

## **Study: Fireplace rules helping public health**

Stockton Record, Friday, Nov. 27, 2015

The San Joaquin Valley's strict residential wood-burning rules are benefiting the region's older residents, who tend to be more vulnerable to pollution, according to a new study.

Researchers for the California Air Resources Board determined that no-burn days in the Valley led to a 12 percent reduction in the harmful tiny particles found in smoke after the rules were first approved in 2003.

And that, in turn, caused hospital admissions for cardiovascular disease in those 65 years and older to decline by 7 percent up and down the Valley.

Hospitalizations for a more specific condition known as coronary artery disease declined by 16 percent.

"Here's proof the Valley Air District's wood burning rule works," the district tweeted on Friday.

Researchers did not find a statistically significant reduction in hospital admissions for adults ages 45 to 64, though they said they believe there have been fewer cases in that group as well.

The study is the first to examine whether policies limiting wood-burning days have an actual impact on public health. Fireplace burning generates up to 23 tons per day of pollution in the Valley, and district officials have urged residents to curtail burning or to upgrade to cleaner-burning gas or certified wood stoves.

## **Biomass future a burning problem for farmers**

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Friday, November 27, 2015

When air quality cops outlawed most open burning on San Joaquin Valley farmland a decade ago, their belief was that biomass power plants would be a viable alternative.

Dead trees or other agricultural waste could be trucked to the nearest plant, burned and converted into energy. From a public health perspective, it was the cleanest solution.

But for some farmers today, especially those whose orchards have been ravaged by drought, it's hardly a solution at all. Five of the 11 major biomass plants in the Valley have closed since 2012, squeezed out of the market by lower prices for other renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. A sixth biomass plant — the Valley's largest, in Delano — is likely to close in December, according to regulators.

Which begs the question: Where is all of that farm waste supposed to go now?

DTE Energy's new biomass plant at the Port of Stockton is in better shape than most, the Michigan-based utility says, thanks to a 25-year contract at a fixed price. Still, the facility is one of just a handful of large biomass plants that remain in business across the eight-county region. And in San Joaquin County, it now stands alone, since one of the plants that recently closed was in Tracy.

"There's barely enough capacity right now," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "If the closures continue, that'll be an even bigger problem."

Air regulators last week began considering ways to address the issue, even raising the possibility of rolling back some of the new rules that have outlawed 80 percent of agricultural burning over the past 10 years.

Sadredin acknowledged that such a move would "undo a lot of what we've been able to accomplish."

"We're putting it on the table for discussion," he said. "It's a last resort and we're hoping we don't have to go there. But people need to realize that if we're not able to find alternatives, we're going to be forced into that situation."

Hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland have been fallowed during the drought, leaving entire orchards packed with dead trees at the same time that the biomass plants equipped to handle those trees

are closing. Unsure what to do next, farmers have contacted the air district asking for relief, Sadredin said.

The problem likely is most severe in the south, where most of the crop fallowing has taken place. But north Valley farmers are subject to the same open burning restrictions, though certain crops — including grape vineyards — have been exempted so far.

The recent plant closures seem to suggest that biomass might not be the long-term solution after all, said Joe Valente, a farmer with Kautz Farms near Lodi.

“We’re always trying to keep up with technology, but it always comes down to the bottom dollar,” he said.

Among the closures was a biomass facility in Tracy owned by Greenleaf Power. The plant burned both agricultural and urban wood waste, employing about 25 people with a payroll of more than \$2.2 million, according to the company website. The plant stopped operating in October 2014 and, for now at least, stands idle.

Air quality officials are considering a number of solutions, including allowing some farmers to burn openly if they’ll pay a penalty equal to what the cost would have been to ship the material to a biomass plant.

The district also might ask the California Public Utilities Commission to extend power purchase agreements with the remaining biomass plants at current prices, to help them compete with cheaper solar and wind sources.

These measures “make sense,” said John Reis, a director with DTE, which accepts about 150,000 tons per year of agricultural waste at its Stockton plant. Reis said that particular plant is in “good shape” because of its extended contract, but he expressed concern for the industry as a whole, and concern about the possibility — however unlikely — of rolling back those open-burning rules.

“Burning the stuff in the fields is bad news for everybody,” Reis said. “We need to have outlets for it.”

The air district also wants to examine other future alternatives, including finding new technologies, using agricultural waste as compost or mulch, or even using it to produce fiberboard for use in furniture products.

That kind of thinking encourages Dolores Weller, director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, a public health advocacy group. Weller says biomass plants aren’t the answer anyway for the pollution-plagued Valley, and welcomes the idea of investigating new options.

“There isn’t any reason we can’t be pioneers,” Weller said. “Yes, biomass is cleaner than agricultural burning, but it’s still a form of combustion and there are still emissions.”

## **Air district tells Tulare County to stop demolition of Pixley Park building**

By Lewis Griswold,

Fresno Bee, Thursday, November 26, 2015

Following a tipster’s complaint, Tulare County has been ordered to halt demolition of an old building in Pixley Park until it is checked for asbestos.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a notice of violation Monday and directed the county to stop work, air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt said Wednesday.

The county failed to notify the air district of the demolition or to check the site in advance for asbestos, she said. Inhaled asbestos fibers can cause lung disease and other problems.

An environmental company will take samples; if asbestos is found, it must be removed and the county would face a second, more serious, notice of violation, Holt said. However, an air district inspector looked at the site and saw no evidence of asbestos, she said.

County public information officer Melissa Withnell said Wednesday in a statement that “staff does not believe there is exposure” to asbestos.

“The structure is dilapidated and became a safety concern for park visitors due to its poor condition,” Withnell said.

The county park is an oasis in Pixley, an unincorporated community south of Tulare on Highway 99.

Christopher Renfro of Pixley, who grew up in the community, said he became concerned that the demolition was creating a health and safety hazard to residents and workers, so he called the air district.

"It's a big red flag when I see this," he said. "This is the kind of thing that's a risk to children."

Renfro, a former schoolteacher, said the plastic fence around the demolition site is not keeping people out.

The county said it will put up a chain-link fence next week.

Renfro said the county was doing the work in-house and could be exposing employees to asbestos, bird feces and mold. In addition, inmates working on the project weren't given the right kind of protective gear, he said.

Furthermore, the county didn't get the proper permits, he said.

Withnell said the county is getting answers to questions after residents expressed concerns.

"The safety of all parks visitors and staff is of utmost importance to the county," she said. "Precautionary steps have taken place in an effort to minimize or prevent the possibility of a health concern due to work on this project."

## **Air quality cops tackle wildfires**

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015

At its worst last summer, the state's largest wildfire in Kings Canyon National Park produced up to 105 times more pollution than the entire San Joaquin Valley.

Every tailpipe. Every smokestack. Every farm tractor.

The 150,000-acre Rough Fire spewed more harmful tiny particles into the air than all of them combined. And it wasn't even close.

Now, after another bad fire season, air quality officials are taking another look at the link between forest fires, air quality and public health. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District took a first step earlier this month toward making it easier to conduct prescribed burns, intentional fires that produce some pollution of their own but help to prevent much larger catastrophic wildfires in the future.

"The policy shift that we're advocating for is not to be penny wise and pound foolish," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air district. "We are so concerned about the short-term localized impacts that may come with a few days of prescribed burning, that it may lead to situations where we don't allow enough of a prescribed burn."

And that, he said, allows forest fuels to continue to grow and pose an even greater risk for larger fires down the road.

Air pollution spiked up and down the Valley as fires burned this summer, from Calaveras County's Butte Fire in the north to the Rough Fire in the south.

The worst smoke impacts were in the south Valley, where even tiny pieces of ash fell on Fresno neighborhoods. But Stockton, too, in mid-August saw tiny particle pollution briefly exceed federal health standards as smoke blew into the region from distant blazes.

For many decades, national policy was to quickly extinguish forest fires, a "Smokey Bear" philosophy that ignored the natural role wildfires play in managing our forests. Despite a more recent emphasis on using prescribed burns to decrease the danger, "the forest fuel buildup has continued to increase at an alarming rate," according to an air district staff report.

So the district is considering taking a number of steps to loosen the restrictions on prescribed burns in forests within its jurisdiction (mostly public lands in the southern Sierra Nevada). Officials may allow larger burns over a shorter period of time. They may allow those burns to occur even when no-burn days are declared on the Valley floor. And they may reduce the fees required to get a permit to burn.

They also say they support efforts to change the way in which federal officials pay for wildfire suppression. Instead of shifting the money away from prevention, the district wants to urge the feds to take wildfire suppression costs out of emergency accounts that pay for other natural disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes. In 2015, for the first time, more than half of the U.S. Forest Service's budget was spent on wildfire suppression.

Finally, the district also may support the use of mechanical harvesting equipment "where appropriate" in wilderness areas.

"Anything we can do to reduce fuel buildup will help," Sadredin said.

The district's governing board approved a suite of broad policies at its meeting last week, and Sadredin said more specific actions will be considered at a future meeting.

## **Emissions event aims to clear the air with low-income drivers**

By Theo Douglas

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2015

With Black Friday almost upon us, it's time to start thinking about getting into another line: the queue for the popular "Tune In & Tune Up" event, a free way for older, potentially smoggier cars to inch their way toward a smog check.

The yearly event returns Dec. 5 to the South P Street parking lot of the Kern County Fairgrounds.

Mari Goodman, senior field representative for Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield, said in previous years drivers have actually lined up the night before.

"Some people have come from over by Pismo Beach. Some of them have brought a car in on a trailer. Others have pushed a car in, if it died on the way in," Goodman said.

Gates open at 6:30 a.m. and emissions testing is from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Organizers warn drivers to expect a wait of more than two hours.

Unlike Black Friday, there are no door-busters, although Dignity Health, Blue Sky Partners and Bread of Life Ministries will be among the local groups with booths on hand.

No actual smog certificates are issued at "Tune In," but it's a free way for drivers to confirm whether their cars will be able to pass an actual smog check.

"This is an effort to help our low income drivers. It's almost \$300,000 in repairs," said Jose Marin, an organizer for Valley Clean Air Now, which is coordinating the day's activities.

The first 525 qualifying vehicles which don't pass their emissions check will receive a \$500 repair voucher paid for by the state of California.

To qualify, failing vehicles must be 1995 or older. Their owners must be from Kern, Kings or Tulare counties and must have owned their vehicle for more than six months.

Drivers with offending cars have other options too.

They might want to enter a second line for a chance at qualifying for up to \$9,500 toward the down payment for a new economy, hybrid or electric car.

Depending on the age and condition of their vehicles, drivers could qualify for up to \$9,500 toward the purchase of an electric car, up to \$7,500 toward a plug-in hybrid, and up to \$4,000 toward an economy car.