

Nothing but gray skies — until wildfires, heat and overcast go away

By Dorothy Mills-Gregg

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 11, 2017

Monday sat in a gray haze, but was that just clouds?

California firefighters are fighting wildfires in Kings and Tulare counties. One fire is north of Kernville and another is near Parkfield, off Interstate 5.

These local fires, plus high temperatures for a couple of weeks and overcast weather, will cause the sky to look gray, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“You can’t always go with what it looks like,” Sadredin said. “Sometimes the stuff you can’t see is what kills you.”

Ozone is one example. He said the pollutant causes respiratory issues and is typical to valley summers as it grows in hot weather.

“In an odd way, the cloud is helpful ‘cause it keeps the sun from shining and actually slows the formation of ozone,” Sadredin said.

The valley air quality district found the average ozone level Monday was dangerous for sensitive groups — people with lung problems or children, who breathe faster than adults. At that level, Level 3, the district suggests those people limit their outside activities.

The particulate matter is also at Level 3, but that is higher than it typically is during the summer and can show the presence of wildfire smoke.

The local air quality district said in a press release Monday this is due to the fires in Whittier, Alamo and Garza, which are causing the air quality to deteriorate in Kings, Tulare and parts of Kern counties. The Shaeffer Fire in Tulare County is also affecting communities in the foothills and mountains, like Kennedy Meadow and Johnsondale.

Ash particles are larger in size than particulate matter so the district’s monitors will not detect ash and could show a lower danger level than it should in an area with ash from a fire, the release said.

“If you can smell smoke or see ash,” the press release advised, “that is an indication that you should be treating air quality conditions as ‘unhealthy’ (RAAN Level 4 or higher) and remain indoors.”

Meanwhile, the Bakersfield Fire Department has sent two engine companies to the Alamo fire in San Luis Obispo County — a blaze that’s burned more than 29,000 acres and threatened 133 structures.

“Good thing schools are not in session,” Sadredin said, as the district would advise the schools to keep kids from going outdoors. “Parents should be responsible and keep kids inside.”

The ozone levels have a tendency to peak in the middle of the day and slowly level off. Today’s forecast for Kern County is the same as Monday: unhealthy for sensitive groups. For more information or to see the air quality in your area, visit valleyair.org.

No matter the makeup of those gray skies, it still made for a vibrant, orange sunset. If you could safely be outside to enjoy it, that is.