

Air pollution concern heats up across Valley

Residents asked to cut driving to reduce the amount of smog.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2004

Don't start your car at noon today. Instead, bring lunch and eat at the office. San Joaquin Valley air officials say public health could use the break.

With temperatures forecast to climb above 105 this week, air officials say a widespread episode of potentially harmful air could quickly unfold. And shutting down even small sources of pollution might make a difference in smog levels.

"It's possible, in the next few days, we could have a real spike," said Evan Shipp, supervising meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

In six of the Valley's eight counties, the district called today for voluntary reductions in driving and other activities that might add to the dirty air. The so-called "Spare the Air Day" applies to Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced, Tulare and Kern counties.

The National Weather Service said Fresno reached 102 on Monday, and forecasters called for 106 today in Central California's largest city. The weather service's forecast indicated that the heat wave could produce temperatures Wednesday as high as 110 degrees in some parts of the Valley.

Such summertime heat brings with it higher levels of smog. Sunlight and heat cook air pollutants into a lung-searing gas called ozone, and the surrounding mountains hold the corrosive pollution in the Valley for long periods of time.

Vehicle emissions create the biggest pollution headaches during these episodes. Air district officials urge people to car pool, ride the bus or work from home on such days. One official said people should wait until evening to put fuel in their cars.

"Even though there are controls on the gasoline pumps, there are still some emissions that escape," said spokeswoman Kelly Malay. "If you wait until evening, you won't be adding to the daytime emissions."

The pollution prevention might make life easier for people with sensitive lungs. Health experts advise people with asthma and other lung problems to stay indoors and turn on the air conditioning during ozone episodes. "If you're going to do any yardwork or spend time outside, do it in the early morning when the air is cleaner," said Kay Vicars, a nurse practitioner who works for a Fresno allergist.

The Kern County community of Arvin has recorded the highest ozone levels this summer, and it continues as the hot spot this week, officials said. The city's monitor showed the air violated the federal one-hour health standard for ozone on Sunday.

But state records show the Valley has had only two of these short-term smog violations this summer -- both in Arvin. Last year at this point, the Valley had 17.

The Valley still leads the country in daylong smog violations with 58, according to the state Air Resources Board. But even that number is down from last year when the Valley had 69 at this point.

Air district officials said their prediction models, which take weather forecasts into account, suggest that the Valley should have experienced higher smog levels than the readings have indicated so far.

"We're seeing weather patterns that should produce ozone," said meteorologist Shipp. "But we don't monitor everywhere."

First Spare the Air day declared

By Rick Elkins, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tues., Aug. 10, 2004

Monday was the first day this year that air quality officials issued the alert that encourages Valley residents to take steps to reduce air pollution. Today will be the second declaration this year, and if the current weather pattern continues, more will be called this week.

Today is forecast to be the warmest day of the year with the high in Visalia expected to hit 101. It hit 102 in Visalia on Monday, only the second day of triple-digit heat this summer, according to the National Weather Service. AccuWeather recorded a high of 97 degrees at 4 p.m.

It will be hot in the foot-hills, with a forecast of 107 for Three Rivers today and 85 for Lodgepole.

"Predominately it's been the weather pattern, but other things come into play, including people's habits," said Janelle Schneider, explaining why the air has been cleaner this summer.

Schneider is an education representative with the air district.

Not only have there been no Spare the Air days but the pollution reading has been in the healthful range on most days.

Spare the Air days are declared when smog levels in the Valley reach unhealthful levels between June and late September. By this time last year, 21 Spare-the-Air days had been declared. On average, there are between 30 and 40 Spare the Air Days in the Valley. Last year there were 39.

Schneider said a Spare the Air day is generally declared when the pollution index is projected to reach 151 in a county, a measure of pollution in the air. It can also be declared for the region when one or more counties is experiencing high pollution levels.

The projection is for a pollution reading of 147 in Visalia today, but Kern County is forecast to hit 169. Spare the Air has been declared in that county, as well as in Fresno County.

People are asked to limit driving and the use of small, gasoline-driven engines, such as those that propel lawn mowers, on Spare the Air Days. Because vehicle emissions are the biggest cause of pollution, Schneider said the most important thing for people to do is to reduce their driving.

Because heat is a big factor in air quality, the lack of extremely hot days this summer has helped the air quality.

Ozone is the result of the chemical reaction of emissions, nitrogen oxide and other emissions that are the result of combustion, basically fuel-powered engines. Combine that with sunlight and heat to cook them and you get bad air.

"In general, it has been a lot cooler, with the exception of one week in July," said National Weather Service meteorologist Mike Sowko.

Until Monday, the only day the mercury reached 100 degrees in Visalia this year was on July 27. By this time last year there had been 17 days of 100 degrees or more.

Fresno has been warmer with 13 days of triple-digit heat compared with 49 days by this time last summer.

Schneider said the air quality should improve as the temperature drops. Sowko said the mercury should dip by the weekend, with highs at or just below the normal of 96 degrees.

While heat cooks the ozone, creating unhealthful air, other factors are wind patterns and the inversion layer.

As was the case in September 2003 when 17 Spare the Air days were declared, smoke from wildfires can also be a factor.

So far this summer, said Schneider, the conditions have been favorable.

"It's been a better season," she said.

Hot yet? There's more to come

By JOEL HOOD - BEE STAFF WRITER

Modesto Bee, Tues., Aug. 10, 2004

With a triple-digit heat wave expected to sweep through the Northern San Joaquin Valley this week, residents are urged to conserve power and do what they can to keep from adding to the already unhealthy air.

Monday was the first Spare the Air Day of the summer for Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties. The alert continues today in Merced County. The 9-year-old voluntary summer program is aimed at reducing air pollution on days when hot weather, vehicle emissions and a lack of wind combine to create dangerous conditions for children, the elderly and those who have trouble breathing.

With its dry summer heat and surrounding mountains, the valley is vulnerable to dangerous levels of air pollution, health officials said. Last April, the region's smog rating was downgraded from "severe" to "extreme," joining only Los Angeles in that category.

But cooler-than-average temperatures this summer helped keep the unhealthy air in check. A year ago, Stanislaus County had 10 Spare the Air Days in June and July alone. Monday's high reached 94 degrees, according to the Modesto Irrigation District.

Cool weather limiting demand

Before Monday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had issued Spare the Air warnings only in Kern County this summer.

"It's a real positive that we haven't had a Spare the Air Day before this week," district spokesman Anthony Presto said. "When pollution settles into the valley it has nowhere to go. It's like a boat taking on water faster than it can bail it out."

Presto attributes the decline to the cooler weather -- Modesto had 17 100-degree days in 2003, compared to only one so far this year -- as well as residents' willingness to reduce pollution by carpooling and limiting vehicle use. He attributes rising gas prices to helping reduce excess travel.

"People sometimes say that there is nothing we can do about pollution in this area because it's all weather related," he said. "But that's not the case. There's a lot that can be done."

Meanwhile, the California Independent System Operator, which manages the state's power grid, issued a power watch Monday morning, to ask consumers to keep an eye on energy usage.

Cool temperatures and improvements to the state's power system means there is little danger of residents experiencing the type of blackouts that occurred four years ago, said Cal ISO spokeswoman Lorie O'Donley.

Improvement since blackouts

Still, residents need to conserve power as best they can this time of year, O'Donley said. Statewide, energy use is up 4 percent from a year ago.

"It has been cooler than normal, but there are other factors that go into energy use," O'Donley said. "Things like the number of new people or businesses moving into an area."

Four years ago, California's power system collapsed because of high demand, market manipulation, an attempt at deregulation, and inadequate generation and transmission capacity.

Since then, the state has improved transmission lines and built power plants. But California's power market remains in flux and state officials are asking residents for help. They recommend

raising thermostats when people are not home and putting off laundry or running the dishwasher until the off-peak hours of before 4 p.m. or after 6 p.m.

Valley could hit 100 Wednesday

Cal ISO is expecting power demand to reach 44,700 megawatts today or Wednesday, eclipsing the previous one-day record usage this year of 44,360 set July 21, the last time a power watch was issued.

AccuWeather predicts the heat to continue, with the valley topping 100 degrees Wednesday and possibly reaching 103.

"(Conservation) is something we need to build into everyday life," said Modesto Irrigation District's Maree Hawkins. "On power watch days we have to have that extra watch."

Modesto's peak power usage this year came July 26, when the temperature reached 100 degrees, Hawkins said. On that day, residents consumed 605 megawatts of power. But Hawkins said the MID is expecting a 620-megawatt demand later this summer as the weather continues to heat up.

"That's based on weather trends, but also on growth patterns we've seen," Hawkins said.

HOT WEATHER POLLUTION-SAVING TIPS

- Carpool whenever possible
- Combine errands into one trip
- Keep your car in good working condition
- Maintain proper tire pressure
- Walk, ride a bike or take public transportation
- Telecommute; shop by phone, mail or Internet
- When replacing your vehicle, look for the most efficient, lowest polluting model
- Take a train instead of driving on vacation
- Use an electric or manual lawn mower
- When barbecuing, light briquettes with an electric starter, or use a propane or natural gas barbecue
- Use water-based, not oil-based, paints and solvents

Source: San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

3 blazes controlled as others break out

By MICHAEL MELLO - BEE STAFF WRITER

Modesto Bee, Tues., Aug. 10, 2004

Firefighters have a chokehold on the three Calaveras-area fires, and they should be out by Thursday evening, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported.

Monday, another major fire burned on the Santa Clara County side of Mount Hamilton, a fire briefly closed a stretch of Highway 108-120 near the Yosemite Junction, and another blaze broke out in the Stanislaus National Forest.

Fire investigators said they have determined two of the Calaveras fires were the work of arsonists, and have asked for the public's help in capturing suspects.

As of Monday afternoon, firefighters had the 3,445-acre Copper fire 95 percent contained; the 876-acre Mineral fire 85 percent contained; and the 82-acre Armstrong fire 90 percent contained. The fires have consumed two homes and seven outbuildings.

CDF Tuolumne-Calaveras Unit spokeswoman Sharon Torrence said firefighters had the upper hand, despite increasing heat and Las Vegas-like humidity as low as 10 percent.

More than 200 people who were asked to leave their homes over the weekend have been allowed to return, Torrence said.

"Things are going very well," she said, so the CDF released some of its crews to a fire in Colfax in Placer County that, on Monday afternoon, was about 600 acres and growing. Two firefighters were injured and one building was destroyed by the Colfax fire, which was half-contained by Monday morning, fire officials said. More than 200 people have been asked to evacuate.

Investigators believe a vehicle with mechanical problems started the Copper fire in Calaveras County.

CDF Fire Investigator Richard Imlach said two smaller grass fires totaling four acres, set along Armstrong Road, preceded the larger Mineral and Armstrong fires, which began along Sheep Ranch Road, west of Avery. The smaller fires were quickly put out.

Imlach said investigators believe the arsonists headed west on Armstrong Road, then south along Sheep Ranch Road about 2 p.m. Friday.

Elsewhere in California, authorities are blaming a discarded cigarette for sparking a fire near Hayward. The fire broke out Sunday afternoon in an area of thick brush and eucalyptus trees, damaging the roofs of several homes before it was contained, according to the Hayward Fire Department.

A 350-acre wildfire that burned through chaparral and forced people to evacuate dozens of homes in Riverside County was fully contained Monday morning, authorities said.

The Mount Hamilton fire had burned over 450 acres, and probably closer to 650, officials said Monday afternoon. It started Sunday, on Kincaid Road east of San Jose. Wind drove it northwest toward Mount Hamilton and Del Puerto Canyons.

Karen Terrill, a spokeswoman at CDF headquarters, said the Kincaid fire was about 30 percent contained at 11 a.m. Monday, as 235 firefighters battled the blaze.

The fire in the Stanislaus National Forest started about 11 a.m. Monday and burned more than 500 acres, a Forest Service spokesman said.

The blaze started near Cherry Oil Road southeast of Tuolumne River, said Debbie Santiago, lead fire information officer for Stanislaus National Forest.

About eight to 10 families in the Hetch Hetchy area voluntarily evacuated.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center, based in Boise, Idaho, 50,555 large fires have burned 5.6 million acres around the country this year. Last year at this time, there were 39,058 fires, which burned only 1.9 million acres.

Investigators ask anyone with information about how Friday's fires were started and who started them to call the CDF Arson Hot Line at 800-468-4408 or Imlach at 532-0821.

Air quality expected to be unhealthy

Hanford Sentinel, Aug. 9, 2004

HANFORD - Today and Tuesday have been designated Spare the Air Days by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The air quality is expected to be unhealthy in Kings, Fresno and Tulare counties.

Valley residents can help reduce and control air pollution levels by the following practices:

- Avoid unnecessary vehicle use, including watercraft and off-road vehicles;
- When barbecuing, use an electric briquette starter instead of lighter fluid;

- Postpone using gas-powered lawn-care equipment;
- Using water-based, not oil-based, paints and solvents.

Heat wave not affecting local power despite alert

By Michelle Miller

Lodi News-Sentinel, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2004

Although high temperatures sent many flicking on their air conditioners and craving scoops of ice cream, Lodi's Electric Utility was well below their peak usage Monday as the state Independent System Operator issued a "power watch" alert and a "Spare the Air" day was declared in the county. It was the first this year.

The city-owned Electric Utility was "doing fine" as peak-usage hours approached Monday, Director Alan Vallow said.

"August is typically the tightest for electric supply because it's also typically the hottest," he said.

Barring any system-wide energy and transmission problems, there shouldn't be any fears of blackouts or brownouts in Lodi, Vallow said, adding that the utility keeps 15 percent power margin of reserves.

"This is a good measure of how efficient our programs have been. We've shaved 5 to 7 percent off our peak usage," Vallow said, but warned that as temperatures break 100 for multiple days, people tend to forget to use their energy wisely.

The high for Monday was a normal 97 degrees, mostly due to some cooling marine winds pushing through the Delta, said forecaster Ken Clark of AccuWeather, a private forecasting firm.

Today and Wednesday will be hotter with highs in Lodi near 100, he said. Temperatures are typically in the low 90s this time of year.

Five days so far this month have posted temperatures in the 80s, continuing the trend of an unusually mild summer. The below-average temperatures even caused an early grape harvest this year.

Highs of 102 in Sacramento and 100 in Stockton didn't put too much strain on the ISO. Actual energy usage for most of the state's power grid Monday peaked at 42996 megawatts, coming short of the one-day power usage record set in the state on July 21 at 44,360 megawatts.

Information on the ISO's Web site suggests that people help conserve energy by not using large appliances during peak hours from 4 to 6 p.m., keep thermostats at 78 degrees or above and use fans to keep cool.

Sacramento Municipal Utility District also reported no problems Monday afternoon.

Although power was flowing smoothly, air quality levels were not so good. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared Monday a "Spare the Air" day, the first in the county this year.

Anthony Presto, a public education representative for the district's northern region, said high temperatures, fires in nearby Calaveras County and poor air quality conditions in Tracy led to issuing the warning.

When temperatures are around 100 degrees, increased vehicle emissions and volatile organic compounds can together create ozone and necessitate an air quality alert, he said.

Presto said using alternative transportation and avoiding unnecessary car trips can reduce emissions while refueling at night, not using gas-burning lawn mowers and not using oil-based paints can lower compound levels on "Spare the Air" days.

"(Air quality) is everybody's problem. Just about everyone can take one of these actions," he said.

San Joaquin declares 'Spare the Air' day

High flow of traffic, fires, heat cause for alert

By Dave Myhra - SAN JOAQUIN BUREAU

Tuesday, Aug. 10, Tri-Valley Herald

Last weekend's California Dry Bean Festival may have led to San Joaquin County's first "Spare the Air" alert of the summer.

"The driving force seems to have come from Tracy," said Anthony Presto, public educator for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The higher flow of traffic in the city because of the festival, combined with fires in Calaveras County and the heat caused the district to declare a "Spare the Air" day Monday.

This is the first such day in San Joaquin County this summer, which is out of character, Presto said.

More "Spare the Air" days may be on the way.

On these days, air districts ask that residents of affected areas to do what they can to help clean up the air on a voluntary basis.

Some suggestions on how to participate include bicycling or walking to work, car-pooling, having lunch delivered for the office and trip-linking.

Alameda and Contra Costa counties have been spared any "Spare the Air" days this summer -- so far.

"There haven't been any this year, which is unusual," said Aaron Richardson, public information officer.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District already boasted about four "Spare the Air" days by this same time last year.

"This may have been the longest we've ever gone without recording an exceedence of the federal ozone standard," Richardson said.

Offshore winds and lower temperatures have helped keep the air clean, but the Bay Area may be looking at bad air ahead.

"Typically, we can have some warm weather," in the next few months, Richardson said.

With warm weather predicted around the bay and the hot weather in the interior valleys, an energy warning has been issued. Residents are asked to save energy by using air conditioners and fans less.

The warning isn't a concern for some people looking to get cool.

"I can't recall anyone asking for an energy-saving (fan or air conditioner)," said Carlos Gonzalez, Tracy Home Depot sales associate. "They're just looking for something to keep cool with, especially on hotter days."

Van's Ace Hardware in Tracy hasn't had anyone ask for energy saving fans, either, but the normal fans are flying off the shelves, said employee Sandy Dewinkle.

To help control air quality, local transportation agencies will offer special deals on "Spare the Air" days.

BART will provide free morning commutes on the first five Spare the Air weekdays that occur until Oct. 15. Anyone who enters a BART station between 4:30 a.m. and 9 a.m. will be able to ride for free.

WHEELS, the Livermore Amador Valley bus service, will offer free service for Dublin, Pleasanton and Livermore commuters on every "Spare the Day" this season.

For more information on "Spare the Air" days, visit the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Web site at www.valleyair.org <<http://www.valleyair.org>>, or to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's Web site at www.sparetheair.org <<http://www.sparetheair.org>>

District urges residents to Spare the Air

By Doane Yawger

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2004

With temperatures near 100 degrees and heightened pollution levels Monday and today, Merced County is experiencing its first "Spare the Air Days" of the year.

In its battle with smog, which reaches its crescendo in summer, the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is hoping a partnership with area businesses will help clear the air.

About 30 Merced County businesses and government organizations are among about 800 Spare the Air "employee partners" in the Valley, building awareness among workers and the companies' customers about how to improve air quality.

Monday, Merced County's Air Quality Index reached 122, which means the air was unhealthy for sensitive groups. Neighboring Stanislaus and Madera counties had AQI readings of 97 and 100, respectively.

Only Kern County, with a 156 reading, had worse air in the Valley on Monday. The Spare the Air designation is in effect for Merced through today, but Anthony Presto of Modesto, public affairs representative for the air district, said he was unsure if it will remain in effect Wednesday.

Ron Lawrence, manager of J.C. Penney's Merced Mall store, said his company has been partnering with the air district for many years. While many of the store's 60 employees have staggered work shifts, Lawrence said workers are urged to take the bus, ride bikes or carpool to get to work.

"We really do encourage our employees. They can make a difference," Lawrence said.

Presto said this is the ninth year for the Spare the Air program. The employee partners effort started shortly after the program's inception.

The air district sends air quality forecasts each day via the Internet to participating businesses, which designate office coordinators. The district also provides a number of promotional items, such as caps, pens, flashlights and picture frames.

"The more businesses we can get involved, the more people who will get the message. When you get a group atmosphere, there's much more of a teamwork effort. Spare the Air should be a call to action to get more people thinking about their everyday habits," Presto said.

Among the Spare the Air employee partners in Merced County are Foster Farms, McLane Pacific, the city and county of Merced, Mercy Medical Center Merced, Unilever Best Foods, Richwood Meat Co. and several school districts.

If the weather follows normal patterns, Presto said, Merced will experience many more Spare the Air days this month and in September. Last year, there were 37 Spare the Air days between June and September.

Nancy Deavours, chief executive officer of the Merced School Employees Federal Credit Union, said credit union branches place posters on entryway doors alerting employees and customers whenever a Spare the Air Day is declared.

The credit union has 80 employees and 32,000 customers in Merced, Atwater and Los Banos, and has been participating in the Spare the Air program for four or five years.

Merced's California State Automobile Association office -- with 15 employees -- is also a partner.

Northern CSAA spokeswoman Jenny Mack said many Merced employees live close to the office, but carpooling is still encouraged. She said the firm provides ongoing education to its workers and customers about reducing Valley air pollution.

Mary Michal Rawling, environmental specialist for the Merced-Mariposa Asthma Coalition, said it has been noticeably hotter since last weekend and she's not surprised by the Spare the Air designation.

"When it's 80 degrees at 8 a.m., that's pretty telling. Spare the Air is a really good program, and I'd like to see more people adhere to its suggestions," Rawling said.

She added that a steady stream of people surveyed by her organization believe poor air quality triggers their asthma.

Presto noted: "Unless everybody does something, we won't get anywhere. One person can start a chain reaction -- lead by example. (Air pollution is) everyone's problem. Health should be a priority over convenience, how much can be accomplished in a day or how much money is made," Presto said.

Central Valley lungs get a break

[Modesto Bee, editorial Tues., Aug. 10, 2004](#)

By this time last summer, Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties had wheezed through 10 Spare the Air days. Merced County residents had suffered through 20.

Monday was the first Spare the Air Day of 2004 for all three counties. Merced is in the category again today.

Does that mean our awful valley air is getting better? Not much, if at all.

A milder, breezier than usual summer, combined with higher gas prices, have worked to make our air more breathable.

"The beginning to the Spare-The-Air season was really a good one," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the northern region of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The weather was a lot cooler with light winds ... and we had higher gas prices" which meant fewer car trips. His agency also applauds those who have carpooled or cut down on trips, to spare the air or their checkbooks.

But this summer's improvement only obscures the problem -- that our valley's heat, bowl shape and burgeoning population combine to create some of the worst air in America. So while we are breathing more easily, we can't take it easy.

"In no way should it make people relax, thinking they don't have to do their part for improving air quality," said Presto.

Doing our part means cooperating when air-quality officials declare Spare The Air days. Such a designation means nitrogen oxides from tailpipe emissions and volatile organic compounds from paint, solvents and even fire-starters fumes are thick in the air. It means the air is still and that it's hot enough to cook those compounds into that nasty soup called smog. It makes breathing tough for everyone and dangerous for those with breathing difficulties.

"(Spare the Air) is a call to action to make a difference in air quality," said Presto. "Just about everybody can do something to make a difference. The biggie is to try to get out of your car as

much as possible ... take a bus, take a train, carpool or just trip-link (making one trip with several stops)."

If you're barbecuing, use propane or gas instead of briquettes; don't use gas-powered engines for fun or chores (stay off the jetskis and lawn mowers); set the thermostat a bit higher.

So far, we have been spared the terrible air that often afflicts our region during the summer. Maybe next time, it won't be a fluke of weather but because we cared enough to spare our air.

Correction

The Fresno Bee, Tues., Aug. 10, 2004

An editorial on Page F2 of the Aug. 1 Bee incorrectly reported that Bakersfield had no representative on the board that governs the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Mike Maggard represents Bakersfield on the board.