

Wildfires contributing to poor air quality in Kern County

By Jason Kotowski

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Aug 19, 2015

Wildfires burning in Fresno and San Luis Obispo counties have caused unusually bad air quality and spread an acrid smoky smell through parts of Kern County.

Central Bakersfield was experiencing particulate matter of 27 micrograms per cubic meter Tuesday afternoon, far above what's normal during the summer months.

Particulate matter usually doesn't even register throughout the summer, with the exception of the Fourth of July, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Heather Heinks said.

"This is the highest reading we've seen since the end of wood burning season (March 1)," Heinks said.

She said people should check updated air quality information and, if possible, stay indoors. Those who have to be outdoors should take longer rest periods between activities and increase their water intake.

Inhaling air with that much particulate matter can cause a scratchy throat, watery eyes, and more serious problems for those with health issues or who are especially sensitive to air quality.

Highs of 104 degrees Tuesday didn't help; the National Weather Service was forecasting a slight cooldown with highs of 100 degrees Wednesday and 98 degrees Thursday.

While current particulate readings are high, Heinks said there's no comparison with readings they get during winter months where micrograms per cubic meter rise to 40 or more.

The Rough Fire, caused by lightning July 31 about 2 1/2 miles southwest of Spanish Mountain and five miles north of Hume Lake, had grown to 23,600 acres as of Tuesday afternoon.

Smoke from that fire, as well as the 2,000-acre Cuesta Fire off Highway 101 north of San Luis Obispo, combined for Kern's poor air quality.

It may not get better soon. There was zero percent containment on the Rough Fire, and only 10 percent containment of the Cuesta Fire, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

On Wednesday, district officials will hold press conferences in Bakersfield, Fresno and Modesto to discuss poor air quality brought about by increased traffic and vehicle idling as children head back to school.

A news release said the conferences will focus on the potential of calling an "air alert" over the next few weeks if air quality begins to deteriorate.

During an air alert, residents and businesses are asked to reduce vehicle emissions by driving less, refraining from idling their vehicles and carpooling.

To receive notification of an Air Alert, call 1-800 SMOG INFO (766-4463); subscribe to a free, automated email notification at www.valleyair.org/lists/list.htm; visit www.valleyair.org or www.healthyliving.com or call a District office in Bakersfield at 392-5500.

Smoke over Bakersfield from fire in SLO county

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015

Winds from the Cuesta Fire in San Luis Obispo County are pushing smoke into the San Joaquin Valley, the Kern County Fire Department reported Monday night.

A fire department news release said smoke is in the Bakersfield area, and residents of Shafter and Wasco reported it too.

It noted dispatchers were being overwhelmed with calls for the smoke.

Wildfire smoke inundates Valley

The Porterville Recorder, Wednesday, Aug. 19, 2015

Air quality flags at schools in Porterville were red Tuesday morning as smoke from the Rough Fire invaded the Valley, reducing air quality to “unhealthy” for sensitive groups, and borderline unhealthy for everyone else.

The Rough Fire has consumed more than 24,000 acres of forest land in the Kings River Canyon area on the border of Sierra and Sequoia national forests. Monday night, smoke from that fire began to billow over the Valley and then slowly moved south to cover much of the southeastern portion of the Valley. On Tuesday morning, the smell of the air in Porterville was similar to that of a mountain campground in the morning.

“We are definitely seeing wildfire impacts in Tulare County,” said Heather Heinks, spokesperson for the Valley Air District.

On top of the smoke which produces particulate matter which is a threat to anyone with respiratory issues, the current heat wave, coupled with the start of school and more vehicle traffic, has pushed up ozone levels as well.

At 2 p.m. on Tuesday Porterville had a PM10 (particulate matter) level of 2, an ozone level in the moderate range and a temperature of 98 degrees, which is not all that bad. Bad would be level 5 for PM, unhealthy for all in ozone and a temperature above 100 degrees.

However, “we’re unhealthy for everyone,” said Heinks of the mixture of bad air.

The Air District is holding a meeting today to discuss declaring an Air Alert, which would be the first such declaration since 2013. An Air Alert is declared when ozone levels reach unhealthy, and with the heat and extra traffic, the district knows it is a possibility the air quality will violate the federal one-hour standard.

“We are definitely in ozone season,” she said, adding. “We’re dealing with two pollutants at the same time.”

Heinks said ozone levels tend to go up with the start of school because more people are driving to and from schools, “particularly in the afternoon when it is hot,” she added.

Both ozone and PM10 are health hazards. “The more immediate (impact) comes from PM10. That itchy throat, running eyes and generally you feel bad,” she said about particulate matter.

During air alerts residents are asked to curtail their use of motorized vehicles. “Don’t idle in front of your child’s school,” she suggested, adding drivers “should be aware of how you are contributing to air quality.”

People are also asked to reduce the use of gas-powered lawn equipment and not use charcoal to barbecue.

Heinks said schools are advised to suspend outdoor activities when the air is bad and Porterville Unified Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services Martha Stuemky said the schools do take steps to reduce students’ exposure to the outdoors on bad air days.

She said if necessary, students are kept indoors during recess and the bad air and heat has coaches reducing their outdoor practicing as well.

PUSD Athletic Director Rich Rankin, who oversees air quality issues throughout the district, said he expected to be notifying schools on Tuesday. At 6 a.m., the PM10 had a level 4 and he only expected it to get worse.

“That surprised me,” he said of the level dropping to a level 2 by mid-day. “You can’t even see the mountains right now.”

He said at Level 4 he begins notifying schools to take precautions and at Level 5, the worst air quality, “that’s when we start shutting down everything.”

He said heat also plays a role in taking steps to protect students. "At 105, that's when we start making adjustments to the practice schedules," he said.

Community meeting called as Rough fire east of Fresno surges to 20,979 acres

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015

The Rough fire in the Sierra National Forest grew Monday to more than 20,979 acres, and smoke from the blaze worsened air quality in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Meanwhile, the Fresno County Sheriff's Office issued a fire evacuation warning Monday afternoon for the Black Rock Reservoir area, east of Pine Flat Lake, and closed Black Rock Road. The Sheriff's Office said the area is sparsely populated, but the Black Rock Campground can be a popular destination for visitors to the area.

Authorities will host a town hall meeting Tuesday night in which residents and other can ask questions about the Rough fire. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. at Dunlap Community Center, 39486 Dunlap Road.

Sunday evening, the California Highway Patrol shut down Highway 180 past the Hume Lake turnoff so that the road down into Kings Canyon would be open only to firefighters. The road to Hume Lake remained open.

A mandatory evacuation was ordered of Cedar Grove. Approximately 320 campsites, a 20-room lodge and restaurant, campground store and a pack station were closed.

CHP officers also reported no one was left at Boyden Cave, the tourist attraction just off Highway 180 in the canyon.

The CHP and Fresno County Sheriff's Office are working closely with the U.S. Forest Service to monitor the fire, which is burning five miles north of Hume Lake.

Fire officials will brief area residents and answer questions during a community meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Dunlap Community Center, 39489 Dunlap Road.

With a spell of hot weather and dry air moving into the area, firefighters expect the blaze will continue to burn. The fire had not crossed the south fork of the Kings River, but was approaching the river below Highway 180.

The multi-agency firefighting team battling the Rough fire in the Sierra National Forest, Sequoia National Forest and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks sent additional firefighters Saturday to Hume Lake Christian Camps and surrounding summer cabins to try to keep the fire away.

The fire started with a lightning strike July 31. The U.S. Forest Service said 1,064 firefighters are working to contain it.

Meanwhile, the Walker fire south of Lee Vining has grown to 3,770 acres, and campgrounds in Lower Lee Vining Canyon remain closed, including Lower Lee Vining, Moraine, Boulder, Aspen Grove and Big Bend campgrounds. The fire is just 10 percent contained.

Tioga Road in Yosemite National Park was reopened without escort Monday afternoon, but no stopping is allowed along the eastern six miles of the road, the U.S. Forest Service said.

The Sierra fires are among 19 major fires burning in California.

A fire that has been burning for more than a week about 100 miles north of San Francisco has destroyed nine homes and charred more than 39 square miles. Firefighters are gaining ground against the Northern California wildfire, with 85 percent containment reported Monday.

In Southern California, crews working through the night stopped the spread of two Los Angeles County fires that burned several structures, charred hundreds of acres of dry brush and led to the arson arrest of one person.

A brush fire sparked near a riverbed in Montebello, a suburb east of downtown Los Angeles, halted operations at an oil field and prompted the evacuation of a park. The fire, which grew to about 200 acres, was 20 percent contained Monday.

To the north, a wildfire that burned buildings at an abandoned rehabilitation center in rural Castaic has charred about 300 acres in Angeles National Forest.

Meanwhile, mechanical problems prompted Cal Fire to ground a fleet of planes Monday that help direct other aircraft where to dump retardant on wildland blazes.

Cal Fire ordered its fleet of 15 OV-10 A Broncos not to fly Monday after a propeller on one of the planes failed while the aircraft was still on the ground, according to Cal Fire Battalion Chief Scott McLean.

Five of the aircraft were later cleared for flights after passing safety inspections, he said.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015](#)

Students and dirty air returning, but August has changed

By Mark Grossi

Schoolchildren breathe bad air outside on August afternoons in the San Joaquin Valley. We've talked about it a lot in the last five years, but something interesting has changed in the back-to-school month.

The change since 2010 has not been postponing the start of school until September or stopping children from riding bikes or walking home in bad air.

Other status quo issues? We don't have radical solutions, such as driving bans during the worst days, but we still do have a \$29 million fee for missing an old ozone standard. We appear to have met that old standard, by the way, but I haven't heard the official word yet from the federal government.

So what's the big change? The Valley is averaging twice as many healthy-air days in August over the last five years, compared to the previous five years.

It's an interesting change and it may indicate people are trying to protect the air, but it's no victory dance. The Valley's summertime air is still as bad as any place in the country. Ozone is a corrosive gas that forms best in hot, stagnant conditions – which pretty much describes this place.

When the federal government soon enforces the most stringent, new ozone standard, this region will struggle to meet it in the 2030s.

And when children make their way home after school this week, they still will face the dirtiest ozone-laced air this summer season.

Ozone attacks the lungs, skin and eyes, especially among children and the elderly. It triggers lung problems, such as asthma, and it has been linked to early death.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on Wednesday will ask parents to avoid idling their vehicles as they wait to pick up their children.

People will be encouraged to carpool and shift the times that they use gasoline-powered equipment, such as lawnmowers.

"Our campaign this year is 'we the people' need to do our share," says district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "Everybody has a part to play. We still have a long way to go."

Back to the big change. A mild early August had helped the Valley to get health air on nine of the first 12 days of the month. But that too changed as a typical seasonal heat wave hit, pushing the Valley to exceed the standard four consecutive days. More are expected.

But consider this: From 2010 through 2014, the Valley has averaged nine healthy days each August. In the previous five years, the average was about four healthy days.

The last two years have been the most interesting. During California's dire drought, summer air pollution is expected to increase. Yet there were 13 good days last year and 16 the year before. Unsettled weather usually is part of it, but people are consciously trying to slow down on pollution-making activities.

"We've got research showing there has been significant change in behavior among Valley residents," Sadredin says. "It's gratifying to see. We need to continue it."

Cleanest July air on record

Earlier this month, I wrote about the amazing lack of dirty air in July, calling it the best July in 20 years. Turns out, it was the best July on record, and I goofed.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District studied the same data and found the Valley had its fewest-ever July exceedances of the federal eight-hour ozone standard.

Once I looked at the data, I realized I was looking at the wrong ozone averages on the California Air Resources Board archive. I stand corrected.

Either way, it was an amazingly clean July. August appears to be cleaner than usual, but the air quality can change quickly in summer. Keep thinking about consolidating driving trips and checking the real-time air quality readings each day.