

Beijing, China Air Pollution Hits Hazardous Levels

By DIDI TANG

The Huffington Post, Saturday, January 12, 2013

BEIJING (AP) — Air pollution readings in China's notoriously polluted capital were at dangerously high levels for the second straight day Saturday, with hazy skies blocking visibility and authorities urging people to stay indoors.

Local officials warned that the severe pollution in Beijing — reportedly the worst since the local government began collecting data a year ago — was likely to continue until Tuesday.

The Beijing Municipal Environmental Monitoring Center said on its website that the density of PM2.5 particulates had reached 700 micrograms per cubic meter in many parts of the city, a level considered extremely hazardous.

By 5 p.m., the center's real-time reporting showed the air quality indexes at or approaching the maximum 500 from some monitoring stations. The index runs from zero to 500 and accounts for the level of airborne PM 2.5 particulates — tiny particles considered the most harmful to health.

Generally, the air quality is considered good when the index is at 50 or below, and hazardous with an index between 301 and 500, when people are warned to avoid outdoor physical activities. Those with respiratory problems, the elderly and children are asked to stay indoors.

The air started to turn bad on Thursday, and monitors in Beijing reported air quality indexes above 300 by Friday. The monitoring center said Saturday that the pollution was expected to linger for the next three days and urged residents, especially the most vulnerable, to stay home as much as possible.

The air quality data are the worst in Beijing since the municipal government began to track PM2.5 early last year, said Zhou Rong of the environmental organization Green Peace.

Monitors at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing recorded an off-the-chart air-quality reading of 755 at 8 p.m. Saturday and said the PM2.5 density had reached 886 micrograms per cubic meter. It was unclear whether the embassy's data were the worst since it began collecting and sharing such information in 2008.

Readings are often different in different parts of Beijing. Chinese authorities and the United States also have different ways to calculate the air quality index, although their indexes are "highly similar" at the two ends of the spectrum, said Ma Jun, founder of the nongovernmental Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs in Beijing.

Air pollution is a major problem in China due to the country's rapid pace of industrialization, reliance on coal power, explosive growth in car ownership and disregard to environmental laws. It typically gets worse in the winter because of heating needs.

In Beijing, authorities have blamed foggy conditions and a lack of wind for the high concentration of air pollutants.

Several other cities, including Tianjin on the coast east of Beijing and southern China's Wuhan city, also reported severe pollution over the last several days.

Snow survey results show higher water levels than last year

By Tiffany Tuell

Sierra Star, Thursday, Jan. 10, 2013

Snow surveyors were out measuring the snowpack last Wednesday, Jan. 2 with much more promising results than last year.

Manual and electronic readings statewide showed water content at 134% -- 49% of the average April 1 measurement (when the snowpack is normally at its peak). This time last year the water content was only 19% -- 7% of the April 1 average.

Electronic readings for the central Sierra are 133% of normal average to do and half the April 1 average. Last year the central Sierra was at 13% normal and only 5% of the April 1 average.

According to the Department of Water Resources, the snowpack normally provides about a third of the water for California's homes, farms and industries as it melts into streams, reservoirs and aquifers in the spring and early summer.

In addition to above average water content in the snowpack, early storms this season have replenished California's reservoirs. Millerton Lake is currently at 58% capacity, 108% of average for the date.

"We are off to a good water supply start for the new year, but we have to remember that we have seen wet conditions suddenly turn dry more than once," said DWR spokesman Ted Thomas. "We know from experience that California is a drought-prone state, and that we must always practice conservation."

Rainfall is also much higher this year than last year. Recorded as one of the driest winters on record, last year the area had only received 4.74 inches of rain at this time. This year it has already received 10.77 inches year-to-date for the season July 1-June 30 according to Lisa Dow, at the U.S. Forest Service offices in North Fork. The historic season average is 32 inches.

The wetter winter is not only a benefit to California's water, but also the air. Because of all the precipitation, the air has been more clear resulting in fewer no burn days according to Janelle Schneider, public information representative for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

However Schneider says they still encourage people to not use wood burning stoves unless they are a home's only source of heat or the home doesn't have gas -- both exemptions to wood burning prohibitions.

"We really try to discourage people from unnecessary burning," Schneider said. "Even if it's a day when wood burning is allowed, we encourage people not to burn because it really keeps the air quality that much better."

Schneider said during the winter, particulate pollution is major problem that is extremely harmful to our health, especially fine particulate matter -- wood burning is a significant source -- that can get into the blood stream. Fine particulate matter is correlated with with heart attacks and strokes and causes respiratory disease, lung infections and bronchitis.

More information about air quality can be found at www.valleyair.org

Central Valley Air District ag workshops will focus on grants

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, January 10, 2013

The Central Valley Air District will host eight workshops designed to assist farmers in replacing their old agriculture equipment.

Staff from the Air District's USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service will help applicants find grants for new tractors, plows, agriculture pumps and mobile farm equipment.

The series of workshops, each about two hours, begin Monday and go through Thursday.

Monday: Hanford, Fresno

Tuesday: Stockton, Modesto

Wednesday: Merced, Madera

Thursday: Bakersfield, Tulare

For information on specific locations and times, visit www.valleyair.org or call 559-230-6000.