

Ag burning restrictions are approved **Without suitable alternative, some may be delayed**

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

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Air pollution cops took another step Thursday toward a ban on agricultural burning in the San Joaquin Valley, though farmers of some crops might get a five-year reprieve.

The Valley Air Pollution Control District approved restrictions to begin June 1 on burning vineyards, prunings from walnuts, almonds and other crops, and weeds, along with other materials. The district is compelled to act because of a state law, which began a slow phasing-out of agricultural burning seven years ago.

However, district officials may delay some of the restrictions if there are no cost-effective alternatives to burning. That decision is expected to come next month.

Among those watching closely are Lodi-area grape growers.

"I think we all want to be sustainable or green, but sometimes it's possible and sometimes it's not," Joe Valente of Kautz Farms said. Valente also is a past president of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation.

Vineyards typically are burned after 30 or 40 years when they've become less productive, Valente said. Taking the vines to a biomass plant, where they could be burned and converted to energy, is difficult because of the wires in the trellises.

"Cogeneration plants don't want wire mixed in," he said. "And if you chip it and leave it in the field, you have wire that's not very good for tractors with rubber tires."

Making things more difficult for farmers, the Valley is home to about 10 biomass plants - half the number that it had in the 1980s. And there's the cost of chipping the material and trucking it to the plant.

The burning of orchards or crop prunings has long been a traditional practice to prevent the spread of disease and to control weeds or pests. Burning, however, also contributes to the Valley's perpetually nasty air.

Growers already have cut back on the amount of material they burn. The number of potent tiny particles which these burns release into the Valley air has decreased by 64 percent, or eight tons per day, according to the district.

Burning to reduce fire hazard would still be allowed under the new rules.

Burned

San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas, who sits on the air district board, was one of three members to recuse themselves from Thursday's vote because they possess burn permits for their own properties. And yet, those members probably know more about the issue than anyone else, said Ornellas, a dairyman.

Last year, he burned tumbleweeds for three hours in October. That was the extent of it.

"I cannot begin to tell you how annoyed I am that I have to step out on something that is very important," he told the board after receiving the opinion from the district's legal counsel.

"I'm leaving," he said, "but I am not happy about this."

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, April 16, 2010:](#)

Cleaning park air

Yosemite National Park received good news last week: \$1.3 million to improve the in-park transportation system. The park plans to reduce traffic congestion in the park, including planning alternative transportation systems like bicycle trails.

This funding comes from the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Program, established to enhance the protection and enjoyment of our national parks and federal lands.

Yosemite and other nearby national parks, Sequoia and Kings Canyon, suffer from the same poor air quality that plagues Fresno. Reducing traffic and providing alternative forms of transportation within and to our national parks is an exciting way we can address the problem of air pollution, which damages Sequoia trees, threatens visitor health and clouds the parks' scenic vistas.

This spring, the Fresno Council of Governments will study the possibility of transportation systems between the city of Fresno and Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. A transportation system would provide easy access to the parks and would help to reduce congestion and greenhouse gas emissions that threaten our local national treasures.

Let your local representatives know that you support this study and other efforts to reduce air pollution for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

*Emily Schrepf, National Parks Conservation Association
Fresno*