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Air quality flag program unveiled in Kings County

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A crisp, new yellow flag fluttered and flapped in the breeze outside the Kings County Health Department Thursday morning, indicating that "moderate" air quality was forecast for the day.

Anyone driving down Lacey Boulevard might have noticed the flag but wondered what it was.

When people begin associating the color yellow with moderate air pollution, which could aggravate asthma, the flag will have truly done its job.

The colored flag --designed as a visual communicator --is part of a new initiative launched this week by the Kings County Health Department and the local asthma health advocates to raise air quality awareness.

"It tells you how to identify different air pollution forecasts with color," said Gloria Arredondo-Malarchick, chair of the Kings County Asthma Coalition.

The idea, she said, is to help people get in the habit of associating the air quality with colors so they can be a bit more conscious --whether about their own respiratory health or volunteer measures they can take to help curb pollution, such as driving less and walking more.

On Thursday, the flags were ceremoniously unveiled by the Kings County Health Department and the American Lung Association, as a crowd of health professionals came to learn about asthma's impact on the health of Valley residents.

"We're concerned," said Tony Barba. "These flags are not only for people with asthma. They are for everyone in the county."

Barba also urged the residents to do their part in reducing air pollution.

"Every little bit will help," Barba said. "Cumulatively, it is a big deal. It's a Valley problem, not just a Kings County problem. And that's how we should work at this issue."

Air pollution can cause breathing troubles, exacerbate asthma, and could lead to premature death according to the American Lung Association. The Valley is known to have the nation's worst smog problem.

Lifetime asthma prevalence for Kings County is 20.3 percent, according to the 2005 California Health Interview Survey. That's almost four times the nationwide average of 5.5 percent and above the California average of 18.4 percent.

“Air quality affects your health, whether you like to believe it or not,” said Susie Rico, program coordinator American Lung Association of California “You may be healthy now, but 20-30 years from now, your health may be compromised because of poor air quality:”

Rico said children are more susceptible to the impacts from bad air days because they breathe outside more during the day.

“The importance of the new flag program lies in its potential empower people and children with asthma,” said Dr. Michael Gage of Hanford Pediatrics, who spoke at Thursday’s ceremony.

"This is a tool to help people take steps on their own to keep their asthma under control," said Gage. "We know people with asthma have their attacks when there's pollution in the air.”

The program is designed for all individuals, not just the asthmatics, “so everybody can be active to the full extent they want, he said.

All of Corcoran and Hanford schools, as well as Kings River-Hardwick, have already been participating in the program for three years.

With the new campaign, officials hope other governmental entities; schools in other Kings County communities as well as nonprofits and businesses would eventually come on board.

“We can all together educate the community to be aware of the air quality,” said Arredondo-Malarchick. “In doing so, we can improve the air quality.”

Colors of the flags correspond with the colors associated with the air quality index issued by the air quality regulators.

The AQI is divided into six categories and identified with colors:

- Green: AQI 0-50 (Good)
- Yellow: AQI 51-100 (Moderate)
- Orange: AQI 101-150 (Unhealthy for sensitive groups)
- Red: AQI 151-200 (Unhealthy)
- Purple: AQI 201-300 (Very unhealthy)
- Deep Purple: AQI over 300 (Hazardous)

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