

Flags work with flying colors

More S.J. schools urged to join air-quality alert program

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Friday, October 28, 2011

LATHROP - This wasn't a day to worry about pollution. The air was crisp, the sky was (mostly) blue, and a slight breeze came from the west.

But not every day feels so fresh, as 12-year-old Taylor Gapuz – and her inhaler – can attest.

Not every day is for running or playing.

For more information on how to bring air pollution flags to your school, or to sign up for real-time air quality information on your computer, visit valleyair.org or call (559) 230-6000.

"When I can't breathe, it gets scary," Taylor said. "It hurts. Once I had to go to the hospital in an ambulance." Taylor, who has asthma, helped Mossdale School raise its first air-quality flag Thursday.

Hundreds of other schools up and down the San Joaquin Valley already use similar color-coded flags to alert both students and adults about pollution levels when they arrive at school each day.

Most of those schools, however, are in the central or south Valley where the air is often worse. Valley air regulators and health advocates want to see more San Joaquin County schools participate.

Kids may not understand the particulars of particulate matter or the issues with ozone, but it's easy to see that a green flag indicates good air, while a red flag means icky air.

And some of Mossdale's children know why it matters. "If we don't have air, we can't breathe," said 7-year-old Jackson Comley.

Thirty-eight of San Joaquin County's 200-plus public schools participate in the flag program. It's nothing new - flags have been distributed to schools since 2004 – but advocates want the flags to fly at every school, public and private.

"I hope this (flag raising) will stimulate that," Susie Rico-Vasquez of the American Lung Association said after Taylor and another student helped hoist Mossdale's new flag (a healthy green one) Thursday.

"I think what we really need to say is that air quality is still bad, and it's better to be preventative than reactive," Rico-Vasquez said.

The lung association, the Valley Air Pollution Control District and the Health Plan of San Joaquin have teamed up to boost participation.

They also hope schools will sign up for a new electronic notification system, which provides real-time information about air quality and could be used to decide, for example, if pollution is so severe that outdoor athletic events should be canceled.

Mossdale, certainly, had no such choices to make Thursday, with its clean air and its green flag. Valley air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt asked a small assembly of children to take a deep breath, all together.

Then Principal Susan Sanders said, "Today, it is a great day to play."

Air quality flags do more than flutter at school

By Jason Campbell Reporter

Manteca Bulletin, Friday, October 24, 2011

LATHROP – Brian Terrell knows what the air can be like on a scorching summer day.

The Mossdale School 8th grader – who plays football for the Lathrop Jr. Spartans – has spent August afternoons in the sun and felt the thick air that comes from car exhaust, Bay Area pollution that migrates and particulate matter from agricultural sources.

And it only makes pulling in air even harder after doing sprints, breaking through a hole and dashing towards the end zone or grinding away as part of a defensive set.

But there might be something that can change the way that staff, coaches and even parents approach air quality in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

On Thursday morning members of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District were on hand to unveil their flag system that Mossdale School will begin incorporating as part of their daily routine. Along with the American and California flags, a colored flag that denotes the air quality for the day will be visible for all who visit the site to see.

Selection of the daily flag comes from a real-time software program that can be accessed via the internet and will notify the school of any periodic changes throughout the day.

“What I think is great about it is that at 8 a.m. parents will pull in, drop their kids off, and see the flag. When they come back they can see how it changed and respond to the air pollution,” said San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornelas. “It’s a great way to let parents know about what’s going on in that regard.”

And awareness is only one of benefits that the program affords. Support from a variety of local health organizations – including the American Lung Association and Health Plan of San Joaquin – hope to bring scenarios related to air pollution, like asthma and other breathing conditions, to light.

The other factor, which focuses on prevention, is a major portion of the program that organizers hope will take hold with the students and spread into their homes.

Because pollution is migratory, what is discharged from the Northern San Joaquin Valley – from places like Stockton, Manteca and Modesto – naturally follows the air flows down toward Fresno. The pollution there continues on toward Bakersfield and sits in a bowl at the base of the Tehachapi range.

What can end up happening, especially when bad ozone days are included in the mix, are outdoor sporting events – even Friday night football games – can be cancelled because of the poor air quality.

But with 38 schools in the local area incorporating the flag system into their day-to-day operations, organizers hope that the efforts of the district are not only recognized but supported as the fight to continue to improve the air quality in California’s Central Valley continues.

“We learned about how the bad air affects kids that have asthma, and how the colored flags will help people know when the air is bad,” said Mossdale 8th grader Bernamay Siano. “I think that it’s a good idea and it should help people try to not pollute the air so much.”

[Manteca Bulletin Editorial, Monday, Oct. 24, 2011:](#)

The answer, my friend, to better air quality is blowing in the wind

By Dennis Wyatt - Managing Editor

It is a scene that happens dozens of times – if not more – each day in Manteca.

Leaf blowers are revved up to move everything from lawn clippings and leaves to dirt.

It is one of the most insane things we do to damage our health and to essentially burn fossil fuel to accomplish very little.

If you doubt that, take a look at most folks who use leaf blowers. They simply blow the debris into the street to scatter to the four winds. They rarely get it in a pile and pick it up.

The yard debris either goes into a neighbor’s yard or ultimately drifts back into the yard it came from.

In essence, they clean up their space for a short time while messing up the rest of the neighborhood. In turn, someone else down the street returns the favor and blows stuff back to the original offender. There is a whole cottage industry built around simply blowing debris around and not actually cleaning it up.

At the same time leaf blowers – gas and electric – create particulate matter pollution. The two-stroke gas powered leaf blowers spew off more emissions into the ozone than lawn mowers do and for what? The

debris they blow is rarely picked up but everyone gets to enjoy worse air quality. One leaf blower may not seem like a big deal but multiply it by hundreds of thousands each week in the San Joaquin Valley.

Nobody wants to deny anyone the right to do as they please unless, of course, it clearly has a negative impact on others. One of the functions of government in a civilized society where people are living close to each other is to have reasonable regulations that establish the common good.

Perhaps outright banning the use of leaf blowers may not be something government should pursue but it does seem nonsensical when brooms and rakes accomplish the same thing with a lot less pollution. And you can't even use the argument that leaf blowers are more efficient and effective at cleaning up messes since most people use them to simply disperse debris off their property or into the street.

The San Joaquin Valley is facing a serious challenge when it comes to air quality. While federal government standards are draconian, it does make sense for all of us to do what we can to ease air pollution.

There needs to be a ban on any new fireplaces than are designed to burn wood from being built as part of homes in the San Joaquin Valley. Currently the rule allows for no more than two homes per acre that can have fireplaces and now more than one fireplace per home. It needs to be a complete ban.

We also keep approving new businesses with drive-thru windows.

They aren't "gross polluters" per se if there is no line and you can zip right through, but once vehicles start stacking up the idling becomes a big source of emissions into the atmosphere.

Simply parking the car and going inside the restaurant and the restarting it when you have your order puts out less air pollution. Besides, most of us are ambulatory and could use the exercise.

Much of what we can do to improve air quality is – and always has been – behavioral modification.

If you do not believe you have a moral obligation to the human race to reduce your proverbial carbon footprint, then you should spend a day breathing in Bakersfield or Fresno.

Hazy days are the norm. And a large chunk of it is thanks to air pollution that flows south into the gigantic bowl we live in not just from the Bay Area but from those living in the northern end of the valley. Their air pollution is partially our air pollution. We just happen to live where the prevailing winds make life tolerable when we use things such as leaf blowers that help compromise air quality with little – if anything – to show for it.

