

## Fires in West Have Residents Gasping on the Soot Left Behind

By Ian Lovett and Jennifer Medina

The New York Times, Wednesday, Sep 9, 2015

FRESNO, Calif. — The air in the San Joaquin Valley hangs thick with gray-brown dust, a result of the state's largest fire, which has burned through more than 160 square miles in the nearby hills.

The fire has so far spared lives and homes. But it has exposed one of the obscured effects that four years of record drought has unleashed here: dangerous drops in air quality that exacerbate public health problems in this region and threaten to choke the quality of life.

"With the fire, even with my inhaler, I'm still [wheezing](#)," Antoinette Wyer, 48, an asthmatic who has lived her whole life here, said at a health clinic on Wednesday. She has kept her 3-year-old grandson inside this week, while a 4-year-old grandson has stayed home from school.

The dreadful conditions here — with temperatures soaring over 100 degrees, dry brush everywhere and a miasma of bad air — seem likely to become more common throughout the Western States, where the fire season is shaping up as a record one. This summer, residents of [Denver grappled with air pollution](#) that had wafted down from wildfires in Canada; throughout the West, a big blaze in one place can be felt many miles away.

In Fresno County, elementary schoolchildren have been kept inside during recess this week because of the soot in the air that blots out the sun, and the Clovis school district may cancel a football tournament this Saturday for the same reason. Public health officials are warning people with heart and lung problems to stay inside. And [asthma](#) clinics around Fresno are overflowing with new patients. Normally, particulate matter levels in the air spike in the winter but drop during the summer, said Seyed Sadredin, the executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

But since the drought began, the volume of particles in the air has been spiking year-round, for a variety of reasons: Rain does not clear the air; dust from dry, fallow fields and from farmers digging wells kicks up more easily; and the longer wildfire season means more smoke in the air more often.

The San Joaquin Valley lies at the center of the state, surrounded by mountain ranges on the east and the west, receiving little coastal air. The air and soot are effectively trapped in a geographic bowl for much of the summer, and the lack of wind and rain has made it impossible for things to clear out.

Mr. Sadredin said that if the drought continued much longer, it would threaten much of the progress the region has made to lower air pollution levels.

"We have the toughest air regulations in the nation, but we have no control over the geography and the climate," he said. "The Valley is basically a bowl with a lid on top for most of the year."

Dr. Vipul Jain, a pulmonologist who runs a chronic lung disease program in Fresno, said the effect of the drought and fires was likely to get worse this week, with temperatures expected to soar to 106 degrees. He said that hospitals could have as many as double the number of patients for acute lung problems in the coming days and weeks.

"It's kind of a worst-nightmare situation," said Dr. Jain, an associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco. "And the worst is still yet to come. We can see it, but anyone with a lung problem, they feel it, and there is no way to prevent an exacerbation of their problems. People have to go outside and work, and they will suffer."

For years, California has had the [most polluted air in the country](#), with cities here dominating national lists of the dirtiest urban areas. And the Central Valley has had the worst air in the state for decades: More than [20 percent of all children in the Central Valley](#) have asthma, according to the American Lung Association.

Many counties throughout the state and the San Joaquin Valley have successfully reduced the amount of ozone in the air. But levels of soot, or particle pollution known as PM-2.5, have started to increase after years of decline, according to state figures. Officials are blaming the drought.

At local asthma clinics, doctors have had an explosion in business since the drought began. Dr. Malik N. Baz said his asthma and allergy practice had grown at least 20 percent each of the past three years, and he has opened five new clinics around the Valley in the past two years — all of them overflowing with patients.

“Our only limitation right now is that there aren’t enough parking spots because there are so many people coming in,” Dr. Baz said, adding that he could open more clinics if he could find more doctors willing to move here. “Right now, pollution is so high, I even started coughing when I went to Starbucks to get coffee — and I don’t have asthma.”

As the drought has dragged on, the soot has left the Sierra Nevada covered for weeks at a time. Dust clouds dot the rural roads here, and there is often a stripe of gray haze at sunset. Residents routinely avoid the outdoors in the summer or when they see (or, worse, feel) the film in the air. Sometimes, the air has been so thickly clouded with pollution [that it is difficult to see across](#) the California State University football stadium here.

Increasingly this summer, even healthy adults have grown wary of spending time outside. On Wednesday, with soot from what has been called the Rough Fire still blowing into town, some traded morbid jokes, comparing living here to smoking and wondering how many years they were taking off their lives.

“It started last week, with eyes burning, [congestion](#), can’t sleep at night,” said Randall Cooper, 62, a retiree who moved here from the Bay Area 10 years ago. Those who could have tried to flee, often to the coast for the weekend. But this remains one of the few affordable places to live in California, which keeps many people here, even as the local economy continues to suffer under the drought’s weight.

Mr. Cooper said his nose had cleared up when he went to the Bay Area for his son’s wedding, but grew clogged again as soon as he came back.

“I think about leaving, but from here to the Bay Area, every mile is \$1,000 more in housing,” he said. “I wasn’t raised here. There are a lot of people who have had to deal with this their whole lives.”

Air and health officials have traded red-coded warnings that indicate “unhealthful” air for purple, calling them “very unhealthful.” But everyone has to go outside sometimes.

Juliet Johnson, 52, has lived in the San Joaquin Valley for nearly four decades and has severe [allergies](#) and asthma. She went for a walk with her dog on Monday, despite the “campfire smell” in the air, and woke up Tuesday with no voice.

“It was so nice out, so I opened up all the windows in my house over the weekend,” she said.

Dr. Jain warned the situation was likely to grow worse. Medical studies have shown that asthma hospitalizations reach their peak in September, and the fire season will not be over by then.

“What we have now makes the good-air days bad and bad-air days worse,” he said. “It jacks up the air to a whole ‘nother level. What the fire and particles do is like [sunburn](#) in their lungs, putting the smoke right down in their lungs. We see a whole bunch of people get exacerbated and getting hospitalized, no matter what we do.”

## **Another climate bill falters in California**

By David Siders

The Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Sep 10, 2015

One day after Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers abandoned a proposal to curtail petroleum use in motor vehicles, another major climate bill fell in California on Thursday.

Senate Bill 32, which sought to dramatically increase California’s greenhouse gas reduction targets, will not get another vote in the Assembly before the legislative session ends this week, the bill’s author, Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, said.

She said in a prepared statement that the Assembly and the Brown administration “were not supportive, for now, and we could not pass this important proposal.”

She said she would try again to pass the bill next year.

Brown spokesman Gareth Lacy said in an email that the administration supported Senate Bill 32 as it was originally proposed, but objected to amendments to curtail authority of the California Air Resources Board. Those amendments, he said, "could have weakened the state's existing ability to fight climate change. We can't trade what is already being done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to get a new bill."

The announcement of SB 32's stalling came after resistance from moderate Democrats in the Assembly forced Senate leaders to abandon a measure to reduce petroleum use in California.

Pavley's companion measure, Senate Bill 32, sought to increase California's emission reduction target to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. It would have expanded upon Assembly Bill 32, the landmark 2006 law requiring California to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

The bill passed the Senate but stalled earlier this week in the lower house, with many Democrats withholding their votes or opposing the bill.

## **San Joaquin Valley officials lobby and learn on Capitol Hill**

By Michael Doyle

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Thurs. Sept. 10, 2015

WASHINGTON - A familiar San Joaquin Valley wish list faces plenty of Capitol Hill obstacles, but here's the thing:

You don't ask, you don't get.

In an annual lobbying ritual, more than 30 officials from eight valley counties this week swarmed the hill in search of federal support for an assortment of projects and priorities. They want better roads, more reliable water and cleaner air, none of which comes cheap.

What they got was a crash course in congressional politics, circa 2015.

"I've learned it's going to be a struggle to get some of our initiatives and priorities moving along," acknowledged Madera Mayor Robert Poythress. "We've been hearing from the legislators that there seems to be a high degree of gridlock."

Poythress chairs the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council, which represents the area from San Joaquin County in the north to Kern County in the south. Mayors, city council members, county supervisors, planners and air quality managers united for the so-called "Valley Voice" trip.

As in past years, the valley officials pressed for an updated Clean Air Act that could better tend to the region's smog problem. They identified the highways and bridges that could benefit from a reauthorized transportation bill. They pleaded for "comprehensive plans that address water supply, reliability and affordability."

I don't know if they're overwhelmed by all the other things they're working on, but they seem not to be very positive or optimistic.

Madera Mayor Robert Poythress, on meetings by San Joaquin County officials with Congress

"We have to stick together, with the same message," said Patterson Mayor Luis L. Molina. "We're in difficult, challenging times."

Meeting on both sides of the Capitol starting Wednesday and concluding Thursday, the valley representatives presented their requests and gathered intelligence. At night, they debriefed each other and strategized at places like Johnny's Half Shell restaurant.

California lawmakers who appeared one by one before the Valley Voice delegation listened sympathetically; they needed no convincing from their own constituents. San Joaquin Mayor Amarpreet S. Dhaliwal said he sensed that "the lasting drought has brought the urgency to do something about reliable water supply for our state on a bipartisan level."

"Those we have met with have confirmed that real solutions require an active partnership between our federal government and the communities they represent," said Rosa De Leon Park, executive director of the Stanislaus Council of Governments.

Even so, some lawmakers candidly acknowledged the often bleak prospects for meaningful congressional action.

"I don't know if they're overwhelmed by all the other things they're working on, but they seem not to be very positive or optimistic," Poythress said.

Some impediments are relatively new. Others reflect longstanding policy conflicts.

Congressional conservatives, heeding the call of presidential candidate Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, are threatening to oppose any federal government appropriations bill that does not eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood. Several dozen House of Representatives Republicans already have signed a pledge to that effect. So far, none is from the San Joaquin Valley.

An earlier stand taken by House conservatives against the Affordable Care Act led to a 16-day federal government shutdown in 2013. The repeated shutdown threats seriously complicate any legislative initiative that requires money.

A separate, seemingly intractable dispute over funding a multibillion-dollar transportation bill, meanwhile, has continually disrupted the valley's long-term highway planning. Congress has failed since 2005 to pass a transportation bill lasting longer than two years, and the latest in a long string of temporary extensions is now set to expire Oct. 29.

"The most difficult part of the transportation bill is how to raise revenue," Tulare County Supervisor Allen Ishida noted. "There is opposition no matter what they do."

Stanislaus County Supervisor William O'Brien added that "we definitely still have challenges ahead of us" in coping with issues like protecting the valley's air quality, while streamlining what he called "administrative bureaucracy."

## **Clovis Unified limits sports due to heat, smoke**

The Fresno Bee, Friday, Sept. 11, 2015

The hot, smoky conditions in the Valley have led the Clovis Unified School District to cancel outdoor sports at its campuses Friday and Saturday.

District spokeswoman Kelly Avants said that an elementary-grade football carnival planned for Saturday would not be held, nor would cross-country events for Friday. Activities that can be held indoors are permitted.

Middle school football games will have a starting time of 7:45 a.m. Saturday, not 8:30, so the contests can be completed by noon, she said. High school events will occur as scheduled, but there will be extended water breaks and added timeouts to keep players hydrated and guard against heat-related problems, Avants said.

Another hot, smoky day is expected across the Valley on Friday as a result of a "stagnant" air pattern, the National Weather Service said.

Thursday's high in Fresno reached 105 degrees, and that mark is forecast again on Friday. The heat wave finally starts easing up on Saturday, when the high is to reach 102, and then begins a retreat into the 90s on Sunday, the weather service forecasters in Hanford said.

An alert for poor air quality Friday has been issued by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The Rough fire burning east of Fresno is creating the smoke.

The Fresno Bee Earth Log, Thursday, September 10, 2015

## **Rough fire soot got you down? Defend yourself**

By Mark Grossi

You've had a headache for two days. The tickle in your throat has become a constant pain. And your airways feel like they're swollen. It's the soot and ozone in the summer's worst week of air quality.

Besides hiding behind closed doors, how should you defend yourself against the afternoon ozone and the soot siege from the Rough fire east of Fresno?

Bee health reporter Barbara Anderson and I have interviewed many allergists over the last decade or so. We came up with a few suggestions. But if you are an asthmatic or you're having heart difficulties, go see a doctor.

Here are the suggestions:

- When you go home at the end of the day, change clothes. Take a shower and wash the tiny soot specks out of your hair. Rinse your nose with an over-the-counter solution, which you can find at a drug store. Don't go back outside afterward.
- Use the recirculation feature on your air conditioning when you are driving. It circulates air inside the car, instead of bringing it in from the outside. Also, replace your interior air filter if your car has one.
- If you're saving on electricity by hanging your clothes out to dry outside, don't. You'll be bringing soot back into the house when the clothes are dry. Use your indoor dryer instead.
- Don't run or ride your bike outside if you can smell smoke. Skip it or work out on a machine indoors.
- If you are particularly sensitive to smoke, wear a simple breathing mask, the kind you can buy at a hardware store. It will not filter out the smallest specks, but it will stop larger ones.