

Air quality worsens as fires grow

By Spencer Cole

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Air quality took a turn for the worse over the weekend in the Central Valley and the conditions could stick around for quite some time.

“A couple of factors are impacting air quality in the Valley,” said Jaime Holt, chief communications officer at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District in Fresno. “We have two key pollutants: the first is ozone and the second is particulate matter.”

Ozone is primarily made by cars and trucks and is a typical summer pollutant while particulate matter tends to come from fires.

“We are seeing ozone levels being typically fairly high this time of year,” Holt said, adding the around 90 parts per billion measured Monday afternoon were normal for peak summer months. “What is making an already poor situation a little bit worse is we have smoke from a few wildfires burning around the state that is also coming into the Valley and beginning to hit the Valley floor.”

Currently, there are three wildfires burning: the Sand Fire in Santa Clarita, the Soberanes Fire in Monterey County south of Carmel Highlands and the Serpa Fire off Highway 41 northeast of Fresno.

Smoke was clearly visible in the air over Porterville Sunday and Monday and is expected to linger for a few days.

As of 5 p.m. on Monday, the Sand Fire had grown to 33,117 acres with only 10 percent containment. While the Soberanes Fire encompassed roughly 15,000 acres with 5 percent containment. The Serpa Fire, the smallest of the blazes, sits at 80 acres with 98 percent containment but is still burning fuel within its perimeter.

“The smoke from the fires is a pollutant that we call particulate matter,” Holt explained. “It is similar to ozone in that it irritates your lungs, if you already have respiratory problems — say asthma or emphysema — it’s going to be really made worse by the pollution levels.”

Fine particulate matter was reported at 10 micrograms per cubic meter by the air pollution control district Monday afternoon.

Holt said the number was deceiving due to the district’s instruments being designed to mainly measure smaller particulates.

“Certain smoke coming off the fires may be too big to register on these monitors,” she said. “People seeing smoke, even when levels aren’t high, need to take precautions because it may be too thick for our monitors to read it. If you can smell or see smoke, you are being impacted by it.”

According to Holt, the best way to protect oneself from the dangers of such air pollutants is by staying indoors.

“Stay some place which is air conditioned, usually the filter system will take a lot of the pollution out of the air,” she said. “If you have to work outside, we recommend that folks take it easy, try not to exert themselves, stay hydrated and to talk to their primary care physician to make sure they are doing everything they need to take care of their health during this period of poor air quality.”

And locals should get used to the added precautions because conditions are not expected to improve for at least a week.

According to the National Weather Service, temperatures will remain above average through next weekend due to a high pressure system settling over the region.

“Unfortunately, high temperatures and the high-pressure system is pushing everything as close to the ground as possible,” Holt said, adding that air quality would most likely get worse before improving. “We expect to see potentially more smoke impacts later on this week than we are right now from the Sand Fire for the southern part of Valley.”

As if on cue, just before 5 p.m. on Monday, a wildfire of around 40 acres was reported in the Strathmore area, contributing more smoke to an area already choked with air pollution.

[Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, Monday, July 18, 2016](#)

Bonnie Holmes-Gen: Greenhouse gas reductions critical to cleaning up air

Re “Cap-and-trade proceeds have better uses” (Page 11A, July 9): In his recent commentary, Assemblyman Adam Gray highlighted the Central Valley received an “F” Grade for both ozone and particle pollution in the annual air quality report from the American Lung Association. That is, unfortunately, a true statement. But what he gets wrong is the notion greenhouse gas reductions are somehow disconnected from air quality improvements.

Climate investments are absolutely critical to cleaning up the air in the Central Valley. The Legislature, however, has decided not to spend that money, letting it sit in the state treasury and collect particles instead of combating them. It’s \$1.4 billion that could go towards cleaning up our air. It can fund the shuttered electric vehicle rebate program and other efforts to put more electric and fuel cell cars, trucks and buses on the road. It can fund programs to help Valley residents replace their older cars with cleaner ones. It can improve the lives of all Californians.

We agree children in the Central Valley shouldn’t suffer from asthma and lung illness and something must be done. But we get zero return on an investment we don’t make.

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