

You might be breathing in some of the unhealthiest air in Merced County on Fourth of July

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By Monica Velez

On Fourth of July people in Merced County will be exposed to some of the most unhealthy air this year, according to San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials.

When the mix of firework emissions, hot temperatures and particulate matter (anything from dust, soot, ash and metals) ban together, officials said in a statement, they create a recipe for dangerous and unhealthy spikes in air quality.

Fireworks increase the levels of particulate matter, "which can cause serious health impacts, especially to individuals with existing respiratory conditions, elderly people and small children."

"It is very rare to see these spikes in pollution as severe as we see on the Fourth of July at any other time of year," said Anthony Presto, Outreach and Communications Representative, for the Valley Air District in an email. "We do tend to see them every Fourth of July throughout the Valley."

Fireworks also contain many metals that can be breathed in when exposed to their clouds of smoke, Presto said.

The high level of pollution in the air expected on Tuesday is considered by Valley Air officials to be dangerous for everyone, and officials advice people to refrain from outdoor activities when levels of air pollution are that high.

Particulate matter isn't visible to the eye and can "invade the bloodstream, get deep into the lungs and has been linked to heart attacks and stroke," Valley Air officials said. The spike in particulate matter in the air on July 4 can often be four to five times higher than health-based federal standards.

Presto said the spikes in air pollution are short lived, usually between 10 p.m. and midnight.

The spikes are partly caused by people lighting off fireworks throughout Merced County neighborhoods, officials said.

"All of the personal fireworks residents light in neighborhoods are creating excess amounts of localized particulate matter pollution at ground level, where people and animals are breathing it in," Presto said.

Professional firework displays have less of an impact on air quality, Presto said, because they explode higher and their emissions dissipate before reaching ground level, posing less of a threat to people's health.

"If Valley residents feel the need to enjoy fireworks, we urge them to exhibit their patriotism by attending a professional Independence Day event in their area instead of using personal fireworks," said Seyed Sadredin, Valley Air's executive director and air pollution control officer. "Each year, people suffer serious health consequences from direct exposure in the neighborhoods where they live and breathe... from fireworks activities that are entirely preventable."

During the summer months Merced County already struggles with higher levels of ozone pollutants, that forms when pollutants are exposed to sunlight, "but, particulate matter, found in smoke, is even more harmful than ground-level ozone," Presto said.

Fourth of July: Practice caution, say air district officials

Porterville Recorder, Saturday, July 1, 2017

The Fourth of July is right around the corner, coming back with a bang as it always does in celebration of this country's independence, but air district officials have a couple of warnings for those ready to get started lighting up those fireworks.

Officials urge Valley residents to consider the health effects of fireworks for themselves and their neighbors. Air quality in the Valley during summer is already burdened by ozone pollution, and fireworks emissions add to what already may be poor air quality.

Fireworks increase levels of dangerous particulate matter (PM) in the atmosphere, including soot, ash and metals, which can cause serious health impacts, especially to individuals with existing respiratory conditions, elderly people and small children.

Fine particulate matter can invade the bloodstream, get deep into the lungs and has been linked to heart attacks and stroke.

"If Valley residents feel the need to enjoy fireworks, we urge them to exhibit their patriotism by attending a professional Independence Day event in their area instead of using personal fireworks," said Seyed Sadredin, the District's Executive Director and Air Pollution Control Officer. "Each year, people suffer serious health consequences from direct exposure in the neighborhoods where they live and breathe from fireworks activities that are entirely preventable."

Each year on the Fourth of July, air monitors across the Valley reflect spikes in PM concentrations, often four to five times higher than the health-based federal standards. These spikes are due in part to personal fireworks used throughout Valley neighborhoods and the high levels of PM threaten the Valley's progress in meeting air-quality standards that protect public health.

The District's Real-time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) provides localized air-quality data from an extensive air-monitoring network which allows Valley residents to track PM in their area by visiting www.valleyair.org/RAAN.

Facts about the Bakersfield Crude Terminal court ruling are good enough, no need for activist groups to "pimp" them up

By Lois Henry

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, July 5, 2017

Perhaps I'm old-fashioned but I think credibility matters.

When you blow facts out of proportion and conflate them with other, marginally connected facts, your credibility goes POOF.

I wish activist groups would get that.

Instead, the Center for Biological Diversity last week issued a press release headlined: "California Court Overturns Approval of Bakersfield Oil Train Terminal."

Well, that certainly caught my attention.

Too bad it's not true.

OK, so I know how hard it is to write an exciting headline that encapsulates all the nuances of a complicated story, so maybe they get a slight pass on that.

But the entire release is flat wrong or just misleading.

"In a major legal victory against oil trains, the California Court of Appeal for the 5th District has ruled that the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District violated the California Environmental Quality Act when it approved permits for the Bakersfield Crude Terminal," reads the first sentence of the release.

Wrong and misleading on a couple of levels.

For reference, Bakersfield Crude Terminal (BCT), southeast of Taft, takes large trainloads of out-of-state oil and puts it in pipelines to California refineries.

“A public-records request revealed that Air District officials gave the terminal’s project manager advice about avoiding public noticing and pollution controls,” the release continues.

Uh...I don’t see it.

Then the release has a string of comments from various groups including: “This victory helps protect thousands of Californians from the horrific risks created by huge shipments of explosive crude oil through our communities,” said Maya Golden-Krasner, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Wow, not even close.

Here’s what really happened.

Earthjustice, representing several local and statewide activist groups, sued the air district in 2015 over permits it issued in 2014 allowing BCT to construct four sump tanks and an oil/water separator to operate a “sewer” to collect storm water rather than using a septic tank/leach field collection method, which it had originally applied for.

The sump tanks would actually reduce emissions above the septic/leach field method, according to the air district.

The air district felt approving the tanks was ministerial, meaning no public notice, environmental review or public hearings.

EarthJustice sued, saying under CEQA rules, the air district should have done all those things.

A Kern County court sided with the air district so EarthJustice appealed.

The 5th District’s ruling last week reversed the lower court’ and sent the case back to Kern saying the lower court needs to A) order the air district to redo those sewer permits with proper CEQA review and B) decide if the sump tank operations should be suspended while the air district does its redo.

It did not "overturn" approval of the terminal.

As for the emails, they have nothing to do with the sump tanks that Earthjustice sued over.

They are from 2012 when the full terminal was up for approval and involved a conversation between an air district engineer and BCT’s consultant about emissions calculations for the terminal overall.

The consultant wants to know how to keep emissions below 20,000 tons a year because going over that amount would trigger public notice, public hearings, etc.

The consultant clearly states BCT is eager to avoid public notice.

The engineer makes some suggestions including reducing the terminal’s operations and/or running less crude through the terminal but leaves that up to BCT.

While the press release implies this is nefarious, it seems to me the engineer was asked a question about how to reduce emissions and he answered it.

Regardless of BCT’s motivations, the end result would be fewer emissions, which is what we all want, right?

Anyhow, the stuff in the press release about this ruling having anything to do with keeping us safe from exploding oil trains is just silly.

The 5th District plainly states it is not suspending the sump tank operations, leaving that to the lower court.

So this ruling, at most, "keeps us safe" from sump tanks used in storm water collection.

Not exactly the kind of “ripped from the headlines” stuff the activist groups like to blast out in order to generate more donations.

Which is unfortunate because I think there are things in this ruling that are significant without adding inaccurate bells and misleading whistles.

For instance, the 5th District noted that activists missed their chance to stop the overall project when they didn't object to the county's notice of exemption issued in April 2012 "despite (or perhaps due to) its multiple flaws."

The notice didn't give a description of the project or even its location, the court states.

And it was approved by the county using a 2002 environmental impact report prepared for the "South Kern Industrial Center Specific Plan."

Think about that.

The county said "okie dokie" to a terminal that regularly brings hundreds of train cars — some filled with explosive oil — right through the heart of Bakersfield based on a 10-year-old report.

The court chastises the air district for arguing the sump tank permits were exempt from CEQA because of that 2002 document saying: "It would have been impossible for the project-specific impacts of the terminal to be evaluated in a document prepared 10 years earlier and for Kern County to have found that none of those potential impacts would be 'significant' for purposes of CEQA."

So, yeah, I think the county slid this project past the kind of public scrutiny it should have had.

That horse, though, has long since left the barn.

While it's important to hold the county and air district accountable for terminal operations, let's just stick to the facts, shall we?