

Weather system brings strong winds, some rain

By Luis Hernandez

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, April 09, 2013

A weather system that moved through the area Sunday night and all day Monday brought some rain and strong winds, prompting the Valley air pollution district to issue a health advisory. According to *WeatherAg.com*, wind gusts reached 30 mph at the Visalia Municipal Airport. In other locations around California, wind gusts reached 60 mph.

"We don't typically see wind gusts that strong throughout the area," said Scott Borgioli, WeatherAg's meteorologist.

Strong winds typically occur when the front of a weather system hits the area. For this week's weather system, Borgioli said the extended periods of strong wind were atypical for Valley weather.

The system brought just a trace of rain — .04 inch — at the Visalia airport.

Besides the cold weather, the strong winds prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to release a cautionary warning about blowing dust. Exposure can cause serious problems, aggravate lung disease, and trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, the air pollution district said.

As a precaution, the air pollution district said people with heart or lung disease should follow doctors' recommendations for exposure to particulates. Also, older adults and children should avoid extended exposure or heavy exertion, depending on local conditions.

The strong winds didn't cause any major disruptions in Tulare. Public Works Director Lew Nelson said no weather-related issues were reported. Borgioli also reported WeatherAg didn't receive any reports of ag damage by Monday afternoon.

That wasn't the case throughout the Golden State. A dust storm closed Highway 14 in the Mojave Desert, and 7- to 9-foot surf was expected Monday in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. Meanwhile, high winds also forced the closure of 34 miles of Interstate 40 in Arizona, and rising winds were also reported in Colorado and New Mexico.

The massive rush of air across California also has had an upside. The main power grid operator says turbines spinning within the grid produced a record 4,196 megawatts Sunday night.

Locally, weather is expected to warm up. Today, temperatures are expected to warm up to 70, and are predicted to be in the mid-80s by Saturday. After dipping into the 40s, low temperatures are expected to get into the 50s.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Winds causes health officials to issue warning

Stockton Record, Monday, April 8, 2013

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials have issued a health warning as a result of the strong, gusty winds currently blowing across most of San Joaquin County.

They warn people with heart or lung disease to try to avoid exposure to the particles the wind picks up. Officials say winds might produce areas of localized blowing dust, possibly causing unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller, which can lodge in the lungs.

The particles can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase people's risk of developing respiratory infections.

The warning is issued through this evening.

For more information, go to www.valleyair.org or call the district office in Modesto at (209) 557-6400.

Less water use = cleaner air

Manteca aims for 20% cut in water consumption

Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor
The Manteca Bulletin, Mon., April 8, 2013

Every time you turn on the faucet you are generating greenhouse gases. It is why those who crafted Assembly Bill 32 - the Global Warming Solutions Act adopted in 2006 - want you to reduce your water use by 20 percent.

Reducing water use is among the many elements included in the draft climate action plan that is being reviewed during a workshop at Tuesday's Manteca Planning Commission meeting. The meeting starts at 7 p.m. at the Civic Center, 1001 W. Center St.

Behind vehicle exhausts, water use is one of the biggest causes of carbon dioxide in the San Joaquin Valley.

It is that premise by air quality gurus that prompted Manteca to include a 20 percent reduction in water use as a way to meet the city's state mandated goal of cutting overall greenhouse gas production from private and public sources within the city limits by 12,014 metric tons by 2020. That goal also takes into account city growth.

The reduction in pollution is tied directly to city wells that pump water from underground aquifers as well as other power needed for the water treatment process at both the well heads and the water Manteca receives from the South County Surface Water Treatment Plant. That surface water plant already is powered mostly by a massive solar farm next door on Dodds Road near Woodward Reservoir.

The city already has a number of the state suggested water conservation programs in place such as requiring low-flow shower heads and low flush toilets in new construction. They have even distributed free water conservation kits that include low flow shower heads for older homes. And each year the city sets aside money for rebates for people who replace inefficient toilets and washing machines with qualified low use versions.

The only way to clamp down further on use is by voluntary compliance or possibly forcing rules such as requiring that new landscaping may have to be drought tolerant.

The city's administrative draft for the state mandated climate action plan delineating on how Manteca is going to cut greenhouse gas by 2020 includes using treated wastewater to irrigate public parks and landscaping.

Water conservation and greenhouse gas reduction, though, don't necessarily go hand in hand.

The city has been slowly adding shallow wells at various city parks for irrigation. They tap into non-potable water and avoid using more expensive treated water to irrigate grass.

The water the wells tap into percolates naturally from nearby yards and other sources.

However, it still takes power to operate the wells even though there is not a treatment component.

Manteca as an entire community generated 408,869 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents in 2010. Based on growth projections and current usage, Manteca will generate 548,437 metric tons of emissions in 2020. State regulations being implemented on everything from how car engines are built to blanket air quality standards and water use regulations is expected to whittle that number down to 441,668 metric tons in 2020. Manteca's community target as assigned by the state, though, is 429,693 metric tons of emissions.

That means Manteca has to come up with city driven ways to reduce projected emissions by another 12,014 metric tons a year.

Fracking foes in California win in court

David R. Baker
San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, April 8, 2013

Fracking opponents in California have won what may be their first victory in court, with a federal magistrate's ruling that federal authorities broke the law when they leased land in Monterey and Fresno counties to oil drillers without studying the possible risks of hydraulic fracturing.

The decision, made public Sunday, will probably delay fracking on four sites leased by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in 2011.

U.S. Magistrate Paul Grewal with the U.S. District Court in San Jose ruled that the bureau did not properly assess the threat that fracking could pose to water and wildlife before selling the leases, some of which lie within the Salinas River watershed. He made clear that he was not ruling on the merits of fracking itself.

"Ultimately, BLM argues that the effects of fracking on the parcels at issue are largely unknown," Grewal wrote, in a decision dated March 31. "The court agrees. But this is precisely why proper investigation was so crucial in this case."

The 2011 lease sale provoked an outcry from local landowners, environmentalists and Monterey County officials, who feared it could represent the start of a fracking boom. The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club sued the bureau, arguing that the federal agency had not performed the kind of in-depth environmental analysis required by law.

"Their default position is, 'Lease as much land as you can,' " said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's a recalcitrant agency that's been captured by the extractive industries."

Impact unclear

Bureau spokesman David Christy said the agency needed to study the decision before determining its next step.

"We'll be reviewing it, so we can't comment in any depth," he said.

The ruling's immediate impact on the leases in question isn't clear. Although Grewal discussed invalidating the leases or blocking activity at each site, he said he did not want to "guess" the correct remedy. He ordered the environmental groups and the bureau to meet and come up with proposals by April 15.

Cummings said his group wanted the leases tossed out. The magistrate, he said, could also leave the leases in place but forbid any drilling at each site until the bureau had conducted a proper environmental study.

"As a practical matter, the results would be the same: no fracking on these leases for the foreseeable future," Cummings said.

Two of the companies that won the leases - Vintage Production California and Lone Tree Energy & Associates - did not return calls seeking comment Monday. Another lease was purchased by Neil Ormond of Clovis (Fresno County), who said he bought it on behalf of a company he declined to name.

Oil and water

Fracking involves blasting a high-pressure blend of water, sand and chemicals deep underground to crack rocks, freeing the oil or natural gas trapped inside. The practice has revolutionized the fossil fuel industry in America, with oil and natural gas production soaring for the first time in decades. Critics accuse it of tainting water supplies and worsening air pollution.

So far, fracking has not taken off in California the way it has in North Dakota, Pennsylvania or Texas. But oil companies are trying the technique here, focusing their attention on the Monterey Shale. A massive rock formation that lies beneath much of the southern San Joaquin Valley and parts of the central coast, the Monterey Shale could hold 15 billion barrels of oil, making it the country's largest oil shale "play."

Who's responsible?

The bureau's September 2011 lease sale involved 2,700 acres of land. Some of the parcels lie in the dry, grass-covered hills southeast of Coalinga (Fresno County). Others sit close to the Salinas River and the San Antonio Reservoir.

Despite protests, the bureau concluded that the lease sale was unlikely to cause any environmental harm. According to Grewal's decision, the bureau justified that conclusion by estimating that only one oil

exploration well would be drilled in the entire area to be leased. The bureau also argued that assessing the safety of fracking was outside the agency's jurisdiction. Grewal disagreed.

"Put another way, if (it's) not within BLM's jurisdiction, then whose?" he wrote.

Lombardi School traffic snarled, often backed up at Westfield

Burton district, city working out issues

The Porterville Recorder, Tues., April 9, 2013

The most modern and possibly the most beautiful school in Porterville has a problem — a traffic problem.

When Summit Charter Academy Lombardi Campus finally opened its doors March 25 traffic was heavy around the campus just north of Westfield Avenue. Many hoped that was just a first-day event, but the lack of ingress and egress still has school and city officials looking at long-term solutions.

The campus sits just west of Lombardi Road, a regular city street, but with basically only one way in and one way out.

When school begins for the 540 students, traffic is often backed up on Lombardi approaching Westfield, where there is only a stop sign for the Lombardi traffic. The problem appears to be worse when school gets out on Wednesdays, the only day of the week when all the students are released at the same time, said principal Treasure Weisenberger.

The problems with the traffic have made the daily police report twice as officers have worked to keep the vehicles moving, but there have been no accidents, and Weisenberger said the parents have been very good.

Last Wednesday, police were there when were dismissed and utilized the cul-de-sac just north of the campus to direct traffic in a more evenly flow. Weisenberger said the children were loaded into their respective vehicles and on their way 10 minutes quicker than the previous Wednesday, but still a more-than-20-minute process.

"We've had a really great police presence. That's really helped," said the principal, who says traffic is normally an issue with new schools.

"It's been busy at every other school I've worked at," she said.

Porterville Police Department spokesperson Dominic Barteau said police, fire department, city engineering staff and the Burton School District are working to find solutions. "Everybody's working together to keep traffic flowing," he said.

Both Barteau and Weisenberger said the biggest concern is where Lombardi and Westfield intersect. Westfield is a busy east-west route across town and has a lot of traffic. Those parents leaving Lombardi often have to wait several minutes to get onto Westfield if they want to go east. Barteau said traffic once backed up all the way to the school, creating a bottleneck there.

While Weisenberger said a traffic stop sign on Westfield at Lombardi might help, Barteau said it is not simply that easy to put up a stop sign. Any stop sign requires study by engineers and even what impacts it might have on air pollution must be considered.

"It's not easy to throw up a stop sign. It's an engineering issue," said Barteau, adding he wasn't sure a three-way stop on Westfield would be the best solution.

His advice is for parents to be patient and "understand it's going to get better."

Weisenberger said some motorists turn east into the nearby neighborhood to avoid the Lombardi and Westfield intersection, but then they also must get onto Westfield at a point where there is no stop sign for the Westfield traffic.

"I've only had one neighbor call with a concern," said the principal, adding that parents have offered a lot of compliments for the efforts made to move traffic better.

"Our parents are great. They are doing exactly what we are asking them to do. We're all doing the best we can," she said.

For those who travel Westfield, the speed limit is 25 mph, the same as it is on Lombardi. Police have been out there monitoring traffic since the school opened.

Barteau said they definitely hope to have a more permanent solution before next fall, when the school will have an enrollment of more than 715 students.

Fires planned for Kings Canyon Park

The Fresno Bee, Mon., April 8, 2013

Fire crews plan two prescribed fires at Heliport and at the valley floor in Kings Canyon National Park tomorrow, the National Park Service said.

The heliport prescribed fire is located on the valley floor of the Kings Canyon, along the south side of the road near the NPS emergency heliport site. The project is 28 acres in size and should be completed in one day.

The valley floor prescribed fire is north of the Kings River and the Sheep Creek and Sentinel Campgrounds. The area will be segmented into four sections and fire crews will complete individual segments as conditions allow. The planned fire is expected to be completed over two days.

There may be temporary closures on the Don Cecil Trail for approximately a month.

The National Park Service said smoke should remain localized to the fires but anyone with respiratory problems is advised to limit outdoor activities when smoke is present.