

Healthy milestone in reach for Valley Numbers encourage air officials, who caution that pollution still not licked.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee
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The San Joaquin Valley's air, perennially among the dirtiest in the country, might reach a cleanup milestone this year — meeting a health standard for dust, smoke and other small debris.

In decades of regulation, the Valley air never has been healthy under any standard for so-called PM-10, known as particulate pollution.

But if the region has no one-day violations in the rest of 2005, it will make three consecutive clean years. That means attainment of the one-day particulate standard, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said Wednesday.

Federal officials said the progress was a good sign, but the district still needs to make a second, related standard, measured as an average level of dust and other specks over a full year.

"It's good news anytime we see this kind of improvement," said Matt Haber, deputy director of the regional air division for the Environmental Protection Agency. "But until we're clean on both the 24-hour and the annual levels, the job isn't over." The job is far from over on other fronts for the Valley, stretching from Stockton to Bakersfield. A more stringent particulate standard will take effect in the next few years, meaning more reductions will be needed. And the district has more violations than any other place in the country for daylong smog readings.

But a modest success story emerged Wednesday as district officials held a workshop on the current plan for cleaning up PM-10, or particulate matter 10 microns wide. Ten microns is about one-seventh the width of a human hair.

"If we don't have an exceedance the rest of the year, we will be in compliance," Planning Manager Dave Mitchell said.

Mitchell's comments came after environmentalists criticized the way the district was amending the cleanup plan. District officials said they were extending deadlines for some rules, but they were compensating with pollution reductions from other actions.

The Sierra Club, Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund and the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment said the rules were too important to delay.

One rule would help clean up diesel buses in school fleets. Another would involve controversial fees on developers to pay for pollution coming from traffic at new homes and businesses.

The delays are not acceptable, said Sierra Club member Kevin Hall of Fresno. Residents are enduring a crisis with lung disorders. State research shows about 1,100 residents die each year from problems related to particulate matter.

Hall said the district has been working on the problem more than 10 years. He accused the district of foot-dragging and watering down rules.

"This is our constant criticism," he said. "Delay and dilution are the hallmarks of this crisis."

District officials said they were adjusting deadlines to reflect the reality that a few rules were taking longer than anticipated, though most of the cleanup measures in the plan have been adopted. The workshop was to inform the public.

Environmentalists, who already have filed one lawsuit against the plan and are threatening a second, said they did not receive notice of the meeting. They added that the workshop lacked detail.

District officials said more detailed analyses would be available by mid-April, and additional comments could be made by May 3.

Officials said they would continue with cleanup rules to maintain clean air if the Valley achieves the one-day PM-10 standard. Mitchell said new rules, such as fireplace burning restrictions, have helped reduce the one-day peaks of particulates.

"We don't think it's a fluke," Mitchell said.

Company pays out for acid's illegal trip

By JESSICA LOGAN, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, March 31, 2005

The company that prosecutors believe sent a reddish brown cloud of potentially lethal gas over Oildale in 2002 agreed last week to pay \$205,000 to settle a resulting civil suit. The state and the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District sued Safety-Kleen in civil court for allegedly allowing fuming red nitric acid to be released.

The incident started in June 2002 when Safety-Kleen removed nitric acid from another company's tank in Pittsburg, Calif. Workers mixed the chemical with water, said Dan Starkey, a hazardous materials specialist for the Kern County Environment Health Services Department who was sent to investigate the case.

"That's a big no-no," Starkey said.

The chemical was taken back to Safety-Kleen's plant in San Jose where workers realized what had happened, according to the suit.

Safety-Kleen hired a second company to pick up the load and truck it to a third company in Vernon.

On the trip, the agitation caused the chemical to mix with the water and form fuming red nitric acid, Starkey said.

"It was kind of like a blender," Deputy District Attorney John Mitchell said.

The driver of the truck started to notice that the pressure was elevated.

By the time he got to the company's plant in Bakersfield, the acid had eaten through the lining of the truck, Starkey said.

Liquid acid started to spill onto the ground and the fuming red nitric acid started wafting over an oil field.

"That was the first time I ever saw anything like that," Starkey said.

They were lucky the potentially lethal gas did not start spilling out of the truck on the freeway and the gas didn't waft over any populated areas, he said.

Safety-Kleen didn't tell the company that transported the load about what it was carrying, according to the suit.

The lawsuit alleged Safety-Kleen used unlawful and unfair business practices, failed to properly categorize nitric acid waste, negligently disposed of hazardous waste and negligently, willfully and intentionally emitted air contaminants.

Safety-Kleen admitted no liability in the settlement.

The company's attorney was not available for comment Tuesday.

The company will pay \$50,000 in penalties to each the Kern County Environmental Health Services Department, the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District and Kern County.

Safety-Kleen also will pay \$30,000 for the cost of the lawsuit split between the Kern County District Attorney's Office and the Kern County Environmental Health Services Department.

The company also will pay \$25,000 in restitution.

Nitric acid is a colorless, poisonous liquid used in the production of fertilizer, dyes and explosives.

Suddenly, mileage matters

Bakersfield dealers say gas-guzzler owners are getting tired of emptying wallets at filling station

By ERIN WALDNER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, March 31, 2005

Drivers are lining up to buy one of the new gasoline-electric hybrid SUVs due to arrive in Bakersfield in June.

"We already have a waiting list of 31. We've had some of the deposits for a year," Kevan Juergens, general sales manager at Bill Wright Toyota, said this week.

Gas and diesel fuel prices have stubbornly remained above \$2 a gallon for about a year now, and are not expected to decrease anytime soon.

Juergens said a trend is beginning among customers who are trading in their vehicles, and in many cases, are looking for something more fuel-efficient.

In the local market, sales of the Toyota hybrid Prius steadily climbed in 2004, according to market research. Juergens said the car has sold briskly from Day One.

However, Juergens said the high cost of gas is not yet impacting his particular dealership's new car sales. The dealership, he said, still has a strong SUV clientele. He's found that in general, fuel efficiency is a not a top priority for people who are in the market for a large vehicle.

Over at Barber Honda, new-car sales manager Brian Reneau said his dealership is selling more fuel-efficient cars than before gas prices went up. The Honda Civic and the hybrid Civic and Accord are doing very well.

"You see people getting out of the big SUVs and into the cars with better gas mileage," Reneau said.

SUV owners tell him they're tired of paying \$50 or so each time they get a full tank of gas.

Juergens and Reneau are certain that if gas prices remain high, it will impact future automobile buying trends.

If you're already thinking about trading in your SUV or Hummer for something more fuel-efficient, you might want to look at the accompanying list. The Energy Department and the Environmental Protection Agency have compiled a list of the most and least fuel-efficient cars.

The Honda Insight, which gets 61 mpg in the city and 66 mpg on the highway, is rated most efficient overall.

If you're shopping for a two-seater, here's something you might want to keep in mind: The Lamborghini L-147 Murcielago, which gets 9 mpg in the city and 13 mpg on the highway, is rated the least fuel-efficient car.

Fuel cell deal links automakers, government

By KEN THOMAS THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Thursday, March 31, Modesto Bee

WASHINGTON — General Motors Corp. and DaimlerChrysler AG have signed agreements with the U.S. Department of Energy to develop hydrogen fuel cell vehicles over the next five years, the automakers said Wednesday.

GM, the world's largest automaker, plans to build a fleet of 40 hydrogen fuel vehicles. Under the program, GM will spend \$44 million to distribute the vehicles in Washington, New York, California and Michigan. The Energy Department also will provide \$44 million in the deal, set to expire in September 2009.

DaimlerChrysler, which has the largest fleet of fuel cell vehicles of any automaker, will invest more than \$70 million in its partnership with the Energy Department, according to the German-American company.

Under the agreement, DaimlerChrysler will place fuel cell vehicles with consumers who will give feedback on the vehicles' performance. The company said it already is testing 100 fuel cell vehicles around the world.

Fuel cells run on the energy produced when hydrogen and oxygen are mixed, rather than gasoline. The only byproduct of a fuel cell is water. Such technology has been used in experimental vehicles and as a power supply for some buildings.

Detroit-based GM also announced that Shell Hydrogen LLC will set up five hydrogen refueling stations in Washington, New York, California and the Eastern seaboard.

The automaker said the U.S. Army at Fort Belvoir, Va., and Quantum Technologies in Lake Forest would provide facilities for GM to maintain fuel cells.

President Bush has pushed a \$1.7 billion research program that would develop hydrogen as America's next energy source and predicted Americans will be driving cars that are operated by hydrogen-powered fuel cells in two decades.

Most major automakers are developing fuel cells but say the cost of the vehicles and a lack of fueling stations make them unmarketable at this time.

The announcements between the automakers and the government coincided with the National Hydrogen Association's conference in Washington.

GM shares rose 89 cents to \$29.50 at the close of trading on the New York Stock Exchange; DaimlerChrysler's U.S. shares rose 71 cents to finish at \$44.82.