

Wind, dust and rain make for gloomy day

By David Burger, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, February 28, 2006

A morning dust storm conjured up images of the Dust Bowl, but before the afternoon was a few hours old the dust was gone with the wind, replaced by a hard rain. The weather was another conversation-starter Monday.

A dry southerly wind preceded a burst of tropical moisture that were all part of what National Weather Service Meteorologist Kevin Durfee said was a "very complex storm system still offshore."

While gusts of wind were recorded as high as 30 mph late Monday night, the winds will give way to clouds that might curtain the sun all week long, Durfee said.

The San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District cautioned residents on Monday to stay inside as the strong winds kicked up unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter, district spokeswoman Brenda Turner said.

By the end of this storm system, NWS meteorologist Carlos Molina said the rain will settle the dust kicked up in Monday's storm and that Bakersfield can expect about a tenth of an inch of rain.

It will be cooler today, Molina said, and it will be cloudy all day.

Some sun is predicted for Wednesday, Durfee said. But, then again, he added, a predicted cold front may bring in clouds that will shield the sun that day until another storm system arrives later in the week.

"I hate to paint a doom and gloom picture," Durfee said, "but it will still be nasty (today)."

The winds caused power outages all across the valley, Pacific Gas & Electric spokeswoman Cindy Pollard said. As many as 2,200 customers were out at any one time, and crews worked through the night to restore power.

Weather or not, the city's ready

By Jillian Daley, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, February 28, 2006

This time, the City of Visalia says, it's ready.

It says it learned from the damaging rainfall that flooded 22 homes Jan 1-2 and was prepared for the more than a half-inch of rain expected to fall overnight and this morning.

"We learned from the last experience, so we're doing things differently and hopefully better," said Visalia City Manager Steve Salomon.

Salomon said the city bolstered its emergency services staff for possible flooding and is working on digging out a major catch basin, which is outfitted with a new pump.

Weather service officials are saying the rain today isn't much to worry about - and the rest of the week looks good, too.

"In the foothills, that's where the heaviest rain will be," said Jim Bagnall on Monday, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford. "Down here in the Valley we're not looking at any significant flooding to threaten homes."

The forecast for the rest of the week shows a rainstorm on its way for Friday, dropping another half-inch on Visalia.

Just in case the rainfall does cause some flooding, Salomon said, the city is prepared.

Salomon said employees are ready for the next couple of days at emergency services at the Visalia Police Department. Sand, bags and shovels are available at four locations throughout the city.

The city has also taken steps to prevent flooding.

The basin on Linwood Street and Houston Avenue that was engorged with water last month from subdivisions such as Cobblestone Estates I - where water damaged 15 houses in the January flood - has been outfitted with a pump to push water into a larger basin on Goshen Avenue and Camp Drive.

Salomon said the water has to rise up to the pumps before the city will even turn them on, and the basin is dry right now.

Workers have dug out 7,000 cubic yards of dirt out of the basin, Salomon said. Workers haven't reached the design goal of 70-acre feet for the basin, which would make it 20 feet deep in places, but there is no cause for concern, said city public works director Andrew Benelli.

"We don't anticipate there will be any problems" with the basin, Benelli said.

In some ways, the rain is good news.

The Monday evening rain ended an air pollution advisory the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued, said Fresno office Pollution Control District public information administrator Jaime Holt. The 20-40 mph winds hit mostly the Valley portion of Tulare and Kern counties and Kings County. Heavy winds kick up dust, making air unhealthy, but rain dampens the dust, keeping it out of the air, Holt said.

The forecast for today in Tulare County was good air quality, Holt said.

Dirty air will take a hike - as city, waste agency partner

From Staff Reports

Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, February 26, 2006

San Leandro - A partnership between the city and Alameda County Industries will soon result in cleaner air for residents.

Through the collaboration, the City Council applied for and received a grant for more than \$200,000 from the local air district's Transportation Fund for Clean Air. The grant will assist ACI in retrofitting all 24 of its diesel-powered waste collection trucks that service San Leandro with new pollution-reducing filters, said Jane McCrea, the city's public information officer.

With matching funds, ACI will retrofit each of its waste collection trucks to meet the California Air Resources Board's new emission standards for solid waste collection vehicles. The filters will reduce particulate emissions by 85 percent as well as reduce other pollutants, McCrea said.

These types of vehicles were targeted because of their frequent trips through residential neighborhoods. The new standards were adopted in 2003.

Compliance with the standards is mandatory, McCrea said, and without the assistance of the grant funding, San Leandro businesses and residents likely would have shouldered the full cost of complying with the California Air Resources Board's requirements.

Solid waste collection vehicles operate up to six days a week in San Leandro's residential neighborhoods.

According to the board's Web site, heavy-duty diesel engines are a significant source of diesel particulate matter, which in turn is responsible for about 70 percent of the total toxic risk to Californians from air pollution. Diesel particulates often are linked to increased cases of lung cancer and respiratory illnesses such as asthma.

For more information, call the city's Solid Waste and Recycling Program at (510) 577-6026.

Lake Tahoe's clarity affected by traffic fumes, scientists say

from the Associated Press

in the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, February 28, 2006

Air pollution from Asia's coal-powered energy plants and dust storms in the Gobi Desert could be a minor factor in Lake Tahoe's declining clarity.

But scientists believe a majority of air pollution affecting Lake Tahoe comes straight from rush-hour traffic here in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Air pollution's effect on the lake came up at a meeting between California's air and water quality control boards, which came together for the first time this month to discuss how their mandates overlap.

The California Air Quality Control Board is primarily concerned with health problems like asthma in children, while the Water Board is responsible for regulating water quality for impacts to wildlife, safe drinking water or clarity standards at Lake Tahoe. The meeting is the first sign they may soon work together to address areas where air and water pollution impact each other.

It's been known for several years that air pollution affects the lake, but scientists are still figuring out where that pollution comes from, according to Dave Roberts with Lahontan Water Board.

More than half of the nitrogen feeding algae growth in the lake comes from air pollution. But what's unknown is how, when and where the nitrogen got into the air. Much of it is nitrous oxide, which comes out of tailpipes.

"It's been documented more and more that what's coming from the sky is significant and problematic," Roberts said. "It's certainly going to be gaining attention in the next couple of years."

Another problem is fine sediment, which is dirt that is so small it literally takes forever to sink to the bottom of Lake Tahoe. While a lot of it comes from stream bank erosion, studies are showing road dust is turning out to be a significant factor, Roberts said.

Periods of rush hour traffic in Lake Tahoe correspond to the largest peaks in pollution in their detection instruments.

The impact of Sacramento's smog is also under debate. Monitoring systems on the West Slope have shown the smog usually is contained in the Central Valley. Storms from the West can bring more of it into the Tahoe basin, though.

The San Francisco Bay is a classic example of air impacting water: almost 60 pounds of mercury enter the bay each year from the air. The metal gets into the air in vapor form through coal-fired power plants.

Exposure to mercury can cause damage to the central nervous system, especially in developing fetuses, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A breath of fresh air

Ways to improve your personal environment

By Elizabeth Jardana, Staff Writer

Tri-Valley Herald, Saturday, February 25, 2006

THE WORLD IS FULL of scary statistics. Here's another one: Indoor air can be two to five times as polluted as outdoor air. And the group responsible for this dire little nugget of information? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

At this point, you might pull your chair back from your kitchen table and look around your kitchen.

You might notice the conspicuous lack of smokestacks, dearth of highway traffic and the complete absence of smoky coal fires in your kitchen.

You might shrug and figure that, once again, somebody is trying to scare you.

But if you live in a typical home typically sealed to keep heat in, full of typical cleaning products, typical carpets, typical furniture, typical paints and other chemicals you're typically living in the midst of not-so-clean air.

If you're feeling the need to open a window right now, that's OK. That's actually one of the EPA's recommended solutions to indoor air pollution. Or you could indulge your green thumb with a crop of houseplants. Or look into less toxic products.

All to take a breath of fresh air.

The air in there

So where do those scary statistics come from?

"Indoor air quality can be 10 times worse than outdoor air quality, essentially because of ventilation," says Northern California EPA spokesman Mark Merchant. "The chemicals that come from everyday living, flame retardants, that stuff my wife puts in the cat box to make it smell better."

Dianne Anderson, the green building coordinator for San Mateo County's RecycleWorks program, recently led a brown-bag lunch session on indoor air quality. The list of things that can make air unrefresh took up pretty much the entire hour.

"There are volatile organic compounds that come from paint, or you can get formaldehyde from glues, there's PVC, that's vinyl flooring, she says. "All of these have emissions that are floating around in the air.

"If people tend to use a lot of cleaning products or pesticides, any time they're sprayed, it releases chemicals in the air."

Why does all this matter? Poor-quality indoor air might give you a headache, asthma, dizziness, fatigue, or eye, throat or nose irritation.

Some of the biggest sources of indoor air pollution are:

- Cigarette smoke (don't, and definitely don't in the house).
- Unvented or leaky oil, gas and wood stoves and furnaces.
- Carpeting, pressed wood products like plywood and flooring that are treated with formaldehyde (as bad as it sounds).
- Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that are released from paints, stains and hobby glue. (This isn't the good kind of organic; "organic" here just means it's a carbon-containing compound.)
- Pesticides and cleaning products, especially those in spray form, which can hang around in the air for longer than you think.

Planting solutions

If you think keeping the air in your house fresh is a sticky problem, there's a scientist in Mississippi who has dealt with even more alarming circumstances.

B.C. Wolverton, author of the book "How to Grow Fresh Air" (Penguin, \$18), worked for NASA for 30 years on the problem of developing a closed ecological system that astronauts might be able to use in space.

"How does one create a healthy environment in a closed, energy-efficient home?" Wolverton says. "Compared to the moon, it's relatively simple.

"At NASA, we didn't have the option of raising a window on the moon."

He says houseplants - ordinary houseplants - have the ability to absorb lots of the nasty chemicals we're trying to avoid breathing in.

"You can use houseplants to help refresh the air," he says.

This may come as something of a surprise to those who have been diagnosed with allergies, say, and told by their doctors that houseplants are a source of mold.

"The plants are falsely accused," Wolverton declares.

He says that if you don't overwater your plants - leaving large amounts of moisture that fosters mold in the soil and the saucers underneath them - it shouldn't be a problem.

Plus, plants seem to have extra protection that nobody fully understands.

"We found that plants, when they transpire - give off moisture from the leaves - they emit something that suppresses the mold, bacteria, viruses - whatever may be in the air," he says. "It may be negative ions. So in addition to removing volatile chemicals from the air, if you have enough plants, they will help suppress nasty molds in the air."

He says he suspects this natural defense from molds may have developed because the tropical plants we typically use as houseplants evolved in low-light conditions under the canopy of the tropical rain forest.

"Warm, dark, perfect for molds," Wolverton says. "Nature had to give them some way to protect their leaves."

One of his favorite houseplants is the lady palm (*Rhapis excelsa*).

"It's one of the easiest to maintain, and it has less of a problem with insects, old mealybugs and so forth, that will attack plants," he says. "It's sort of a tough leaf so your animals and children won't chew on it. Of course, the whole palm family, based on our studies, are among the better ones for removing those volatile organic chemicals."

Of course, houseplants are not a magic bullet.

"If you have a serious problem, adding a few plants is not going to solve it," he says.

But for 100-square-foot room, two large houseplants can make a substantial difference in air quality.

Start with nontoxics. Or, you could avoid the products that emit these questionable chemicals in the first place.

Eco Design Resources, a store in San Carlos, sells paints, flooring and other interior-design supplies that emit low or zero VOCs.

"What we try to do is give you alternatives to some commonly used items that may cause indoor air problems," says showroom manager Jon Heffner.

The bamboo flooring made by South San Francisco's Smith & Fong, for

example, releases remarkably little of the formaldehyde used as a binder that the EPA and other organizations have identified as a by-product of many new flooring products.

They also sell paints, stains and even paint strippers made by companies American Pride and AFE Safecoat that contain safer ingredients than conventional paints. They also claim to release low or no VOCs, so they don't have that distinctive new-paint smell.

Heffner says that many of the products they sell are more expensive, but that's because the companies have chosen to make the more expensive, but safer, choice.

"In all paints, there's some kind of glycol," he explains. "Some choose ethylene glycol, which is in antifreeze. Or they could choose propylene glycol, which is safer; it's used in pharmaceuticals."

The market for Eco Design Resources, which opened in 2003, and stores like it, such as EcoHome Improvement in Berkeley, is strong, Heffner says.

"There are more solely green designers, contractors and architects, and they're doing good business."

Anderson, from RecycleWorks, says that even small first steps can make a difference.

"Try to do what's easiest first," she says. "Start with education and research into what you're purchasing. Always go to the less toxic choice if you're cleaning, and lower pesticide use. If you've got a choice between two products, choose the one that's not vinyl. If you're using anything that creates a pollution or an emission, you don't want to trap the chemicals in the house, you want to make sure windows are open. An air-out period helps.

"It's making the small steps and that will be incorporated into your lifestyle," she says. "But it's difficult because you can't just rush out and do everything at once."

- For more information on indoor air quality, visit www.epa.gov/iad or www.recycleworks.org.

Seven plants that improve the air

Tri-Valley Herald Sat. Feb. 25, 2006

B.C. Wolverton, author of "How to Grow Fresh Air" (Penguin, \$18) recommends having plants within your "personal breathing zone," about 6 to 8 cubic feet. Work in a windowless office? Don't think you can't grow foliage plants. For most, typical office fluorescents will provide adequate light. But blooming plants won't bloom without grow lights or sunshine.

- Lady palm (*Rhapis excelsa*): A large palm with tough leaves that requires some sun.
- Rubber plant (*Ficus robusta*): Robusta is right. This tough plant can take some sun, but it also can flourish in a dark bathroom. It's also very common and easy to find.
- English ivy (*Hedera helix*): Though hated outdoors by native plant advocates for its tenaciousness, that same quality makes it an absolutely bulletproof houseplant.
- Peace lily (*Spathiphyllum*): While it looks delicate, the peace lily is perfect for inconsistent waterers. It will tolerate overwatering (but don't, because that can harbor mold), but also tolerates drying out (to the point of wilting) without protest.
- Corn plant (*Dracaena fragrans Massangeana*): Its striped leaves make it a distinctive choice. It prefers some sun.
- Golden pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*): While it's somewhat less effective at removing vapors than other choices, the pothos' greatest asset is its easygoing nature.
- Boston fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata Bostoniensis*): It can be tricky to grow - requiring frequent misting and general coddling - but it excels in removing chemical vapors from the air. Also, its tendency to drop its leaves when it's even slightly unhappy will encourage you to vacuum, which also improves indoor air quality.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Tuesday, February 28, 2006:](#)

Padre and downtown getting dressed up

At last. The Padre Hotel, after undergoing an exterior remodeling, is set for an interior remake. That's great news as a renovated Padre holds great promise for downtown Bakersfield. The Bakersfield Planning Commission has approved a plan for condos in the landmark hotel. The only thing left is getting building permits approved.

Paul Holling, company spokesman for the hotel's owner, Pacifica Enterprises, said if the commission had not approved plans for the Padre, it would have meant "plywood on the windows all the way up."

In other words, Pacifica, which has struggled to renovate the 1928 hotel since 2002, would have had to give up on the Padre if commissioners had killed its condo plan. Now, he said, the interior renovation can move forward.

Work stopped on the Padre when the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and Kern County sued Pacifica for illegally removing asbestos from the hotel. The lawsuit was settled and Holling said Pacifica will make the air pollution district a part of the Padre project team.

Donna Kunz, the city's economic development director, said the hotel's condos mean more customers for downtown businesses and better chances for redevelopment of the downtown to continue.

Holling said a couple of new retailers also will open shop in the new hotel.

Approval of the condos' plan comes at a time when the Downtown Business Association is meeting with downtown property owners to explain plans for formation of a business improvement district. If the district is approved, owners will be assessed a fee to fund downtown improvements.

The future of downtown Bakersfield keeps looking brighter.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Tuesday, February 28, 2006:](#)

A crucial consensus

New spending plan for Measure C extension deserves support.

The group planning an extension of Fresno County's Measure C has overwhelmingly signed off on a spending plan for the half-cent transportation sales tax.

On balance it's a good plan. The largest parts of the spending would be on highway construction, local street repair and public transit.

The plan must now be approved by each of the county's 15 city councils, the transportation authority itself, and finally by the Board of Supervisors.

If all goes well, it will appear on the November ballot. This is not a new tax, but the extension of the current one.

The original Measure C was passed in 1986. Its 20-year run expires next year, so November is, practically speaking, the last chance for a seamless extension. An effort to extend the measure failed in 2002, largely because the various interest groups couldn't achieve a consensus, and it was publicly opposed by some environmental groups as well as anti-tax forces.

The extension is markedly different from the original measure in several respects. The 1986 version allocated almost three-quarters of the revenue to major street and highway projects. That's down to about 30 cents per dollar in the proposed extension.

The new measure would give a big boost to mass transit. Almost one-quarter of the funds would be spent on buses, van pools and other public transit uses, including some money for studies of

light rail feasibility. Most of the money would be spent to add buses and increase their frequency on the routes most heavily traveled.

Other funds would be used to replace older, polluting school buses, and for a local contribution to rail consolidation in the city of Fresno.

The extension would run for another 20 years. It was heartening to see such broad support from the 24-person committee. There was one abstention and one "no" vote, with the remainder of the committee supporting the plan.

The Valley Taxpayers Coalition's representative cast the "no" vote. The group has suggested that more money should go to metropolitan Fresno/Clovis at the expense of rural cities and the county. That's too bad. The mix of funding may not be perfectly satisfactory to every special interest, but it strikes a useful balance.

This is a measure that deserves support. It will need it, since it must get two-thirds of the votes cast in November to take effect.

We urge the various city councils and the county board to approve it, and we hope they will help lead the campaign for its passage. This is simply too important to all of us for it to fail.