

Ferguson Fire containment advancing, but alert for unhealthy air in Valley continues

By Jim Guy

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Firefighters battling the Ferguson Fire near Yosemite National Park advanced containment of the blaze to 39 percent Wednesday morning as the fire footprint increased 4,809 acres overnight.

The fire, which erupted July 13, has burned 63,883 acres, authorities reported. The cause remains under investigation.

Air quality continued to be degraded in the Fresno area as the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reported that the level of fine particulate matter was unhealthy for sensitive groups.

A total of 3,558 firefighters are working to suppress the fire. There have been two deaths on the fire lines and nine others have been injured.

Firefighters are setting back fires along the Wawona Road, toward Wawona Campground and working to contain the fire as it spreads southeast from El Portal, and scouting locations to build more lines to contain the fire, according to a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Forestry.

The closure of Yosemite Valley, Wawona Road, the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, the Merced Grove of Giant Sequoias, Hetch Hetchy, and other areas was extended through Aug. 5, the forest service said Wednesday.

In the Stanislaus National Forest, officials closed several roads and trails in the Groveland Ranger District, from Ferguson Ridge in the South to Pilot Ridge in the north. The closure is expected to continue until Sept. 30.

Smoke from Ferguson fire causing air quality to reach danger level

By Lewis Griswold

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Smoke from the Ferguson Fire caused air quality in Fresno to reach the danger zone for a few hours Tuesday.

Early Tuesday, soot from the fire caused one measure of air quality to reach Level 5, meaning "No outdoor activity. All activities should be moved indoors," according to advice from the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District.

Fine particulate matter known as PM 2.5, which can get into the bloodstream via breathing and cause health problems, exceeded 75 micrograms per cubic meter for four one-hour periods from midnight to 4 a.m. Tuesday.

The high reading was registered by the central Fresno air monitor.

The measure then dropped to a lower level at which sensitive individuals should stay indoors and people should exercise indoors or limit vigorous activity outdoors. After noon, the risk level fell to safer Levels 3 and 2.

Also Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency issued an Air Quality Index map showing bad air coming to Fresno from the Ferguson Fire early Tuesday.

Although the central San Joaquin Valley is a federal non-attainment area for air pollution, high PM 2.5 values caused by wildfire emissions do not count against the region, said Jaime Holt, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The EPA deems wildland fires to be "exceptional events," she said.

Meanwhile, the Valley has been experiencing high ozone numbers at air monitoring stations most of the month, according to preliminary data from the California Air Resources Board. Ozone is a precursor to smog.

High ozone numbers can be attributed to wildfires, but the numbers must be analyzed to figure out what caused them, as summer is the typical ozone season, Holt said.

"It is not as cut and dry as the high PM 2.5 readings," she said.

On July 25, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a "health cautionary statement" about smoke from the Ferguson Fire in Mariposa County and other fires.

"Smoke from wildfires produces particulate matter which can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke," the district said. "Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice. ... Anyone being exposed to poor air quality or wildfire smoke should move inside to an air-conditioned environment."