

Valley air officials urge firework restraint

By Katie Jenkins-Moses, staff writer

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For many, one of the highlights of Independence Day is the fireworks show at the end of the night.

However, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials remind Valley residents that fireworks increase levels of dangerous particulate matter (PM) and pose a health threat.

According to air officials, fireworks release large quantities of PM, such as soot, ash and metals. These emissions cause serious health impacts, especially to people with existing respiratory conditions, elderly people and small children.

Also, fine-particulate matter, PM_{2.5}, can invade the bloodstream and has been linked to heart attacks and stroke.

"Each year, we urge residents to consider the effects of our actions on our communities," District Chief Communications Officer Jamie Holt said. "People suffer from serious health consequences of activities that are entirely preventable."

In addition to these health risks, high levels of PM also threaten the Valley's progress in meeting air-quality standards that protect public health.

Officials say air quality in the Valley during the summer is already burdened by ozone pollution. The PM that fireworks create adds to the already poor air quality.

According to Outreach and Communications Supervisor Heather Heinks, the impact of fireworks is more noticeable in the summer because it is not the usual season for high particulate matter. Winter is the season with high PM levels because of wood burning.

PM levels created by fireworks are noticeable around a two-hour window on July 4. "People use fireworks consistently between 10 p.m. and midnight," Public Information Representative Janelle Schneider said.

Schneider used PM levels measured in Visalia in 2012 as an example of what usually happens on July 4. At 9:30 p.m. the air quality rates were below the federal health standard for PM pollution; however, at 10 p.m., the rates more than doubled. By midnight, the rates had returned back down.

"Sometimes it's more dramatic, but the rates usually jump from low levels to either unhealthy or to the very unhealthy levels in a very short time," Schneider said.

For Valley residents who want to track the air quality levels on July 4, the Air District's Real-time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) makes localized air quality data available. This is a free service and can be subscribed to at valleyair.org/Programs/RAAN/raan_landing.htm. This data is also available through the iPhone app, Valley Air.

Although officials understand people will want to use fireworks this holiday, they still urge residents to not use them this year. "Refraining from fireworks use will not only have a positive effect on air quality, but will also ensure that you, your family and your neighbors are safe from accidents and home fires," Holt said.

For more information about the Air District, call a regional office in Fresno at 559-230-600, Modesto at 209-557-6400 or Bakersfield at 661-392-5500.