

## **Stronger air alerts even when pollution lower**

By Mark Grossi

In the Modesto Bee, Friday, January 13, 2012

FRESNO — In the midst of the nation's worst soot problem this season, air authorities are issuing stronger warnings when pollution is at a much lower level than before — a new protective measure.

The San Joaquin Valley has been caught in a seven-week dry spell that shows no sign of relief. The lack of cleansing storms has allowed a haze of tiny debris to build up and violate the federal health standard for 37 consecutive days.

During that time, hourly readings in Fresno and Clovis have spiked nearly four times higher than the daily health standard. Yet stronger alerts weren't issued because an old threshold for warnings of very unhealthy air was not crossed.

Outdoor burning suspended in central Sierra Nevada foothills

Now the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will warn people when pollution spikes are twice the daily health standard. That was not nearly enough to trigger a similar warning in the past.

School administrators, teachers, coaches, parents and anybody else can sign up on the district's Web site to get e-mail notifications about changes in air quality on the hourly warning system.

The warning system, which the district started in 2010, is the only one of its kind in the country. Participation in the system is voluntary. The district has no authority to force anyone to stop outdoor activities when pollution spikes.

But officials say schools and the rest of the public should heed the warnings.

The air district worked for many months adjusting the online, hourly warning system and launched the revisions just after Christmas.

They say the only hitch now is that people may be confused by their changes. The confusion centers on two separate air rankings online — the district's daily air forecast and the hourly warnings. Until now, both have used a five-color system to rank the air quality in a range between healthy (green) and very unhealthy (purple).

Now the hourly warnings will show air quality in five numbered levels, the fifth being very unhealthy. The idea is to make a clear distinction between hourly spikes and all-day averages.

Kevin Hall, executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, says the district should have kept it simple to avoid confusion.

"There's been a lot of money invested in the color system over the years," he said. "We should stick with it."

Behind the colors-versus-numbers discussion, there is a science-based reason for the change. Under the 1997 standard, pollution spikes would have to rise above a lung-searing 150 micrograms per cubic meter before schools would be informed that outdoor activities should be canceled. Now, the threshold is 75 micrograms per cubic meter — still a hefty reading.

For perspective, a federal health violation occurs when an air monitor averages more than 35 micrograms for the day. Since Dec. 3, there have been many hourly spikes well beyond 100 micrograms.

"You shouldn't be outside exercising when particulates reach these levels," said David Lighthall, district science adviser.

## **Bucket brigade evaluates toxic tour results**

By Kellie Schmitt, Californian staff writer  
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Jan. 13, 2012

The results of the bucket brigade's toxic tour are in.

In December, Arvin residents concerned with air quality took their own sample near composting operator Community Recycling & Resource Recovery Inc.

They sent it off to a Simi Valley lab and tested the sample for dozens of sulfur gases and volatile organic compounds. This week, the group said it found "threatening" levels of hydrogen sulfide, the colorless gas that smells like rotten eggs and can, in very high concentrations, lead to death.

But valley air officials dismissed the tests, questioning their methods and the significance of concentrations found.

The air sample, which the group took outside the composting property's gate, measured 21 micrograms per cubic meter of hydrogen sulfide. That's less than the state's one-hour standard of 42 micrograms per cubic meter. Hydrogen sulfide isn't immediately dangerous to life until it reaches about 142,000 micrograms per cubic meter, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Still, Denny Larson of Global Community Monitoring said the results are noteworthy, pointing to studies that link even low level exposures to respiratory irritation, headaches and other health problems. He said residents report the smells are sometimes even more intense, meaning the concentration could be higher at times.

"This is just confirmation of a problem we have," added Sal Partida, president of Committee for a Better Arvin. "This is a dangerous spot, and we can't afford to have it so close to our community."

Community Recycling is being investigated by Cal-OSHA and other agencies after the October deaths of two brothers who apparently inhaled fatal doses of toxic fumes while working there. Mary Jane Wilson, a spokeswoman, said the facility is operating in "complete compliance with all court orders," and working to maintain a safe working environment.

There were additional temporary sources of hydrogen sulfide during that December day, Wilson added. Lamont waste water, which can emit the gas, was located in an emergency discharge area to prevent an overflow. The odor residents detected could have come from a number of sources, from the waste water to a nearby dairy or the Arvin landfall, she said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also tested the air near the recycling center several years ago, and mapped out the substances present, said Executive Director Seyed Sadredin. Those same chemicals were not found in significant quantities in greater Arvin.

He suggested that any hydrogen sulfide levels detected on the property are a workplace safety issue, not a district issue, since they do not extend into the greater community.

"If they can discover something, we'll pay attention," Sadredin said. "So far, it's more of a media campaign."

The Arvin Bucket Brigade, which is receiving \$130,000 from The California Endowment to monitor its own air, wants to evaluate other possible polluters as well, from dairies to auto repair shops. Next month it'll train about 10 people who will collect air samples in "trouble spots."

The hope is to use that data to persuade air officials to give those locations another look.

"We're not going to depend on the state to tell us," Partida said. "We can tell ourselves just how bad our air is."

## **Temperate Temperatures**

By Tiffany Tuell  
Sierra Star, Jan. 12, 2012

While recent spring-like temperatures are allowing jackets to be thrown aside temporarily, the mild winter weather seems to be having both negative and positive results in the Mountain Area.

Last year at this time the Mountain Area had received almost 30 inches of rain, which was above normal. However this year the area has received only 4.74 inches of rain, according to Philip Messerschmitt with

the USDA Forest Service in North Fork. He said the last dry winter the area suffered was in 2003/04 when the area only received 25 inches of rain. However in January of that year, the area had still received 15.01 inches of rain -- 10 inches more than the area has received this year.

"If we don't get rain in February or March, we're going to be in deep, deep trouble," Messerschmitt said.

He said his concern isn't over wildfire because with no precipitation, there will be no vegetation to ignite.

"The biggest problem is the water table," he said. "This year the water table is lacking considerably."

The Jan. 3 snowpack measurement revealed that this year's snowpack is one of the driest on record according to the California Department of Water Resources.

According to the snow survey, the recent snowpack water content is 19% of the average statewide and only 7% of the average April 1 measurement. Electronic readings for the central Sierra show 13% normal for the date and 5% of the April 1 average.

"Fortunately, we have most of winter ahead of us, and our reservoir storage is good," said Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin.

Kari Cobb, public affairs officer for Yosemite National Park, said the unusually warm temperatures have brought more visitors than normal to the park because with no snow or ice, access to the park is easier and visitors aren't having to use chains to get into the park.

"It's really bad for skiing but it's really good for hiking," Cobb said. "Most of the trails are completely clear of snow and in the valley it's in the lower 60s and Tuolumne is in the upper 40s so it's been perfect hiking weather."

Although waterfalls are low, it is normal for this time of year, Cobb said. Waterfalls are fed mainly through snow precipitation so results aren't seen until spring. However Cobb said if there is no snow in the next month or two, Yosemite Falls won't be flowing and other waterfalls will be down to a trickle.

"One reason we suspect we had a lot of visitors this year is because we had amazing waterfalls so people definitely come out of their way when they (falls) were spectacular," Cobb said.

Cobb also said the current weather is perfect for climbing and many mountain climbers are taking advantage of it. "It's been over a decade since we've had such a mild early winter," Cobb said. "Overall this year, we are .53% above our visitation numbers as of November 2011 from November 2010."

Lisa Cesaro, public relations manager for Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts at Yosemite, also mentioned that visitation to the park is good even though Badger Pass isn't open yet.

"Between the high country being open and winter activities such as ice skating, we haven't noticed a big change because of Badger being closed," Cesaro said. "We're hoping the snow will come eventually so we can open Badger."

Cesaro said even the Glacier Point Ski Hut is open for visitors to drive to and stay overnight and that visitors are also still allowed to get parking passes to stay overnight at Glacier to take sunrise photos if they choose.

Tenaya Lodge has racks of snowshoes awaiting visitors who want an adventure through the snow -- they just need the snow for it.

"We're definitely seeing a little bit softer occupancy," said Jonathan Farrington, regional director of sales and marketing for DNC. "What we're seeing is people that really want that snowy, winter experience, many of them are delaying their stay. I think the storms are going to come -- they're just a little delayed."

Tom McCann, general manager of Tenaya Lodge in Fish Camp, said that occupancy was down about 10% during the holiday period. "We have prepared for winter and we, along with our guests, are looking forward to snow. We hope to make up the cancellations we have lost when it snows."

Tenaya still has most of its spring and fall activities running, Farrington said, with a few winter activities. There is ice skating, a climbing wall, archery, hiking and evening programs.

"Guests are still getting a great Yosemite experience," Farrington said. "For the people that live in the area, you can have not enough (snow) or too much of it. A year ago we were getting a lot of snow and it was keeping people away."

For Yosemite Trails, their sleigh rides through a winter wonderland have been replaced by horse-drawn wagon rides because of the lack of snow. Owner Larry Knapp said this has happened before but this is not his biggest concern.

"If we don't start getting some winter it will affect our summer business, too," Knapp said.

During the summer, third generation cowboy Knapp runs Black Angus cattle in the Sierra forest, but with no rain or snow, forest springs will be low and meadows for grazing will be dry. He said the last time he recalls a winter this dry was in 1977.

According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, December 2011 tied December 1989 as the driest December on record for the Valley due to the La Nina weather pattern. The air district said that the cold overnight temperatures and warm air aloft are causing "strong surface-based temperature inversions (from 500-2,500 feet) that have trapped particulate pollution within a very small volume of air."

According to Janelle Schneider, central district media contact, the inversion layer tops out at 3,000 feet -- Oakhurst is about 2,200 feet. In the Valley, residents are being urged to adhere to wood-burning prohibitions, but in the Mountain Area many residents are exempt from wood-burning prohibitions.

Because of the dry winter, Cal Fire sent out a release alerting residents that fire danger is above average across the Central Sierra and Cal Fire has suspended all burning in Eastern Madera County effective Jan. 9.

"Even though the area has experienced cooler temperatures and a little moisture, recent dry winds have brought back the danger of wildland fire," said Karen Guillemain, Fire Prevention Specialist II. "California lends itself to severe wildfire conditions year round with its unique climate and topography."

Some safety tips were also issued:

- Never dump hot or warm ashes from fire places or wood stoves onto dry vegetation, into a Dumpster or trash container.
- Although burning is an effective tool in the reduction of wild land fuels, if a homeowner has a fire escape their control they can be issued a citation (misdemeanor) and be required to pay fire suppression costs.
- Homeowners conducting hazard reduction burning are responsible for calling the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District at 1-877-429-2876 to determine if it is an approved burn day.

Guillemain said Cal fire and the Madera County Fire Department will continue to monitor and evaluate local fire weather conditions, and the burn suspension will be lifted as soon as conditions are safe to do so.

[Bakersfield Californian Editorial, Saturday, Jan. 14, 2012:](#)

### **CSUB not just a college; it's a 'green' mentor**

The southern San Joaquin Valley's primary university, Cal State Bakersfield, plays an important role in furthering the region's educational attainment and economic vitality, as it should. But CSUB, like many California universities, can, should and does make a difference in another often overlooked department: Green living.

In fact, CSUB (along with Bakersfield College) is setting the standard for green in Kern County, and other entities are beginning to pay attention.

Late last year, CSUB installed a new east-west bike path that runs through campus -- a project funded by a \$66,350 grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the university's fines and forfeitures fund. It is part of a long-term project at CSUB to decrease vehicle traffic and air emissions on campus.

The southwest Bakersfield campus is also coming up on the one-year anniversary of its new 1.2-megawatt solar parking canopy, a \$9.5 million solar system will provide between 25 and 30 percent of CSUB's energy. Other educational institutions are jumping on board that ship: The Bakersfield City School District is now exploring solar-panel options at some of its schools. Greenfield Union School

District is installing solar panels on the rooftops of most of its schools, which could result in savings of \$50,000 per year. Standard School District and Mojave Unified have also taken the solar step.

Hard as it may be for some to believe, separate receptacles for cans, bottles, paper and ordinary trash (such as food waste) are rare in Bakersfield. Not at CSUB. Recycling bins are common across campus -- and the school actively promotes awareness of the recycling habit. CSUB participates in the annual RecycleMania, a nationwide, student-led competition that pits colleges and universities in a contest to see who can reduce, reuse and recycle the most campus waste. It awards trophies made out of recycled materials to the winning schools.

Compare the recycling activism of CSUB and BC to other institutions around Bakersfield, including commercial enterprises such as high-traffic, high-visibility areas like Valley Plaza Mall. The popular shopping destination invites shoppers to toss their waste -- be it cans, bottles, paper or food waste -- into a single can.

CSUB and BC are doing the right thing by making their campuses green-friendly zones. We would love to see local businesses follow suit in greater number.

[Letters to the Fresno Bee](#)  
[Friday, Jan. 13, 2011](#)

### **Let me burn wood**

For sale: two cords firewood, oak. Excellent condition, seasoned and very dry. Stored in dry, covered area. Needs a good home. Paid \$400-plus. Must sell due to lack of use.

I know that the Valley does not have the best air, but come on now. There has not been one burn day since close to Thanksgiving. We are getting a little ridiculous with being told what we can and cannot do.

When I purchased my home with fireplace, I did not do so for looks. My family likes to cuddle up in the front room on a cold winter night and watch movies by the fire. But no, instead of using my fireplace once or twice a week, I have to heat my entire house because the government tells me I cannot burn.

I am beginning to wonder if PG&E is lining the pockets of the members on the Valley Air Board. It's time to say enough is enough. Allow wood burning a minimum of twice a week. I know that there are those who will tell me that I am ruining their air, but it's my air too. I pay taxes just like everyone else.

Mike Simmons  
Fresno

[Sunday, Jan. 15, 2012](#)

### **Amazing selfishness**

I try to practice patience and understanding of other viewpoints when discussing politics, religion or the Valley's dirty air. However, Mike Simmons (letter Jan. 13) has killed tolerance for such ignorant selfishness. Would I rather see the mountains and breathe cleaner air or see smoke bellowing out of his chimney and suck soot into my lungs?

I choose -- breathing cleaner air and seeing the mountains.

What a fine example he is for his children, teaching them to not consider how their negative actions will affect others. He wants to burn simply because he wants to "cuddle up in the front room on a cold winter night and watch movies by the fire." Concerning burn days and no burn days, every day in the Valley should be a no burn day.

I have two suggestions to solve this issue: He should build a dome around his house so he can burn whenever he wants to and only him and his family breathe in the dirty air he creates; or move out of the Valley.

Mr. Simmons should get his head out of the dirty air he helps create, and maybe it will clear his thinking.

Wendy Carraway  
Fresno

Monday, Jan. 16, 2012

### **Have some consideration**

I guess I should not be surprised by the selfishness of people like Mike Simmons (letter Jan. 13, "Let me burn wood"), but I always am. Apparently neither he nor anyone close to him has ever experienced the discomfort and frightening experience called asthma.

While he and his family can have a warm and cozy evening together watching a movie and enjoying their fireplace, those with asthma, emphysema, COPD and other related respiratory illnesses take their medication, do a breathing treatment or rush to the hospital for lifesaving measures to be taken and praying the whole time they won't lose their life.

I assure him, if it were him or his child going through this horrible experience every time a burn day is announced, and five to 10 residents eager for fireplace ambience light up the fire and the choking begins, he would be singing a different tune.

It is not just about Mr. Simmons' "family movie night." It is also about other people's right to breathe air that won't kill them. Please have a little consideration for other's right to live.

Sandy Spivey  
Clovis

Saturday, Jan. 14, 2012

### **Air quality challenges**

This week, articles by the Associated Press and Bee reporter Mark Grossi appeared, telling of the severe and growing threats of air pollution in the Valley, and related alert systems.

Record air pollution hammers California's agricultural heartland. Air pollution threatens our family's homes, workplaces and treasures such as Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks.

The articles included comments from Air District staff that indicate they are doing everything they can and that the situation is essentially a lost cause.

It is pertinent that the Air District strengthen its policy in the Valley to reduce the pollution that is so damaging to our health and the health of the natural resources we depend on.

The Air Board simply needs to begin insisting their staff propose adequate rules and regulations that address all sources of pollution, including major industrial sources.

Until they do so, we will continue to see this kind of negative attention and face negative ramifications to an area that is home to major food sources for the entire country, and some of our most precious natural, national treasures.

Emily Schrepf  
Member, National Parks Association and Central Valley Air  
Quality Coalition  
Fresno