

Smoke, heat make for miserable mix throughout Valley **Slightly cooler temperatures expected but crud from fires might linger**

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, July 11, 2008

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A farmworker who died in Kern County earlier this week may have succumbed to heat, officials said. And a 91-year-old woman died of heat-related causes early Thursday at a Modesto mobile home park, Stanislaus County coroners officials reported.

No deaths or serious heat-related injuries were reported in Fresno.

Officials at most area hospitals said they haven't seen any illnesses directly related to the heat, but said weather may have been a contributing factor sending some people to emergency departments.

At Kaiser Permanente, one patient showed up in the emergency room with symptoms of minor heat exhaustion after her car's air conditioner failed, said spokesman Rob Saroyan.

Thursday's high of 112 made it the hottest day of the year so far. Fresno also broke a record for the date for the highest overnight low temperature. The low Thursday morning was 82. The old record for July 11 was 80, which was set in 1896.

Cooler air should provide temporary relief beginning today.

State regulations require farms and contractors to give workers water, allow regular shade breaks and have emergency plans in place to help heat exhaustion sufferers, among other requirements.

Sunview Vineyards attorney Howard Sagaser said the company followed all the state's heat-illness prevention regulations at the site where Felix was loading grape boxes into a truck. The employees had stopped working early that afternoon because of the heat, he said.

"We are investigating and cooperating fully with the authorities," he said. "Regardless of the cause here, you have a loss here, and Sunview would like to express its sympathies to the family."

United Farm Workers spokeswoman Vicki Adame, who identified the worker as Abdon Felix Garcia, said he had a wife and three children living in the state of Zacatecas, in Mexico.

UFW was investigating the site where he had been working to see "whether they had water, whether they had shade, whether they got their minimum five-minute break per hour," Adame said.

A weather system moving through Washington state will bring westerly winds off of the Pacific Ocean, said Carlos Molina, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

"That cool air will filter down the Delta, and over the coastal range, and drop our high temperature below 100 degrees by Saturday," Molina said. "Those winds should remain through at least Monday."

Today, expect patchy smoke with a high of 103 with an overnight low of 75.

Patchy smoke will remain in the air on Saturday, with a forecast high of 99, and an overnight low of 75. There's a 20% chance of showers and thunderstorms on Saturday night and into Sunday morning. Sunday's high should be 97.

The scorching heat and lingering smoke from wildfires burning across the state contributed to a continuing air quality alert that urges residents to limit outdoor activities.

Fresno officials once again waived admission charges at city pools and extended the hours to help residents cool off. Cooling centers also opened throughout the Valley.

The heat and the bad air quality combined to send a rush of patients to local hospitals and respiratory specialists. Dr. Malik Baz, a Fresno allergist, said this is normally a slow time of year for him and other asthma and allergy specialists.

"Not this year," Baz said. "This year we have a high pollen count, plus the smoke-polluted air. So we're seeing many more patients than usual."

Baz said the air quality is so bad right now that he is telling everyone, even friends who have no respiratory problems, that they should stay indoors as much as they can.

"Everyone should also drink a lot of fluids right now," Baz said. "When they drive, people keep their windows up and use the recirculating setting for their air conditioners."

The heat was especially unwelcome news for residents of the Californian, an eight-story former hotel in downtown Fresno. One of two air conditioners at the building broke down on Tuesday, and a part expected to arrive on Thursday won't be installed until today.

"We're continuing to do everything we can to make our residents as comfortable as possible," said Californian spokeswoman Trudy Moxley. "We are using the one system that is working, and we are keeping everyone well hydrated with water and Gatorade."

In Kern County, Abdon Felix, 42, died Wednesday after working from morning to early afternoon in an Arvin vineyard owned by Delano-based Sunview Vineyards, the Kern County Sheriff's Office reported. If confirmed as a heat death, it would be the third this year for a farmworker in California.

Felix was a passenger in a Sunview truck headed from Arvin to Delano on Highway 99 when he became unresponsive, the sheriff's office reported. Emergency workers took him to Delano Regional Medical Center, where his body core temperature was measured at 108 degrees. He died 12 minutes after arrival.

The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health was investigating Felix's death, and whether Sunview Vineyards followed state regulations to prevent heat illness, said agency spokeswoman Kate McGuire. That investigation could take two to three months, she said.

Fresno bakes under high of 112

Two deaths in the Valley investigated as heat-related.

By Jeff St. John and Denny Boyles / The Fresno Bee
Friday, July 11, 2008

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EPA strengthens controls on 5 common pesticides

By GARANCE BURKE , Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee and Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, July 11, 2008

FRESNO, Calif. — The federal Environmental Protection Agency strengthened regulations Thursday on five common pesticides and for the first time required farmers to set up sizable buffer zones around fields treated with the chemicals.

The new restrictions came after four years of heated meetings among scientists, environmentalists and the chemical industry about how to protect farm workers' health while allowing growers to use the pesticides to reap more bountiful crops.

Anti-pesticide and community activists celebrated the new requirements, saying they would help protect rural residents from being sickened by the chemicals' gaseous byproducts.

A prominent national grower's organization said their members may challenge the agency's call for buffer zones up to a half-mile wide, which could force farmers to forgo planting thousands of acres.

"Our policy is not in favor of buffer zones that are politically motivated," said Paul Schlegel, director of public policy for the American Farm Bureau. "We don't think there should be buffer zones if they're not related to a clear risk."

The agency considers Thursday's decisions final but may make some modifications after a 60-day comment period, said Steven Bradbury, who directs the EPA's pesticide reviews.

The restrictions apply to five toxic fumigants: methyl bromide, metam sodium, metam potassium, dazomet and chloropicrin.

As part of their lengthy evaluation process, EPA scientists traveled to [California's San Joaquin Valley](#) to meet with farmers who sterilize their soil before planting season by injecting it with metam sodium in hopes of yielding better strawberries, potatoes and carrots.

In 1999, that chemical also caused the state's largest known pesticide drift, when 250 people fell violently ill after a cloud wafted over the farm worker town of Earlimart.

State regulators have since restricted the use of fumigants in three growing regions on the grounds that they cause smog.

California is in the process of improving its regulation of fumigants and expects to implement measures that will meet or exceed federal rules before 2010, a Department of Pesticide Regulation spokesman said.

In addition to the buffer zones of between 25 feet and a half-mile, the new federal instructions also require that growers post warning signs around their fields, monitor gas levels and provide workers with protective breathing masks.

Environmental and community groups called the decision a good first step but said they fell short of their petition to ban fumigants altogether.

"The combination of posting, advance notification of state agencies, and buffer zones around fields will substantially reduce the number of fumigant poisonings," said Dr. Brian Hill, science department director at the San Francisco-based Pesticide Action Network. "And when something does go wrong, communities and emergency personnel will be much better prepared to respond."

Bay Area air board limits wood fires

By Denis Cuff - Staff writer

Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, July 10, 2008

Bay Area residents who repeatedly burn wood in fireplaces and stoves on bad air nights may face a \$100 fine starting this winter.

Ending the era of unrestricted indoor wood burning that dates back to the cavemen, the air pollution board for the Bay Area's nine counties passed a rule Wednesday making it illegal to burn wood on Spare the Air nights, when unhealthy soot levels are forecasted.

The rule, passed unanimously, also prohibits chimney smoke that exceeds a visibility standard.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District will begin enforcement this winter when the weather gets cold enough to set up temperature inversions that trap smoke near the ground and trigger Spare the Air nights.

People caught with wood fires on bad air nights initially will be sent a warning letter. Repeat offenders can be issued \$100 tickets, or given the option to attend a smoke education class.

"Voluntary efforts are not enough," Kelly Wee, the air district director of enforcement, told the air board meeting in San Francisco.

Bay Area air exceeds the federal health standard for fine soot particles some 15-20 nights a year, Wee said, and wood smoke accounts for about one-third of the particles on those nights.

With some 50 or so air pollution inspectors to monitor 1.2 million fireplaces in the Bay Area, the air district will rely heavily on public cooperation not to burn on bad air nights, and make complaints about violators, Wee said.

The air district also will check around to find out if some cities want to authorize their building department inspectors to assist with enforcement in neighborhoods upset about smoke, said Jack Broadbent, the air district's chief executive officer.

During a public hearing before the board vote, several doctors, nurses, mothers of asthma patients, and other clean air advocates said the public needs the rule to protect against fine particle pollution, which can lead to a variety of lung and heart problems. Several residents said they felt imprisoned in their home because of neighbors' smoke.

Representatives of the wood stove industry argued unsuccessfully that EPA certified stoves should be allowed to burn on bad air nights because they emit a small fraction of the soot released by open hearth fireplaces.

A simple burn or no burn rule is easier to enforce and understand, district officials said.

Bad air delays decision on mosquito spraying in south Sacramento

By Andrea V. Brambila
Modesto Bee, Friday, July 11, 2008

DEFEND AGAINST WEST NILE VIRUS

The Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District urges preventative steps against mosquitoes, which can spread West Nile virus. It says think of 6 D's:

- DRAIN standing water that may produce mosquitoes.
- DAWN and DUSK are times to avoid being outdoors.
- DRESS appropriately by wearing long sleeves and pants when outside.
- DEFEND yourself by using an effective insect repellent. Make sure to follow label directions.
- DOOR and window screens should be in good working condition.

Poor air quality is delaying a decision on whether to conduct aerial spraying to control mosquitoes in south Sacramento.

The Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District, which announced the delay in a press release Thursday, said spraying may not work as intended because of the smoky and polluted conditions.

"High mosquito infection rates indicate we should be considering spraying now," said David Brown, district manager. "However, based on high particulate matter in the air, we are waiting for the right environmental conditions before we proceed with any aerial treatments."

So far this year, 18 birds and 34 mosquito samples in Sacramento and Yolo counties have tested positive for West Nile virus.

No humans have tested positive.

The district will decide whether to proceed with spraying next week, when weather conditions are forecast to change.

If it goes ahead, the treatments will occur for three consecutive days over 23,000 acres of high-risk areas in south Sacramento, including the Pocket area plus 2.4 miles east to the railroad line as well as the Florin/Elk Grove area from Elder Creek Road to Elk Grove Boulevard.

"Our goal is to protect public health and welfare," Brown said. "At this point, aerial treatments may be necessary to prevent human illness."

Brown said that until then, the district would encourage residents to stay indoors at dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes are most active.

Spare the Air alert means free transit

By Andrea Brambila
Modesto Bee, Friday, July 11, 2008

Today and Friday are Spare the Air days in the Sacramento region and that means free transit.

In Placer County, Auburn Transit, Lincoln Transit, Placer County Transit and Roseville Transit are free on Spare the Air days. Same goes for Yolo Bus and UNITRANS in Yolo County. El Dorado Transit and the North Natomas TMA shuttle are also free. According to Sacramento Regional Transit, there are no free fares on Spare the Air days.

According to an air alert from the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, an upper-level ridge of high pressure over the Sacramento region is reducing air movement and producing sunny skies, hot temperatures, and light winds, which will limit pollutant dispersion and enhance ozone formation.

Today, ground-level ozone air pollution is forecast to reach 174 on the Air Quality Index (AQI), an unhealthy level. On Friday, that number will remain unhealthy at 154. The Spare The Air trigger is 150. AQI levels are expected to remain unhealthy Saturday and unhealthy for sensitive groups through Tuesday.

The alert asks people to:

Eliminate vehicle trips

Carpool with friends or co-workers

Use public transit

Work from home if your employer supports "teleworking"

Avoid using charcoal lighter fluid and barbecue grills

Court overturns Bush air pollution rule

S.F. Chronicle, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, July 11 2008

WASHINGTON — A federal appeals court has struck down an environmental rule that the Bush administration championed as crucial in protecting public health.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit unanimously rejected the Clean Air Interstate Rule, saying it found several flaws.

Announced in 2005, the regulation required 28 mostly Eastern states to reduce smog-forming and soot-producing emissions. Those chemicals can drift long distances in the wind. The EPA said the regulation would reduce pollution more than any clean air rule in a decade.

Advocacy group Clean Air Watch said the ruling was without a doubt the worst environmental news of the year and called on the Bush administration and Congress to quickly come up with a fix.

EPA: Smog could get worse with global warming

By DINA CAPPIELLO, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Thursday, July 10, 2008

WASHINGTON (AP) --Global warming could worsen smog and stretch what typically is a summer pollution problem into the spring and fall, government scientists predicted Thursday.

Smog is most likely to get worse in the Northeast, lower Midwest, and mid-Atlantic regions of the country, where numerous counties and cities are already struggling to clean up the air, according to a draft analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency.

But in Texas and Southern California, already among the smoggiest areas in the country, the science is unclear, even conflicting. Smog there could get slightly better or become more severe, the analysis said.

Nonetheless, researchers said state officials should be factoring in the impact of global warming as they make plans to try to reduce smog, calling it a "climate penalty."

"These findings also indicate, that, where climate-change-induced increases in (smog) do occur, damaging effects on ecosystems, agriculture, and health will be especially pronounced, due to increases in the frequency of extreme pollution events," the analysis concluded. However, the prediction came with a caveat: the researchers did not take into account efforts to reduce smog that are already under way because of stricter environmental regulations.

EPA stressed that the document did not represent the agency's policies or position on global warming. On Friday, the agency is scheduled to officially respond to a Supreme Court ruling that

said greenhouse gases could be regulated under the Clean Air Act if they pose a risk to human health or welfare.

The Bush administration has resisted linking global warming to public health problems.

The ill-effects of smog, however, have been long been recognized. Smog is formed when nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds released from cars, industry and plants mix in sunlight. It can irritate the respiratory system, reduce lung capacity and aggravate asthma. Global warming would make smog worse because it would cause plants to release more smog-forming organic compounds and spark more lightning storms, which create nitrogen oxides naturally.

Barry Wallerstein, executive director of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which regulates air pollution in Orange County, Calif., and parts of Los Angeles, said the link between global warming and smog should compel EPA to control greenhouse gas emissions.

EPA says an American life isn't worth what it used to be

Seth Borenstein, Associated Press

In the N.Y. Times, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Friday, July 11, 2008

Washington -- It's not just the American dollar that's losing value. A government agency has decided that an American life isn't worth what it used to be.

The "value of a statistical life" is \$6.9 million in today's dollars, the Environmental Protection Agency reckoned in May - a drop of nearly \$1 million from just five years ago.

The Associated Press discovered the change after a review of cost-benefit analyses over more than a dozen years.

Although it may seem like a harmless bureaucratic recalculation, the devaluation has real consequences.

When drawing up regulations, government agencies put a value on human life and then weigh the costs against the lifesaving benefits of a proposed rule. The less a life is worth to the government, the less the need for a regulation, such as tighter restrictions on pollution.

Consider, for example, a hypothetical regulation that costs \$18 billion to enforce but will prevent 2,500 deaths. At \$7.8 million per person (the old figure), the lifesaving benefits outweigh the costs. But at \$6.9 million per person, the rule costs more than the lives it saves, so it may not be adopted.

Some environmentalists accuse the Bush administration of changing the value to avoid tougher rules - a charge the EPA denies.

"It appears that they're cooking the books in regards to the value of life," said S. William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, which represents state and local air pollution regulators. "Those decisions are literally a matter of life and death."

Dan Esty, a senior EPA policy official in the administration of the first President Bush and now director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, said: "It's hard to imagine that it has other than a political motivation."

Agency officials say they are just following what the science told them.

The EPA figure is not based on people's earning capacity, or their potential contributions to society, or how much they are loved and needed by their friends and family - some of the factors used in insurance claims and wrongful-death lawsuits.

Instead, economists calculate the value based on what people are willing to pay to avoid certain risks, and on how much extra employers pay their workers to take on additional risks. Most of the data is drawn from payroll statistics; some comes from opinion surveys.

The EPA made the changes in two steps. First, in 2004, the agency cut the estimated value of a life by 8 percent. Then, in a rule governing train and boat air pollution in May, the agency took away the normal adjustment for one year's inflation. Between the two changes, the value of a life fell 11 percent, based on today's dollar.

Energy official frowns on cutting back ethanol

By DINA CAPPIELLO

USA TODAY, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, July 11, 2008

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Energy Department frowned on relaxing federal requirements to boost the use of ethanol in gasoline.

Any reduction in the renewable fuel standard would sap investment in biofuel technology and undermine efforts to wean the nation off oil and reduce greenhouse gases, Deputy Assistant Energy Secretary Steven Chalk said Thursday.

"Keeping that in place is very important to us," Chalk told the Senate Environment clean air subcommittee.

Chalk made the comments as the Bush administration is considering a request by Texas Gov. Rick Perry to halve the ethanol requirement this year, from nine billion gallons to 4.5 billion gallons, because of high corn prices.

The renewable fuel standard was expanded in last year's energy bill to require 36 billion gallons of biofuels to be blended into gasoline by 2022.

In April, Perry, a Republican, asked EPA for a waiver, saying the ethanol requirements were having an "unnecessarily negative impact" on Texas' livestock industry, which relies on corn and soybeans to feed its cattle.

Perry met in Washington Wednesday with EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson, who will ultimately decide whether a waiver is granted. More than four dozen House Republicans and two dozen GOP senators, including presidential candidate John McCain, have written EPA in support of a waiver.

And they are joined by some rare allies — environmentalists.

The Clean Air Task Force, the Environmental Working Group and Friends of the Earth, in a joint statement Thursday, said the ethanol mandate should be suspended, albeit for different reasons.

"The petition to waive the mandate provides EPA with a much-needed off-ramp ... to examine the ways in which biofuels threaten climate, water quality and biodiversity," said Jonathan Lewis, an attorney with the Clean Air Task Force.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, July 11, 2008:](#)

Do local developers have water to waste?

The Business section of The Bee July 4 shows a beautifully rendered drawing of the proposed Fancher Creek plan and is headlined, "\$20m grant to aid 'smart growth'." Smart growth? Any plan "designed to reduce driving and air pollution and (make for) a more efficient use of land" is indeed laudable.

But the drawing shows a proposed lake and waterway. Does the developer own the water he's willing to let evaporate while gussying up his smart, new money-making venture? Bet it's not really his water to waste. Is it smart to design a lake, yet another artificial lake, in Fresno? Is this Portland, Ore.? Do we live in a rain forest?

There is an illustrated answer to those questions. Check out the front page of The Bee, July 6. "State's water crisis is taking a withering toll on life."

When the powers that be allow developers to squander our precious water, perhaps a citizen gets the perception that individual water-conservation efforts are insignificant and not really necessary. If the city wants the residents to care, to conserve and to cooperate, it might ask the same of the big guys.

Carole James-Wenzel, Fresno