

[Earth Log, Fresno Bee, Monday, Aug. 31, 2015](#)

Wilsonia: Smoke, wildfire and the 1916 presidential vote

By Mark Grossi

Wilsonia has long been a quirky political note in a presidential election nearly a century ago. Now it's part of a dramatic air-quality story linked to wildfire smoke that made breathing dangerous.

The gorgeous mountain hamlet was among the places last week where soot rose from risky to hazardous levels, which was mentioned in a Bee story about the dangers of smoke from a forest fire.

The readings appeared on temporary air monitors tracking smoke from the Rough fire, east of Fresno in the Kings Canyon National Park area. The numbers provided insight on a type of wildfire damage that sometimes does not get media coverage – human suffering.

There's more to this story, but first, what about this election?

It was 1916, and Woodrow Wilson was preparing to concede the election to Republican Charles E. Hughes. Just before he conceded, Wilson learned the almost dead-even voting in California was not yet over. Precinct results were delayed 12 hours by an early November snowstorm.

So Wilson waited for the last votes to be counted from a precinct on private land not far from the famed General Grant giant sequoia. Surrounded by the now-defunct General Grant National Park, the precinct area had no name.

As the story goes, people realized after votes were counted that the little precinct put Wilson over the top and probably swung the election. Afterward, residents named the area Wilsonia.

As the story goes, people realized after votes were counted that the little precinct put Wilson over the top and probably swung the election. Afterward, residents named the area Wilsonia.

Flash forward to 2015. Wilsonia is still private. It's a 100-acre village in the Grant Grove area of Kings Canyon National Park – a slice of natural charm in a stunning Sierra setting.

But at times last week, the air briefly became hazardous. If you look at the official color-coded categories of dirty air, you'll see "hazardous" is maroon, the worst level. We don't see a lot of maroon even in the San Joaquin Valley or South Coast Air Basin, the two biggest air-quality hot spots in the nation.

Wilsonia, Cedar Grove and Hume Lake all brushed the maroon level at one point or another last week, according to the monitors.

By the numbers: The federal health threshold for particle pollution, called PM-2.5, is a daylong average of 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air. Maroon is 250 or more, which is pretty much unheard of in the Valley for a 24-hour average.

But it does happen occasionally a few hours at a time on the Fourth of July after the fireworks. The numbers can range up to several hundred micrograms per cubic meter of air.

Wood smoke is natural, but it also has many chemicals, including carcinogens.

That kind of spike has become synonymous with Beijing's notorious air quality. The Fourth of July particulate shower is filled with metals and other chemicals from the fireworks. Wood smoke is natural, but it also has many chemicals, including carcinogens.

In Sunday's story, I wrote about the hundreds of annual premature deaths in the San Joaquin Valley attributed to tiny particle pollution, such as soot. People with heart and lung problems are vulnerable. At high levels, it can harm even healthy people.

Bee health reporter Barbara Anderson and I have interviewed scientists who say they believe there are impacts to most people even at levels below the federal health threshold. It's something to keep in mind whenever you smell smoke in your neighborhood.