

Manuel Cunha: Perea is sticking up for Valley

By Manuel Cunha

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015

In response to the Aug. 31 commentary by Dean Florez, “Two bills, two momentous choices for Valley lawmakers,” I ask this:

How dare he condemn Assembly Member Henry T. Perea for standing up for the Valley?

Mr. Florez, as you may recall, was our former representative in the Legislature. During his tenure in Sacramento, the Fresno County economy literally went in the tank. Tens of thousands of jobs vanished. Farms all across the Central Valley were lost. Our community was devastated.

After spending 12 years in the Legislature — doing more harm than good for local growers — Mr. Florez packed his bags and moved to Pasadena, leaving the Valley to pick up the pieces.

Thankfully, we have a genuine leader in Assembly Member Perea. Our current representative in Sacramento cares deeply about water, jobs, rural communities and energy. He has proven that he understands the people of this community time and time again.

The Valley is lucky to have such thoughtful representation at a time when power brokers in Southern California and the Bay Area continue to push policies that run roughshod over our communities.

Senate Bill 350 would be devastating to agriculture and farmers in California’s rural counties. At a time when our state’s drought has put an immense strain on growers, Sacramento’s attempt to go after our fuel would literally be the final straw for agriculture.

For the record, farmers in California already use the cleanest diesel fuel in the world. Cutting fuel supplies in half will only drive up prices and put many hardworking Central Valley farmers on the road to hardscrabble.

Perhaps Mr. Florez thinks about us from time to time in Pasadena. I certainly hope he does. Senate Bill 350 will impact the food we grow, package and deliver to his table each and every day.

I know I speak for farmers and ranchers when I say: Thank you, Assembly Member Perea, for your leadership and defense of the Central Valley.

Smoke from Rough fire smothers Clovis-Fresno area

By Barbara Anderson

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015

The Rough fire grew by several thousand acres overnight and consumed a total of 97,884 acres by Tuesday morning, officials said.

But its biggest impact was on air quality on the central San Joaquin Valley floor.

Smoke as thick as fog shrouded Clovis and surrounding foothill communities, forcing schoolchildren indoors.

Air quality authorities advised people to stay inside if they smelled smoke — a scent Clovis residents awakened to this past weekend holiday and at the start of the work week.

Soot levels from the Rough fire increased to dangerous levels in Clovis, where the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has a monitor to track pollution levels.

The pollution, known as PM-2.5, is particularly harmful to children, the elderly and people with lung or heart problems. The spike in Clovis was considered to be harmful even for healthy people.

“We were lucky most of the summer because wind conditions prevented this kind of spike,” said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the air pollution control district. “But that has changed. People need to take protective measures.”

Clovis Unified School District said that recesses at all schools were canceled, as well as physical education classes and outdoor activities.

“We will continue to monitor the situation and adjust activities accordingly throughout the week,” said district spokeswoman Kelly Avants.

Clovis Unified athletic directors were monitoring air quality and giving students water breaks every 10 minutes, athletic directors said.

Sierra Unified School District, based in Auberry, took similar protective action.

Janelle Mehling, assistant superintendent of business services, said the smoke “looks like fog.”

Mehling, who lives in the foothills, said the air quality was worse during the weekend, but Tuesday was only slightly better. “It just looks and feels horrible.”

The Chawanakee Unified School District in North Fork, which also placed restriction on recess and outdoor activities, is monitoring students who have asthma, said Superintendent Darren Sylvia.

The students aren’t able to escape the smoke at home or at school, he said.

Fresno Unified School District also restricted recesses and outdoor activities Tuesday afternoon and was monitoring air quality for sporting activities.

Visits to the doctor’s office

Doctors at Kaiser Permanente-Fresno outpatient clinics have seen more children with asthma who need breathing treatments, said Michelle Hanrahan, assistant medical group administrator.

“It seems to be the children who are affected at the moment,” Hanrahan said.

Air quality for the central San Joaquin Valley was listed as unhealthy for those with sensitive conditions in Fresno, Tulare and Madera counties. And adults with lung problems have had flare-ups.

Adults and children were showing up at the Baz Allergy, Asthma and Sinus Center at Herndon and Fowler avenues in Clovis on Tuesday.

Dr. David Pettigrew had treated half a dozen patients for asthma problems by mid-afternoon. One was a 10-year-old who had been kept inside at school but had an asthma episode walking home after school, he said. “The air is particularly atrocious,” he said. “It’s caustic to the lungs and nose.”

Maurice Celedon-Castro has had asthma for about 30 years and tries to keep it under control, but he had to go to an urgent-care clinic Monday. “I had my medication and I was taking it, but it felt like the air was really thick,” he said.

Celedon-Castro, of Fresno, said he stayed indoors at work and at home, but it was difficult to escape the tiny soot particles that irritate his lungs. “This is one of the worst times I’ve had,” he said.

Dr. Vipul Jain, a UCSF-Fresno associate professor and medical director of the chronic lung diseases program, expects to see more pulmonary patients this week. The air district has warned that smoky conditions will continue. “The worst is yet to come,” Jain said.

And the doctor’s advice for patients who live in the mountains, where smoke is thickest: “I would get out.”

Weather impact

A double whammy of soot and possible ozone spikes is expected to continue at least until Saturday, meteorologists said. In addition to smoke, wildfires also create ozone-making gases called oxides of nitrogen.

The air quality problems began over the weekend when a high pressure system formed. That system will remain over California, and make for high temperatures over 100 degrees through the weekend, forecasters say. Today’s high in Fresno is to be 104 degrees; Thursday will be 105 and Friday 106 degrees.

The high pressure also created a breeze blowing from east to west, meteorologists said. Now smoke and other polluting gases are streaming into the Valley.

The smoke had largely stayed away from Valley cities in August as wind patterns trapped it in the foothills. After the change in wind direction, a pall of smoke drifted into Clovis. People noticed the smell of smoke in Fresno, too.

Visalia and Porterville also recorded increases in soot pollution Monday evening, said meteorologist Shawn Ferreria of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Foothill communities to the north, such as Auberry, have been harder hit, too.

"We haven't seen a lot of this high pressure pattern this summer," he said. "But it is very typical for this area."

Smoke from a wildfire usually moves downslope in the evening as temperatures drop. Ferreria said longer evenings in late summer give the smoke more time to spread into cities.

In the afternoons, the smoke often rises, clearing the way for sunshine and possible ozone spikes.

But if the smoke hangs around in the afternoon, it can actually reduce the chances of high ozone readings by blocking some sunshine. Ozone, which attacks the lungs, needs sunshine to form.

As a result of the fire, all campgrounds in Kings Canyon National Park are closed until further notice.

Nearly 2,000 firefighters and allied personnel are fighting the fire, currently the largest in California.

A firefighter was injured Monday morning while working as part of a night shift crew in the Converse Basin. He is "doing OK," Forest Service spokeswoman Brenda Bowen said Tuesday afternoon. The firefighter, who is in stable condition, has requested that his identity and his crew assignment not be released, she said.

The firefighter was with a crew looking for spot fires, Bowen said. "We do not have the specifics of exactly what happened at that time, other than he did receive burns." A special team will be looking at the events surrounding the incident, she said.

Because of the changing nature of the fire, officials are evacuating people north of the intersection of Highway 180 and Millwood Road in Dunlap, specifically an area bounded by U.S. Forest Service Road 12S01 and Sampson Flat Road to the south and Crabtree to the north; and U.S. Forest Service Road and 12S19 to the west and Cherry Gap (U.S. Forest Service Road 13S03 and Highway 180) to the east.

The Red Cross set up a shelter in Sanger to assist evacuees, but no one needed it, so it was closed Tuesday afternoon. It can be re-activated as needed.

Most of the area burning is in the Sierra National Forest, where the fire started July 31 with a lightning strike five miles north of Hume Lake in the Kings River Drainage. However, about 37,000 acres are on fire in the Sequoia National Forest, and more than 2,000 acres are burning in Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Park.

The fire stretches north of Cedar Grove, Rough fire spokesman Andy Isolano said Monday. But it is heading northeast, away from the Kings River. Fire crews are trying to steer it up into the granite canyon.

Merced temperatures spike, high school coaches take precautions

Sun-Star Staff

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015

Temperatures flirted with triple digits on Tuesday afternoon, and high school coaches took notice and safety measures.

Merced High School's varsity football team, for example, opted out of full practice gear while keeping shoulder pads and helmets. On hot days, head coach Rob Scheidt said, they modify dress rules to keep student athletes as cool and safe as possible.

Temperatures are expected to reach a high of 102 Wednesday and up to 103 Thursday and Friday. The higher-than-average temperatures are caused by a ridge of high pressure moving over the area, said William Peterson, a meteorological technician with the National Weather Service in Hanford.

Highs in the mid- to upper 90s are anticipated for next week. Peterson said temperatures are expected to make a gradual decline as the fall season approaches.

Wednesday, Scheidt said, the team will practice later in the day, skipping the peak of the high temperatures. On Thursdays, the team has short practices regardless of weather conditions to give the athletes some recovery time for Friday night games. That break is especially convenient on warm days, Scheidt said.

"We also talk about the importance of nutrition and hydration," he said. Student athletes are encouraged to drink at least six 16-ounce bottles of water every day.

When temperatures surpass the 103 mark, coaches are put on high alert. Yet, dry heat is usually less dangerous than heat combined with humidity, Scheidt said.

To protect against heat-related illnesses, such as heat exhaustion and cramps, the California Department of Public Health suggests that individuals who engage in heavy exercise, either through sports or work, replace the body's salt and minerals by drinking fruit juice or sports beverages. Health officials also recommend wearing light clothing and sunscreen, and planning outdoor activities before noon or in the evening.

While coaches keep in mind high temperatures when drawing out practice, air quality is a bigger concern.

"Every day we monitor our heat index and air quality," he said. The Merced area is "fortunate" because compared to other areas in the Valley, Scheidt said, there is usually a breeze that helps eliminate some of the pollutants. But coaching staff members always keep an eye out, he said.

On Tuesday, San Joaquin Valley Air District officials issued a health warning for smoke drifting into the area from the Rough fire in Fresno County.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter, which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks, and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. The public health warning was sent out to Merced, Madera, Kings, Fresno, Tulare, Stanislaus, San Joaquin and some parts of Kern county.

The impacts of smoke are expected to be felt throughout the week, and the health caution remains in effect until the fire is extinguished.

Record heat to hit Modesto this week has school coaches taking precautions

By Deke Farrow

Modesto, Bee, Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2015

With anticipated record heat hitting the Modesto area this week, school coaches and athletic directors say safety will come first for student athletes.

The high Wednesday will be near 103, according to the National Weather Service. That's just shy of the Modesto record high of 105 degrees, set in 1944. But if the weather service forecast holds true, Thursday and Friday will see records fall. Thursday's high is expected to be near 105, compared with the record 101 for Sept. 10 set in 1953. Friday is expected to be even hotter, near 107. The Sept. 11 record for Modesto is 101, set in 1979.

"This is expected to be the longest heat wave of the year," the Sacramento office of the National Weather Service reported Tuesday.

The weekend temperatures should be back in the double digits, though highs still will be near 98 for Saturday and Sunday. But these remaining weekdays are the ones that have coaches acting to keep athletes well hydrated and as cool as possible.

Modesto City Schools athletic director Don Wallace, who's also Modesto High School's athletic director and head football coach, said he's reminded all coaches – and especially at schools where gyms aren't air conditioned – to make sure students have had plenty of water, to shorten drills, and to be very observant and cautious in general.

“A lot of these kids don’t eat and drink right all day long,” Wallace said. “They need to be taking in the water, and we’ll have more water breaks at practices.”

Even on a hot but not scorching day like Tuesday, when the high was expected to be near 100, the cross country team, for example, did part of its workout in the weight room for strength training, he said. Running was in the shade at Cesar Chavez Park – no big distance run – so the coach could keep an eye on how the students are faring, Wallace said.

As for this week’s football games, the heat was brought up at Tuesday’s Quarterback Club meeting of coaches and will be discussed at a meeting of athletic directors Wednesday.

At least a couple of schools have triple-headers Friday that have freshman teams playing about 3:30 p.m. If scheduling allows those freshman games to be moved to Thursday, later in the day, “I’m sure that will come up,” Wallace said. Another possibility is that if coaches all agree, quarters could be shortened a bit, he said.

Wallace noted that Modesto High – in all black no less – faced Ceres High on Aug. 28 when the temperature was 104. There were no issues then, he said. “Every time they came off the field we’d get water in them ... had them pour cool water down their necks.”

Downey High varsity head football coach Jeremy Plaa said he is more concerned with afternoon practices – in the peak heat of the day – than evening games later this week. He’ll have players do drills without helmets and shoulder pads as much as possible, he said, and would shorten practice by 10 or 15 minutes Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday, he plans to cut practice to an hour at most, he said.

The daily air quality forecast from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District can be checked online at www.valleyair.org.

Downey’s freshman team plays Thursday at 6 p.m. The JV has the earliest kickoff of the school’s three teams: 5 p.m. Friday. The JV coaches will have more players ready to get into the game so no players are overtaxed, he said.

Players are being encouraged to eat saltier foods during the day and to carry a gallon of water around with them as a reminder to stay hydrated so they don’t cramp up. “If they wait till game time, it’s too late,” Plaa said. “We tell them to eat pretzels and put a lot of mustard on their food.” The team is big on mustard because it has good sodium content and is easy on the stomach, he said.

Davis High School athletic director and head football coach Tim Garcia said he’s taking every precaution to make sure athletes stay hydrated and healthy in the heat. “For football practices, we’ll have a shorter time, players will not be in full pads on days they regularly would be,” he said. “We want to keep them as cool as possible and still get the work done that needs to be done.

“As AD, I’ve given coaches a heads-up on the air quality and temperatures to make sure safety’s first. A lot of my guys are shortening practice time.” Cross country runners, he noted, will stick to the shaded parts of Davis Park.

Davis’ football teams have a triple-header scheduled Friday against Los Banos at Modesto Junior College, with the freshman kickoff at 3:30. He said he’d be attending Tuesday afternoon’s Quarterback Club meeting and “there’s a definite possibility” that early game could be canceled or moved.

Football in Modesto faces a double whammy, said CIF Sac-Joaquin Section Director of Communications Will DeBoard. First, Modesto City Schools has the scheduling challenge of seven schools but just three stadiums. Second, “If somebody misses a big tennis match, you can replay the next day no problem, but football’s a different animal because you have just 11 weeks to play 10 games, so can’t just push one back easily,” he said.

The California Interscholastic Federation does allow some flexibility, DeBoard said. Football teams can play no more than two games in any eight-day period, he said, so the rules mean a game could be pushed back to a Monday or Tuesday. “It’s not perfect, but it’s allowed,” he said. The section doesn’t have any rules on game cancellation because of the heat index, he added. “We’ve never really had games postponed due to heat but have due to fires because of air quality – it happened during the Rim fire.”

As Garcia noted, air quality also is being taken into consideration by coaches during this heat.

Karl Swanberg, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in Sacramento, said, "High pressure builds up over us and traps the pollutants, so we'll get a near-surface, heat-generated froth and above that a high-pressure system. It's almost like a pressure-cooker situation."