

Ag gets reminder about burning

Burning field crops and most prunings banned

By Shannon Darling, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2005

As the harvest season comes to an end and farmers begin piling up brush and wood trimmings, they were reminded Monday of new restrictions on agricultural burning.

The restrictions went into effect June 1, but the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued the reminder Monday because the end of harvest typically marks the beginning of burning, said Brenda Turner, the district's public information representative.

The new rules ban farmers from burning field crops such as alfalfa, asparagus, barley, beans, corn and cotton. In addition, the new restrictions don't allow farmers to burn prunings from apricot trees, avocado trees, cherry trees, citrus trees, nectarine trees, olive trees, peach trees, pistachio trees, plum and pluot trees or pomegranate trees.

"This is expected to reduce pollution considerably," Turner said.

But they can, with a permit, burn grapevines and prunings from almond and walnut trees.

Turner said about 10 tons of particles are released into the air a day from agricultural burning in the district's eight-county region. In Tulare County alone, that number is 1 ton a day. The new rules are expected to reduce particulate matter in the air by about 400 pounds a day Valleywide.

In the meantime, Brad Caudill, executive director of the Tulare County Farm Bureau, said farmers have to figure out how to get rid of prunings.

"Our concern as an industry is how we will dispose of prunings, if there are not adequate biomass outlets," Caudill said.

The air district has told farmers that they can chip and shred prunings or take them to biomass-fueled power plants.

But Caudill said there is a shortage of plants that burn agricultural waste to produce electricity in the area.

"The amount of agriculture waste they are able to take is somewhat limited," Caudill said.

And chipping isn't always the answer for farmers. Walnut farmers, for example, can't spread chips under walnut trees because during harvest season, the walnuts are shaken to the ground and then raked up. Wood chips in the harvest would hurt the value, Caudill said.

"Chipping, shredding and spreading works for some crops," Caudill said.

But that is one reason, Turner said, some farmers can still burn their waste and have until 2010 to come up with alternatives before they, too, can't burn their prunings. Those prunings are almonds, apples, chestnuts, pears, pecans, quince, walnuts and grapevines.

Pecans and almonds are similar to walnuts in that they are raked off the ground.

Quince, pears and apples got the extension because of fireblight, a disease that can attack trees and that farmers are currently using fire to combat, Turner said.

Farmers are also still allowed to burn orchard removals and tree stumps until June 1, 2007.

Barry Bedwell, president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, said most farmers are willing to comply with the rule, but it does affect profit.

"It's just another challenge for growers to make sure they economically dispose of pruning," Bedwell said. "I don't think this is a huge issue out there right now, but it will be more noticeable when a total ban goes into effect."

Bob Klein with the California Pistachio Commission in Fresno said that pistachio farmers will likely have to chip their prunings rather than burn them. But he said he doesn't know too many farmers who still burn.

"Burning is quite unusual," he said.

Also under the new restrictions farmers aren't allowed to burn berms, fence rows pastures and grass this year forward.

Study finds higher levels of tailpipe exhaust increases mortality for the old and ill

by Chris Bowman

Tracy Press, Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2005 (also in Sacramento Bee yesterday)

Scientists have found what appears to be a significant association between the daily health-related death rate in Sacramento and other populous counties in California and the amount of haze in the air that day, state environmental officials said in what they described as the largest study of its kind.

The statistical analysis comparing daily mortality with levels of tiny tailpipe exhaust particles smudging the skies showed a strong enough correlation to implicate the wind-blown specks in the deaths, which would be limited mainly to people with heart or lung disease, the researchers said.

Health-related deaths in Sacramento County averaged 22 a day during the 1999-2002 study period.

"These people are dying earlier than what their life expectancy normally would be," said Bart Ostro, the state's top air pollution epidemiologist who conducted the study along with scientists at the University of California, Davis, and UC San Francisco.

The results were released Friday.

The link is particularly evident among women, diabetics and people older than 65, according to the peer-reviewed study, published in the scientific journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

The study raised several questions, such as why higher mortality rates were found among people with less than a high school education. Researchers said this was probably a reflection of poor diet and health care and higher exposure to heavy traffic, such as by living close to freeways.

Also, researchers could only speculate as to why the increase in the death rate from lung diseases in Sacramento County was more than double that of any other area studied, except Orange County.

Ostro has launched a follow-up study to learn which factors — such as obesity, age, location of residence — might explain why the pollution affects some regions and some groups of people more than others.

Without identifying such risk factors, Ostro said, this would be "just another scare story."

The Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, Cal-EPA's scientific arm, initiated the study to help regulators identify better ways to cut people's exposure to pollution, such as tougher auto emission controls, better land-use planning and encouraging healthier lifestyles.

"It's important to know the factors that affect our health, and fortunately this is something we can do something about," Ostro said.

In the past decade, many studies from around the world have tied the inhalation of microscopic

specks, or soot, to heart attacks and lung-related deaths.

The correlations found in the California study are considered especially robust because it looked at a much larger population, about 23 million.

The study is one of the first to examine such associations with tinier pollutants, known as “fine particles,” which studies show are more toxic.

“Overall, this large, multicounty analysis provides evidence of significant associations of fine particles with daily mortality among nearly two-thirds of California’s population,” scientists concluded in the paper.

The fine, wind-blown particles penetrate more deeply into lungs than ordinary dust, aggravating existing heart and lung conditions, such as asthma, and even triggering death, many studies show.

Even brief episodes of severe particle pollution — a day or two — can be enough to kill people with asthma or heart disease sooner than expected.

The California study focused on these day-to-day exposures, taking four years of data from air pollution monitors in downtown Sacramento and in other cities in Contra Costa, Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego and Santa Clara counties.

Death data during the same period were obtained from the state Department of Health Services.

The California findings come as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is revising national standards for fine particles, which measure 2.5 microns or less in diameter and are mainly products of fossil fuel combustion in automobiles, power plants and other sources.

A human hair is about 100 microns in diameter.

“The EPA administrator is going to have a harder time rejecting the stronger standards proposed by his own staff,” said Dr. John Balmes, a volunteer consultant for the American Lung Association.

Balmes, a UC San Francisco professor of medicine, was not connected with the study.

The findings support California’s initiative in setting the nation’s strictest enforceable limits on fine-particle pollutants, adopted in 2002 by the state Air Resources Board, said Dr. Joan Denton, director of Cal-EPA’s Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

She supports tightening standards nationwide.

“We should not overlook the potential health impacts of the smallest of these particles,” Denton said.

California has some of the worst particle pollution in the nation.

Hardest hit are the inland, poorly ventilated counties in the southern San Joaquin Valley and in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The Sacramento area generally meets national standards for particle pollutants, except during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays when smoke from wood-burning fireplaces is heavy.

News from the San Joaquin Valley

S.F. Chronicle, Tues., Sept. 27, 2005

Fresno AP -- A Chino farm is seeking an \$8.4 million state pollution-fighting loan to help build a massive dairy that environmentalists say will create more smog in the San Joaquin Valley.

The new 3,200-cow dairy in Fresno County would add 30 tons of smog-making gas per year to one of the nation's dirtiest air basins, according to estimates.

The California Pollution Control Financing Authority froze funding last year after it was reported that \$66 million in loans were approved for 18 dairies over the past four years. A three-month moratorium on loans expired in January.

State Treasurer Phil Angelides is pushing for another halt to the low-interest loans until regulators create stricter air and water quality regulations.

"The loans should only be made for projects that clearly protect the environment," Angelides said. "That case can't be made for these dairies."

The \$8.4 million loan has already been tentatively cleared by the authority's board. The applicant, the Van Der Kooi family of Chino, must now present an air permit and other documents before seeking final approval.

The family claims the loan would help build a \$16 million, state-of-the-art dairy near Riverdale that is more environmentally friendly than the family's current operation in the Southern California area of Chino.

"The requirements for building dairies are very strict in this state," Charles Van Der Kooi said. "A year ago, if I had known everything I know now, I might have gone out of state. This loan helps stimulate business in California."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Tues., Sept. 27, 2005:](#)

Unscheduled delay

Funds to replace or fix noxious school buses held up by air board.

A lot of those old yellow school buses belching all those unhealthy and dangerous fumes will stay on Valley streets and roads a little longer. State air regulators need more time to sort out the bureaucratic intricacies of distributing funds meant to begin replacing some of the aging and polluting vehicles.

This year's state budget has \$25 million in it to begin replacing the oldest buses, those built before 1977, when emissions standards became more restrictive. California has about 1,000 such buses — the most in the nation, by far — and many more built before 1990 that don't meet current standards. The cost of replacing or retrofitting all of those buses is as high as \$250 million, by some estimates.

The diesel engines on the older school buses are particularly noxious sources of particulate matter, increasingly blamed for a wide array of respiratory and other ailments that sicken and kill Californians.

School buses are a special problem because the fumes affect not only motorists and residents in the areas where they are used, but also the children sitting inside them — and children are even more vulnerable than adults to the damage the particulate pollution causes.

In the past, funds such as these have been allocated around the state on the basis of population. That means southern California and the Bay Area get the lion's share. In some cases, where the problems are spread equally, that makes sense. But sometimes it means that Valley and other inland communities get shortchanged.

And sometimes, the decision should be based on need, rather than numbers. The greatest need for school bus replacement funds is here in the Valley, where some 25% of the state's total of older buses is found. The standard formula is not simply unfair in this case, it is damaging.

The staff of the California Air Resources Board concluded in August that the Valley's needs had a higher priority in this case. Then politics intervened: The governor's pick to head the air board, Cynthia Tuck, was rejected by the Democrat-controlled state Senate. Now the board's staff wants to hold off on a bus funding formula until hearings can be held on the decision. That's reasonable, on its face, but there are suspicions that the delay is political. There are also concerns that the delay is meant to give southern California jurisdictions time to snatch a bigger share of a pie they don't need as badly.

We hope that's not the case, and that the air board will eventually come to the right decision. The Valley's needs should trump the coastal numbers in this case.