

NorCal fire harms Valley

Fresno Bee, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

A Northern California wildfire is affecting air in several Valley counties, air quality forecasters said Wednesday.

Smoke from the Moonlight fire in Plumas County, which has burned about 5,000 acres 150 miles northeast of Sacramento, has drifted southward into San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties. It also may affect Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties, and Valley portions of Kern County.

Particulate matter is the pollutant that has forecasters concerned. Particulate matter is tiny pieces of soot and ash that can aggravate respiratory problems, such as asthma.

"If you smell smoke, you are probably breathing it," said Gary Arcemont, a meteorologist for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

For air quality forecasts by county, visit www.valleyair.org or call (800) 766-4463. Forecasts are updated at 4:30 p.m. daily.

Smoke settles over Tracy

Danielle MacMurchy

Tracy Press, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

A fire in a South Bay state park and another near Sacramento are blamed for Wednesday's brown haze, which blocked out the sun and hung low to the ground.

Two large wildfires created a heavy, smoky haze in Tracy and surrounding counties Wednesday.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District rated the air in San Joaquin County "orange" at 5 p.m., which indicates the air pollution is unhealthy for older adults, children and people with heart or lung illnesses.

An 11,000-acre brush fire in Henry Coe State Park outside San Jose pushed smoke to the area. The fire has blackened wilderness terrain, and officials say it might devour another 25,000 acres before it's squelched.

The district says the fine smoke, dust and ash in the area is also due to the Moonlight Fire, a wildfire more than 200 miles from Tracy, northeast of Sacramento.

"If you smell smoke, you should remain indoors, because it probably is affecting your lungs," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the local air-pollution district.

The haze is expected to linger through Saturday because of light winds.

The ratings on the air-quality index range from green, which means the air quality is good, to red, which indicates an unhealthy level of pollution. Air quality reached red in San Joaquin County in January because of high amounts of pollution from wood-burning heaters.

For more information: www.valleyair.org.

Blazes cover valley in haze

Officials: Two wildfires in Plumas, Stanislaus counties are creating dirty air locally

By MICHAEL G. MOONEY

Modesto Bee, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

Most, if not all, of the smoke choking the sky over the Northern San Joaquin Valley on Wednesday was generated by a raging wildfire in Plumas County, about 170 miles due north of Modesto.

But it was a much closer fire -- burning in hilly and remote terrain at the western edge of Stanislaus County -- that commanded most of the attention of area firefighters.

By nightfall Wednesday, one 17-member Stanislaus strike team had been deployed and a second was en route to the Lick fire, which erupted Monday on the Santa Clara County side of Henry Coe State Park but spilled into Stanislaus County. The cause is under investigation.

"It's burning in very steep terrain near Red Creek and Orestimba Creek," said Stanislaus Fire Warden Gary Hinshaw. "It's into Stanislaus County now, about 18 miles west of Newman."

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported that the Lick fire was about 25 percent contained at 7 p.m. Wednesday. The fire has burned about 14,000 acres, destroying at least one outbuilding.

Hinshaw said the blaze largely was consuming scrub oaks, digger pines, manzanita and grass over an area that hasn't burned in at least 50 years.

State officials said the fire was threatening 25 homes and 10 barns and sheds.

"There are some hunting camps and ranches in that area," Hinshaw said. "There are some isolated residents (living) there. And there are only a few ways in and out."

Hinshaw said the first Stanislaus strike team was made up of representatives from the Modesto, Ceres, Salida, Turlock Rural and West Stanislaus (Newman area) fire departments.

The second strike team, which gathered in Patterson about 4 p.m. Wednesday for the trip to the base camp in Gilroy, had firefighters from the Woodland Avenue, Oakdale Rural, Mountain View and Stanislaus Consolidated fire departments.

An engine unit from Ripon Fire Department, in San Joaquin County, also was part of the strike force.

1,700 firefighters battling blaze

There are more than 1,700 people battling the blaze, and four firefighters have been injured since the fire broke out; none of them was identified.

Meanwhile, smoke generated by the 15,000-acre Moonlight fire in Plumas County prompted officials at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a "cautionary health statement" Wednesday for residents of Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties.

By 5 p.m. Wednesday, air district spokesman Anthony Presto said readings for particulate matter indicated that the air quality was unhealthy for people in sensitive groups, including those with chronic lung conditions, in Modesto, Turlock, Tracy and Stockton.

"The fire is sending a large plume of smoke down through the valley and elevating particulate readings in some areas," said Gary Arcemont, an air district meteorologist.

Smoky conditions also were reported in the Bay Area.

Particulate matter -- small pieces of material in the air including soot, ash and droplets of liquid -- can aggravate respiratory conditions and cause asthma attacks.

"If you smell smoke, you are probably breathing it," Arcemont said.

Officials urged residents throughout the eight-county air basin to use caution "as air conditions warrant."

'Probably affecting your lungs'

While today's forecast called for "moderate" air quality conditions, Presto said, people should take precautions if they smell smoke.

"It's very important for people to stay inside if they smell smoke," Presto said. "If you smell smoke, it's probably affecting your lungs."

In addition to the three Northern San Joaquin Valley counties, the air district encompasses Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, as well as the valley portion of Kern County.

People with chronic heart or lung diseases were advised to follow their doctors' advice for dealing with unhealthy air quality.

Older adults and children were cautioned to avoid prolonged exposure to the acrid air and curtail heavy exertion or other strenuous outdoor activities.

Officials in Plumas County said the fire had tripled in size from Tuesday night to Wednesday morning, prompting some evacuations of scattered homes in the Lights Creek area.

It grew to about 15,000 acres overnight Tuesday, said Mark Beaulieu, a fire information officer for the Plumas National Forest. While no communities or towns had been evacuated by late afternoon Wednesday, Beaulieu said, some isolated residents had been ordered to leave the area.

The fire, which was 5 percent contained at 4 p.m., was burning along and south of the ridgeline bordering the Plumas and Lassen national forests.

The Plumas fire also prompted a call for additional firefighters to join an estimated 1,000 battling the blaze, the cause of which remained under investigation late Wednesday.

Given the Lick fire, Hinshaw said, it was unlikely that Stanislaus County firefighters would be sent to assist in Plumas, at least for the time being.

Distant wildfire prompts air warning for Valley

By Aaron Swarts, STAFF WRITER
Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

A substantial wildfire near Sacramento is sending plumes of smoke into San Joaquin County, prompting air district officials to issue a cautionary health warning.

The Moonlight Fire in Plumas County, burning northeast of Sacramento, was feeding off more than 15,000 acres of rural forest land. As fire crews battled the blaze Wednesday, prevailing wind shifts were forcing ash and smoke to the south.

"The fire is sending a large plume of smoke down through the Valley and elevating particulate readings in some areas," said air district meteorologist Gary Arcemont, noting that tiny pieces of material in the air including soot, ash and droplets of liquid can aggravate respiratory conditions and cause asthma attacks.

Winds at the fire shifted Tuesday night. Normally, the wind there blows from the southwest, but on Tuesday the wind blew from the northeast.

The wind probably won't shift again until late this evening or early Friday, resuming the normal flow from the southwest Saturday and Sunday.

The haze could hang around all day today. Contra Costa residents noticed Wednesday's pollution: Calls to 9-1-1 centers were unusually heavy.

"It's been absolutely unbelievable the number of calls coming in" to the Contra Costa Fire District dispatch center since Wednesday morning, Battalion Chief Dave George said.

"It's been nonstop since the first whiff of smoke. It has been a virtual avalanche of calls that have been pouring into the center."

San Joaquin air quality could fluctuate, depending on the impact of the smoke.

Officials say those with heart and lung diseases should follow their doctor's advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality. Older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion, as conditions dictate.

"At this time, the main thing we want the residents of San Joaquin Valley to be aware of is that if they smell smoke, they should remain indoors," air district spokesman Anthony Presto said.

"Because if you can smell smoke, it is likely impacting your lungs in a negative way."

As a precaution, Tracy Unified officials canceled all outdoor after-school athletic practices Wednesday.

"Our coaches keep a close eye on air quality, keeping the students inside if conditions are bad," district spokesperson Jessica Wakefield said.

Unlike the common summertime "spare the air" warnings issued by the district, the current situation is result of particulate matter and not ozone levels.

"Particulate matter can actually be more damaging than ozone pollution," Presto said. "So we cannot emphasize enough - if you can smell smoke, you are probably breathing it."

Presto said the air district will closely monitor the situation and continue to update residents.

"We will be monitoring the situation constantly, both visually and with satellite imagery," he said. "Unless there is a change in conditions, it looks like the smoke will continue to move down the Valley. That could change if there is a shift in wind direction or a change in the rate that the fire is burning."

Valley residents can check local air quality by visiting <http://www.valleyair.org> or by calling 800-766-4636.

Staff writer Scott Marshall contributed to this report.

Wildfire smoke pours into Valley

By Tara Cuslidge - Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

STOCKTON - Wildfires in Santa Clara and Plumas counties prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health advisory Wednesday, and officials are warning the hazard may still be present today.

Air district spokeswoman Brenda Turner said San Joaquin County is getting the brunt of the smoke from the Plumas fire.

"The counties in the north that are closest to the fire will get the most impact," she said.

Satellite images at 10 a.m. Wednesday showed a large smoke plume heading into the Valley. Turner said later images showed the plume dissipating. But smoke was reported at ground level in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties at midday, she said.

Gary Acremont, a meteorologist with the air district, said the smoke is elevating particulate readings in some areas. Particulate matter - tiny pieces of material in the air including soot, ash and droplets of liquid - can aggravate respiratory conditions and cause asthma attacks.

Johnnie Powell, a weather forecaster at the National Weather Service in Sacramento, said the wind is expected to shift today, pushing the smoke out of the Valley.

The district is projecting a "moderate" level air quality rating today, but Turner said that doesn't mean the danger is gone.

"We're seeing good air quality forecasts, but people need to be cautioned that when a fire is going on like this, a wildfire, wind can change in just a few hours' time," she said. "Just because the air quality is in the moderate range doesn't mean that it can't get significantly worse during isolated times and in isolated areas."

Dr. Karen Furst, public health officer for Public Health Services of San Joaquin County, said the fires may seem far away, but it is important for people to know it can affect them here, especially those with chronic heart or lung conditions.

"The smoke is an irritant," she said. "It can affect anybody."

Both agencies recommend limiting outdoor activities until the fires are extinguished and the smoke clears.

On Wednesday, the Moonlight Fire in Plumas County had burned 15,000 acres and was 5 percent contained. The Lick Fire in Santa Clara County had burned 11,000 acres and was 20 percent contained. Both fires started Monday.

Plume from Plumas shrouds Valley, raises health fears Warnings issued on strenuous outdoor activity

By Crystal Carreon, Bobby Caina Calvan and Ryan Lillis - Bee Staff Writers
Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

The effects of a massive wildfire that continued to burn more than 160 miles from Sacramento swept into the region Wednesday, bringing layers of smoke and ash that clouded the sun and piqued concerns over whether it was safe to stay, work or play outside.

Placer County officials issued a warning for residents to avoid exercise outdoors and the National Weather Service said Wednesday afternoon that residents with health problems should stay inside. Some schools curtailed activities for students with lung or health problems.

"In a nutshell, if you can see or smell smoke, you should limit outdoor physical activities, and strongly consider canceling outdoor sporting events and other group physical activities," Placer County Health Officer Dr. Richard Burton said in an advisory issued Wednesday afternoon.

Other officials said individuals should use common sense when deciding whether to venture out for strenuous activity.

"I can't tell you 'yes' or 'no,' but if you're smelling some smoke it's not good for children to be out there," said Lori Kobza of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, who fielded phone calls from coaches, principals and parents across the region. "If you smell smoke, it's there."

The smoke turned the morning sun a deep orange hue and residents reported finding ash coating their vehicles, but officials said the conditions would likely pose problems only for people with breathing problems or other health ailments.

Concerns were exacerbated by the air quality charts on the sparetheair.com Web site, which until early afternoon had shown that parts of Sacramento, Yolo and Placer counties were recording healthy levels.

Those readings were from monitors at ground level, too low to detect the plume of smoke far overhead until later in the afternoon when it began to settle in lower.

By about 4 p.m., air quality levels around the region were reclassified on the Web site -- to color yellow -- showing a moderate risk for sensitive residents, including the elderly, pregnant women, and children under 14 whose lungs are still developing.

"We definitely have smoky conditions in the Valley," Kobza said, "and we always err on the side of caution when it comes to particulate matter -- i.e., pollution."

Officials in the San Juan Unified School District advised children predisposed to breathing problems such as asthma to stay indoors and refrain from attending physical education classes, said spokesman Trent Allen.

Sacramento City Unified School District did not issue such warnings.

The smoky conditions, which were reported across the foothills and the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys, were forecast to continue through midday today or when the winds shift.

"It's still spewing quite a bit of smoke into the Valley, and we don't expect conditions to change much until well into the morning," said Robert Baruffaldi, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

A high pressure system to the north and east of the Sacramento region is funneling smoke from the Plumas Moonlight fire -- pushed by 10 mph to 15 mph winds from the northeast -- to the lower Sacramento Valley, Baruffaldi said.

The haze, he said, may have thickened overnight as cooler temperatures pushed down the smoke, trapping it closer to the Valley surface.

It appeared there was no immediate end in sight for the wildfire fire that erupted Monday in Plumas National Forest.

By Wednesday afternoon, it had engulfed 15,000 acres in the forest and adjacent state land near Greenville.

At least 50 homes were under a mandatory evacuation order and another 300 families were advised to leave voluntarily, said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The winds also made the firefight in the rugged Plumas County terrain more difficult.

The churning forces of nature and eerily overcast sky slightly unsettled Anthony Race.

The 19-year-old breathed in the air at the corner of Fulton Avenue and Cottage Way, where he twirled a large white "I (heart) Mr. Pickles" sign in the afternoon.

"The sky's weird. It's usually blue out, but today it's gray," he said after turning off his MP3 player. "It's overcast, but bright."

Race said he smelled smoke in the morning but had grown used to it around lunchtime, his prime time to woo customers.

The smoky haze was of mild concern to Mike Plescia, who continued his afternoon workout at McKinley Park.

"Yeah, I smell it," he said of the whiffs of acrid smoke. "It's probably not a good idea to be working out outside. But I figure the winds will change and the smoke would move on."

Besides, "I work for a fire department," said Plescia, of the Butte unit of Cal Fire, "so I'm used to the smoke."

Smoky skies in Lodi

Fire 100 miles away triggers health advisory

By Layla Bohm - News-Sentinel Staff Writer

Lodi News Sentinel, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

Smoke lingering over Lodi on Wednesday kept temperatures a bit cooler than forecast, but also caused officials to issue a health advisory.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District advised residents in San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties that the smoke could trigger asthma attacks, especially for those with health troubles.

The district said the smoke came from a 15,000-acre forest fire in the Plumas National Forest, southwest of Susanville - more than 100 miles from Lodi as the crow flies. Called the Moonlight Fire, it started Monday afternoon in steep terrain and grew significantly Tuesday night.

Another large fire, called the Lick Fire, is also burning in the Bay Area near Morgan Hill, and it had consumed 11,000 acres by mid-Wednesday. It was burning in Henry W. Coe State Park and was 20 percent contained Wednesday afternoon.

Those with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with bad air quality, said officials with the air pollution district. They also recommend that children and older adults avoid strenuous activities and prolonged exposure to the smoke.

Though the Moonlight Fire is far from Lodi, the wind shifted overnight Tuesday, sending smoke west and then south down into the San Joaquin Valley. It was visible by daybreak and soon grew thicker; by mid-morning the smell of smoke couldn't be missed.

That fire was only 5 percent contained by Wednesday afternoon, with more than 1,000 personnel and at least seven air tankers fighting the blaze. All major roads remained open and no structures had been damaged.

The fire started on private property and the cause remains under investigation, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

The smoke in Lodi also made weather forecasts, issued a day early, obsolete. Private forecasting service AccuWeather had predicted temperatures would reach 89 degrees at noon, but the thermometer had only reached 85 by 2 p.m.

Northern California fire could foul South Valley air

By Michael Miyamoto, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

A wildfire in Plumas County northeast of Sacramento is adversely affecting air quality in the northern part of the San Joaquin Valley, officials say.

And the poor conditions may spread southward.

An alert was issued Wednesday by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which noted that the wildfire has created a large smoke plume.

Air-pollution officials issued a health cautionary statement for San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties.

The large plume may also affect air quality in Tulare, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Kern counties, officials said. As of 4 p.m. Wednesday, no advisory had been issued for Tulare County.

"The fire is sending a large plume of smoke down through the Valley and elevating particulate readings in some areas," said Gary Arcemont, a meteorologist with the air-pollution control district. Particulate matter — tiny pieces of material in the air, including soot, ash and droplets of liquid — can aggravate respiratory conditions and cause asthma attacks, Arcemont said. Residents of the eight-county air basin are advised to use caution today, officials said. Those with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with unhealthful air, they said.

For air-quality forecasts by county, visit www.valleyair.org or call (800) 766-4636. Forecasts are updated daily at 4:30 p.m.

Fire may send smoke over Kern County

The Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

Local air officials issued a health caution after a wildfire in Northern California sent a smoke plume through the San Joaquin Valley.

The Moonlight fire is burning in Plumas County, northeast of Sacramento, according to a news release by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The blaze has affected air quality in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties. The fire may affect Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties and the valley areas of Kern County.

The fire is elevating particulate matter such as soot and ash that can aggravate respiratory conditions and cause asthma attacks, according to the news release.

"If you smell smoke, you are probably breathing it," Valley Air District Meteorologist Gary Arcemont said in the news release.

The air quality in Kern's valley is forecasted to be moderate today.

Fires cast haze over region

Marisa Lagos, Chronicle Staff Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

Greenville -- A fire burning more than 200 miles from San Francisco has cast an eerie pall over the Bay Area this morning, making the sun appear red.

Offshore winds are pushing smoke and haze southwest from a 24,300-acre blaze in Plumas County, near Greenville, said National Weather Service forecaster Brian Tentinger. Much of the smoke from the Moonlight Fire had settled in the Sacramento Valley on Wednesday, but now appears to have spread south away from the capital and into the Bay Area, said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"The Plumas (County) fire is burning pretty good and ... blowing all the smoke down to the Bay Area ... the sunlight passing through the smoke and haze makes it do different things," said Tentinger. "(It) should switch back to onshore winds by tomorrow and (the smoke) will start to disperse a little bit this afternoon and evening."

Dennis Perfetto, who lives in San Francisco's Panhandle area, said he was stunned by the red and orange sky this morning.

"It was absolutely beautiful, spectacular," he said. "I looked east about 8 a.m. and I just thought, that's spectacular, then I thought, 'What's causing this?' I figured it was smoke ... It looked like in Hawaii, on the Big Island, when the volcano kicks up."

The rural blaze, which is only eight percent contained, is being fed by windy, dry conditions and low humidity, Berlant said. It has forced the evacuation of 500 homes in Greenville, said Berlant, though the majority of the blaze is in rugged, steep and rural terrain.

"It fanned out to a huge number of acres in a short amount of time," he said.

Firefighters' efforts are also being hampered in Santa Clara County, where about 1,750 people are battling an 18,900-acre fire east of Morgan Hill in Henry W. Coe State Park. Officials said Wednesday that the blaze was caused by an illegal debris burn. Both fires began on Monday.

Henry DeKruyff, a forestry spokesman, said the Santa Clara County blaze, dubbed the Lick Fire, is still only 25 percent contained. Officials are bracing for a rough day, he said, with low humidity also expected to help fan the flames in the South Bay.

"The low humidity is affecting burnout operations and will continue to affect our efforts intensely," he said. "We're expecting significant resistance (today) - the fire is going into a lot of heavy timber and brush."

The large amount of smoke from that fire has also grounded air support this morning, said DeKruyff. Officials hope to get planes and helicopters back up later this morning, he said.

Fire crews are attempting to build 19 miles of fire lines around the blaze, which is still moving east. Twenty-five residences and 10 outbuildings remain in danger, as well as the park's visitor center and several campgrounds. State park officials and archeologists are also working to protect archeological sites in the area, said DeKruyff.

The good news, according to the National Weather Service, is that temperatures are expected to peak today in the low 90s and then drop off a bit tomorrow into the mid-80s.

Smoke gets in your eyes as South Bay fire rages on

Elizabeth Fernandez, Marisa Lagos, Chronicle Staff Writers
S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, September 6, 2007

Morgan Hill -- Smoke from a 3-day-old wildfire east of Morgan Hill spread across the Bay Area on Wednesday and investigators pinpointed the cause of the blaze as an illegal debris burn.

"Usually such fires are started in metal barrels," said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "This one escaped."

The blaze, known as the Lick Fire, began Monday afternoon in Henry W. Coe State Park and has burned 14,000 acres in the back country. It is 25 percent contained.

Smoke from the fire was especially thick in the South Bay and East Bay, to the point where some residents closed their windows, but the odor was noticeable as far away as downtown San Francisco.

Air quality was also deteriorating in the Central Valley, thanks to a second blaze - the Moonlight Fire - that began Monday in a remote part of the Plumas National Forest. The 15,000-acre fire is only 5 percent contained.

By late Wednesday afternoon, air quality monitors in the Central Valley were picking up elevated levels of particulate matter. In Turlock, Tracy, Stockton and Modesto, air quality reached orange - unhealthy for sensitive people.

"Our general message is, if you can smell smoke, it's best to stay indoors because it's affecting your lungs," said Anthony Presto, spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The smoke effects reached Sacramento, said Berlant.

"Our valley is still completely fogged in due to the inversion layer -- the smoke just lingers instead of naturally dissipating," he said.

A force of 1,700 battling the Lick Fire experienced high temperatures and low humidity, a worrisome combination.

"The humidity is dropping way down into the single digits, but we have been beefing up the western line, and we have a lot of iron on the hill, a lot of dozers," said Wayne Connor of the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "We don't expect the western flank to grow."

Fire officials intensified air support, amassing seven air tankers including a DC-10. Crews were also assisted by new Air National Guard helicopters. Joining in the effort were 186 fire engines and 25 bulldozers.

"The good news is we didn't have as much of an adverse effect Wednesday by the weather -- if the north winds had blown really strongly, it would have been much harder to contain, so crews were able to make progress," said Berlant.

Temperatures were expected to rise into the upper 90s by today.

"It's going to get hotter," Connor said. "But we're ready for it; everybody has been briefed."

He said four firefighters have been injured battling the blaze. Three were stung by bees and a fourth was hospitalized from heat exhaustion.

One building has been destroyed by the flames and 12 cabins in the area have been evacuated. About 13 more homes remain in danger but have not yet been evacuated.

Connor said there is no estimate for containment.

Plumas fire blankets area in haze

by Scott Marshall, staff writer

Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, Sept. 5, 2007

Smoke from a fire in Plumas County blew down the Feather River Canyon into the East Bay today, creating a noticeable haze but no health risk, authorities said.

Winds at the fire shifted Tuesday night. Normally, the wind there blows from the southwest. But on Tuesday the wind shifted and blew downward from the northeast, propelling the Plumas smoke toward the East Bay.

Calls to 911 centers have been unusually heavy.

"It's been absolutely unbelievable the number of calls coming in" to the Contra Costa Fire District dispatch center since this morning, said Battalion Chief Dave George. "It's been nonstop since the first whiff of smoke. "It has been a virtual avalanche of calls that have been pouring into the center."

Fire officials ask that residents be vigilant and report any column of smoke or flames, because the fire danger is acute. A fire of 10 acres to 15 acres broke out a midmorning on Johnston Road east of Camino Tassajara. Firefighters contained it by 12:20 p.m.

"There's always a chance a fire could start anytime in our hills," George said.

Air quality is not unhealthy, said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

"I think at this point the levels we're seeing are slightly elevated for particulates but still well within the health range," she said.

For instance, the health standard is 35 micrograms of particulates per cubic meter of air. The level in Livermore today is 11; the level in Benicia is 8.

The district still recommends that residents take reasonable precautions, such as closing windows and doors, turning off ventilators and limiting outdoor activity.

The man-caused fire began Monday on private land in Plumas County and has grown to between 12,000 and 15,000 acres, said Steve Goodson, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service.

Plumas County is east of Chico, near the Nevada state line.

Farm bill draws mixed response

'Compromise' law under fire from some groups

Written by Jonathan Partridge

Patterson Irrigator, Wednesday, Sept. 5, 2007

MODESTO — Proposed farm legislation aims to curb federal crop payments to millionaires and could provide more benefits for specialty crop growers in California, but some critics say its reforms do not go far enough.

Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Atwater, defended the bill during a roundtable discussion last week in the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau boardroom, saying it was the best bill the House could pass at the time, though there is room for improvement.

"Politics is the art of the doable," Cardoza said.

Contributions for Californians

For the first time, the new bill contains \$1.6 billion for various fruit and vegetable programs.

The bill includes measures that will provide \$215 million to specialty crop growers and provide conservation incentives and nutrition programs.

Cardoza said apricot growers on the West Side could benefit from economic research programs that would study the effects of foreign markets that import dried and canned apricots at extremely low prices, preventing local farmers from being able to compete.

The bill also includes \$200 million for pest detection and surveillance, \$25 million for organic research and \$110 million for farmers market promotion. Another \$350 million is included for a federal program that provides fresh fruit, vegetables and nuts to school children.

Specialty crop block grants totaling \$365 million will be distributed to states. Block grant money in the past has been used to fund the "California Grown" campaign, in which labels are used to mark produce that is grown in the state.

Another \$25 million for fresh-cut produce safety will help with troubles such as last year's scare involving E. coli-tainted spinach, Cardoza said.

The bill also provides \$150 million for air quality mitigation to help farmers comply with federal and local air pollution laws. Cardoza said that is especially important for San Joaquin Valley farmers, who work in an area that has some of the worst air in the nation and the toughest air-quality laws.

The money from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program offers financial and technical help for growers to practice conservation practices. Cardoza said farmers told him that was their top priority for the Farm Bill.

Jack King, manager of national affairs and research for the California Farm Bureau, said last week that California has gained a lot in the House version of the bill.

Though California is the top ag producer in the nation, it was 13th in the nation in receiving payments for federal conservation programs in 2005 and 11th in the nation for receiving crop payments.

"We (in California) should be getting the lion's share of the money, but we are, in fact, down the list," Cardoza said.

Disagreement over subsidies

The farm bill stops all payments to farmers who have an annual adjusted gross income of \$1 million or more per year. The law now allows businesses and people who make as much as \$2.5 million annually to apply for federal subsidy payments.

Some critics say the limits in the farm bill do not go far enough.

In late July, Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns stressed that the Bush administration did not want any subsidies for farmers who earn \$200,000 or more each year. He also took aim at a last-minute addition to the bill that would raise money by increasing taxes on international companies with U.S. subsidiaries.

Environmental organizations and fair-trade advocacy groups also have criticized the bill.

The Washington, D.C.-based Environmental Working Group keeps an online database of federal crop subsidies and who gets them. Seventy percent of crop subsidies today go to the top 10 percent wealthiest farms, said Bill Walker, vice president of the group.

Walker said Cardoza's addition of specialty crop measures to the 2007 farm bill is good, but the bill does not go far enough to curb other major subsidies. The \$1 million income cap is "absurdly high," he said, and the bill has loopholes that would still allow millionaires to take advantage of subsidies.

On the other hand, some growers say some subsidies are necessary.

Steve Carlson of Crows Landing-based Perez Farms said last week that the high cost of water in Fresno County makes cotton subsidies essential.

Environmental Working Group's site indicates that Perez Farms took in about \$3.7 million in crop payments from 1995 to 2005. A large percentage of those subsidies was for cotton grown in Fresno County, according to the site.

However, Perez Farms growers said those figures can be misleading. Subsidies raise the price of cotton from 50 cents per pound to about 70 to 80 cents, Carlson explained. Without them, he said, there is no way Perez Farms could make money with cotton.

In turn, that allows for cheaper products for consumers, said Tom Perez of Perez Farms.

Several fair-trade advocates and environmental groups touted a proposed amendment by Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wisconsin. The amendment would have expanded conservation programs, eliminated payments for growers who make more than \$250,000 and gradually reduced crop subsidies.

Critics of the amendment said it would have defeated the purpose it intended by removing a safety net for growers. The amendment was soundly defeated by Congress.

Cardoza described the Kind bill as a mess, saying he felt it would end up doing the same thing as the Freedom to Farm Bill in 1996. That act aimed to dramatically reduce crop subsidies, but it was amended during some economically difficult farming years, resulting in billions of dollars in emergency relief payments to some of the nation's wealthiest farmers.

"It was kind of like cotton candy at the fair," Cardoza said of the Kind amendment. "It looks great from the outside, but if you eat too much of it, it makes you sick."

Hashing things out in the Senate

Despite criticism that the bill doesn't do enough to eliminate unneeded subsidies, Cardoza said 25 to 30 senators are from states that would never pass a bill with tighter restrictions on subsidies.

The Senate plans to review the bill later this month. The bill passed in the House by a vote of 231 to 191, with most representatives in the Democrat-controlled Congress voting along partisan lines.

Proponents say the bill is a compromise and that its benefits outweigh its disadvantages.

Earl and Tom Perez of Perez Farms said they appreciated that the U.S. Department of Agriculture sought input from farmers for the bill through public meetings around the country.

"I think it's improved quite a bit over the last (bill)," Earl Perez said.

EPA Sued Over Pollution From Ocean Ships

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

N.Y. Times, Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Wednesday, Sept. 5, and Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- Environmentalists sued the federal government Wednesday, complaining that it has failed to regulate emissions from oceangoing vessels that pollute the air and cause respiratory illness around ports nationwide.

The lawsuit alleges that the Environmental Protection Agency has missed its deadline to set emissions standards for ship engines that spew exhaust into communities surrounding major ports in Oakland, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Houston, Seattle and other cities. The complaint was filed by Oakland-based Earthjustice on behalf of Friends of the Earth.

"These emissions have a widespread negative impact on the people and the environment," said Teri Shore, Friends of the Earth's clean vessels campaign director in San Francisco. "What's at stake here is the lives of thousand of people around the country who will continue to inhale diesel exhaust from large ships."

EPA officials in Washington did not immediately return calls seeking comment Wednesday.

Oceangoing ships are among the fast-growing sources of air pollution, with emissions projected to double in North America over the next 10 to 20 years. A single cruise liner or cargo ship can emit as much pollution as 350,000 cars, and hundreds of large vessels dock at the nation's major ports each month, activists said.

Studies have linked air pollution from ports to higher rates of asthma, cancer, heart disease and other health ailments.

The complaint alleges that the EPA is required to regulate ship pollution under the federal Clean Air Act. In response to a previous lawsuit by environmentalists, the agency had committed in 2003 to set emissions standards by April this year, but no new regulations have been issued.

The complaint also contends that the agency has failed to regulate ships registered in foreign countries, which make up more than 80 percent of large vessel traffic at U.S. ports.

Last year, the California Air Resources Board passed a new law requiring large ships to use cleaner fuel when traveling within 24 miles of the state's coast. But a federal judge last week ruled that the state did not have the authority to establish shipping fuel standards without approval from the EPA.

Scientists to Study Pollution Particles

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

N.Y. Times, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Wednesday, Sept. 5, 2007

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) -- Scientists at West Virginia University will study thick black diesel smoke and other air pollution particles over the next five years to determine how they might be affecting cardiovascular health.

Researcher Timothy R. Nurkiewicz has received a \$2.1 million grant from the National Institute of Health's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the school said Wednesday.

Nurkiewicz, who studies tiny blood vessels, says pollution from combustion sources like truck engines may impair the vascular and immune systems, compromising blood flow throughout the body.

"We're focusing primarily on diesel particles because they're environmentally relevant and one of the most prolific components of ambient air pollution," he said. "Everyone has been stuck behind that ominous large truck spewing out black soot. But we are exposed to particulate matter from more sources than exhaust from semi tractor trailers."

School buses and construction vehicles also emit such particles, he said.

Without a full understanding of the health effects, Nurkiewicz said, government cannot be expected to appropriately regulate air quality and set limits for acceptable human exposure.

It's clear that air pollution can worsen cardiovascular disease, said Matthew A. Boegehold, director of WVU's Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Cardiovascular Sciences.

"But we are still a long way from understanding the mechanisms by which these changes arise," he said. "Dr. Nurkiewicz's project, along with similar studies, could serve as an important foundation for developing better clinical treatments for this problem."

Scientists Compare U.S., China Pollution

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

N.Y. Times, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Los Angeles and Pittsburgh provide examples of what to do -- and not to do -- about China's severe air pollution in the face of surging energy use from rapid economic growth, U.S. and Chinese scientists say.

The study released Thursday compared the world's two biggest energy consumers, the United States and China.

One of the most important lessons? It makes more sense to try to prevent pollution, rather than clean it up afterward.

The study also found that national controls are important though focusing on small sources of pollution also can have a broad impact.

Los Angeles was compared with the Chinese city of Dalian, both port cities, while Pittsburgh was stacked against Huainan, both coal-rich centers of industry.

According to the study, the result of a 2 1/2 year collaboration between U.S. and Chinese academies of engineering and sciences, both countries still have major problems with dirty air and must improve their energy efficiency.

Los Angeles' serious smog problems are well-studied and the city uses federal and local planning to try to address it. On the other hand, its over-reliance on cars and sprawling development haven't helped, the study said.

Pittsburgh began attacking its smog problem in the 1940s, but only after early reliance on coal that overlooked the consequences of air pollution.

"An important lesson learned is that air pollution damage imposes major economic costs, through premature mortality, increased sickness and lost productivity, as well as decreased crop yields and ecosystem impacts," the report says. "Cost-benefit analyses in the U.S. show that emission reduction programs have provided much greater benefits than their costs, by a ratio of up to 40 to 1, according to some estimates."

U.S. efforts in the past 30 years have reduced the biggest risks from lead in gasoline, acid rain-causing sulfur dioxide and some soot pollution, the study says, though in some areas the Chinese are ahead -- such as in research on coal gasification -- to use it more efficiently and emit less pollution. Coal gasification is the conversion of coal into gaseous fuels.

By contrast, Dalian's urban planning to minimize sprawl and its local transit -- more bicycles, pedestrians, buses and light rail -- is seen as an example for Los Angeles.

"In China, they have very good rules but they don't have good enforcement for air pollution," said John Watson, a co-chairman of the report and professor at Reno, Nev.-based Desert Research Institute. "They're making a lot of the same mistakes we made in our air pollution history. You can just see the parallels: they're building more highways and encouraging more sprawl."

Though fossil fuel burning dominates both nations, a major difference is the source for roughly two-thirds of their energy needs: for China, which has some of the world's filthiest air, it is coal; for the United States, it is petroleum and natural gas.

China is the world's biggest emitter of sulfur dioxide; both countries lead the world in their emissions of industrial carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas blamed for warming the atmosphere like a greenhouse. But the study skirted the issue of global warming.

Another recommendation is that the Chinese government focus on collecting and providing good quality data on air pollution and energy uses. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, by 2020 China will have 20 million cases of respiratory illness a year because of air pollution.

"We're not saying we're the best example. We're saying, Learn from our experience, look at our successes, but also our failures," said Derek Vollmer, an associate program officer for the National Academy of Sciences, who oversaw the study. "But we have a longer history of dealing with air pollution."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Thursday, Sept. 6, 2007:](#)

Senate bill crucial to cleaner air

Assembly Speaker Fabián Núñez has rightly earned international plaudits for authoring Assembly Bill 32, the landmark law that requires California to reduce its greenhouse gases 25% by 2020.

Passage of this 2006 law has moved California to the forefront of the fight against global warming. If it can be properly implemented, this law could propel California to a cleaner future and could create a model for other states and nations to follow.

Yet, as Núñez knows, the state's transportation network poses California's greatest challenge in meeting the mandates of AB 32. Emissions from cars, trucks and other transportation sources generate 41% of California's greenhouse gases, and they are growing all the time.

Unless steps are taken to greatly reduce these emissions, the state's population growth -- with more people driving farther each year for work or play -- could overwhelm all other efforts to cut greenhouse pollution.

That's why it's so crucial that Núñez and other state lawmakers support Senate Bill 375, an attempt to encourage smart transportation planning in the years ahead.

In a nutshell, SB 375 would create incentives for metropolitan regions to reduce pollution from cars and trucks by calculating how those emissions would vary under different development scenarios.

Dispersal of state transportation dollars would depend on regions conducting these reviews, which several -- including the Valley -- have already begun. Regions that chose to develop in a land-efficient, transit-friendly pattern, as opposed to leapfrog development, would get relief from certain requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act.

This would help cities to grow up, instead of out, with better prospects for transit and fewer long-distance commutes -- a major cause of smog and greenhouse pollution.

Over the past several months, the bill's author, Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, has worked with an array of interest groups to fine-tune the bill and address concerns. All along, he has faced continuing opposition from the California Chamber of Commerce and the California Building Industry Association, who have yet to propose a workable alternative for curtailing emissions from the transportation sector.

Even more mystifying is the behavior of the League of California Cities, which has waffled at times on what changes it wants to see.

That opposition has helped turn the tide against SB 375, which now looks like it will become a "two-year" bill, having already passed the Senate.

Núñez should not let this happen. At this point in last year's Legislature, Núñez was able to knock heads and resolve differences over AB 32. He should do so again with SB 375.