

Storms in the forecast, but cozy fire off-limits

Sacramento and Modesto Bees, Friday, Dec. 3, 2010

There is a 20 percent chance it will rain on Stanislaus County's parades this weekend.

Forecasters predicted cold, rainy weather, but cozying up next to a roaring fire won't be allowed today.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has banned fireplace and wood stove burning today in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties because of deteriorating air quality.

National Weather Service Meteorologist Eric Curth said an eastern Pacific storm was expected to make its way through Modesto sometime later today, with the high temperature predicted to reach 61 degrees.

A second storm, however, was expected to move into the region from the Gulf of Alaska during Turlock's downtown Christmas parade tonight.

Curth said the high temperature will drop to the mid-50s throughout the weekend and the low will be about 40 degrees.

The likelihood of rain will increase to 30 percent Saturday and Sunday, threatening to drench attendees at Riverbank's Community Christmas Parade and the Modesto Celebration of Lights Parade.

Curth said Monday should be dry and mostly sunny, but a third system is expected to move into the area Tuesday night.

Burning of wood, pellets and manufactured logs is prohibited until Saturday, according to an air district news release. Violations can result in fines.

This was the district's first fireplace ban of the winter season. The ban included Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties along with the valley air basin portion of Kern County.

The ban is part of the eighth season of the district's Check Before You Burn program, which runs through Feb. 28.

High levels of particulate pollution can have serious health effects, including bronchitis, lung disease, and increased risk of stroke and heart attacks. Children, the elderly, and people with respiratory and coronary disease are especially vulnerable.

The 2009-10 winter was the cleanest on record for the air basin, and officials credit Check Before You Burn.

To receive the daily forecast and burn status in an e-mail alert, go to www.valleyair.org/lists/list.htm. The daily burn status is also available by calling 557-6400 in Modesto.

Giacomazzi wins environmental award

By Seth Nidever, staff writer

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, Dec. 4, 2010

One of Kings County's own has been declared a "Sustainable Agriculture Champion" by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Dino Giacomazzi, a member of one of Kings County's oldest dairy families, received the award Thursday in Los Angeles for strip tillage, a method of farming that radically reduces the number of times a tractor has to go through the field.

"It's sort of weird for me to be getting an award for something like that ... I do it for my own benefit, and it just happens to benefit everybody else around me," Giacomazzi said.

EPA praised Giacomazzi's techniques, saying that the process "radically reduces diesel, dust and particulate emissions."

Giacomazzi saves on labor, maintenance, equipment and diesel fuel. He's been experimenting for years with low-tillage methods. He said he's pleased to see EPA recognize a technique that is both environmentally sound and business friendly.

"I appreciate the fact that EPA is taking an interest in conservation tillage ... because in my opinion, this is more sustainable than other practices considered 'organic,'" he said.

He's hosted several field days to promote the practice to other farmers. But it hasn't caught on in Kings County as much as in other areas, he said.

Part of the reason may be the different types of soils. Some local soils aren't as suitable for conservation tillage as Giacomazzi's ground - 600 acres of forage crops around the Giacomazzi Dairy on Sixth Avenue north of Highway 198.

Strip tillage works by plowing narrow rows in the field for planting, leaving much of the ground undisturbed. It may also have greenhouse gas benefits by keeping more carbon trapped in the dirt.

Giacomazzi said he's shifted all his fields to the method. He's cut his annual number of tillage passes from 14 to two. He isn't planning to go back to the old ways.

"I'm just trying to improve the process," he said.

Birth defect report to face scrutiny at Kettleman City meeting

By Eiji Yamashita, staff writer

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Dec. 2, 2010

Two state agencies investigating birth defects in Kettleman City will hold a community meeting tonight to answer questions and receive public comment on a draft report detailing their findings.

The meeting will take place in the Kettleman City Elementary School cafeteria starting at 6 p.m.

The high-profile state investigation is the result of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's order in January, which came months after concerns were raised about an unusually high rate of birth defects in the community. The health anomaly was first identified by activists who surveyed the community and has since become a rallying point for those opposing the expansion of landfills at the Kettleman Hills Facility operated by Chemical Waste Management.

The 160-page report, released last Monday, is the culmination of the investigation by the California Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Public Health.

In the draft report, the agencies said their investigation yielded no conclusive cause for the recent spike in birth defects in Kettleman City. The report also concluded that the investigation found no link between the deformities and pesticides and no association between the health problems cited by residents and the Chemical Waste Management toxic waste facility 3.5 miles away from where they live.

The Department of Public Health examined the state's birth defects registry from 1987 to 2008 and reviewed the cases of 11 Kettleman City children identified as being born with major birth defects between 2007 and March 31 of this year. Cal/EPA monitored and sampled air, soil and water in the community and at the West's largest toxic-waste facility run by Chem Waste.