

New burn rules cause confusion

Ag burning is no longer answered by simple yes, no

By David Castellon, Staff writer Visalia Times Delta, December 4, 2003

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection officials know some San Joaquin Valley farmers and foothill residents don't know about new pollution-reducing burn rules.

After all, "we found out about it last week," even though the rules have been in effect since the start of October, said Mike Davidson, battalion chief in charge of fire prevention for CDF's Visalia office.

"And we found out about it because of so much confusion in the mountain foothills" that prompted many residents to call fire stations seeking clarification, Davidson said.

So his department looked into the new rules and is trying to let the public know them.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District initiated the changes for hazard-reduction burning of brush and trees to reduce wildfire risks in foothill communities and for agricultural burning by farmers in the Valley's eight counties.

Also imposed were burn days and no-burn days for residential fireplaces, a first for the Valley.

"The way things used to work is the district would monitor air conditions, and they would determine if it was a burn or no-burn day," for farm- and hazardous-waste burning, Davidson said.

On burn days, farmers or foothill residents with burn permits were free to burn their tree stumps, branches, husks, clippings and other waste.

Both groups still need burn permits, said Jose Martinez, a senior air quality inspector for the air district, but a blanket green light for everybody with a permit to burn on a given burn day is a thing of the past.

Instead, he explained, the district will decide whether to allow burning in the foothills above 3,000 feet, at all elevations or no burning at all. Foothill residents can call a toll-free number to hear a recorded, daily message to find out at which altitudes, if any, burning is permitted.

On the Valley floor, burn days for people with fireplaces are announced in newspapers as well as by radio and television news agencies, but farmers have to find out if they can burn by calling their own toll-free number.

"It's on a first-come, first-served basis," Martinez said. "If [the recorded message] says any burning is authorized, then it will ask you to hang on and speak to an operator."

The farmers then will have to provide their burn-permit numbers, the types of items they intend to burn, the amounts and the locations.

Using that information, along with weather conditions, pollution levels that day and proximity to population centers, district officials would then tell the farmers if they can burn and how much.

"So maybe 10 [farmers] will get to burn, and maybe 20 won't," Davidson said.

And farmers who do get the go-ahead may be allowed to burn only a portion of what they want to burn.

So on days where there's a low inversion layer -- hot air sitting over warm air, trapping pollutants low to the ground -- over Tulare County, only a small amount of burning may be allowed, if at all.

Doug Peltzer, whose Porterville-based company owns and manages about 2,000 acres of farmland in Tulare and Kern counties, got permission on Monday to burn some orange trees, and so far he hasn't had problems with the new system.

"The limits haven't affected us so far, but we haven't burned anything large yet," Peltzer added. He has several fallen trees that need burning, "but I'm in no rush."

His feelings could change, however, when more farmers vie for authorizations to burn their waste.

"If I were denied over a period of a month, it would be a problem" because it could delay preparing the ground for replanting, he said.

"In the first quarter of 2004, we hope to have a fully automated agricultural authorization system," Martinez said. "It's even going to have a feature where if you don't [get] your allocation for that day, it will [call you and] let you know when the allocation is available for you."

One potential side effect of all this is that people won't be able to simply check their newspapers to see if it is a burn day to determine if farmers and foothill residents are burning illegally.

Some fire stations in Tulare County will be notified of where burning is allowed, Martinez said. If your local fire station doesn't have that information, you can call one of the toll-free numbers to find out if burning is allowed or -- in the case of agricultural burns -- to find out which farmers have permission to burn that day.

Martinez added that his agency has about 60 inspectors in the eight counties who can be sent to check on and possibly cite people for illegal burning.

Information

To check on burn days, to get authorization for agricultural burning or to report illegal burning, call the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District:

Agricultural burning: (800) 972-2876

Hazard-reduction burning: (877) 429-2876

Report illegal burning: (800) 870-1037

Valley air district invites public input on smog-control measures

The Bakersfield Californian

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The Kern Council of Governments will host two public workshops Wednesday to introduce a variety of strategies to reduce smog in Bakersfield and throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The goal is to gather public comments on 157 air-quality measures, which range from paving the shoulders of roads to changing the way cities grow.

Public input will help determine the effectiveness of a proposal to adopt the federal "extreme" designation for the region's air quality.

The valley is classified as "severe" under federal smog rules. This status means the region has until 2005 to meet federal clean-air standards.

But the valley is not likely to meet this deadline, so the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will consider opting for the "extreme" category, which extends the compliance deadline to 2010.

This tougher status will require new measures to reduce smog.

The workshops will be held Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon and from 4 to 6 p.m. at the KernCOG board room, 1401 19th St., third floor, Bakersfield. Residents may attend either session.

For more information, call 861-2191.

[Fresno Bee editorial, December 4, 2003](#)

Rocks and hard places

Brutally difficult decision looms for San Joaquin Valley's air board.

(Published in the Fresno Bee - Thursday, December 4, 2003, 5:32 AM)

There seems to be a growing inevitability about the Valley's slide into the position of worst air basin in the nation. That's going to hurt, but it may hurt even more to stay where we are.

The federal government gives areas and regions designations based on their failure to meet air quality standards or non-attainment. The Valley is rated in "severe" non-attainment, one step from the "extreme" rating at the bottom of the list. Only Los Angeles enjoys that dubious distinction.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will hold a workshop Friday on the question of voluntarily moving from "severe" to "extreme," with a decision on the matter likely coming as soon as Dec. 18.

Why would the Valley district wish to move voluntarily into a worse designation? The answers are complex, and the trade-offs involved are costly.

Under the "severe" designation, the Valley has until 2005 to meet goals for reducing pollution set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency using "peak measurements," those made over a one-hour period. It isn't going to happen; we're already too far behind with no hope of catching up. But moving into the "extreme" category pushes that deadline back to 2010. The Valley would have more time to meet the cleanup goals.

But the price is steep. Moving from "severe" to "extreme" would mean many businesses would face much tighter rules and much higher fees for the pollution they generate. Those costs would be borne by their customers, in most cases -- which means the rest of us.

But staying where we are, given the fact that we won't be able to meet the 2005 deadlines, could be even more costly. It could mean, at some point, forfeiting some \$2 billion in federal highway funds for this region.

And here's another complication: The federal regulators also measure pollution over eight-hour periods, which many scientists and officials believe gives a better picture of the damage than smog and pollution do. But eight-hour standards have never been enforced; only the one-hour peak measurements are used as a yardstick of progress or failure.

That's about to change, but no one's entirely sure to what. The eight-hour standards will soon be enforced, but the EPA hasn't decided whether to keep enforcing the one-hour standards as well. They measure different things, and both have their uses in understanding air pollution.

If all of this sounds perfectly tangled, well, it is. One thing is clear: This air quality problem of ours is going to be very difficult to untangle. It will take many years and much dislocation and cost before we have finished the task. We'd better be geared up for a long haul.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Another in a series of Thursday editorials on the Valley's poor air quality. Today: Going from bad to worse may actually help.

[Editorial, Visalia Times Delta , December 4, 2003:](#)

Ride the Holly Trolley

Holiday shopping gets a bit hollier this weekend as the Visalia Towne Trolley turns into the Visalia Holly Trolley.

Other times of the year, the trolley travels around downtown, the Lincoln Oval and to the County Civic Center. During the holiday shopping season, the trolley extends its route to shopping centers on Mooney Boulevard Fridays and Saturdays through the holidays and the two days before Christmas.

The service is free, it connects all the malls with downtown, and it allows shoppers to avoid the crush of holiday traffic, the hassles of parking and the expense of driving. **Using the trolley spares our air, too.**

Riders can also register for a \$300 shopping spree provided by downtown businesses.

The best reason to ride, though, is that it's fun. The trolley's old-fashioned ambience is a treat for shoppers, especially children.

If you're going to be in the holiday crunch, let the Holly Trolley take some of the pressure off.

[Letter to the Editor, The Bakersfield Californian, December 3, 2003](#)

Communism not over

A few years back, a lot of people were bragging about how we had defeated communism, but I think they bragged too soon.

Now we have the air pollution control district telling us that we cannot burn our fireplaces unless they say it is OK.

If you want to burn, you are supposed to check in the newspaper, watch TV news or give them a call.

Then they want you to tell on your neighbor if they burn on a no-burn day. Sounds like a dose of communism to me or one of those other tyrannical governments. As for me, I'm not going to tell. Search for yourself.

They have "officers" who will be riding around looking for violators. Give me a break. They don't have enough people to control this.

The next thing you know, they will be stopping us from using our barbecue grills.

What will they do about the people who are using their outside fireplaces, the homeless who are burning trash on a vacant lot to keep warm, the crews who burn scrap wood in a barrel on a construction site or the people enjoying a campout along the river?

What will they do about forest fires that will pollute more air than hundreds of fireplaces?

By the way, I don't have a fireplace.

-- ALLEN HUMPHREY, Bakersfield