

Mineral Fire consumes 5,000 acres near Coalinga

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The Mineral Fire burning west of Coalinga consumed nearly 5,000 acres overnight and remained just 10 percent contained. Smoke was drifting toward Fresno on Wednesday.

About 1,000 firefighters were battling the blaze, which started Tuesday afternoon north of Highway 198 near Mineral Springs Road, about eight miles west of Coalinga. A Cal Fire spokesman said the blaze was in steep terrain.

By Wednesday afternoon, a gray cloud appeared on the edge of Fresno, believed to be smoke from the Mineral and Soberanes fires.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District meteorologists said strengthening high pressure could move smoke into the area by Thursday afternoon.

On Wednesday, haze was visible in the sky, but it wasn't being smelled in the Fresno area, said Heather Heinks, Valley air district spokeswoman.

"This high-pressure system will cause smoke emissions to remain trapped within the air basin causing elevated PM 2.5 (particulate) and ozone levels for an extended period of time," she said.

The fires combined with the expected warming trend could create serious air-quality problems.

"With an increase in heat, we are expecting to see an increase in ozone," Heinks said. "The perfect storm of emissions and hot sun produce ozone, and additional smoke from the fire will cause more ozone."

The air district advised residents who see or smell smoke to take precautions. Those include limiting outdoor activities (especially children and those with chronic heart and lung diseases), remaining inside air-conditioned buildings, and, for those with asthma or other lung diseases, following doctors' instructions and alerting your doctor if symptoms worsen.

Also Wednesday, Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes flew over the fire with Cal Fire officials. He said firefighters are trying to keep the flames from moving into Los Gatos Canyon, where there are three to four dozen homes.

He said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the firefighting effort.

"Seeing the fire lines they have from the air, it looks better than what they are describing on maps," he said.

Two concerns mentioned by firefighters were the scarcity of water in the area and that no burns had been recorded there in the past 100 years, Mendes said, which means there could be a great deal of fuel ready to burn.

Mendes said firefighting efforts and changing winds will dictate the direction and spread of the fire heading into Thursday.

The Fresno County Sheriff's Office issued dozens of evacuation warnings Wednesday afternoon to homeowners living along Los Gatos Creek Road between Derrick Road and the San Benito/Monterey county lines. These warnings are given out when a potential threat to civilian life is more than two hours away. Residents were told to be ready to leave their homes at any moment and to make necessary arrangements for pets, livestock or personal property.

A mandatory evacuation order for homes along Mineral Springs Road remains in effect. An evacuation center is set up at West Hills College in Coalinga.

Highway 198 is closed at Alcalde Road in Coalinga on the east and at the Fresno/Monterey county line on the west.

Coalinga Fire Chief Dwayne Gabriel said the fire is spreading north and doesn't pose a current danger to the city.

The cause is under investigation, Cal Fire said.