

Over 400 homes confirmed destroyed by 100,000-acre Caldor Fire. Highway 50 remains closed

By Michael McGough

Modesto Bee, Monday, Aug. 23, 2021

Crews achieved the first small amount of containment on the Caldor Fire over the weekend, but the wind-swept blaze continues to displace nearly 25,000 residents of Pollock Pines, Sly Park, Kyburz and surrounding parts of El Dorado County, with a long stretch of Highway 50 also shut down indefinitely.

Cal Fire and U.S. Forest Service officials reported the wildfire Monday morning at 106,562 acres (167 square miles) with 5% containment.

Firefighters fought red-flag fire weather conditions Saturday that pushed the fire to the northeast. The fire stayed active early in the day Sunday as a smoke inversion layer lifted, but activity was moderate overnight due to cooperating winds and better humidity levels, according to an incident report.

A spot fire on Saturday jumped to the north of Highway 50 near Kyburz. The bulk of the Caldor Fire remains south of Highway 50 and north of Highway 88, where it is burning through extremely dry fuels.

"Crews continue to encounter heavy down and drought-stressed fuels that are extremely receptive to spotting," Cal Fire and Forest Service officials wrote in Monday morning's update.

Caltrans on Friday shut down Highway 50 in both directions for a 46-mile stretch between Pollock Pines and Meyers, effectively severing traffic between Sacramento and the South Lake Tahoe area. Caltrans as of early Monday morning said the highway remains closed with no estimated time of reopening.

The Caldor Fire started Aug. 14, then roared to life early last week, ripping through the town of Grizzly Flats and prompting urgent evacuation orders in El Dorado County, quickly expanded to include Pollock Pines and surrounding areas along Highway 50 in the rugged Sierra Nevada foothills, up through the Kyburz area to the northeast.

An evacuation warning remains in place for northern portions of Amador County.

Two civilians located in Grizzly Flats with serious injuries were airlifted to hospitals, Cal Fire and Forest Service officials said. Their conditions were not known. Another man, believed to be among the evacuated in Grizzly Flats, remains missing.

At least 403 homes as well as a half-dozen businesses have been destroyed, according to the agencies' Monday morning incident report, many of them in Grizzly Flats. Damage assessment remains in progress, and another 17,500 structures are considered at risk.

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services says 24,500 people have been evacuated from El Dorado County. Fire and sheriff's officials don't yet have an estimated timeline for repopulating the area, as the fire continues to burn actively.

The Caldor Fire has spewed thick plumes of smoke, deteriorating air quality in different regions of California depending on wind direction. It's one of several major incidents currently burning, including the Dixie Fire near Plumas and Lassen counties as well as a pair of large fires near Trinity County.

Gusts pushing from the southeast as well as a Delta breeze helped push smoke out of the Sacramento area over the weekend, improving air quality considerably. The National Weather Service said relief in the capital region is expected to continue at least through Monday.

But the air has become abysmal in the Lake Tahoe area, according to the weather service and air quality districts.

Return of smoky air season gives Fresno residents a hazy, coughing feeling of déjà vu

By Marek Warszawski

Modesto Bee, Merced Sun-star and other papers, Sunday, Aug. 22, 2021

When the swarm of red dots overtook us a couple days ago, I did what every sensible Fresno-area lung breather should.

Closed all the windows in the house. Then replaced the air filter in the HVAC system with a beefier type that removes smoke and smog particulates — purportedly.

Thanks to air pollution monitoring websites like PurpleAir.com, it was actually possible to “see” those red dots (each representing individual dirty air readings) drift their way down the San Joaquin Valley on Wednesday as shifting winds funneled smoke from multiple Northern California wildfires in our direction.

And when the smoky air did arrive, transforming the sky into a gray cotton ball that nearly blots out the sun, the feeling was oh so familiar. The exact same thing happened one year ago, almost to the very day, after 15,000 lightning strikes across the Bay Area, Northern California and the Sierra Nevada ignited five massive complex fires that burned a combined 2.2 million acres.

For Fresno-area residents, the siege was only beginning. Our air remained smoky right through Labor Day weekend, when the Creek Fire sprung to life in an overgrown canyon 40 miles northeast of town. That gray cotton ball hung around past Thanksgiving.

Will the same thing happen this year? Will it keep happening? Is being stuck indoors for months at a time, worried about the air inside and out, simply the price of living here? Considering the scientifically proven harmful effects of dirty air — there are even studies linking wildfire smoke to increased COVID-19 cases and deaths — is that price too high?

Those are the questions I ask myself each time we’re swarmed by red dots on PurpleAir. Surely some of you are as well. Because life at the bottom of an ashtray isn’t much fun.

RETURN OF SMOKY AIR SEASON IN FRESNO

Some of us are born here and have chosen to stay. Others move here, either for a job, because of the relatively low cost of living or for any number of reasons. In doing so, we all accept two realities: The summer heat for which the Valley is well known. And the air pollution, which gets less attention but has a more deleterious effect on our collective health.

Smoky air season, which in Fresno is wedged between summer and fall, forces a reconsideration. Do smaller house payments or cheaper rent make up for months of inhaling fumes from Mother Nature’s tailpipe?

That’s a question each of us must answer for ourselves or as a family. But it’s one nobody can ignore. The red dots may go away for a day or so (we enjoyed a few clean air days in early August), but they inevitably return.

Throughout other times of the year, most of the air pollution in Fresno and the Valley is of our own making. We produce it right here, with our car and truck exhaust, agricultural equipment, freight trains, dairy cows, restaurant charbroilers and wood-burning fireplaces. We can do something about those sources, or hold the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District accountable for failing to.

WHERE WILL THIS YEAR’S CREEK FIRE IGNITE?

The PM 2.5s and PM 10s carried in smoky air, pollutants that get inhaled by our lungs and absorbed into our bloodstreams, can’t be as easily categorized or contained. California’s wildfire woes are the result of decades of negligent forest management (mainly by the federal government), climate change and drought — factors that are largely beyond our control. Which only increases the feeling of helplessness.

Unfortunately, the only way out of this mess is more burning. Much, much more. The question is whether those fires come in the form of massive, uncontrolled blazes, or whether fire managers allow areas to burn intentionally.

Either way, the future is smoky.

Meanwhile, a new wildfire broke out Friday in the mountains east of Fresno near Dinkey Creek. Two are currently raging in the southern Sierra east of Bakersfield. Will any of these become this year’s Creek Fire? Or has that blaze yet to ignite? Only time, and the wind, will tell.

At some point, all these fires and accompanying smoke might drive this lifelong Californian someplace else. For now, though, it's close the windows, replace the HVAC filter (every few months) and consider shopping for an air purifier.

Such is life at the bottom of an ashtray.

French Fire destroys 13,000 acres: 'The worst of the fire season is still ahead of us.'

By Sheyanne N Romero

Visalia Times-Delta, Sunday, August 22, 2021

The French Fire grew significantly on Friday, destroying several properties near the Alta Sierra community in Kern County.

As of Sunday, the fire was at 13,341 acres and 10% contained. The fire is burning near Sawmill Road and Waggy Flat, west of Lake Isabella.

"We feel very bad for the fact there have been structures lost," said Teresa Benson, Sequoia National Forest supervisor. "We are very sorry for that... It is our priority to contain this fire as soon as we can."

It remains unclear how many structures were damaged and destroyed.

'Simply strapped'

The challenge many California fire crews are face is the limited amount of resources. Due to numerous major wildfires across the US, firefighters are stretched thin.

Currently the French Fire incident is being managed under unified command with Kern County Fire Department and a Type 2 Incident Management Team.

"We hardly have any teams nationwide, but we've got a team here," Benson. "We're all working together to do everything we can to suppress this fire."

As of Friday, there were 883 firefighters assigned to the incident, including crews from Tulare County. Additional resources have been requested, according to French Fire officials.

Large fire activity continued in 12 states, where 99 large fires and complexes have burned 2.5 million acres.

Extreme fire behavior was reported on incidents in California, Minnesota, and Washington. More than 26,500 wildland firefighters and incident management teams continue to work toward containment goals, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

Cal Fire Chief Matt Streck emphasized the limited resources available throughout the state. He urged residents under evacuation orders and warnings to leave when asked.

"We are simply strapped. The number of resources we normally have available to us at the local, state and federal level are simply not there right now," he said. "We need your cooperation. The worst of the fire season is still ahead of us."

Mandatory evacuations are ordered for Isabella Highlands, Hungry Gulch, Waggy Flat and Dutch Flats, until further notice.

Evacuation warnings are in place for Rancheria Road east to Wofford Boulevard, between State Route 155 south to Old State Road and The Black Gulch area, north of Highway 178.

Additionally, Caltrans closed Highway 155 between Glennville and 2 miles east of Alta Sierra. The roadway will reopen once deemed safe by emergency personnel on site, the agency announced on Twitter.

The American Red Cross set up an evacuation center at Woodrow Wallace Elementary, located at 3240 Erskine Creek Road in Lake Isabella. Animal Services will help with sheltering companion animals at the center.

'No stranger to fires'

This is not the first large wildfire reported in the Kern River Valley.

The Erskine Fire in Lake Isabella was the second-largest wildfire of the 2016 California wildfire season. It was also the first fire of the year to have fatalities.

"Here in the Kern River Valley, we're no strangers to fires," Kern County Battalion Chief Bill Steers said. "We've had many fires over the years and we've come through this together."

The fast-moving fire swept through the community of Lake Isabella, destroying more than 80 homes in the first few hours. In total, more than 300 structures were lost or damaged in the Erskine Fire.

"These are our communities, our neighbors that we continue to protect," Steers said. "We will continue to do so throughout this fire."

Tulare County under air quality alert due to wildfires

By Sheyanne Romero

Visalia Times-Delta, Sunday, August 22, 2021

Ash settled on cars and outdoor furniture across Tulare County, and the sky was an all too familiar orange hue.

California is in the midst of another active wildfire season.

On Friday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District extended an air quality alert due to smoke impacts from California wildfires. The alert was extended again on Saturday.

There are active fires in Tuolumne, Mariposa, and Tulare Counties, which have impacted San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings, and Kern counties.

The alert will be in effect until the fires are extinguished, according to the National Weather Service. Two wildfires are burning in and around Tulare County. Those fires aren't expected to be contained until September.

The French and Walkers fires are burning in the Sequoia National Forest. Over the weekend, the Walkers Fire reached the southern boundary of Sequoia National Park, roughly eight miles south of Mineral King. However, it slowed its progression in that area due to rocky terrain and sparse vegetation.

In the coming week, weather conditions are not expected to be favorable for fire suppression.

National Weather Service predicts that temperatures will rise and reach "warmer than average by midweek." Rain isn't in the forecast, and strong winds are expected, which will cause blowing dust.

This means air quality will likely remain unhealthy for Tulare County.

Exposure to particle pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, and increase the risk of respiratory infections. Residents are advised to use caution when outdoors.

People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctor's advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality. Additionally, as conditions dictate, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities, or heavy exertion.

French Fire burns more than 13,000 acres

The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Aug. 22, 2021

The French Fire has burned more than 13,300 acres and was at 10 percent containment Sunday evening as it chews through grass, brush and timber west of Lake Isabella, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

More than 800 personnel are battling the fire, which started Wednesday.

Fire information officials said that firefighters were able to take advantage of relative humidity Saturday night, making an impact with night-flying aircraft on a spot fire north around Alta Sierra and in the southwest region near Woodward Peak. The aircraft were expected to work again Sunday night.

"Crews and engines continue working on control lines on Old State Road to keep the fire from impacting the Wofford Heights community," a fire news release said. "Structure protection work remains in Highland, Shirley Meadows, Alta Sierra, Slick Rock, and Dutch Flat communities.

"The overall strategy to contain the fire is to continue building containment line from the east end of the fire towards the west into higher elevations. Heavy equipment and hand crews will continue scouting for opportunities to construct back-up contingency containment lines to meet that objective."

Go to ReadyKern for current evacuation orders and warnings.

Caldor Fire grows to more than 100,000 acres, 5% contained but not spreading further across Highway 50

By Jessica Flores, Shwanika Narayan
San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday, August 22, 2021

The explosive Caldor Fire in El Dorado County grew to more than 104,000 acres during the weekend. Firefighters, aided by a decrease in wind gusts, started containing the blaze and kept it from spreading further on the north side of Highway 50, a major gateway route to South Lake Tahoe, officials said Sunday evening.

The fire, which started Aug. 14, had crossed to the north side of Highway 50 on Saturday near Kyburz, a small mountain community familiar to motorists driving to South Lake Tahoe; but no communities or structures were threatened as of Sunday evening, said Cal Fire spokesperson Keith Wade. Firefighters managed to get it 5% contained and held it at 200 acres on the north, he said. "The goal is still to hold it south of Highway 50."

Gusty winds were about half of what they were a day earlier, reducing spot fires, and firefighters Sunday "had a lot of time to work on getting some hardened containment lines," Wade said.

Crews battled flareups on the south end of the fire in steep terrain Sunday. A major problem is rollouts, a term referring to dry, dead timber burning and smoldering as it rolls down hill, Wade said. "That ends up lighting up more vegetation as it moves," not only exacerbating the fire spread but pushing containment lines.

The fire was expanding toward the east and southwest below Grizzly Flats, said Dana Walsh, a spokesperson with the U.S. Forest Service.

Kyburz was one of several areas under mandatory evacuation Sunday after officials said a day earlier that the community of fewer than 200 residents was directly in the fire's path.

Highway 50 remained closed Sunday between Sly Park Road and Meyers. Officials gave no indication as to when the 40-mile stretch of road would reopen. The fire, active for eight days as of Sunday, has torched 475 commercial and residential buildings.

Statewide, more than 13,200 firefighters were battling 13 large wildfires that had burned over 1.54 million acres by Sunday, according to Cal Fire. And nearly 700 people were in shelters because of fires, according to the California Office of Emergency Services.

The Caldor Fire grew from 82,444 acres Saturday night to 104,309 acres Sunday night, and was expected to grow as embers continue to be released over a "very dry fuel bed," Cal Fire said.

Walsh said Sunday crews focused on three main active areas of the fire: the southwest end of the fire below Grizzly Flats, the northern area near the Mormon Emigrant Trail near the community of Sly Park, and the area near Highway 50.

Meanwhile, the Dixie Fire burning in Butte, Plumas, Tehama, Lassen and Shasta counties continued spreading Sunday. It had charred 724,110 acres as of Sunday night, officials reported. Firefighters were able to extend containment a little, with 38% of the blaze contained as of Sunday evening, Cal Fire said.

The second-largest wildfire in California history, the Dixie Fire has destroyed 1,247 structures. The cause remains under investigation.

Air Quality Alert in effect indefinitely, depending on surrounding fires

By Shelby Bracho

Fox 26 News, Sunday, Aug. 22, 2021

An air quality alert is now in effect indefinitely, that's according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"Based on current information and current data I would not expect to see that air quality alert lifted at any point in the near future," said Jeff Barlow, a Senior Meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford.

While we're not experiencing any fires locally, we've got a few happening to the north of us, and to the south of us, the French Fire is burning, which is where most of the smoke we're currently breathing is coming from.

"We decided collectively that it would be a good idea to go ahead and let the area fires, which are causing the poor air quality," said Barlow, "Let their behavior kind of determine how long or how short this smoke event is going to last."

Barlow says, depending on the day and direction of the wind, smoke from different California fires has been landing in the Central Valley.

"Unfortunately that northerly wind brought the smoke from the Dixie Fire and the Caldor Fire down into our region," said Barlow, "And then the winds turned around to the south, and then heavy smoke from the rapidly growing French Fire moved up into our area yesterday."

According to CalFire on Saturday, the French Fire in Kern County has burned over 10,000 acres and is just 5% contained.

CalFire says that the Caldor Fire, which is east of Sacramento, has hit more than 82,000 acres, destroyed 245 structures, and is 0% contained.

And the Dixie Fire, which has spread across five northern counties, is 35% contained, has destroyed 1,230 structures, and spread across more than 714,000 acres, which has collectively produced a lot of smoke.

"That smoke, once it gets into the bowl, the trapped San Joaquin Valley, it just sloshes around and then it lingers," said Barlow, "And so if you still have these fires that are actively producing more smoke, you know, it just kind of fills up the bowl with smoke."

Barlow says we're expecting a trough of low pressure from the Pacific Northwest on Sunday.

"Once this trough pushes through, that smoke will then start blowing to the east but unfortunately with that, we're going to start drawing in smoke from the Caldor Fire and the Dixie Fire and several other fires in northern California," said Barlow, "So we're just switching the source of smoke right now."

Based on current data, Barlow says he doesn't expect to see the air quality alert lifted anytime in the near future. In the meantime, he advises people to wear masks.

"If you can smell the smoke from area wildfires then you're probably breathing in bad air," said Barlow, "Just take whatever necessary precautions that you can to protect yourself and your loved ones."

Barlow says the extremely high air quality values can be really dangerous for people when exposed for a long period of time.

Wildfire smoke continues to affect Fresno air quality. How bad will it get?

By Tim Sheehan

The Fresno Bee, Saturday, August 21, 2021

The air quality in Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties was expected to be unhealthy on Saturday and Sunday, thanks to plumes of smoke being pumped into the region by wildfires across California.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health caution on Friday warning that microscopic particles of soot were expected to create “ongoing unhealthy air quality across the region.” That caution notice will remain in place until fires are extinguished or smoke is no longer affecting the Valley.

“It’s very smoky outside the past few days and you can feel it in your lungs,” Jon Klassen, director of strategies and incentives for the Valley air district, told reporters Friday. “The air quality has been unhealthy for sensitive groups (and) unhealthy for much of the San Joaquin Valley.”

On top of the smoke warning, district officials said strong winds could create localized areas of blowing dust, further adding to the amount of crud that residents are breathing into their lungs.

“We really worry about our vulnerable populations, those that have preexisting pulmonary or cardiovascular disease, pregnant women, asthmatics, and young children,” Dr. Rais Vohra, Fresno County’s interim health officer, said Friday.

Up and down the Valley, from San Joaquin County in the north to Kern County in the south, the air quality index was expected Saturday to climb above 101, a level that is considered unhealthy for sensitive people who may have chronic breathing problems such as asthma. In Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, the forecast was for the AQI to exceed 150 – a level that is deemed unhealthy for anyone, regardless of their health condition.

Klassen mentioned the massive Dixie Fire that continues to grow in Northern California, as well as the Caldor Fire near Lake Tahoe, the French Fire in Kern County and the Walkers Fire in Tulare County, as contributors to the problems.

“We’re really surrounded by a lot of things going on,” he said.

For much of this summer, prevailing winds blowing from west to east have pushed smoke from the major fires in the north toward Nevada, Utah and Idaho, Klassen said. But in recent days, “wind directions have been shifting and a lot of that smoke has been drawn into the San Joaquin Valley, impacting a lot of the communities around here, and the air quality has suffered as a result.”

Similar conditions were expected for the next couple of days. “There may be some improvements next week, but for the weekend at least we’re expecting some similar smoke impacts,” Klassen added.

Vohra said employers with workers whose jobs call for them to work outside are, under state occupational safety laws, required to provide those workers with N95 face masks – high-quality filtering respirators also used by medical professionals in high-risk conditions – when air quality is poor.

Vohra added that the Fresno County Department of Public Health can work with employers to connect with resources to provide field workers and other outdoor employees with N95s.

For others, however, the recommendation is to stay indoors and use their home air conditioners, changing the filters as often as possible, said Jamie Holt, a spokesperson for the Valley air district.

People who lack air conditioning at home can seek temporary relief at large indoor public spaces such as movie theaters or shopping centers, Holt said. She added that residents can also improvise a relatively inexpensive air filtering system using a box fan and store-bought, high-efficiency air conditioner filters using directions from the district’s website.

Holt warned that while many people may be wearing cloth masks to protect against the spread of COVID-19 when they leave their homes, those loose-fitting coverings aren’t sufficient to prevent smoke from being inhaled through gaps around the face. “They really need to be wearing an N95 mask, and we know those are in short supply right now.”

But if going outside is necessary, Holt said people can use more readily available KN95 masks, or multiple layers of lesser masks, to protect themselves as best as they can.

Residents can check air quality in their area using the Valley air district’s RAAN, or Real-time Air Advisory Network, at www.valleyair.org/myraan/.

UPDATED: Evacuation order expands, 400 impacted as French Fire balloons

By Ishani Desai
Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Aug 21, 2021

The Kern County Department Fire Department reported the French Fire, which erupted around 4:30 p.m. Wednesday west of Lake Isabella, has grown to 12,037 acres and is 5 percent contained as of 6:38 p.m. Saturday.

The burned area grew by 2,000 acres overnight and the containment has not increased above 5 percent since approximately 8 p.m. Thursday. Wind speeds reaching up to 20 miles Friday night propelled the flames.

On Saturday, the wind speeds slowed, said Lyn Sieliet, a public information officer with the California Interagency Management Team 12, which oversees the firefight.

However, Sieliet said Saturday could be susceptible to changes in wind direction. Crews plan their firefighting tactics according to these weather patterns; sudden shifts could drive debris into their path, hurting personnel or igniting areas where fuel still exists, Sieliet added.

Low humidity and high temperatures make subduing flames more difficult, Sieliet said. The Management Team said the dry weather will continue throughout the next week.

West of the incident's starting point has not witnessed many past fires, Sieliet said. The untouched dry fuels, lacking humidity because of the weather, create difficult conditions to contain the flames, she added.

A separate spot fire rages north of the massive conflagration near Shirley Meadows, according to a map of the region. The spot fire probably started from an ember separating from the main wildfire that was carried by the wind to dry vegetation, Sieliet said.

Land near north Rancheria Road experienced fire growth since the update from Friday night, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Firefighters successfully held the fire from the Willow Flat area, along the northeast and southeast perimeter, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Crews are continuing to protect structures in Shirley Meadows, Alta Sierra, Slick Rock and the Dutch Flat communities, the Forest Service added.

Around 883 personnel are battling the flames, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

California Highway Patrol announced the closure of Highway 155 at Sawmill Road, Calgary and Rancheria Road at Poso Flat.

The BLM closed the Keysville Special Recreation Management Area on Thursday.

Evacuation orders issued include west of the Sequoia National Forest border and south of Highway 155 east to Old State Road. Also included is the Lake Isabella Reservoir, to Keysville South along Highway 155. On the west side, the order extends south to Rancho Road, following east to Black Gulch. Residents within Shirley Meadows, Alta Sierra, Slick Rock, Dutch Flat, Isabella Highlands, Waggy Flat and North and South Keysville must evacuate.

As of 6:38 p.m. Saturday, the KCFD said residents within the communities of Paula Ranches and Calgary must also evacuate.

About 504 structures and 417 people are affected by the order, according to the Management Team.

Evacuation warnings include south of the Tulare County border to Cane Peak and east of the Sequoia National Forest border to Black Mountain. Also, residents in the area east of Cane Peak to Burlando Road and south of Cane Peak to Old State Road Highway 178 are warned the fire could advance in their direction. North Black Gulch north residents could also be affected; the BLM warns that Keysville Road could become clouded by smoke and fire.

The warning impacts approximately 1,052 structures and 1,755 people, according to the Management Team.

Kern County Animals Services offered to collect any animals left behind by evacuated residents. Individuals can call 661-868-7100 to access the services or the Kern County Sheriff's Office dispatch line after hours.

The Red Cross transformed Woodrow Wallace Elementary School into a shelter. Volunteers, nurses and counselors are available to provide comfort for affected residents, said Cindy Huge, the public information officer for the Red Cross. Impacted individuals can spend the night and receive food, Huge added.

There were 12 residents occupying the Red Cross shelter, three dogs and two cats around 5 p.m. Saturday, Huge said. Individuals can receive service if they are impacted by the smoke, Huge added.

More than \$178 million in state grant funding could help end agricultural burning as we know it

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Aug 21, 2021

Agricultural burning in the San Joaquin Valley was supposed to end by 2010.

But the deadline in the law authored by then state Sen. Dean Florez, of Shafter, was postponed and postponed again — until earlier this year, when the California Air Resources Board voted unanimously to require virtually all agricultural burning in the valley be phased out by the end of 2024.

Will it happen this time?

Maybe, now that the state is putting millions of dollars on the table with the goal of helping farmers meet this ambitious goal.

On Friday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District announced in a news release that it will accept \$178.2 million in new state funding to launch an expanded grant program to assist farmers in phasing-out the open-field burning of woody waste through the use of new cleaner practices, including the chipping and grinding of material for incorporation into the soil.

"This essentially pays farmers to chip material instead of burning it," said Valley Air District spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

According to the news release, after nearly two decades of significant work to reduce agricultural burning in the San Joaquin Valley, the air district and the California Air Resources Board have approved a strategy that will result in a near complete phase-out of all valley agricultural burning by Jan. 1, 2025.

To meet this deadline, the Air District has worked with agricultural advocates and industry leaders to bring new state funding to the valley to help ensure that this phase-out is successful.

After Florez's Senate Bill 705 became law in 2003, there was a lot of progress for a number of years in reducing open ag burning, Holt said.

"Then we started to see a decrease in the number of biomass facilities in the valley," she said of the power-generation plants where huge amounts of agricultural wood waste was being consumed.

As the facilities closed, many growers returned to the practice of open-field burning, and the overall effort was thwarted, Holt said.

The \$178.2 million from the state will be used to fund the district's Alternatives to Agricultural Open Burning Grant program on an expanded scale throughout the valley, the air district said in its release. Originally launched by the district in 2018 as a pilot program, the grant program provided financial incentives to growers to chip woody materials as an alternative to burning.

The program will be enhanced to provide additional funding to help small farmers — defined as having fewer than 100 total acres — expand funding options for vineyard removals; expand options for chipped material disposal through beneficial reuse alternatives such as mulch or compost; and provide an option to fund the purchase of new chipping equipment to be used within the valley, among other program enhancements.

Elaine Trevino, president of the Almond Alliance of California, was part of the discussions to determine the path forward.

"You don't want a situation where policy is set with no solutions," she said. "This is a monumental undertaking."

Trevino's goals in the effort included overcoming several challenges: having enough equipment to get the job done in a reasonable window of time; making sure the state follows through on its funding promises; and guaranteeing that small growers don't suffer.

"I have always said it's easy to look at a problem from the outside and think you know the answer," she said.

So she and others will be closely monitoring the new program.

Fortunately, Trevino said, chipping, grinding and integrating almond trees and other woody product into the soil — sometimes called whole orchard recycling — has another benefit: carbon sequestration.

Not only does it keep particulate pollutants out of the air, it keeps millions of tons of carbon out of the atmosphere.

According to studies sponsored by the Almond Board of California, growers can increase their yields 19 percent by chipping up their old trees and incorporating the material back into the soil.

Not only does it reintroduce needed minerals and help orchards retain water, but it stores carbon underground. Many in the industry hope one day carbon credits will be traded on the open market, providing a new revenue stream for almond growers.

The Air District anticipates the new program will launch in early September. To learn more about this funding and other available grants, visit valleyair.org/grants or call program staff at 559-230-5800.

Wildfire smoke and COVID-19

By Laura S. Diaz

Stockton Record, Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021

Seems as if you can't catch a breath between vaccines, flu and COVID-19 variants? Air quality in the Central Valley has been unhealthy this week, a factor that can further complicate our county's COVID-19 pandemic situation.

Among the many coronavirus information guides, the CDC published a "Wildfire Smoke and COVID-19" frequently asked questions page since both potential health threats overlapped this season.

The CDC lists four main reasons why we should think about the ongoing pandemic and wildfires together:

- The COVID-19 pandemic is overlapping with the occurrence of wildfires in the United States.
- Wildfire smoke is a complex mixture of air pollutants that are harmful to human health.
- Exposure to air pollutants in wildfire smoke can irritate the lungs, cause inflammation, alter immune function, and increase susceptibility to respiratory infections, likely including COVID-19.
- Scientific publications suggest that air pollutant exposure worsens COVID-19 symptoms and outcomes.

Just like the flu and COVID-19 have similar symptoms, effects from wildfire smoke and coronavirus symptoms share some common ground, too.

"Respiratory symptoms such as dry cough, sore throat, and difficulty breathing are common to both wildfire smoke exposure and COVID-19," the CDC states.

For more details – and answers – about proper masks, health protection tips, information resources and more, you can visit cdc.gov/disasters/covid-19/wildfire_smoke_covid-19.html and/or cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/smoke-faq.html.

This week the county published data reports on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. From Friday afternoon's data, the county reports 82,047 total confirmed cases since the pandemic began, 1,491 total confirmed deaths, and that 51.5% of the eligible population (12 years of age and older) is fully vaccinated.

Compared to the last published report from last week (Aug. 12), the county then reported 79,641 total confirmed cases, 1,478 total confirmed deaths and 49.9% of the eligible population was fully vaccinated, showing there were an additional 2,406 confirmed cases between the data published last Friday and now.

Aspire APEX Academy announced students are heading back to school on Aug. 23 after closing Aug. 13 because of an increase of positive COVID-19 cases in their community.

Additionally, Lodi High School postponed its season-opening game because of positive COVID-19 cases and contact tracing protocols. In a third situation, two classrooms within Stockton Unified School District are undergoing 10-day independent study after being exposed to COVID-19.

Five positive cases were reported at Commodore Stockton Skills School and three others at Flora Arca Mata Elementary School, said Stockton Unified's director of communications Melinda Meza.

San Joaquin County Public Health Services' report from Aug. 12 (page 12) showed a chart where outbreaks by industry were graphed. Suspected outbreaks in schools K-12 were reflected in a distinct green line that stood out from the rest of the graphed bars.

"It is possible" that these three situations at different schools were part of or contributed to that green line graphed by the county, county public health officer Dr. Maggie Park stated.

"Schools are required to report positive cases to us," she stated. Yet "we (SJCPHS) don't disclose suspected outbreaks because they are still under investigation."

Reminder: Students 11 years of age and younger are not vaccinated because they are not yet eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine.

How to keep them (and others) safe? "Masks are an important part of layer prevention strategies – including hand washing, social distancing, testing, contact tracing, quarantine protocols, and environmental modifications – to stop the spread of COVID-19 in schools," Park stated.

"Additionally, anyone 12 or older in a household should be vaccinated to provide protection for those under 12 who are not yet eligible for the vaccine," she said.

More COVID-19 and Stockton schools:

- After closing from positive COVID-19 cases, Stockton school has reopening date
- Two Stockton Unified classrooms move to temporary independent study following COVID-19 cases
- Lodi reschedules opening game vs. Grant after positive COVID tests, contact tracing

UPDATED: Day 3: The French Fire grows as containment holds

By Ishani Desai

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Aug 20, 2021

The French Fire continues to ravage the Lake Isabella community — flames have burned 10,061 acres and containment is at 5 percent, according to the California Interagency Management Team 12, which is managing the fire.

Flames scorched almost 6,000 acres since Thursday night; containment held steady since Thursday night as well. The Bureau of Land Management said 809 firefighters are fighting the blaze, and the cause is unknown. Southeast winds and dry fuels contributed to the fire's growth Friday, said Michael Nobles, an incident commander with the interagency management team.

Evacuation orders remain in effect for the Sawmill community and Wofford Heights from Rancheria Road east to Wofford Boulevard, between Highway 155 south to Old State Road. Additionally, the KFCD ordered the evacuation of Keysville south, from the intersection of Black Gulch Road and Forest Route 26S06, continuing east to Highway 155.

The areas south of Cedar Creek and North of Shirley Creek are under an evacuation order and Alta Sierra region, according to the KFCD. More information can be found here. There are no residential structures at risk on Shirley Creek, though officials are not 100 percent certain, said the interagency management team.

Evacuation warnings were issued for the area between north of Old State Road and south of Evans Road. Also included is the area surrounding Black Gulch.

An evacuation order lawfully closes the area to public access and informs individuals they must leave and seek shelter elsewhere. An evacuation warning recommends residents to leave the area.

The BLM also closed the Keysville Special Recreation Management Area because of the wildfire's proximity Thursday.

The Red Cross moved into the Woodrow Wallace Elementary on Erskine Creek Drive, from the Lake Isabella Senior Center said Cindy Huge, the public information officer for the Red Cross. Wallace Elementary is now a shelter, a shift from Lake Isabella's Senior Center designation from as a temporary evacuation site, Huge said.

As of 7:50 p.m. Friday, four residents were going to sleep at the school, Huge said. Many people filtered through the Red Cross services throughout Friday as well, she added.

"Anyone affected by the fire is welcome," Huge said. "We feed them, we take good care of them."

Animal Services also offers its services and said to contact them if any animals get left behind. The KCSO dispatch line can be called after hours to track down any animals as well, said Kern County Animal Services Director Nick Cullen.

Deputies from the Kern County Sheriff's Office increased the presence of officers along evacuated zones to ensure stop trespassers and looting, said Sgt. Ryan Pitcher with the KCSO. Their main goal is to give adequate notice for people to evacuate and protect property, Pitcher added.

Firefighters hope to contain the fire by Sunday, Sept. 5. Containment proves difficult because the mountainside is steep and the gusty winds egg on the flames, said Stephanie Bishop, the public information officer for the California Interagency Management Team 12, which manages the fire.

Multiple factors pieced together make subduing the flames problematic, said Dan O'Connor, a fire behavior analyst with the California Interagency Management Team 12.

First, clumps of timber have created a dense canopy structure to the ground, named a ladder fuel. The fire climbs this structure, igniting the trees grouped together. Then, wind carries embers from this torching to another cluster of trees, which then catch on fire, O'Connor said.

These factors, coupled with extreme drought conditions, allow the flames to spread without any barriers, O'Connor added. Furthermore, the direction of the wind aligns with the slope's slant. The fire can quickly travel down the ridge and leave destruction in its wake, O'Connor said.

There are 14 wildfires consuming California, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Many agencies are forced to share personnel and equipment, which hurts fire management efforts, Bishop added.

"There aren't enough folks to go around," O'Connor added, echoing Bishop's claims.

Moisture in the air could help vanquish the blaze, O'Connor said. However, according to the U.S. drought monitor, the area faces an extreme drought, or the most severe categorization of a drought. O'Connor said the drought has also been "long term," which limits the resources available to battle the wildfire.

O'Connor added the conditions of this current fire season usually happen once every 10 years. However, they are now becoming more common, he said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air District released an air quality alert for Kern County, prompted by the smoke from the northern California fires and the French Fire. Residents should reduce outdoor activity and stay hydrated to avoid contracting any illnesses brought on by wildfire smoke, the Kern County Department of Public Health said on Twitter.

French Fire smoke pushes into Central CA, Visalia Unified football games canceled amid falling ash

ABC 30, Saturday, 21, 2021

The French Fire that is burning out of control in Kern County is also having an impact on the Valley's air quality.

The flames have burned more than 10,061 acres and crews currently have it 5% contained.

Video from a Southern California Edison camera showed the flames come close to a tower, covering the camera lens in soot.

In the South Valley, residents have reported seeing ash fall from the sky. Due to the falling ash and poor air quality, Visalia Unified has cancelled all home football games scheduled for Friday night.

ABC30 Meteorologist Madeline Evans says that smoke will stick around for a few more days as winds continue to push it from the north, where several fires are burning.

The San Joaquin Valley Air District issued a health caution and Air Quality Alert earlier this week. They recommend everyone, especially those with health conditions, stay indoors as much as possible.

Some Valley high schools already forced to cancel football games

By Vanessa Vasconcelos

ABC 30, Friday, August 20, 2021

Action under the Friday night lights is coming to a pause for some players as more than a handful had to cancel their first week of games.

CIF Commissioner Ryan Tos is commending various school sites for keeping player safety a top priority.

"As long as they're getting most of their games in it shouldn't affect their rankings too much," he said.

Tos adds, "Whether it's COVID or air quality, I think that our schools have done an amazing job looking out for the health of our student athletes. I'd rather a school miss 10 or 20% of their season, instead of our whole section missing 100% of the season."

Selma High school reported one case of COVID on their football team, while Immanuel Schools is citing Injury and Illness as the reason for the cancelation. Yosemite and Fresno High are the latest to cancel.

Madera High School's Varsity football team did not meet practice requirements for a COVID case earlier in the school year.

Madera Unified Athletic Director Marty Bitter says student athletes district-wide are tested every Monday for COVID -- prior to school so class isn't disrupted.

He says, "We're fortunate. We think we have a good plan in place now, at least as far as athletics goes, so that we can keep all of our teams practicing and intact."

Bitter adds he's reached out to athletic directors to periodically stop by weight rooms to make sure students are adhering to safety guidelines.

Bitter says, "If it's not one thing it's another, right? You're battling COVID and then we go through where it's 100 degrees outside."

Triple-Digit temperatures aren't impacting Friday's play, but air quality can. Visalia Unified canceled all home games.

Redwood High postponed their away game and El Diamante canceled theirs because of air quality.

As jarring satellite images show wildfire smoke blanketing California, the Valley Air District is working closely with school athletics, advising them of the deteriorating air quality.

Valley Air District's Cassandra Melching says, "PM 2.5 is really, really harmful and that comes from wood smoke, so that's currently what we're experiencing right now. If those numbers are elevated, then folks that are out there are going to feel tightening in the

chest, their eyes are going to burn, it's going to be difficult to breathe, it can aggravate asthma, bronchitis and just bring on a whole wealth of issues."

Both Immanuel and Madera high school have expressed their plans to fill their bye weeks to make up for this week's game.

Valley Air District Gets \$178M to End Ag Burns Once and for All

By Bill McEwen

GVWire, Friday, August 20, 2021

Armed with \$178.2 million in new state funding, the Valley Air District is expanding aid to farmers to end ag burning by 2025.

"The District and the California Air Resources Board have approved a strategy that will result in a near-complete phase-out of all Valley agricultural burning by Jan. 1, 2025," the district said in a news release Friday afternoon.

"To meet this deadline, the Air District has worked closely with agricultural stakeholders and leaders to bring new state funding to the Valley to help ensure that this phase-out is successful."

The new funding provides incentives to farmers to chip woody materials instead of burning them.

Ag Burns Harmful to Valley Health

Clear-air advocates, doctors, and scientists have long chronicled ag burning's harmful effects on the health of Valley residents.

Ag burns are a significant contributor to PM 2.5 pollution which, at elevated levels, causes serious health problems — especially for children and older adults.

A state law enacted in 2003 was supposed to end burning in the Valley by 2010. But instead of a ban, the law yielded a slow phase-out combining incentives for compliance and fines up to \$20,000 for those who burned without permits.

"With this new funding, ... the grant program will be enhanced to provide additional funding for small agricultural operations of less than 100 total acres," the air district said.

Other program enhancements include funding for vineyard removals and paying for new chipping equipment to be used in the Valley.

District officials said the new program begins early next month. Additional information:

www.valleyair.org/grants, 559 230-5800.

San Joaquin Valley has one of the worst air qualities in the world right now

By Nathalie Vera

KSEE/KGPE, Friday, August 20, 2021

Hazy skies drape over the Central Valley on Friday, continuing a week of unhealthy air quality. Over the last few days, the air quality index has oscillated between 159 to 176. That's worse than the air quality predicted in both China and India.

"When you step outside right now you don't even see blue skies, you can't even see the sun," said Cassandra Melching of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The region's chronic pollution and smoke from the Northern California wildfires are to blame.

"I was planning to do some hiking this weekend and I decided not to do it," shared allergist Dr. Malik Baz.

Dr. Baz suggests following his lead – outdoor activity with this air quality is strongly discouraged, especially for those with respiratory problems and allergies.

“Make sure they take their medication properly, stay indoors, [and do] no exercise outdoors. If they have an air purifier at home, use the air purifier,” he said.

“[Particulate Matter] 2.5 is a very harmful pollutant, all because it’s so small,” said Melching. “It can get into the bloodstream, and it can get deep into your lungs. It triggers asthma attacks, it aggregates chronic bronchitis and it can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.”

For those who can’t avoid staying outdoors, like farmworkers or construction workers, experts recommend wearing a wet cloth mask and drinking plenty of fluids.

Dr. Baz also points out the Valley’s unhealthy air quality can trigger symptoms similar to COVID-19.

“I have seen two patients in my own office, I was so sure they have allergies, no way they were gonna come back positive with Covid and I was wrong.”

He recommends getting tested if you have any suspicions you might’ve caught the virus.

He also reminds people to beware of a false sense of security at night when you can’t see the smokey skies.

“Pollution is not like pollen or the heat. Unfortunately, it’s 24/7.”

Health Concerns Rise as Air Quality Worsens in the Central Valley

By Essence Vasquez

South Kern Sol, Friday, August 20, 2021

Smoke from the Northern California wildfires and the French Fire in Lake Isabella have increased air quality concerns throughout the Central Valley, including Kern County.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a health cautionary statement due to gusty winds and smoke impacts from continuing wildfires. The health caution will remain in effect for Kern County until the fires are extinguished or until

smoke is no longer affecting the Valley.

As of August 20, there are 12 wildfires that may be impacting air quality in the San Joaquin Valley: the Dixie Fire, French Fire, Cache Fire, Lava Fire, Antelope Fire, Monument Fire, River Complex, McFarland Fire, Tiltill Fire, Caldor Fire, Walkers Fire, and McCash Fire.

Cassandra Melching, with the San Joaquin Valley APCD, told FOX40 that the shift in the winds prompted the district to issue a health caution for San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties.

“It’s like a bowl, we have mountains on all sides of us,” she explained. “And so what, essentially, that means is that any type of pollutant that’s created, whether that be, you know, through the daily business or through forest fires, it has nowhere to go. It blows into the valley, and then it gets trapped by those mountains and it becomes stuck.”

The smoke and dust pollute the air with particulate matter, which at elevated levels can be a health hazard for pets and people.

“It’s really, really detrimental to one’s health,” Melching said. “It can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis. It increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes, and so it’s a very gnarly pollutant.”

As the French Fire continues to burn in Lake Isabella, the Kern County Public Health Services Department urges the public to limit their exposure to wildfire smoke by reducing the amount of time spent outdoors, if possible. They also suggest that individuals stay hydrated and reduce other sources of indoor air pollution, such as burning cigarettes, candles, gas, propane and wood burning stoves and furnaces, and vacuuming.

Individuals with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of PM exposure. Those with existing respiratory conditions, including COVID-19, young children and the elderly, are especially susceptible to the health effects from this form of pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District recommends staying inside and changing the air filters in air conditioners to ensure particulates remain outside the residence. Using an air purifier can also remove toxic materials from the atmosphere. Wearing an N95 mask, not a cloth mask, can also provide relief to those suffering from respiratory ailments.

The public is advised to visit the District's Wildfire Information Page at for details on current and recently past wildfires affecting the Valley. The site includes resources on how to protect yourself from exposure to wildfire smoke, including instructions on how to make a DIY air filter for your home, links to foothill air monitors and the District's Real-time Air Advisory Network (RAAN), allowing residents to track air quality at any Valley location.

New fires bringing smoky air to the Valley until at least Monday

By Ravyn Cullor

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, August 20, 2021

An Air Quality Alert for the Central Valley due to smoky conditions has been extended through at least Monday morning, fueled by 14 wildfires in California alone.

One of the newest fires, the French fire, started on Wednesday in Kern County and is contributing to the bad air quality, including reports of falling ash in Visalia, according to the National Weather Service.

The alert covers Kings, Merced, Madera, Tulare, Fresno, Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Kern counties, with extremely poor air quality in some areas.

While previous forecasts said smoky conditions in the San Joaquin Valley would be intermittent, Gerald Meadows, meteorologist in charge at NWS Hanford, said the French fire in Kern County changes that.

"We're sandwiched between fire in the south and the north, so generally speaking we're going to have some wind, which will push smoke in our direction," Meadows said.

He said the best case scenario is winds from the ocean pushing the smoke east, but that the area is most likely to see some smoke for a while.

The Valley Air District says the conditions can pose health risks including increased risk of heart attacks, asthma attacks and strokes, as well as aggravated bronchitis and lung disease, with increased risk for young children and elderly people.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are also monitoring air quality conditions for visitors. While the worst air quality in the park will be in and below Ash Meadows, and the best conditions will be above 8,500 feet.

The district recommends staying indoors with air filtration and air conditioning.

'How much more of this can we take?' Wildfires prompt air quality advisories in Northern California

By Hayley Smith

Los Angeles Times, Thursday, August 19, 2021

Smoke from a dozen major wildfires is spreading across Northern California, darkening skies, dropping ash and creating health hazards from Lake Tahoe to San Francisco.

Officials have issued air quality alerts warning of hazardous conditions that could last into the weekend.

"Overall, there's smoke pretty much covering most of Northern California," said Bill Rasch, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

The Bay Area Air Quality District extended its air quality advisory for wildfire smoke through Friday, noting that light northerly winds are transporting smoke from the fires into the region.

The agency also issued a “spare the air” alert through Friday indicating that pollution in the area will exceed federal health standards, officials said.

Agency spokeswoman Kristine Roselius said conditions in the Bay Area tend to be clearer in the mornings and get worse as the day wears on, when smoke meets with heat and mixes down to the surface.

Residents are also seeing ash and soot, she said.

“There’s a lot of smoke aloft, and what happens is that ash is heavy, so it starts dropping down,” said Roselius, who lives in the North Bay. “I cleared it off my car this morning.”

The El Dorado County Air Quality Management District advised of dense smoke and unhealthy air quality through Thursday, while the Placer County Air Pollution Control District warned the public to prepare for worsening conditions over the next several days.

Residents who can see or smell smoke are advised to stay indoors with doors and windows shut, and use N-95 masks whenever it is necessary to go outside, Placer County officials said.

The smoke is coming from several large fires, including the multicounty, 678,000-acre Dixie fire and the Caldor fire in El Dorado County, officials said.

The Caldor fire, which ignited Saturday, exploded to more than 65,000 acres Thursday morning.

The Monument and McFarland fires in Shasta-Trinity National Forest are also generating considerable smoke.

EPA air monitoring site [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov) showed air quality in several areas — from Susanville to Mendocino — hovering in the unhealthy or hazardous range.

“How much more of this can the environment withstand, and how much more of this can we take?” said Robin McBain, a San Francisco resident who awakened to yet another day of smoke and soot.

McBain said yellowish skies were giving way to reddish hues, including an intense halo around the sun.

“This is very concerning, of course,” McBain said. “We’re still in the throes of a pandemic and our health is at risk from that, coupled with wildfires which compound COVID. Even if you’re relatively healthy, it’s obviously not good to breathe these pollutants year after year.”

Wildfire smoke is composed of small particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs, and can cause negative health impacts — particularly for sensitive groups such as people with asthma.

Studies have found that the smoke can also contain fungi and bacteria, as well as heavy metals and other toxic substances.

Experts advise people in affected regions to avoid strenuous activity and invest in air filters or purifiers if possible. People with air conditioners can set them to the “recirculation” setting to prevent outside air from pulling into their homes.

Another option is to create a “clean room,” or an area in the home closed off to outside air that can be cleaned with a portable filter.

“Sadly, this seems like the new norm for fall,” said Mill Valley resident MJ Gorton. “Every year I get more worried about wildfires. It’s super dry where I live, and that combined with the drought is reason for concern.”

Indeed, the conditions are similar to what the region saw during last year’s devastating wildfire season. A Reddit user unearthed a Google Street View image from September 2020 that captured the tell-tale martian glow in Redwood City.

Rasch, the meteorologist, said changing winds could soon shift the smoke in a northeastern direction, which could be good for California but not necessarily for the rest of the country.

Already, smoke from the fires has blanketed much of the continent.

"It's worse in some places, but it's moving around," Rasch said. "This stuff has been blowing all the way across the country."