

Wildfire smoke hangs over Tracy as heat wave continues

Press staff report

Tracy Press, Monday, August 17, 2020

A smoky haze from grass fires burning out of control in the hills near Patterson hangs over Tracy as the region swelters in a triple-digit heat wave that has triggered widespread rolling blackouts and air-quality warnings.

A group of four fires designated by Cal Fire as the Canyon Zone Fire is burning in Del Puerto Canyon northwest of Patterson, about 21 miles southeast of the intersection of 11th Street and Tracy Boulevard.

The fire burned through Sunday night, and brown smoke had crept over Tracy by Monday afternoon, giving the sun a red-orange hue. As of 4:14 p.m., Cal Fire estimated that 1,851 acres had burned and the fires were still entirely uncontrolled.

The Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office has issued mandatory evacuation orders for people who live on Del Puerto Canyon Road from Frank Raines Park to Mines Road.

Another group of grass fires near Mount Diablo State Park on Deer Valley and Marsh Creek roads, dubbed the Deer Zone Fires, has consumed 1,161 acres since Sunday and is also burning out of control. Those fires were sparked by lightning.

People across Tracy reported ash falling in their neighborhoods Monday afternoon.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District cautioned valley residents to stay out of the smoky air caused by those wildfires and other fires farther south near Turlock, Fresno County and Los Angeles.

The air district warned that microscopic particles in the smoke can trigger asthma, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Young children, older adults, and anyone with existing respiratory conditions, including COVID-19, are especially at risk from this type of air pollution.

Anyone who can smell smoke or see falling ash should consider the air unhealthy. The best response is to move indoors to a filtered, air-conditioned environment and keep windows closed.

The air district emphasized that cloth and paper masks used to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 via respiratory droplets are not sufficient to filter out the microscopic particles that make up smoke.

At the same time, an extreme heat wave has brought triple-digit temperatures and warnings of rolling blackouts.

A statewide flex alert calling for everyone to conserve electricity was issued Sunday and continues through Wednesday. Temperatures are expected to peak over 100 degrees each day, driving electricity demand higher in the late afternoon and early evening, just as the sun sinks and solar power generation becomes less efficient. In response, people are asked to turn off unnecessary lights; use major appliances in the morning or later at night; and, health permitting, keep thermostats at 78 degrees or higher between 3 and 10 p.m.

Flex alerts are issued by the California Independent System Operator, which oversees the state's bulk electrical power system, transmission lines and electricity market. The goal is to prevent rolling blackouts and other emergency measures.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. notified customers by a recorded voice message that rolling blackouts were possible in the area through Wednesday at the discretion of Cal ISO. The blackouts could last up to two hours until the demand on the power grid stabilizes.

A similar alert was issued Friday, followed by a Stage 3 Electrical Emergency, the first declared since the 2001 energy crisis.

Accuweather forecasts Tracy's high temperatures to remain in the triple digits through Wednesday, cooling into the high 90s on Thursday but immediately rebounding to triple-digit heat Friday through Monday.

Air district issues health caution in response to wildfires

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, August 17, 2020

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a health caution as a result of the various wildfires that are impacting the air quality throughout the Central Valley.

The Canyon Fire in Stanislaus County near Turlock, the Hills Fire in Fresno County and the Lake Fire in Los Angeles County are producing smoke that is infiltrating eight valley counties, including Kern County. Air pollution officials caution residents to reduce exposure to the particulate matter emissions by remaining indoors in affected areas.

"Anyone experiencing poor air quality due to wildfire smoke should move indoors, to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed," the air pollution control district said in a news release.

"The common cloth and paper masks individuals are wearing due to COVID-19 concerns may not protect them from wildfire smoke."

Air monitoring stations are designed to detect microscopic particulate matter 2.5 particles that exist in smoke. However, larger particles, such as ash, may not be detected, according to the district.

"If you smell smoke or see falling ash in your immediate vicinity, consider air quality 'unhealthy' even if RAAN displays lower levels of pollution," the news release said.

Residents can use the district's Real-time Air Advisory Network to track air quality by visiting myRAAN.com or check the district's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about any current and recently past wildfires affecting the Valley.

High temperatures slow work, trigger special precautions for outdoor laborers

By John Cox

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, August 17, 2020

High temperatures are making tough jobs harder for people working outdoors in Kern County, and recently high humidity and poor air quality aren't helping.

Probably the biggest impact the ongoing heat wave has had locally is shortened work hours for some crews. The workday starts and ends earlier, which can lower productivity and reduce paycheck totals.

"The guys don't necessarily want to go home" when temperatures rise to the upper 90 degrees, said pistachio orchard professional Josh Newfield, owner of Newfield Ag Management. "A lot of time they do want the hours. They want the work."

OILFIELD HEAT

A similar situation faces oilfield workers who have recently been placed on reduced schedules because of the heat, Bakersfield oilman Chad Hathaway said. In his case, the reduced availability of electrical power during the heat wave presents an additional problem.

"It's causing a lot of us havoc and forcing a lot of us to shut down and start up and putting everyone at risk of an accident that is out of our control," Hathaway said by email Monday.

Construction being another activity sensitive to high temperatures, contractors working on the Centennial Corridor transportation project have requested and received the city of Bakersfield's permission to work late at night in order to avoid the worst of the heat.

The good news is that these scheduling adjustments haven't slowed work on the corridor, city Project Manager Luis Topete said.

Recent humidity has complicated matters — California Farmworker Foundation Executive Director Hernan Hernandez called it "suffocating at times." But high moisture content in the hot air does not trigger special workplace precautions the way high temperatures do.

REQUIRED PRECAUTIONS

Cal-OSHA has been working with employers to remind workers of preventative steps that must be taken to minimize the chance of heat illness, which can be fatal.

As temperatures near 95 degrees, laborers unaccustomed to working in such conditions must be observed by a supervisor or other designee for their first 14 days on the job.

Communication is another emphasis: To avoid accidents, workers and their supervisors must stay in close contact throughout the workday. Employees must be reminded of their right to cool-down breaks and the need to drink extra water.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cal-OSHA says it's also important that employers provide adequate shade while ensuring workers maintain a safe distance from each other, including through the use of staggered breaks, increased shaded areas "or both." Additionally, the agency said employers need to conduct extra disinfecting procedures at restroom facilities and water sources.

MASKS OUTSIDE?

The necessity of wearing a mask can make outdoors work harder, Cal-OSHA warns.

"Employers should be aware that wearing face coverings can make it more difficult to breathe and harder for a worker to cool off, so additional breaks may be needed to prevent overheating," an agency spokesman said by email. "Workers should have face coverings at all times, but they should be removed in outdoor high heat conditions to help prevent overheating as long as physical distancing can be maintained."

The agency added that high humidity limits the body's ability to cool through evaporation, increasing the risk of heat illness. It also said that while poor air quality doesn't directly increase the risk of heat illness, "it can increase cardiovascular risks and put additional strain on the body's cardiovascular system, which may also be stressed in high heat conditions."

Pete Belluomini, vice president of farming operations at Lehr Bros. Inc., said he's grateful his crews recently finished up the potato harvest and are therefore less busy now than before. Workers are now cleaning up fields in preparation for the next season, which is mercifully less work during this time of year, he said.

Lately crews are starting their days at 5:30 a.m., which he said is pretty standard for this time of year. Although some workers would rather work longer hours, he said employees get dismissed when it gets too hot.

"When you're getting in the 90s and you're starting to flirt with 100, it's time to shut it down," he said.

Smoke from wildfires prompts Central Valley air pollution district to issue health caution

By Vongni Yang

Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, Aug. 17, 2020

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health caution on Monday because of smoke caused by wildfires across the state.

Smoke from the Canyon Fire (Stanislaus County), the Hills Fire (Fresno County) and Lake Fire (Los Angeles County) is infiltrating into the San Joaquin Valley, affecting the air quality.

Smoke from the growing River Fire in Salinas could also push its way inland if winds shift.

Air pollution officials caution residents to reduce exposure to the particulate matter emissions by remaining indoors in affected areas.

Affected counties include San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and parts of Kern counties.

Pollution can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, pollution officials said. Residents should move indoors, to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed if they are experiencing poor air quality due to smoke from the wildfires.

Residents can track air quality by visiting this website. If you smell smoke or see falling ash in your immediate vicinity, consider air quality to be “unhealthy.”

The health caution will remain in place until the fires are extinguished.

Modesto battles wildfires, record-setting heat wave. Why we won't see any relief soon

By Kevin Valine

Modesto Bee, Monday, Aug. 17, 2020

If you thought Sunday was a scorcher, you were right.

Modesto's daytime high of 109 and nighttime low of 80 both set records for the hottest August 16 since the Modesto Irrigation District started keeping records in 1939.

And we won't see any relief soon from a prolonged heat wave that has baked California and much of the West Coast.

The National Weather Service in Sacramento predicts Monday's high will be 108 degrees, and Tuesday will be hotter by about a couple of degrees. Wednesday should hit 104, which is when the excessive heat warning the NWS issued Friday is expected to end.

The conditions are causing other problems in Stanislaus County, with lightning the likely cause of a fire in Del Puerto Canyon, and possible rolling blackouts this evening affecting the area's PG&E customers, including much of the city of Newman.

NWS meteorologist Scott Rowe said Thursday should be 100 degrees, but Modesto will start heating up again over the weekend, with temperatures in the low 100s.

Rowe said a massive upper level ridge of high pressure parked over the Southwest is the culprit for heat wave. “We get them every summer,” he said. “But this one is stronger and more persistent.”

The previous daytime high for August 16 was 104 in 1992 and the previous nighttime low for the same date was 75 set last year. The MID records temperatures in downtown.

Lightning storms in Bay Area

The excessive heat also has brought thunderstorms and lightning to the Bay Area and other parts of California as well as wildfires. Those fires include four burning in Del Puerto Canyon, northwest of Patterson. Cal Fire reports that what it is calling the Canyon Zone wildfires had burned 1,851 acres as of about noon Monday with 0% containment. The fires started Sunday.

The fires have brought smoke to Modesto and elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a health caution because of the smoke. “Air pollution officials caution Valley residents to reduce exposure to the particulate matter emissions by remaining indoors in affected areas,” according to a news release.

The district said the masks and other face coverings residents are wearing because of the new coronavirus may not protect them from the effects of wildfire smoke.

The district reported that Valley residents are seeing and feeling the effects of the smoke from the Canyon Zone fires, the Hills fire in Fresno County and the Lake fire in Los Angeles County. The Hills fire had burned more than 950 acres and Lake fire more than 18,500 acres as of Monday, according to Cal Fire.

Cal Fire spokeswoman Pam Temmermand said the lightning storm that came through the Bay Area over the weekend could have caused the Del Puerto Canyon fires. “It may have reached (the canyon),” she said. “It's certainly a possibility given the weather.”

But she said it's too soon to know the fires' cause with any certainty. Temmermand said she is not aware of any injuries, and it's too soon to report on any property damage.