

Valley curse: Nice winter weather often means poor air quality

By Steven Mayer

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When Bakersfield enjoys long stretches of warm, winter sunshine, it's enough to make you want to hike the hills above Hart Park, kick around a soccer ball with the kids, or pedal your road bike from here to eternity.

But there's a catch: It's almost a given that air quality will worsen even as the weather draws us outdoors.

"I had to use my rescue inhaler and epi-pen today (Monday) and last night," said Christine Zimmerman, 47, a regulatory and environmental affairs consultant, who sometimes suffers when air quality goes south.

But Zimmerman is careful to note that pollen allergies and other factors play a part as well, and she can't lay the blame solely at the doorstep of poor air quality.

This winter has been dry — and according to the National Weather Service's Hanford station, it's going to stay dry and mostly sunny for the next 10 days, and possibly much longer.

Sayed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, likely cringes when one of these massive high pressure systems parks over California, because it means the air becomes stagnant, trapping pollution inside the topographical bowl that makes up the southern valley.

"Those who live in the San Joaquin Valley have to understand that some of the things that make the valley a great place to live — like nice weather nearly all year-round — also create conditions that are not the best for air quality," said Sadredin.

Despite the blown haze that has been hanging over the city, Bakersfield has seen worse winter air quality. Much worse.

"When you had the same conditions 10, 15, 20 years ago, concentrations of PM 2.5 were twice, three times what we are seeing now," Sadredin said.

But the valley's air pollution control officer argues that regulatory controls, incentives and valley business largely buying into clean air efforts have transformed the valley's air.

No, it's hardly pristine. But the improvements have been measurable.

A prime example has been Kern's oil industry, which Sadredin noted remains a "popular target" of clean air advocates.

"Since 1992, emissions (of fumes generated by oil and gas production) have been reduced by over 95 percent," he said.

In fact, more than 80 percent of the valley's air quality problems are caused by mobile sources — cars, trucks, tractors, trains, off-road vehicles — over which the air district has little control.

Nevertheless, according to a real-time air monitor in central Bakersfield, concentrations Monday of PM 2.5 — ultra-fine particles that are much tinier in diameter than a human hair — were hovering above and below 35 micrograms per cubic meter. Not good, but not as bad as the bad old days.

Could it get worse? Yes.

According to Jim Dudley, a NWS meteorologist in Hanford, a Rex block has formed over the West Coast. This blocking pattern has a strong low pressure next to a strong high pressure. And it is blocking winter storms from entering the valley.

"It's one of the most stable, long-lasting pressure systems we see," Dudley said.

Translation: We could be locked into this drought-like pattern for weeks.

It's bad news for air quality, and unwelcome news for the state's water supply.