

# Wood burning banned as Valley experiences unusually unhealthy air

By Mark Grossi and Barbara Anderson



It was a smoggy day in Old Town Clovis on Thursday. Air quality Friday is also poor, leading the Valley air district to ban all wood burning.

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Rare levels of microscopic soot, chemicals and other debris prompted air authorities Friday to ban wood burning in several San Joaquin Valley counties and threatened the cancellation of Friday night football games.

“Because of abnormal weather conditions, we are experiencing unusually high pollution levels that are dangerous to public health,” said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Districts.

Sadredin said people confuse the haze that has shrouded the Valley for the past few days with winter fog. “It’s not your typical harmless winter fog with just water in it,” he said. “This has dangerous, fine particles in it.”

Particle pollution in some parts of the Valley — Clovis and Bakersfield — have spiked to three times higher than the daily health standard, which is 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air. At midday Friday, the air monitor in Clovis showed 115 micrograms.

Fine-particulate pollution can cause respiratory and lung disease, heart attacks and even stroke. People should follow

[the hourly updates on the air district's web page](#) and reduce their exposure outdoors during spikes, the air district advises.

On Friday, the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, a nonprofit group for improving health, called on the air district to cancel end-of-the-regular-season high school football games that were expected to draw thousands to stadiums.

“It’s shocking the Valley air board and the school districts are not protecting these student athletes’ health,” said Kevin Hall, former executive director of the coalition and a steering board member. Football games were played Thursday night in Clovis with air quality conditions that made it “not even safe to be sitting in the stands,” he said.

Friday night’s air quality was expected to mirror Thursday night’s.

Sadredin said he wants school administrators, school boards, teachers and parents to “know that the air quality levels we are experiencing are dangerous to the health of everyone, especially the sensitive, younger-age schoolchildren and we strongly urge them to follow the information the district is providing about air quality in their areas.”

But the district does not have the legal authority to prevent or stop a football game, he said.

The district has provided school officials with a way to monitor air quality hour-by-hour to know when it reaches unhealthy levels, he said. But schools have to make the call to postpone, cancel or reschedule games, and he said: “Canceling football games is even more difficult than telling people ‘Don’t use your fireplace.’”

School officials said they were monitoring the air quality, but football teams were still suiting up in the late afternoon.

Fresno Unified canceled outdoor physical education activities Friday for elementary students, but “middle and high school activities are going to proceed as scheduled,” said spokesman Jed Chernabaeff. One of the rivalry games, the Pig Game between Roosevelt and Fresno, was set to go.

Clovis High cross country coach Bill Buettner, leading a workout of about 50 boys and girls at the corner of Barstow and Clovis avenues, said “practices are modified, but football games are a go.”

Clovis Unified was watching the hourly air ratings, spokeswoman Kelly Avants said. The district cancels games when it has two unhealthy “purple” readings in a row.

“The air quality forecast is changeable, in our experience,” Avants said, and the district does not want to cancel a game “on a weather forecast and it’s fine the whole time.” Friday night’s games between longtime rivals Clovis High-Clovis West and Clovis North-Buchanan were expected to bring out thousands of spectators.

On Thursday night, a game was played between Central and Clovis East. “Air quality levels were at an unhealthy mark beginning at 6 p.m. and continued through midnight,” said Jaime Holt, an air district spokeswoman. Avants said only one reading showed unhealthy during games. A second unhealthy reading did not occur until after the last game was over, she said.

Air quality forecasters expect the current pattern to linger into the weekend.

The weather pattern has developed an unusually strong inversion layer, keeping temperatures high and trapping fine particulates in the bowl-like air basin. The pattern includes deteriorating air quality levels in the evenings.

“Between 2 to about 5 p.m. that’s going to be some of the cleanest air we have,” Holt said Friday afternoon. “But when the sun goes down, the pollution in this bowl will be pushed closer to the ground.”

The district banned all residential wood burning, including clean-burning registered devices, in Fresno, Madera, Kings, Tulare counties and a portion of Kern County.

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