

Cooling temperatures means healthier air for the Central Valley

By Monica Velez

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The recent cooling in Merced County has helped improve air quality in the region, experts said Tuesday.

Pollutants from wildfires near Big Sur have been reduced, leading to better conditions in Merced County, according to San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials.

As of Tuesday, the Soberanes Fire was 50 percent contained, according to the Cal Fire website. The fire has burned more than 67,000 acres and leveled 57 homes. One person has died.

"They do correlate," said Anthony Presto, outreach and communication representative for the Valley Air District. "The higher temperatures that came out during the beginning of these fires really brought up the ozone levels."

Although the air quality this past weekend was reported at "good" and "moderate" levels, Presto said the emissions from the Soberanes Fire will once again start to negatively affect the San Joaquin Valley air by the beginning of next week.

"We're expecting the fire to go on a while longer," Presto said in a phone interview. "What's been really helping us is the weather isn't so hot."

Temperatures this week will be in the low to mid-90s until the weekend, according to the National Weather Service. Friday temperatures are expected to reach 98 degrees and hit 100 by Saturday.

With school beginning this week, Presto encourages residents to keep track of the air levels using the Real-Time Air Advisory Network that can be found at valleyair.org.

"Residents should be aware that the presence of smoke means that you are being impacted and it is best to remain indoors during periods when you can see or smell smoke," Presto said in an email to the Sun-Star.

Pollutants from wildfires can be worse on the health scale because the particles that can be inhaled are so small they can enter the bloodstream, Presto said, causing a greater risk for heart attacks and strokes.

The poorest air quality typically is reported between 1 and 6 p.m., Presto said.

"We also ask that you don't make air quality worse by idling your vehicle and creating other unnecessary emissions," Presto said in the email.

Report: Fresno could avoid 260 deaths a year with better air quality

By Andrea Castillo

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Fresno could avoid 260 deaths a year with better air quality, according to a new report by the American Thoracic Society (ATS).

The report, released Wednesday by the ATS and New York University's Marron Institute of Urban Management, found that the Fresno metro area endures an estimated 672 yearly "morbidity" – major health issues including chronic bronchitis, hospital admissions for heart and breathing problems, and emergency room visits for breathing problems – because of bad air. It also found that Fresno could avoid 390,551 "impacted days" of restricted activity, acute respiratory symptoms, and work and school loss.

The first annual "Health of the Air" report looked at ozone pollution, which forms in heat and sunlight by combining nitrogen oxides from fuel combustion and reactive organic gases from paint, gasoline and dairies. It also analyzed particle pollution, known as PM 2.5, which is made from tiny pieces of matter like dust and smoke.

Both are associated with a host of issues, from asthma to pulmonary heart disease and cancer to premature death.

The ATS recommends keeping ozone pollution below 60 parts per billion (ppb) every eight hours. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency adopted a standard last year of 70 ppb. The ATS recommends an annual standard for particle pollution of 11 micrograms per cubic meter, while the EPA standard is 12 micrograms.

Kevin Cromar, lead author and Marron Institute professor, said his team used the ATS recommendations for ozone and particle pollution as the baseline. They compared county-level pollution data between 2011 and 2013 to numbers that describe the association between pollution and health outcomes. For example, a January ATS study says that every additional 10 ppb of long-term ozone exposure increases the risk of death by 12 percent from lung disease and 16 percent from diabetes. Researchers also took into account the location conditions of each community, including population and health issues such as mortality risk.

Cromar said information about the effects of air quality hasn't been easily available. Researchers sought to do away with "wild guesses" and let people know what the tangible health benefits would be with cleaner air.

"Providing these numbers on ozone and particle pollution we hope will be useful in the discussion of how to move forward and improve air quality," he said.

Nationwide, the report found that 9,320 deaths a year could be avoided with improved air. Fresno's air issues are relatively low compared to other metro areas such as Los Angeles, where the report estimated that 1,341 deaths could be avoided.

Fresno deals with worse particle pollution than ozone. New York, by comparison, had 282 avoidable deaths and almost all were due to ozone.

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said that while he respects groups like the ATS, "we have to take what they say with a grain of salt."

Sadredin said the EPA standards are very challenging to reach, though higher than what the ATS recommends. Plus, he said, the Valley has seen an 80 percent reduction in air pollution during the past 20 years.

He said the report overestimates some of the air quality damages by assuming everyone in Fresno breathes the worst air. The air district's daily reports are based on the worst monitor in the worst location in the Valley. Some people in Fresno County already breathe ozone levels of less than 60 ppb, he said.

"Air in the San Joaquin Valley, even as we're experiencing wildfires and triple-digit temperatures, is the cleanest it's ever been," he said.

Even if no one lived in the Valley, Sadredin said, the base ozone level would still be around 60 ppb. So, while he said it's good to consider maybe someday reaching that level with advanced technology, that won't happen anytime soon.