

The cost of bad air in the Central Valley Pollution hits your pocketbook and your health

By Kyle Harvey

Visalia Times-Delta, Sun., Sep. 1, 2013

We all know the Valley's hot summer conditions bring significant hardship. Whether it's your electricity bill, or the extremely hot steering wheel every time you get in your car, we all look forward to the end of the triple digit temperatures. But heat also presents an increased risk of air pollution, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

And that pollution will hit you in more ways than one — first your health, and then your wallet.

What ozone means to your wallet

Ozone, which is a chemical cocktail of emissions cooked by high heat, is a matter of significant concern to the Environmental Protection Agency during the summer months.

The concern is so great that Valley drivers — as well as businesses that contribute significant levels of emissions — have been collectively paying out \$29 million in annual fines over the last three years — penance for the Valley's stubbornly high ozone levels, according to the air district. Individuals have paid in the form of a \$12 increase in vehicle registration fees. The formula for what businesses pay is much more complicated.

The good news however, is the air district reports that our air quality — at least as it pertains to ozone levels — is steadily improving.

The end of summer marks the end of a three-year penalty period, and if our air continues to stay below the legal ozone limit, the fines we all pay — or at least the way they are collected — could come to an end.

Air officials say the millions of dollars collected in fines have gone toward incentivizing green energy solutions for businesses, vehicles and other sources of pollutants. For a complete list of the financial incentives offered by the air district, visit valleyair.org/grants.

How ozone affects your health

According to the EPA website, ozone is associated with problems in the body's respiratory system. The primary physiological effect of ozone is a reduced lung capacity. Other effects include coughing, throat irritation, painful breathing and shortness of breath.

Air district officials said that ozone is of particular concern to sensitive groups of people who have asthma or emphysema.

Asthma is a part of life for about 69,000 people in Tulare County, including more than 21 percent of children, according to a 2009 survey by California Breathing, a division of the California Department of Public Health's Environmental Health Investigations Branch.

The timeline going forward

The first step towards ending the ozone-related fines is getting through the next six weeks without major ozone spikes at any of the Valley's 30 ozone monitors.

Each of the monitors is only permitted three ozone overages — known officially as "exceedances" — in a three year period. If one of them has four, we all pay.

Wildfires like the Fish Fire and the Rim Fire may appear to pose risks to our chances of keeping an ozone-free environment, but Heinks said otherwise.

"We've been very fortunate so far — not Nevada so much — the weather pattern is very favorable," she said. "Smoke is not hitting the valley floor."

While wildfires do not directly produce ozone, Jaime Holt, chief communications officer for the air district, said that any type of combustion produces nitrogen oxide, which is one of the major contributors to the chemical cocktail that makes up ozone. If we make it through the next several

weeks without a spike, the next step involves an appeal for a fourth ozone spike that occurred in August 2012. Because the exceedance occurred during a major wildfire, air quality officials are confident that the appeal they have filed will be approved.

But the process of appeal, successful or not, will take time — possibly a year, Heinks said.

If and when the Valley's appeal is granted for the ozone exceedance during the wildfire, the fines would expire and the question would then turn to how — or if — funding would continue for the numerous green energy incentives currently offered by the air district that rely on the fines for funding. The district has spent \$87 million on them over the past three years.

Fight against ozone begins in parking lots

Air district officials said the primary battleground in their war on ozone in the next six weeks and beyond is the Valley's 1,600 schools. As school gets under way, the number of vehicle miles traveled increases on account of all the back and forth trips to schools. Furthermore, many thousands of vehicles across the Valley idle while waiting for children in the morning and afternoon.

Air district officials say the emission from these vehicles contributes to ozone spikes in August and September that could threaten our ability to finish out the summer season without an ozone exceedance.

And besides the potential financial consequences of an ozone spike, children's health is at risk where ozone is present.

"There is a localized impact of exhaust — either small or large depending on the age of the vehicle," Holt said. "Kids are breathing it in before it can disperse."

The air district has reached out to the school districts to provide air alerts and warnings.

School districts in Tulare and Visalia receive a report of the air quality index every morning, according to district officials. The district then notifies all sites of the conditions and schools post flags that represent various air quality levels.

Based on the color of the flag, districts may take measures to limit outdoor physical activity.

According to the air district, a green flag means there are no restrictions to activity. A yellow flag indicates the air district recommends that schools pay special attention to children with asthma and other respiratory issues and be ready to help them manage their conditions.

An orange flag advises sensitive individuals to exercise indoors and avoid vigorous outdoor activity. Athletic practice and sporting events are to offer more breaks and substitutions. A red flag recommends exercise and outdoor activities, such as recess for elementary schools or PE classes, be moved indoors or limited to 15 minutes outdoors. At level five — represented by a purple flag — all activities should be moved indoors and events are to be rescheduled.

"We do take it seriously," Tericia Grissom, district nurse for Tulare City Schools, said. "It's not worth taking the risks with the kids."

This sentiment was shared by district officials in Visalia Unified School District and Tulare Joint Union High School District. They said they work with students with asthma to ensure they are safe on poor air quality days.

What you can do to help

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District recommends several lifestyle changes that they say will help reduce ozone, especially during the past six weeks of the current three year probation period. All statistics also come from the air district.

1) Don't sit idling your vehicle when it's not necessary. Idling for more than 10 seconds uses more fuel than turning off your engine and restarting it. On the emission side, idling for four minutes produces the same amount of emission as driving one mile. So by turning your engine off as you

wait for your child, you will not only reduce the amount of emission your vehicle emits, but you'll save gas as well.

2) Parents — Get involved in a rotating car pool at your kids school. Are there multiple families on your block who all drop off at the same place? Drive together!

3) Better yet, if you live close to your children's school(s), walk. Studies have shown that 43 percent of children driven to school in private vehicles live within a mile of their school.

4) Check out your lawnmower. If your mower is older than your adult children, it's probably time to get a new one. Not only are there newer gas-powered mowers that burn much cleaner, there are all-electric models that run on re-chargeable batteries which don't produce any emissions.

How you pay for ozone

If you own a car, ozone has been costing you money every time you pay for your vehicle registration. For the past three years, all counties in the San Joaquin Valley have shelled out \$29 million per year as penance for the excess ozone measured in our air during the mid-2000s. About half of that amount is paid out by businesses which have a high emission contributions, and the other half comes from an additional \$12 fee for vehicle registration, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Rim Fire sends smoke onto Valley floor

Visalia Times-Delta, Mon., Sep. 2, 2013

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a cautionary warning for those in Visalia, Tulare and especially the foothill and mountain communities.

The warning is a result of the smoke drifting over from the Rim Fire, which has charred more than 200,000 acres near Yosemite National Park.

Portions of Kings and Kern counties could also be affected by the smoke, according to the warning.

The fine-particulate matter from the smoke can cause serious health problems, including lung disease, asthma attacks and an increased risk for heart attacks and strokes, according to the the air district.

Older adults and children should limit their time outside.

For information on current air quality, call 230-6000.