

Drought, dust and wind equal ugly air

By Steve Levin

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Drought? Of course. Dust? Check. Wind? Yep.

Add up those ingredients and you get the kind of lung-clogging, eye-watering air Bakersfield endured for about 12 hours Tuesday and into the early hours of Wednesday.

The bad news is that may have been a preview for Summer 2014.

According to the National Weather Service in Hanford, a weak low-pressure system moved from the Pacific across southern California Tuesday and Wednesday. While it lowered temperatures from Monday's record-setting high of 110 degrees in Bakersfield to a more pedestrian 104, it also created stronger winds.

As the wind spilled through mountain passes it kicked up plenty of accumulated dust.

Jim Bagnall, an NWS meteorologist in Hanford, said Tuesday's winds in Bakersfield were 15 to 20 mph with gusts.

"It wasn't any real incredible spectacular wind," Bagnall said. "It's pretty usual."

But it was enough, said Jaime Holt of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, to "kick up a whole variety of sizes of particulate matter," which is what created the hazy, ugly air.

Holt, chief communications officer for the air district, said while fine particulate matter, or PM2.5, readings were high, the coarse dust particles, or PM10, "were really high levels."

Readings in Bakersfield over a 24-hour period were 56 micrograms per cubic meter, the highest since dry windy days in January and February.

"This is tied to the drought and the drought has been extraordinary," Holt said. "It's setting the stage for what we think may be a really, really rough summer."