

Smoky skies again force some Mountain Area school closures for Friday

By Mark Evan Smith

Sierra Star, Thursday, September 7, 2017

As several wildfires continue to burn in the Mountain Area, at least one school district in Eastern Madera County chose to keep its sites closed for another day.

Randy Seals, Superintendent of Bass Lake Joint Union Elementary School District (BLJUSD), confirmed all sites would be closed on Friday, as they were in previous days.

"This will give us through the weekend for the air quality to improve as they continue to gain more control over the local fires," the district sent out through a message to area parents.

That meant Oakhurst Elementary School, Oak Creek Intermediate School, Wasuma Elementary School, and Fresno Flats Day School would again be closed.

The district's schools briefly reopened on a two-hour delay Wednesday, but students were quickly sent home as the smoke created extremely hazardous conditions outdoors. They remained home Thursday as classes were canceled.

Yosemite Unified School District Superintendent Cecelia Greenberg also confirmed that in conjunction with BLJUSD, all Oakhurst area schools in the district (Yosemite High, John Muir North, and alternative education and adult education programs) would also be canceled Friday.

Southern area sites, including Coarsegold and Rivergold elementary schools, Raymond-Granite High, and John Muir South would be open, she said.

"Unless conditions worsen drastically over the weekend, we anticipate a regular schedule on Monday," Greenberg wrote in a Facebook post.

Darren Syliva, Superintendent of Chawanakee Unified School District, said classes at all schools including North Fork Elementary and Minarets High would be on a normal schedule Friday.

Michelle Townsend, Superintendent of Raymond-Knowles Union Elementary School District, confirmed that the district's elementary school would be in session Friday.

Darin Soukup, director of Oakhurst Community College Center, also said classes would continue as normal.

Yosemite football game and MyTri Triathlon canceled due to unhealthy air quality

Sierra Star, Wednesday, September 6, 2017

Yosemite High School's Friday night home football game with Caruthers and Saturday's My-Tri Triathlon at Bass Lake have been canceled due to poor air quality caused by the Railroad and Mission fires..

This is the second straight week the Badgers have been unable to play a game due to the unhealthy smokey conditions. Due to the bad air quality the team has not practiced since last Wednesday

According to Coach JD Burnett, a decision on the next scheduled home game against Mariposa on Friday, Sept. 15, will be made next week depending on the air quality.

A decision to reschedule or not reschedule the My-Tri Triathlon has not been made at this time.

The foothill and mountain communities of Madera County are experiencing unusually severe smoke impacts according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

According to Ash particles are much larger in size and will not be detected by our monitors. Therefore an area may be experiencing ash impacts from these wildfires while the PM monitor reflects a moderate reading. If you can see or smell smoke or ash it is an indication that you should be treating air quality conditions as "unhealthy" and remain indoors.

Smoke from fires can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

From bad to worse

By Julissa Zavala

Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, Sep. 6, 2017

While firefighters are currently battling dozens of large wildfires in California, the smoke and ash in the air from these fires can cause havoc on the Central Valley residents already dealing with respiratory issues like asthma.

Lihong Lin, a nurse practitioner at Adventist Health Prompt Care in Hanford, said she has already seen many patients from the Coalinga area who have been dealing with severe asthma and allergy symptoms.

Lin said the smoke and ash in the air can exacerbate symptoms for the people who have asthma and allergies, including shortness of breath, sneezing, watery eyes, sore throats and dry coughing.

Limiting time outdoors is the obvious answer, but Lin said people can also use their prescribed inhalers and allergy pills for help.

“Masks are a good idea, too,” Lin said, adding that good quality masks can be found at local stores and are effective at preventing inhalation of airborne particles.

Children, especially ones with asthma or other respiratory issues, are advised to remain indoors as much as possible, Lin said.

Bill Fishbough, superintendent of Hanford Joint Union High School District, said in order to provide a uniform procedure for outdoor activities and athletics, the district follows the guidelines set by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District’s Real-Time Air Advisory Network (RAAN).

RAAN outdoor activity guidelines contain five levels that dictate whether or not students can participate in recess, P.E., athletic practice and training, or scheduled sporting events.

“If the reading at noon is Level 5 in any location where HJUHS students will be involved in athletic competition, that game must be cancelled or postponed until a later date,” Fishbough said.

If the risk level is 1-4, for example, then the match may be played and all guidelines for that level must be followed; which include increased breaks and substitutions.

Rich Merlo, superintendent of Corcoran Unified School District, said all of the district’s school sites have been watching air quality even prior to the fires due to the unusually high temperatures.

“Each of our sites looks at both [air quality and temperature] and makes a decision on whether or not to reduce or eliminate or any outdoor activities in the afternoons,” Merlo said.

Merlo said all sites advise teachers to limit the amount of outdoor activity — meaning less rigorous activity as well as a shorter duration of activity — until temperatures and air quality improve for students who may have a respiratory health related issue.

According to CalFire, more than 10,000 firefighters are currently battling the state’s dozens of wildfires that are causing the excess smoke and ash in the air.

One of the bigger blazes nearby is the Pier Fire, which started on Aug. 29, east of Springville on Highway 190 in Tulare County.

That fire has burned 20,529 acres and is only 20 percent contained. According to CalFire, a total of 1,568 firefighters are assisting with the fire.

The Peak Fire in Mariposa County has burned 680 acres and is currently 75 percent contained, according to CalFire. One hundred firefighters are currently fighting this fire.

The Mission Fire in Madera County continues to pose a threat to the communities of Cascadel and North Fork along with the Sierra National Forest and areas affected by tree mortality, said the CalFire website.

The residents of approximately 250 homes are under mandatory evacuation orders because of the fire, which has burned 1,025 acres and is only 12 percent contained.

The 462 firefighters are being challenged by limited access and steep terrain, and the potential for thunderstorms moving into the area may create erratic fire behavior, said the CalFire website.

Lin urges residents to visit their doctors as soon as possible if they are experiencing severe asthma or allergy symptoms due to the air quality.