weeks. Nightly "drainage" winds that blow downhill into the San Joaquin Valley brought some of the smoke into Kings County and surrounding areas. To top it off - literally - a ridge of high pressure has kept the whole air mass in place.

Add the fact that lots of smog is generated by the heat, and you have an effective recipe for foul air.

So what's the diagnosis for the next several days? The lower pressure system expected to bring cooler temperatures this weekend should also bring higher humidity -- both good things for firefighters.

On the down side, however, low-pressure systems create more wind in the mountains.

Firefighters in Sequoia National Forest, where the fire's active western edge is located, have back-burned a fire line and are hoping it will hold over the next few days until better conditions arrive. Parts of the westward-moving fire have reached the line, but other sections of the blaze haven't gotten there yet - particularly in a steep section where firefighters couldn't physically establish a line, said Paul Gibbs, incident commander.

Helicopters are dousing that section with water, hoping it will hold, Gibbs said.

Air pollution impacts from the Sheep Fire decreased over the weekend, according to air district officials. The fire has burned more than 8,500 acres, making it the largest active fire in the southern Sierra, Gibbs said. The western line has slowed it down, however. If the line holds, it will effectively contain the Sheep Fire. If it doesn't, the fire could keep burning westward, forcing firefighters to consider another containment line. In that case, the fire might continue burning for some time, Gibbs said.

Meanwhile, in Kings County, the heat was enough for some local school districts to keep students inside for P.E. classes.

County officials aren't expected to open cooling centers, because conditions don't meet county criteria: At least two consecutive days in which the temperature reaches at least 105 and never drops below 80 degrees.

Worth noting in the community: Art contest, literacy brunch and more

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2010

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is looking for artwork submissions from K-12 students for its upcoming bilingual calendar.

The calendar, which is distributed for free to schools and other community centers, is meant to encourage Valley residents to make environmentally conscious decisions in their daily lives.

Artwork and messages should be submitted in color and drawn sideways on standard-sized notebook paper, then mailed to the air district at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, CA, 93726. Fourteen entries will be used in the calendar.

For more information, contact the air district's Southern region office at 392-5500.

MID agrees to reconsider wood-burning power plant Board holds off voting to cease negotiations

By John Holland, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2010

A proposal to turn orchard wood into electricity is still flickering at the Modesto Irrigation District.

The district board, which took a key vote against the project last month, held off Tuesday on a vote that would affirm that position.

Four of the five directors met in closed session and agreed to consider the project again Oct. 12. That will allow Director Cecil Hensley, who was absent Tuesday, to take part.

On Aug. 31, the board voted 3-2 against accepting a study on the project's environmental effects, a needed step before construction could start in the Beard Industrial District, south of Yosemite Boulevard.

Tuesday's agenda included a resolution ending negotiations with the company that proposed to build the plant and sell the power to the MID. The board went into closed session because of the possibility that the project will end up in litigation.

The August vote followed a public hearing in which critics warned of unhealthy emissions and proponents talked of the plant's advanced smokestack controls.

Project partner Stephen Endsley urged the board to reconsider during Tuesday's open session.

"I don't think we really got our message across as well as we should have," he said. "The pollution coming out of the plant is very low."

Endsley also said he would put profits from the plant into a new research center for renewable energy in the Modesto area.

Modesto resident Emerson Drake urged the board to cut all ties with the project.

"We don't need it, you shouldn't want it, and I hope you continue to act that way," he said.

The project mainly would burn wood chips from nut and fruit trees that are removed for new plantings or development.

The 30-megawatt plant would supply about 9 percent of the MID's demand and help it meet a state mandate to get at least 33 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020.

Endsley, a real estate investor and retired cardiologist in Modesto, proposed the plant with Robert Ellery, owner of a boiler company in Hayward.

They hope to cover 30 percent of the \$80 million-plus cost with a federal stimulus grant. That means they have to spend at least 5 percent of the construction money by the end of the year, a tight timeline, Endsley said.

The power would cost the MID 11.2 cents per kilowatt-hour at the start of the 20-year contract, with annual increases capped at 2 percent.

That's more than the 8.5 cents the MID pays on average from all sources, but Endsley noted that it is less than the 17 cents the board has agreed to pay for solar power from a complex proposed for north McHenry Avenue.

Temperatures soar near 100 degrees in first week of fall

By Kristina Hacker, Editor

Turlock Journal, Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2010

Fall officially began last week, but the heat says summer never left.

Residents across the Central Valley had to endure temperatures in the upper 90s to 100s on Monday and Tuesday, and the poor air quality that hot weather brings.

"The ridge of high pressure that has been over the region the past several days will remain the dominant feature this week, with resulting ozone problems," said Samir Sheikh, the San Joaquin Valley Air District's director of Strategies and Incentives.

Ozone that is forecast to be unhealthy for sensitive groups can affect people with respiratory disease, children and the elderly. Ozone that is categorized as unhealthy can affect even people with no pre-existing health conditions, according to the Air District. Officials urge people to take their own health situation into account when planning outdoor activities.

The National Weather Service has released a Hazardous Weather Outlook for the entire Central Valley due to the unseasonably hot temperatures that are expected to continue through the week.

The NWS recorded a high temperature of 99 degrees for the Modesto area at 3:41 p.m. on Tuesday. The highest temperature ever recorded for Sept. 28 is 100 degrees. It was recorded in 1997.

While Turlock and the Modesto area managed to stay under the century mark on Tuesday, Livermore and Vacaville both reached 104 degrees and Fresno and Stockton recorded temperatures of 100 degrees.

While heat-related illness is usually a concern during June, July and August, Valley residents need to be aware of the affects heat can have on the body. Heat exposure can even kill; it caused 8,015 deaths in the United States from 1979 to 2003, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. People who are at highest risk are the elderly, the very young, and people with mental illness and chronic diseases. But even young and healthy people can get sick from the heat if they participate in strenuous physical activities during hot weather. Air-conditioning is the number one protective factor against heat-related illness and death. If a home is not air-conditioned, people can reduce their risk for heat-related illness by spending time in public facilities that are air-conditioned. The CDC recommends the following steps to help prevent heat-related illnesses, injuries, and deaths during hot weather:

- Stay cool indoors
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Replace salt and minerals
- Wear appropriate clothing and sunscreen
- Schedule outdoor activities carefully
- Pace yourself
- Use a buddy system
- Monitor people at high risk
- Adjust to the environment
- Do not leave children in cars
- Use common sense.