

Tulare County breathes in wildfire season

By Sheyanne N Romero

Visalia-Times Delta, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

The Detwiller Fire, burning east of Modesto near Lake McClure, has doubled in size in less than 24 hours – 7,100 acres. A cloud of smoke can be seen from Highway 99 in Fresno County.

But, the effects of the wildfire can be felt as far south as Tulare County.

Air quality in Tulare County is listed as moderate.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District released the following statement:

"Smoke from fires produce particulate matter 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."

There are 11 actively burning fires throughout the state, wrecking havoc on air quality.

Officials are urging residents to follow their doctor's orders and stay indoors, if at all possible.

The Detwiller Fire was sparked early Sunday afternoon near Detwiller Road in Mariposa County. In that time, the fire has destroyed one structure and damaged another.

Evacuations have been ordered for residents living near Hunters Valley Road, Detwiller Road, Bears Valley between Cotton Creek and Highway 49.

Roads are closed at Hunter Valley Access, Hunter Valley and Detwiller roads, Bear Valley Road at Mount Gains and Highway 49 North.

CAL FIRE officials have not released a containment estimate, as the fire spreads quickly.

Smoke from the Whitter, Alamo and Garza fires are also causing air quality concerns throughout the Valley. The Whittier Fire, which has destroyed 16 homes in Santa Barbara County, has burned more than 18,000 acres.

The Alamo Fire remains at 28,687 acres in San Luis Obispo and is reaching full containment with the help of hundreds of firefighters.

The Garza Fire, burning in Kings County, scorched 48,233 acres and is now 85 percent contained. More than 1,000 firefighters have responded to the fire that began on July 9, near Avenal.

"Smoke will likely remain visible as interior pockets of vegetation burn," CAL FIRE officials stated.

Additionally, smoke from the Schaeffer Fire in Tulare County is affecting air quality in the foothill and mountain areas, officials said.

The fire that started from a lightning strike in Sequoia National Forest in June is now 77 percent contained.

Evacuations in Mariposa underway, highways closed as firefighters battle Detwiler Fire

By Marc Benjamin and Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado

Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Wednesday, July 19, 2017

Evacuations here were underway Tuesday and Highways 140 and 49 were closed to traffic because of the growing Detwiler Fire.

The evacuation warning was called shortly after noon Tuesday, when the fire jumped the highways and roared to the Mount Bullion and Highway 49 cutoff, a couple miles north of Mariposa.

With winds whipping up as they typically do in the mid-afternoon, concern was growing among fire officials that the fire would cross Agua Fria Road, then Yaqui Gulch Road to the southeast. If that happens, it can move swiftly east toward Mariposa County Fairgrounds two miles away.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared an emergency Tuesday afternoon.

As of Tuesday evening, the fire had grown to 25,000 acres. The blaze is threatening hundreds of homes. Eight structures have been destroyed and one damaged.

Cal Fire officials said the fire was spreading at a moderate pace, about 1 mile per hour. Still, firefighters struggled to fight the blaze, which was only 5 percent contained.

"It's significantly larger than we expected," said Jordan Motta, a Cal Fire public information officer.

Evacuations were being extended to the Mormon Bar area, south of the fairgrounds by mid-afternoon. Former congressman George Radanovich, whose winery is south of Mariposa, was among those evacuating.

Evacuation centers are set up at EV Free Church in Oakhurst, Sierra Vista Presbyterian Church in Oakhurst and Cesar Chavez Junior High School in Planada. A Mariposa Elementary School evacuation center was moved because of the approaching fire.

As firefighters tried to keep the fire from breaking its lines, the concern was that a break could rush the flames toward Mariposa and Yosemite National Park, causing damage similar in scale to the 2013 Rim Fire, which gobbled up a quarter-million acres inside and outside the park. Power in Yosemite was on and off all day Tuesday as the fire encroached on the park's main source of power, which follows the Merced River through Mariposa to Merced. The park remained open. Visitors were advised to avoid Highway 140, which was closed from the fire, and to use Highways 41 and 120 instead.

The fire began Sunday in Hunters Valley near Lake McClure and has doubled in size each night since. Nearly 1,000 firefighters from across the state were fighting the flames as of Tuesday afternoon using 100 engines and nine air tankers, including several jets.

Blow to tourism

In the town of Mariposa, the Detwiler Fire was causing headaches for business owners and residents who normally would be basking in the busiest time of year for tourism.

Business owners were trying to help customers and to accommodate employees who had to leave work because they have to pack up their homes.

"There are a lot of customers coming in and stocking up and our employees are leaving because they are being evacuated," said Stephanie Martins, who works at the Pioneer Market near Highways 49 and 140 in Mariposa. "A lot of customers and not a lot of employees."

And those leaving are stocking up, she said.

"They want water, pet food, fruits and vegetables and non-perishables," Martins said.

People were stocking up at Grizzly Gas on Highway 140, though the main highways are closed.

"I got everybody coming in here," clerk Brian Redding said.

At Comfort Inn in downtown Mariposa, patrons were checking out and others were calling about their reservations, said Monica Martin, a front desk clerk.

"People are trying to leave and find lodging for other people," she said.

As she put the phone down, a customer was overheard saying "we may be getting an evacuation notice at any time."

Martin added: "We will try to help as best we can ... this is really crazy right now."

Hectic pace for residents

As ash rained down on Mariposa and the skies gradually darkened with smoke, residents hurried in all directions to place their most important possessions in cars to leave town.

Several dozen people were getting help at the makeshift evacuation center set up by the Red Cross at Mariposa Elementary School, which was later closed.

Joey Street, 49, a tree trimmer who's lived in Mariposa for about 25 years, was among them, waiting to be bused to another evacuation center in Oakhurst.

"(Firefighters) don't have control of it now, so they'd better be safe than sorry," Street said. He was helping other people at the evacuation center load items onto their cars. The conditions significantly worsened from Monday to Tuesday, he said.

"Yesterday it didn't look too bad, today you can't even see Mt. Bullion right now, which tells me it's getting closer," Street said. "More ash falling from the sky tells me it's getting closer."

Around 12:30 p.m., Kathleen Leavitt, 49, closed her shop, Mariposa Shipping Co., because she got a warning on her phone that the town would need to evacuate.

"With the town on 'evacuation,' I don't want to keep my employees here," Leavitt said. "And I do want to, if it gets worse, go and be able to get into my house."

Leavitt said she lives in a stucco home and was going to make sure embers were not falling on her yard. She lives only with her pet dog and some chickens, but she wasn't planning on immediate evacuation like others.

"I hope to heck they're going to get a bunch of aircraft back in here and drop a lot of retardant and keep (the fire) from hitting town," she said. "They've got a whole bunch of resources."

But Leavitt admitted that if the fire climbed over the mountain ridge near Mariposa, "all bets are off."

Several businesses closed early and then came the power outages. Hardly anyone was walking in town and gas stations were crowded with residents hitting the road.

Mark Couch, 47, who is homeless, said he had been staying at Mariposa's Heritage House, a home for recovering addicts and homeless people.

He said he was up at 6 a.m. Tuesday and that it felt like any other day. Then he was told he needed to plan on leaving town. He was also at the evacuation center at the elementary school, where he was fed. He said his ride out of town will be the bus.

"I hope (the fire) is put out as soon as possible," Couch said. "We don't need to lose Mariposa, because this is about the only place I've got."

Evacuated areas

Evacuations were underway in:

- Town of Mariposa;
- Mount Bullion area;
- Mount Bullion Ridge Road, from Highway 49 north to CYA Road;
- Old Toll Road between Corbett Creek and Highway 49 north, including Corbett Creek Road; Mount Gains Road to No. 9 Road;
- Mount Bullion Cutoff Road to Agua Fria Road from Highway 49 north to Highway 140; Highway 49 north to Baxby Ridge Road to Agua Fria Road;
- Highway 49 north from Mount Bullion Ridge Road to Old Toll Road;
- Pendola Garden Road from Highway 49 north to Old Toll Road.

For current road closures and evacuations, see www.fire.ca.gov/current_incidents/incidentdetails/Index/1672.

Fouling the air

Plumes of smoke from the Detwiler Fire were visible as far away as Fresno.

Air quality throughout the Valley has been impacted by the growing fire, forcing the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health caution as ash continues to fall from the sky.

What the approved cap-and-trade package could mean to Central Valley residents

By Ken Carlson

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 18, 2017

Legislation approved Monday by the state lawmakers will extend the cap-and-trade program to combat global warming, despite concerns it could raise gasoline prices.

A companion bill, AB 617, will require more localized monitoring of air pollution and calls for the state Air Resources Board to establish minimum standards in 2018 for reducing toxic air contaminants in San Joaquin Valley communities.

Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said a key battle will occur in the next few weeks as the Legislature approves the state budget and allocates cap-and-trade funding for reducing emissions in the Valley and other high-pollution areas such as Southern California.

The district's eight-county region needs funding to cut emissions from mobile sources including diesel trucks, buses and farm equipment, Sadredin said.

The district is hoping for \$200 million to \$400 million for helping owners to buy vehicles with cleaner-burning engines. "We need about \$1 billion a year to replace 280,000 trucks," Sadredin said. "The newer trucks are 90 percent cleaner."

California's cap-and-trade program is extended until 2030 in a continued effort to bring down carbon dioxide emissions from major industries. The state hopes to reduce the emissions to the 1990 level by 2020 and use the extension of cap-and-trade to help cut emissions another 40 percent by 2030.

Under the California system, carbon dioxide emissions, blamed for rising global temperatures, are capped and companies are required to buy permits for the greenhouse gases they emit. Companies can trade for more capacity through a state auction, but the costs are intended to create incentives for reducing their carbon footprint.

To win the necessary votes, the legislation was crafted so that the local air districts and the state are not duplicating efforts in regulating CO2 emissions from large polluters.

Assemblyman Adam Gray, D-Merced, cited rising fuel costs in opposing renewal of the cap-and-trade program. He cited one estimate of a \$1-per-gallon increase in gasoline prices tied to renewal of cap and trade, but estimates have varied.

Since the California Global Warming Solutions Act passed in 2006, "Sacramento has failed to make good on promises to invest in disadvantaged communities," Gray said in a statement. "Instead, cap and trade has served as a tax on the working families of Merced, Ceres, Los Banos and other communities like them. It has increased the price of gasoline and energy which has a disproportionate impact on people living in inland California."

Sen. Tom Berryhill, R-Twain Harte, was the only Republican to support the measure in Monday's Senate vote. Berryhill said he decided to break with fellow Republicans after being assured a manufacturers' tax credit applied to the agricultural industry.

The California Farm Bureau Federation, Agricultural Council of California and other groups representing the farming industry supported the bill.

Sadredin said part of the legislative package will require community monitoring of local sources of pollution. Additional monitors could be installed in Modesto to get a better read on sources of pollution such as the Gallo glass plant. The Air Resources Board will analyze the data and set minimum standards for local air districts to implement measures to reduce the harmful pollutants.

Kevin Hamilton, executive director of the Central California Asthma Collaborative in Fresno, said the group favors some measures in AB 617, but had hoped the bill would eliminate the emission reduction credit system. For years, the system has allowed companies to use credits on old equipment to meet requirements, Hamilton said.

“We really wanted this system fixed and saw this bill as an opportunity to do that,” Hamilton said. “Apparently, you can buy these credits and use them forever.”

The respiratory therapist, who previously worked in health clinics, said for decades he saw asthma patients who suffered from effects of dirty air, regardless of their income or ethnicity. “They were sick at higher rates than we saw in other areas of the country,” Hamilton said.

Right now, pollution monitors are not close enough to facilities putting nitrogen oxide, particles and other contaminants into the air. “In places north and south of Fresno, we don’t know what the pollution looks like in those communities,” Hamilton said.

More information could allow the air district to address the issues and reduce residents’ exposure to those pollutants.