

Plans on Valley air expected (EPA to demote region, triggering wider controls.)

Mark Grossi - The Fresno Bee (Updated Friday, February 13, 2004, 6:01 AM)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is expected today to announce plans for dropping the San Joaquin Valley into the country's worst-offender status for smog pollution, alongside Los Angeles.

The status will extend the Valley's smog cleanup deadline from 2005 to 2010, averting expensive sanctions that would include withholding \$2 billion of federal road-building funds. It also will impose stricter controls on businesses.

"They're stricter, but it's not immediate," said Planning Director Dave Jones of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "We don't know what the timetable will be yet."

The EPA's announcement, which will appear in the Federal Register next week, will include a schedule of deadlines for the district to submit new cleanup rules under the new status, called "extreme noncompliance" of the federal ozone standard.

EPA officials are expected to say the extreme status will keep momentum going on the Valley's air cleanup. The 25,000-square-mile Valley, which stretches from Stockton to Bakersfield, was the second-dirtiest place in the nation last year for smog or ozone pollution, and the area has never attained federal ozone standards. Los Angeles last year remained the worst place for short-term or one-hour violations of the standard.

The extreme status will lower the annual emissions threshold for major pollution sources, usually large businesses that must obtain a special federal permit, an annual accounting of pollution and fees. More Valley businesses will have to get the special permit as a result of the new status.

The Valley air district last year reluctantly made an unprecedented request for the extreme status, knowing the area will not meet standards by 2005. In addition to applying sanctions, the federal government would have collected more than \$36 million from the Valley business community in additional penalties for missing the deadline.

Officials said the district cannot achieve the standards without cleaner vehicles. State and federal agencies plan new standards for fuel and engines for 2007.

Said Jones: "We needed the time."

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CLAREMONT CITY COUNCIL WRAP-UP

The Claremont City Council approved a move to seek a grant from the Mobile Source Air Pollution Reduction Review Committee.

Los Angeles Times (Friday, February 13, 2004)

Claremont is seeking \$220,000 for the construction of clean-air fueling facilities and to buy heavy-duty, alternative-fuel vehicles. The money will be spent on the construction of a natural-gas fueling station for the new city yard and to offset the cost of purchasing three natural-gas refuse trucks.

Letter to the Editor - The Bakersfield Californian (Friday, February 13, 2004) Don't Blame Business

I was going through Bakersfield recently and a letter to the editor caught my eye regarding the hateful stance on U.S. Borax Inc. I have passed by U. S. Borax many times in my life and I have never witnessed pollution as described by the letter writer.

With California in the financial mess it's in and taxes in great need to balance the budget, it's not a wise thing to force another company to go out of business in California. Hello? Anyone home?

For the letter writer to dispute the E.I.R. is a right, but I'll put my money on the scientists' findings. I believe "Farm Burn Days" are the real culprit in San Joaquin Valley pollution, but I voiced my opinion and that's that.

Come to think of it, isn't U.S. Borax Inc. on the other side of the mountains by Highway 58? How in heaven's sake can the Borax air go over the mountains into the San Joaquin Valley? Hello?

-- JOHN SANCHEZ, Madera

Editorial - Modesto Bee (Friday, February 13, 2004)

Our Views: Burn discouragement has encouraging results

The first season of restrictions on residential wood burning is nearly over. When announced, tempers flared over the rules. Now, three months later, there's been hardly a spark of protest.

And now the good news... It worked.

Officials predicted that as many as 25 days might fall into the most restrictive "no burn" category. To this point, we haven't had a single "prohibited" day in the northern part of the region -- Modesto, Stockton and Merced. Fresno County has had two and Bakersfield one.

Yes, winter weather has cooperated. We have suffered far fewer stagnant days than normal. When winter skies go gray and the wind ceases to move, much more of the particulate matter -- soot, dust and ash -- is trapped in the air around us. With more wind, not as much of the particulate matter has been trapped -- a real blessing.

It appears that people are getting the connection between residential wood burning and the choking haze that often afflicts us. The evidence is nearly all anecdotal, but it is believed many people went beyond what was required by San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District rules. They voluntarily chose not to light fires on days when it was discouraged. Good for them, because that's good for all of us.

Here's another measure of how well we have been doing: For the entire region -- from Stockton to Bakersfield -- only 67 violations were reported. None of those were in the northern area, since we had no "prohibited" days. There were no violation notices written and no fines levied in the entire district.

It's clear, people everywhere got the message -- and they were acting to keep their air clean.

One part of the system may still need work. There were nine occasions around the valley when the conditions warranted a full ban in some areas, but they weren't predicted. Predicting the weather has never been perfect, and only better prediction methods can help us better determine when the air is particularly bad.

Because people cared more about the health of their neighbors than about having a cozy fire, the air wasn't as bad as it could have been in the valley. For that, we're all breathing easier.