

Prep football: Fresno, Clovis, Madera districts cancel all Friday home games over poor air quality

Bee Staff Reports

Fresno Bee, Friday, Sept. 11, 2015

Fresno, Clovis and Madera unified school districts canceled all home high school football games scheduled for Friday, the latest impact of hot, smoky conditions on Central Section sports.

The largest high school girls tennis tournament in the nation, set for Friday and Saturday at sites around Fresno and Madera counties, also was canceled.

“Poor air quality continues to present a hazard,” Kelly Avants, the district’s chief communication officer, announced. “In addition to football, all outdoor activities have been canceled, kindergarten through 12th grade on Clovis Unified campuses. In cases where teams have traveled to participate in activities at other school sites, district officials are working with the hosting school district to determine whether to postpone or cancel activities.”

Clovis Unified’s decision wiped out the California Tennis Classic, a 116-team tournament that was to be held at 23 sites Friday and Saturday. The event got its 8:30 a.m. matches in Friday before conditions worsened, prompting two delays and eventually the cancellation of the rest of tournament.

The announcement came soon after Madera Unified said it was canceling two home football games. Reedley High at Madera and the Madera South game at Liberty-Madera Ranchos both were called off, part of a districtwide ban on outdoor activities.

The Liberty-Bakersfield at Central game was moved to a 7:30 p.m. Saturday kickoff at Koligian Stadium.

Bullard’s game against state eighth-ranked Grant-Sacramento was shifted from McLane Stadium on Friday night to Grant at 7:30 p.m. Saturday. Grant’s school district doesn’t offer weekend busing, therefore, the Pacers of the Sac-Joaquin Section – 14-1 a year ago – are unable to come to Fresno.

Hoover’s game at Memorial was moved to the teams’ bye week of Oct. 2. Fresno Unified also canceled its middle school games scheduled for Saturday.

The Kingsburg-Washington rivalry game at Easton was called off and will not be rescheduled, as were the Corcoran at Yosemite, Fowler at Sierra and Kerman at Coalinga games.

Minarets High canceled all outdoor activities, including its home football game against Mariposa.

Earlier in the week, amid signs that air quality would only worsen, some schools had moved to delay kickoffs until 8 or 8:30 p.m. to take advantage of cooling temperatures.

Friday kickoffs moved to 8 p.m. included Clovis at Atwater, Hanford at Dinuba, King City at Hanford West, Immanuel at Chowchilla, Farmersville at Woodlake and Sunnyside at Mt. Whitney. Shafter’s home game against Selma was pushed to 8:30 p.m., as was Monache against El Diamante. Sierra Pacific beat Riverdale 41-14 Thursday in a game that was pushed back to 8 p.m.

Games in Tulare and Kings counties were scheduled to be played.

Visalia Unified, via Twitter, referred to its air quality policy posted online. Like other school districts, VUSD says it works with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to determine “the amount of outdoor activity that is allowable under each condition.”

“Conditions may change suddenly, so we closely monitor the air quality throughout the school day and receive alerts whenever the air changes from one level to another,” the policy states.

Air quality in the central San Joaquin Valley, already usually affected by hot early September temperatures, is being further reduced by the Rough Fire burning in the Sierra Nevada east of Fresno. That blaze grew by nearly 10,000 acres Thursday to more than 119,000 acres in Sierra National Forest, Sequoia National Forest and Kings Canyon National Park.

Farther north, the Capital Christian-Sacramento game at Amador was rescheduled for Monday, according to The Sacramento Bee’s Joe Davidson, with all revenue going to player families in need of relief.

Bulldogs soccer postponed

Fresno State's women's nonconference soccer match with Pacific Friday night at Bulldog Stadium was also postponed because of poor air considerations. A make-up date hasn't been determined.

The Bulldogs are scheduled to play at Sacramento State at 1 p.m. Sunday.

The Fresno State Invitational cross country meet went on as scheduled Friday morning at Woodward Park. Stanford, San Jose State and seven other schools took part.

Blaze threatens historic trees, ash fallout seen around Valley

By Rory Appleton and Tim Sheehan

Fresno Bee and Sacramento Bee, Friday, Sept. 11, 2015

The Rough fire burning in the Sierra Nevada east of Fresno expanded by nearly 9,000 acres Friday, growing to more than 119,000 acres in Sierra National Forest, Sequoia National Forest and Kings Canyon National Park. Fire officials say the blaze moved closer to the historic giant sequoia trees in Grant Grove and the Wilsonia community.

Rough fire public information officer Paul Garnier said the blaze was within two miles of Grant Grove and Wilsonia. Firefighters Friday worked to cut trees, wet underbrush and even pre-emptively burn trees to form a containment line just north of Grant Grove.

Grant Grove is home to the General Grant Tree, an international tourist destination and the world's second-largest tree. Firefighters have covered the area around the General Grant in flame retardant, and installed sprinklers around the 267-foot tree.

Grant Grove also features a visitors center, lodge and restaurant and market.

"A lot of our resources will be deployed in that area to protect the structures and national monuments," Garnier said.

If the fire continues its current growth pattern – and Garnier predicts it will – it could hit Grant Grove as early as Saturday.

The blaze was within a quarter-mile of the Boole Tree in Sequoia National Forest as of noon Friday. The Boole is the sixth-largest tree in the world. No reports from Converse Basin, where it is located, were available Friday night to determine whether or not flames hit the tree. Extensive fire defense preparations around it were made in the past week.

Firefighters report that containment lines have only been established around 29 percent of the Rough fire's perimeter.

More than 2,200 firefighters are battling the blaze, aided by 14 helicopters dropping water and 18 bulldozers working to cut lines around the fire, the U.S. Forest Service reported Friday morning. The fire was sparked by a lightning strike July 31. As of Thursday, the firefighting effort had cost an estimated \$79 million, according to the National Interagency Coordination Center.

The wildfire's continued growth prompted a new round of mandatory evacuations of residents in the Dunlap area starting Friday morning, with people along Millwood Road and Todd Eymann Road ordered to use Dunlap Road to get out. A larger area between Miramonte and Dunlap was placed under an evacuation warning as officials worry about the fire's potential spread as hot, dry weather lingers over the region.

Garnier said the blaze is about five or six miles from these communities.

The American Red Cross of the Central Valley opened an evacuation shelter at the Sanger Community Center, 730 Recreation Ave. The Central California Animal Disaster Team has also set up emergency pet shelters at the community center.

Spokeswoman Jessica Piffero said no one spent Thursday night at the shelter, nor was anyone there as of noon Friday. She said few people live permanently in the evacuated areas, and those who do have had time to plan and make arrangements should the evacuation mandate come.

The shelter will remain open for any residents seeking food, information or a place to stay, and will be for future evacuations, which Piffero said could come at any moment.

The Bear Mountain Branch of the Fresno County Public Library in Squaw Valley has been converted into a base for firefighters to rest and recuperate.

Fresno County Agricultural Commissioner Les Wright put out a call Friday morning seeking volunteers to provide shelter for horses and other livestock being evacuated from the endangered mountain areas. "At this time the Sheriff's Posse is moving animals, but help may be needed to trailer animals to safety," said Wright, who was coordinating efforts with the Red Cross and the county's Office of Emergency Services.

By Friday afternoon, Wright sent out a statement saying the county had received an outpouring of support and no longer needed new volunteers.

Fire commanders said they expect the blaze to continue burning west down the Kings River and up the Mill Creek drainage, where the flames are being fed by dry underbrush and dead trees that have been killed by beetle infestations. Crews are being hampered in their efforts by steep, rugged terrain.

Dunlap School evacuated

Due to the heavy smoke and fire threat, Kings Canyon Unified School District closed Dunlap School on Thursday.

Deputy Superintendent John Campbell said around 430 students were bused Friday from Dunlap to either Al Conner Elementary in Orange Cove or Jefferson Elementary in Reedley. Extra classrooms will house the students and their teachers, who are also making the daily commute.

"Our staff is really pulling together to make it a normal school day for these kids," Campbell said.

Campbell sent an email to all staff members involved to thank them for their professionalism and dedication. "Because of all of you, your flexibility and your can-do attitude, our kids are with their teachers and friends being educated and cared for in a safe environment," the email said.

Right now, Campbell said, the district is able to accommodate the trek using its own buses. Should evacuations push farther westward, the district will have to use charter buses, which are already on hold in case of any emergencies, Campbell added.

Smoke hazards

Smoke from the Rough fire is fouling the Valley's air, with a thick haze dimming the sun and prompting warnings for people to limit their outdoor activity.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an air alert, a notification that the region is primed for conditions that exceed health standards for ozone or smog. But smog isn't the only concern. Soot and ash are also part of the problem, with tiny particles sifting out of the sky and settling on surfaces across the central San Joaquin Valley.

District spokeswoman Heather Heinks said the poor air can produce health issues "even in the most healthy person." The particulate matter in the air can cause watery eyes, scratchy throats and troubled breathing.

Heinks said air quality is expected to improve throughout the weekend, but that is subject to weather and fire conditions. She recommended Valley residents check the district's Real-Time Air Advisory Network at valleyair.org/raan for hourly updates.

Kaiser Permanente Fresno spokeswoman Kerri Leedy said the hospital's emergency department received an increase in patients with respiratory issues on Friday. Parents also called the pediatric department throughout the day asking for breathing treatments for asthmatic children.

"Our medical offices in Clovis, Selma and Oakhurst also are being impacted with more patients complaining of difficulty breathing, coughs, runny noses and wheezing," she said.

Scott Rowe, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford, said his office has received reports of ash falling as far west as Lemoore.

The smoke from the fire could linger into Saturday, Rowe said, as a large area of high pressure remains settled over the Great Basin “and puts a cap on things for smoke being able to blow out to the east.” Friday’s high temperature was predicted to be 104 degrees, “but with the sustained smoke we may have to modify that” as sunlight is blocked from reaching the ground.

Things could get better over the weekend. “We’re looking at an onshore flow of low pressure to come into the area that should provide some relief and push smoke over the crest onto the east side of the Sierra and into Nevada,” Rowe said. “We’re forecasting a cooling trend over the next few days.” The high temperature in Fresno is expected to be 102 degrees on Saturday, 98 by Sunday and 95 on Monday, “and it just gets better from there,” falling to 89 by Wednesday, Rowe said.

Weather, air quality affect outdoor activities

As a result of smoke and heat, the Fresno Unified School District canceled outdoor recess and physical education classes on Friday.

On Thursday, Clovis Unified announced that a Saturday football carnival for elementary grades was canceled, as were Friday cross-country events. All high school football games hosted within the district, as well as all outdoor activities for K-12 students on all district campuses, were also canceled.

The 2015 Ranch Rodeo in the Squaw Valley Rodeo Grounds on Saturday and Sunday has been canceled.

The Mountain Rodeo Association had originally planned to continue as scheduled, but an association official said the Fresno County Sheriff’s Office informed him that the event could not take place during the evacuation threat.

Several outdoor events in Fresno and Clovis are continuing this weekend as planned.

The Old Town Clovis Farmers Market planned to run at its usual times on Friday night and Saturday morning.

Carol Lester is the executive director of the Business Organization of Old Town, which coordinates the markets.

“We recommend that people looking to beat the heat or the bad air attend Saturday morning,” Lester said. “And we are telling people not to hang out long if they are sensitive to the air.”

Lester explained why the events were not canceled.

“These growers have committed to us for a year,” she said. “If we cancel, they are stuck with whatever they picked for us that morning. And we can’t have that.”

Tour de Fresno executive director Varoujan Der Simonian said the benefit bike ride will run on Saturday with several modifications: The century plus and Wildcat century routes no longer continue into the mountains, where smoke is heaviest. Riders on these routes are asked to make a U-turn at the intersection of Pittman Hill and Watts Valley Road (known to cyclists as corral stop). If riders choose to continue on the original routes on their own, they do so at their own risk – no support teams will be available.

Riders on the shorter metric century will not go east to Winton Park, but instead will loop off Belmont, Riverbend and to Academy and head to Sanger that way.

Der Simonian said any riders who pre-registered for the event but choose not to ride are still welcome to attend the post-ride lunch at 11:30 a.m. at the California Armenian Home.

The ride is a benefit to various Valley charities.

The Fresno-Clovis Walk to End Alzheimer’s will run from 8 to 11 a.m. Saturday at Fresno State. More than 1,100 walkers have registered for the event, raising \$271,308 in the process.

Registration will also be available on Saturday. The event is free, but participants are asked to fundraise for the cause. The walk covers a 1.2-mile course on the campus.

Stanislaus County firefighters get scare at Butte fire

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2015

A wildfire burning 50 miles away was having plenty of impact on the Modesto area Friday:

- Firefighters from Stanislaus County, deployed to help fight the blaze, found themselves in a defensive mode as the fire ran at them.
- Smoke covered the skies, delivering a significant hit to air quality already damaged by an extended heat wave.
- Several high school football games involving local teams were moved or canceled.

Encroaching smoke from the Butte fire, which has burned more than 50,000 acres in Amador and Calaveras counties since Wednesday afternoon, combined with the final day of an extended heat wave to bring deteriorated air quality to the Northern San Joaquin Valley. Earlier this week, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an air alert for Friday even before the start of the fire.

The fire was 10 percent contained as of Friday afternoon and more than 6,000 structures were threatened, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported.

A strike team leader from the Modesto Fire Department headed a team with Office of Emergency Services engines staffed by firefighters from Modesto, Stanislaus Consolidated and West Stanislaus Fire District.

The Fire Department also provided the strike team leader for structure protection engines staffed by Modesto, Burbank-Paradise Fire District and Turlock Fire Department. They were joined by firefighters from El Dorado and Alpine counties.

On Thursday afternoon, Modesto and Stanislaus Consolidated crews serving as part of a strike team “were involved in structure defense and the fire made a significant run at them, very erratic fire behavior,” Modesto Fire Chief Sean Slamon said Friday. They were forced to take refuge behind a house and other structures, he said.

“A couple of fire engines suffered heat damage but the most important thing is that the crews are safe,” Slamon said. From what he’s heard – he hasn’t yet received photos – the damage was mainly cosmetic and the engines remain in service. A Stanislaus Consolidated battalion chief said one of that department’s rigs had some bubbled paint, melted plastic trim and melted hose but was fully functioning.

The firefighters did not have to deploy their personal fire shelters, Slamon added; the structures provided enough refuge. “This is a very trying time for that area and we’re doing everything we can to keep those communities safe,” the chief said.

The fire has left a thin layer of ash across parts of Tuolumne County, and Friday morning, Sonora High School announced that its football game with Hilmar would be moved from the foothills to Hilmar High. Other games to the south were canceled due to concerns stemming from the Rough fire in Fresno County.

Firefighters might get a break from the weather starting Saturday, when temperatures are expected to drop from the previous days. Highs of 97 and 95 are predicted for Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Monday should drop a few more degrees and the high for Tuesday is expected to be 84.

Rough fire’s smoke shrouds Merced; some football canceled

By Ana B. Ibarra

Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2015

A shift in wind patterns sent smoke from wildfires in new directions, causing disappointment Friday for football players at Buhach Colony High School, whose game at Clovis North High School was rescheduled due to poor air quality.

Clovis, Fresno and Madera school districts were forced to cancel all Friday night games, although those in Merced and Atwater continued.

Buhach's head coach Kevin Navarra said their game would be moved to Saturday night, but was still awaiting confirmation as of press time. Smoke was expected to move out of the Clovis area by the weekend. Players were keeping their fingers crossed.

The hazy and smoky skies over most of the Valley on Friday were a result of the Rough fire burning in Fresno and Tulare counties. Falling ash was reported in several parts of the region.

Scott Rowe, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford, said smoke from the wildfire had been moving into the area for the past few days, but became more noticeable Friday because of a change in wind patterns.

Previously, midlevel winds were blowing smoke from the Rough fire to the east into desert areas, but a high-pressure system created a more stable air pattern, which caused smoke to sit around in the Valley, Rowe said.

Weather officials expect the smoke to clear out of Merced, and most of the Valley, by the weekend as more favorable wind patterns come through the area.

"It's tough on our kids," Navarra said about Friday's change in plans. "They prep all week and the change in schedule created some anxiety. They were nervous all day wondering if they'd play or not."

Friday's air quality reached "unhealthy levels for sensitive groups," according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Real-time Air Advisory Network. But monitors, air officials explained, detect only fine particulates and not larger soot, meaning air can be dirtier than indicated by the network.

On Friday, the Merced City School District implemented a "rainy-day" schedule to limit students' outdoor exposure.

Leslie Schleth, lead nurse with the district, said students would have indoor recess to protect them from the heat and poor air quality.

"We just felt it was in all students' best interests to treat today differently," she said. "It's unsafe for the children, but also for the adults."

Conditions such as Friday's are especially dangerous for children with asthma and allergies, she said. She asked that parents keep children indoors this weekend if possible. It is especially important that children with respiratory problems take prescribed medications and stay hydrated, she said.

Earlier this week, local air officials issued a health cautionary statement for most of the Valley in response to smoke from the Rough fire. That warning was extended through the weekend. On Friday, air officials also warned about smoke from the Butte fire burning in Amador and Calaveras counties.

Smoke from fires, air officials explained, produces fine-particulate matter, which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

"Particulate matter lodges deep into the lungs and can reduce lung function," Anthony Presto, spokesman for the air district, said. "It can also increase risk of heart attacks in sensitive groups."

People with heart or lung disease are advised to follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure.

Turlock fire, police join effort in Butte Fire

Officials extend air alert for Valley

By Sabra Stafford, staff writer

The Turlock Journal, Friday, Sept. 11, 2015

Turlock fire fighters and police officers are headed up north to help authorities try to reign in the growing fire raging in Amador and Calaveras counties.

The Butte Fire, which ignited Wednesday afternoon, has burned 50,000 acres and destroyed six structures and two outbuildings, according to Cal Fire. The fire is about 10 percent contained and is currently threatening about 6,000 structures in the area.

The city of Turlock received a request for mutual aid and in response is sending one fire engine staffed with four Turlock Fire Department personnel and three members of the Turlock Police Department's Traffic Unit. The officers will be assisting with patrol duties for the City of Mountain Ranch, while the fire fighters will be a part of a mixed-county strike team which will provide assistance in Amador and Calaveras counties.

"As fires continue to burn throughout California, we should all be proud of our deployed police officers and firefighters. They not only protect our community, but others as well. We anxiously await their safe return," said Mayor Gary Soiseth.

California Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency for the area Friday.

A mandatory evacuation order has been issued for the town of San Andreas in the wake of what Cal Fire described as "explosive fire conditions in the area." Other mandatory evacuations have been ordered for areas of Amador and Calaveras counties.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

Cal Fire said the fire has proven difficult to contain because of the steep topography of the area, the current high temperatures, and the extremely dry conditions brought about by the drought.

More than 1,500 fire personnel are fighting the blaze, with a total of 178 engines, seven air tankers, 16 helicopters, 21 bulldozers, and seven water tenders.

The American Red Cross has opened three emergency shelters in Amador and Calaveras counties to assist those affected by the Butte Fire. Currently, more than 200 people have registered at just one of the shelters and dozens of Red Cross staff and volunteers are providing warm meals, a safe place to sleep and emotional support for those with immediate, disaster-caused needs.

"We sympathize with the individuals that we serve," said Lilly Wyatt, director of regional communications for the Red Cross Gold Country Region. "Red Cross disaster teams are helping now and will continue to help as long as we need to."

The Butte Fire, along with the Rough Fire burning in Fresno and Tulare counties, is negatively affecting the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley and has prompted an extension of the air alert by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The air alert is being issued for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley air basin portion of Kern County.

Some areas are experiencing a cloud of visible ash falling from the sky. Any location where the odor of smoke can be detected and ash can be seen, the air quality would be "unhealthy" according to the air district.

While conditions are expected to improve over the weekend, smoke will continue to impact air quality in the foothill and mountain areas and potentially isolated areas of the Valley floor.

Fine-particulate matter (PM2.5) can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on their local conditions.

People with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are especially susceptible to health effects from these pollutants. Air district officials urge residents to follow their doctors' orders when exposed to fire emissions and stay indoors if at all possible.

Air quality still a concern

The Hanford Sentinel, Friday, Sep. 11, 2015

From the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District:

Many areas are experiencing a cloud of visible ash falling from the sky. Please note that our RAAN monitors are designed to detect the fine particulates (called PM 2.5 which are microscopic in size and not visible to the human eye) that exist in wildfire smoke. Ash particles are much larger in size and will not be detected by our monitors. Therefore your area may be covered in ash, while our PM monitor reflects a moderate reading. If you can smell smoke and see ash, that is an indication that you should be treating air quality conditions as a Level 4 or higher.

A health caution is still in place for the entire San Joaquin Valley. We urge schools in areas impacted by fire smoke or ash to keep students inside. The news release is available here:

http://www.valleyair.org/recent_news/Media_releases/2015/PR-health-caution-Rough-Fire-090815.pdf

Additionally, the Valley is still experiencing an Air Alert based on rising ozone levels. The RAAN monitors will effectively demonstrate ozone levels and should be referenced this afternoon during the hottest part of the day. The Air Alert news release is available here:

http://www.valleyair.org/recent_news/Media_releases/2015/PR-Air-Alert-9-9-15.pdf

Smoke health caution extended through weekend

The Hanford Sentinel, Friday, Sep. 11, 2015

A Valley air district health caution for smoke pollution that was set to expire Friday night has been extended through the weekend.

The culprit is the Rough Fire burning near Pine Flat Lake that has nearly reached 120,000 acres, placing it among the top 20 largest forest fires in California since 1932.

Adding to the problem is the explosive Butte Fire burning in the Sierra Gold Country. That fire, now 50,000 acres and counting, was just 4,000 acres on Thursday morning.

Some areas in the Valley are experiencing falling ash landing on car windshields.

People with breathing issues, the very young and older adults are being urged to stay indoors. If outside, they're being asked not to engage in vigorous exercise.

Go to www.valleyair.org for more information.

Record temperatures, bad air hit Modesto area; Sonora moves football game

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Friday, Sept. 11, 2015

High heat, mixed with bad air, is going to make it a trying day for people across the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

As a second straight day of record heat is expected in Modesto, the high temperatures will be joined by bad air made worse by the encroaching smoke from the Butte fire, which has burned more than 30,000 acres in Amador and Calaveras counties since Wednesday afternoon.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an air alert for Friday even before the start of the fire.

The fire, though, has grown to more than 32,000 acres with only 10 percent containment. Cal Fire reported that more than 6,000 structures are being threatened.

It's left a thin layer of ash across parts of Tuolumne county, and Friday morning, Sonora High announced that its football game with Hilmar would be moved from the foothills to Hilmar High.

In Calaveras County, the Angels Camp Farmers Market announced its event tonight would be canceled because of the fire.

Meanwhile, thirty-six personnel from five Stanislaus County fire agencies were sent on strike teams to assist on fighting the Butte fire, said Deputy Fire Warden Eric Holly.

At about 4 a.m. Thursday, brush rigs from Modesto Fire Department and Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District formed a strike team with three rigs from Yolo County.

Two more strike teams with Stanislaus County personnel left later.

A strike team leader from Modesto Fire headed a team with Office of Emergency Services Engines staffed by firefighters from Modesto, Stanislaus Consolidated and West Stanislaus Fire District.

Modesto Fire Department also provided the strike team leader for structure protection engines staffed by Modesto, Burbank-Paradise Fire District and Turlock Fire Department. They were joined by firefighters from El Dorado and Alpine counties.

On Thursday afternoon, Modesto and Stanislaus Consolidated crews serving as part of a strike team “were involved in structure defense and the fire made a significant run at them, very erratic fire behavior,” Modesto Fire Chief Sean Slamon said Friday afternoon. They were forced to take refuge behind a house and other structures, he said.

“A couple of fire engines suffered heat damage but the most important thing is that the crews are safe,” Slamon said. From what he’s heard – he hasn’t yet received photos – the damage was mainly cosmetic and the engines remain in service. A Stanislaus Consolidated battalion chief said one of that department’s rigs had some bubbled paint, melted plastic trim and melted hose but was fully functioning.

The firefighters did not have to deploy their personal fire shelters, Slamon added, the structures provided enough refuge. “This is a very trying time for that area and we’re doing everything we can to keep those communities safe,” the chief said.

In addition to the fire and difficult terrain, they were met with high temperatures that were expected to last through the weekend.

In Modesto on Friday, a high of 105 degrees was predicted, according to the National Weather Service.

If that holds true, it would be two days in a row for a record temperature, according to the Modesto Irrigation District.

On Thursday, the temperature reached 103 degrees, which broke by 2 degrees the record high for Sept. 10, which was previously set in 1953.

The record for Sept. 11 was set at 101 degrees in 1979, the MID reports.

Forecasters say our area should begin to cool off a little by tonight, when a breeze is expected to settle in. Highs of 97 and 95 are predicted for Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Monday should drop a few more degrees and the high for Tuesday is expected to be 84.

The hot weather has forced the postponement of some youth sporting events, and a handful of high schools are moving the start times of their junior varsity and varsity football games tonight back 30 minutes.

Unhealthy air impacting school activities

By Morgan Voorhis

Sierra Star, Friday, September 11, 2015

The poor air quality that seems to have settled in the Mountain Area, due to the Rough Fire, has forced school routines to be altered.

Oak Creek Intermediate School has been restricting outdoor activities for a couple weeks. These physical restrictions are based on: “... if we can smell, smoke, we restrict activities,” Principal Brad Barcus said.

There was no weekly mile run or rigorous PE activities, and after-school football practice has been canceled. The library and computer lab are open, and for those students who want to play outside to shoot hoops, they are reminded to take it easy.

Oakhurst Elementary School staff have monitored the daily air quality alerts from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“The last two days, we’ve canceled recess and PE,” OES Principal Kathleen Murphy said. “There have been other days when the smoke from the Rough Fire blew into our area, so we called a Smoky Day Schedule, which restricts outdoor activities.”

During the morning recess, the students gather in the multi-purpose room for group singing and indoor PE activities. At lunch, they eat indoors, and then can return to their classrooms to read or draw.

Prior to last weekend, the smoke seemed to be hit-or-miss. Murphy said that she and her husband even enjoyed a day of biking over the Labor Day weekend.

“On Saturday, we biked from Nelder Grove to Tenaya and it was gorgeous,” Murphy said. “Then, on Sunday morning, there was a cloud of smoke and haze overhead. Since then, we’ve all been suffering with this heavy smoke. We’re hoping El Niño kicks in soon ... we really need the rain.”

Naturally, with the lingering heavy haze, outdoor sports have been postponed. The tennis match between Yosemite and Liberty high schools was canceled. The match was scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 10, at YHS. On a day when Deadwood was hidden because of the thick haze, an OCI football game was postponed. Rivergold Elementary School in Coarsegold also canceled after school sports on Thursday, and a boys football game scheduled the following day.

“When the Rough Fire started creating bad air quality in our area about two weeks ago, we began monitoring the air concentration value through the forest service and National Park Service,” Rivergold Principal Bob Rose said. “The sensor is in North Fork, which measures the air quality index (AQI), and we make adjustments throughout the day according to these levels.”

When AQI levels are lower, students are allowed outside but are cautioned to reduce activity; and should students notice a sensitivity to the air, they then have the option of going to the library. When the air quality worsens, a Rainy Day Schedule is called, where the students eat in the cafeteria, and then return to class. It’s then up to the teacher as to how the remaining lunch time will be spent.

Rose said that there have only been a couple days this week that the students were kept inside all day because of the poor air.

The Rough Fire, which began July 31 because of a lightning strike, has grown to 119,0694 acres and is currently the largest active fire in California, the eighth largest in the country. There are 2,229 personnel assigned to this fire, which was only at 29% containment as of Sept. 11.