

## **From cold snap to warm rain to blowing dust: Bakersfield is weather-crazy this week**

By Steven Mayer

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Two nights ago, many Bakersfield residents were covering their ornamental shrubs with plastic to protect them from frost damage.

By Wednesday, many had abandoned their jackets as temperatures rose into the mid-60s and gusty winds picked up dust in some areas of town, prompting air officials to issue a health caution.

By 9 a.m., particulate air pollution in Bakersfield had shot up from Level 1 or "good" earlier in the day to Level 5 or "very unhealthy," according to an air monitor in the central part of the city operated by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

According to the National Weather Service, wind advisories were in effect as gusty winds were expected across the area through Thursday. Dusty evidence of that was already obvious by midday. Motorists reported reduced visibility on Highway 58, east of town and in other sectors as well.

Tree limbs could come down and cause power outages, officials warned. Blowing dust could become a health hazard.

According to a news release from PG&E, Valentine's Day power outages caused by runaway metallic balloons have more than tripled during the past decade in the utility's service area.

"In Kern County last year metallic balloons caused 31 power outages impacting more than 8,000 customers," PG&E said in the release. "Unlike latex helium balloons, metallic balloons can stay inflated and floating for two to three weeks, posing a hazard to power lines and equipment even days after being released outside."

The utility asked residents to securely tie a weight to all metallic balloons containing helium.

Air officials issued the health cautionary statement at 12:24 p.m., effective Wednesday afternoon through Thursday evening for Tulare and Kings counties and the valley portion of Kern County.

"A strong low pressure system off the Northern California coast is producing strong winds that will cause localized blowing dust in areas where soils are exceptionally dry — creating unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller (PM10)," the district said.

Exposure to particulate pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections.

Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on local conditions.

The spike in particulate pollution in central Bakersfield eased as quickly as it began Wednesday. By 4 p.m., concentrations of PM2.5 had dropped to 25 micrograms per cubic meter, or "moderate," from 89 micrograms per cubic meter at 1 p.m.

Andy Bollenbacher, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford, said Bakersfield's infamous rain shadow blocked much of the rain that impacted other areas of California on Wednesday. And while more precipitation is on its way Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Bollenbacher said he would be surprised if Bakersfield's share totals more than a quarter-inch altogether. And it could be much less.

But snow is likely in the Kern County mountains. And while the Lebec area and the Tehachapi mountains will likely get snow, it's a toss-up whether the Grapevine and the Tehachapi pass could see enough snow to seriously affect travel.

"We have a colder system coming in Friday and Saturday," Bollenbacher said. "There could be a small accumulation at 4,000 feet."