

Back to school traffic leads to first Air Alert of 2011

By Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Wednesday, August 24, 2011

Air officials have issued the first Air Alert in their newly-minted program that asks individuals to make some small changes, which could have big impacts on the Central Valley's air quality and collective wallets.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District initiated an Air Alert Tuesday that will continue through Sunday. During these times residents are asked to curtail practices that increase smog-forming emissions. The alert is for the entire Central Valley.

The district said the Air Alert was issued because back to school traffic is triggering higher emission levels, which when combined with higher temperatures and little to no air circulation, has the possibility of exceeding the federal air quality standards.

Air pollution can cause respiratory and heart problems, especially among children, the elderly and those with existing health concerns.

In addition to the negative health effects, ozone violations can result in monetary penalties for Central Valley residents.

In 2010, the Environmental Protection Agency fined the Central Valley \$29 million for violating federal air-quality standards. Penalty fees can be assessed on businesses that are not using clean-air technology and practices. Additionally, Central Valley residents will have a \$12 fee added to their vehicle registration beginning in October to pay a portion of the fine.

"Ozone is a serious health problem in the Valley, and in addition, has enormous economic repercussions," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director and air pollution control officer. "Air Alerts provide a critical window of opportunity for residents and businesses to take action that can prevent triggering an ozone episode that carries severe penalties."

Eighty percent of the Valley's ozone problem is caused by vehicle use. When an Air Alert is declared, residents and businesses are urged to put into place measures that reduce vehicle miles traveled, including carpooling, vanpooling, using alternative transportation, avoiding the use of drive-through services and refraining from vehicle idling. All of these actions produce emissions that lead to ozone formation. Businesses are asked to offer flexible scheduling to reduce commute-time traffic and allow telecommuting. Additionally, residents and businesses are encouraged to shift ozone creating activities, such as lawn maintenance, to early mornings or after the Air Alert episode is over.

So far this year the Central Valley has not had any air quality violations. However, last year the violations occurred during the back to school time period.

The district has incorporated the use of social media and texting to spread the Air Alert. To sign up for Air Alerts visit <http://valleyair.org/lists/list.htm>.

Hot weather has air officials on ozone alert Valley warned of potential health risks.

By Paula Lloyd

Fresno Bee, Tues., Aug. 23, 2011

The San Joaquin Valley has not been hit with any one-hour violations of federal air quality standards so far this year.

That's the good news.

The bad news? Valley air pollution coupled with hot, stagnant air – like what's forecast through the weekend – creates perfect conditions for dangerous peaks in ozone levels, and the potential for a one-hour violation.

Air quality officials are urging Valley residents to take precautions to avoid ozone spikes, which are not only unhealthy but also costly.

"We asking people to change their behavior now, to avoid a peak later in the week," said San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

Ozone can trigger health problems for children and people with breathing problems.

In addition, penalties for ozone standard violations will soon add \$12 to Valley vehicle registrations. The fee increase is part of a \$29 million annual penalty levied on the region for violations, and will continue until the region is violation-free for at least three years. The funds will be used to help reduce pollution in the Valley.

Back-to-school traffic on Monday didn't cause ozone levels to violate federal standards. Valley air quality Tuesday was moderate to unhealthy for sensitive groups, but conditions could worsen as days remain hot and sunny and with no breezes to blow pollution away.

Forecasts by National Weather Service and air district meteorologists and atmospheric scientists show high temperatures bumping up against the century mark for Fresno through the week.

"We may see 100s in other parts of the Valley," Holt said.

Although we can't control the hot weather, there are several things we can do to reduce emissions, Holt said:

- Drive less – put off unnecessary trips or consolidate errands – and car pool to work or school.
- Ride a bicycle, walk or take a bus to school.
- Don't let the car idle while waiting.
- Bring your lunch to work.
- Put off yard care and home-improvement projects that use gas-powered tools or strong solvents and paint.
- Don't use charcoal barbecues.

At least one school district is doing its part to reduce emissions.

Fresno Unified School District has replaced diesel buses with compressed natural gas buses, and buses do not idle more than 30 seconds when stopped, said district spokeswoman Susan Bedi.

Because most of the district's elementary students live within walking distance to school, fewer buses and cars are needed for transportation, Bedi said.

The air district will meet with its weather scientists Thursday to discuss the forecast for early next week, Holt said. One-hour violations often happen in August, but last year five of the Valley's seven violations were in September.

But "once October rolls around, we're kind of out of the danger zone," Holt said.

California air board asks drivers to use restraint

By Tracie Cone - Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Tuesday, August 23, 2011

FRESNO, Calif. -- Air quality officials in one of the nation's most polluted basins are appealing to residents' sense of civic responsibility to try to save the region from an extension of a federal fine for ozone pollution.

The San Joaquin air basin in California's Central Valley became the first in the nation to be fined last year for failing to meet the federal deadline for reducing ozone pollution.

Now as an ozone-trapping summer temperature inversion begins forming across the valley, officials have launched a media blitz to get the word out that short-term personal sacrifices might help avoid the same fate in 2011.

"All it takes is for one place in the valley to go over for one hour and it jeopardizes everybody's attainment status," said Sayed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The valley must record three clean years in a row for the \$29 million annual fine to end. It is being paid by an assessment on businesses and through a new \$12 annual vehicle registration fee for drivers from Stockton to Bakersfield.

So far this year there have been no violations. But with temperatures forecast to exceed 100, a volatile combination of stagnant air and back-to-school traffic exists through Sunday, officials warn. The district has asked businesses to allow employees to telecommute and is asking drivers to reduce trips and avoid idling engines at fast-food windows and schools.

"It would be heartbreaking if we violate because we're so close," said Sadredin, whose agency is using Twitter, email and text message alerts as well as a media blitz to spread the warnings.

The valley that is home to some of the most notoriously polluted air in the country was hit by the EPA with the fine last October for missing the deadline to comply with the Clean Air Act limit on ozone pollution. Its trough-like shape means that pollution from northern areas is sucked south, where most of the violations historically have been recorded.

Ground-level ozone is created when the sun's rays hit pollutants such as oxides of nitrogen and volatile organic compounds that are components of motor vehicle exhaust, solvents, the many large-scale dairy operations and gasoline vapors. Exposure has been linked to premature death, asthma and cardiopulmonary problems.

Air officials complained to the federal government that fining the San Joaquin Valley was unfair given tremendous reductions in both ozone and particulate pollution over the past 15 years. In 1996, for instance, the region failed to meet federal health standards on 56 days. The region missed by fewer than seven days for each of the past three years.

In an agricultural region that has endured scorching, stagnant summers with the massive Sierra Nevada obscured behind a wall of brown smog, the improvement is becoming apparent.

The mountains have been increasingly more visible over the last several years as cutbacks in agricultural burning and dust went into effect along with school bus retrofitting, farm diesel engine upgrades, and strict limits on winter fireplace use.

"The challenge that we have is these mountains," said district spokeswoman Jaime Holt. "We get these inversion levels and it's perfect for creating and trapping pollution. We are not polluting as much as other areas, but it has no place to go."

The 2010 violations that triggered the fine occurred during back-to-school week after eight months of no problems, Holt said.

Tuesday was the first day of the alert, and officials said it was unclear yet whether drivers were heeding the warnings. Though the ozone rate recorded in North Fresno, one of the stations with the highest violations, moved from 16 ppb at 8 a.m. Monday to 23 ppb at the same school commute time Tuesday, inversion layers trapping pollution could be contributing to the buildup.

The highest rate recorded in Fresno on Monday was 70 ppb at 4 p.m. If it exceeds 125 ppb for any one-hour period the region will be in violation and have to start over in 2012, which means the fine will remain for at least four years.

There is an upside to the fine. All of the money comes back to the air district to use for other pollution-reducing programs, such as a popular electric-for-gasoline lawnmower exchange.

USDA gives \$1.15M to dairy group and Fiscalini Farms in Modesto

Sun-Star Staff

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, August 22, 2011

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-Merced) said the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has awarded \$1,150,000 in Conservation Innovation Grants to implement new programs and buy equipment.

The two recipients, Western United Dairymen (WUD) and Fiscalini Farms, were awarded the funds to adopt new technologies to comply with federal, state, and local environmental regulations and address important natural resource concerns facing the industry. Cardoza was instrumental in obtaining funding in the 2008 Farm Bill for the Conservation Innovation Grants program for dairy producers, farmers, and ranchers, according to a news release from his office.

“California dairy producers have some of the strictest environmental regulations in the nation, and these funds will help Central Valley dairymen comply with these tough standards,” Cardoza said in the release. “Given the economic hardship many dairy operators are facing, the timing could not be better. This is a win-win program for our farmers and the environment, and I am proud to have supported it in Congress.”

Western United Dairymen, which represents many of California’s dairies, received a \$1 million grant for groundwater monitoring. This project will help California dairies decrease waste discharge into local water supplies by monitoring a representative portion of Central Valley dairies to determine which methods best protect water quality so the most effective new practices can be implemented.

Tom Barcellos, First Vice President of WUD and Chairman of the Central Valley Dairy Regional Monitoring Program said, “Western United Dairymen is grateful to the Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Dave White and his staff, and California state conservationist Ed Burton and his team for their support and hard work on the Conservation Innovation Grant Program. It was Congressman Cardoza’s efforts in the last farm bill to include additional resources for conservation and his tireless support of the dairy industry in his district and the state that made this grant possible. This is the latest project in which WUD has successfully leveraged public and private investment to better assist California dairy families in complying with the toughest environmental regulations in the country.”

Fiscalini Farms, located in Modesto, received \$150,000 to evaluate the performance of an “enclosed aerobic manure drying” system, a new and innovative way of managing dairy manure year round. This project will demonstrate the system’s effectiveness to improve air quality and reduce emissions.

Conservation Innovation Grants is a voluntary program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production. Under this program, funds are used to award competitive grants to state or non-governmental organizations, tribes or individuals. --Sun-Star Staff