

Air alert targets back-to-school pollution

By Mike Eiman, staff writer

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In an effort to head off back-to-school pollution, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued its first air alert of the year, which remains in effect through today.

According to the district, poor air quality tends to peak at the start of the school year. Increased traffic, idling vehicles, high temperatures and stagnant conditions increase the chances to violate the one-hour ozone standard. A violation results in a \$29 million federal penalty to be paid by Valley businesses not using the best available emissions control technologies and by drivers via a \$12 increase in their DMV registration.

The air control district is asking residents to reduce vehicle use, refrain from idling when dropping off or picking up students, use carpools or alternate transportation and refrain from using drive-through services.

Area school district officials say air quality is a big concern as far as student safety goes, but there's very little they can do to enforce any of those preemptive measures. Kings County actually had good air quality on Monday.

Lemoore Union Elementary School District Superintendent Rick Rayburn pointed out that staff members don't have the authority to tell parents to shut off their engines when there is an air alert.

"Our main concern regarding traffic is just the safe dropping off and picking up of kids," Rayburn said.

The Lemoore district has a Walking School Bus program that debuted last year that allows parents to volunteer to walk a group of students to and from school.

Rayburn said the program, funded by a state Safe Routes to School grant, promotes healthy living and reduces the number of people who use cars.

"We're hoping we can pick up a few more walkers this year that we didn't have last year," Rayburn said.

Many local school districts have comprehensive plans to protect students at different levels of air quality. When air quality worsens, they begin placing restrictions on outdoor activities.

Gerry Mulligan, director of facilities and operations for the Hanford Elementary School District, said state law already prohibits school buses from idling for longer than five minutes or starting their engines more than one minute before departure.

The district also applies that law to its food delivery vehicles.

"We do encourage bussing," Mulligan said.

"That way you have one tailpipe instead of a whole bunch. We also have some neighborhood schools that are within walking distance for students, so they can walk or ride bikes to and from school."