

Is smoke from wildfires affecting Bakersfield?

By Steven Mayer

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Look! Up in the sky! It's a cloud. It's a smog bank.

It's wildfire smoke.

Bill Peterson, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Hanford station said earlier this week that moderate air flow from the south-southwest last week helped keep smoke from the Ferguson fire, a major wildfire burning on the western edge of Yosemite National Park, from heavily impacting Bakersfield.

But that may be changing. A smoky haze has been hanging high over Bakersfield Friday morning. And that can mean dangerous air quality.

It is important to note that if you can smell smoke and see ash, it is an indication that you should be treating air quality conditions as Level 4 "unhealthy" or higher, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

While local air monitors weren't reporting high pollution levels Friday, air officials warned conditions could still be unhealthy. That's because the district's air monitors are designed to detect fine particulates found in tailpipe and industry emissions, which are not visible to the human eye. Ash particles from wildfires are much larger in size and will not be detected by district monitors. So a neighborhood or area could be covered in ash, even as fine particulate monitors reflect moderate readings.

Chemicals emitted from wildfires can also be precursors to ozone pollution, or smog. So the fires may result in elevated summer ozone, as well. On Friday, ozone levels reached 82 parts per billion, into Level 3, which is unhealthy for sensitive groups.

The Ferguson Fire, now in its 15th day, started July 13 in the Sierra National Forest. As of early afternoon Friday, the fire had consumed 45,911 acres with 29 percent containment. More than 3,800 firefighters and other personnel were engaged in battling the blaze.

Watch for more on this story as the day progresses.