

Searing heat breaks Valley records, makes tough work of fires

By Brianna Vaccari, staff writer

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Searing heat across the central San Joaquin Valley region Monday broke a century-old record in Fresno and made tough work for fire crews battling a pair of foothill wildfires.

And the Valley can expect a couple more days of triple-digit heat before daytime highs recede toward the end of the week.

Monday's high in Fresno hit 110 right before 4 p.m., breaking the old record for the date of 108 set back in 1902. Monday's high was 20 degrees above normal.

Records were also set in Hanford (108), Madera (106) and Merced (107).

For firefighters, the heat compounded the challenges of battling two wildfires Monday.

The first fire broke out in Squaw Valley just before noon near Highway 180 and Elwood Road, said Cal Fire/Fresno County Fire spokesman Ryan Michaels.

The fire burned about 25 acres at its max and was 75% contained around 6:30 p.m., he said. He said the fire was expected to be fully contained by Tuesday morning.

Several outbuildings were destroyed or damaged, but homes were spared, Michaels said. No evacuations were ordered. One firefighter sustained heat-related injuries and was taken to a hospital.

CalFire, along with crews from Fresno, Clovis, Sanger and Fresno County departments, battled the flames.

Then, just after 3 p.m., firefighters in Squaw Valley headed to another fire near Highway 168 and Morgan Canyon Road near Prather. Michaels said by 6:30 p.m., fire had blackened 40 acres and was just 10% contained. By 10 p.m., 25% had been contained. One commercial structure was destroyed, and four people suffered minor injuries, Cal Fire said.

Michaels said fire crews were expecting to work the Morgan Canyon fire overnight and assess it in the morning Tuesday.

Highway 168 was closed from Millerton Road into Prather as fire scorched both sides of the road. Traffic was diverted to Auberry and Sample roads before reopening after 9 p.m. Monday.

Michaels said the fires in Squaw Valley and the Prather area were among four fires Cal Fire was battling Monday.

Fire and heat weren't the only hazards.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. reported a power outage affecting 496 customers in northeast Fresno just before 7 p.m. Monday. The outage affected homes and businesses east of Blackstone Avenue from Bullard to Sierra avenues. PG&E was investigating the cause.

Tuesday's high in Fresno is expected to reach 103, three degrees below the record for the date set in 1986. That marks the beginning of a slight cooling trend throughout the week, said National Weather Service meteorologist Gary Sanger. Temperatures are expected to moderate -- slightly -- by Thursday, when the daytime high is expected to reach just 96. Low temperatures should remain in the mid 60s, he said.

Monday's heat was due to a strong, high-pressure system. That system will give way later this week to a low pressure system that will bring a bit of marine air through the Valley, Sanger said.

Normally Fresno sees temperatures in the 90s around this time.

With the heat and fires, air quality was listed as unhealthy for Fresno County on Monday by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Fresno's air quality will be unhealthy for sensitive groups Tuesday. Kings, Tulare and Madera counties all had unhealthy air quality Monday. Air quality in Madera and Kings counties is expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups Tuesday. Tulare County's air quality will be moderate.

Valley lawmakers fight to keep pollution cleanup funds

Kristina Hacker, Turlock Journal Editor
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Local legislators are opposing a proposal that would eliminate funds promised to help reduce pollution in the Central Valley.

In 2012, the state passed SB 535, which allocates 25 percent of cap-and-trade revenues to the most disadvantaged communities in the state. In response, the California Environmental Protection Agency developed the CalEnviroScreen to measure environmental and socioeconomic indicators across the state and determine which communities have the greatest needs. The tool uses existing environmental, health, demographic and socioeconomic data to create a screening score for communities across the state. An area with a high score would be expected to experience much higher impacts than areas with low scores.

West Turlock and areas of north Merced County are ranked in the Top 10 percent for high pollution in the state, according to the CalEnviroScreen map. The Central Valley is also ranked at the top on the list of worst areas in the country for air pollution, according to the American Lung Association's State of the Air 2014 report.

Opponents to the CalEnviroScreen favor a regional allocation based on population levels, instead of need.

"The State made a promise to invest in the long-term health of our most disadvantaged communities," said Assemblymember Adam Gray. "But at the last minute, a cash grab from the wealthiest areas of the state is letting politics trump that promise."

A coalition of Valley legislators, headed by Assemblymember Gray, submitted a joint letter to the State Legislature's chief budget committee in opposition to the proposal. The letter is also signed by Assemblymembers Henry Perea, Rudy Salas, Kristin Olsen and Senators Anthony Cannella, Cathleen Galgiani, Tom Berryhill, and Andy Vidak.

"This really shows the different worlds we come from," said Assemblymember Olsen. "While coastal communities worry about freeing whales, we are worried about underweight births and childhood asthma."