

Weekend storm helps to clear Valley air

By Joshua Emerson Smith

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, January 24, 2012

The light storm over the weekend in the Central Valley has reduced air pollution in Merced County and surrounding areas. But it's not clear how long favorable conditions will last.

Air quality in Merced County has improved to "good" from "moderate" over the past few days, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's real-time air advisory network.

"Was this a huge storm? No. But did it clear out the area? Yes," said Jaime Holt, spokeswoman with the regional air district. "Fortunately the weather system that came through did have wind to it. We anticipate that system moving out of the Valley sometime (today) and a high pressure system building over the region. Hopefully there will be some light winds with that system."

Restrictions on burning wood have been lifted. But that could change as early as this weekend if more wind and rain doesn't come through.

"I would remind people that we've had this clear out, but that doesn't mean we can't see another building up," Holt said. "Just because we tell people it's OK to burn, doesn't mean they have to."

Over the weekend, Merced County saw rainfall up to 0.84 inches, according to the National Weather Service. The city of Merced and surrounding areas should see light wind and late-night dense fog through Saturday. There's no rain in the forecast for the rest of this week.

EPA's valley visit signals hope, officials say

By Kellie Schmitt, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Jan. 23 2012

A top U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official will travel to the Central Valley this week to discuss reducing diesel emissions as well as a strategic plan for meeting tough federal air goals.

The visit by regional administrator Jared Blumenfeld coincides with news the valley will receive \$5 million of \$21 million the EPA is allocating statewide to fund cleaner locomotives, school buses, trucks, ships and agricultural irrigation pumps.

"We believe a lot of the work we've done is paying off in terms of the level of attention the EPA is paying to the valley," said Sayed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The strategic plan will lay out how the district and EPA can work together to help the valley achieve federal air standards. It will also address some environmental justice issues, such low-income, mostly minority regions that shoulder a disproportionate share of the valley's bad air burden. Discussion on this could lead to more grant funding for air improvements in areas such as Arvin, he said.

Blumenfeld confirmed that improving the valley's air – and helping it meet federal air standards – is an important priority for the EPA.

"I think we're all trying to focus on one clear goal, which is to get valley residents the same air quality the rest of the nation has," he said. "The valley is an incredibly vital and important region to the country and we need to make sure its air quality is meeting federal standards."

While many people think those goals require new technology, Blumenfeld said existing technologies could bring the valley very close. Funding to retrofit heavy-duty trucks that emit diesel pollution throughout the valley would have a significant impact, he said.

But that might be easier said than done.

In the past year, the federal EPA has given the air district about \$11 million in funding but Sadredin estimates \$200 a million yearly is needed to adequately address the region's pollution.

Blumenfeld said he's read the letters to the editor of The Californian and gets a sense of the area's discouragement with air pollution that doesn't seem to improve. Still, he said he's optimistic about the commitment on every level of government to solve the problems of an area he described as "a national treasure" that deserves more attention.

"It's not a bleak picture for the San Joaquin Valley," he said. "I think we can get there."

Central Valley needs high speed rail

By Stephen Breacain

Manteca Bulletin, Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012

I fail to understand your irrational hatred for the idea of a high speed rail system in California, as expressed in your column today, and in many of your editorials in the past. As you put it, "Obviously people who want to go from downtown Los Angeles to downtown San Francisco and vice versa - think corporate types and political animals - will see high speed rail as a viable and reasonably priced alternative."

I am neither a "corporate type" nor a "political animal". I have family in Southern California, and I have spent many long hours on the road over the years, traveling to visit them. Yes, of course, if you took the train you would have to rent a vehicle when you reached your destination. You have to do the same thing now if you fly.

Your argument that a train system which is projected to carry 100 million passengers a year from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 2 1/2 hours for about \$100 per person is somehow an "elitist" form of transportation is odd, to say the least. When you compare the cost of a high speed train ticket to the cost and time required to drive, or fly, or take the bus, or even go by Amtrak, high speed rail looks like a great deal to me.

In the year 2000, Californians made half a billion trips between the state's various regions. The number of those trips is projected to double to 1 billion by 2030. Demands on our highway system and airports will only continue to grow as the state's population and economy grow. High speed electric trains would eventually connect San Francisco and Sacramento to San Diego, and upgrade connecting rail systems already in existence, reducing air pollution in the Central Valley. The system is projected to reduce the state's dependence on oil by 12.7 million barrels per year. Eleven countries around the world, including China, already have operating high speed rail systems. Are you telling me that the United States of America can't do it?

The construction and maintenance of these trains, the rail systems, the 24 train terminals spread across the train's route, and all of the ancillary projects involved in its development will create countless jobs over the decades, boost local economies, get more cars off the road and cut pollution in the Valley, as well as reducing the demand on air travel within our state. Some estimates project the creation of 600,000 construction jobs over the life of the project, and another 450,000 permanent jobs. That is considerably more than "a reasonable amount of (short term) uptick" in the job picture, as you characterized it in your editorial, and precisely what the residents and the economy of the Central Valley need.

Yes, a world class, safe comfortable, environmentally sustainable alternative to automobile or air travel will be expensive to build, but going into the 21st century with no plan to meet the state's mobility demands is not an option in my opinion.

State News Briefs

Manteca Bulletin, Monday, Jan. 23, 2012

JUDGE SENDS CALIF OZONE PLAN BACK FOR REVISION: FRESNO (AP) — State and local air pollution districts in California's Central Valley must come up with a new plan to meet ozone emission standards after a federal appeals court ruled that the data used was out of date.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved the plan in 2010. But Earthjustice sued arguing that the plan and emission projections didn't match reality. To measure diesel emissions,

the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District had considered where trucks were registered — not whether they drove through the region.

On Friday, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the EPA's decision to use that data was "arbitrary and capricious."

Officials say the agency will need at least two years to rewrite a new plan for reducing the lung-damaging pollutant.

Judge: EPA must revisit ozone plan

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, Jan. 23, 2012

HANFORD — The San Joaquin Valley remains the most dangerous place to breathe, with Hanford, Visalia and Bakersfield topping the list of cities with the worst air quality in the country. But activists and concerned local residents won the latest round in their push to clean up the area's ozone pollution.

Clean air advocacy groups prevailed in a lawsuit Friday in the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The court concluded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ignored recent air pollution data when it approved the Valley air district's plan to meet the one-hour ozone standard.

Calling EPA's action "arbitrary and capricious," Circuit Judge Ronald Gould ordered the agency to revisit its 2010 approval of the 2004 compliance plan for the Valley.

"What this decision does, I hope, is send a wake-up call that these plans are supposed to mean something, and EPA just can't pretend as if there's no real obligation to consider up-to-date information or consider what's going on in the real world," said Paul Cort, staff attorney for Earthjustice, which sued EPA on behalf of a coalition of activist groups led by the Sierra Club and Medical Advocates for Clean Air.

"If EPA and the air district get that message, maybe we can actually start making some progress in both L.A. and the Valley," he added.

The plan in question, adopted in 2004 by the air district, was supposed to reduce enough ozone pollution in the Valley to meet the 2010 deadline. But EPA approved the plan after six years, just a few months before that 2010 ozone deadline. When the agency approved it, it knew the plan underestimated the amount of air pollution in the region, but chose not to consider that data.

"[We] should not silently rubber-stamp agency action that is arbitrary and capricious in its reliance on old data without meaningful comment on the significance of more current compiled data," Gould wrote in his opinion.

Dirty air finally caught up with the Valley in 2010, when its perennial ozone standard violation triggered a \$29 million federal air pollution penalty.

Because the air district did not want to pass the burden onto major industrial sources with fees, Valley motorists are on the hook for a \$12 charge tacked onto their vehicle registration fees to cover the \$29 million fine. They are stuck with the same fee this year and in 2013.

[Modesto Bee Guest Commentary, Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012:](#)

OLSEN: State transportation cuts unfair to rural students

By Kristin Olsen

Two young kids. One attending a school in Escalon and one attending a school in San Francisco. Aren't their lives of equal value? Don't they both deserve the same opportunities for education? Apparently not because the education trigger cuts pulled by Gov. Brown last month result in taking \$132 from the Escalon student but only \$36 from the student in San Francisco.

Last month, California became the first state to completely eliminate transportation funding for schools. Funding for many programs has had to be reduced or eliminated over the last few years

in order to deal with California's budget crisis, but this cut to home-to-school transportation unfairly targets students in rural areas.

Rural students rely heavily on home-to-school transportation; most of their families are unable to provide transportation themselves due to the far distance they live from school, conflicting work schedules, or lack of access to transit options.

In some rural districts, up to 90 percent of rural students rely on home-to-school transportation. If a rural school chooses to continue providing transportation to and from school, they will likely have to take money from the classroom.

Some of the highest transportation cuts per student are in rural districts and the inequity is astounding. The Sacramento Bee reported that the Milbrae Elementary School District in San Mateo County will lose \$1 per student in state transportation funding, while Desert Center Unified in Riverside County will lose \$2,216 per student.

According to the California School Board Association, some schools in the Central Valley will see cuts as high as \$145 per student (San Joaquin County) and \$242 per student (Stanislaus County), while wealthy, urban school districts such as Piedmont City Unified, Beverly Hills Unified and San Marino Unified will have a less than \$5 per student cut.

The impact of these disproportionate cuts could affect student safety since many of the students in rural areas live long distances from their schools, and there are often no sidewalks, no regional transportation, and no bicycle lanes along rural roads.

In the valley, most students live more than a mile from their school campus. In the Eastern Sierra Unified School District, some students trek 35 miles to school.

Additionally, if the cuts to school transportation do result in more students being driven to and from school, [it will mean more vehicles on the road which will add to the air quality](#) challenges already affecting the valley. And for the families driving students, it will mean increased costs for gasoline and car maintenance, a difficult burden for lower-income parents.

California continues to face tough economic times and the state cannot afford to fund all the programs we did in the past. We should strive to protect education, but any cuts that are made should be equitable for schools and students throughout the state. The home-to-school transportation cut should either be replaced with a non-education cut or at least restructured to be an equal cut per student for all school districts.

This would require that schools absorb a \$42 cut per student, but it would be fair and would maintain balance across the state.

Leaving rural and low-income districts to bear the brunt of these transportation cuts sends a message that not all kids deserve equal opportunities, and will be devastating for families and students in those communities. I urge the governor and my colleagues in the Legislature to make fixing this inequity a priority in January.

Olsen, R-Modesto, represents the 25th Assembly District, which includes many rural school districts in eastern Stanislaus, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa counties.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012:](#)

You can improve air

The air quality in the Valley is at its absolute worst. Weather reports are stating that the air hasn't been this bad in the Valley in 20 years. Those suffering from asthma or other similar disorders are having trouble breathing in their homes.

The high percentage of pollutants in our air is one of the highest contributing factors causing Fresno to have one of the highest asthma rates in the nation. If those who live in the Valley could quit burning on no-burn days, stop idling their cars when they can be turned off, and would walk rather than drive to their locations, the Valley's air quality would improve greatly.

Courtney Busick, Fresno