

Dusty air triggers air quality alert

By Courtenay Edelhart, staff writer

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The Bakersfield area got very little of the rainfall that was expected in the region Wednesday, but got enough wind to prompt an air quality warning from local air-pollution officials.

The "healthy cautionary statement" was issued for the valley portion of Kern County, as well as Kings, Fresno and Tulare counties. It remained in effect from Wednesday afternoon to Wednesday night.

At the other end of the spectrum, the National Weather Service issued a Winter Weather Advisory until 5 a.m. Thursday for the Tehachapi area as low pressure brought thunderstorms and gusting winds. Possible snow showers were predicted for elevations above 6,000 feet.

But the rest of the county was draped with dust.

"The dust is due to gusty winds," said Ana Reyes, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Exposure to particulate pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections, she said.

The sky was brown in parts of Bakersfield, and it was hard to see objects in the distance.

Conditions spoiled several outdoor sports events.

Two high school tennis matches were canceled: Bakersfield versus Centennial, and Independence versus Liberty.

The Southwest Yosemite League, which has six schools, cut short its girls' golf tournament at Mifflin-Buena Vista Golf Course near Taft after eight holes. The remaining holes will be played at a later date.

The league also canceled its cross country meet at Yokuts Park.

Bakersfield High School Cross Country Coach Steven Anderson said he was disappointed.

"It actually might have been a good day to run," he said. "It was nice and cool for a change."

The high at Meadows Field airport was 69 degrees on Wednesday, compared with an average temperature of 83 this time of year.

Rain might have helped clear the air, but it mostly failed to materialize.

"You got dry westerly wind blowing into Bakersfield, which blew all the rain out," said NWS meteorologist Jim Dudley.

Gusts were up to 60 miles per hour around Twisselman Road, he said. Pretty much any dirt that wasn't paved or irrigated was kicked up and strewn about, he said.

Kern County has been particularly susceptible to dust storms because of the lack of rainfall over the past year.

Between July 2012 and June 2013, just 3.15 inches of rain fell in Bakersfield, 48 percent of normal.

Since July, there's been almost no rain at all, but that's not unusual because, typically, the rainy season doesn't begin until late October or early November.

There were spots where it at least drizzled, though. Arvin got some rain, and so did northeast Bakersfield and Tehachapi, but it was all "trace amounts," Dudley said.