

Number of no-burn days doubles this winter

By The Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Feb 28, 2014

The number of wood-burning curtailments in the San Joaquin Valley's eight-county air basin more than doubled this winter compared to last winter, the valley air district said in a news release Thursday.

The news should come as no surprise to anyone who experienced -- especially in December and January -- the worst winter air pollution levels in the valley's history.

During the season, which began Nov. 1 and ends Friday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared 376 curtailments -- days in all counties when wood burning was prohibited. Last winter, 186 no-burn days were declared.

Violations issued for noncompliance were also up this winter, from 384 in 2012-13 to 569 this season.

"This was an unusual winter not only for the valley but for the entire state," Jaime Holt, the air district's chief communications officer, said in the release. "Without these extreme conditions, this winter would have been the cleanest on record for the valley."

Check Before You Burn, enacted more than a decade ago, requires wood-burning curtailments on days when levels of fine-particulate matter, known as PM2.5, are forecast to exceed the federal health standard. Wood-burning forecasts are issued daily for each county.

PM2.5, microscopic soot and aerosol particles measuring 2.5 micrometers or smaller, is a particularly harmful type of air pollution that is linked to chronic lung disease, respiratory illness, heart attacks and premature death.

This year, the "historically abnormal" high-pressure system that settled over much of California was responsible for trapping particulate matter at ground level, the air district said. Many schools restrict students' physical activities when pollution levels reach dangerous levels.

The picture was the same throughout California, as even coastal areas recorded high particulate levels. For example, San Luis Obispo saw its highest PM2.5 levels on record, and other air basins experienced multiple days of exceedances and curtailments.

The valley portion of Kern County saw 51 no-burn days this winter, compared to 36 last winter.

"Despite our experience this winter, it's important for people to remember that overall we have experienced significant, long-term improvement in winter air quality, thanks to valley residents embracing Check Before You Burn and refraining from wood burning," Holt said.

Record number of winter no-burn days

By Alex Breidler

Stockton Record, Friday, February 28, 2014

Wood burning was banned a record 45 times in San Joaquin County this winter, another consequence of our dismally dry winter.

On average, burning was illegal roughly one out of every three days this season. That's never happened before.

Many counties farther south saw even more frequent prohibitions.

Year by year

Until 2008-09, wood-burning bans were infrequent in San Joaquin County. Then, officials tightened the rules. Here's what has happened since:

2008-09: 24 no-burn days

2009-10: 21 no-burn days

2010-11: 7 no-burn days

2011-12: 29 no-burn days

2012-13: 21 no-burn days

2013-14: 45 no-burn days

The Valley's notoriously bad air has generally been improving, but the dangerous tiny particles that come from wood smoke and other sources hung in the air for weeks at a time this year because there were few storms to wash them away.

When the air quality is poor, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District forbids burning any solid fuels in a fireplace or wood stove.

"This was an unusual winter, not only for the Valley but for the entire state," said Jaime Holt, a district spokeswoman.

San Joaquin County's previous record was 29 no-burn days, in 2011-12. In 2012-13, burning was banned 21 times.

Somewhat surprisingly, although this year saw a dramatic increase in no-burn days, fewer San Joaquin residents were cited for burning illegally.

Most other counties saw citations go up. But just 72 citations were issued here, down from 84 last year.

District spokesman Anthony Presto said the decline was a result of San Joaquin County's "very good compliance" with the rules.

"People in that county are hearing and understanding the 'no burn' message," he said.

The district's "Check Before You Burn" program ends Saturday, meaning no more burn bans until next fall.

Back-seat Driver: Got a gas guzzler? Dump it for dollars

By TONY BIZJAK

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, February 27, 2014

The Legislature has been on a push for years to clean California's air and improve residents' health. In the transportation realm, that's meant policies that try to get more people onto public transit, and lately into electric vehicles, or at least into more fuel-efficient cars.

Those are admirable efforts, but what about the working poor, many of whom live in the state's largely rural Central Valley and drive old clunkers that guzzle gas and belch emissions? Plenty of people can't afford to run down to the dealer to buy the newest \$29,999 electric Nissan Leaf. Nor are there transit systems that can take you 10 miles to your kids' rural school, then another 20 to your job, with a swing by the grocery store on the way home.

That in mind, Next Generation, a nonprofit group, issued a report this week – "No Californian Left Behind" – that encourages state officials to keep low- and even moderate-income Californians in mind when they work on reducing the state's reliance on gas.

One good solution, they say, lies in an existing state program that gives drivers cash for turning in old clunkers as well as cash to help them buy newer, more fuel-efficient cars. The state's Enhanced Fleet Modernization Program has not been well-used, though. A state law passed last year, SB 459 by Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, directs the state Air Resources Board to strengthen that program, including increased payments to lower-income people. Program funding comes from the state's vehicle registration fee.

Pavley's office points out that cleaner cars help improve family finances as well as community health: Upgrading to a 25 mpg car from a 15 mpg car saves a driver \$1,600 a year.

Kate Gordon of Next Generation said state data show the oldest 15 percent of cars and trucks on the road are producing 50 percent of the vehicle pollution. Her group is pushing the ARB to require that all "replacement" vehicles in the program get at least 30 miles to the gallon.