

Valley actually had its best July air quality ever

By Mark Grossi - Earth Log

Fresno Bee, Friday, Aug. 14, 2015

Earlier this month, I wrote about the amazing lack of dirty air in July, calling it the best July in 20 years. Turns out, it was the best July on record, and I goofed.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District studied the same data and found the Valley had its fewest-ever July exceedances of the federal eight-hour ozone standard.

Once I looked at the data, I realized I was looking at the wrong ozone averages on the California Air Resources Board archive. I stand corrected.

Either way, it was an amazingly clean July. August appears to be cleaner than usual, but the air quality can change quickly in summer. Keep thinking about consolidating driving trips and checking the real-time air quality readings each day.

Triple-digit temps gone for the week in Modesto

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015

With its high of 101 degrees, Monday brought the last triple-digit heat of the week for the Modesto area, according to the National Weather Service forecast. That was well above the historic average temperature of 93 degrees, by Modesto Irrigation District records, and a few degrees shy of the record high for Aug. 17 – 105 degrees in 1967.

Smoke from wildfires burning north of Sacramento also hung around Monday. The haze and smell in the air over the past couple of days has been from fires in Trinity County.

For Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said the air quality Monday was “unhealthy for sensitive groups.” The general public is not likely to be affected at this air quality range, the district says, but people with heart and lung disease, older adults and children are at a greater risk from exposure to ozone and particles in the air.

“If you can smell it, you are taking it into your lungs and it is having an impact,” said Heather Heinks, spokeswoman for the district. The extreme heat and stagnant air have contributed to ozone pollution, she said.

More exhaust fumes are produced in August as parents resume taking their children to school. Parents can help by not letting cars idle as much in front of schools. Another idea for improving air quality is taking a lunch to work instead of using the car during the lunch hour, Heinks said.

Monday afternoon, the air district posted the air quality forecast for Tuesday. For Stanislaus and Merced counties, it remains “unhealthy for sensitive groups,” but for San Joaquin County, it improves to “moderate.”

On Wednesday, air officials will discuss the potential of calling an Air Alert over the next few weeks if quality begins to deteriorate.

Air Alerts, according to the district, are declared Valley-wide when conditions such as increased emissions, high temperatures and stagnant air flow are favorable for ozone accumulation.

During an Air Alert, which could last several days, residents and businesses are urged to reduce vehicle emissions by driving less, refraining from idling their vehicles, carpooling and avoiding the use of drive-through services.

Over the week, the daily high temperature will gradually decline, the Weather Service predicts: near 96 Tuesday, 94 Wednesday, and 92 Thursday through Sunday.

Saturday brings the return of X-Fest to downtown, with more than 150 acts on 20 stages and an anticipated crowd of as many as 20,000. It will be a bit hotter for festivalgoers than last year, when the high was 89 degrees.

To check local air quality, residents are advised to visit the air district’s Real-Time Air Advisory Network at www.valleyair.org.

Rough fire east of Fresno surges to 20,979 acres

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015

The Rough fire in the Sierra National Forest grew Monday to more than 20,979 acres, and smoke from the blaze worsened air quality in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Air quality was graded as unhealthy in Fresno and Tulare counties by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. In Madera and Kings counties, the air was unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Meanwhile, the Fresno County Sheriff's Office issued a fire evacuation warning Monday afternoon for the Black Rock Reservoir area, east of Pine Flat Lake, and closed Black Rock Road. The Sheriff's Office said the area is sparsely populated, but the Black Rock Campground can be a popular destination for visitors to the area.

Sunday evening, the California Highway Patrol shut down Highway 180 past the Hume Lake turnoff so that the road down into Kings Canyon would be open only to firefighters. The road to Hume Lake remained open.

A mandatory evacuation was ordered of Cedar Grove. Approximately 320 campsites, a 20-room lodge and restaurant, campground store and a pack station were closed.

CHP officers also reported no one was left at Boyden Cave, the tourist attraction just off Highway 180 in the canyon.

The CHP and Fresno County Sheriff's Office are working closely with the U.S. Forest Service to monitor the fire, which is burning five miles north of Hume Lake.

Fire officials will brief area residents and answer questions during a community meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Dunlap Community Center, 39489 Dunlap Road.

With a spell of hot weather and dry air moving into the area, firefighters expect the blaze will continue to burn. The fire had not crossed the south fork of the Kings River, but was approaching the river below Highway 180.

The multi-agency firefighting team battling the Rough fire in the Sierra National Forest, Sequoia National Forest and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks sent additional firefighters Saturday to Hume Lake Christian Camps and surrounding summer cabins to try to keep the fire away.

The fire started with a lightning strike July 31. The U.S. Forest Service said 1,064 firefighters are working to contain it.

Meanwhile, the Walker fire south of Lee Vining has grown to 3,770 acres, and campgrounds in Lower Lee Vining Canyon remain closed, including Lower Lee Vining, Moraine, Boulder, Aspen Grove and Big Bend campgrounds. The fire is just 10 percent contained.

Tioga Road in Yosemite National Park was reopened without escort Monday afternoon, but no stopping is allowed along the eastern six miles of the road, the U.S. Forest Service said.

The Sierra fires are among 19 major fires burning in California.

A fire that has been burning for more than a week about 100 miles north of San Francisco has destroyed nine homes and charred more than 39 square miles. Firefighters are gaining ground against the Northern California wildfire, with 85 percent containment reported Monday.

In Southern California, crews working through the night stopped the spread of two Los Angeles County fires that burned several structures, charred hundreds of acres of dry brush and led to the arson arrest of one person.

A brush fire sparked near a riverbed in Montebello, a suburb east of downtown Los Angeles, halted operations at an oil field and prompted the evacuation of a park. The fire, which grew to about 200 acres, was 20 percent contained Monday.

To the north, a wildfire that burned buildings at an abandoned rehabilitation center in rural Castaic has charred about 300 acres in Angeles National Forest.

Meanwhile, mechanical problems prompted Cal Fire to ground a fleet of planes Monday that help direct other aircraft where to dump retardant on wildland blazes.

Cal Fire ordered its fleet of 15 OV-10 A Broncos not to fly Monday after a propeller on one of the planes failed while the aircraft was still on the ground, according to Cal Fire Battalion Chief Scott McLean.

Five of the aircraft were later cleared for flights after passing safety inspections, he said.

Poor air quality becomes concern during back-to-school season

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, August 17, 2015

Residents in the San Joaquin Valley are being reminded about the health risks that come with episodes of poor air quality during this back-to-school season.

Emissions related to the increase in traffic and vehicle idling that occur when children are dropped off and picked up at school often contribute to dirty air, local officials say.

On Monday, when many students in the area started school, air quality in Merced and Stanislaus counties was categorized as “unhealthy for sensitive groups,” including those with respiratory problems.

In areas such as Fresno and Tulare, Monday’s air was “unhealthy” for everyone, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District.

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Poor air quality has been linked to several health problems. Exposure to fine particulate pollution, for example, can affect the respiratory and cardiovascular systems.

In Merced County, it is estimated that more than 15,000 adults and 7,000 children have asthma. Bad air can aggravate asthma attacks and worsen other lung ailments such as emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

School health officials keep an eye out for dirty air forecasts, said Leslie Schleth, head nurse at the Merced City School District.

When air quality is deemed “unhealthy,” students are not allowed to play outside and instead are given other options.

Schleth said parents of children with respiratory problems, such as asthma, are advised to form an asthma action plan with their medical provider and share it with school staff. Schleth said that a few years ago, there was a big push for doctors to create such action plans, but she sees fewer of them now.

To check local air quality, residents are advised to visit the air district’s Real-Time Air Advisory Network at www.valleyair.org.

Campgrounds Closed as Fast-Moving Sierra Fire Burns 20,000 Acres

KQED News, Monday, August 17, 2015

Steep, rough terrain was making it hard for firefighters to get a handle Monday on a growing fire raging in and around Kings Canyon National Park, east of Fresno.

KQED’s Sasha Khokha reports the Rough Fire has burned more than 20,000 acres and is still zero percent contained:

Lightning sparked the fire more than two weeks ago, but it took a turn with this weekend’s hot weather.

The fire isn't threatening any buildings. But officials have shut down the only road into the Cedar Grove area of the park, which meant closing campgrounds and a lodge there.

Smoke from the fire is affecting air quality near some popular giant Sequoia groves and mountain lakes. "This is actually one of the deepest canyons in North America," Mike Theune, fire information officer with Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, told Khokha. "You're talking sheer cliff walls. You're talking slopes that anything rolling on it is going to keep on rolling.

"Being so steep and rugged makes firefighting really tough. This is a very, very challenging fire."

Another challenge, reports Khokha: Because it's a wilderness area, firefighters have to be light on the land and not use flame retardant that will impact the sensitive watershed.

The fire is currently the fifth largest of more than a dozen wildfires reported across California.

The Fresno Bee reports a mandatory evacuation was ordered in Cedar Grove and "320 campsites, a 20-room lodge and restaurant, campground store, and a pack station were closed."

Fire officials said a strong high pressure system was expected to bring warmer, drier conditions, along with light winds.

EPA's stringent smog rules could suffocate economic opportunity

By Jillian Melchior

Sacramento Bee, Saturday, Aug. 15, 2015

Joshua Tree National Park is "as pristine as any site in the California desert today or ever will be in the future," the State Water Resources Control Board has said. Noting its proximity to Los Angeles, the National Park Service once touted how "for people who are subjected to automobile congestion, air pollution and disappearing open space, (the park) offers rest and relaxation, fresh air, clear skies, outdoor recreation, solitude and contemplation."

But last year, Joshua Tree National Park failed to meet the Environmental Protection Agency's ozone standards, with many of its sites charting smog levels far higher than the 75 parts per billion standard established by the federal government in 2008. And Joshua Tree isn't alone. From Yosemite's Turtleback Dome to Sequoia and Kings Canyon's Ash Mountain and Lower Kaweah, several national park sites have failed to meet federal smog standards.

Though the amount of ground-level smog has decreased at an accelerating pace over the past four decades, the EPA's standards keep getting tougher, with the agency reconsidering its mandates at least every five years under current law. The last regulatory revisions, established in 2008, were so stringent that several national park sites – as well as myriad cities and towns across America – fail to meet them.

Instead of creating more realistic goals or waiting for states to reach more uniform compliance with current regulations, the EPA is now finalizing even more adamant smog standards to mandate ozone levels somewhere between 60 and 70 ppb.

At those levels, the number of noncompliant national park sites will roughly double, and even immaculate places like the Mojave Desert and Colorado's Longs Peak could land on the naughty list. Thousands of cities and counties could also find themselves in violation, forced to impose stringent measures that hinder economic growth and cost billions of dollars. Overall, the National Association of Manufacturers has said the smog rules "could be the most expensive regulation in history."

The EPA claims lower smog levels would yield significant health gains. Then again, it's increasingly clear that the EPA is cherry-picking its science, giving undue consideration to studies that support lower ozone standards while ignoring research that doesn't match the agency's political agenda.

The EPA has given great import to studies with small sample sizes, poor controls or unlikely scenarios, according to a June 17 letter to the agency written by 23 physicians in Congress.

For instance, the EPA reanalyzed one study on exercise and ozone, drawing the opposite conclusion as its author, William C. Adams of UC Davis. He later told the EPA that it had "misinterpreted the statistics contained in my published, peer-reviewed paper."

The EPA has also leaned heavily on decades-old findings, even though new studies may present different, more relevant perspectives. And in other instances, the agency has altogether refused to reveal what data it has used to reach its conclusions about appropriate pollutant levels.

In other words, junk science can enjoy its heyday, as long as its conclusions are politically convenient for an overzealous EPA.

The reality is that Americans want clean air and economic opportunity – and with few exceptions, they currently enjoy both. Ignoring that, at enormous economic expense, the EPA is pursuing standards that even the federal government can't meet on national park land.