

Mercury hits 108 as Valley residents try to beat the heat

By Sharon Martin and Katie Elwood

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 1, 2014

Some hid in the shade at Courthouse Park while others stayed indoors with the air conditioning at full blast.

In Fresno on Tuesday, people who had business downtown dealt with the triple-digit heat as best as they could. Temperatures reached a high of 108 degrees Tuesday, National Weather Service meteorologist Christine Riley said.

While scorching, that was well off the all-time high for the date of 114, set in 1891.

Gregory Bennett, a facility services employee for the county for seven years, is originally from San Francisco. Over the years he's learned to cope with the Valley heat.

"You just gotta deal with it," Bennett said as he walked through downtown. "I try to stay inside at work and only walk in the shade."

Bennett also said he visits his hometown on the weekends when temperatures get too hot.

"It's much cooler there," Bennett said. "It's a good way to beat the heat."

Other local cities broke the century mark on Tuesday as well. Madera and Visalia both reached 104 degrees, Merced topped out at 103 degrees, and Hanford residents endured 107 degree heat, Riley said.

The forecast through the holiday weekend will not give Valley residents much of a break. Fresno will reach a high of 104 degrees today and 103 degrees on Thursday. On the 4th of July holiday it will be 104 degrees. A minor temperature drop in the forecast is expected for the weekend, with Saturday's high expected to reach 101 degrees and Sunday at 102 degrees.

The cause the heat spell is high pressure in the atmosphere that allows air to warm up. Winds are also light. For that reason, pollutants can build up, and there is an advisory that the air will be unhealthy today for those sensitive to pollution in Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties, as well as Sequoia National Park.

Tulare Elementary School gets rare environmental award

By Donna-Marie Sonnichsen

Tulare Voice, Tuesday, July 1, 2014

Tulare City School District won a rare state award this year for its proactive efforts to teach kids about air quality and keep their elementary and middle school students safe from health issues that can arise from air pollution.

Tulare's Cypress Elementary School was one of only six California schools to receive the AIR Health award this year from the California Department of Public Health, and it could easily have gone to any one of the district's 15 schools, the TCSD board of trustees was told when presented the award during the June board session.

State officials were impressed with the district's attention to things like asthma and the access students have to medication and school nurses during an attack. The district was also lauded for its efforts to educate the public about air quality warning flags at every school and the dangers of idling vehicles in student drop-off zones.

"There is no finishing line and problems can arise quickly without vigilant attention so effective strategies have to become part of the culture for a school and a district," Department of Health Programs Manager Scott Kessler told trustees while presenting the award and a \$1000 check to use for air quality programs.

Cypress Elementary School Principal Gary Bates hopes winning a state public health award will inspire students even more when they return from summer vacation for a new year of promoting ways to improve the region's notorious air quality.

"It is a tall hill to climb and you're climbing it beautifully," Kessler said.

When it comes to bad ozone levels across the nation, the Visalia to Porterville region is second only to the Los Angeles area according to national environmental studies.

Locally that means approximately 63,000 Tulare County adults and children diagnosed with asthma and "a great many others who have asthma but not yet been diagnosed," Kessler said.

He also painted a sober picture of how hard that hits Tulare County schools.

"About 17.3 percent of your students have asthma, that's almost one in every five students in classrooms and that accounts for about 25,000 asthma-related absences each year," Kessler told trustees.

Cypress Elementary students and San Joaquin Valley Air District's Heather Heinks give thumbs up while publicizing the school's clean air efforts during a press conference in February.

"It's costing the county about \$685,000 each year in lost revenue [calculated on] average daily attendance and you have to think what else that \$650,000 could be spent on...instructional materials and teachers...health services and hiring nurses and providing them with additional resources, facilities and staff to keep schools clean and asthma safe," Kessler said.

He also pointed to less obvious costs such as when parents are forced to miss work because an asthmatic child is home sick, behavioral problems in the classroom because a child can't concentrate after being up all with asthma symptoms, and liability issues if a child has a serious attack at an unprepared school.

Cypress and all TCSD campuses are members of the state sanctioned Healthy AIR Living Schools partnership between the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the Central California Asthma Collaborative (CCAC).

CCAC Communications Director Destiny Rodriguez, who nominated Cypress for the award, said while all Tulare City district schools were worthy of the award Cypress stood out after hosting a media day in February, when students helped in hopes of inspiring other school districts.

"I think people should ride bikes or scooters and walk very often," 8-year-old Cypress student Deslie Rios said during that event where students displayed colorful banners about ways to educate their community and other school districts about improving air quality.

Cypress Principal Gary Bates was honored and humbled his school was singled out.

"Cypress is just a product of all the great things we have going on in our district and all the community resources and support that we have from state agencies and so on," Bates. "It's special to be recognized but I think just about any of the schools in our district are doing the same thing."

Cypress is the only Tulare County school to receive the award.

TCS District Superintendent Dr. Clare Gist couldn't say if publicizing her district's efforts last February has inspired other California schools, but had high praise for schools throughout the county.

"I know other districts may not follow the same approach as we do but they are very conscientious about the quality of air and their children's health as much as we are," Gist said.

Public Health Department public affairs spokesman Matt Conens said it's too early to tell if Cypress's award winning efforts inspired other districts, but CDPH learned the award itself can inspire schools districts.

"Some schools have implemented new asthma and air quality management policies to become eligible for AIR Health awards competition," Conens said.

Only four schools received the state award last year, three in 2012 and none in 2011.

Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Wednesday, July 2, 2014:

Lower the boom on this idiotic practice

By Lois Henry

Fireworks = bad. They are dirty, costly and pose needless danger to our community.

They need to be banned.

Yes, I'm doing it again, agitating for our alleged leaders to pull their collective heads out of the sand and realize fireworks absolutely must get the heave-ho in Kern County.

Professional shows, hey, I'm totally cool with those. But any kind of personal firework, "safe and sane" or otherwise, needs to go.

Let's go over the reasons one more time:

It's dry. Yes, we are in the middle of an epic drought. Fireworks should have been banned statewide this year. But even without a drought, Kern County is always a tinderbox in summer. Ban them. It's just so DUH! it makes my head hurt.

Air pollution. The soot from these Chinese- and Mexican-made smoke bombs routinely takes us over -- way over -- allowable limits for particulate matter (PM2.5). The allowable standard, per the EPA, is 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air over a 24-hour average. Last year's Independence Day "celebration" put us at 129 micrograms per cubic meter. In 2010, we were at 675 micrograms per cubic meter.

The EPA has mystifyingly given PM2.5 spikes during July Fourth a pass despite the fact that the agency, along with the California Air Resources Board, claims exposure to even a little PM2.5 kills more than 9,000 Californians a year.

I personally don't believe PM2.5 is killing anyone but it's beyond hypocritical for regulators to shut down our fireplaces on cold winter nights out of fear for our health and then let hundreds of thousands of people clog the air with magnesium-, barium- and copper-infused smoke. Does PM2.5 from fireworks not kill?

Injuries and death. This Fourth of July will mark 10 years since Ray Reilly III, 45, was killed by a modified Piccolo Pete "safe and sane" firework. There are countless other eye and hand injuries each year (though it's hard to track because doctors and emergency rooms don't have to report them as they do gunshots).

But I think that one death should weigh a heck of a lot more heavily than it seems to on the minds of city and county leaders.

What if, heaven forbid, a child were killed? Would that get more attention?

Damages. We see fireworks-related fires every year. A lot of years we're lucky and it's just grass and fence fires. Some years, though, we're not so lucky. Like 2009, when fireworks caused an estimated \$850,000 in damage to people's homes.

Animals. We all know how overwhelmed our animal control facilities are already. Each year, they start picking up dozens more dogs in the days before and after July Fourth.

Enforcement. Every year, the city and county send out extra teams of firefighters, police and deputies to try and quell the overload of illegal fireworks. And every year they fail, miserably.

That's no fault to them. It's an impossible task.

City and county fire and police agencies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars putting extra people on overtime so they can race from neighborhood to neighborhood as projectiles are launched into the night sky to explode over our shake roofs, tinder-dry fences and weed-filled vacant lots.

Sure, they confiscate some illegal fireworks, about 3,000 pounds between both agencies last year. And they write citations, 136 last year, according to city and county fire statistics.

But those amounts haven't changed in years.

Our population has increased and the amount of illegal junk exploding overhead has multiplied, but our enforcement teams have not been able to keep up.

A big part of the problem is that the illegal junk is mixed up with the legal stuff, and with mobs of people crowding onto the streets at night it's difficult to find the culprits.

People have often chided me that doing away with all personal fireworks won't stem the tide of illegal stuff.

I disagree. Limiting celebrations to professional shows would clear the field, so to speak, so enforcement teams would have an easier time going after offenders.

The key, though, is having professional shows for people to attend -- for free.

Without that, people will resort to their own means, as San Jose found out in recent years.

The city, along with the entire county of Santa Clara and most of the south bay region, have banned personal fireworks for years -- decades, in fact -- according to San Jose spokesman David Vossbrink.

But the city also provided an elaborate professional show downtown for residents. San Jose shut that down in recent years as the economy clipped its budget -- and found a corresponding increase in illegal fireworks.

This year, Vossbrink said, council members found some money in the budget and enlisted the aid of community organizations to bring back the city's professional show.

"We're crossing our fingers that bringing the show back will help," he said.

Because San Jose, like most cities, doesn't have the money to pay for more enforcement, which doesn't work anyway.

Here, the city of Bakersfield, with full funding from Dignity Health, has provided a free fireworks show at The Park at River Walk for the past two years. Each show, last year and this, cost \$20,000.

Hmmm. Twenty grand compared with hundreds of thousands of dollars for ineffective enforcement, extra animal control costs, untold injuries, property damage and exponentially crappier air.

I'd say that's a bargain.