

Drought changes 'gray Christmas' in San Joaquin Valley - more soot than fog

By Mark Grossi

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Fresno's version of "White Christmas" would have to include shades of cruddy gray -- fog and soot. It's not Irving Berlin, but it is the tradition here.

On Wednesday, California's continuing drought will affect even Fresno's Christmas tradition. Look for soot but not a lot of fog.

Expect local air authorities to ban the burning of the yuletide log.

The air won't be as fouled as it was last week when a stagnant, dry weather pattern allowed soot to build into monstrous levels -- hazardous even for healthy adults.

The fog will be patchy in the morning, followed by hazy sunshine and an afternoon high temperature in the mid-60s, according to the National Weather Service in Hanford. There are no pollution-busting storms in sight this week.

Microscopic debris again is slowly accumulating in this stagnant air, says the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It's pretty likely you'll see a wood-burning prohibition for Christmas," said district spokesman Samir Sheikh. "There's no doubt that wood burning is a major contributor to our cold-weather pollution problems."

The district's forecast for Christmas will be posted online Tuesday afternoon for the Valley's eight counties from Stockton to Bakersfield.

Check the air district's website before you light the wood in your fireplace.

People who violate the no-burn orders could be fined \$50. More than 125 notices of violation have been written Valleywide this year, compared with about 80 at this point last year, air district leaders said.

Fine particle pollution, known as PM-2.5, was three times higher than the federal health standard last week. The bad air was held close to the Valley floor for days by an unusually low and powerful inversion layer -- colder air trapped below warmer air above the Valley.

A passing storm stirred the Valley bowl enough to break up the pollution late last week, but that's history now, says the National Weather Service.

"We see the inversion layer persisting," said meteorologist Modesto Vasquez. "We expect haze and pollution to be held in the region. There will be patchy fog, but conditions are too dry for fog to be dense or widespread."

Over the last decade, Fresno has had fog of some kind every Christmas, according to the Weather Service records. Six times during the decade, the fog reduced visibility on Christmas to less than a quarter of a mile.

In most of those years, the skyline was hazy and smoky -- including last year, even though there was above-average rainfall in December 2012.

But does the air usually violate federal health standards on Christmas day in Fresno?

Over the last 10 years, it has happened five times. The last Christmas violation in Fresno was in 2011, according to the California Air Resources Board.

Typically, particle pollution is worse during stagnant dry spells in colder weather. Fresno will have its driest calendar year on record unless a sizable storm happens before the middle of next week.

"We don't think there will be a crazy buildup of PM-2.5 for Christmas," said air district spokesman Sheikh. "But it's happening because of these dry conditions."