

Is the valley's air quality getting better or worse?

By Kellie Schmitt, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011

First came the good news from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District: August passed without a one-hour ozone violation, the first time since such records have been kept.

District officials called the news "historic" and lauded residents for their role in improving the air.

But not everyone was so quick to pop open the champagne. That same day, the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, a clean-air advocacy group, issued a counter-statement arguing August was the worst since 2006 for the tougher eight-hour ozone standard, a gauge many say is more representative of true health risks.

So who's right? Is the valley's air getting better or worse?

The answer may depend on how you analyze an avalanche of statistics on monitors, timing and standards.

There's the outdated one-hour ozone standard the valley air district -- which includes eight counties from Kern to San Joaquin -- still must meet to escape a \$29 million federal fine.

There's the 1997 eight-hour ozone standard of 84 parts per billion the valley won't have to reach until 2024. And there's the 75 ppb standard, the threshold set in 2008, which the valley will likely have to meet by 2031.

The one-hour standard measures the maximum hourly ozone concentration that was previously deemed to be safe, 125 ppb. Later, studies found that a better health indicator is the average ozone concentration someone is exposed to over eight hours.

Once a standard has been selected, there's the quandary of whether to look at individual monitors' readings -- as air advocates do -- or review regional trends, an approach air officials say is more telling.

The Californian examined data from 1996 to the end of September 2011 for both the one-hour ozone standard and the more rigid 2008 eight-hour standard. The one-hour standard shows a clear downward trend; the eight-hour standard's line decreases more gradually. That trajectory can appear more or less steep depending on where you start the regression line.

Improving or not?

The view of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's San Francisco office is that the overall valley trend is becoming cleaner -- in some areas.

"My sense is the air is getting better from north to south and west to east," said Kerry Drake, associate director, air division. "But the southeast part of the valley isn't improving as much as it should."

And, Drake acknowledged, not everyone's sharing equally in the improvements with the highest stations "being a bit stubborn." In short, progress has been made, but there's still a long way to go -- especially in the southern end of the basin.

The Kern County and Fresno areas are considered the valley's air quality hot spots because of winds that gather bad air from the south and sweep it north again in an eddy.

Air advocates such as Kevin Hall of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition strike a more pessimistic note: He said the air is getting worse.

Too much attention has been placed on the one-hour ozone standard instead of warning the public about the myriad days when the tougher eight-hour standard is violated, he said.

And, he and other advocates point to areas such as Ash Mountain, at the entrance of Sequoia National Park, and Maricopa and Clovis, which have seen spikes in ozone readings. Those spots are "showing a steep upward trend in the last five years," Hall said. "The air district has failed to do its job."

Air advocate Tom Franz acknowledges that progress has been made, but said he's disturbed that the number of eight-hour ozone violations isn't plunging, especially since the valley is far from obtaining even the 1997 standard.

"It should be a steeper decline, without a doubt," he said.

Frantz is aware that he has a reputation for cherry-picking data but argues the air district also strategically picks its graphs' starting points to manipulate trend lines.

Seyed Sadredin, the air district's chief executive, dismissed the advocates' claims as fearmongering.

"They think if politicians see the news that air quality is getting better, they will stop funding the efforts and making tough decisions," he said. "If every monitor was going up, you could say the air is getting worse. But, just looking at a tiny spot over here and ignoring the other counties, to me, that's just a frivolous argument."

He said weather, wind and other uncontrollable factors could explain why a single monitor sees an uptick. Ash Mountain, for example, experienced spikes this year because of the nearby Lion fire.

On Monday, the district asked the EPA not to count ozone violations at Ash Mountain and another site in Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park since they were affected by wildfires.

Despite the fact the district has been adding monitoring stations, the number of violations is still decreasing, Sadredin pointed out. The one-hour standard is nearing zero, and a plan hasn't even been approved for the 2008 eight-hour standard. Getting the valley's air to those levels would require a ban on fossil fuels or finding zero-emissions technology, he said.

Celebrating improvements doesn't mean the district isn't aware of the hurdles left to go, he added.

"When we say we're doing a lot better, we're still the second worst in the nation other than L.A.," he said. "When we say it's the best it's been, it's not 'Raise the mission accomplished and go home.'"

No noticeable changes

The data may indeed show a downward trend, but any improvements aren't significant enough for some local residents to notice.

In interviews with nearly a dozen Bakersfield residents eating lunch downtown Friday, no one said the air is getting better. In fact, many said it's getting worse, something they witness anecdotally in terms of worsening allergies, children's asthma and few clear views of the mountains.

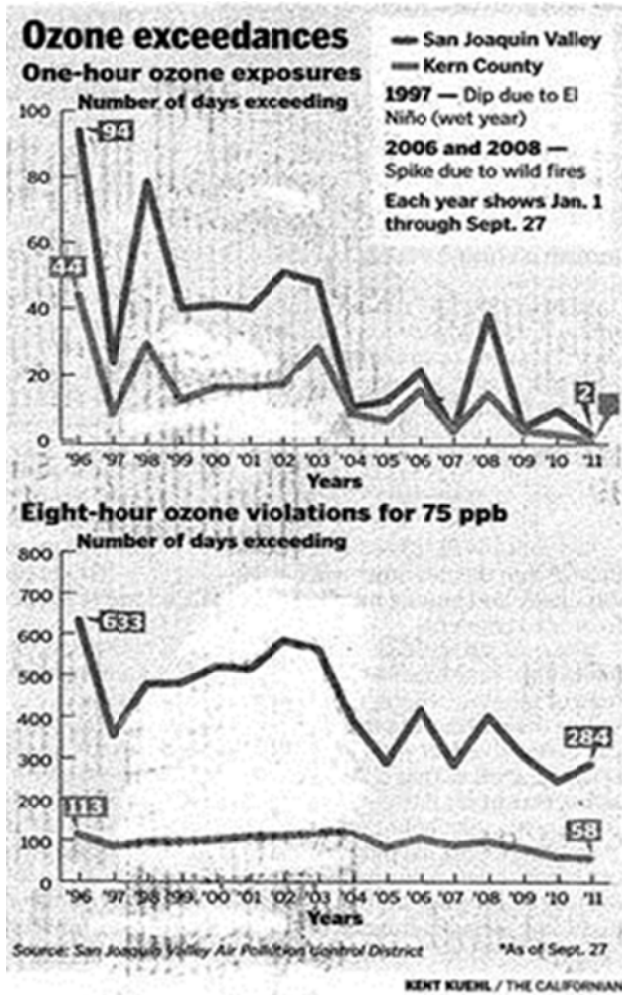
"There's no question: It's getting worse," Gregory Van Mullem said. "My allergies are the worst ever."

Imelda Canales, who moved to Bakersfield from the Burbank area several years ago, said she's found the air worse in Kern County. She, too, sneezes much more.

Likewise, Yvonne Salomon reports worsening allergies since she moved to Bakersfield. She says she'd like to see more efforts such as carpooling, bike lanes and safe places to park bikes. Salomon has also been disappointed about the lack of information on where to recycle.

If there are statistical improvements, the effects aren't substantial enough to improve people's lives, said Jeremy Brock, who has a child with asthma. The evidence still points to a dire smog problem.

"When you drive off the Vine or the 58, you see it hanging in the valley," he said. "I think it's worse than it has been."



Modesto Irrigation District to settle wood-burning power plant suit for \$1.2 million

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, October 11, 2011

MODESTO -- The Modesto Irrigation District has paid \$1.2 million to settle a lawsuit from a company that had planned to build a wood-burning power plant.

The settlement, disclosed Monday, comes nearly a year after the MID board rejected the plant, which would have burned orchard wood in the Beard Industrial District.

Valley Bio-Energy, the company behind the project, had claimed that the MID violated an agreement to work "in good faith" to get it built.

In the eight-page settlement, the district declared that it "completely denies any such liability or wrongdoing, and intends by this agreement only to avoid further litigation."

Stephen Endsley of Modesto, one of the partners in the company, said the payment covers much of the \$2 million or so invested in the project.

"(The district) acted very responsibly in unwinding it," he said.

Board member Tom Van Groningen supported the settlement in a 3-2 vote in closed session.

"It was obviously a business decision given the fact that there would be protracted litigation that was possibly going to cost more than the settlement," he said.

Board members Paul Warda and Glen Wild also voted in favor. John Kidd and Cecil Hensley dissented.

Dave Thomas, president of the Stanislaus Taxpayers Association, said it was "absurd" for MID to pay the \$1.2 million while stating it was not at fault.

"Of course they did something wrong," he said. "Of course they acted outside of their scope of authority."

Revealed after judge's OK

The settlement was negotiated over several months and released after final approval by a judge.

The 30-megawatt plant would have met 9 percent of the MID's electricity demand and helped it reach a state mandate for renewable energy.

The partners were counting on a 30 percent federal tax credit to cover some of the \$80 million-plus construction cost.

The plant mainly would have burned nut and fruit trees removed from orchards, along with pruned limbs and clean wood waste from construction sites.

Opponents said the plant would pollute the air and cost more per kilowatt-hour than conventional power sources. Proponents said it would have had advanced emission controls and be among the cheapest renewable sources.

Valley Bio-Energy sued the district in Stanislaus County Superior Court. It claimed that along with violating the good-faith promise, the MID did not make the findings required under state law to reject the report on the project's environmental effects.

Endsley, a real estate investor and retired cardiologist, said Monday that he hoped to create jobs in Modesto by building the plant. It also would have reduced open burning of orchard waste, a practice that has sharply declined because of air pollution rules.

Split vote on rejecting plant

The MID board rejected the plant on a split vote last year. Wild and Van Groningen were in favor. Warda, Hensley and Kidd were opposed.

"Through this settlement, MID avoids any further litigation with Valley Bio-Energy," district spokeswoman Melissa Williams said by e-mail. "Further litigation would likely be lengthy and costly. This settlement provides cost certainty and closure, ending MID's relationship with Valley Bio-Energy and the proposed biomass project."

Open burning ban lifts in areas

Stockton Record, Tuesday, October 11, 2011

SAN ANDREAS - Effective 8 a.m. Wednesday, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will lift the suspension of burning on private lands within the Tuolumne-Calaveras Unit. This includes Calaveras, Tuolumne and those eastern portions of San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties within the State Responsibility Area.

It also applies to lands within the Direct Protection Area of the Stanislaus National Forest. Open burning will be allowed on permissive burn days as established by the Air Pollution Control District in each county. Fire weather will be monitored, and if the need arises, restricted burning hours or suspension will be reissued.

Burn permits are still required. Prerecorded information for each county is available:

- » Calaveras: (209) 754-6600.
- » San Joaquin and Stanislaus: (877) 429-2876.
- » Tuolumne: (209) 533-5598.
- » Stanislaus National Forest: (209) 532-5601.

High-speed rail promises green -- but how green?

By Tim Sheehan The Fresno Bee

In the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011

High-speed rail could help cut air pollution in California -- if the system succeeds in getting enough people out of their cars.

Planners with the state's High-Speed Rail Authority expect that the electric trains could reduce traffic on the state's roadways by 2.5 percent by 2035.

Each vehicle-mile traveled creates emissions that foul the air with greenhouse gases, smog-forming chemicals and fine particles like soot and dust.

Whether high-speed trains can deliver on the promise of improved air quality, however, will depend largely on their ability to attract enough riders.

That's a questionable proposition, experts suggest, based on studies of other systems around the world.

And in letters and at hearings up and down the San Joaquin Valley, some people are saying they believe the pollution benefits are either being overstated or require additional study before construction begins next year.

The rail authority hopes to launch construction next year on its Fresno-to-Bakersfield stretch, the first piece of what is expected to be a system of 220-mph trains connecting San Francisco to Los Angeles by the early 2020s. Ultimately, extensions would reach Sacramento and San Diego, with trains running statewide by 2035.

Engineers working for the rail authority say that's when the air-quality benefits would start taking effect. By the time the trains are running statewide, ridership would reduce car and truck traffic on the state's highways by more than 31 million vehicle-miles a day -- or about 2.5 percent of all daily miles driven in the state.

If those predictions are accurate -- and it's a big "if" -- that would reduce car and truck emissions of greenhouse gases -- the pollutants, including carbon dioxide, that are typically associated with global warming or climate change -- by nearly 5.8 million tons each year statewide compared to a future without high-speed trains, according to the engineering projections.

By 2020, the longest-range forecasts available from the California Air Resources Board, greenhouse gases from highway vehicles are expected to add up to more than 187 million tons a year. The statewide reductions predicted by rail planners represent just 3 percent of that 2020 forecast.

In the valley, the anticipated reduction of more than 9.8 million vehicle-miles every day in cars and trucks would slice annual greenhouse gas emissions by 1.7 million tons by 2035 -- less than 1 percent of the state's total emissions.

Those estimates don't include the air-quality benefits of fewer airline flights because of the trains.

The rail authority maintains that taking people out of cars and planes is only one benefit.

"High-speed rail has proven around the world to be more efficient than other modes of transportation," the agency said in a statement. But, "potentially the biggest benefit ... is introducing the means by which California can handle its future growth in a more sustainable manner."

Backers believe train stations will become hubs to promote growth based on improved public transportation instead of urban sprawl, reducing people's reliance on automobiles over the long term.

Significant benefit?

The rail authority acknowledges, however, that benefits are tied to ridership and the numbers of vehicle trips that trains replace.

But those expected benefits won't kick in for years, until the system has an established ridership. In the nine years to build the line through 2021, engineers predict that earthmoving and other construction activities could pump about 1.6 million tons of greenhouse gases into the region's air.

Pollution created during construction of high-speed train systems in other countries prompted some international experts to question the overall air-quality improvements claimed by backers of the technology.

In studying European high-speed train projects, Spanish scholar Ginas de Rus of the University of Las Palmas said in the Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis that "the environmental effect of the HSR technology is particularly acute in the construction phase."

De Rus' article earlier this year reported that "the negative environmental effects of the construction of a new HSR have to be compared with the reduction [of pollution from] road and air transport when passengers shift to HSR."

Over the long term, "high-speed rail is under most circumstances likely to reduce greenhouse gases from traffic compared to a situation when the line was not built," Swedish researcher Per Kagenson declared in a 2009 paper for the International Transport Forum. "The reduction, though, is small and it may take decades for it to compensate for the emissions caused by construction."

Other consequences

The rail authority believes its estimates may, in fact, understate the potential air-quality benefits because the figures don't count the agency's plans to buy electricity only from renewable sources -- solar, wind, biomass, geothermal and small hydroelectric dams -- to power the trains. Avoiding electricity generated by burning fossil fuels like natural gas or coal will enhance the air-pollution reductions, officials said.

But critics say the environmental reports for the valley rail segments ignore other potential air-pollution effects.

E.J. deJong, a Hanford farmer and dairyman, said the rail line bisecting his property will close Lansing Avenue and add about eight miles to each round trip his trucks must drive to get back and forth between his farm fields on one side of the tracks and his dairy on the other side.

"Just for our silage harvest, that's going to be at least 3,000 extra gallons of diesel a year," deJong said. "That's a lot of trucks, and they're not very fuel efficient when fully loaded."

DeJong added that his calculations don't include other farming operations on his property, including the trucks used to spread manure on the fields and trips by tractors and other equipment -- all using fuel and all producing emissions. Nor do they include other farmers up and down the line who will be similarly affected, he said.

The city of Chowchilla is also worried about dust and valley fever -- a fungal infection of the lungs caused by spores in the soil -- kicked up by dozens of trains flying through the region each day.

The trains have "the potential to create near hurricane-force winds with trains traveling at 220 mph," Chowchilla Mayor David Alexander wrote in a letter to the rail authority. "Such forces will certainly cause particles to fly" and create dust-devils -- the small, dusty summer whirlwinds that blow across valley fields.

"Research on the effects of dust devils indicates that the frequency of valley fever is among the by-products of such wind-driven phenomena," Alexander added.

Even the Sierra Club, which supports the project, is concerned about pollution from growth that might be spurred by the trains and stations.

"If we can reduce our impacts on the air-quality problem of the San Joaquin Valley, we would be delighted," local Sierra Club representative Gary Lasky of Fresno said at a rail authority hearing last month in Fresno.

But "there could be growth-inducing impacts with people wanting to move into the San Joaquin Valley and build housing here because they could effectively commute to other cities," Lasky added. "We welcome that [growth], but we don't welcome the impacts on air quality and local traffic. We need to know more."