

Air district issues health caution due to blowing dust

The Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Feb 27, 2021

The air district has issued a health cautionary statement through Saturday evening for the valley part of Kern County and other counties because of blowing dust from gusty winds.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says a low-pressure system will generate gusty northwesterly winds as it moves across the region.

"The gusty winds will cause localized blowing dust in areas where soils are exceptionally dry — creating unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller (PM10)," the air district said in a news release. "Exposure to particulate pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections."

Arvin, Lamont area chosen for program to improve air quality in disadvantaged communities

By Stacey Shepard

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Feb. 26, 2021

After years of grassroots efforts to improve air quality, the communities of Arvin and Lamont now stand to receive tens of millions of dollars to address air pollution in their own neighborhoods.

The communities were chosen this week by the California Air Resources Board to be one of the next locations to participate in its Community Air Protection Program, implemented under AB 617, a bill signed into law in 2017 by then-Gov. Jerry Brown. The program is meant to involve community members in developing new, innovative actions that go beyond existing state and regional regulations and programs to reduce air pollution in disproportionately burdened communities.

"This process is something that is very local, and very organic," said Gustavo Aguirre, the Kern County director of the Central California Environmental Justice Network. "The folks that live in Arvin, and Weedpatch and Lamont, will be the folks on the ground that are developing these programs."

Under the program, the selected communities will have air monitors installed to measure pollution levels and will undergo a technical process to identify the sources of pollution in the immediate area. The program also calls for a committee of local community members to be assembled to come up with ways to reduce the identified pollution using millions in grant funding provided by the state. The committee is to be comprised of residents, business owners, environmental justice advocates, local government officials and air regulators.

"Community members have intimate familiarity with their neighborhoods and a vision for what they want their communities to become," says a blueprint document the state Air Resources Board published describing how the legislation would be put into practice.

Aguirre was part of a similar effort in Shafter, which was previously chosen to participate in the program. There, a group of industry representatives and community members meted out a plan that provides \$30 million in funding for various projects to improve air quality. The plans range from providing money to companies to buy cleaner vehicles and agriculture equipment, to electrifying school buses that serve the area, exploring air filtration systems for schools and planting trees and other greenery around the outside of farm fields and orchards.

"You literally put the (companies) that are permitted by the air district and the people who live across the street at the table to talk to each other," Aguirre said. "After all the debacles and misunderstanding, the people left are the ones that want to get to work."

The process in Shafter was not always smooth, Aguirre said. Ultimately, much of the funding will go to help subsidize companies that emit the pollution upgrade their equipment and vehicles, which some members of the committee objected to, Aguirre said. He recalled one instance when some resident became upset at the idea that \$1 million could go to fund cleaner trains owned by BNSF railroad, a company owned by Warren Buffet — to clean up emissions from its trains.

In a California Air Resources Board staff report, Arvin and Lamont were described as being located in a geographic area that is "a trap for air pollution." An environmental analysis found that Arvin and Lamont have a higher pollution burden than 95 percent of the state's 8,000 census tracts, the report said.

The sources of pollution are both regional and local. Pollution from larger cities like Bakersfield and Fresno and even as far away as Sacramento are known to contribute to sink down through the valley and collect in Arvin and Lamont. But the communities also have 38 stationary sources of emissions that contribute to pollution, the air board's report said, including pesticides, agriculture operations and oil and gas activity.

Arvin and Lamont was recommended for the program by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"We're very excited to move forward ... with the city of Arvin and the community of Lamont to understand their concerns and determine how new clean air resources and strategies can be best applied in the community," said David Couch, the Kern County supervisor representing those communities and a member of the regional air district's governing board, in a news release for the San Joaquin Valley air district.

GET INVOLVED

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District invites residents, businesses and other community stakeholders from the Arvin and Lamont area to participate in the formation of a community steering committee that will assess community needs and work on a Community Air Monitoring Plan and Community Emissions Reduction Program during the upcoming year.

To learn more about the AB 617 effort in Arvin and Lamont, download a community steering committee application or sign up to receive email alerts, visit <http://community.valleyair.org/selected-communities/arvin-lamont/>. The public may also call (559) 230-6000 or email AB617@valleyair.org.

Getting around Fresno will get cheaper on Monday when FAX bus rides become free

By Brianna Calix

Fresno Bee, Friday, Feb. 26, 2021

Fresno buses will be free to ride starting Monday.

The Fresno City Council voted this month to forgo fees for Fresno Area Express (FAX) bus rides to ease pandemic costs for riders, most of whom don't make much money, don't have a car and live in central and south Fresno. Rides on Handy Ride paratransit vehicles also will be free.

The proposal from freshman Councilmember Tyler Maxwell makes Fresno the largest municipality countrywide to offer free bus rides. He hopes making rides free will also encourage fewer people to drive cars, which are one of the bigger causes of air pollution in Fresno.

It remains unclear how long the free rides will last. City staffers must crunch the numbers to see how to pay for the program, dubbed the "Zero Fare Clean Air Act," longterm.

In the meantime, seating on FAX buses will be limited to 10 passengers per route and three per Handy Ride vehicle to comply with social distancing requirements and help prevent the spread of COVID-19. All passengers and drivers are required to wear masks.

Staff will continue to disinfect all vehicles each night. Sanitation efforts also will expand at major transit hubs around the city.

California air board OKs crackdown on agricultural burning in San Joaquin Valley

By Ryan Sabalow

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021

Nearly two decades ago, California passed a law that was supposed to stop San Joaquin Valley farmers from burning fields and piles of tree limbs and vines — a practice that chokes the region with smoke and contributes to the Valley's abysmal air quality.

On Thursday, state air quality regulators finally cracked down.

After a six-hour meeting, the California Air Resources Control Board unanimously approved a plan to begin phasing out almost all agricultural burning in the Valley by 2025, a move that may eventually lead to increased fines for farmers caught breaking the rules.

The move was a long time coming for a region that has some of the worst air quality in the nation, leading to profound health consequences for some of the state's most vulnerable residents, many of whom are immigrant families living in poverty with inadequate access to healthcare.

Almost one in six children in the Valley have asthma or some type of respiratory problem — compared to a national average of one in 12.

"In some sense, that's historic," said Dean Florez, a state air board member who wrote the original burn-ban law when he was a state senator 18 years ago. "I think it really shows where the board is, and how we feel about pollution, particularly at the source. And it feels like this is something that everybody should recognize, for all of those years we've passed on this."

In 2003, state lawmakers passed Florez's legislation that was supposed to end burning in the Valley by 2010, but state air quality regulators were reluctant to fully crack down amid pleas from farmers it would cripple their operations.

Agriculture is the backbone of the Valley's economy, and it costs farmers substantially more to bring in wood chippers to process their piles into pieces small enough to be incorporated back into the soil. Hauling slash away to landfills or biomass power plants represents another substantial expense.

Plus, farmers argue that burning is often the easiest way to address many sorts of diseases that plague their crops and keep their operations organic. Several farmers and agricultural associations on Thursday warned that the added costs of the air board's plan could put small growers out of business.

At the meeting Thursday, Valley almond farmer Stan Chance said it would add tens of thousands of dollars in costs to either buy or contract out for the specialized equipment needed to chip, grind and till the waste back into their soils in the ways environmentalists say farmers should.

"I'm here to say the Valley is not yet equipped for the burn option to go away," Chance testified. "There's not enough equipment and systems to meet the demands in the Valley."

An additional challenge is the numbers of biomass power plants available to farmers to haul their limbs and vines have shrunk dramatically, said Samir Sheikh, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

He said that at one point there were more than 20 plants for farmers to haul their waste; now it's down to just five, he said.

"We know that these plants for a variety of reasons are probably not going to be sustainable into the future," Sheikh said. "We've lost well over 500,000 tons per year of woody-material capacity by those plants going down, and we just need to really roll up our sleeves and work to find some alternatives and really handle the very large amount of material that we're talking about here in our region."

But biomass power generation comes with its own controversy. Several environmentalists spoke out against increasing the state's biomass plant capabilities since they, too, release emissions.

TONS AND TONS OF AG SMOKE

The dilemma of what to do with all the Valley's ag waste became especially pronounced over the last decade, despite the local air quality district tightening its agricultural burning rules to the most restrictive in the state.

Beginning in 2011, a series of droughts forced growers to remove many of their orchards and vineyards because there wasn't enough water to keep farming.

The shutdown of so many biomass plants and all those piles of dead trees and vines led to an uptick in burning. The air board estimates that, as a result, approximately 600,000 tons of agricultural waste is being burned in the Valley every year.

The local board launched a pilot program in late 2018 that paid out \$12 million in grants to subsidize chipping and other farming practices to reduce burning, but activists say it's not been nearly enough.

Though farm groups said they've already cut back burning substantially, activists said it's already taken the board far too long to force farmers to comply with the state law on the books, and they said the phased-in plan over the next four years represents yet another delay as the lungs of Valley residents suffer.

"I'd like to see you ask for a 17-year exemption from doing your taxes from the IRS," said Fresno resident Peter Dorian. "You're not going to get anywhere. (The 17-year delay) is very, very, very frustrating."

Valley activist Marissa Acosta agreed.

"We might be the breadbasket of the world providing food to others, but we can't even provide clean air to breathe for our own locals," she said. "I hope you will think of those already suffering from asthma and other health problems."

NEW BOARD CHAIR'S FIRST BIG VOTE

The resolution the air board approved calls for a six-month transition period to create an enforcement plan that includes mapping out "economic feasibility of alternatives to open burning" and finding more sources of cash to help farmers transition away from burning.

The air board estimates that to carry the plan out, it will cost \$15 million to \$30 million each year, funds from which will need to come from multiple federal, state and local sources.

Florez, the state air board member, called on Gov. Gavin Newsom to approve funding in this spring's budget to carry the plan out.

"We need the governor to complete this last act," he said.

The board at its remote meeting held over Zoom on Thursday didn't directly discuss the issues of penalties for violating the rules, but the plan calls for increasing them.

Currently, the San Joaquin Valley air quality board can fine farmers up to \$750 per acre for violating burning rules.

The issue of open-air farm burning is a familiar one in the Sacramento area. In the 1990s, the state began cracking down on Sacramento Valley rice farmers burning their crops after harvest because the smoke was choking the region's air.

In response, farmers began increasingly flooding their rice fields with river water in the winter to break down their rice straw instead of burning it.

Thursday's vote was the first major action taken by the powerful California regulatory board under its new chairwoman, Liane Randolph. The former chair, Mary Nichols, retired at the end of 2020 after 13 years leading the board. Environmental justice activists had criticized Nichols for continually passing up the opportunity to enforce the state law.

Randolph said it was clear that after 18 years, farmers need to comply.

"I think it is absolutely clear that this process must end," Randolph said. "I believe this framework can do that. I believe it can draw that line in the sand."

No More Ag Burning After 2025 Says Air Board in Unanimous Vote

Jim Jakobs

GV Wire, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021

Agricultural burning is a practice that began in 1859 but will come to an end on January 1, 2025 after a unanimous decision by the California Air Resources Board Thursday.

Former state Senator Dean Florez, D-Shafter (now a member of the air board), started the process over 17 years ago with Senate Bill 705 which was supposed to phase out ag burning in 2010.

“The only real negotiation as we all sit down and think about this is the people’s lungs in the Central Valley,” said Florez. He later noted the Central Valley has some of the worst air in the nation.

After a four-hour hearing and more than an hour and a half of debate, the board approved a resolution directing staff to work with the local air district to phase out nearly all ag burning over the next four years.

“Finally, yes,” said Florez when it was his turn to vote.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Samir Sheikh, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, spoke during the earlier portion of the meeting.

“We do operate a comprehensive and state approved smoke management system program that does tightly regulate and enforces open burning in the valley,” said Sheikh. He says he looks forward to implementing the board’s direction, but noted there are not nearly as many biomass plants for farmers to take their wood waste to as in years past. There are now five such plants versus 20 a few years ago.

Sheikh says smaller growers will need additional state funding as they don’t have the same resources to buy large equipment that can chip up wood and reintegrate into the soil.

Part of the state’s plan is to allocate \$15-\$30 million to help farmers transition to alternative methods.

Fresno County Farm Bureau

Ryan Jacobsen, CEO of the Fresno County Farm Bureau told board members that Valley farmers have championed many efforts to contribute towards cleaner over the past several years.

“These farmers and ranchers have spent real money, hundreds of billions of dollars with the public and private partnerships we’ve had that have made our air remarkably cleaner today than it was,” said Jacobsen. “Other regions of the world have not even come close to exhibiting the leadership we’ve seen from our local farmers and ranchers on this particular issue.”

Jacobson, himself an almond and wine grape grower, told members the last 17 years haven’t been wasted doing nothing about the burning issue.

“Investments, research and technology advancements have been committed by the agricultural community, the Valley Air District and CARB,” said Jacobsen.

He says the costs to vineyard farmers unable to burn waste will cost them between \$1,500 to \$2,000 more an acre.

“California farmers compete worldwide with our products. We are price takers, not price makers,” said Jacobsen.

Air Curtain Burners as an Alternative

Several people, including the president of the Nisei Farmers League brought up the need for more funds to buy ‘air curtain burners’ as a way to safely dispose of excess wood.

“I would hope that with the funding, that we will look at air curtain burners that our farmers will be able to purchase,” said Manuel Cunha.

According to a Forest Service report, the use of air curtain burners is an efficient, environmentally friendly, and technically viable means of disposing of wood and other burnable waste materials. The ash may be used as a soil amendment that can be spread on the forest floor.

Burning Notification Systems

Cynthia Pinto-Cabrera of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition strongly advocated for a warning system to notify communities about nearby burning until 2025.

“There’s no notification system for these communities,” said Pinto-Cabrera. “Notifications are missing from from both the Valley Air Districts and the CARB staff reports.”

Before the final vote, several board members agreed that some sort of warning system should be put in place utilizing existing technology.

“We owe it to the communities,” said board member Hector De La Torre. Some suggested the use of an app that could alert residents to nearby burns