

Please don't burn wood at home, air officials beseech residents in 'worst wildfire season'

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2020

It's been a tough summer and fall for local air quality, thanks to lung-choking smoke drifting into the valley from wildfires up and down the state.

Valley air officials are asking Bakersfield-area residents to refrain from adding to the problem by burning their own wood fires in hearth and home.

"We're once again asking San Joaquin Valley residents to continue the cooperation that made last winter the cleanest on record," said Samir Sheikh, executive director and air pollution control officer at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"To protect the health of their families and their neighbors, we encourage residents to not burn wood this winter and instead choose to upgrade to natural gas devices through our grant program," he said.

This week marks the beginning of the air district's annual Check Before You Burn program, which runs from Nov. 1 through the end of February, and whose goal is to gain valley residents' cooperation in protecting public health and improving wintertime air quality.

The regulations determine when residential wood burning will add dangerous levels of particulate matter to the valley's air, and regulates the use of wood-burning devices on those days. Wood-burning forecasts are issued by county or region each day.

Residents with no natural gas service or other form of heat are exempt from the rule, but only for indoor heating.

"Unlike wildfires, we have control over how we choose to heat our homes," said the district's Chief Communications Officer Jaime Holt. "It is critical to public health that we do not add to the unhealthy air quality created by wildfires."

So-called "Hot Spot" areas, including the valley portion of Kern County, have more stringent controls than some other valley counties because they historically have poorer air quality.

This year, as the program kicks off amid the worst wildfire season in California history and fires continue to impact valley air quality, air officials say residents should expect curtailments to begin early and continue through the 120-day period — with few "burn days" allowed, days that are referred to as "burning discouraged."

According to the district, last winter in the valley portion of Kern, there were only 22 "Burning discouraged" days. The other 98 were either "No burning for all" or "No burning unless registered."

That means, for the vast majority of residents, only about 18 percent of last year's 120-day Check Before You Burn season was it OK to burn.

Sure, those have clean-burning devices that are registered with the district may burn on more days, but the percentage is tiny. According to the district, the number of registered wood burning devices is only 1,514 valley wide. In Kern, the number is practically irrelevant at 84.

Check Before You Burn protects public health through the reduction of harmful PM 2.5, which are particulate matter 2.5 microns and smaller, so small they can become lodged in the lungs — and even migrate into the blood stream.

Residential wood burning is one of the valley's largest sources of wintertime PM 2.5 emissions and is shown to have a direct effect, especially on neighborhood air quality. If you can smell the smoke from your neighbor's fire — or your own — you are inhaling smoke, air officials warn.

Creek Fire update, Nov. 3: Here's what firefighters are up against, how to get help

By Manuela Tobias

Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2020

With containment at 70% and active fire activity reduced, teams battling the Creek Fire on Tuesday planned to focus on repairing the damages made by the fireline.

"The name of the game at this point is suppression repair," the U.S. Forest Service posted on the Sierra National Forest Facebook page on Monday night.

Firefighters constructed nearly 600 miles of fireline over the last two months, relying on bulldozers to clear vegetation. They are now using equipment to build water bars and pull foliage back to help the forest begin its return to normalcy, protect wildlife and discourage the formation of off-road vehicle trails.

About 60% of repairs had been completed, mostly on the west side of the fire, the U.S. Forest Service reported Tuesday. Repairs are still pending around Shaver and Huntington Lakes.

The Creek Fire has been burning since Sept. 4 around Big Creek, Huntington Lake, Shaver Lake, Mammoth Pool, and the San Joaquin River Canyon. It has burned 378,201 acres as of Tuesday morning, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Officials noted a 2,500-acre decrease in the fire area due to better mapping.

Dry brush and dead trees sprinkled among the rocky terrain are fueling the remaining flames, which are located in the northeast corner of the fire. Gusts of wind overnight fanned fire activity and increased smoke, which is expected to continue today, the U.S. Forest Service reported.

The main areas of concern are the Cold Creek drainage just north of Thomas A. Edison Lake, near Pincushion Creek, and in the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River. Firefighters can't access much of that rugged terrain, however, so the fire is mostly being monitored by ground and air, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

The cause remains under investigation. Full containment isn't expected until Nov. 15.

FEMA registration center opens

A Federal Emergency Management Agency Mobile Registration Intake Center will open Wednesday to serve Creek Fire survivors. The unit, located at the Heritage Center, 3115 N. Millbrook Ave., Fresno, will be open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., until further notice.

By registering with FEMA, the agency will determine what financial assistance residents are eligible for, including rent, home repair, home replacement, and other needs such as childcare, transportation, medical, funeral, or dental expenses.

You can also register online at DisasterAssistance.gov; by calling the FEMA Helpline at 800-621-3362 or downloading the FEMA app.

The deadline to register is Dec. 16.

SQF Complex Fire

The SQF Complex stood at 170,512 acres and 80% containment on Monday night. Ignited by lightning, the fires have been burning since at least Aug. 19. They have torched parts of the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument, Inyo National Forest, Sequoia National Park, and other lands.

A total of 250 people are battling the fire, compared with 878 people on the Creek Fire.

Firefighting efforts will be transferred on Wednesday from the Eastern Area Gold Incident Management Team to California Interagency Team 13, according to a Facebook post Tuesday morning. On Monday, crews constructed a fireline between several small lakes in the Hockett Meadow area to stop the fire from spreading north. Helicopters made water drops throughout the day.

The Rattlesnake Fire had some growth Monday where it meets the Castle Fire. Water drops helped to contain that growth, and firefighters today are focused on building 1,000 feet of fireline in that area, according to the same post.

Suppression repair is concentrated on the south part of the fire around Ponderosa and the Peppermint Area.

Full containment isn't expected until Nov. 20.

Sequoia National Park continues to have partial closures. The Mineral King area, some wilderness lands, and Sequoia National Forest Western Divide remain closed, while the Hume Lake and Kern River Ranger Districts are open.

Inyo National Forest is also open.

Cold front approaches

The National Weather Service on Tuesday reported warm temperatures and dry conditions would continue throughout the week in the San Joaquin Valley and predicted cooler weather by the week's end, with the potential for rain or snow over the Sierra.

The U.S. Forest Service said a significant drop in temperatures would arrive on Thursday night. The air quality is pegged at "unhealthy for sensitive groups" in Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, and Tulare counties. Fireplace or woodstove burning is prohibited unless registered in Merced.

Why stubborn Sierra wildfires continue to burn in Fresno, Madera and Tulare counties

By Tim Sheehan

Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Nov. 1, 2020

Critically dry fuels and an abundance of dead trees continue to fuel the Creek Fire and SQF Complex Fire in the Sierra Nevada range on the east side of the central San Joaquin Valley.

The Creek Fire, burning in the Sierra National Forest in eastern Fresno and Madera counties, is already the fourth-largest wildfire incident in California history. Its footprint was estimated at 380,345 acres as of Sunday morning. It is also among the 20 most destructive wildfires ever in the state, having destroyed more than 850 structures since it started Sept. 4.

The cause remains under investigation.

The SQF Complex in the Sequoia National Forest in eastern Tulare County stood at 170,165 acres as of Sunday morning, and ranks 18th in size among the state's historic wildfires dating to the early 1930s.

Incident commanders on both fires reported that dry vegetation, including dead trees and foliage on the forest floor, are feeding their modest growth.

The most active area of the Creek Fire is in the northeastern part of the fire perimeter, near Vermilion Cliffs north of Edison Lake in Fresno County. While the fire is not growing rapidly – adding only about 340 acres since Saturday – U.S. Forest Service fire behavior analyst Byron Kimball said, "There's still lots of potential for this fire to stand up and move around with winds coming."

More than 960 firefighters remain assigned to the Creek Fire, as well as dozens of excavators, bulldozers and other equipment being used to build and maintain a containment line around the fire. As of Sunday, lines had been constructed around 70% of the fire, and full containment is expected in about two weeks.

On the SQF Complex, lines have been built around 80% of the fire's perimeter, but full containment is not expected until mid- to late December.

The firefighting effort includes the Castle and Shotgun fires, both of which were sparked by lightning on Aug. 19 and soon combined into the SQF Complex. On Saturday, firefighters dropped water on the southern part of another fire, the Rattlesnake Fire, to keep it from moving south and joining with the Castle Fire.

A total of 335 people are assigned to the SQF Complex.

Check Before You Burn Program Begins Amid Wildfire Season

By CR Staff

Clovis Roundup, Friday, October 30, 2020

Starting November 1, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will begin the Check Before You Burn program.

The program runs through the end of February. The purpose is the reduction of PM 2.5 (particulate matter 2.5 microns and smaller) emissions from residential wood smoke.

Residential wood burning is one of the valley's largest source of wintertime PM 2.5 emissions and has been proven to be a direct effect on air quality in neighborhoods.

Residents are urged to heat their homes through other types of heating over the use of wood.

"It's been a very challenging summer and fall because of wildfires all over the state, with several still burning. We're asking San Joaquin Valley residents to continue the cooperation that made last winter the cleanest on record," said District Chief Communications Officer, Jaime Holt. "Unlike wildfires, we have control over how we choose to heat our homes. It is critical to public health that we do not add to the unhealthy air quality created by wildfires," She added.

The District will be releasing a daily, county-by-county wood burning declaration based on the air quality forecast.

For information, visit checkbeforeyouburn.org or call 1-800-SMOG INFO (766-4463).

Restrictions do not apply to natural gas devices. Valley residences in areas with no natural gas service or where wood burning are the sole source of heat, are exempt from the restriction. The exemption also applies to areas that rely on propane tanks.

Homes with outdoor wood burning devices will be subjected to daily restrictions, regardless of exemption status.

Residents with EPA Certified wood and pellet-fueled devices may register them with the Valley Air District in order to use them on "No Burning Unless Registered" days.

To register, visit www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration.

Valley residents are encouraged to participate in the Burn Cleaner incentive program, they could receive as much as \$3,000 to upgrade from older, higher-polluting wood stoves and open-hearth fireplaces to EPA Certified wood, pellet or natural gas inserts and free-standing stoves.

To participate in this program please visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner.

Residents should expect fewer days to use wood-burning fireplaces

Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Friday, October 30, 2020

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Check Before You Burn program starts on Sunday and air districts are telling Valley residents to expect a season of curtailments.

The program, aimed at improving wintertime air quality, is kicking off amid the worst wildfire season in California history. Wildfires continue to impact Valley air quality and residents should expect prohibitions on wood-burning fireplaces to start as soon as Sunday.

"It's been a very challenging summer and fall because of wildfires all over the state, with several still burning," said District Chief Communications Officer, Jaime Holt. "We're asking San Joaquin Valley residents to continue the cooperation that made last winter the cleanest on record. Unlike wildfires, we have control over how we choose to heat our homes. It is critical to public health that we do not add to the unhealthy air quality created by wildfires."

Check Before You Burn runs from Nov. 1 through the end of February every year, protecting public health through the reduction of harmful PM 2.5 (particulate matter 2.5 microns and smaller) emissions from residential wood smoke. During that time, the District releases a daily, county-by-county wood burning declaration based on the air quality forecast.

Residential wood burning is one of the Valley's largest sources of wintertime PM 2.5 emissions and shown to have a direct effect on neighborhood air quality. Members of all Valley communities are urged to heat their homes by means other than burning wood whenever possible and continue the trend of wintertime air quality improvement experienced in recent years.

Each day the District will release a wood-burning notification. The notifications are: No Burning For All; No Burning Unless Registered; and Burning Discouraged.

Curtailments do not apply to natural gas devices. Residences in areas with no natural gas service or where wood burning is the sole source of heat are exempt. Areas where propane tanks are used are considered to be without natural gas service. Outdoor wood burning devices at all residences are still subject to daily restrictions, regardless of exemption status.

Residents with EPA Certified wood and pellet-fueled devices may register them with the Valley Air District in order to use them on "No Burning Unless Registered" days. Find out how to register by visiting: www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration.

Valley residents are encouraged to participate in the Burn Cleaner incentive program and receive as much as \$3,000 to upgrade from older, higher-polluting wood stoves and open-hearth fireplaces to EPA Certified wood, pellet or natural gas inserts and free-standing stoves. To participate in this program please visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner.

Daily burn information is available by visiting checkbeforeyouburn.org, by calling 1-800-SMOG INFO (766-4463), or by downloading the free "Valley Air" app on your mobile device.