

Bay Area air quality worst in years this winter

By Peter Fimrite, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Friday, January 6, 2012

The unusual winter calm and gleaming sunshine that brightened up the holidays is largely responsible for some of the worst air pollution seen in the Bay Area in years, experts said this week.

Winter Spare the Air days have been called 12 times since Nov. 1 in the Bay Area, which has exceeded federal health standards for fine particle pollution seven times. "The worst of those seven days was Christmas Day," said Lisa Fasano, the spokeswoman for Bay Area Air Quality Management District, who blamed smoke billowing from people's chimneys for most of the pollution.

The air pollution on Christmas Day alone was equivalent to the summer of 2008, when wildfires across California clouded the skies with smoke, Fasano said. Thousands of people ignored the Spare the Air alert that day and built illegal fires, but air quality has been horrendous the entire winter season, she said, and the situation isn't expected to change any time soon.

"We're calling the alerts because we're having stagnant cold air, and it's trapping particle pollution here in the Bay Area and making it very unhealthy to breathe," Fasano said. "There are a number of families and a number of people who have asthma and can't be around wood smoke. I am one of them. It's fine for the people who have an OK respiratory system, but for children, the elderly and people who have respiratory problems it is potentially dangerous."

Why the air's bad

The bad air is lingering because a particularly stubborn high-pressure system has been pushing storms away from Northern California. As a result, car exhaust and smoke from factories and chimneys has remained in place for people to breathe, meteorologists and air district officials said.

Studies have shown that people who inhale fine particulate matter increase their risk of asthma, lung cancer, cardiovascular problems, birth defects and premature death. The air district regulates particles in the air that are smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter, the kind that can lodge deep in the lungs.

In 2008, the air district implemented a ban on wood burning in the Bay Area during Spare the Air days after studies showed that one-third of the fine particle pollution during the winter comes from chimney smoke.

"Wood smoke this time of year is more unhealthy than car exhaust," Fasano said. "When you breathe these particles into your lungs it can trigger an asthma attack within an hour and send people to the hospital with difficulty breathing and even cause heart attacks."

The 12 alerts this season probably won't match the 30 that were called between November and February in 2006-07, but it is the most since the ban on wood burning was approved in 2008 and, given the persistently stagnant air, there are undoubtedly more alerts to come.

Predictably, the large number of alerts over the winter holidays led to pyrotechnics among folks used to having their eggnog in front of a warm, crackling blaze. There are more than a million fireplaces in the Bay Area.

Winter Spare the Air days were called on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and on New Year's Day and the day after that, putting a damper on that cozy holiday tradition.

"It is all about controlling people and telling them how they should live," said a resident of unincorporated Mill Valley who declined to use his name because he fears retribution for his regular use of his fireplace.

He and many others who view the bans on wood burning as Orwellian intrusions into their private lives simply ignored the holiday alerts. Some 400 people reported smoke coming out of a neighbor's chimney over the Christmas weekend. Another 411 reported on neighbors who lit blazes in their homes over New Year's weekend. The holiday finger-pointing resulted in 108 potential violations that are being reviewed by the air district.

Illegal burning reported

Overall, 2,618 people have tattled to the district about wood fires and smoking chimneys since November, resulting in 314 total violations. That's compared with almost 2,400 complaints in 2009-10. There were 1,400 complaints in 2010-11, but there were only four air alerts.

Quite a few of the firebugs may soon be getting belated gifts in the mail, but the presents are unlikely to rekindle the holiday spirit. People caught with their hand in the tinder box during alerts receive a warning if it is their first violation. Repeat offenders get \$400 citations unless there are extenuating circumstances, like a wood stove being the only available method of heating the house.

Fasano said it is not the home but the hearth that the district is trying to regulate.

"What we want to do is have people really think twice before they burn" and "help them understand how unhealthy wood burning is," Fasano said. "We may have been doing this for thousands of years, but we didn't live as long either."

Bad air means continued burn ban

by Joel Danoy

Tracy Press, Friday, January 6, 2012

A strict adherence to residential burning bans is of the highest priority, especially as the Central Valley endures its driest air conditions in more than 20 years, a government agency recently stated.

The La Niña weather pattern has brought stagnant and drier-than-average conditions to the valley, and last month tied December 1989 as the driest December on record, according to a Dec. 29 statement from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Anthony Presto, the agency's media contact for the Northern District — which includes San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties — said the conditions are causing particulate pollution to become trapped over the valley.

That trapping has led to more than 20 "unhealthy" days this burning season, which runs annually from November to February — compared with just five "unhealthy" days in the county during the entire 2010-11 season.

As a result, the agency has declared daily residential burning bans for almost a month straight — including Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Burning bans prohibit the use of outdoor chimneys and fire pits, as well as the burning of wood, pellets and manufactured fire logs in home fireplaces and stoves.

From Nov. 1 to Dec. 28, there were 15 burning ban days declared in San Joaquin County, according to the district's statement.

"It was very unfortunate that the bans had to be during those times," Presto said, "but when it comes to public safety and health, nothing is more important."

Though the valley had some of its cleanest air on record during the past two burning seasons, La Niña ended that streak. Since Nov. 1, San Joaquin County has been cited 15 times for exceeding the federal air-quality standards at PM2.5 levels (particle matter smaller than 2½ microns). The entire air district has received 120 violations this year, compared with 72 during the entirety of the previous season.

Presto said that with these conditions, the issuance of burning bans "is essential to reducing the problem." A high volume of residential fires can increase particulate pollution — which includes small pieces of ash, soot, liquid droplets and other airborne matter — in the air. The matter can cause respiratory disease and cancer, lung infections, heart attacks and stroke, and it can exacerbate cardiac disease.

"It's a terrible problem," Presto said. "There isn't too much we can do about it, except do our best to not make it worse than it already is."

Residents who choose not to respect the burning bans can face a \$50 fine for a first offense — a cost that increases for repeat offenders, Presto said. A team of air-quality compliance officers who are already monitoring "permitted sources" in the Northern District will "take a small time out of their day and try and

catch violators," according to Presto. Potential violators can also be reported by calling the Air District at 800-281-7003.

"If they see smoke coming out of a chimney, they will produce a violation and send it to the violator in the mail," he said. "It will always come in the mail, because we do not knock on doors."

Only residents who live in an area where there is no natural gas service or who have a wood-burning stove or fireplace as their only source of heat are exempt from the burn bans.

Daily burning ban notices are issued daily at 4:30 p.m. and are available at www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/woodburnpage.htm, by calling 800-766-4463 or by subscribing to the air district's air-quality forecast at www.valleyair.org/lists/list.htm.

Calif. appeals judge's low-carbon fuels ruling

Associated Press

Stockton Record, Friday, January 6, 2012

California officials are appealing a federal judge's ruling that blocked implementation of the state's mandate for low-carbon fuels.

Stanley Young, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board, said the appeal was filed Thursday in U.S. District Court.

The appeal comes after Fresno-based U.S. District Court Judge Lawrence O'Neill blocked California from implementing its first-in-the-nation low-carbon fuel standard. The board will request a stay of O'Neill's ruling next week.

O'Neill said the rule discriminates against crude oil and biofuels producers outside California, in part by mandating that fuels receive a "carbon-intensity score," which takes into account the pollution created in the manufacture and transportation of the fuels to the state.

The mandate requires all vehicles' fuels, on average, to be 10 percent less carbon-intensive by 2020 than gasoline is now.

Prescribed burns on calendar in national forest

By Donna-Marie Sonnichsen

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, January 6, 2012

Forest rangers want to treat fire with fire, but they need a window in one of the driest winters in history.

Prescribed burning in the Western Divide District, Giant Sequoia National Monument is already long overdue because of the dry conditions, officials say, and Sequoia National Forest personnel would like to begin Monday.

"We're waiting on weather and air quality to improve or we'll have to postpone it until it does," said National Forest spokeswoman Denise Alonzo.

Also known as hazard-reduction burning, prescribed burns are used as a management technique to reduce fuel buildup and decrease the likelihood of serious, hotter fires.

It is a technique that can also be used to stimulate germination of the giant sequoia trees because their cones need serious heat to open and disperse seeds.

But in this case, forest personnel want to burn piles of small limbs, brush and trees. About 1,200 acres of these approximately 5-foot-wide by 5-foot-tall piles are waiting to be lighted. If started on time, the burning is expected to continue through April, as weather conditions and smoke dispersal allow, Alonzo said.

Normally, the annual practice is started in November, she said.

Even though the site near the community of Ponderosa is at an elevation of 7,500 feet and above the snow line, statewide snowpack in the mountains is only at 18 percent of its normal average, with little relief in sight, according to WeatherAg.com meteorologist Scott Borgioli.

National Forest personnel need surrounding vegetation to be moist enough so that it won't ignite. And they need good air distribution so that the smoke doesn't linger in the area and disturb residents, Alonzo said.

Forest personnel are also working closely with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to make sure that conditions are as ideal as possible to reduce local impact, Alonzo said.

She also urged anyone traveling in the forest to be aware of how dry conditions are and of the potential for fire, such as the 18-acre grass fire Wednesday in the Porterville area, which was started by people using a cutting torch to remove fencing.

