

Valley officials ask parents to help cut ozone

Reducing the annual surge in school traffic may help delay a \$29 million penalty.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Wed., Aug. 11. 2010

Hoping to head off a spike in lung-corroding ozone, air officials are asking parents to have their children walk, bicycle, take the bus or ride in a car pool next week when many schools open.

Reducing the annual surge in traffic would not only be healthier for the children, it might also help the Valley's economy, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

If the Valley avoids a violation of the federal one-hour ozone standard in the next seven weeks, the government would delay a \$29 million penalty for businesses from Stockton to Bakersfield.

The businesses are on the hook for the penalty in 2011 because this region has missed an ozone cleanup deadline, air officials say. But if there are no violations of the one-hour standard this summer -- there haven't been any so far -- the penalty would be delayed until 2012.

The one-hour standard focuses on short-term peaks in ozone, a summertime gas that forms when gases from such sources as vehicle emissions and dairies combine in the air.

Call it a \$29 million incentive to leave your car at home," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "In the tough economic times we're having, it would be great if we could get through this summer without" exceeding that standard, he said.

Air officials this year already have been getting the message out this year about alternative transportation on billboards as part of their new Healthy Air Living campaign. They also plan a Valleywide press release today.

But will it be more unhealthy for children to walk or ride bikes if the air turns corrosive next week? Sadredin said that if enough people opt for different modes of transportation, the air will be more healthy for children, including those who regularly walk to school.

"This is not a silver bullet," Sadredin said. "But it might be enough if we can just get parents to take a few other neighborhood children with them when they drive their student to school."

Cool and breezy weather earlier this summer has helped slow the formation of ozone. The Valley has only 48 violations of the more stringent eight-hour standard -- an all-time low for this point in the season.

But the mid-August trend of ozone spikes -- due mostly to back-to-school traffic -- could easily spoil the clean season. The Valley had its cleanest summer on record last year, but there were still four one-hour violations. They took place in mid-August and September in Arvin and Edison, downwind of the Bakersfield metropolitan area.

Over the past several years, statistics show air quality in June, July and early August is better than in mid-August and September, says David Lighthall, science adviser for the district. A sudden increase in ozone concentration in August has been distinct, he said.

"The key factor is vehicular traffic in town when school starts up," Lighthall said.

Ironically, the one-hour standard was abolished in 2005 and replaced with the eight-hour standard. Yet the law requires the Valley to eliminate violations of the old standard or businesses face a penalty.

Ozone can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems. This region's air has never been clean enough to achieve state or federal ozone standards.

Most of the Valley's ozone-making nitrogen oxides come from vehicles, but federal law requires payment of the penalties from businesses.

Officials earlier this year began discussing ways of helping businesses with the \$29 million penalty, including the idea of a \$10 increase in vehicle registration fees to cover most of the penalty.

The air district board would have to approve such an increase this year if there is a violation of the one-hour standard.

If the Valley remains clean this year and avoids the penalty in 2011, the same scenario could develop next summer. The penalty again would be put off until 2012 if the Valley had a second clean year in a row.

"If we had a third clean year in a row," said Sadredin, "the penalty would go away."

EPA reviews California scientists' pesticide report

The Associated Press

In the Capital Press and other papers, Wed., August 11, 2010

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is examining a report that warned an agricultural pesticide approved by the agency could poison the air and water.

The EPA wrote in a letter last week to Sen. Dianne Feinstein that it was reviewing the report from a panel of California scientists. The agency is also reviewing a plan by California regulators to mitigate environmental and health risks from the chemical methyl iodide.

The letter was in response to Feinstein's request that the EPA reconsider its approval of the compound, which the agency sanctioned for use in most of the country in 2007.

California regulators opted to put the compound through their own registration process and gave it tentative approval in April.