

Valley groups push for better air pollution info

By Ken Carlson and Garth Stapley
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CENTRAL VALLEY -- The valley air district has developed more ways to show current air quality readings to the public, but it has not calmed debate about smog alerts.

Clean-air advocates have called for countywide alerts when pollution is unhealthy for sensitive groups such as children with asthma.

The advocates charge that an hourly warning system used by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is confusing and does not warn the public when the air is harmful to a large segment of the population, including people with chronic illness and the elderly.

The Central Valley Air Quality Coalition has taken its concerns to county boards and city councils that have representatives on the valley air district board.

"Last year, on anywhere from 53 days in the northern counties to 117 days in the south, most people were at risk of being harmed, but they were not warned," said Sarah Sharpe, a committee chairwoman for the coalition.

Other groups wanting to improve the warning system include Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton and the Grayson Neighborhood Council.

The district no longer issues "Spare the Air" alerts. Its hourly warnings, which began in 2010, provide real-time information on ozone and soot in the nine counties of the valley.

School officials and residents can sign up for email notifications, use their smart phones or look under "current air quality" on the district's Web site.

The district issues emergency air alerts if it sees pollution approaching levels that are harmful to everyone.

Schools use data

Officials said the hourly system was designed to make a distinction between hourly spikes of bad air and all-day averages. The district continues to work with schools to give warnings to parents and students on orange- and red-flag days. But, with the hourly data, they can tell whether conditions have improved enough to hold football practice or resume normal school activities.

"We believe in providing quality, accurate information to the public," said Heather Heinks, a district spokeswoman.

Betsy Reifsnider, environmental justice director for Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Stockton, said the coalition does not have a specific proposal for air alerts, but wants to set up a meeting with the district in January to discuss ideas.

She said the public is not made aware when pollutants violate federal health standards. "I am sure we can come up with something that makes sense for people in the San Joaquin Valley," she said.

The district last week unveiled an application for iPhones delivering constantly updated air-quality information.

The free app (search "valley air") provides real-time readings on ozone and particulate matter, the main health concerns during summer and winter, respectively. Users tap into monitoring stations closest to them instead of seeing countywide or valleywide readings.

For example, a reading early Thursday in Modesto showed 5 micrograms per cubic meter of particulate matter, with an icon reading Level 1, or not much to worry about. An hour later, the reading bumped to Level 2 for moderate concern. It edged back to Level 1 by early afternoon.

Closest to you

Turlock users can get different information from a monitoring station there, as can people in other counties.

"They can go directly to the station closest to them and see what it is right now," said Anthony Presto, a district spokesman.

Users also can see whether it's legal to burn wood on that day or the next, without calling or checking the newspaper or the Internet.

Android and Windows apps should be released by the first of the year. For details, see www.valleyair.org or call (209) 557-6400.