

Smoke from Junction fire in Oakhurst prompts health caution

By Merced Sun-Star staff

Also in the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, August 19, 2014

Smoke from the Junction fire in Oakhurst is affecting air quality in Madera County and may affect Merced and other Valley counties, air officials said Tuesday.

As weather conditions change, smoke impacts may be felt in Fresno, Stanislaus, Tulare and Kings, as well. Smoke may periodically affect these counties until the fire is extinguished, officials said.

Smoke can send pollution to the Valley floor, including particulates and ozone precursors, setting off a health caution.

Smoke from fire is mainly particulate matter that can be harmful to public health. Particulate matter can lodge deep in the lungs, causing illnesses such as emphysema, bronchitis and asthma, as well as lung infections.

Air officials warned that people with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people should keep away from smoky areas, as they are especially susceptible to health effects from these pollutants.

Air district officials urge residents to follow their doctor's orders when exposed to wildfire pollutants.

For more information about current wildfires and their impacts on the Valley, residents can check the Valley Air District's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires.

The district also provides the Real-Time Air Advisory Network at www.valleyair.org/RAAN, an automated reporting system that delivers data directly to users' computers.

Wildfire near Yosemite slows; anxious evacuees return home

By Diana Marcum, Joseph Serna, staff writer

L.A. Times, Tuesday, August 19, 2014

Residents living near Yosemite National Park were returning to their homes Wednesday as firefighters continued to make progress in their battle against a wildfire that has burned more than 600 acres.

More than 2,000 firefighters battling the blaze were aided in part by higher humidity and lower winds that allowed them to slow the fire's crawl toward the park's south entrance, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The Junction fire had prompted authorities on Monday to issue more than 13,000 evacuation orders. As of Tuesday night, the blaze was 35% contained and downgraded in size to 612 acres, officials said.

Mandatory evacuation orders were lifted for an area along California 41 and all areas west of the highway, except Road 620, according to Cal Fire.

The fire destroyed eight structures and injured two firefighters, and continues to threaten up to 500 homes, Cal Fire reported. The cause of the blaze remains under investigation.

Despite the improving picture, some residents were holding their breath Tuesday as they waited for roads to reopen.

Orville McCollom, 81, stood at the window of a friend's hilltop house overlooking the area where he lives - or lived -- he said. His Yosemite Pines Drive home was in the burn area.

He scanned for smoke, but a hill blocked his view.

"I'm within a mile of my house," he said, "and I still don't know if it's there or not."

Containment increases on fire near Yosemite

Hanford Sentinel and Porterville Recorder, Wednesday, August 20, 2014

OAKHURST, Calif. (AP) — A wildfire that surged early and led to mass evacuations around a community near Yosemite National Park was tamed by firefighters, and the remaining evacuees were expected to return to their homes on Wednesday.

"We're at the point where we're turning the corner with the progress we had last night and yesterday," state fire spokesman Chris Christopherson said Wednesday.

The flames drove about 1,000 people from their homes around Oakhurst, a community of several thousand in Madera County about 16 miles from a Yosemite entrance. Some of the evacuees were allowed to return on Tuesday, and Christopherson said the remaining residents would more than likely be given the green light to go home on Wednesday. He did not know how many people were still evacuated.

The fire has burned about 1 square mile and was 40 percent contained. It started on Monday and quickly took off because of strong winds and tinder-dry conditions.

Eight structures, including two commercial buildings, were destroyed, and two firefighters suffered minor injuries. The cause of the blaze was under investigation.

A road leading visitors to the park reopened Tuesday, and the park itself remained unaffected by the blaze.

Evacuated residents in Oakhurst said they had braced for the worst.

"There is nothing you can do when a fire is raging," said Clement Williams, 67. "You just have to flee. It's a real sinking feeling."

Williams and his wife, Gretchen Williams, 63, were trying to get information about the fire and their home from officials. They spent the night at a nearby hotel.

The fire comes amid California's third straight year of drought, creating tinder-dry conditions that have significantly increased the fire danger around the state and sent firefighters scrambling seemingly nonstop from blaze to blaze.

Firefighters on Tuesday stopped the growth of a blaze some 50 miles northeast of Bakersfield.

The wildfire burning near Lake Isabella in Kern County grew exponentially Monday, but was 5 percent contained Tuesday after scorching some 5 square miles, or 3,367 acres.

Some structures burned, but it wasn't immediately clear how many or if any were homes.

Local agencies send firefighters to blazes

Staff Report

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, August 19, 2014

Local firefighters are helping battle two blazes in California that have destroyed thousands of acres of wildland and nearly a dozen homes.

So far, departments in Tulare County have sent nearly 80 firefighters to blazes near Oakhurst, in Madera County and Lake Isabella, in Kern County. Visalia Battalion Chief Doyle Sewell said strong, effective air attacks could reduce the number of days the firefighters are away from home. He still expects them to be out of town most of the week.

CALFire's Tulare Unit has sent the most, with more than 63 firefighters headed to Oakhurst. They've also sent multiple resources, including planes to the Lake Isabella area.

With an engine and two strike teams gone from Visalia, Sewell said he doesn't expect the fires, which have destroyed several square miles of wildland, to impact services locally. Visalia sent reserve engines to ensure services wouldn't be hit hard.

"We have been able to backfill for the firefighters we've sent," Sewell said. "We won't lose any services here."

CALFire Capt. Evan Carlos said with more than 60 firefighters and hand-crews out, it's been quiet locally. CALFire sent five engines with three firefighters each. They also sent a crew of 40 inmates from the Mountain Home Camp.

Officials say the Oakhurst wildfire has forced about 1,000 people from their homes in the foothills near Yosemite National Park. It is holding steady amid higher humidity and calmer winds. Air attacks have also proven effective.

The blaze around the Madera County community of Oakhurst remained at a little under two square miles on Tuesday. It has destroyed eight structures and was threatening about 500 homes around Oakhurst, which is about 16 miles from a Yosemite entrance.

The wildfire began Monday and was fueled by gusty winds and dry brush.

It comes on the heels of another blaze around Yosemite this summer and last year's Rim Fire, which raged for two months across 400 square miles of land. The Rim Fire threatened thousands of structures, destroyed 11 homes and cost more than \$125 million to fight.

The fire near Wofford Heights has charred more than 3,000 acres and is threatening multiple homes. Evacuations are being ordered near Lake Isabella. Evacuees are being urged to go to Kern Valley High School.

The state submitted a request for a fire management assistance declaration for the Kern County fire. FEMA approved the state's request Tuesday. The authorization makes FEMA funding available to reimburse up to 75 percent of the eligible firefighting costs under an approved grant for managing, mitigating and controlling the fire.

Air quality effects of fire

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reports that the air quality in neighboring counties is being affected by the Junction Fire in Oakhurst.

Tulare, Kings, Fresno, Merced and Stanislaus counties will experience impacts from smoke which can send pollution to the Valley floor, including particulates and ozone precursors, the air board warns in a statement issued Tuesday.

People with respiratory conditions, especially children and the elderly, are cautioned to heed doctors' warnings when exposed to wildfire emissions.

To stay current on air quality conditions, residents are encouraged to check for updates at www.valleyair.org/wildfires.

Way Fire burns 3,327 acres; threatens Kernville

By Ruth Brown

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, August 20, 2014

KERNVILLE — The Way Fire continued to spread Tuesday, shifting southeast toward Kernville and threatening 200 homes there and in Wofford Heights.

By 6 p.m. the fire had consumed nearly 3,327 acres and was just 5 percent contained.

A battalion chief with the federal Bureau of Land Management said in some areas the fire was within a few feet of structures and elsewhere a quarter mile distant.

"I've been in all areas of the fire and it's consistent on all sides," said Steve Watkins, who's working as the operations section chief for the Type 1 Interagency Incident Management Team on site. Type 1 teams

operate through an interagency cooperation of federal, state and local land and emergency management agencies.

Watkins said he was concerned “downward canyon winds” could occur overnight, fanning the flames.

An estimated 150 firefighters were deployed to keep that from happening.

He described the terrain as steep, rocky and grassy with pine trees, with flames as high as 60 feet.

Both Wofford Heights and Kernville were crammed with fire, law enforcement and emergency vehicles, with some in virtually every neighborhood. Throughout Tuesday the sky was gray from the fire’s billowing smoke, and its acrid smell was everywhere.

The Kern County Fire Department and other agencies have a combined 455 team members on the scene.

The command center for the fire has been shifted from Wofford Heights to Kernville.

No injuries have been reported, and there was no official count on the number or nature of structures lost to the flames.

Kern County Fire Chief Brian Marshall told the Board of Supervisors Tuesday that 10 homes were lost Monday.

He said the fire has already cost more than \$500,000 to fight and — with fires raging across the state — finding resources to battle it has been a challenge.

“We have over 110 Kern County fire fighters on the fire at this time,” Marshall said.

Mark Cohen, a Bakersfield Fire Department firefighter, worked the 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. Monday overnight shift. His crew was stationed near Plater Road in Kernville where a bulldozer had created an earthen barrier between the fire and the neighborhood.

When the fire began Monday, it was a 5-acre brush fire centered north of Highway 155 and east of Calgary Drive in the Earl Pascoe Road area.

Kern County Fire Department Capt. Derek Tisinger called into the “First Look with Scott Cox” simulcast Tuesday morning and said the fire picked up speed Monday evening. By morning it had grown to more than 3,000 acres. The drought conditions in the mountains caused the fire to burn more quickly.

Firefighters are dealing with steep terrain, which makes for “extreme fire behavior,” he said.

One concern is the many propane tanks used in areas of 2,800 to 6,000 feet elevation because of the difficulty of getting electrical service there, officials said. None of the tanks has exploded yet, they said.

Other concerns include rattlesnakes, mine shafts and eight Southern California Edison power lines that are reported down. Fire officials said people should assume the lines are live and avoid them.

The threatened Kernville homes were in neighborhoods west of Burlando Road.

Donna Brown, who lives on Burlando Road, said when she woke up Tuesday morning she could see the hill across from her home “smoldering,” backlit by the fire less than 1 1/2 miles away.

Brown, 52, said she has invested \$50,000 in her home in the past five years for a new kitchen, roof, garage door and hardwood floors.

The problem, she said, is their home insurance has not been updated.

Bob Powers, a captain with the Kern County Fire Department, worked from 3:30 p.m. Monday to 8 a.m. Tuesday in the area of Bristlecone and Sycamore drives.

The Kernville native — and graduate of Kern Valley High School — was part of a crew protecting homes.

“...You know you can’t save everything,” said Powers, 57, “but you do the best you can.”

In Wofford Heights officials established “hard closures” for several roads. That means if residents are currently in their homes, they may remain. But if they leave, they will not be allowed back.

Those under hard closure are Valley View Road, Sierra Vista Drive, Anchorage Avenue, Sycamore Drive, Bristlecone Drive and Earl Pascoe Road.

Recommended evacuations in Wofford Heights and Kernville were made for residents on Needham Drive, Llama Lane, Sargent Lane, Adams Road, Mountain View Lane, North and South Frontier Trail, Burlando Road, Mar Vista Drive, Rogers Road, South and North Trail, Whitney Road, Grove Park Way and Silver Mine Road.

Fire officials do not call for mandatory evacuations. The only evacuation categories are preliminary and recommended; the latter is the strongest possible evacuation language.

The evacuation center is located at Kern Valley High School, 3340 Erskine Creek Road, in Lake Isabella.

Six people spent Monday night at the high school.

Tuesday morning, Gov. Jerry Brown secured a Fire Management Assistance Grant from FEMA to cover the costs of the Way Fire. The grant will assist local, state and tribal agencies responding to the fire to apply for 75 percent reimbursement of their fire costs.

Business appeared to go on much as usual along Kernville Road, with diners, convenience stores and antique stores open for business.

At Cheryl's Diner, waitress Michelle Walker said between 6 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. 137 firefighters ate at the restaurant.

"It's great for business," said Walker, 40, who lives in Lake Isabella. "They're really nice. Sometimes they help bus their own tables and get their own refills."

Firefighters' meals are paid for by the U.S. Forest Service at a flat rate of \$20 for breakfast, and \$25 each for lunch and dinner, with tip included.

But residents spent the day looking toward the ominous gray cloud rising over the hills west of town.

Wendy Russell, 53, was packed and ready to leave if the fire began rushing toward her home at the intersection of Silver Mine Drive and Grove Park Way. She kept watch with a pair of binoculars, and used a hose to wet down the roof of her house Tuesday afternoon.

She said in the 21 years she's lived in Kernville a wildfire has never come this close to her neighborhood.

Mary Erwin, 57, who lives nearby, stood by the side of the roadway watching air tankers and helicopters drop water and red fire retardant. She said she was a little nervous, but reassured by the presence of fire crews in the area, including some firefighters stationed along Silver Mine Drive.

Erwin said a Sheriff's Office patrol vehicle drove through the neighborhood Monday night with its lights flashing while deputies informed residents of the precautionary evacuation. Among the belongings she packed were her guitar and golf clubs.

Gwen Dockery, 70, who lives on Pinehurst Way in Wofford Heights, said she heard the air tankers traveling back and forth all night. Not a lot of brush is near her home, and she raked pine cones off the road Tuesday morning.

A fire about six weeks ago got even closer to her neighborhood than the Way Fire had by Tuesday morning, but she said a wind change could quickly alter the situation. She was ready to pack if the situation grew worse.

New fire burns near Wofford Heights

Porterville Recorder, Tuesday, August 19, 2014

Two fires about 100 miles apart that broke out at nearly the same time Monday are threatening homes in the Wofford Heights area southeast of Porterville and near the Madera County foothill community of Oakhurst.

The Wofford Heights fire is the third in that area this summer. It began at just after 2 p.m. Monday and was rapidly expanding, but few details were known.

According to Raul Contreras, air attack base manager, eight tankers —two of them VAE converted British passenger jets — were flying out of the Porterville Air Attack base as of 7:30 p.m. Monday. There were also two air attack planes, two lead planes and four helicopters on the fire. Information was that some structures had been lost.

The Oakhurst area brush fire prompted widespread evacuations of that foothill community.

Erica Stuart, a spokeswoman for the Madera County Sheriff's Office, said Monday that more than 1,500 residents and guests at four hotels near the community of Oakhurst have been advised to seek shelter in town. Oakhurst is about 16 miles away from the west entrance to Yosemite National Park.

Stuart says nearly 3,000 residents were notified by phone of the fire but not all of those people were told to leave their homes.

State fire spokesman Daniel Berlant said the fire had burned about 200 acres by 5 p.m.

Monday evening, the City of Porterville sent an engine and crew as part of a strike team to the fire near Oakhurst.

There have been no reports of injuries or destroyed buildings.

The wildfire some 50 miles northeast of Bakersfield is also threatening buildings and bringing evacuations, but it wasn't immediately clear how many. A Bakersfield television station reported the fire had grown to more than 1,000 acres by 6 p.m. Footage showed the fire burning very close to homes in the area of Jeannette Way and Highway 155.

Earth Log: Air authorities alert Madera County to wildfire smoke

By Mark Grossi

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Aug. 19, 2014

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has announced an alert in Madera County for smoke coming from the Junction fire near Oakhurst, south of Yosemite National Park.

Check the particles, known as PM-2.5, in your area on the air district's real-time monitoring page.

As weather conditions change, smoke impacts may be felt in other counties, air authorities said. The counties include Merced, Stanislaus, Fresno, Tulare and Kings.

If you see or smell smoke, you are likely breathing it. Smoke contains gases and particles that trigger health problems, such as allergies and asthma.

The tiny particles have been linked to chronic heart disease and early mortality.

The air district has a web site related to Sierra wildfires.