

Back to school means spikes in ozone pollutants, experts say

By Monica Velez

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School started this week for most Merced schools, which for parents and guardians means long lines of cars and waiting during drop-offs and pick-ups from school.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said the lines of idling cars contribute to air-quality issues in Merced.

“We do find a trend in ozone pollution spikes during back to school hours,” said Anthony Presto, outreach and communication representative for the Valley Air District.

The Valley Air District recommends carpooling or walking children to school to help reduce the number of idling vehicles.

“There could be up to 50 cars sitting and idling for half an hour and kids are going to be walking into those emissions,” Presto said.

Presto said children are more susceptible to issues caused by dirty air because their lungs are still developing and they take more breaths than adults.

According to Real-Time Air Quality, last week’s air pollution, at its worst, was in the “unhealthy for sensitive groups” range. Children, seniors and anybody with breathing-related illnesses are considered to be part of those sensitive groups.

“By reducing the number of cars to and from school we’re going to see air-quality benefits,” Presto said.

If a parent or guardian has no other choice than to drive a car to and from school, Presto advises them to park and turn off the engine, because the hour of the day kids are released from school is the worst time for creating ozone pollution.

Consistent high temperatures this week mixed with the wildfires around the Valley have been contributing to poor air quality this year, Presto said. Pollutants from wildfires can be inhaled and are so small they can enter the bloodstream, Presto said, causing a greater risk for heart attacks and strokes.

Temperatures Wednesday will be hitting triple digits, and the rest of the week is expected to be in high 90s until Saturday, according to the National Weather Service, when temperatures will cool down to 93.

The wildfires affecting the Central Valley air are the Soberanes Fire, the Clayton Fire and the Chimney Fire. Information on wildfires can be found at <http://valleyair.org/wildfires.htm>.

“If you look at the sky, you can see smoke,” Presto said. “We’re all breathing the air and we all need to be making lifestyle choices and do everything we can to reduce air pollution.”

Air quality could take hit with back to school traffic

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The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is hoping area residents can help avoid a spike in ozone levels by refraining from idling vehicles while transporting kids to and from schools.

With school back in session the Valley Air District is asking the public to reduce vehicle emissions by carpooling or walking their children to school and to refrain from vehicle idling during school pick-ups and drop-offs. Triple-digit temperatures and multiple wildfires are impacting Valley air quality, and the public’s help is crucial in reducing the risk of spikes in ground-level ozone and exceeding federal air quality standards.

“Thanks to the vigilance and cooperation of residents and businesses throughout the Valley, we’ve had a great summer with regard to keeping ozone levels down,” said Seyed Sadredin, the District’s air pollution control officer and executive director. “We urge the public to be even more mindful of their contributions to poor air quality during this crucial Back-to-School window.”

Valley air quality has shown tremendous improvement over the past several summer ozone seasons compared to many years ago, and has continually set new improvement records over the past 35 years, according to the Air District.

“These improvements would not be possible without the success of the District’s control strategy through its various attainment planning efforts, its robust incentive programs, and the commitment from Valley stakeholders doing their part to reduce emissions as much as possible,” the Air District stated in a news release.

Residents and businesses are urged to reduce vehicle emissions by driving less, refraining from idling their vehicles, carpooling or vanpooling and avoiding the use of drive-through services. Other measures, such as shifting ozone-creating activities, including lawn maintenance to early mornings, can also help offset rising ozone levels.

To help minimize pollution associated with school site vehicle idling, the District has partnered with hundreds of Valley schools through the Healthy Air Living Schools program. The program gives schools tools and materials to encourage parents to “Turn the Key & Be Idle Free” when picking up or dropping off students.