

Valley to see small relief from triple-digit heat

By Ashleigh Panoo

Fresno Bee, Monday, Aug. 22, 2016

The central San Joaquin Valley will see small relief from triple-digit heat this week, with daytime highs climbing only into the upper 90s during the first half of the week through Tuesday.

Although forecasts call for 99 degrees in Fresno on both Wednesday and Thursday, William Peterson with the National Weather Service in Hanford said he wouldn't be surprised if Fresno ended up seeing 101 on both days. "We're just transitioning from higher pressure to lower pressure temporarily," he said.

Smoke from the wildfires burning throughout California, including the Cedar Fire burning along the Kern and Tulare county lines, has contributed to an air quality alert. Peterson said that although it expires Monday, he expects a reissue from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Next Sunday the daytime high is expected to reach 95 degrees, but Peterson said after that it's hard to tell if temperatures will stay that way.

Valley air quality suffers at the hand of fires

Luis Hernandez

Visalia Times Delta, Saturday, Aug. 19, 2016

Wildland fires burning around the state are worsening air quality in the Central Valley, officials with the pollution control district said Thursday.

Atypical high particulate matter and ozone levels around the Valley prompted air officials to release a health caution statement for the entire Central Valley.

Smoke from wildfires produces particulate matter and contributes to the creation of ozone, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"The businesses and residents of the Valley have done so much to reduce summertime pollution that it is unfortunate when these wildfires overwhelm that great work," said Seyed Sadredin, air pollution control officer. "However, the public needs to be advised that while these fires burn and bring smoke into the Valley, they need to take the appropriate steps to protect their health."

And there's a quick way to take protective action, said Anthony Presto, a spokesperson for the pollution control district.

"Residents can protect themselves by going indoors if they see or smell smoke," he said. "That's what you can do to protect yourself."

Presto said people with existing respiratory conditions, children and the elderly are susceptible to the health effect from pollutants. Air district officials recommend Valley residents follow medical orders when it comes to wildfire emissions.

"Take cover and stay inside," he said.

The particulate matter poses a danger because it reduces lung capacity and affects those with asthma and emphysema. The particulate matter may also lead to lung infections or, if it gets into the blood stream, trigger a heart attack or a stroke.

There are plenty of Internet-based ways to check on air quality, including the pollution control's site: www.wallyair.org. Other sites include www.valleyair.org/wildfires and www.valleyair.org/RAAN.

The poor air conditions are expected to continue until at least next week, Presto said.

"We don't see thing improving until the fires are extinguished," he said.

The Cedar Fire is closest to Tulare County. According to Incident Information website, The Cedar Fire is 1619 acres and only 5 percent contained on Thursday. It's estimated the fire burning along Highway 155 in Kern County will be contained by the end of the month.

The Chimney Fire, reported last week, is 8,300 acres and 30 percent contained by Thursday. Already, the fire has destroyed 45 structures and damaged seven.

The fire in San Luis Obispo County drew the response of more than 2,000 personnel.

The Soberanes Fire in Monterey County started on July 22, has burned 79,000 acres and is 60 percent contained. Already, one fatality and three injuries were reported.

There are two other fires burning around the state.

In San Bernardino, air tankers bombarded rugged slopes with fire retardant Thursday and a squadron of helicopters dropped load after load of water to corral a destructive wildfire threatening mountain homes.

On the ground, firefighters and bulldozers worked to protect the ski town of Wrightwood and other areas high in the San Gabriel Mountains.

Authorities estimated that only half the 4,500 residents of Wrightwood heeded evacuation orders.

The fire has blackened more than 49 square miles and was just 4 percent contained, with more than 34,000 homes and some 82,000 residents still under evacuation warnings three days after it erupted in hot, gusty conditions and spread with extraordinary speed.

After five years of drought, California's wildlands have seen a continuous streak of destructive and sometimes deadly fires this year.

The dry vegetation is like firewood, said fire information officer Sean Collins.

"It burns that much quicker, that much hotter. The rate of travel is extremely fast," he said.

Fire officials indicated there were significant property losses but had yet to release a tally, leaving those who fled waiting to find out whether their homes were still standing.

In mountains north of San Francisco, fire crews gained more ground on a wildfire as damage inspectors surveyed the area to determine how many structures were destroyed or damaged.

The 6-square-mile blaze was 55 percent contained after destroying at least 268 structures, including 175 homes and eight businesses, in the working-class community of Lower Lake.

Damin Pashilk is charged with 14 counts of arson in connection with 12 separate fires dating back to July 2015 and one count of attempted arson. The 40-year-old construction worker appeared in court Wednesday, but he did not enter a plea.

Cedar Fire threatens communities

By Spencer Cole

The Porterville Recorder, Saturday, August 20, 2016

A wildfire in the Sequoia National Forest continues to thwart crews as they battle to contain it.

The Cedar Fire, north of Alta Sierra and west of Kernville, had consumed nearly 10,000 acres by Thursday evening.

The fire continued to burn throughout the night, eventually jumping containment lines on its northwestern flank.

According to Amy Masi, public information officer with the Kernville Ranger District, fire activity Friday morning had picked up four hours earlier than the day before.

"That's a 'big fire' indicator," she said, adding that fuels in the area are dry due to the drought and extensive tree mortality. "That's mainly what's (driving) the fire: it's not wind driven right now, it's fuel driven."

Exceptionally low relative humidity levels have also contributed to the blaze's rapid spread.

According to the National Weather Service, the minimum relative humidity for the area around the fire ranged from 8 to 14 percent.

According to Masi, no giant sequoia groves are immediately threatened at this time.

“[The fire] was growing this morning towards the northwest but it’s shifted a bit and has been coming backwards,” she said. “Again, high winds haven’t been a factor, so it’s kind of spreading in a lot of different directions.”

As of 5 p.m. Friday, the blaze was only 6 percent contained.

Masi was unable to give an approximation for the growth of the wildland fire as of 5 p.m.

Forest officials were expected to release updated acreage numbers Friday evening.

As the fire began to showcase renewed and increased intensity during the early morning hours, Tulare County Emergency Operations Center issued mandatory evacuations for the mountain communities of Posey, Pine Flat, Pine Mountain, Sugar Loaf, Sugar Loaf Village, Sugar Mountain area, California Hot Springs and Panorama Heights.

Evacuation orders had previously been issued for McClenny Tract, Sugar Creek Mountain Home, White River Summer Homes, Balance Rock and Idlewild.

A recommended evacuation was ordered just after noon Wednesday for the communities of Alta Sierra, Slick Rock and Shirley Meadows.

The American Red Cross of the Central Valley opened a full shelter at Granite Hills High School, at 1701 E. Putnam Ave., for residents affected by the fire.

Volunteers will be on hand to provide lodging, meals, health services and comfort for evacuees.

An evacuation center had previously been opened at Porterville College but transitioned to a full shelter at the high school late Thursday evening.

Thus far, seven people have made use of the facilities at Granite Hills.

Carrie Crane, public information officer for Tulare County, said sheriff deputies had not yet reported any resistance from evacuating residents in affected communities.

The fire has contributed to the air pollution currently plaguing the Central Valley.

This week, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an Air Quality Alert due to smoke impacts.

On Thursday evening, a plume of smoke was visible rising from the mountains southeast of Porterville.

Ash began raining down on the city and surrounding communities early Friday morning and continued sporadically throughout the afternoon.

Due to the poor air quality conditions, Porterville Unified School District cancelled all outdoor activities and events, including two football scrimmages.

Local firefighters from multiple organizations have been called to battle the blaze.

The Porterville and Tulare County fire departments both responded to requests for units.

Cal Fire Capt. Tom Crass said two strike teams of dozers consisting of two battalion chiefs and four bulldozers had been dispatched to aid with containment.

Raul Contreras, manager of Porterville’s Air Attack Base, said four tankers were currently utilizing the base to make their runs at the fire.

According to Contreras, a Very Large Air Tanker or VLAT had also been called to assist with the blaze.

The cost to date of the fire is \$2.5 million.

There have been 935 personnel dispatched to the affected area including 18-hand crews, 59 engines, nine helicopters, 12 bulldozers and 10-water tenders.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

Wildfires in neighboring counties affect Valley air

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, August 22, 2016

Smoke caused by fires in Kern, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey counties is affecting the air quality throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

Air officials are expecting poor air quality conditions to continue this week based on the projected weather conditions and impacts from the wildfires around the Valley continue to be a concern.

“The businesses and residents of the Valley have done so much to reduce summertime pollution that it is unfortunate when these wildfires overwhelm that great work,” said Seyed Sadredin, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Executive Director/Air Pollution Control Officer.

“However, the public needs to be advised that while these fires burn and bring smoke into the Valley, the need to take the appropriate steps to protect their health,” Sadredin said.

Smoke caused by wildfires make particulate matter and contributes to the creation of ozone which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increases the risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

People with respiratory conditions, children and the elderly are more susceptible to health problems from these pollutants. Air District officials urge residents to stay indoors as much as possible and follow doctors’ orders when exposed to wildfire emissions.

The District’s Real-Time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) monitors detect fine particulates that exist in wildfire smoke that are not visible to the human eye.

RAAN monitors cannot detect ash particles because they are much larger in size meaning that certain areas can be impacted by the wildfires while the monitor reflects a moderate reading. People should remain indoors if they can see or smell smoke or ash.

Residents can check the District’s wildfire page — www.valleyair.org/wildfires — for information about any current wildfires that can impact the Valley. Residents can also check the nearest air monitor to their location to determine local air-quality conditions. Visit the Real-Time Air Advisory Network to subscribe for free — www.valleyair.org/RAAN.

Schools prepare for bad air

By Cassandra Sandoval

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, August 22, 2016

Local elementary school districts have been monitoring the air conditions because of recent wildfires in Kern, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties.

These wildfires are causing problems for air quality in areas throughout the Valley which can cause serious health problems like lung disease, asthma attacks and other respiratory infections, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“The air quality in the Valley is always a concern, but we’ve seen a drastic change for the worse with the recent fires,” said Kit Carson Union Elementary School District Superintendent/Principal Todd Barlow in an email.

The Air District has a system called the Real-Time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) to monitor the air quality in the Valley. School districts use the system to receive alerts on an hourly basis by county or by city to see if outdoor activities need to be limited.

For this week, the RAAN system forecasted air conditions to be moderate in Kings and Fresno counties, meaning that sensitive individuals should reduce their time outside.

Barlow said the district keeps an eye on students and staff especially those who have asthma. He said the district issued a hazardous air warning on Friday deeming the air too unhealthy to be outside.

Barlow said he saw an “orange tint” to the air on Aug. 19, relating it to recent fires.

"It's almost like a rainy day schedule, and we limit outdoor activity," he said. "Our physical education teacher has changed his regular scheduled lessons and is planning activities that can be done indoors."

The Lemoore Union Elementary School District monitored students on Friday during recess and limited their time outside.

"Our school nurses are very much aware of the students as well as the staff at the school who have asthma," said the district's Superintendent Cheryl Hunt. "The bottom line is we want to ensure our students are safe."

Pioneer Union Elementary School District Superintendent Paul Van Loon said he and school principals have an app on their phones that alerts them of any changes to the air quality.

On Aug. 19, when Van Loon checked the RAAN system, he said the air quality was at a level one, meaning it was good. Within the afternoon, air conditions were moderate, reaching a level 2, he said.

"It is gradually getting worse as the day goes on," he said.

Dr. Gerald Rogado from the Adventist Health Physicians Network in Hanford, said he has seen a rise in asthma cases including allergies and sinus infections within the past few months.

"There have been more and more patients coming in especially the pediatric population," he said. "It seems to be getting worse especially with the fires going on."

Rogado said it is common for people to not necessarily link a dry cough with asthma especially with younger children.

"A lot of times people think they are coughing or just sick," he said.

He urges people to contact their primary physicians if they are coughing, wheezing, having difficulty breathing and shortness of breath as those can be symptoms of asthma or other respiratory infections.

In bad air quality conditions he recommends people to stay indoors as much as possible.

"Stay home with the AC on and with the windows closed," he said.

"We are just hoping that the fires get controlled and the air quality improves," Van Loon said.