

No change in S.J. burn ban on the horizon

Despite chill, poor air quality prohibiting fires

By Alex Breitler

Record Staff Writer

(Stockton) Record, Thursday, Dec. 29. 2011

A surge in air pollution across the San Joaquin Valley is making this a December to remember for air quality officials - or, perhaps, one they would rather forget.

One federal pollution standard had been shattered across various Valley locations for 25 days in a row as of Wednesday afternoon. That's the longest streak since late 2002, according to state air quality data.

As a result, Valleywide wood burning bans have become as predictable as tule fog.

BY THE NUMBERS

No-burn days in San Joaquin County

- This month: 15
- All of last winter: 7

Citations issued in San Joaquin County

- This month: 40
- All of last winter: 9

People in areas with no natural gas service, and people with no other source of heat are exempt from the rule.

To check local wood-burning status, visit valleyair.org and click on "Check Before You Burn." Or call (800) 766-4463.

This month alone, San Joaquin County residents have been prohibited from lighting up their fireplaces on 15 days (including today). Compare that to last year, when the ban was in place only seven days over the entire winter.

Forty people in the northernmost county have already been cited for breaking the rules. That's compared with nine all last winter, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

This was the first Christmas when the entire Valley was under a no-burn order. And with little change expected in the cold and dry weather, New Year's weekend may bring more of the same.

"It's not looking good," said air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

"We haven't seen this spell of stagnant dry weather since 2000, and we haven't seen air quality levels as poor in years," she added.

The air district says it's trying to protect public health. When inhaled, the tiny particles contained in wood smoke might embed in your lungs, or enter your blood stream, worsening asthma or other respiratory problems.

At worst, they can cause premature death.

As usual, the pollution has been most severe toward the central or south Valley, but even in Stockton the federal standard has been exceeded eight times, with a noticeable spike over the Christmas weekend as some residents - either unaware of the fireplace rule or unconcerned with it - burned merrily away.

"People are just not paying attention, and they're not being warned (by the air district); they're not being told of the danger," said Kevin Hall, an advocate with the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition.

Some were, in fact, warned - such as Lawson Crosby, who checks his newspaper each day to find out if burning is allowed.

Crosby loves a glowing fire. And he hates the government telling him when he can light one.

Just the same, Crosby's fireplace was dark over the Christmas weekend, as were his neighbors' fireplaces off Mariposa Road east of Stockton.

"I don't think anyone wanted to run the risk this year," said Crosby, 75.

The risk, that is, of receiving a \$50 fine.

Also playing by the book was Central United Methodist Church in Stockton.

After its annual 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service, worshippers typically gather around a jolly bonfire and sing Christmas carols well after midnight. Not this year. Because of the ban on burning, the congregation went home a bit cold and a bit quiet, but within the law.

It's not a matter of air quality peaking at high levels for short periods of time, said Holt. In some places - particularly in the central or south Valley - the air has hovered in the "unhealthy" range all day long.

On the other hand, even though the federal standard has been violated on a routine basis, the numbers aren't as high as they were years ago.

Holt said there's been a deliberate effort to increase enforcement of the no-burn rule this month. Even over the Christmas weekend, inspectors were roaming neighborhoods in search of smoking chimneys.

The rate of citations has risen at a rate faster than the increase in no-burn days, she said.

"We get that people want to have a fire; we do," she said. "But we want people to be able to breathe more."

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Political Notebook: Another candidate to join 5th District supervisor race

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Dec. 28, 2011

A local business manager and community volunteer said he plans to join the race for Kern County's 5th District supervisor's seat.

Ronnie Cruz said he would like to improve the Department of Human Services next to Kern Medical Center, [aggressively address air quality concerns in Arvin](#), help curtail gang violence, and create a fund to bury those killed in gang violence.

"And I will run a clean campaign," Cruz said in an email.

Already expected to compete for the 5th District seat is Karen Goh, who was appointed to the seat last year by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Leticia Perez, a field representative and consultant with state Sen. Michael Rubio.

The district, which covers east and southeast Bakersfield as well as Lamont and Arvin, is largely Democratic and Hispanic.

Perez has been a Kern County deputy public defender and Kern County planning commissioner. Perez said she'll announce her intentions at the beginning of the year.

Goh, who has announced her candidacy, was onetime executive director of the local faith-based nonprofit Garden Pathways, which runs mentoring, training and education programs.

Cruz, who started a community-feeding program, ran for Bakersfield City School District's board in 2010, and lost. He picked up the fewest votes -- 4,250, or about 9 percent of all votes.

Candidates for the 5th District are expected to officially "pull paperwork" to run starting Tuesday, Kern County Elections officials said.