

Smoke from wildfires clogging air in Northern San Joaquin Valley

by Doane Yawger

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MERCED — Smoke from wildfires east of Fresno and in Northern California has blown into the Merced area in a big way and the haze is likely to last for several days.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said smoke has reached Level 4, which means the air is unhealthy for just about everyone, said Jaime Holt, a district spokeswoman. The district has a monitoring station in Merced.

In the valley, Merced had one of the worst visibility rankings Tuesday, according to meteorologist Jim Dudley of the National Weather Service office in Hanford.

At Merced's airport, visibility was only 3 miles, compared with 5-mile visibility figures for the Fresno and Hanford airports.

Robert McLaughlin, Mercy Medical Center Merced spokesman, said the hospital's emergency room hasn't seen a big increase in respiratory distress cases. However, if the smoke lasts more than a few days, the number of such cases likely will rise, he added.

Getting the blame for the visible haze in Merced is the Aspen fire burning in eastern Fresno County near Huntington Lake, along with fires burning in Northern California and Oregon.

The fires have prompted the air district to issue a health cautionary statement for smoke impacts throughout the air basin, which includes Merced, Madera, Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties, as well as foothill and mountain areas.

Holt said the district recommends that Merced residents avoid outdoor activities and stay inside, with the windows closed. If people must be outside, they are urged to drink lots of water, take frequent breaks and try not to exert themselves.

Expected to linger

She said she can't predict if hazy conditions will worsen but said the haze is expected to last through the rest of the week and possibly into next week. If these conditions were occurring in the winter, the smoke would prompt a no-burn day designation from the air district, Holt said.

Air quality in the valley is expected to deteriorate in the coming days because of the smoke and a relatively stable weather pattern. The cautionary warning will remain in place until the fires are extinguished.

Dudley said he doesn't anticipate weather systems blowing the smoke out. There could a little bit of clearing in the early evening, but smoke will spread across the valley again overnight.

He expects the stagnant weather patterns to continue for the next couple of days.

Smoke from fires produces fine particulate matter which can cause serious health problems, including lung disease, asthma attacks, and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

The air district said older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on local conditions.

San Joaquin Valley air getting double whammy of soot, ozone

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Wed., July 31, 2013

Wildfire smoke pouring into the San Joaquin Valley caused soot levels to spike Tuesday above the federal standard in Madera, Merced and Stockton.

On Wednesday, meteorologists with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reported a layer of marine air should ease air quality problems a little, but soot and ozone levels are expected to climb again by the weekend.

The local air district is advising residents throughout the Valley to avoid vigorous outdoor exercise if they smell smoke. Children, seniors and people with lung and heart problems should be cautious about their outdoor exposure this week.

"We've called outdoor camps in the Sierra to warn them about the air quality," district spokeswoman Jaime Holt said. "We've alerted county public health officers. This is a serious concern at this point."

Valley residents are encouraged to use the air district's real-time monitoring website to check air quality on the monitor closest to their homes.

Elevated soot levels Tuesday added to ozone problems in Fresno, Clovis, Parlier, Hanford and Turlock. Merced's dirty air breached both the ozone and the soot standards Tuesday.

The smoke is coming from the Aspen fire near Huntington Lake and from wildfires in Northern California and Oregon. The fires also put out gases that create ozone. The Valley has one of the worst ozone problems in the nation.

Soot is considered PM-2.5, a microscopic particle that can be drawn deep into the lungs and pass into the blood system. PM-2.5 is more dangerous than ozone, according to health scientists.

Ozone is a corrosive gas that forms in warm weather and sunlight. It damages skin, eyes and lungs.

The combination of the two air pollutants is considered a threat even to healthy lungs, scientists say.