

Climate change poses risks to Valley residents

Study: Merced County lacks necessary resources

By Joshua Emerson Smith

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The Central Valley is particularly ill-equipped to deal with the impacts of climate change, according to a new Pacific Institute report.

While the majority of residents vulnerable to global warming live in pockets of densely populated coastal areas, Central California is dominated by large regions unprepared for the health and economic impacts of rising temperatures, the report states. Many communities in the Valley may not have the resources to support their residents who will likely suffer from climate change, said Heather Cooley, co-author of the study.

"It's important to realize that not everyone will be impacted the same," she said. "As we start making plans at the community and state level, we need to start thinking about those who are most vulnerable."

According to the report, 70 percent of Merced County residents are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. That's second only to Imperial County, where that number is 90 percent.

In Fresno and Tulare counties, over half of all residents do not have the resources to adequately deal with the effects of a warming planet, according to the report.

The study looked at a number of social-risk factors specifically related to the impacts of climate change, including air conditioner ownership, childhood obesity, percentage of tree cover, income levels and numbers of workers in outdoor occupations.

From Merced to Fresno, an abundance of outdoor workers consistently topped the factors in climate change vulnerability.

"Agricultural workers are at high risk of heat-related illness because they often work long hours in the sun and, in some cases, may not have access to adequate health care," Cooley said.

Extreme heat is of particular concern to scientists studying climate change in the Valley, as well as flooding from altered weather patterns, potentially adverse impacts on [air quality](#) and shrinking levels of mountain snowpack.

A warmer climate means more precipitation will fall as rain rather than snow, said Roger Bales, a UC Merced professor studying climate change. "The rain runs off in the winter and that's not the time when you need the most water for crops."

According to the report, by mid-century Merced County will experience an average of 29 to 32 days a year where the temperature is 102 degrees or higher -- conditions that currently only occur about eight days a year on average.

Winds causing smoke to billow through canyons

Areas evacuated as firefighters losing ground

By Dana M. Nichols, Record Staff Writer

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CAMP CONNELL - Some residents returned to the Gann's Meadow neighborhood of summer homes Tuesday even as the Ramsey Fire continued to move further east, at times closing Highway 4 with dense clouds of smoke.

"All the trees were exploding across the street," Laura McGavren, 60, said of what she witnessed late Monday before deciding to evacuate.

Thanks to the attention of fire crews who extinguished embers as they blew into the neighborhood, no homes were damaged. By Tuesday afternoon, McGavren was back and able to thank the firefighters in person.

"They are the most terrific, hardworking people you can imagine," she said.

U.S. Forest Service representatives said that by Tuesday the fire had grown to 800 acres and 383 people working on the incident. On Monday, officials said the fire was 20 percent contained, but Tuesday they revised that to 10 percent.

Although the Forest Service is in command on the blaze, other agencies from around California and even as far away as Pennsylvania are also providing firefighters.

Those crews have already had to cope with harsh conditions including steep terrain, high temperatures and temperamental winds.

At one point Monday, the fire jumped Highway 4, said Bill White of the Atascadero Fire Department, who is serving as an information officer for the Forest Service.

"It did spot over a couple times yesterday on the north side," White said Tuesday. "The crews caught it real fast."

Also Monday, crews had been setting small control fires in some locations in the Stanislaus River canyon in an effort to eliminate fuel in the path of the blaze. Those efforts had to be called off, however, when thunderstorm cells moved into the area.

"They send down winds that blow in all directions," said Tina Rose, a fire inspector with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection who is also serving as an information officer for the Ramsey Fire. "It's very dangerous for the firefighters."

Winds kicked up again Tuesday afternoon, causing dense smoke clouds to billow out of the canyon. Although there are few permanent residents in the area, fire officials were making plans in case cabins and a campground in the Big Meadows area should need to be evacuated.

"We are trying to get an idea how many houses and residences are in that area," White said.

Meanwhile, Calaveras County Public Health Services advised residents take measures to protect themselves from smoke exposure. Health Officer Dean Kelaita urged everyone to avoid smoke, stay in air conditioned spaces if possible, and to be aware that the elderly, infants, children, pregnant women and smokers may be at particular risk of suffering health problems due to smoke.

"If an illness gets worse due to a smoke exposure, get medical assistance," Kelaita said.

Smoke from the Calaveras fire and other blazes in Northern California also formed a shroud over the north San Joaquin Valley, [prompting air quality officials to issue a health warning Tuesday](#).

Residents who are sensitive to smoke or to ozone air pollution, levels of which were also climbing, should exercise indoors and avoid vigorous outdoor activities, the Valley Air Pollution Control District said.

The smoke could linger for the rest of the week, the district said.

The Ramsey Fire started Saturday as the result of an escaped campfire. Although campfires are still legal in some parts of the Stanislaus National Forest, fire officials urged visitors and residents to exercise extreme caution with open flames.

"You're going to need to really extinguish your campfire," Rose said.

Although the official estimate is that it will take until Tuesday to contain the fire, crews on the ground said it could be much longer or much sooner, depending on weather.