

Blowing dust cuts visibility, triggers crashes in Valley

By Carmen George, staff writer

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Strong winds gusting primarily along the west side of the central San Joaquin Valley from Merced to Kern counties on Tuesday contributed to some crashes and fanned the flames of a Fresno vegetation fire.

As of Tuesday evening, Lemoore experienced stronger winds than other Valley cities, with gusts measured at 44 mph around noon. In the southern Sierra, 77 mph gusts were recorded at Bird Spring Pass around 7,500 feet in elevation.

"It's not rare," said National Weather Service meteorologist Jim Andersen of the strong winds, "but what is more rare is the duration. We've been windy pretty much all day, and the gusts were pretty strong all day."

Peak winds in Fresno were recorded at 38 mph around 1 a.m. Tuesday. As of 5 p.m., winds were still blowing at 29 mph and weren't expected to grow stronger.

Winds increased in the south Valley on Tuesday afternoon. A National Weather Service wind advisory was set to expire at 11 p.m. in Kern County and by 8 p.m. further north.

Blowing dust reduced visibility to nearly zero along Highway 180, causing two multi-car accidents between Kerman and Mendota on Tuesday morning near Napa Avenue. California Highway Patrol said a three-car crash about 11:12 a.m. was followed by a seven-car crash about 10 minutes later that caused minor injuries and closed the roadway for a few hours.

Winds weren't strong enough to cause serious roof damage in Fresno, but gusts did make it harder for some roofers to keep track of materials, said Lorn Thompson, plant manager and safety director at Fresno Roofing Company.

"This is more of an annoying type of wind, truthfully," Thompson said. "It reminds me of when my daughter was 5 or 6 and liked to cause turmoil. This wind is causing as much distraction as possible."

Fresno Fire Department spokesman Pete Martinez said strong winds spread embers and fed the flames of what would have likely been a tiny vegetation fire along northbound Highway 41 in southeast Fresno. The onramp from North Avenue was temporarily closed Tuesday afternoon as firefighters extinguished a few spot fires covering about a quarter acre. Nine engines responded to the fire, which was reported at 1:48 p.m. Without the winds, Martinez said only one engine would have been needed. The cause of the fire was not known Tuesday night.

The wind worried some parents dropping off their children at Carrie's Childcare Connection in Lemoore.

"I've had about five different parents ask that the children not go outside at all," said daycare owner Carrie Risk, who added that blowing dust previously caused many of the children to get pinkeye.

Blowing dust prompted local air pollution officials to issue a health cautionary statement through Tuesday night throughout the eight-county air basin, from San Joaquin County to the Valley portion of Kern County.

Some of the strongest winds were along Interstate 5, with visibility reduced to one mile or less. In mountain passes such as Pacheco Pass west of Los Banos, gusts reached up to 39 mph as of Tuesday evening. CHP Officer Marc McWilliams said motorists should treat windy, dusty conditions much like fog: turn headlights on, drive slow, and if possible, don't drive until conditions clear.

Strong winds are not expected Wednesday.

Temperatures reached 71 degrees in Fresno on Tuesday and should steadily increase throughout the week. By the weekend, Fresno temperatures are expected in the high 80s.

Rain isn't expected in the Valley's foreseeable future, but meteorologists said this weekend the high Sierra could see some showers above 7,000 feet in elevation.