

Wood chip fire fouls the air near Porterville, but here's why putting it out won't be easy

By Lewis Griswold

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A smoky fire on farmland west of Porterville is fouling the air and potentially causing breathing problems, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, but there's a problem in trying to put it out.

Those with breathing problems should stay indoors, as should the young and elderly, the air district stated.

Smoke already has descended on Porterville, Visalia and other communities in the South Valley. And if the fire is not put out soon, the smoke will drift into eastern Kern County as a high-pressure ridge builds and temperatures rise.

Breathing risks come into play because smoke carries particulate matter, called PM2.5, that can cause lung disease, asthma and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

The fire started this week in a former orchard, where the trees had been ground into chips, in the area of Avenue 152 and Road 208, Tulare County Fire Chief Charlie Norman said. Spontaneous combustion caused the fire, he said.

So much water would be needed to put out the fire that spraying it with fire hoses is not very effective, the chief said, so another plan is being used.

"The property owner is trying to build a berm and they will flood it," he said, noting the owner will use his own water from a pond.

In the meantime, the public should expect to keep seeing plenty of smoke.

Authorities placed reverse 911 calls to homes in the area warning that there will be "a lot of smoke" until the fire is out, he said.

It's also not the only fire in the area.

The King wildfire in mountains southeast of Porterville likely will cause smoke to blow toward the city in the mornings, the National Weather Service reported.

Walnut wood chip fire prompts health caution

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Smoke from a walnut wood chip fire west of Porterville is affecting air quality in Tulare County and has the potential to impact eastern portions of Kern County, announced the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District in Fresno.

The fire began Sunday night and Tulare County Fire officials said it was caused by spontaneous combustion of the chipped wood material which had been stacked in numerous large piles along Avenue 152, just east of Cedar Avenue.

On Thursday, heavy smoke was still rising from the large piles and workers were reportedly at the site beginning to spread out the piles to make them burn quicker. For much of the afternoon Thursday, wind pushed the smoke into Porterville and residents of the housing subdivision adjacent to the fire said conditions have been unhealthy all week.

Beginning today, a strong high-pressure pattern will build over the region with triple-digit temperatures forecast through the weekend and into next week, said air district officials. The health caution will remain in place and smoke impacts are likely, until the fire is extinguished. Officials said since the fire was caused by spontaneous combustion, no fine will be levied against the property owner, but they were encouraging the owner to extinguish the fire as quickly as possible.

Currently, the City of Porterville, Visalia and neighboring communities are experiencing smoke impacts. The hot, stagnant conditions will have the potential for new fires to occur across the Valley.

Smoke from fires produces particulate matter (PM 2.5), which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. People with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are especially susceptible to health effects from these pollutants. Air District officials urge residents to follow their doctors' orders when exposed to PM 2.5 and stay indoors if at all possible.

The District advises the District's Real-time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) monitors are designed to detect the fine particulates (called PM 2.5 which are microscopic in size and not visible to the human eye) that exist in smoke. Ash particles are much larger in size and will not be detected by district monitors. Therefore an area may be experiencing ash impacts from potential fires while the PM monitor reflects a moderate reading. If a person can smell smoke or see ash, that is an indication that you should be treating air quality conditions as "Unhealthy" (RAAN Level 4 or higher) and remain indoors.

Residents can check the nearest RAAN monitor to their location to determine localized air-quality conditions at www.valleyair.org/RAAN. For more information, visit www.valleyair.org or call a District office in Fresno, 230-6000.