

Wood-burning curtailments could expand

By Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Saturday, March 29, 2014

The nights of sitting in front of a warm fire could become an infrequent occurrence in the Central Valley as new lower standards for wood-burning prohibitions are under consideration by the air district.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is considering revisions to the burn curtailment program to help keep the Central Valley below the federal guidelines for particulate matter. The air district is currently gathering public and business comments and suggestions about the proposed changes.

The central element of the air district's curtailment effort is the Check Before You Burn program. Check Before You Burn requires wood-burning prohibitions on days when levels of fine-particulate matter (PM2.5) are forecast to exceed the federal health standard. Wood-burning forecasts are issued daily for each county. Currently the level at which no burn days are declared is at 30 micrograms per cubic meter of PM2.5. The air district is considering dropping the level to 20 micrograms per cubic meter. They are also discussing extending the Check Before You Burn from October to the end of March.

PM2.5 is a particularly harmful type of air pollution that is linked to chronic lung disease, respiratory illness, heart attacks and premature death. Check Before You Burn minimizes the build-up of particulates. The District issues wood-burning forecasts by county beginning at midnight for the following 24 hours. Forecasts are derived from analyzing multiple factors, including meteorology, expected emissions and other variables.

The air district also is considering ways to promote and expand the movement to replace wood-burning devices with cleaner versions, such as pellet stoves. The air district has provided funding to help replace more than 4,000 wood-burning devices over the years. Under the new guidelines the air district is considering, cleaner burning devices would be allowed to burn on days when traditional devices are prohibited.

The air district is expected to hold another community workshop to discuss the revisions in April or May.

Dry, dirty skies

Drought threatening to worsen air pollution

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Saturday, March 29, 2014

HANFORD — Picture an area the size of Rhode Island covered in plowed dirt, just waiting for hot summer winds to blow it into the air.

That's the situation facing air pollution control officials, farmers and the residents of the southern San Joaquin Valley as they head into hot summer weather with a patchwork of hundreds of thousands of acres of fallowed fields to deal with.

The sheer amount of exposed acreage is unprecedented. What's not known is whether that will translate into more dust storms like the one that darkened Hanford's skies in 2012.

On a smaller scale, there's the issue of dirt roads, packing shed yards and unpaved truck lots. Typically, farmers satisfy air pollution control standards for fugitive dust by watering things down periodically. This summer, facing major water shortages, they're likely to cut back on the number of applications.

There are chemical alternatives, according to Dave Warner, director of permit services at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Growers also have the option of covering dirt roads with shells or hulls from nuts.

Warner said district officials will be meeting with farmers and farm organizations in the next couple of weeks to decide how to best deal with the problem.

"We're going to need to have everybody continue to control dust," he said. "We already have a very comprehensive enforcement program."

The wildcard is whether all that exposed ground will stay in place or not. There are ways to plant vegetation to act as a windblock, but it gets back to the problem of drought.

“Again, you have to have [irrigation] water,” said Diane Friend, Kings County Farm Bureau executive director.

Friend wondered aloud if there are provisions in the farm bill to fund dust-control efforts.

Arguably, the drought has already made its mark. The massive high pressure ridge that kept rain away from the Valley this winter also produced weeks of stagnant air that concentrated particulate pollution into a noxious stew. The air district repeatedly banned wood burning in fireplaces, one of the worst sources of winter pollution.

So will you have to bust out the dust mask in the middle of July? Stay tuned.

“A lot remains to be seen,” Warner said.

Kern County again ranked low for health

By Courtenay Edelhart, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, March 28, 2014

For the second year in a row, Kern County is ranked among the worst of California counties in health outcomes, according to data released this week.

Kern ranked better than Siskiyou, Del Norte and Lake counties. Marin County placed first.

The County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program is a collaborative project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

They’ve been tracking overall health across the United States for five years, ranking counties within each state according to health outcomes, behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment.

“We not only looked at demographics, but also things that were modifiable,” said Kate Konkle, a community coach at the institute. “The hope is that the rankings will be a starting point for conversations about local solutions.”

Kern’s rank of 54 out of 57 California counties was unchanged from last year but down from 2012, when the county was No. 49. California has 58 counties, but data for Alpine County was unreliable or insufficient, so it was excluded from the 2013 and 2014 rankings.

The study “does indicate that we have a lot of room to improve on a lot of different indicators,” said Kimberly Hernandez, an epidemiologist with the Kern County Department of Public Health.

Still, comparing overall rankings year-to-year isn’t as helpful as examining the individual elements that go into the ranking formula, Hernandez said.

If the county and the state both improve or both decline in overall health, a ranking will not change, but checking out the county’s performance on key indicators “helps us to prioritize,” she said.

Nearly a quarter of deaths in Kern County so far this year were “premature,” according to the study, compared with about 18 percent of deaths statewide.

The county also exceeded state rates of smoking, obesity, violent crime and excessive drinking, among other factors.

One of the most glaring contrasts was in drinking water violations. The percentage of the population potentially exposed to water exceeding a violation limit during the past year was 14 percent in Kern, compared with 2 percent in California.

Stephanie Hearn, water quality program manager at California Water Service Co., said she wasn’t sure what those numbers were based on, but speculated the county’s poor assessment may be related to the heavy presence of agriculture and the many small water systems in Kern.

“At Cal Water, we have a lot of experts who make sure our water does meet drinking water standards and complies with regulations, but there are also tiny water systems here that may only serve an RV park or a development of just 25 homes.

“They don’t have the resources to hire someone to oversee all that full time.”

Kern also is hurt by a relatively low number of health care providers. There is one primary care doctor for every 1,999 residents in Kern, compared with one for every 1,326 residents statewide.

The local ratio of dentists and mental health providers was high, too.

That could be why the county lags behind the state on preventive care such as mammography and diabetes screenings.

Both the county and the state did poorly on air quality — specifically, the average daily measure of fine particulate matter in micrograms per cubic meter, which was 9.2 in Kern and 9.3 in California.

Kern's air quality, although bad, has gotten better in recent years, said Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It's really just one component of a very complex issue," she said. "It just goes to show how many things we have to confront to improve health in the valley."

If Kern's consistently poor showing in national health rankings is a bit exhausting, there is one upside to this latest one, Hernandez said.

The "roadmap" portion of the report shares best practices that have been used successfully to improve health in other communities.

"That is what's helpful about these national rankings, looking at things that have worked in other areas," Hernandez said. "We can pull ideas from other places to see what might work here."

[Fresno Bee Earth Log, Friday, March 28, 2014:](#)

Earth Log: No-burn days could double for some folks in fall

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The wood-burning season has passed, but the buzz about this practice will linger long into summer. And you really don't want to miss this one.

The air quality rule for wood burning will get stricter this year. How much stricter? That's what folks are talking about at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

At a public meeting Thursday, the district introduced the latest thinking that would probably double the number of no-burn days for folks who use a fireplace or a nonregistered burning device, such as a wood stove.

The thinking also includes wider latitude for those who use registered clean-burning devices, such as certified pellet-burning stoves.

Right now, the no-burn threshold is like an on-off switch. You can burn wood in your fireplace or any device until the soot pollution reaches 30 micrograms per cubic meter of air. Above the threshold, you can't burn.

The concept being considered now is to allow wood burning with a registered clean-burning device between 20 and 29 micrograms. Again at 30, nobody would be able to burn.

Here's the meat of it for fireplace users and those without the registered devices: At 20 micrograms, they would have to stop. That's why the number of no-burn days may double for those folks.

Even below 20 micrograms, the district is proposing to tell residents that burning is discouraged.

The air district is tightening this rule as part of its campaign to achieve the federal PM-2.5 standard. Medical researchers have linked the microscopic particles to heart disease, lung problems and premature death.

The district is planning draft amendments in April, followed by public workshop. The issue is expected to come before the district board for action in summer.