

Southland Smog Reaches Highest Level in Six Years

By Gary Polakovic, Times Staff Writer

A combination of hot, stagnant weather and growing emissions from cars, ships, factories and household products generated the highest levels of smog in Southern California in six years.

Not since 1997 has ozone, an invisible toxic gas and the main ingredient in smog, blanketed the greater Los Angeles area as it did this summer. Dirty air occurred on many more days and at higher concentrations than forecasters had expected, making breathing unhealthy for millions of people from Simi Valley to Banning. Only communities hugging the coastline escaped the elevated smog levels, air quality officials said.

Although air pollution these days is diminished from a generation ago — days when unhealthy ozone occurs have fallen by 70% since 1976 — the resurgence of heavy smog over the last three years, and particularly this summer, threatens the long-term trend toward cleaner air.

Without major emission reductions in the next several years, air quality officials warn that the region may miss a 2010 Clean Air Act deadline to virtually eliminate smoggy days. If the deadline isn't met, the Los Angeles region could face federal sanctions amounting to billions of dollars.

"After more than a decade of steadily improving air quality, the trend has leveled off," said Barry Wallerstein, executive officer of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Just how poor was air quality this summer?

Unhealthy air developed somewhere across Southern California, on average, almost every other day since May 1, the start of the smog season. There were nearly 30% more smoggy days than were recorded last year, the AQMD said.

Ozone is an invisible gas formed when emissions from tailpipes, smokestacks and ordinary household chemicals mix in sunlight. Brief exposure can cause chest pains, coughing and dizziness, but long-term exposure can lead to loss of lung function and increased risk of lung disease. The gas is highly toxic, and federal law permits no more than 0.12 parts per million of ozone in any one-hour period on any day of the year.

Yet, the highest ozone measurement this year was 80% higher than the federal limit — a concentration that prompted air quality officials to declare a first-stage ozone alert, the first in Southern California in five years, when air is dangerous for everyone to breathe. It occurred on July 11 at Lake Arrowhead. There, residents were advised to stay indoors and avoid all prolonged, outdoor exercise until the smog cloud, which lingers in bowl-shaped mountain valleys, passed.

The Inland Empire bore the brunt of smog this year. Sea breezes blow emissions deep into inland valleys, chemicals react with sunshine along the way, and mountains block smog from escaping. Towns with the worst air pollution this year included Lake Arrowhead with 44 days over the federal ozone limit; Redlands with 36 days; Santa Clarita with 33, and Glendora with 20. Thirteen smoggy days were reported in Reseda, seven in Pasadena and four in Burbank, the AQMD said.

A few years ago, Houston and the San Joaquin Valley briefly overtook the Los Angeles region as the smoggiest places in the country.

This year, the region of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties posted twice as many smoggy days as were reported in either Houston or the San Joaquin Valley. Air quality improved slightly in those places, while there has been virtually no progress made against smog here for nearly six years, air quality officials said.

Environmentalists said this region's summer of smog should serve as a klaxon call to officials to redouble efforts to attack emissions.

"It's a very negative trend," said Todd Campbell, policy director of the Coalition for Clean Air. "It's a combination of growth, hotter temperatures and regulators not being as aggressive as they have in the past."

Joe Cassmassi, senior meteorologist for the AQMD, said much of this year's foul air was due to unusually warm temperatures and stubborn inversions, or warm-air layers that trap air pollution over cities.

"Weather was the overriding factor. No question," Cassmassi said. "This year has been an anomaly and by next year we should, hopefully, see an improvement over the previous years."

Until recently, California air quality officials were optimistic about achieving healthful air in the Los Angeles region. But they now warn that major reductions in emissions will be required from a host of sources, including automobile tailpipes, big-rig diesel trucks, consumer products, ships and harbor equipment, airports and trains.

"We're running out of time," Campbell said. "Every day that goes by when we miss an opportunity to clean up, achieving healthy air becomes less likely."

At the root of the problem, experts said, are too many people driving too many cars, especially big trucks and sport utility vehicles that are not required to meet the same fuel efficiency standards required of passenger cars. Half the new vehicles sold in California are trucks and SUVs.

Household chemicals, such as cleansers and hair spray, are the second leading source of smog-forming emissions after auto tailpipes. And diesel engines, which power ships, locomotives, forklifts, construction equipment, buses and trucks, remain one of the biggest but least regulated sources of pollution.

Clean air cannot be attained by the end of the decade unless air quality officials find ways to slash half of the nearly 2,000 tons of smog-forming pollutants released in the region every day, officials say. The state Air Resources Board will consider a master plan to cut Southern California smog at an Oct. 23 meeting in Diamond Bar.

Choking off Recess

Valley children may have to take it easy again today; unhealthy air is forecast.

By Barbara Anderson

The Fresno Bee

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Children at Mayfair Elementary School in Fresno knew the rules for recess Tuesday: No running. No volleyball. No soccer balls on the field. No four-square games on the asphalt.

In other words: "It's boring," says Jackeline Zavala, a fourth-grader.

Recess on a bad-air day isn't fun, says Principal Al Sanchez. But students have learned grudgingly to accept the restrictions.

"In the summer, we have more 'find the shade and sit and chitchat' recesses than we have play recesses," Sanchez says. "It's almost a special occasion when they can take equipment out."

Principals from Fresno to Bakersfield were given early notice Tuesday that ozone levels could be unhealthy for everyone and might come close to being very unhealthy -- above 145 parts per

billion. At ozone levels above 145 ppb, schools are required by law to cancel outdoor recesses and sporting events.

Tuesday's smog levels fell short of those projections -- but not by much.

As of 5 p.m., the eight-hour ozone level at a south Fresno air-monitoring station was 100 ppb, or 137 on the Air Quality Index. The air in Arvin was 166 AQI.

The air district uses the AQI to inform the public about air quality. An AQI of 151 to 200 is unhealthy air for everyone. An AQI of 100 to 150 is unhealthy for people with lung conditions, such as asthma.

Concern about smog levels was high enough Tuesday for San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Officer David Crow to issue this statement before noon: "I strongly recommend that schools, youth organizations and sports teams in the central and southern portions of the Valley reduce rigorous outdoor activities this afternoon."

Today's air quality forecast for Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties and parts of Kern County is for unhealthy air to continue, meaning students can expect to be kept under shade trees at recess and after-school sports practices could be canceled or delayed.

Today's AQI forecast for the Fresno area is 151. A level of 164 is forecast for Kings, Tulare and parts of Kern County; and in Merced, the AQI is 129.

Today also has been declared a Spare the Air day in Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced and Tulare counties and the Valley portion of Kern County. On Spare the Air days, people are encouraged to carpool, forgo mowing lawns with gas-powered mowers and not use charcoal lighter fluids to start barbecues.

The good news: Air quality could improve slightly Thursday, says Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist for the air pollution district. "It does look like we might be seeing some improvement ... there are indications some marine air may be trying to push its way into the Valley."

Research shows that breathing ozone, a corrosive gas, can cause shortness of breath and trigger asthma attacks in the short term. And long-term exposure -- even at levels below a health alert -- may cause lung scarring, birth defects and other chronic health problems.

The air district sent a cautionary letter to school districts Tuesday morning to give notice that ozone levels would be high all day and could reach very unhealthy levels later during the day. Ozone peaks in the Valley often occur after 3 p.m., too late for a health advisory to reach principals, physical education teachers and coaches to keep students indoors and postpone activities.

Such was the case Monday, when a health advisory was called in Arvin -- but not until after 5 p.m., when ozone levels there spiked at 156 ppb. Fresno's high Monday was 140 ppb, and Madera's was 136 ppb -- barely under the cutoff for a health advisory.

A lid of high pressure has trapped pollutants in the Valley, Shipp says. And a lack of wind to scrub the air caused smog to build up and have no escape Monday and Tuesday.

Fires burning in Yosemite National Park also contributed to the pollution index, Shipp says. Fires produce oxides of nitrogen and hydrocarbons, precursors to ozone, the chief ingredient of smog.

It's not unusual for bad air to engulf the Valley in September. Last year, 11 unhealthy air days were recorded, the same as through Tuesday of this year.

Monday's ozone peak in Arvin caused the first health advisory this month -- and the only one since Aug. 9 of this year. In 2002, health advisories were issued on four days in September, including Sept. 13 -- triggering cancelation of Friday night junior varsity football games.

Although smog clouds stopped short of health advisory levels Tuesday, Clovis coaches heeded the cautionary message from the air pollution officer, canceling practices on outdoor fields after school.

In Fresno, starting times for football practices were pushed back at some schools but no athletic activities were canceled.

Most football coaches made practice adjustments by reducing physical workout times.

"It hasn't reached a point where we're having to cancel games," says John Mauer, athletic director of Fresno Unified School District. "But the advisory we receive could change day by day."

Children aren't the only smog victims in the Valley. The air district advises healthy adults to take frequent breaks and drink plenty of water on bad-air days.

Carlos Fajardo, 44, and Freddy Martinez, 44, of Fresno could feel the ozone stealing their breath Tuesday, as they labored to load a palm tree onto a trailer.

"Whew," Fajardo said, breathing hard. "I guess this is what the air does. I'm still winded."

Bee reporter Bryant-Jon Anteola contributed to this report.

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Visalia school fuel plan OK'd

By Tim Sheehan

The Fresno Bee

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VISALIA -- Cleaner air and long-term savings on fuel are expected to be the benefits of a new fueling station that the Visalia Unified School District will build as part of a 17-acre bus-maintenance site.

A \$700,000 compressed-natural-gas station is at the heart of the district's plans for the new bus center, which will be adjacent to Visalia Unified's existing transportation headquarters and along the west side of Green Acres Middle School.

The Visalia Planning Commission this week approved permits for the district's plans. Visalia Unified Assistant Superintendent Mark Fulmer said the district expects to seek bids for the fueling station in 45 days, with construction to begin soon after.

Terry White, the district's director of administrative services, said the district has about 76 buses in its fleet, including 20 that are powered by cleaner-burning compressed natural gas. The rest run on either gasoline or diesel.

Now, the CNG buses are fueled at a Southern California Gas Co. station about 1 1/2 miles away near Murray Avenue and Tipton Street. Compressed natural gas yields about the same mileage as gas or diesel, White said, and current prices per gallon fall midway between diesel and gasoline.

But the district hopes to save about \$3,000 annually per bus after its CNG station is up and running, through a combination of lower fuel prices and savings in time and travel by not having to take buses elsewhere for fueling.

"We hope to save over 50 cents per gallon," White said.

"But one of the biggest savings you cannot measure is clean air," White said of the cleaner-burning CNG engines in the newer buses.

Although each CNG bus costs about \$30,000 more than an equivalent gasoline- or diesel-powered bus, White said, the district is committed to doing what it can to improve air quality.

Grants are available to help ease the difference in price, and the CNG engines are expected to last twice as long as those burning more traditional fuels.

Over time, White said, the entire Visalia Unified bus fleet will be converted to compressed natural gas.

"As we replace our older buses, we're replacing them with natural-gas buses," he said, at a rate of two to five buses a year.

White explained that the natural gas would be stored in above-ground tanks, pressurized to 3,600 pounds per square inch. While the property is next to a school, he discounted the perception of danger.

"The fire hazard for natural gas is less than diesel or gasoline," he told Planning Commission members Monday.

Visalia Unified is not the only agency looking at cleaner-air technology in its fleet. Its site will also serve as a fueling station for CNG-powered Visalia City Coach buses and city trash-collection trucks, city officials said.

Monty Cox, the city's transit director, said the Visalia City Coach includes 38 buses. The five most recent purchases, smaller specialty buses such as those that carry handicapped riders, run on compressed natural gas.

After this year, Cox said, the city will no longer buy diesel buses and will look to compressed natural gas as the most viable alternative clean-air fuel.

Visalia public-works director Russ Webber said the city is getting ready to place its first order for seven CNG-fueled trash-collecting trucks. As trucks need replacing, the entire fleet of more than 40 trucks eventually will run on compressed natural gas, Webber said.

In addition to the fueling station, the first phase of the 17-acre expansion will include employee parking and covered parking for about 40 buses.

Future phases, which Fulmer said likely will be built over three years, will include shop facilities, 12 bus bays, an administration building, additional covered bus parking, a bus wash and a driver-training area.

Once the transportation division moves, the buildings now used by the transportation staff eventually will house the district's building-maintenance workers.

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S. California Suffers Worst Smog Season

By DAISY NGUYEN

Associated Press Writer (published in the Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and Tulare Advance-Register, September 24, 2003)

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- Southern California is enduring its worst smog season since 1998, as the previously steady gains in the fight to clean up the nation's dirtiest air taper off, air quality officials said.

The high levels of ozone are in large part due to unusually hot and stagnant summer weather, which has kept pollution trapped in the Los Angeles basin where it can build up to unhealthy levels.

"After more than a decade of steadily improving air quality, the trend has leveled off," Barry Wallerstein, executive officer for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said Tuesday.

As of Monday, the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region had experienced 63 days of unhealthy air quality, when ozone levels exceed federal standards. That far exceeds the 49 days of unhealthy air quality during 2002 and 36 days in 2001.

The number of unhealthy days this year also was more than twice that of the two other smoggiest areas in the country, the San Joaquin Valley and Houston, which had exceeded the federal health standard on 33 days and 25 days, respectively, as of Monday.

A bill signed Monday by Gov. Gray Davis to end the agriculture industry's exemption from federal clean air laws was the latest step taken to improve air quality in the San Joaquin Valley. The industry is blamed for making the valley the second dirtiest air basin in the nation.

High S.J. Valley smog expected

The Record, September 24, 2003

Smog levels are expected to reach unusually high levels in parts of the San Joaquin Valley this week, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

High temperatures this week have aggravated the Valley's air problem, prompting air regulators to warn residents to avoid strenuous outdoor activity. Tuesday was one of the smoggiest days this year.

Smog can aggravate breathing problems and has been linked with cancer.

Parts of Fresno and Kern counties may see smog pollution reach levels close to those that warrant formal public health advisories, air-district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said.

Although the northern part of the district that includes San Joaquin County won't experience smog levels that high, residents are still urged to take precautions.

The elderly, people with breathing problems and people who work outside are particularly susceptible to poor air quality. At-risk groups are advised to limit outdoor activities during the peak smog periods between 3 and 7 p.m.

People who must stay outside should take frequent breaks and drink plenty of water to keep lung tissue hydrated, according to air officials.

Today is a Spare the Air day. Residents are advised to cut back on pollution-causing activities, such as driving, using gasoline-powered gardening equipment, boating, and using barbecues and lighter fluid.

So far this summer, 15 Spare the Air days have been called. By this date last year, there had been 26 Spare the Air days.

For more information, go to air district's Web site at www.valleyair.org.

Valley gags through late smog attack

Modesto Bee, September 24, 2003

When summer turns to fall, it's the leaves that are supposed to turn brown.

Tuesday, the air turned brown -- prompting a health alert from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district predicted an air quality index reading as high as 154 in the northern zone: San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties. Anything above 150 is considered unhealthy for all people.

At 5:30 p.m., San Joaquin had a 66 reading, Stanislaus a 61 and Merced a 129 -- and the peak was yet to come about 7 p.m. The district could not provide readings past 5:30, however. One official predicted a 7 p.m. high of 138 to 140 in Merced, unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Earlier, though, with the 154 AQI forecast, officials said adults and children who are sensitive to pollution should avoid outdoor exertion, and advised everyone else to limit prolonged outdoor exertion during the peak pollution period, 3 to 7 p.m.

"We had plenty of parents calling and plenty of school districts calling," said Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

For the southern valley, Madera County and points south, the district advised keeping children indoors in the afternoon or allowing limited exertion outdoors.

For the northern counties of San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced, the district advised school officials to watch for breathing problems when children played outdoors.

The district declared a Spare the Air day from one end of the valley to the other on Tuesday and the designation remains in effect today from Merced County southward.

The extra-smoggy conditions came a day after Gov. Davis signed a number of bills aimed at cleaning the valley's air.

One measure fulfills a court order requiring the elimination of agriculture's exemption from air quality regulations.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, wrote the legislation, as well as two other valley air quality measures that gained the governor's signature. The other two bills:

Require the valley air district to adopt a schedule for the phaseout of agricultural burning.

Allow the air district to adopt rules similar to those already in place in the Los Angeles air district; for example, LA has a rule under which large fleets must include some alternative-fuel vehicles.

Davis also signed two other Florez measures affecting the entire state. The bills:

Authorize counties to set up checkpoints for gross-polluting vehicles, increase fines for second and third offenses, and expand the repair assistance program.

Provide \$6 million in state money to biomass power generators as incentive to burn more agricultural waste.

The governor signed a bill by Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, that requires the inclusion of air quality improvement strategies in valley city and county general plans.

And he signed a measure by state Sen. Byron Sher, D-Palo Alto, enacting statewide air quality standards, the same as a set of federal rules that existed before the Bush administration made them less stringent in December 2002.

"This package of legislation passed because the people of the San Joaquin Valley are sick of air that's easier to see than it is to breathe," Davis said in a statement. "From little children to editors of great newspapers, valley residents have united to say, 'Enough is enough. We demand change now.'"

As of Monday, the valley had exceeded the federal government's prevailing standard for healthy air on 33 days this year, the nation's second worst record.

The greater Los Angeles area topped the list, with 63 days of unhealthy air as Southern California endures its worst smog season since 1998.

The high smog levels are due in large part to unusually hot and stagnant summer weather that has kept pollution trapped in the Los Angeles basin.

Fall getting off to a hot start

By Eiji Yamashita
Sentinel Reporter

HANFORD - Fall is here, but it doesn't feel like it.

Triple-digit heat returned to Kings County and the rest of the Valley Monday. And it's not expected to get any cooler as the autumnal equinox marks the beginning of fall today. "Just because it's fall, nature doesn't work according to the calendar," said Jim Bagnall, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in Hanford. "It can get hot here in summer, and the particular pattern of high pressure, which is typical over the summer, is still holding on."

That weather pattern is keeping temperatures in the region about 10 degrees higher than usual for this time of year, Bagnall said.

The momentum of summer remained intense yesterday in many areas around the Valley.

Yesterday's 105-degree heat in Bakersfield tied its record high temperature for the date, while Fresno was only a few degrees short of its record, Bagnall said. Among the highs recorded in Kings County yesterday, the hottest was in Lemoore, which recorded a high of 104, according to the NWS. The area is expected to experience similar heat today.

Along with the heat, the air quality is hitting its "unhealthful" level as well. The San Joaquin Valley Air Quality Management District is forecasting a "poor" air quality index of 182.

That has prompted the air district to call a "Spare the Air Day" for today as well as Wednesday.

One factor in the forecast is Tropical Storm Marty, which walloped Baja California today with heavy rains. While it is currently expected to move east toward Arizona, some clouds and humidity may reach the Central Valley.

Daily highs are forecast to remain in the upper to mid-90s for the next few days.

But the weather may take a seasonal turn starting next week, Bagnall said.

"One of these fall-like weather systems is moving through the Pacific West giving the region some relief," Bagnall said. "The temperature will then get closer to its normal, which is from the upper 80s to lower 90s."

Meanwhile, the "roller coaster" effect of the temperature pattern between warm and cool weather will continue over the next month, but the temperature will see a general downward trend toward winter, Bagnall said.

[Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, September 24, 2003:](#)

Trapped in pollution

Imagine yourself in a very large room. A room so large it would take you 10 minutes to run from one side to the other. Imagine yourself standing on one side and on the other side is an open

door of bright sunlight and pure fresh air. Imagine that the room is filled with acrid smoke. Your mission is to get to the open door of sunlight and fresh air.

You can't run because that would cause the smoke to penetrate deep into your lungs and could be fatal. So, your only choice is to walk slow and breath shallow.

Half way there you realize that your friends and family know of your situation but are helpless to do anything for you. You realize that the flames that cause the smoke are the flames of industry and agriculture and no one is going to put them out. You realize that the government agency sworn to protect the environment and your health is a paper tiger and as important as a range steer. You realize that the local media does not want to talk about this situation because it would dim their town's image.

So, you realize that you are on your own to solve your problem and you keep heading for the open door of sunshine and pure fresh air.

If you have COPD/asthma and live in Bakersfield that is what it is like. Now imagine what it will be like for your kids 20 years from now. Just imagine.

KENNETH M. CANNON, Bakersfield