

Fresno-area smoke levels from wildfires off the chart. When will it get better?

By Carmen George

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020

Expect thick smoky skies and unhealthy air to hang over the central San Joaquin Valley for at least several more days, the National Weather Service at Hanford reported Monday morning.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an alert last week warning of “very unhealthy air quality” due to numerous California wildfires. That “health caution” will “remain in place until the fires are extinguished.”

Air monitors showed particulate matter in the air, PM 2.5, as off the charts Monday morning in Fresno and Merced. That’s above level 5, the worst air quality, when the Valley air district recommends everyone avoid outdoor activity.

Air officials named nine wildfires – including the SCU Lightning Complex, Hills Fire, CZU August Lightning Complex and the Lake Fire – as the likely air-pollution culprits pumping smoke into Fresno, Madera, Tulare, Kings, Merced, Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Kern counties.

Looking forward, NWS meteorologists on Monday said there is a chance of thunderstorms in the High Sierra into the afternoon, “otherwise, expect dry conditions with temperatures right around normal through the end of the week.”

A separate storm this weekend isn’t expected to bring the Valley rain, but might help blow some smoke out of the region.

Northern California officials have also reported unhealthy air conditions from wildfire smoke.

Protect yourself from bad air

Despite what monitor readings say, experts warned: “If you smell smoke or see falling ash in your immediate vicinity, consider air quality ‘unhealthy.’”

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reminds people to take air quality seriously: “PM pollution can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.”

Those with respiratory conditions, including COVID-19, along with young children and the elderly are likely to be the most affected by unhealthy air, officials said.

“Anyone experiencing poor air quality due to wildfire smoke should move indoors, to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed,” the air district said. “The common cloth and paper masks individuals are wearing due to COVID-19 concerns may not protect them from wildfire smoke.”

Thousands allowed to bypass environmental rules in pandemic

By Cathy Bussewitz, Ellen Knickmeyer, John Flesher, Matthew Brown and Michael Casey, Associated Press

The Business Journal, Monday, August 24, 2020

Thousands of oil and gas operations, government facilities and other sites won permission to stop monitoring for hazardous emissions or otherwise bypass rules intended to protect health and the environment because of the coronavirus outbreak, The Associated Press has found.

The result: approval for less environmental monitoring at some Texas refineries and at an army depot dismantling warheads armed with nerve gas in Kentucky, manure piling up and the mass disposal of livestock carcasses at farms in Iowa and Minnesota, and other risks to communities as governments eased enforcement over smokestacks, medical waste shipments, sewage plants, oilfields and chemical plants.

The Trump administration paved the way for the reduced monitoring on March 26 after being pressured by the oil and gas industry, which said lockdowns and social distancing during the pandemic made it

difficult to comply with anti-pollution rules. States are responsible for much of the oversight of federal environmental laws, and many followed with leniency policies of their own.

AP's two-month review found that waivers were granted in more than 3,000 cases, representing the overwhelming majority of requests citing the outbreak. Hundreds of requests were approved for oil and gas companies.

AP reached out to all 50 states citing open-records laws; all but one, New York, provided at least partial information, reporting the data in differing ways and with varying level of detail.

Almost all those requesting waivers told regulators they did so to minimize risks for workers and the public during a pandemic — although a handful reported they were trying to cut costs.

The Environmental Protection Agency says the waivers do not authorize recipients to exceed pollution limits. Regulators will continue pursuing those who "did not act responsibly under the circumstances," EPA spokesman James Hewitt said in an email.

But environmentalists and public health experts say it may be impossible to fully determine the impact of the country's first extended, national environmental enforcement clemency because monitoring oversight was relaxed. "The harm from this policy is already done," said Cynthia Giles, EPA's former assistant administrator under the Obama administration.

EPA has said it will end the COVID enforcement clemency this month.

Refinery giant Marathon Petroleum, already struggling financially before the pandemic, was one of the most aggressive in seeking to dial back its environmental monitoring. On the same day EPA announced its new policy, the Ohio-based company asked Indiana officials for relief from its leak detection, groundwater sampling, spill prevention, emissions testing and hazardous waste responsibilities at its facilities statewide.

"We believe that by taking these measures, we can do our part to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus," Tim Peterkoski, environmental auditing and processes manager for Marathon Petroleum, told the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

Marathon also pushed for and was granted permission to skip environmental tests at many of its refineries and gas stations in California, Michigan, North Dakota and Texas.

Spokesman Jamal Kheiry said Marathon sought broad regulatory relief early in the pandemic, when it was uncertain how long lockdowns would last or how its operations would be affected. But the company continued emissions monitoring and other activities and usually met deadlines, he said.

Penny Aucoin, a resident of New Mexico's oil-rich Permian Basin, said since the pandemic, she and her husband have spent days begging regulators to investigate surges of noxious gas or hisses that they feared could signal a dangerous leak from one of the many oil and gas companies operating near their mobile home.

"There's nobody watching," Aucoin said. "A lot of stuff is going wrong. And there's nobody to fix it."

Maddy Hayden, New Mexico's environmental spokesperson, said her agency stopped in-person investigations of citizen air-quality complaints from March to May to protect staff and the public but stood ready to respond to emergencies.

Almost every state reported fielding requests from industries and local governments to cut back on compliance. Many were for activities like delaying in-person training or submitting records by email rather than paper. Others, however, were requests for temporary exemptions or extensions on monitoring and repairs to stop the flow of harmful soot, toxic compounds, disease-carrying contaminants or heavy metals, AP found.

Regulators, for example, waived in-person inspections at parts of a former nuclear test site in Nevada, switching to drive-by checks.

North Carolina allowed Chemours Co., which is cleaning up dangerous PFAS industrial compounds in drinking water, to pause sampling of residential wells because it would require entering elderly residents' homes.

Saint-Gobain, whose New Hampshire plant has been linked by the state to water contaminated with PFAS chemicals, has requested delaying smokestack upgrades that would address the problem. The company says the delays are necessary partly due to problems the company's suppliers and contractors have faced because of the coronavirus.

State Rep. Rosemarie Rung, a Democrat who uses bottled water due to the PFAS contamination, said the company was "just dragging their feet."

The AP's findings run counter to statements in late June by Susan Bodine, EPA's assistant administrator for enforcement, who told lawmakers the pandemic was not causing "a significant impact on routine compliance, monitoring and reporting" and that industry wasn't widely seeking relief from monitoring.

A separate analysis of EPA enforcement data shows 40% fewer tests of smokestacks were conducted in March and April compared with the same period last year, according to the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, a network of academics and non-profits.

Hewitt, the EPA spokesman, said the agency did not know why there were fewer tests but pointed to the plunge in economic activity accompanying the pandemic, and said closed facilities would have been unable to test smokestacks.

Oil and gas companies received a green light to skip dozens of scheduled tests and inspections critical for ensuring safe operations, such as temporarily halting or delaying tests for leaks or checking on tank seals, flare stacks, emissions monitoring systems or engine performance, which could raise the risk of explosions.

Taken together, the missed inspections for leaks could add hundreds or thousands of tons of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, and could be making refinery work more dangerous, said Coyne Gibson, a former oil and gas engineer and a member of the Big Bend Conservation Alliance in Texas.

"The whole point of leak detection is to avoid people being harmed from a leak of toxic material," said Victor Flatt, environmental law professor at the University of Houston. "If you suspend leak detection, you don't even know if it's happening."

Monitoring and other pollution regulations often are depicted as legally mandated paperwork requirements, said Philip J. Landrigan, a biology professor and director of the Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good at Boston College. But air pollution alone increases risks of heart disease, stroke, lung disease and premature births, and when environmental standards are not held to, "as surely as night follows day there are going to be an increased number of deaths from those causes," Landrigan said.

EPA's policy was "primarily related to record keeping, training and flexibility in the timing of routine inspections where there may have been limited personnel or capabilities due to COVID-19," said Frank Macchiarola, senior vice president at The American Petroleum Institute, which pushed for the policy. He maintained the industry's pollution control equipment continues to operate.

In North Dakota, regulators granted Oklahoma-based ONEOK's request to bypass groundwater sampling at its natural gas liquids processing plant in Garden Creek, where regulators said at least 837,000 gallons of natural gas liquids have spilled from a leak since 2015.

ONEOK skipped sampling because of safety concerns about third-party contractors traveling during the pandemic, and the company resumed sampling in June, spokesman Brad Borrer said.

Some states were generous with exemptions. Arkansas granted a blanket, months-long waiver to oil and gas companies for safety testing of temporarily abandoned wells and other activities.

Alaska authorized delayed inspections at dozens of massive tanks used to store petroleum, and let companies defer drills designed to ensure they can quickly respond to major oil spills. It also said the state would take no action against companies for not complying with some air pollution regulations in instances related to COVID-19.

In Wyoming, regulators gave breaks on air emissions rules in about 300 cases, mostly for oil and gas companies, including ExxonMobil and Sinclair.

It wasn't just huge industry that requested the exemptions.

As supply chains broke down at the start of the outbreak, Minnesota granted more than 90 waivers on how many animals could be stuffed into feedlots, potentially raising risks of water contamination from manure.

Farms and landfills in Iowa received variances on animal disposal regulations to allow for the mass burial and composting of livestock.

Michigan approved or was reviewing requests from several cities to delay replacing lead water pipes or testing for lead, spurred in some instances by the Flint water crisis.

Eric Schaeffer, a former director of EPA's office of civil enforcement under President George W. Bush, dismissed assurances from governments that reducing monitoring during the outbreak wouldn't lead to a surge in pollutants.

"It's like saying we're going to remove the radar guns and remove speedometers, but you still have to comply with the speed limit," said Schaeffer, now head of the Environmental Integrity Project advocacy group. "That doesn't make sense."

Poor air quality not going anywhere, anytime soon

By Quinn Wilson

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020

The hazy horizon over much of Kern County likely won't be going anywhere anytime soon, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Jessica Olsen, program manager for the district, said there's the potential for a high pressure front to help "raise the cap" on smoke over the Central Valley on Wednesday or Thursday. However, that will only be a temporary reprieve before more smoke will likely take its place from the northwest, she said.

"I would love for our forecast to be better news," Olsen said. "The lifting of the cap might help the firefighters (battling fires near the Bay Area). If the fires are still burning, (the smoke) could be here for the foreseeable future."

Olsen estimates the smoke will hang around Kern County for at least another week, if not longer.

Both her and Heather Heinks, the district's outreach and communications manager, said they'd never seen this level of smoke have the impact on the high number of air quality monitors and counties for this long.

"We may be in for a small break and then back to similar air quality values," Heinks said. "The big issue is that we live in a bowl and wind comes from the northwest from the ocean. With the major complex fires in that area, smoke is just going to keep getting carried across the valley."

As of Monday, both fires near the Bay Area that are about 350,000 acres each in size — the LNU and the SCU lightning complex fires — continued to rage on with less than 25 percent containment on each.

With prolonged poor air quality exposure plaguing the Central Valley and a large portion of the state, health concerns have been at the forefront people's minds.

"At this point, we tell everyone — no matter if you're healthy or have underlying health issues — get yourself into a cool indoor filtered environment," Olsen said. "Of course if you have other underlying health issues, don't go outside but it's everyone that should be staying indoors."

"(The smoke) can irritate your lungs, worsen any respiratory issues and cause headaches."

In a news release Monday, the Asthma Coalition of Kern County shared health and safety tips pertaining to wildfire smoke. The coalition said the smoke and ash can be triggers for asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis and increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

"Individuals with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of (particulate matter) exposure," the coalition said.

For those who struggle with asthma, the coalition recommended taking steps to cope with stress and anxiety, having a 30-day supply of non-prescription medications and supplies, disinfecting and cleaning surfaces regularly and following an asthma action plan.

Fortunately, area hospitals haven't reported increases of patients in emergency rooms for respiratory-related issues stemming from the poor air quality.

"There's been no real uptick," said Laura Sabedra, manager of marketing and communications at Bakersfield Heart Hospital. "Our emergency department is full serviced and I know we can answer any inquiries through our website or through Facebook."

Last week, Michelle Corson, spokeswoman for the Kern County Public Health Services Department, said that everyone should be aware of the health impacts smoke can have. She underscored that "vulnerable residents" which includes children, pregnant women, older adults and those with existing lung or heart conditions, are even more susceptible.

Olsen and Heinks emphasized that despite air quality getting slightly better locally, it is still "really bad."

"Friday and Saturday were the worst," Olsen said. "It has gotten a little better, but it's still the highest we've ever seen. I don't want people to let their guard down."

Residents can see current air quality conditions online at www.valleyair.org/myraan/ and can also check out a variety of resources regarding the current wildfires at valleyair.org/wildfires/.

California wildfires: Prepare to be away from home for days

By Janie Har, Associated Press

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — California fire officials are cautiously optimistic after dodging a major lightning storm, but they are pleading with residents to stay out of evacuation zones and prepare for days away from home as three massive San Francisco Bay Area wildfires rage on, suffocating the region with smoky air.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said this week will be critical as more than 14,000 firefighters battle 17 major fire complexes, largely in Northern California where wildfires have surrounded the city of San Francisco on three sides, singeing coastal redwoods that have never been burned. The wildfires, all caused by lightning, have been burning for a week.

"We are dealing with different climate conditions that are precipitating in fires the likes we haven't seen in modern recorded history," he said Monday.

A warning about dry lightning and winds that could have sparked more fires was lifted for the San Francisco Bay Area on Monday morning, a huge relief to fire commanders who said the weather was aiding their efforts as firefighters pour in from out of state. Temperatures are expected to be hot again this week.

At an evening news conference, officials said progress has been made against a huge fire in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties with the help of rain Sunday evening and calmer weather Monday.

"With the clear air, we were able to fly a lot more aircraft," said Mark Brunton, operations chief with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, of Cal Fire.

Helicopters dropped 200,000 gallons (over 757,082 litres) of water on the blaze, he said, calling it "the best day yet."

Fire lines on the fire's southern border appeared to be holding, he said.

But officials warned the danger was far from over and called the fires complex and large. They admonished residents to stay out of evacuated areas and warned looters they'll be arrested.

"It is highly dangerous in there still," Jonathan Cox, a Cal Fire deputy fire chief, said of the blaze north of Santa Cruz. "We have bridges that have failed, old wooden bridges that have failed that may not appear failed" to drivers.

Not knowing whether her home is still standing is the hardest part, says Barbara Brandt, a Boulder Creek resident who fled the Santa Cruz area fire Tuesday night.

"The last few days have been a roller coaster," she said. "You get conflicting reports. You don't know what your life is going to be like. We don't know when we can go back, but we know it's not going to be for a long time."

When Brandt evacuated with her 94-year-old father, they figured the order was just a precaution. It was smoky, but not the massive complex of fires it is now. Her cats weren't inside so she left without them, thinking they'd be back soon.

She went back Wednesday to put her cats in the house and feed her chickens. On Thursday, she returned yet again — this time to grab the cats.

North of San Francisco in wine country, Tim Ireland, 48, and Sherri Johnston, 47, were heading back to their destroyed Healdsburg home in Sonoma County to look for one of their dogs. The dog refused to get into the car when they fled.

"We only got out with a car full of clothes, firearms, safe, all our electronic devices, one dog, and two cats," he said.

California has had more than 13,000 lightning strikes since Aug. 15, sparking more than 600 wildfires statewide that have burned over 1,875 square miles (4,856 square kilometers), said Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director with Cal Fire.

The burn area is bigger than Rhode Island and not quite the size of Delaware.

More than 1,200 buildings have been destroyed. The number is bound to increase as residents are allowed back into neighborhoods and inspectors get a better look.

Another body was found Sunday from that wildfire, bringing the death count from the blazes to seven. Santa Cruz authorities said Tad Jones, 73, was found in Last Chance, a remote area. He was found on a trail near his van. Police had to use a helicopter to reach the area of roughly 40 homes at the end of a windy, steep dirt road north of Santa Cruz.

Among the victims was 70-year-old Mary Hintemeyer, of the city of Winters, her boyfriend Leo McDermott, and his son, Tom, said Hintemeyer's son, Robert McNeal.

McNeal told KPIX-TV that he lost contact with his mother Tuesday night as the fires sped up. He said his mother had tried to go into town earlier that day but turned back at a roadblock where authorities said if she went through she wouldn't be allowed back. She returned home to get her boyfriend, who was in a wheelchair.

Authorities found their remains among the ruins on the Napa County property Wednesday, he said.

"Just get out, don't wait," McNeal told the TV station, urging people to follow evacuation orders. "If you think it's going to be too much to get your sprinklers on before you get out of there, forget those too. Forget it. Get out. Just get out. It ain't worth it."

A utility worker found unresponsive in his vehicle in Solano County while assisting fire crews also died last week, but authorities have not yet released a cause of death.

Berlant, with Cal Fire, said about 170,000 people remain evacuated after about 50,000 were allowed back into their homes starting Sunday.

Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Chris Clark said several people were arrested, including a man who had \$5,000 and some items in his car, and a woman, not a local, "seen walking around with a backpack" in a closed area.

The governor on Monday called reports of looting "repugnant" and applauded prosecutors' tough stance.

The wine country fire north of San Francisco and another southeast of the city burning in seven counties grew within a week to be two of the three largest fires in state history, each scorching about 550 square miles (1,425 square kilometers).

The wine country fire has been the most deadly and destructive blaze, accounting for five deaths and destroying more than 900 buildings. It is 25% contained.

Crews keep working to pen in huge California wildfires

By Martha Mendoza and Janie Har, Associated Press
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Aug 25, 2020

SCOTTS VALLEY, Calif. (AP) — Aided by weather and reinforcements, firefighters were cautiously optimistic Tuesday about their progress to pen in California wildfires that have killed at least seven people and burned more than 1,200 homes and other buildings.

A warning about dry lightning and strong winds that could spark more fires was lifted for the San Francisco Bay Area on Monday morning, a huge relief to commanders battling three enormous blazes in the area and in California's wine country north of San Francisco.

The deadliest and most destructive of the three in the wine country had containment lines around 25 percent of it that serve to prevent fires from burning more land.

Officials said progress was also made against a fire in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties with the help of rain Sunday evening and calmer weather Monday. The 123-square-mile (318.5-square-kilometer) fire was 17% surrounded after destroying 330 structures. Some 25,000 structures remained threatened.

"The past couple days we've seen significant progress in our firefight on this incident," said Mark Brunton, operations chief with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, which is known as Cal Fire. "The weather's really cooperating with us."

Helicopters dropped 200,000 gallons (over 757,082 litres) of water on the blaze, he said, calling it "the best day yet."

In addition to better weather, fire crews along with bulldozers and other equipment were arriving from other states.

But officials warned the danger was far from over and admonished residents to stay out of evacuated areas. Six people who returned to a restricted area south of San Francisco to check on their properties were surprised by fire and had to be rescued, the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office said.

Looters have been warned they'll be arrested, and some people have been taken into custody, including a man found with \$5,000 in his car, authorities said. Detectives were also investigating seven reports of missing people.

Evacuees tempted to return to check on their homes should think again, fire officials said.

"It is highly dangerous in there still," Jonathan Cox, a Cal Fire deputy chief, of the blaze north of Santa Cruz. "We have bridges that have failed, old wooden bridges that have failed that may not appear failed to people that they may drive on. It is not safe," he said.

An estimated 170,000 people are under evacuation orders and tens of thousands of homes remain under threat from fires around the state.

Elinor Slayer fled her home in the redwood-dotted mountain town of Boulder Creek north of Santa Cruz on Tuesday evening along with her four children when they started seeing burnt leaves and large pieces of ash.

"Luckily for me, I have a 13-year-old daughter who is very cautious about wildfires. We had bags packed already," said Slayer, 48. "We hadn't gotten an evacuation order yet but my daughter said, 'It's time to go.'"

The family is counting their blessings that everyone is safe and hoping their home is, too, Slayer said.

"We don't know what we're going to return to," Slayer said.

The siege of wildfires in the state has been astonishing, especially since California's peak fire season usually is during the hot, windy days of September and October.

In just a week, the wine country fire became the second-largest by size in recent California history, followed by another fire that has burned into seven counties and is just 15% contained.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said that at this time last year, California had about 4,300 wildfires that burned about 87.5 square miles (226.6 square kilometers), while the toll this year is 7,000 fires and nearly 2,200 square miles (5,698 square kilometers).

"We are dealing with different climate conditions that are precipitating in fires the likes we haven't seen in modern recorded history," he said Monday.

The fires are blamed for at least seven deaths, among them 70-year-old Mary Hintemeyer, her boyfriend Leo McDermott, and his son, Tom, said Hintemeyer's son, Robert McNeal.

McNeal told KPIX-TV that he lost contact with his mother Tuesday night as the fires sped up. He said his mother had tried to go into town earlier that day but turned back at a roadblock where authorities said if she went through she wouldn't be allowed back. She returned home to get her boyfriend, who was in a wheelchair.

Authorities found their remains among the ruins on the Napa County property Wednesday, he said.

"Just get out, don't wait," McNeal told the TV station, urging people to follow evacuation orders. "If you think it's going to be too much to get your sprinklers on before you get out of there, forget those too. Forget it. Get out. Just get out. It ain't worth it."

San Lorenzo and Scotts Valley CZU Fire Updates

Press Banner

Tracy Press, Monday, Aug. 24, 2020

From the County of Santa Cruz:

Evacuee Free Hotel Accommodations

Free hotel accommodations may be available to residents evacuated from Lightning Complex Fire evacuation areas. The Santa Cruz County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is working in coordination with the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department to secure hotel access as part of a state-wide response for community members impacted by fires.

The free hotel assistance program, a part of the federal disaster relief assistance, is available to those displaced by wildfire. Anyone in Santa Cruz County who has been evacuated from their home through official evacuation notice is eligible for free hotel program assistance, and proof of residency will be required. Hotels may allow pets but please verify prior to arrival. Transportation and food may be provided for those that qualify.

Participating hotels are located throughout the greater Bay Area. To apply for the program, displaced evacuees may go to an official County shelter site and request a program application form. Volunteer Emergency Services Team members will accept completed application forms in person.

For a list of current county shelter sites and locations to obtain an application, please visit <http://www.santacruzcounty.us/FireResources.aspx>. Evacuees are eligible whether or not they are staying in an official shelter.

The Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) is offering disaster assistance to California wildfire victims. The assistance is meant to supplement state, tribal and local recovery efforts for wildfires included in the State's emergency declaration.

Greetings from the Dominican Hospital Foundation Team

Our hearts are full, and our prayers are many for all those impacted by the recent fires in our communities, and with deep gratitude for the determination, strength and skill of the first responders who are dealing with this catastrophe for hours upon hours, day after day.

For those seeking the latest, most up-to-date information on the fire fight itself, this morning's online daily press briefing jointly conducted by the agencies responding to the CZU Lightning Complex Fire is well worth your time and laden with some good news and cautious optimism click here to view. In fact, as I

write this email, the sky outside my office is cloudless and blue. But, the battle is from over: the fire is still burning, and the total damage is still to be assessed (and sure to be devastating to many of our friends, neighbors and co-workers).

Our own Dominican Hospital staff has not been spared. Many have been evacuated, along with their families, and have been scrambling for temporary shelter, and experiencing the stress that goes with that difficult and tenuous situation. In many cases, once their family's immediate safety has been ensured, these folks have returned to work virtually and side-by-side with the hundreds and hundreds of dedicated staff present 24-7-365 to guarantee that Dominican Hospital is ready for any member of the community that needs us. As can be imagined, our Emergency Department has been busy, as has been the entire hospital; still, the hospital, as always, is ready for you and your loved ones.

As witnessed throughout the ongoing, continuing COVID-19 pandemic, we are blessed to have the steady, compassionate and uplifting leadership of Nanette Mickiewicz, MD, President/CEO at the helm of the hospital, along with an outstanding and resilient management team. This group inspires confidence that we can get through ANYTHING, and that safety and good care are never compromised despite the hardship caused by plague or pestilence.

While our primary purpose here is to connect and inform, we have received inquiries as to how friends might be able to help our community and hospital staff in need. To that end, monetary contributions can be made to our Frontline Spirit fund and/or Emergency Equipment & Preparedness fund online at <https://www.supportdominican.org/donate> or to our attention at Dominican Hospital Foundation, 1555 Soquel Drive, Santa Cruz, CA 95065. For other ways that you may help, please give us a call at (831)462-7712.

Should you or someone you care about need some special assistance due to these fires, please call us and we will try our level best to assist, or connect them with the appropriate agency or non-profit organization best suited to help.

In closing, I want to share a very meaningful reflection for these challenging times that our Vice President of Mission Integration, Sister Rita Eileen Dean, OP shared just yesterday with us all:

“God of Creation, we live in a world where both beauty and danger surround us. Receive our prayer for those affected by, and living in fear of, the wildfires across our homes. For all our neighbors who cannot find adequate food, safety, or shelter. For all who have lost their homes, and workplace. For all your glorious natural Creation that has been destroyed and is in harms' way. We pray and ask that you help heal the pain of all those affected. Strengthen with your presence for all who are numb with fear and distress. For those on the front lines, give them strength and endurance. These things we ask in your name. Amen.”

With my deepest gratitude,

Drew A. Gagner, MBA

Vice President & Chief Philanthropy Officer, Dominican Hospital Foundation

AIR QUALITY EVENTS GUIDANCE County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY: The recent unprecedented fires and dense smoke are the result of years of impacts brought on by climate change. The best public health strategy is to be aware that heavy smoke will be in our future and for people to prepare themselves, their home, their loved ones, and community for smoke events.

When heavy, dense smoke blankets the region, there is no one public health solution that can be widely applied.

PREPAREDNESS

- Stay informed by signing up for alerts from Cal Fire, your city or county, local air quality district, or local public health department.
- Weatherize homes and buildings in preparation for wildfires by replacing or refurbishing old leaky windows and doors; use caulking to seal the openings.

- Consider purchasing a non-ozone-producing air purifier (HEPA) to create a cleaner air room in your home, or consider purchasing a MERV 13 or greater filter for your HVAC system to be used when experiencing a heavy smoke event.
- Consider upgrading to an HVAC system that allows for both heating and cooling. Be sure it includes a mechanism to switch to “recirculate” to prevent smoke from entering the space.
- Create a personal, family, or group emergency plan, gather emergency supplies, and be ready to evacuate.

INDIVIDUALS WITH HEALTH CONDITIONS

- Individuals with health conditions should talk to their physicians to develop a personal plan for dealing with smoke.
- Elderly persons, pregnant individuals, children, and individuals with cardiovascular disease or respiratory illnesses are particularly susceptible to elevated air pollution levels and should take extra precautions to avoid exposure.
- Those with heart or lung disease, older adults, pregnant individuals, and children should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion, and should either reschedule outdoor activities or move them to another location. All individuals should avoid outdoor activity, including exercise, during air quality events.
- Elevated particulate matter in the air can trigger wheezing in those who suffer from asthma, emphysema, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), or other respiratory conditions.
- Asthmatics should follow their asthma management plan.
- Keep up to two weeks’ worth of extra medication on hand. Be ready with plans to treat asthma or diabetes when there is smoke.
- Individuals should contact their physician if they have cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms believed to be caused by smoke. Concerned individuals should consult their physician for personalized recommendations.
- Consider leaving the affected area if there is a prolonged heavy smoke event

DURING SMOKE EVENTS

- Shelter in place. Staying indoors with windows and doors closed, where air quality is better, is the best way to protect your health. During high heat and heavy smoke events, keep indoor air cool or visit an air-cooling center.
- Plan to go to a cleaner air location if you are unable to seal your home or if dense smoke occurs during hot weather events and you cannot stay in your home.
- If you are in an affected area and need to leave your home, ensure you practice physical distancing, cover your cough, wash your hands frequently, and always wear face coverings to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Set air conditioning units and car vent systems to re-circulate to prevent outside air from moving inside.
- Smoke can irritate the eyes and airways, causing cough, a dry scratchy throat, runny nose, trouble breathing, and irritated sinuses. Stay hydrated by drinking water during heavy smoke events.
- Avoid adding additional air pollution by curtailing activities, such as wood burning, lawn mowing, leaf blowing, driving, barbecuing, smoking, or other dust-producing activities. Avoid using hairspray and painting indoors. If possible, use the stove fan when cooking.

ABOUT MASKS

- COVID-19 is circulating in our community and the best way to protect yourself from the virus and poor air quality is to stay indoors. Face coverings should be worn if in proximity to others outside your household, both indoor and outdoor.
- Bandanas, cloth masks, and typical surgical masks do nothing to protect against wildfire smoke particles, but are recommended community wide to protect each other from COVID-19.
- Taking a mask on and off can cause fine particulate matter and virus particles to build up in the mask, which the wearer will breathe when it is put back on the face.

IRS provides tax relief for victims of California wildfires; Oct. 15 deadline, other dates extended to Dec. 15

Victims of the California wildfires that began Aug. 14 now have until Dec. 15, 2020 to file various individual and business tax returns and make tax payments, the Internal Revenue Service announced today.

The IRS is offering this relief to any area designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([FEMA](#)) as qualifying for individual assistance. Currently this includes Lake, Monterey, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Solano, Sonoma and Yolo counties in California, but taxpayers in localities added later to the disaster area will automatically receive the same filing and payment relief. The current list of eligible localities is always available on the [disaster relief](#) page on [IRS.gov](#).

The tax relief postpones various tax filing and payment deadlines that occurred starting on Aug. 14, 2020. As a result, affected individuals and businesses will have until Dec. 15, 2020, to file returns and pay any taxes that were originally due during this period. This means individuals who had a valid extension to file their 2019 return due to run out on Oct. 15, 2020, will now have until Dec. 15, 2020, to file. The IRS noted, however, that because tax payments related to these 2019 returns were due on July 15, 2020, those payments are not eligible for this relief.

The Dec. 15, 2020 deadline also applies to quarterly estimated income tax payments due on Sept. 15, 2020, and the quarterly payroll and excise tax returns normally due on Oct. 31, 2020. It also applies to tax-exempt organizations, operating on a calendar-year basis, that had a valid extension due to run out on Nov. 15, 2020. Businesses with extensions also have the additional time including, among others, calendar-year corporations whose 2019 extensions run out on Oct. 15, 2020.

In addition, penalties on payroll and excise tax deposits due after Aug. 14 and before Aug. 31, will be abated as long as the deposits are made by Aug. 31, 2020.

The IRS disaster relief page has details on other returns, payments and tax-related actions qualifying for the additional time.

The IRS automatically provides filing and penalty relief to any taxpayer with an IRS address of record located in the disaster area. Therefore, taxpayers do not need to contact the agency to get this relief. However, if an affected taxpayer receives a late filing or late payment penalty notice from the IRS that has an original or extended filing, payment or deposit due date falling within the postponement period, the taxpayer should call the number on the notice to have the penalty abated.

In addition, the IRS will work with any taxpayer who lives outside the disaster area but whose records necessary to meet a deadline occurring during the postponement period are located in the affected area. Taxpayers qualifying for relief who live outside the disaster area need to contact the IRS at 866-562-5227. This also includes workers assisting the relief activities who are affiliated with a recognized government or philanthropic organization.

Individuals and businesses in a federally declared disaster area who suffered uninsured or unreimbursed disaster-related losses can choose to claim them on either the return for the year the loss occurred (in this instance, the 2020 return normally filed next year), or the return for the prior year (2019). Be sure to write the FEMA declaration number – 4558 – for California on any return claiming a loss. See [Publication 547](#) for details.

The tax relief is part of a coordinated federal response to the damage caused by wildfires and is based on local damage assessments by FEMA. For information on disaster recovery, visit [disasterassistance.gov](#).

