

Did you wake up to falling ash? You may want to head back inside, air officials say

By Ashleigh Panoo

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

If you woke up to find a dusting of ash your car this morning, you weren't the only one.

The Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County is dropping ash on the central San Joaquin Valley and coating not only cars, but lungs, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

A health caution issued by the district was set to end on Tuesday because most of the nearby fires are wrapping up, said district spokeswoman Cassandra Melching. But there's one fire that may cause the district to extend the alert. "The one that's giving us a lot of grief is the Detwiler Fire," Melching said. The fire began Sunday near Lake McClure east of Modesto and left Valley skies looking hazy Sunday evening and Monday morning.

Taking a look at the district's air monitors, data seem to indicate there are minimal health risks, she said. But it's only because monitors detect fine particulate matter, which can't be seen by the naked eye. This time, the danger lies in what you can see, said Melching.

"Ash is a lot larger," she said. "We tell people, if you can see and smell smoke and see ash falling, treat it as a level four or five. Stay indoors in that cool filtered air."

Smoke and ash particles can enter eyes or lungs and cause burning, a runny nose and other respiratory illnesses, the district said. Those with chronic heart or lung diseases are more susceptible. Air quality tends to get worse in the afternoon, Melching said.

A two-week long heat wave is also not helping Fresno's air. Wednesday might break that streak with a high of 99, said meteorologist Cindy Bean with the National Weather Service in Hanford. Upper 90s are expected throughout the rest of the week, but will rise again into the triple digits on Saturday and Sunday, she said.

Melching said wildfires, bad air quality and even raining ash are a normal part of summer in the Valley. "We're surrounded by mountain ranges," she said. "This is what we get."

Detwiler Fire scorches 15,500 acres, forces additional evacuations

By Mark Evan Smith

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

UPDATE: The wildfire near Lake McClure in Mariposa County has grown to 15,500 acres, CalFire reported this morning. Containment, listed at zero Monday night, crept up to 5%.

ORIGINAL STORY: The raging wildfire near Lake McClure in Mariposa County remains at 0% containment and has exploded to 11,000 acres in a little more than 24 hours, Cal Fire reported.

Evacuations are in place for the entirety of Hunters Valley Road, Detwiller Road, Hunter Valley Mountain Access Road, Bears Valley Road between Cotton Creek and Highway 49, and Highway 49 north from Pendola Garden Road to Fremont Fort.

Highway 49 is closed from Pendola Garden Road to the intersection with Highway 132 in Coulterville.

The Red Cross set up an evacuation center at Mariposa Elementary School, located at 5044 Jones Street in Mariposa. Meals and health-related services are offered there, as well as animal shelters.

At least one structure has been claimed by the Detwiler Fire, with another one damaged as the blaze continues to grow.

The fire was first reported shortly before 4 p.m. Sunday, and roared to 2,500 acres in a mere five hours. Dry, hot weather, coupled with steep weather, have made firefighting conditions difficult as crews continue to battle the flames, Cal Fire officials said.

The Merced Sun-Star reported Janet Kirkland, 72, who lives in Hunters Valley near the fire's location, was able to escape with her two dogs.

"I have no idea if my home burned or not," she said. "The last fire came into the back of the valley, nowhere close to us, and we were gone three days. This time every fire department from here to LA is on the fire."

The Mariposa County Sheriff's Office showed a dramatic video of the flames scorching surrounding roadways. The office asked everyone to avoid the area so the efforts of firefighters will not be impeded.

Air quality throughout the Mountain Area was impacted by the growing fire, forcing the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health caution as ash fell on cars and residents throughout the day.

Wildfire dropping ash in Merced County. Here's what you need to know about the air

By Thaddeus Miller and Ashleigh Panoo

Merced Sun-Star, Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

The air in Merced, which is bad on its best days, could get worse in coming days as a number of wild fires burn around the Valley, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County is dropping ash on the central San Joaquin Valley and coating not only cars, but lungs, according to officials.

A health caution issued by the district was set to end on Tuesday because most of the nearby fires are wrapping up, said district spokeswoman Cassandra Melching. The Detwiler Fire remains the outlier.

The fire began Sunday near Lake McClure and left Valley skies looking hazy Sunday evening and Monday.

What we're advising the public is if you see smoke or ash, you should try to remain indoors.

Anthony Presto, a Merced-area spokesman for San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

The district's air monitors seem to indicate there are minimal health risks, she said. But it's only because monitors detect fine particulate matter, which can't be seen by the naked eye.

The danger lies in what you can see, according to Anthony Presto, a Merced-area spokesman for the air district. "What we're advising the public is if you see smoke or ash, you should try to remain indoors," he said.

Smoke and ash particles can enter eyes or lungs and cause burning, a runny nose and other respiratory illnesses, the district said. Those with chronic heart or lung diseases are more susceptible.

Smoke and ash particles can enter eyes or lungs and cause burning, a runny nose and other respiratory illnesses, the district said.

The Merced area should get a slight respite from its three-digit heat in the coming week, according to William Peterson, a meteorologist technician with the National Weather Service in Hanford. Upper 90s are expected throughout the rest of the week, but could rise again past 100 on Saturday and Sunday, he said.

The winds have remained light, he said, so most of the smoke and ash have fallen in the foothills.

Presto noted much of the Valley does not meet federal air standards.

"(Air) does tend to be a little worse in Fresno and the Bakersfield, Kern County area," he said. "Modesto and Merced are in a similar range."

Detwiler Fire grows to 15,500 acres near Mariposa, with 300 structures threatened

By Mark Evan Smith

Sierra Star, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

Firefighters continued their battle overnight to try and tame a raging inferno about two miles east of Lake McClure in Mariposa County, which grew to 15,500 acres and 5% containment early Tuesday.

A community meeting was planned for 6 p.m. Tuesday in the auditorium at Mariposa County High School, 5074 Old Highway North, to discuss the efforts of firefighting personnel to control the flames.

The Detwiler Fire, located in the area of Detwiler and Hunters Valley roads, has forced a host of evacuations around the Mariposa area as 780 firefighting personnel with 100 engines, 22 crews, 14 aircraft, five bulldozers and four water tenders are assigned to the blaze. Evacuations so far have been ordered on:

- Hunters Valley Road
- Hunter Valley Mt. Access Road
- Bear Valley Road to Exchequer Road
- Highway 49 to Pendola Garden Road
- Pendola Garden Road to Old Toll Road
- Mt. Bullion Road from Highway 49 north to CYA Road
- Old Toll Road, between Corbett Creek Road and Highway 49
- Mt. Gains Road to No. 9 Road

Highway 49 north is closed from Pendola Garden Road to the intersection with Highway 132 in Coulterville, with limited access for residents.

In an update, Cal Fire reported unfavorable weather conditions, combined with "ample fuel" such as tall brush and dying trees, as well as steep, rocky terrain has made it difficult for firefighters to get a handle on the growing flames.

The Detwiler Fire began shortly before 4 p.m. Sunday, growing to 11,000 acres in only a little more than 24 hours.

Air quality throughout the Mountain Area has been impacted by the growing fire, forcing the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health caution as ash continues to fall from the sky.

At least one structure has been destroyed, and another damaged, with 300 threatened by the blaze as it continues to grow.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Heat and wildfires making poor Valley air quality even worse

By Dale Yurong

ABC30, Monday, July 17, 2017

FRESNO, Calif. - The Valley is already home to some of the worst air quality in the country, but the blue skies have been replaced by smoke and haze due to two wildfires burning in the area.

The Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County is the latest wildfire to spew smoke and ash into the air. Many people around the Valley woke up to find ash covering their cars.

"If you see it or smell it, you're being impacted," Cassandra Melching with the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District said.

Valley air quality is taking a big hit with all the smoke in the air. Joe Rincon brought his three kids to Woodward Park to have some fun in the shade before it got too hot and smoggy.

"Yeah, it's coming around," he said. "You could definitely feel it. Yesterday, it was big. You could see it especially. The clouds were something else so you want to get in and get the kids out, get some exercise and then head in."

And the Garza Fire continues to burn near Avenal. The impact of two big wildfires is being felt around the entire Valley.

"If you go outside and you look outdoors, you'll notice all the smoke is back aloft, and we're getting ash that's falling in Madera County, Fresno County, Tulare County and even Kern County," Melching said.

Melching says the ash particles are so big they're not being picked up by PM 2.5 monitors. She recommends people try to stay indoors especially those with respiratory issues.

"It's warm right now and the air's been a little bad," Melissa Sample of Fresno said. "A few days ago, I think it was worse."

Sample and her daughter Megan spent the morning feeding the geese at Woodward Park, but the bad air cut their visit short.

"Yeah, you can feel it when you're having a hard time breathing," she said. "She has a harder time breathing when it gets hot and it's humid."

In addition to the falling ash, the air district also reports a rise in ozone levels which is normal at this time of year with the high heat.