

Air quality takes a turn for the bad

By Alex Breitler

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Air quality briefly soared into the "very unhealthy" range in Stockton for the third day in a row Monday, another consequence of a historically dry 2013.

"Very unhealthy" is the most severe among five levels established by air quality officials. From 10 a.m. until sometime after noon, officials recommended that everyone avoid outdoor activity - not merely those who are elderly or sick, but also those who are considered healthy.

It's not unheard of for Stockton's air to deteriorate to this extreme. But many cities from Stockton to Bakersfield struggled with particularly poor air on Monday.

Air aware

To check air quality on an hour-by-hour basis, visit

valleyair.org and click on RAAN. There is also a Valley air app for iPhone users, though it's not yet available for other smartphones.

All activities should be moved indoors if the air is "very unhealthy," color-coded in purple. This happened Monday, though only for about two hours.

The more common "unhealthy air," colored in red, means people sensitive to pollution should stay indoors and others should avoid vigorous outdoor activities.

"Right now is probably the worst it's been in a long time," said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Over the years, wintertime air quality has actually improved due in large part to the district's crackdown on residential wood-burning fireplaces.

Officials can't control the weather, though.

Without much rain to speak of, pollution simply sits in the bowl-like San Joaquin Valley and accumulates, gradually building up until we face days like Monday.

Wood burning has been banned in San Joaquin County for six days in a row as a result of the worsening conditions. Another ban was scheduled for today.

A weak storm expected to pass through later this week could help, but there were no major weather systems in the National Weather Service forecast. Stockton is on pace to set a new record with just 4.59 inches of rain in 2013.

Greg Bensch, a Stockton-based allergist, said he's busy this week not only with respiratory viruses commonly associated with winter, but also people suffering from poor air.

"It's just particulate matter from cars, people burning fires, etc., and it stays really close to the ground," Bensch said. "Without any weather system coming in to clear it up, people with asthma start to have problems."

He recommended people with respiratory issues avoid exercising outside. And if the air continues to occasionally spike into the "very unhealthy" category, that warning would apply to everyone.

"If you exercise, you may want to go work out in a gym," Bensch said.