

Dry winter brings bad air to Central Valley

Associated Press

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Sunday, January 26, 2014

The winter air is so bad in the Central Valley that even healthy people are being urged to stay indoors.

Such warnings typically are broadcast in the summer and are aimed at the elderly, children and people with breathing problems. But a haze of fine particles has cloaked the skies from Stockton to Bakersfield this winter because a stubborn high-pressure ridge parked off the West Coast has prevented storms from cleaning the air.

There's no rain in sight and the forecast calls for temperatures in the low 70s through Saturday.

Saturday's high of 72 topped the record 68 degrees set in 2007 and exceeded the average, which is 56 degrees, according to the Modesto Irrigation District. Friday reached 74 degrees in downtown Modesto, topping 68 in 1976, according to Weather Underground.

The season rain total stands at 1.74 inches. Average rainfall in January is 2.36 inches, but there hasn't even been a sprinkle this month. As of today, downtown Modesto has gone 50 days without rain.

The state's agricultural heartland is no stranger to air pollution. It is home to farms and oil fields, and trucks rumble through the region daily. But this winter is the most polluted on record.

Skies are filled with microscopic, chemical-laden particles that can get lodged in the lungs and absorbed into the bloodstream to create health risks in everyone. Children rarely ventured out for recess. Doctors urged patients to stay inside. Even outdoor types are told to limit their activities.

Kellie Townsend, who works at California State University, Fresno, initially exercised indoors. But after several weeks, she took up running again.

"I'm scared. I can feel that something isn't right. I can feel the tightness in my chest," she told the Los Angeles Times. "But I get tense when I'm inside too long."

Dr. Pat Golden, a Fresno cardiologist, told his patients to stay indoors for nearly two months. But he recently took a walk outside.

"I prefer not to see what I'm breathing, and you can see this air," he told the newspaper. "But I don't know how to quantify the risk. I balance it against my peace of mind from being outside and moving my leg muscles. It's a terrible choice to have to make."

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board said the region would have clean winter air if it weren't for the drought.

Earlier this month, the board's executive director, Seyed Sadredin, noted that other regions in the state have seen dirty air that exceeded federal health standards. The group has long maintained that the Central Valley should not be penalized for failing to meet federal clean air standards, in part because some of the pollution is wafted from elsewhere, including China.

Air quality advocates said the Central Valley needs to stop blaming others.

"It's building up and not blowing away because we need rain. But we've created every bit of what we're breathing right now. We can't blame San Francisco or China," clean air activist Tom Frantz said. "What we're seeing is what's ours to change."

Forest Service prescribed burn continues south of Shaver Lake

By Carmen George, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Sat., Jan. 25, 2014

A prescribed burn is continuing south of Shaver Lake in the Blue Canyon area near Barnes Mountain, officials with the Sierra National Forest's High Sierra Ranger District said.

The prescribed burn was ignited in late November and was mostly inactive throughout most of December and January. Dry conditions rekindled the fire on Jan. 22, officials said.

The burn is primarily intended to keep the forest healthy and reduce the intensity of other potential fires, officials said. However, this blaze is also part of an ongoing, two-year research project to study the habitat of Pacific Fisher dens and how they respond to fire.

Unlike wildfire, prescribed burns are ignited and managed under very specific weather conditions, and closely monitored to reduce the spread and intensity of flames. Fire crews are on scene to make sure the fire stays within determined boundaries.

Smoke from the fire may be visible from Highway 168 along the four-lanes section at about 4,000 foot elevation, as well from Burrough Valley and the central San Joaquin Valley on clear days.

The High Sierra Ranger District is working closely with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board to minimize smoke impacts to communities.

For more information or questions, contact district fire management officer Carolyn Ballard or fire specialist Tomas Gonzalez at the High Sierra Ranger Station in Prather at (559) 855-5355.

Yokohl Ranch project moving, albeit slowly

By Lewis Griswold, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Sat., Jan. 25, 2014

The controversial Yokohl Ranch Co. "new town" project for scenic Yokohl Valley east of Visalia is coming back to life after disappearing in the recession -- but not as quickly as originally expected.

Dave Bryant, special projects planner at Tulare County, said last week that the county recently received word from company officials that a draft environment impact report will be delivered next year instead of early this year.

"They are completing technical studies," Bryant said.

A traffic report, noise studies, air quality estimates, biological studies and water supply assessment are being done, he said.

Much of Yokohl Valley, site of Yokohl cattle ranch, is owned by J.G. Boswell Co.

Unveiled seven years ago, the housing project envisions a 36,000-acre town of 10,000 homes and 30,000 people that would be built in phases over 25 to 30 years.

According to the company, much of the land would remain undeveloped, but environmentalists say development in the foothills would cause loss of habitat and air pollution from cars.

Winds disrupt water service in Arvin

By John Cox, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Jan 25, 2014

Another day of record warm weather caused trouble in Kern County Friday as a wind-blown tree forced Arvin residents to get by with little or no tap water, and dry, dusty conditions raised concerns about wildfire risks and limited driver visibility.

Winds let up considerably by late afternoon, and the National Weather Service raised hopes that a shift in the local climate pattern could bring light precipitation within 10 days.

That may be little comfort to Arvin residents whose faucets stopped running at about 8 p.m. Thursday after strong winds uprooted a tree that happened to stand over a water main on the south side of Comanche Drive about a block east of Bear Mountain Boulevard.

That same day, winds knocked over a tree at Bakersfield College, injuring a student who had to be hospitalized.

The Arvin tree's lifted roots caused a leak in the 6-inch diameter plastic pipeline. Officials with the Arvin Community Services District said a few hundred customers went without water while several hundred more made do with low water pressure. State and county health officials, however, said the number of affected residents numbered 18,000.

A utility crew worked through the night to remove the tree and replace a 15-foot section of pipeline. They were able to restore water service by mid-afternoon Friday.

The utility joined public health officials in warning residents about the potential for bacterial contamination resulting from the stoppage. They advised residents to boil and then cool water before drinking it to avoid stomach or intestinal illnesses.

"Boiling water kills any potential bacteria and other organisms in the water," Matt Constantine, the Kern County Public Health Services Department director, said in a news release issued Friday afternoon.

Before water service was restored, a Clinica Sierra Vista office next to the broken main had to bring in a pair of portable toilets and a hand-washing station for patients and staff.

Although Clinica CEO Steve Schilling said at about noon Friday that he was growing impatient with the water stoppage, he was glad the clinic was able to continue serving clients.

"We're in business," he said.

Thursday and Friday's high winds and dry conditions prompted the National Weather Service to call a blowing dust advisory for drivers and a red flag warning because of the risk of wildfire. Both were set to expire at 9 p.m. Friday.

The agency said Friday's high of 79 degrees in Bakersfield set a new record for the day. The previous record, set in 1946, was 77 degrees.

A meteorologist at the weather service's Hanford office, Cindy Bean, said there were signs the high pressure system of the last few weeks — whose shifts brought on the winds — could give way to precipitation in early February.

But she cautioned that it remains far from certain whether the dry spell will end soon. And even if it does, she said, don't expect a lot of precipitation.

"(Changing weather systems) may bring us some light rain, light snow but certainly ... nothing real significant at this point," she said.

Thursday's winds kicked up enough dust to temporarily create near-foglike conditions along Highway 99 and other area arteries. And many worried about the dangers of breathing the dust-filled air.

But the news wasn't all bad.

While Thursday's high winds created dusty conditions, they appear to be responsible for significantly reducing concentrations of PM2.5, the ultra-fine particles of soot, aerosols and other materials that have been present in Bakersfield at unhealthy levels for weeks.

All day Friday, at least through 5 p.m., an air monitor in central Bakersfield showed PM2.5s in the "good" range, below 12 micrograms per cubic meter of air. In recent weeks, such a reading has been unheard of.

While the real-time data produced by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is considered preliminary, it appears the wind and the unsettled weather may have brought at least one benefit.

Dust blankets Bakersfield as temperature reaches record high

By Laura Liera, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Jan 24, 2014

Motorists turned their heads as Kevin Wilcocks rode his forest green bike north on Oak Street. A light blue medical mask covered his mouth and nose to keep him from inhaling the blowing, dirty dust that unexpectedly hit Bakersfield Thursday morning.

“Being outside or with your car window rolled down with this air quality is really, really bad,” 36-year-old Wilcocks said. “But this mask helps me.”

Riding home from a doctor’s appointment — using his bike because it’s his only mode of transportation — Wilcocks was already experiencing what the National Weather Service was saying: The dust was bad.

The NWS in Hanford issued a blowing dust advisory for Kern County at about 10:05 a.m. after winds whipped through the Kern River Canyon, topping 40 miles per hour. The advisory was for the west-central and southern San Joaquin Valley, and, extends through Friday.

“The winds were supposed to pick up this afternoon, but they picked up faster than we thought,” NWS meteorologist Gary Sanger said at about 1:30 p.m.

Early in the afternoon, dust blew at about 40 miles per hour at Meadows Field Airport. At the foot of the Grapevine, winds were at about 50 miles per hour.

The drought is making conditions worse.

“There is no vegetation to hold the dust in place because of the lack of water in the ground,” Sanger said.

Along with the dust, the temperature was unseasonably warm.

Bakersfield on Thursday set a temperature record for the date. The high reached 79 degrees at Meadows Field Airport by 4 p.m., breaking the previous record high for Jan. 23 of 77 degrees set in 1970, the meteorologist said.

It’s forecast to be cloudy in Bakersfield for the next seven days, with no precipitation predicted.

The dust stirred up health concerns.

Dr. Claudia Jonah, Kern County health officer, said residents should be concerned about the dust, especially with the chance of valley fever exposure. With winds so strong, the spores can blow long distances.

“This is a concern for the potential aggravation of chronic health problems, like valley fever, emphysema, and other respiratory problems,” Jonah said.

Even people who stay inside could be hurt by the dust as it enters homes and workplaces.

“Moisten the dirt on your countertops because if you just wipe it dry, the dust particles will end up in the air inside your home and you’ll be inhaling it,” Jonah said.

Jaime Holt, chief communications officer for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the dust kicks up unhealthy particulate matter and people should avoid the outdoors.

“If you’re outside, you are going to breathe in particulate matter or it will get in your eyes, nose, and it will cause problems,” Holt said.

There’s no simple or safe way to avoid being exposed to the blowing dust, but Holt recommends at least putting your hand in front of your mouth if you are just walking quickly to your car.

“Dust is not meant to be inhaled,” Holt said.

Gusty winds prompt air officials to issue dust caution

Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Friday, January 24, 2014

Gusty winds have prompted local air-pollution officials to issue a health cautionary statement through Friday for the western and southern portions of the San Joaquin Valley due to kicked-up dust.

“Winds may add to the burden of particulate matter already in the air basin and produce areas of localized blowing dust, which can result in unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller (PM10),” The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said in a news release. “Exposure to

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

“Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors’ advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on their local conditions.”

For more information, visit www.valleyair.org or call the Modesto district office at (209) 557-6400.

Electric car drivers face charge challenge

By Joseph Luiz

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, Jan. 24, 2014

HANFORD — Despite rapidly rising sales of all-electric cars, Kings County has no public charging stations available, posing a significant challenge for electric car owners like Hanford West High School teacher Lou Compagno.

Although he has a personal charging station at his home in Visalia, Compagno’s 2011 Nissan Leaf can only get up to about 80 miles on a single charge. Commuting to and from work alone takes up more than half of his power each day.

It’s not just a Kings County issue, either. The Central Valley as a whole also has very few public charging stations available. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, there are three public charging stations in Tulare, two each in Fresno, Modesto, Stockton and Tracy and one in Bakersfield, Clovis, Coalinga, Madera, Merced and Visalia.

“There’s no infrastructure in this area compared to other parts of the state,” he said. “There’s no public charging stations within a 21-mile radius of Hanford, which definitely gives me some anxiety.”

Luckily, Compagno was able to reach out to a few businesses in Hanford to use their private charging stations. Firestone Tires and Keller Motors both allow Compagno to periodically use their stations so he can do more business in the area.

“They’re really kind business people,” he said. “They’ve been understanding of my situation and have been really supportive. However, I think it’s still important that the state open more public charging sites in the area so more people will consider buying electric cars.”

The Valley air district, in partnership with the California Center for Sustainable Energy, aims to do just that. A siting analysis of the Valley was conducted in 2013 to show areas and businesses that would be optimal for charging stations.

In the analysis, Kettleman City was pointed out as a possible location, most likely due to the fact that it’s a major transportation hub in the region because of Interstate 5 passing through it. Wal-Mart and Target as well as the Hanford Mall have also been considered for stations.

“I think that any business that’s new and has a good business model should do it,” Compagno said. “It’s easy for organizations to install.”

The district’s ideas for expanding the stations is in line with state goals to reduce carbon emissions by providing more support for electric cars and offering more incentives to consumers.

Although electric cars currently make up less than 2 percent of overall sales, use has been steadily growing. State sales reports show that electric car sales almost doubled from 53,000 cars in 2012 to 96,000 last year.

Gov. Brown has set a goal to reach 1.5 million electric vehicles on California roads by 2025. With about 200,000 electric cars sold since they first arrived on the market five years ago, the state still has a long way to go to reach its goal.

Compagno said he believes more people will begin to see the benefits of electric cars and begin to switch over. He said he loves his car and it has proven to be a very economical and environmentally friendly option.

"It's kind of like riding a golf cart that goes 100 miles per hour," he said. "It's an absolutely perfect car. It's a smooth ride with no noise and it handles really well. You also don't have to spend money on gas and there's not much maintenance involved."

Compagno originally decided to get an electric car after he was encouraged by a student to upgrade from his 1995 gas-guzzling truck to a vehicle that was better for the environment, but still economical. He bought his Nissan Leaf in Napa for \$36,000 in 2011.

However, several rebate programs from the pollution control district and other organizations were available to him due to the car being good for the environment. In the end, he was reimbursed \$8,000 for the car.

Since getting the car in 2011, Compagno said he's saved more than \$3,000 from not having to fill up at the pump, which he uses towards paying off his car. He said that combined with various government rebates and reimbursements, the car has been a successful venture, despite some travel concerns.

"Part of the reason I got the car is that I wanted to help with the air and reduce gas emissions," he said. "Electric cars are the way to go. We need to move to less contaminated vehicles if we want to clean up the bad air in the Valley and across the nation."

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Jan 26, 2014:](#)

To improve air quality, let's all do our part

Pollution is a growing concern to the citizens of Kern County. Garbage can be seen on highways and streets. Even air pollution is extremely visible. Air pollution can contribute to asthma, heart disease, lung functions and even death.

There needs to be a change. The American Lung Association ranked Bakersfield as the worst year-round and short-term particle pollution city. Bakersfield also ranks third in ozone pollution.

I understand that Kern County officials, just like the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, are doing their best to clean up the air and particle pollution. A local news report stated that in 2013, the Air Pollution Control District made changes such as restricting new filters for big-rigs, getting rid of old trucks and making fines higher for those who pollute.

Although I think more should be done to make pollution decrease, I am thankful for the work that's being done and believe that we should all continue to do our best in this new year to help reduce pollution.

Linai Posada, Bakersfield