

Put that log down

Crackdown on wood-burning fireplaces continues

by Alex Breitler

Stockton Record, Thursday, Oct. 27, 2005

Nothing beats a wood fire crackling happily in the hearth.

But for the third straight year, air quality experts are asking San Joaquin Valley residents to think twice before throwing another log on the blaze.

The Valley is close to meeting a federal standard for particulate matter such as the soot, ash and dust that billow out of thousands of chimneys from Stockton to Bakersfield each winter.

The first two years of the crackdown were nothing short of successful, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The program is credited with likely helping the Valley this year meet clean-air standards for the first time since the Clean Air Act was amended in 1990.

But it might be harder to keep people away from their wood-burning fireplaces and stoves this winter because of rising natural gas prices.

Businesses are reporting weeks-long delays as manufacturers struggle to keep up with demand for the stoves.

"This year, nobody wants to touch gas," said Larry Chisler, owner of the Fun Pool & Spa stove outlet in Stockton. "They don't care about the law. Everyone's scared of gas."

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. estimates that December and January natural gas bills will be 40 percent to 50 percent higher than last year. That's in part because of hurricane-caused damage to gas facilities and growing demand.

Those prices are even more reason to heed the wood-burning rules, said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the air pollution district.

"We really credit them for helping these past couple of seasons," he said Wednesday. "Now it's more important than ever."

Possible burning restrictions begin Tuesday and are possible through the end of February.

Wood burning will be prohibited on days when the air quality is deemed unhealthy. Burning is just discouraged on days when the air is unhealthy for residents particularly sensitive to particulate matter, such as the elderly or lung disease sufferers.

Air pollution causes more than 1,250 Valley deaths each year, Presto said. And the majority of those can likely be attributed to airborne particles that measure 10 microns or smaller, about one-tenth the width of a human hair. It's that size of particle pollution that's regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. If left unchecked, wood burning in the Valley could contribute about 24 tons per day of particulate pollution, the air district estimates. That's four times the amount produced by cars and trucks on Valley roads and highways.

While dust pollution is also stirred up by construction workers and farmers, during the winter, most of the particulate pollution spews from wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

"The bottom line is, it's very serious," Presto said.

Of the district's eight counties, air regulators have only called no-burn days in three -- Tulare, Kern and Fresno. Violators face fines from \$50 to \$1,000.

"People are gun-shy about gas, that's for sure," said Jon Wentzell, a sales executive at Heavenly Spa & Stove in Stockton.

Wentzell pointed out that federally certified wood and pellet stoves burn cleaner than an open fire.

Starting Tuesday, wood-burning restrictions will be published in The Record on Page A2. You can also check on possible restrictions at www.valleyair.org.

Air summit tries to build on good year Valley leaders gather knowing much more work must be done.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, October 27, 2005

When the first Operation Clean Air summit took place in 2003, the San Joaquin Valley violated the federal health standard for smog 134 times.

Today, as the group discusses more voluntary air cleanup, violations have dipped dramatically to 72 for this year - the lowest total since the 1970s.

Weather and rule enforcement play major roles in the progress, but groups like Operation Clean Air are credited with pushing voluntary efforts above and beyond the rules.

The group will bring together industries, government leaders and the public in downtown Fresno today to rally around air-friendly ways of living and doing business. Examples include building bicycle lanes into plans for roads in developments and encouraging regional transit.

"No question these efforts play an important part," said David Crow, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "If we're going to succeed, we need groups like Operation Clean Air."

The Valley will reach the standard for particle pollution, so called PM-10, by the end of the year for the first time if no violations occur between now and then. But PM-10 is only one of several standards that the Valley has never met.

For smog, the area will be considered clean if it has only three violations over three years. The area has had more than 300 violations in the last three years.

Health advocates point out that one in six Fresno County children has asthma, one of the highest childhood asthma rates in the country. Respiratory illness costs millions to treat each year in this region.

"I'm glad that we're improving," said community advocate Carolina Simunovic of Fresno Metro Ministries. "But we can never forget we have a long, long way to go. We have a large air pollution problem here."

Yet the Valley produces far less pollution each day than the South Coast Air Basin in Southern California, a notorious smog trap. This area's bowl shape and calmer wind patterns allow chemicals, dust and gases to stubbornly hang in the air. That may be the area's major hurdle. Officials from Operation Clean Air believe the Valley needs innovative ideas to attack the problem.

Lawyer Hal Bolen II, who is part of the group, said federal legislators need to establish the Valley as an Air Quality Empowerment Zone. The idea would be to provide tax incentives and possibly low-interest loans to people who invest in clean-air alternatives.

Bolen suggested the zone could be used to turn this region into a hotbed of air quality research and production. Federal legislators have discussed the idea in the past, but nothing has happened.

"Why not attract the company that builds solar panels or any other company that provides technology to make the air better?" asked Bolen. "We need to do it."

Operation Clean Air has made two trips to Washington, D.C., in the past two years, securing grants of about \$100,000 for education and \$836,000 for converting older public vehicle fleets to clean-air engines.

At the summit today, industries and businesses will discuss their work and changes over the past few years. The panels include representatives from agriculture, transportation and urban growth. "We need to view ourselves differently from the rest of the country because we are a special case in this Valley," Bolen said. "We must be willing to listen and contribute to making progress."

Air board may assist scrapping of old buses

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger / Bee Capitol Bureau
Thursday, October 27, 2005

SACRAMENTO - The Valley's oldest school buses could be replaced with newer, safer models by next fall if the state air board adheres to a revised schedule that speeds up the distribution of bus money.

The California Air Resources Board is deciding how to divide \$12.5 million in state budget funds to replace buses built before 1977, which are considered the least safe for passengers and the highest-polluting.

In the past, school bus funding was allocated based on population. This time, a growing number of officials want the oldest buses replaced first - regardless of where they're located.

Under this plan, the San Joaquin Valley would get the most money, enough to replace about 38 old buses.

About 1,000 buses older than 1977 exist in California, about a quarter of them in the Valley. If the population formula is used, the Valley would get enough money to replace just 10 buses, and more money would go to the Los Angeles area, enough to buy 44 new buses. In all, \$12.5 million will buy about 100 new buses. New diesel school buses cost about \$110,000 apiece, and natural gas buses cost about \$140,000 apiece.

Air board staff initially said it would take several months to decide which method to use. It estimated that school districts would have to wait until September to apply for the state money. Staffers wanted to make sure the public had ample time to comment before the board decided to switch funding methods.

Catherine Witherspoon, the air board's executive officer, explained the timeline in a memo last month to Alan Lloyd, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency. Lloyd asked that the timeline be moved up.

"I appreciate all the intermediate steps that must be taken and the workload involved, but it is imperative that children's health be protected by the earliest possible date," Lloyd wrote. A couple of weeks later, 27 state lawmakers - including senators Dean Florez, D-Shafter; Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno; and Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield; and Assembly members Mike Villines,

R-Fresno; and Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto - sent a letter to the air board asking for the funds to be dispersed quickly.

In response, the board staff moved up a public hearing date and expedited the distribution of an additional \$12.5 million to retrofit newer buses with pollution-reducing equipment. The board now is scheduled to debate and possibly approve the plan to replace old buses in February. School districts could apply for funding shortly thereafter.

That means new buses could be on the roads by the beginning of next school year. Vickie Nishida, superintendent of West Park Elementary School District in Fresno, hopes her oldest bus will be replaced. The district has three buses, including one that was built in 1970. "We definitely would like to secure a newer vehicle if possible," Nishida said.

Bonnie Holmes-Gen of the American Lung Association of California is anxious for the air-quality benefits that come with newer buses.

School buses were redesigned in 1977 to make them safer. Before 1987, particulate emissions from school buses was unregulated. Particulate matter includes small specks of soot and chemicals that can lodge in lungs and cause a variety of health problems.

"We're very dedicated to replacing all these older school buses and reducing children's exposure to high-level toxic exhaust," Holmes-Gen said.

A state study finished in 2003 showed that children who ride school buses have increased exposure to diesel particulate matter.

The study found that exhaust levels inside buses are higher than those inside passenger cars. Exposure was the highest in the oldest school buses and for children on the longest commutes. Said Jerry Martin, a spokesman for the state air board: "Children and the elderly, aside with those with asthma, are the state's most vulnerable recipients of air pollution."

State Air Board to Review Railroad Deal

L.A. Times, Thursday, Oct. 27, 2005

A controversial pact between California air regulators and the nation's two largest railroads will be reviewed today at a meeting of the state Air Resources Board. Local activists are expected to criticize the deal with BNSF and Union Pacific railroads, saying tougher pollution controls are needed. Board officials say their ability to regulate railroads is limited.

Today's meeting is scheduled to run from 2 p.m. into the evening at 9530 Telstar Ave., El Monte.

News in brief from the North Coast

By the Associated Press

in the S.F. Chronicle and the Los Angeles Daily News, Thursday, Oct. 27, 2005

Rohnert Park, Calif. (AP) -- Residents here may soon lose the convenience of ordering food without ever leaving their vehicles after a majority of the City Council said they would support a restriction on drive-thrus to cut down on air pollution from idling vehicles.

A final vote is expected soon.

"If we're serious about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we need to be looking at how people use their automobile," Mayor Jake Mackenzie said.

The majority of council members agreed that drive-up windows should be confined to a central commercial zone.

But Councilwoman Amie Breeze said drive-thrus are important to parents with children and the disabled.

"As far as the convenience of being in the car with eight kids, you could quickly go through the drive-thru and you're done with it," she said.

[Sacramento Bee, Letters to the Editor, Thursday, Oct. 27, 2005](#)

Diesel bus compromise

Re "CARB's urban bus rules," editorial, Oct. 19: The American Lung Association of California has been supporting strong transit bus regulations to reduce diesel pollution. The editorial implied that public interest groups had an unreasonable position.

The American Lung Association of California and other groups offered a compromise solution that would allow the transit agencies to move forward and buy more buses, whether they are pursuing diesel or alternative fuel technology, as long as they purchased the cleanest buses available. The proposed compromise would also require larger transit agencies purchasing diesel buses to retrofit older buses to burn cleaner, reducing the pollution burden to local communities. Our approach would allow transit agencies to buy needed buses to maintain service while maintaining most of the clean air benefits of the current law.

Bonnie Holmes-Gen, Sacramento,
Assistant V.P., Government Relations, American Lung Assn. of California

The need to move beyond diesel

The Bee's Oct. 19 editorial "CARB's urban bus rules" unfortunately suggested the Air Resources Board should mimic the Bush administration and allow transit agencies to continue using diesel-powered buses for several more years. Luckily, the board disagreed, deciding to require cleaner buses sooner, an issue they will re-address today.

Transit agencies have had four years to budget for safe buses. Now many agencies claim they cannot afford cleaner buses; needed technology is unavailable; and certain diesel fuel is safe. In reality, a natural gas-powered bus, over its life cycle, is more cost-effective to operate and maintain than a diesel-powered bus, according to an alliance of state and federal air quality, transportation and energy agencies, vehicle and engine manufacturers and fuel providers. To protect public health, we must enforce existing goals.

Todd Campbell, Sacramento,
Policy, Science Director, Coalition for Clean Air