

Air standard within reach

Valley is on its way to three years without a PM-10 pollution violation.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, Sept. 15, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley's horizon of dust, smoke and chemical specks may have cleared up enough to qualify as clean air under one federal health standard, an unprecedented event in this region.

The Valley has gone almost three years without violating the standard for particulate matter, or so-called PM-10. If the area makes it until Dec. 31 without a dirty-air incident, it will be the first time the Valley has met any federal air standard.

"This is a significant achievement for the San Joaquin Valley," said Seyed Sadredin, deputy director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"The air basin is reaping the benefits of the ... courageous actions of the district's governing board, substantial investment by Valley businesses, and the general public's participation and cooperation."

In a push for the attainment, local air authorities are asking farmers, builders and the public to continue keeping pollution-making activities under control this fall.

PM-10, specks 10 microns wide or one-seventh the width of a human hair, comes from agriculture, construction, roads and burning. Fall is considered prime time for this pollution.

The microscopic specks evade the body's defenses, lodging deep in the lungs and triggering asthma, bronchitis and other lung ailments. Medical science has linked the pollution with heart disease and higher mortality rates.

Community activists and environmentalists are pleased about the cleanup, but they say the weather has as much of an influence as district rules. Damper conditions helped hold down pollution.

"It would be an outstanding accomplishment to achieve this standard," said lawyer Brent Newell of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, a legal watchdog in the air fight. "But the credit is not all theirs because they don't control the weather. And this job is not over."

Lawyer Susan Britton of Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund, which has filed several lawsuits over Valley air, added that nobody should relax after achieving the standard.

"Once you make a standard, you have to maintain it," she said.

"We're not home free."

Air district officials said they will not slow their efforts against PM-10. They also know there are five other standards that the Valley has not attained.

The five are state and federal standards applying to smog and the tiniest specks, called PM-2.5, or particulate matter 2.5 microns wide. About 30 of these specks would fit along the width of a human hair, and they are considered more dangerous than PM-10.

It may take many years to clean up PM-2.5.

But this year, the district hopes to attain two federal standards for PM-10, particles 10 microns wide and smaller. One applies to 24-hour or one-day periods; the other is an annual average.

In 1990, the Valley had 55 days when particle pollution exceeded the daily limit. By 2001, the figure had dropped to 12 days.

There have not been any since 2002.

The area needs three consecutive good years to achieve the standard.

Agriculture, a large contributor of PM-10, has been kicking up less dust since summer of 2004, officials said. Many beneficial practices have become standard, such as watering unpaved roads, reducing speeds on those roads and less tilling in the fields.

The district also has cracked down on wood burning during the worst episodes of bad air in cooler weather.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which supervises federal clean-air issues, said the Valley is moving in the right direction.

"There are three months left in the year," said Lisa Fasano in San Francisco. "We think it is important for everyone to keep up their efforts."

Air quality shows improvement Valley may meet federal standard at end of year

By Lynn Doan, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Thurs., Sept. 15, 2005

Air quality officials are holding their breath as they count down the days until the San Joaquin Valley meets its first federal air standard.

The Valley has failed to meet the federal standard for particulate matter - a broad group of pollutants including soot, ash and dust - and several other air standards for at least 15 years. But if levels of pollution remain low for the rest of the year, Valley residents will breathe a little easier, officials said.

Dr. Danae Hansen, Tulare County's public health officer, said particulate matter can exacerbate health conditions such as asthma and create respiratory problems for children.

"If you look at nationwide data, it does show that the lower the particulate matter, the less chance there is that people go to emergency rooms, get sick and have asthma exacerbation," she said.

Kelly Malay, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air District, said smaller particles can also get lodged further inside the body, triggering heart attacks.

The federal standard, based on health effects, requires the district to submit data showing that particulate matter remained below 50 micrograms per cubic meter for three consecutive years. In 1990, the Valley was in violation for 55 days.

Since then, Malay said, the district has enforced emission controls that have kept the Valley just below the 50-micrograms per cubic meter level the past two years. She said 2005 is on track to stay below that level again this year.

"We're asking for the help of the public to help the Valley finish this year strong," she said.

Particulate matter becomes airborne through a variety of channels, including farm operations, construction sites and diesel trucks. But the pollution becomes the most concentrated during the fall and winter because of wood-burning fireplaces, Malay said.

Bob Keenan, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Tulare and Kings Counties, said meeting the standard will be a victory for the building and agricultural industries.

"It's nice to know that we're doing our part, and it's helped pay off," Keenan said. "I know our industry and agriculture have made a success of it."

Keenan said laws now require builders to spray water on dust and drive no more than 5 miles an hour on construction sites. Workers also wash down the tires of their construction equipment to keep the dust from spreading onto streets, he said.

"We're all doing our part," Keenan said.

The district has until 2010 to meet the particulate matter standard. If it doesn't, counties in the Valley could be federally sanctioned, making it more expensive to do business in the area, Malay said.

"There are economic repercussions, loss of highway funds, and we would have to adopt more technology to reduce emissions," she said.

Though months away from meeting this standard, Malay said, the Valley is far from meeting a number of other state and federal air standards, including those for smog and smaller pieces of particulate matter. But even in those areas, the Valley has seen progress, she said. Last year, Malay said, the Valley was in violation of federal smog standards on four days, compared with 48 days in 1999.

SoCal air regulators want stricter school bus emission standards

The Associated Press

in the SF Chronicle, Bakersfield Californian and Hanford Sentinel, Thurs., Sept. 15, 2005

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Southern California air quality officials want the state to approve stricter emission standards for Los Angeles school buses, saying that children's health is threatened by continued exposure to diesel exhaust.

The California Air Resources Board is scheduled to consider on Thursday a rule requiring that new school buses in Southern California have the cleanest burning engines available.

The standard also would apply to municipal transit vehicles and trash trucks in the South Coast Air Quality Management District's four-county jurisdiction.

"We owe it to our children to reduce their risk from breathing toxic diesel exhaust," Marlene Canter, president of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, said at a Wednesday news conference.

An AQMD study concluded that diesel engines are responsible for 70 percent of the air pollution cancer risks in Southern California.

The AQMD in 2000 ordered clean-burning engines in school buses, but the rules were never completely implemented after engine manufacturers and others filed legal challenges against them.

The state rule would require that school bus operators buy clean-burning vehicles when they replace old vehicles or add to their fleets. It would call for phasing in stricter emissions standards for new bus purchases, beginning with 2005 models.

Currently, 75 percent of the region's 4,000 trash trucks have diesel engines, said Sean Edgar of the California Refuse Removal Council, which represents private waste-haulers. Converting them to natural gas could have unforeseen consequences, he said.

"Natural gas has occasional supply problems," Edgar said.

Additionally, the higher costs of maintaining natural gas buses could force cash-strapped school districts to reduce or stop busing, said Doug Schneider of the California Association of School Transportation.

"Schools already have enough straws on the camel's back, this could be the one that causes districts to say, 'We'll only provide the minimum transportation,'" Schneider said.

Safeway taps wind power

By Jon Ortiz -- Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Thurs., Sept. 15, 2005

Pleasanton-based Safeway Inc. on Wednesday announced that it will shift part of its corporate electric consumption to wind-generated power.

The company said it is purchasing enough renewable electricity to power its Pleasanton and Walnut Creek campuses, its 270 gas stations and its 15 San Francisco stores.

Safeway has agreed to purchase 78 million kilowatt-hours of wind-generated electricity as part of the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Green Power Partnership program. Under terms of the plan, the wind-generated electricity will be supplied to the power grid, replacing electricity generated from less environmentally friendly sources.

The wind energy purchased by Safeway will come solely from new wind turbine generators, the company said.

The EPA estimates that Safeway's shift to wind-generated power equals an 85 million-pound reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, comparable to planting more than 10,500 acres of trees.

Clean air advocate speaks

News Brief in the Merced Sun-Star, Thurs., Sept. 14, 2005

This Thursday, Kevin Hall will speak on "The Politics of Air Pollution: How Will the San Joaquin Valley get to Healthy Air?"

The Merced Group of the Sierra Club will host this event, which begins at 7:30 p.m. at Sierra Presbyterian Church, corner of Yosemite Avenue and M Street.

For many years, Hall has been one of the leaders in the Valley's grassroots clean air movement. Sierra Club California and the California League of Conservation Voters have both honored him for his clean air advocacy.

Hall will lead a conversation and help to brainstorm local strategies for grassroots activism to help work toward clean air.

Parts of New Orleans to open next week

By BRETT MARTEL, Associated Press Writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thurs., Sept. 15, 2005

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Mayor Ray Nagin announced Thursday that large parts of the city will reopen early next week, and the French Quarter the week after that. "The city of New Orleans will start to breathe again," he said.

The announcement came amid progress in restoring power and water service and the day after the release of government tests showing that the floodwaters still contain dangerous bacteria and industrial chemicals, but that [the air is safe](#) to breathe.

The first section to reopen to residents will be Algiers, across the Mississippi River from the French Quarter, on Monday, the mayor said. The city's Uptown section, which includes Tulane University and the Garden District, will be reopened in stages next Wednesday and next Friday, he said. The French Quarter will follow on Monday, Sept. 26.

"The French Quarter is high and dry, and we feel as though it has good electricity capabilities," the mayor said, "but since it's so historic, we want to double- and triple-check before we fire up all electricity in there to make sure that because every building is so close that if a fire breaks out, we won't lose a significant amount of what we cherish in this city."

The reopened areas of the city represent 182,000 residents out of a city of nearly half a million.

"We will have life. We will have commerce. We will have people getting into their normal mode of operations, and the rhythm that makes this city so unique," the mayor said.

He added: "It's a good day in New Orleans. The sun is shining We're going to bring this city back."