

Earth Log: Are there lessons in November's awful air?

By Mark Grossi



The haze hanging over Old Town Clovis on Nov. 6.

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The San Joaquin Valley's eye-stinging haze, filled with dangerous debris last Thursday, foreshadowed a most uncomfortable weekend, especially for those with heart and lung problems.

On Thursday, [all but one Valley air monitor](#) listed by the California Air Resources Board showed big problems. Only Tracy in San Joaquin County showed healthy air. Every other monitor from Stockton to Bakersfield recorded at least one hourly spike that was twice the average daily standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air.

Friday night football was played in particulate pollution nearly twice the average daily federal health standard in some places. By Sunday, summer-like ozone breached the federal eight-hour standard in Bakersfield, Arvin and Maricopa.

Just from one four-day episode, it's already a memorable November for air quality. Are there lessons here? Probably. I'll come back to that in a moment.

The worst pollution trap over several days was Bakersfield. It lived up to its reputation as ground zero for the Valley's worst microscopic soot, chemicals and other debris, called PM-2.5. I wrote [about the problem in Sunday's newspaper](#).

How bad was it in Bakersfield on Sunday? At noon on a warm almost windless day, [PM-2.5 was three times](#) the daily health standard.

But the ozone was the real kicker. It was well above the health standard. Bakersfield residents suffered a double-whammy. One Bakersfield resident told me he could taste the air – a little like an unfiltered cigarette.

Not every monitor recorded PM-2.5 as bad as Bakersfield's. Clovis was another hot spot on Thursday and Friday, but the monitor unfortunately went down on Saturday and Sunday.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District blamed a power outage for knocking out the equipment, which the district got back online at 8 a.m. Monday.

The lessons? How about the advice of a doctor?

[Dr. A.M. Aminian, a Fresno allergist](#), has told me many times that people need to shift into a defensive mode immediately when the air turns bad. For asthmatics and others with sensitive lungs, stay indoors, stay on your medications, monitor your reaction closely. Get to the doctor quickly if your symptoms get out of control.

For others, remember to shower and change your clothes after you go back indoors for the rest of the day. Pollution particles can linger and find their way into your nose. These PM-2.5 specks can pass through your lungs into your body – into the heart, liver, kidneys.

PM-2.5 is more dangerous than ozone, health researchers have concluded. Of the more than 800 premature deaths each year due to air pollution, the overwhelming majority of them are blamed on PM-2.5.

Bigger lessons? Given the dangers in this type of pollution, should public leaders be making a bigger fuss?

The Valley air district warns the public about these episodes. Schools watch hourly pollution updates online and keep children indoors during big spikes. Similarly, individual school districts decide when to delay outdoor sports events, such as football.

But many activists have told me over the years that it's not enough. The air district does not have the authority to temporarily stop outdoor activities, but it could publicly ask school districts to stop the activities on bad days, they say.

District leaders say they actually do ask schools to refrain from outdoor sports when the air gets into crisis mode. The district notifies the public and urges everyone to follow the guidelines connected to [the RAAN system – the “real-time air quality network.”](#)

RAAN is an hourly monitoring system that people can see online. The system [includes detailed guidelines on outdoor activity](#). Those guidelines, which are not mandatory, specifically say: “Event must be rescheduled or relocated” when the pollution is above 75 micrograms per cubic meter of air. That translates to 165 or above on the Air Quality Index, described in the [RAAN users guide](#).

Does it work? That's probably a good place for a debate to start.

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