

Wildfires still affect Valley air

By Cassandra Sandoval

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Wildfires in Tulare, Kern, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties are still affecting air quality conditions here in the Central Valley.

On Sunday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District deemed air conditions to be unhealthy for sensitive groups in Kings County. As of Monday afternoon, the Air District forecasted air conditions to be moderate in Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties.

Air District outreach and communications representative Cassandra Melching said the smoke generated from the Cedar Fire has directly affected the Valley's air quality.

Melching said smoke from the wildfires produce particulate matter that consists of small particles that get into the air and can cause health problems like lung disease, asthma attacks and other respiratory conditions.

"When the fire first broke out you could step outside and look up and see that nasty haze," she said. "Last week there were a couple of counties that reported ash fall in their area and they could smell it."

So far, the Cedar Fire in Tulare and Kern counties is 45 percent contained. It started on Aug. 16 west of Kernville.

Melching said the Valley will see a little break this week as the wind blows the smoke caused by the Cedar Fire toward the mountains.

She said the break will not last long because of the Soberanes Fire burning in Monterey County, which has been 60 percent contained.

"Just our geographical location, unfortunately, delays the process of us having cleaner air with all these fires around," Melching said.

The Soberanes Fire was caused by an illegal campfire at Garrapta State Park, which is along the Monterey coast, on July 22, according to officials. So far, the fire destroyed 57 homes and 11 buildings.

Melching said the Air District has been pointing local schools to use the Real-Time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) which monitors air quality in the Valley and sends out alerts on an hourly basis by county or by city.

She said RAAN is a great tool to use since not every school district in the county may experience poor air conditions.

"What's happening at one end of the county might not be happening at the other end," she said. "One school might be having great air quality."

Lemoore Union High School District Superintendent Debbie Muro said the district is always receiving alerts from the Air District to keep students safe, especially those who have asthma.

She said the district has not had to limit any outdoor activities for physical education and sports this past week.

She said football practice had to be cancelled about three weeks ago because of the heat and air quality.

"I think with it being cooler and a little bit of a breeze makes it better," she said.

The Corcoran Unified School District also canceled practice about two weeks ago because of poor air conditions.

Melching said the Air District urges schools to keep activities in doors when areas are exposed to poor air conditions.

"You definitely want to keep the warnings and safe guard your health," she said.