

Storm could clear out San Joaquin Valley air gunk

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star Thursday, Dec. 19, 2013

Dangerous soot levels continued Wednesday morning in Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern counties, but a storm forecast Thursday could make breathing a little easier.

For the last eight days, the Valley has been under siege from high levels of soot and other debris that can trigger asthma and heart problems.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District earlier this week advised residents to check hourly updates online and stay inside as much as possible.

"This is related to the dry winter we're having," said air district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "We've had no cleansing wind or storms. This is affecting the whole Valley."

However, a northwest wind of 10 to 20 mph is expected Thursday. There is a slight chance of rain in the Fresno area. But the storm probably won't clear out enough pollution to make a big difference, the National Weather Service reported.

Microscopic pollution specks dominated the atmosphere on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in the Valley. The Valley had the nation's worst particle pollution, known as PM-2.5, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's website.

At 8 a.m. Wednesday, Visalia's air monitor showed 130 parts of soot per cubic meter of air -- the threshold is 35 parts per cubic meter averaged over a full day. Fresno, Hanford and Bakersfield had readings higher than 100 parts per cubic meter.

Such soot levels are considered very unhealthy, even for adults with no lung problems. Children, senior citizens and those with sensitive lungs are more vulnerable to the pollution.

The tiny specks of pollution come from fireplaces, diesel engines, cars and other sources. The pollution has been building in the stagnant Valley air for more than a week.

Doctors in Fresno reported seeing patients with complaints of coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath because of the bad air.

Over the last several days, air district leaders have been prohibiting wood burning in fireplaces for many parts of the Valley. Holt said this is among the more intense PM-2.5 episodes in the last few years.

People who violate the no-burn orders could be cited and fined. More than 125 notices of violation have been written Valleywide this year through Tuesday, compared to 78 at this point last year. The fine for violating the no-burn order is \$50.

Hold your breath: Air pollution on the rise

Lack of rainfall, residential wood burning blamed for particulate threat

By Joe Johnson

The Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Dec. 19, 2013

HANFORD — Poor air quality has been a problem Valleywide for close to a week now, enough that local schools have canceled sporting events and practice as a safety precaution.

It's not just Christmas in the air: Fine particulate matter levels have surged through the roof, putting Kings County on the "very unhealthy" end of the air-pollution scale.

Anthony Presto, spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, says nothing short of a strong rainstorm will fix the problem.

"The only way to clean the air is to wash it out with rain and wind," Presto said. "If we don't get a major weather system in here soon, we won't be seeing much improvement."

Particulate pollution is made up of tiny particles like dust, ash and soot that can become lodged in the lungs and cause health problems.

To put it in perspective: The district considers any particulate count above 75 to be very unhealthy. Kings County peaked at 136 on Wednesday.

“We have one stage past very unhealthy, which we call hazardous,” Presto said. “We’ve never reached that. But this is definitely the worst we’ve seen so far this season.”

So where is it all coming from? It’s not the fire up in Big Sur, Presto says. Instead, it’s people building fires in their homes to combat the cool temperatures.

Wood burning is currently prohibited in Kings County, as well as the other eight counties in the Valley basin.

The district recommends refraining from outdoor exertion while the health warning remains in effect.

Those wishing to check on the air quality can do so through the district’s website at www.valleyair.org, by calling 1-800-766-4463 or through the district’s iPhone app.

“If you can smell smoke, then it is entering your lungs,” Presto said. “Try to remove yourself from situations like that. Don’t spend any more time outdoors than necessary. Other than that, just hope we get some rainfall soon.”

Bad air may stay in Tulare County Storm system arriving today could help

By Kyle Harvey

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, December 19, 2013

The Valley’s air is bad — really bad.

Wednesday marked the third consecutive day that air quality officials declared the air to be unhealthy for not just sensitive groups, but for the population at large. Air quality lows recorded this week were only equaled once this year, in September.

Why?

There are billions of tiny reasons for the Valley’s worst week of air in at least a year — collectively they’re called particulate matter (PM). This week, the amount of particulate matter — measured in micrograms per cubic meter — is more than three times the federal public health standard, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

While there is no single reason for the buildup of particulate matter, bitter cold weather  last week followed by a stagnant weather pattern is perhaps the most to blame, said SJVAPCD spokesperson Heather Heinks.

“We don’t need to point a finger at anyone. We’re not any dirtier than we were last year, but what we emit is being trapped,” she said. “Everything that was created when we were cold is still here with us.”

The particulate matter that is of the most concern to public health is called PM 2.5. The number indicates the size of the particle. PM of this particular size is associated with wood smoke and emissions from combustion engines.

Because of this, the public is prohibited from using wood-burning fireplaces and is asked to avoid excessive driving until the air clears.

From a health standpoint, officials cautioned the public against participating in any sort of strenuous activity outdoors for the next several days. Particulate matter is associated with cold-like symptoms, such as coughing, sore throats, swollen glands and irritated eyes.

A clue you may be suffering from significant exposure to particulate matter, Heinks said, is if you have allergy-like symptoms, but nothing’s blooming.

The Times-Delta/ Advance-Register reported Wednesday that all of the West Yosemite League high school soccer openers scheduled for Tuesday were postponed on account of the poor air. School officials will make a decision this morning regarding games left to be played this week.

Storm system

A storm system slated to arrive Thursday may alleviate some of what ails Tulare County air. The air district has lowered the air quality forecast for today from unhealthy to moderate.

But unfortunately for many sensitive groups, the storm's effects will be short lived. As of Wednesday afternoon, current weather models do not call for sufficient atmospheric movement to completely clear the air.

Poor air quality lingers in San Joaquin Valley basin

By Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Thursday, Dec. 19, 2013

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY — Poor air quality Valleywide continues as the air basin lingers under a high-pressure system that has kept emissions from escaping, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said in a news release Wednesday.

The eight counties of the air basin have been under wood-burning prohibitions for several days and local air officials discourage residents from using wood-burning devices unless they are exempt from curtailments.

An active weather system – with rain and wind – is required to disperse accumulated pollutants.

Although a system is expected to pass through the Valley today, officials are not confident it will be strong enough to clean the air.

Daily wood-burning and air-quality forecasts are issued each day at 4:30 p.m. for the following day.

Forecasts can be found at www.valleyair.org and at (800) 766-4463.