

Stronger alerts will be issued even when Valley's air pollution is low

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Monday, Jan. 9, 2012

In the midst of the nation's worst soot problem this season, air authorities are issuing stronger warnings when pollution is at a much lower level than before -- a new protective measure.

The San Joaquin Valley has been caught in a seven-week dry spell that shows no sign of relief. The lack of cleansing storms has allowed a haze of tiny debris to build up and violate the federal health standard for 37 consecutive days.

During that time, hourly readings in Fresno and Clovis have spiked nearly four times higher than the daily health standard. Yet stronger alerts weren't issued because an old threshold for warnings of very unhealthy air was not crossed.

Now the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will warn people when pollution spikes are twice the daily health standard. That was not nearly enough to trigger a similar warning in the past.

School administrators, teachers, coaches, parents and anybody else can sign up on the district's website to get email notifications about changes in air quality on the hourly warning system.

The warning system, which the district started in 2010, is the only one of its kind in the country. Participation in the system is voluntary. The district has no authority to force anyone to stop outdoor activities when pollution spikes.

But officials say schools and the rest of the public should heed the warnings.

The air district worked for many months adjusting the online, hourly warning system and launched the revisions just after Christmas.

They say the only hitch now is that people may be confused by their changes. The confusion centers on two separate air rankings online -- the district's daily air forecast and the hourly warnings. Until now, both have used a five-color system to rank the air quality in a range between healthy (green) and very unhealthy (purple).

Now the hourly warnings will show air quality in five numbered levels, the fifth being very unhealthy. The idea is to make a clear distinction between hourly spikes and all-day averages.

Kevin Hall, executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, says the district should have kept it simple to avoid confusion.

"There's been a lot of money invested in the color system over the years," he said. "We should stick with it."

Behind the colors-versus-numbers discussion, there is a science-based reason for the change. Under the 1997 standard, pollution spikes would have to rise above a lung-searing 150 micrograms per cubic meter before schools would be informed that outdoor activities should be canceled. Now, the threshold is 75 micrograms per cubic meter -- still a hefty reading.

For perspective, a federal health violation occurs when an air monitor averages more than 35 micrograms for the day. Since Dec. 3, there have been many hourly spikes well beyond 100 micrograms.

"You shouldn't be outside exercising when particulates reach these levels," said David Lighthall, district science adviser.

Air pollution hammers valley

La Nina makes air even dirtier between Stockton and Bakersfield

By Tracie Cone- Associated Press

In the Manteca Bulletin, Tuesday, January 10, 2012

This is the time of year when residents who often live with the nation's worst pollution often can draw a breath of fresh air. But this winter has not been kind to people who want to play outside in California's Central Valley.

A dry December and January has stagnated air across California, but nowhere is the situation more serious than between Modesto and Bakersfield, where nearly every day dirty air has exceeded federal health standards.

It's the worst air quality recorded in a dozen years, and it's the unhealthiest kind— microscopic, chemical-laden particles that can get into lungs and absorbed into the bloodstream to create health risks in everyone, not just the young and infirm.

The southern San Joaquin half of the valley stretches 200 miles from Stockton to Bakersfield and is home to 4 million people. It traditionally records the highest level of particulate matter and ozone pollution in the United States and has a rate of asthma three times the national average, according to the American Lung Association.

Air quality advocates have argued for years that the local air district's focus on fireplace burn bans ignores other major sources of industrial pollution, such as dairies, feed lots and oil rigs. "The air board's strategy is failing," said Kevin Hall, executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition.

Air officials say their policies are sound, but there is little they can do with La Nina conditions in the Pacific creating stagnant air.

Fighting air pollution in the Central Valley is a task that so far has not succeeded in meeting federal health standards. Surrounded on three sides by mountains, the valley opens in the north toward San Francisco and Sacramento, where weather patterns suck emissions south.

Cutting through the valley are the state's two main north-south highway corridors, the routes for nearly all long-distance tractor trailer rigs, the No. 2 source of particulate pollution in the valley. Also in the mix are millions of acres of plowed farmland and 1.6 million dairy cows and the flatulence and ammonia-laden manure they create.

Without wind air stays trapped

Without wind and rain, the air sits, trapped as if in a pot with a lid.

Since 2003, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has targeted fireplace soot as biggest source that is easiest to end and calls "no burn days" based on weather forecasts.

Fires were banned on nearly every day in December, including Christmas Eve and New Year's, and the 60 people who patrol neighborhoods writing citations to offenders have been busy. Violations doubled in some areas and were up to five times higher in others last month as the district cracked down during unseasonably cold weather.

"When we have weather conditions like this, there is nothing we can do really to meet the federal standards," said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the district. "Even if we shut down I-5 and (U.S. Highway) 99 and shut businesses we would still violate the standard because there's no

dispersion. The best we can do is to minimize the damage, and the best way to do that is with the fireplace rule.”

The struggle with particulate pollution comes after the district failed during the summer months, despite a publicity campaign, to keep ozone emissions under EPA limits to avoid ongoing federal fines.

Warnings about the potential adverse health effects of air pollution become a year-round event in the valley. And those warnings are about to start coming more furiously. This week district officials lowered by nearly half the level of pollution they say is safe for outdoor activities.

Heart attacks, asthma attacks go up when particulate pollution goes up

The air district helped fund a study of 1 million residents in 2011 that found that emergency room visits for asthma and heart attacks went up when particulate pollution went up. That convinced officials that the federal government’s standard, which relied on a 24-hour average of air quality, was too high. Small particulates in the bloodstream can break off plaque in the coronary artery, creating a logjam and a heart attack.

“The old level may work for Beijing, China, but we need to bring it down to where it really belongs,” said David Lighthall, the district’s health science adviser. “We are recognizing that the air quality is different from one time of day to another and we’re trying to give people the information they need to make decisions about outdoor exercise.”

The district sends advisories to schools and those signed up for email alerts, called “Real Time Outdoor Activity Risk” warnings, whenever the air reaches the “unhealthy” level so that teachers know whether to call off recess and residents can decide to postpone a jog or a bike ride. On Friday morning, for instance, some Fresno residents received an email alert at 10 a.m. working that the air was “Level 5 Very Unhealthy” for everyone, indicating the highest levels of pollution.

“We can give people a tool, whether an athlete or school manager, and ensure they do stay indoors at particular times when air quality is threatening, and also find out when a better time to go out would be,” Lighthall said.

Just before Christmas, the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment sued the U.S. EPA on behalf of Central Valley residents alleging it has not pressed California for a viable, enforceable plan to improve air quality.

“We are going to need far tighter rules coming out of the air district if we are really going to make progress in meeting federal standards,” said Tom Franz of the Bakersfield-based Association of Irrigated Residents, one of the groups suing.

Air pollution officials say the technology doesn’t yet exist to lessen the valley’s pollution and bring the region into compliance, though the district is investing in research and giving grants for things such as the new generation of battery powered leaf blowers and lawn mowers.

Cal Fire suspends all burning in eastern Madera County

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, January 9, 2012

Cal Fire Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit (MMU) and the Madera County Fire Department suspended all burning in Eastern Madera County effective 8 a.m. Jan. 9.

The burn suspension is in effect because of the prolonged dry conditions that exist across Eastern Madera County and the frequency of escaped hazard reduction burns. Even though Eastern Madera County has experienced cooler temperatures, recent dry winds and lack of rain has increased the wild land fire danger.

Cal Fire and the Madera County Fire Department will continue to monitor and evaluate local fire weather conditions, and the burn suspension will be lifted as soon as conditions are safe to do so.

Helpful safety tips : · Never dump hot or warm ashes from fire places or wood stoves onto dry vegetation, into a dumpster or trash container. · Although burning is an effective tool in the reduction of wild land fuels, if a homeowner has a fire escape their control they can be issued a citation (misdemeanor) and be required to pay fire suppression costs. · Homeowners conducting hazard reduction burning are responsible for calling the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District at 1-877-429-2876 to determine if it is an approved burn day.

For more information on fire safety visit Cal Fire at www.fire.ca.gov or www.ReadyForWildfire.org

New 2012 California laws

Sierra Star, Jan. 05, 2012

More than 700 new laws went into affect Jan. 1 in California covering a wide range of subjects including animal abuse, school and cyber bullying, firearms, caffeinated beer, tanning beds, cold medications and child safety seats.

A few of the new laws are as follows:

...The lower emission School Bus Program: Current law allows air quality control districts throughout the state to impose a surcharge on motor vehicle registration. This surcharge is used to pay for a number of air quality projects, including the Lower Emission School Bus Program. The goal of the program is to reduce the exposure of school children to the harmful effects of school bus exhaust. Current laws only allow the motor vehicle registration surcharge funds to be used to purchase brand new buses. The new law grants school districts the ability to retrofit the emissions control equipment on existing school buses that use diesel fuels. The law gives school districts greater flexibility in how to use available funds and offers a cost-effective alternative to having to purchase brand new school buses...

For complete list and details of state laws that went into effect Jan. 1, visit leginfo.ca.gov/pdf/BillsEnactedReport2011/pdf.

Note: only the lower emission school bus law is listed here as it is the only air quality-related law from the news article.