

China's polluted air may be affecting Fresno

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee, Merced Sun-Star, and Modesto Bee, Saturday, September 22, 2014

Last weekend, the most corrosive air of summer descended on northwest Fresno — the kind of lung-searing day that would crack the rubber band on your newspaper if you left it on the driveway.

The usual suspects in this kind of ozone siege are stifling heat, traffic and fires. It was a weekend, so commute pollution was not as bad. But Fresno was a stagnant 103 degrees, Sierra Nevada wildfires had burned for days and dirty air hung in the sweltering Valley.

As bad as that sounds, it may not be the whole story, local air leaders say. Global pollution may be helping to create those dirty-air days.

They say evidence points to plumes of pollution from China and eastern Asia, thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has contributed about \$200,000 to help study it. The research is led by federal agencies, such as NOAA and NASA, as well as the University of California at Davis.

The research and the Valley were featured earlier this month in Science magazine, a leading outlet for the latest research and scientific news.

Among the bigger questions: How much ozone gets all the way across the ocean and down into the Valley?

Is it 1 or 2 parts per billion of ozone? Or is it something more significant, such as 10 or 20? The air district's estimate is a range from 4.5 to 22, but nobody knows for sure — yet.

"We're trying to quantify this source," said atmospheric researcher Ian Faloon of UC Davis. "There is pollution coming from beyond the U.S., and it is affecting the western edge of North America."

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the Valley air district, said China and other countries could be adding just enough to nudge air quality up to and sometimes over federal standards.

It may have been a factor in the northwest Fresno problem last weekend when ozone peaked at 125 parts per billion, which is an exceedance of the federal one-hour standard, Sadredin said.

The issue may become important as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tightens the ozone standard in the next few years, Sadredin said. Global pollution may push other air basins over the more stringent ozone threshold in the future.

The Valley air district already has been forced to look at this big picture, Sadredin said. The air district last year used the latest research to argue for a waiver on a 2012 ozone exceedance.

If the exceedance were waived, the district would come into compliance with the one-hour ozone standard, an older and more lenient standard than the federal eight-hour standard.

At the same time, research on global pollution is not yet complete, scientists said, and no one is suggesting that the great majority of the Valley's pollution is not generated here.

Staying focused locally

UC Berkeley professor Ronald C. Cohen, director of the Berkeley Atmospheric Science Center, believes the Valley district's use of the research distracts from its fight against major pollution sources, such as diesel engines.

He said global pollution research is important, but it shouldn't be used as a substitute for local action. He said prevention of asthma and other health problems connected to air quality should be the focus.

"I'm shocked at the way the air district has talked about this when most of the problem is happening in the Valley," he said.

Sadredin said he is not looking for a way around regulating home-grown pollution, nor does he want to roll back rules.

Rather, he wants the EPA to lift the federal requirement for the district to annually collect \$29 million in fees, mostly from Valley motorists. The fine was triggered when the Valley failed to achieve the federal one-hour ozone standard.

The money remains in the Valley and is used to help with air-friendly projects, such as replacing dirty diesel engines.

Sadredin added that the Valley has extensive pollution rules and local businesses have invested billions of dollars in new pollution-control technology.

"We're down to talking about regulating people's deodorant and hair spray, yet we're tolerating pollution coming from coal plants in Asia," he said.

EPA has made no official statement about the air district request for a waiver on the ozone violation. Federal officials said the agency is waiting to see if the Valley violates the one-hour ozone standard this year.

Even though northwest Fresno exceeded the standard last weekend, it is not considered a violation. Federal law allows three exceedances at any monitor over a three-year period, and the northwest monitor has only two in the last three years.

If the Valley gets through October without a violation of the one-hour threshold, it would be in compliance with the one-hour standard. Which means EPA would not need to consider the China argument.

Chasing global sources

At some point, though, as EPA tightens the ozone standard for the eight-hour federal threshold, the global pollution and every other source may become a big part of the discussion.

California Air Resources Board research has shown the Valley gets some pollution from the Bay Area. Fires in other parts of California also contribute ozone gases.

The Valley also gets ozone from the high-elevation ozone layer in the Earth's stratosphere as well as wildfires in Alaska or Russia, said researcher Faloona of UC Davis. It rides here on high-elevation winds moving from west to east.

To measure the pollution, scientists are sampling air at about 5,000 feet in elevation along a coastal ridge about 20 miles from Big Sur in Monterey County. Analysis has shown chemical remnants of coal combustion, which is widespread in China and eastern Asia.

"You can tease out the chemicals in parcels of air and determine where the air came from," Faloona said. "For instance, you can find mineral compounds in the dust that are linked to the Gobi Desert."

Faloona said he takes part in flights over the Valley to sample the air. The findings will help scientists understand how the pollutants are moving up and down vertically.

He said the global contribution would have gone unnoticed 30 years ago. Local air pollution was overwhelming. But with advances in clean fuel and engines as well as other technologies, California will need to identify every source.

"At what point do we say pollution is a global problem?" Faloona asked. "It's an important question."

Air district adopts compromise on 'no burn' days

By Garth Stapley

Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Sept. 19, 2014

Air-quality leaders on Thursday approved landmark restrictions that will significantly affect people who burn wood. Rather than dwell on when they can't burn, leaders want to emphasize a compromise focusing on when they can.

The “can’t” part is dismal for those who enjoy fireplaces and older stoves; come winter, there will be more days than not when burning is illegal.

The new rules are expected to double “no burn” days in Stanislaus County, from an average of 36 to 72, among 120 winter days from November through February. Those in Merced and San Joaquin counties would see increases from 19 and 24, respectively, to 55 and 53 “no burn” days.

Those willing to invest in new clean-burning technology, on the other hand, will have much more freedom to light up than before. In fact, they will bask in firelight glow almost every night.

“This rule reduces smoke pollution from wood burning while still allowing it to occur,” said Bill O’Brien, a Stanislaus supervisor and member of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District’s governing board.

O’Brien characterized the compromise as a “carrot-stick approach; if you’re going to burn, you’ve got to do it cleanly.”

The catch is the cost.

Only devices certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can be used on most winter days. They include newer wood stoves, pellet stoves, and all gas stoves and gas heaters. They typically run from \$3,000 to \$5,000.

The air district has had good participation in previous rebate programs, offering \$100 to people willing to convert to efficient wood stoves, \$250 for pellet stoves and \$500 for gas-powered devices. Now people can get \$1,500 rebates for any of them, starting today.

Owners will need to register clean-burning devices online, and eventually pay \$12.50 every three years to cover the district’s administrative costs. Also, people will need to hire a certified expert to inspect their stove or heater every three years to make sure it’s running right; O’Brien compared that to California’s auto smog check program.

Only one member of the air district’s governing board, a Kern County supervisor, voted against the new rule, and few people in the audience spoke against it.

Crystal Whole, a Duraflame spokeswoman, said only a fraction of the people who once regularly enjoyed fires still do so since the air district began pushing air-quality programs two decades ago. It’s obvious, she said, that other pollution sources – vehicles and businesses are commonly cited – are more to blame than fireplaces.

Mark Anaforian said the air district has attempted to “vilify the wood industry,” labeling 75 percent of burners as “dirty.” Kurt Kautz, who employs 44 people at a Lodi firewood company, said the rule could hurt poor people because wood is cheaper than electricity and natural gas. Others have questioned why the air district is going after homeowners rather than businesses.

The district’s Errol Villegas noted 500 rules addressing air quality since 1992, many aimed at businesses, which have spent \$40 billion upgrading equipment, reducing their pollution output by 80 percent. Nowhere else in California, and probably the United States, do companies put up with such strict requirements, said Seyed Sadredin, the district’s executive director.

Both men said the Valley, cursed with bowl features that trap air, cannot hope to meet federal standards for particle pollution without the new fire restrictions. The vote lowers the trigger for “no burn” days from 30 micrograms per cubic meter to 20, in daily measurements – by far the strictest in California.

The new restrictions won’t apply to people who have no other heat source, or to remote places with no access to natural gas. Barbecues remain OK, but outdoor fireplaces, pits and rings would be subject to the same rules as fireplaces.

Commercial charbroilers and landscapers could become targets of future regulation, officials say.

Most speakers praised the compromise.

D.C. Snow said his ailing wife craves dry heat produced by their EPA-certified stove. “We’ve got a window. Sometimes she’d rather watch that and the flicker of fire than television,” he said.

Modesto's Louise Johnson, who has asthma, applauded incentives for low-income people – \$2,500, plus \$500 for those needing gas plumbing, which combined could pay for a low-end device. "I'm positive this will do a lot of good for air quality in the Valley," she said.

Robert Guardiola of Riverbank's All Brands Hearth & Spa said the rule could help the wood industry. Customers save enough on power bills to pay for devices within five years, he said, although half of his inventory is gas units.

People who might have seen past restrictions as punitive could embrace clean technology because of the higher incentives, helping to mend the district's perception among regular folk, said Steve Goldstein of Modesto's Spa Doctor Pool-Spa & Stove Center.

A board member representing public health interests, Dr. John Capitman, said, "I understand how emotional and concerning this topic is to people."

With 240,000 homes burning wood in the San Joaquin Valley, he calculated that the district hopes to persuade about 43,000 to convert to clean-burning appliances; Tuesday's vote set aside \$2 million for incentives, which might cover 1,400 rebates, or less.

Sadredin said the board could opt to put more money in the program. However, a lot of people are expected to simply give up burning, he said.

For more information on rebates, see <http://valleyair.org/grants/burncleaner.htm>.

New air rules to reduce 'dirty' fireplace use

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Sept 19, 2014

Don't tell Norman Rockwell, but a crackling fire in a home hearth is no longer the cozy family tradition it once was for many residents of the valley.

On Thursday, the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District voted 12-1 to amend its Check Before You Burn program, delivering something akin to a death blow to "dirty" fireplaces and old-style wood-burning stoves. At the same time, the board made it easier -- and cheaper -- to burn in cleaner devices.

The lone dissenting vote came from board member and 4th District Kern County Supervisor David Couch, who expressed reservations about the new program's need to register owners of certified devices, and the decision to provide additional financial incentives to low-income residents who want to convert their polluting devices.

Some members of the public, including a few who sell firewood for a living, also objected to the changes. But most district board members praised the amendments, with descriptions like "brilliant," "innovative" and "well thought out."

While summer air pollution in the form of valley smog has charted significant improvements in recent years, the valley's wintertime particle pollution has worsened -- especially as the drought has brought more stagnant conditions to the valley.

Fireplaces and wood-burning stoves contribute about 13 percent of the valley's PM-2.5 pollution, made up of microscopic particles that can be breathed deep into the lungs and even migrate into the blood stream, potentially causing serious consequences to human health.

Other sources, according to the district, include farming operations, 17 percent; road dust, 13 percent; agricultural waste burning and forest management, 11 percent; and heavy-duty diesel trucks, 6 percent. The remaining sources include wind blown dust, cooking and road dust.

"This rule has been the most cost-effective regulation the district has developed, and yields dramatic health benefits," Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director and air pollution control officer said of Check Before You Burn.

The changes to the rule, he predicted, will encourage the use of cleaner wood-burning devices while reducing the use of "dirty" devices, especially conventional fireplaces, which send most of the heat they

produce, and virtually all of the PM-2.5 particle pollution right up the chimney and into nearby homes and neighborhoods.

Indeed, the changes come with an encouraging carrot: If you convert your wood-burning stove or fireplace with cleaner-burning technology, those pesky no-burn days could virtually disappear.

And that's not all. The district will even help you pay for half the cost of conversion, and more for low-income residents.

But there's also a stick. For those who maintain their old-school "dirty" stoves and fireplaces, the number of no-burn days could double over the 120-day season -- which stretches from November through February -- leaving them with far fewer opportunities to seduce a lover, create an ambiance or just roast some marshmallows.

"There's no way the San Joaquin Valley can meet (clean air) standards" without these changes, Sadredin said.

Even with the changes, meeting the EPA's ever-more stringent federal air standards may be a pipe dream.

A January 2014 survey in the district indicated that 24 percent of valley residents with wood-burning devices would convert to cleaner-burning technology if they were provided a discount of about 50 percent.

In an average Kern County winter, the old program flagged 44 no-burn days. But the rule change will lower the allowable concentration of PM-2.5 from 30 micrograms per cubic meter of air to 20.

Under the new rules, Kern residents without cleaner-burning devices will see an average of 79 no-burn days, or about two-thirds of the burn season. Those with certified devices would be subject to just six no-burn days, on average.

The meeting was held at the Air District's main office in Fresno with some board members attending via video conferencing. Some public comment was also made by video conferencing.

One person speaking during the public comment period was Shafter almond farmer and environmental activist Tom Frantz, who spoke from Bakersfield. He criticized the new rules for allowing increased burning of cleaner devices as an incentive to convert.

"The only incentive that makes sense to me," he said, "is to take a dirty fireplace and convert it to natural gas."

Fewer wood burning days ahead for Valley Air District approves amendment lowering particulate threshold

Turlock Journal, Friday, Sept. 19, 2014

By Sabra Stafford

The Governing Board for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District approved a proposal to tighten the wood burning bans in the Central Valley, lessening the number of days individuals can use traditional fireplaces.

The District's Check Before You Burn residential wood-burning rule was amended Thursday to lower the threshold for fine particulate matter (PM2.5) from 30 micrograms per cubic meter to 20 micrograms per cubic meter. As a result the number of no burn days issued for the area between November and February is expected to double. Stanislaus County had 53 burn prohibitions issued over last season.

Check Before You Burn requires wood-burning prohibitions on days when levels of fine-particulate matter (PM2.5) are forecast to exceed the federal health standard. Wood-burning forecasts are issued daily for each county.

Fine particulate matter can increase the risk of lung disease, respiratory illness, heart attacks and stroke.

According to the air district, wood burning contributes 13 percent to winter-time particulate matter emissions.

"This rule has been the most cost-effective regulation the district has developed and yields dramatic health benefits," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director and air pollution control officer. "We're pleased that we can make it even more effective in encouraging the use of cleaner wood-burning devices."

The air district has promoted efforts to switch traditional wood burning fireplaces and stoves to cleaner technology by offering financial incentives to help cover the cost. The Governing Board approved bolstering the Burn Cleaner incentive program by \$2.1 million. The program will offer Valley residents up to \$1,500 off the cost of upgrading to an EPA-certified wood-burning stove or insert, pellet stove or insert, or a natural gas stove or insert. Qualified low-income residents may receive up to \$2,500 off the approved appliances.

Additionally homes with the cleaner burning devices will be allowed to burn on the declared no burn days when the level is lower than 65 micrograms.

The Check Before You Burn program begins Nov. 1.

King Fire sending smoke into Valley

Porterville Recorder, Saturday, Sept. 20, 2014

PORTERVILLE - The King Fire burning in El Dorado County has prompted local air officials to issue a health cautionary statement for smoke impacts in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties, and the Valley air basin portion of Kern County. The smoke may continue to impact the Valley as long as the fire burns, local air officials said.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter (PM2.5), which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on their local conditions.

Residents can check the District's wildfire page — www.valleyair.org/wildfires.htm — for information about any current wildfires and whether they are impacting the Valley. Residents can also check the nearest air monitor to their location to determine localized air-quality conditions.

Smoke from Sacramento-area fire blows into Fresno County

By Mark Grossi, the Fresno Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Sept. 19, 2014

Smoke from the King fire in the Eldorado National Forest, east of Sacramento, is drifting into the San Joaquin Valley, air quality officials warned on Friday.

People with lung problems should stay inside if they notice the smell of smoke, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said. The district will issue a health cautionary statement Friday afternoon, officials said.

Soot levels climbed in the early afternoon around Clovis and central Fresno, officials said. The pollution level in Clovis is only slightly below the federal health standard for particle pollution.

Smoke from the King fire is also blanketing Yosemite-area communities, including Oakhurst. Residents there are calling the Madera County Sheriff's Office, thinking the Courtney fire has flared up again. Sheriff's spokeswoman Erica Stuart said "the smoke enveloping Oakhurst at this hour is coming from the King Fire in El Dorado County."

A low pressure system has allowed smoke from the King fire to be drawn into the Valley. It is expected to continue sending smoke into the Valley on Saturday and maybe Sunday.

The King fire has burned more than 75,000 acres, threatening thousands of homes.

By comparison, the Courtney fire is 90 percent contained and has burned 56 structures, including 30 homes.

Kings Fire sends smoke through Oakhurst

Sierra Star, Friday, September 19, 2014

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For more information, visit www.valleyair.org or call a District office in Fresno (559-230-6000), Modesto (209-557-6400) or Bakersfield (661-381-1809).

Air officials issue health alert

Turlock Journal, Friday, Sept. 19, 2014

The King Fire burning in El Dorado County has prompted local air officials to issue a health cautionary statement for smoke impacts in surrounding counties, including Stanislaus and Merced, for as long as the fire continues to burn.

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