

Chomping down on pollution

By Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Friday, Jan. 1, 2016

One of Stockton's newest burger joints was so popular after it opened two years ago that the public complained about the thick fumes that periodically wafted from a rooftop vent into the surrounding neighborhood.

"Sometimes the place looks like it's on fire," one observer told The Record last year.

The good news is that The Habit on March Lane is experimenting with new technology that could take a bite out of its rush-hour pollution problem.

The restaurant was the first in the San Joaquin Valley to sign up for a new pilot program aimed at reducing emissions from restaurants with charbroil grills.

Cooking meat contributes to the Valley's notoriously bad air. Microscopic specks of grease escape into the air while the meat sizzles away on the grill; those tiny specks add to dangerous particle pollution in nearby neighborhoods, just like chimney smoke does.

As of 2009, nearly 2,500 commercial charbroilers in the Valley were serving up more than 75,000 tons of meat each year, spewing more than 900 tons of pollution, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

More than a decade ago, Valley air regulators began requiring restaurants with chain-driven charbroilers — think most fast-food restaurants — to slash emissions.

But restaurants such as The Habit, those with under-fired charbroilers rather than the chain-driven ones, were not subject to the same rules because the technology didn't exist for those kinds of grills.

After a few more years of research, that's starting to change. Earlier this year the air district agreed to set aside \$750,000 to test some new control technologies for under-fired charbroilers in Valley restaurants.

In September, the air district invested \$171,044 in a new scrubber and filtration system at The Habit. For its part, the restaurant must evaluate how well the controls work and submit reports to the air district.

Officials hope to fund at least three to five of these test projects across the Valley. They may then expand the existing rules to the under-fired charbroilers by 2017.

K.G. Suh of Stockton called The Record to express his concern about The Habit in 2014. He said at the time that he had to roll up his car window every time he drove by the business on March Lane, and expressed concern about the environmental impacts of the exhaust from the restaurant.

This week, Suh said that he was glad improvements had been made.

"I've seen the difference," Suh said. "I think (the pollution) is quite a bit reduced. It's great."

Barbecue eateries in Merced could face air quality regulations

By Thaddeus Miller

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Jan. 1, 2016

The wafting smoke from barbecued meat may be enticing to diners, but regulators are looking at whether there's a better way to cook it while keeping the air clean.

Restaurants that use barbecue pits or smokers make up a fraction of the air polluters in the state, officials said, but could be subject to regulations in the coming years.

In the meantime, the San Joaquin Valley Air District is looking to enlist barbecue eateries in a pilot program to test devices that could improve air quality. The district would add the devices to participating eateries.

Bar B-Q Pit owner Roy Mercado said he is not sweating any of the potential changes handed down from regulators. He said he is confident that if necessary his restaurant would come up with a solution for the

pit, a roughly 6-by-8-foot chamber used to smoke ribs and chicken since before he bought the place in 1992.

He uses almond wood from local sources to heat up the Pit's pit, he said. "We're very proud of this little old place," he said Thursday.

The eatery smokes thousands of pounds of meat a week.

While most pollution comes from cars and trucks, the air district must reduce overall emissions by 283 tons per day – more than 80 percent – by 2024. Commercial smokers produce less than half of 1 ton of particulate matter pollution, which claims hundreds of premature Valley deaths and can lead to a host of other health problems such as pulmonary heart disease and cancer.

"We have such a big air quality challenge here that we truly take the 'no stone left unturned' adage to heart," said air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

The restaurants that participate in a pilot program to test the new technologies would have most or all costs covered by the air district. Officials hope to determine whether the technologies produce the anticipated reductions and weigh the costs with benefits.

So far, only one restaurant has agreed – The Habit Burger Grill in Stockton. Air district executive director Seyed Sadredin said the agency is in talks with two or three other restaurants.

Regulators figure a couple of hundred restaurants in the eight-county Valley could become subject to a future rule.

Sadredin said the agency will decide by 2017 whether the regulation is worth pursuing further.

"This really highlights the difficulty that regions such as ours face with respect to the federal Clean Air Act," he said.

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Sunday, Jan. 3, 2016:](#)

Valley air doesn't look so bad when viewed with common sense

By Lois Henry

My wish for 2016 is that we all apply a little more critical thinking to the many claims thrown at us on a regular basis.

Here's your first exercise.

When you hear, or read, that our air quality is "unhealthy" per the Air Quality Index on any given day, do you stop and wonder what that actually means?

You should.

My contention is it doesn't mean much, but I'll get to that.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is put out by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District every afternoon and forecasts the next day's air as "good" all the way down to "hazardous" depending on anticipated weather and levels of various pollutants.

The AQI has been a ubiquitous part of valley life for decades. It is used by schools, some of which employ different colored flags to alert parents of the day's forecast.

And the AQI is dutifully reported every single day by newspapers, (this one included) radio and television news channels all over the valley.

The AQI is also used by the American Lung Association to give most valley counties, and certainly Kern, a big fat "F" every year for air quality.

It seems like a simple, straightforward way to track our air quality, right? Wrong.

It's neither simple nor straightforward and, I would argue, it's become downright misleading.

I say that because AQI ratings are based on pollutant levels that are considered harmful to human health as established by the Environmental Protection Agency. (Don't get me started on how the studies used by the EPA don't show any real harm at all. Another column, another time.)

Those standards have changed over the years so that ever smaller amounts of pollutants are considered harmful.

For example, the acceptable standard for ozone on an 8-hour average now is 70 parts per billion. It was 75 ppb just last year and 84 ppb until 2008. Acceptable amounts of PM2.5, tiny particulate matter from soot or smoke, was set at 65 micrograms per cubed meter in 2013. Now that standard is 35 micrograms.

So, an AQI rating for "good" air just a few years ago can easily slip to "moderate" or even "unhealthy" per newly adopted standards.

It's those "unhealthy" categories that the good old American Lung Association uses to "F" our air rating, by the way.

Does that mean our air is dirtier? No. It. Does. Not.

It means the standards have changed.

In fact, our air is far cleaner than it was just 20 years ago.

Emissions have been reduced by more than 80 percent even as the valley has continued to grow, per Air District data. And the number of good air days has increased in that time while the unhealthy air days have dropped.

That means our air is improving. Significantly.

But when the standards change, the goalposts for success move with them, which unfairly paints our air quality as bad, bad, bad.

And you have to remember, the numbers used for the AQI are based on monitors that were purposely placed in areas with the highest levels of pollutants, not necessarily where people live. It's unlikely a majority of people are breathing anywhere near the levels of pollutants being recorded.

What that means is the AQI, and related Real-time Air Advisory Network where you can see monitor-by-monitor hourly pollution readings, are extremely conservative.

I'm not the only one concerned about the veracity and usefulness of AQI readings.

"We will be taking this issue to the board in January," said Samir Sheikh, deputy air pollution control officer, who added that the new standards would definitely increase the number of days that fall into unhealthy categories on the AQI.

Sheikh said district staff hope to start a process to find a way to properly communicate how best to use the AQI and Real-time Air Advisory Network and explain what the information truly means.

Basically, they want to find a balance to keep the public informed without unduly frightening anyone.

I wish more organizations would try to strike that balance.

For instance, the American Lung Association.

You might want to apply your critical thinking skills to how that organization arrives at our annual "F" grade.

It unfairly weights days that hit any of the "unhealthy" categories (four of the six categories are in the unhealthy range) and compares them to an arbitrarily low "pass" line that the Lung Association developed on its own.

The result is that a majority of counties in California (even coastal San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties) have air that earns an "F" from the Lung Association.

The Lung Association only recently began acknowledging that there are fewer unhealthy days compared to years past (after much prodding from outsiders).

And nowhere on the Lung Association's site does it let people know these "unhealthy" days are based on standards that allow for ever smaller amounts of pollution.

Perhaps accurate perspective isn't as helpful in generating donations as scare tactics.

Anyhow, that's how this issue looks through my critical thinking lens.

Happy new year, everyone.

Modesto Bee Editorial, Friday, Jan. 1, 2016:

Our View: The age of the all-electric Valley is upon us

If we finally are to cleanse our Valley air and make this a more healthy place to live, we must get belching cars off the streets and start adding electric cars and plug-in hybrids to our garages.

We wish the path to ending premature deaths and our high asthma rates weren't so narrow. But the reality is that a combination of the Valley's bowl shape and warm, sunny weather are the perfect recipe for forming ozone.

What is ozone and why is it bad for us?

It is a corrosive gas that irritates lungs and triggers breathing problems, asthma and heart ailments. There's no mystery about why so many more kids in our valley suffer with asthma than do kids in other parts of the nation.

The Environmental Protection Agency says that a new tougher ozone standard introduced this year will prevent more than 200 premature deaths in 2025, when most of the nation will have complied with the stricter rule.

But our ozone problem is so bad the EPA has given the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Quality Control District until 2037 to meet the higher standard.

Reducing our ozone to the new mark of 70 parts per billion – down from 75 ppb, a standard we have yet to achieve – will require us to use cars, trucks, buses, tractors and trains that run on electricity.

"We will have to eliminate emissions associated with fossil-fuel combustion," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the Valley air district.

So, the age of the all-electric Valley is upon us.

Change is never easy, but change we must. It helps that the Valley air district has incentive programs designed to help. These are in addition to state and federal incentives.

For example, the district's "Drive Clean!" program can give an additional \$3,000 for the purchase or lease of an all-electric vehicle (with lower amounts for plug-in hybrids). Combined with state and federal rebates, this allows someone interested in going electric to walk into a new-car showroom with \$13,000 in incentives. That's a pretty good head start in purchasing a \$35,000 vehicle.

A person in a low-income household currently driving an old beater (aka, a gross-polluting vehicle), can qualify for \$22,500 in district, state and federal assistance for buying or leasing an electric car. And once you've made the purchase, it really starts to pay off as you pay far, far less to fuel it.

The district determines eligibility for its \$9,500 incentive to take gross polluters owned by low-income households off the road at its Tune In Tune Up events.

Employers, too, have an important role to play. The air district provides up to \$50,000 a year to businesses and public agencies that invest in charging stations for electric vehicles. There is a caveat: The charging station must be available for public use at least part of the time. That's why you might have noticed the station in the Vintage Faire Mall parking lot.

Our region has a reputation for being skeptical of new technologies. We typically don't jump on the bandwagon until the early adopters have worked out the bugs.

This time we need to get aboard early.

All of us will benefit from cleaner air, but our children, the elderly and those suffering from heart and lung ailments stand to gain the most, says EPA administrator Gina McCarthy.

And for those who say we can't afford to go electric, we say, do the math. Be sure to include all the incentives – as well as the staggering costs of missed school days, employee absences, emergency room visits, extended hospital stays and premature deaths.