

Take it easy: Smoke from Northern California fires is choking Valley air

By Silvia Flores

Fresno Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017

San Joaquin Valley air pollution officials have issued an air quality alert that extends into Saturday.

The alert was issued shortly before noon Wednesday. The reason is smoke from the Northern California wildfires coupled with smoke from a big blaze in Tulare County wilderness.

The Lion Fire in the Sierra of far eastern Tulare County, caused by a lightning strike Sept. 24, had grown to 12,980 acres by Wednesday. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said smoke from that fire is most likely to cause problems in the region's foothills.

Several wildfires erupted Sunday night in Northern California, the worst in Santa Rosa.

The air district issued the Valley-wide alert because of the fine particles that are found in smoky skies. Particle pollution can cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, aggravate lung disease and increase the chances of respiratory infections.

People with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are especially susceptible to these pollutants. Anyone exposed to poor air quality or wildfire smoke should move inside to an air-conditioned environment. Those with heart and lung diseases should follow doctor's advice.

Fresno, Central and Clovis unified school districts canceled all outdoor activities Wednesday, including outdoor sports practices.

And Valley Children's Hospital spokeswoman Zara Arboleda said its emergency department has recorded more children with breathing problems in the past few days. "They're attributing those cases to the poor air quality," she said. "Our staff is bracing for more kids to come in over the coming days, too."

Smoke from wildfires prompts health caution

By Kristina Hacker

Turlock Journal, Thursday, October 12, 2017

Smoke from the Northern California wildfires is affecting air quality throughout the entire San Joaquin Valley, prompting local air pollution officials to issue an Air Quality Alert.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued the Air Quality Alert on Wednesday due to smoke impacts from wildfires for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley portion of Kern counties. The alert is in effect through Saturday.

As of Wednesday, 22 wildfires were burning in Northern California, up from 17 the day before. The blazes killed at least 21 people and destroyed an estimated 3,500 homes and businesses, many of them in California wine country.

The smoke from those wildfires is extending through the Bay area into the Delta and Sacramento Valley, and into the Sierra, according to satellite and observations reported by the National Weather Service.

According to the weather service, a northerly wind is acting to mix and shift the smoke southward.

Dry with temperatures and wind gusts are expected to continue critical fire weather conditions through Thursday in Northern California, with further fire concerns from north winds possible this weekend, according to the National Weather Service.

Smoke from wildfires is a mixture of gases and fine (microscopic) particulates that result from the burning of wood and other organic material. These microscopic particles can get into eyes and the respiratory system, where they can cause health problems such as burning eyes, runny nose and illnesses such as bronchitis. Fine particles can also aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases — and are even linked to premature deaths in people with these conditions. According to the air district, if you see or smell smoke, you are likely being impacted by it.

Residents are advised to use caution as conditions warrant. People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctor's advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality.

Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion, as conditions dictate.

Anyone being exposed to poor air quality or wildfire smoke should move inside to an air-conditioned environment.

Residents can check the air district's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about any current wildfires and whether they are impacting the Valley. Residents can also check the nearest air monitor to their location to determine localized air-quality conditions. Visit the Real-time Air Advisory Network page on the District's website to subscribe for free: www.valleyair.org/RAAN.

Here's how today's smoky air is affecting Merced County schools

By Shawn Jansen

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017

When Los Banos High athletic director Joseph Barcellos arrived at the Western Athletic Conference league meeting in Turlock on Wednesday morning everything looked normal outside.

That wasn't the case when he left two hours later at 11 a.m.

"Everything was great when we got there," Barcellos said. "When we stepped outside it was like, 'What the heck is going on?'"

Barcellos emerged to see the smoky, hazy air that had overtaken the sky.

At around 11 a.m., the air quality index was at level 5, which suggests people should avoid outside activities. The poor air quality forced area high schools to cancel all outdoor games and practices on Wednesday. All outdoor sporting events were canceled by Merced Union High School District schools.

"Once the air quality reached a level five all outdoor activities had to be canceled," said Golden Valley athletic director Matt Thissen.

The smoke seen in Merced County is from all the fires burning in Northern California.

The Tubbs Fire in Napa County burned 27,000 acres as of Tuesday afternoon, according to the CalFire website. Also in Napa County, the Atlas Fire spread to 25,000 acres and the Patrick Fire burned up 1,000 acres. All three fires were burning out of control Tuesday, as were at least two other fires in Sonoma County.

A health caution was also issued Valley-wide on this by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District as smoke from the wildfires blazing around California drifted into Merced and surrounding areas.

Water polo, cross country and golf matches were postponed around Merced County. Many football teams are forced to practice indoors if there is a gym available or watch film.

"We're working on that right now," said Buhach Colony football coach Kevin Navarra. "I'm going to meet with our athletic director (Rich Cometta) to see if we have the option of coming back here in the evening. If not, we'll just have film session. We don't have access to the gym. We'll have to be creative and utilize the film time in smaller groups."

Some football teams like Merced and Los Banos practice at night on Wednesdays. They were unsure if the air quality will change this evening.

"Fortunately for us, we don't start until 5:30 in the weight room," said Merced coach Rob Scheidt. "We will check the air quality at that point and see where we're at and make a decision. If we're at a level four or above we can't practice."

Many school districts canceled outdoor games on Wednesday throughout the Sac-Joaquin Section including Modesto City Schools, Modesto Christian School, Elk Grove Unified School District, San Juan Unified School District and Fairfield-Suisun School District. The Napa Valley Unified School District has canceled all activities for the week.

"Luckily for us it was a light day," said El Capitan athletic director Lou Souza. "We just had water polo and golf."

Barcellos said he had a busy morning on the phone.

“You’ve got to deal with transportation, bus drivers, officials,” Barcellos said. “We know we’re not the only ones canceling games. So you want to be able to get a hold of officials so you can reschedule the games. I have volunteers that help with the cross country. I want to make sure I don’t forget anyone. There were a lot of phone calls today.”