

A lightning strike started a fire. Now dangerous smoke has reached this community.

By Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado
Fresno Bee, Thursday, June 29, 2017

Smoke from a nearby fire has invaded a community in the southeast mountain area of Tulare County. And the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said serious health problems could arise if residents are exposed for a long period of time.

“Kennedy Meadows is engulfed in smoke,” said Cassandra Melching, outreach and communications director for the air district’s central and southern regions.

A lightning strike ignited the fire, which has grown to about 600 acres near the community of Kennedy Meadows in the Sequoia National Forest. The fire, called the Schaeffer Fire, is burning at an elevation of about 7,300 feet, Melching said. No structures have burned, and that’s mainly due to the high altitude of the fire, she added. There are currently about four other wildland fires burning in the state.

The air district office said smoke could cause serious health effects to children or elderly people who may have existing respiratory conditions. People with pre-existing conditions like lung complications or asthma, or those who are at risk of a stroke or heart attack are encouraged to stay indoors in well-ventilated conditions as the smoke continues to flow through the area.

The U.S. Forest Service said it does not expect to close any roads due to the fire at this time.

Melching said the air district has not been told when the fire, which erupted Saturday, will be extinguished. Other mountain communities like Johnsondale, Ponderosa and Camp Nelson are also warned of the health risks.

Air quality conditions can be checked online using the air district’s Real-Time Air Advisory Network. For more information, call the air district’s office in Fresno, 559-230-6000.

Lightning sparks the Schaeffer Fire

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Smoke leading to ‘health caution’ by Air District

KERNVILLE — The Schaeffer Fire has burned nearly 600 acres since being started by lightning on Saturday and is putting off enough smoke to prompt a “health caution” in Tulare County.

The Kern River Ranger District of the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument received thunderstorm activity over the area on Saturday. In the hours that followed, Sequoia’s Jordan Fire Lookout discovered the lightning caused Schaeffer Fire and reported the smoke at 4:16 p.m. Saturday.

The fire is burning within the 2002 McNally wildfire area on the KRRD, east of the Needles Lookout site and northeast of Johnsondale, and is presently 586 acres burning in whitethorn, dead and down logs and needle cast.

The forest service has taken a “confine and contain strategy,” which is to restrict the fire to a defined area primarily using roads, trails and natural barriers that are expected to restrict the spread of the wildfire under prevailing and forecasted weather conditions. It is a natural ignition (lightning) wildfire with protection objectives and a confine and contain strategy that will likely grow in the coming weeks or possibly months.

Smoke is drifting across the Sierra Crest and visible along Highway 395, between Olancho and Lone Pine. Smoke is also presently visible from many vantage points north of Johnsondale, and along the Lloyd Meadow and Western Divide roads. No road closures are expected at this time.

Air Quality Impact

Smoke from the Schaeffer Fire is affecting air quality in Kennedy Meadows, with the potential to impact other foothill and mountain communities near the fire including Johnsondale, Ponderosa and Camp

Nelson, and prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health caution on Wednesday. The health caution will remain in place and smoke impacts will continue, until the fire is extinguished.

Smoke from fires produces particulate matter (PM2.5), 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 PM2.5 and stay indoors if at all possible.

Bell Fire

Firefighters are also battling the Bell Fire which is burning within the Kern River Ranger District of the Sequoia National Forest. The fire is located in the community of Riverkern, 5 miles north of the town of Kernville.

Helicopter 23 gave the first size up as 5-10 acres, in grass and brush. The fire was burning behind the residential area of Riverkern, making runs uphill and away from the homes. Upon initial attack the fire had high potential and homes were at risk. Hazards were powerlines in the area.