

Local colleges, Galt schools close through weekend; Lodi remains open

By John Bays

Lodi News-Sentinel Staff Writer

Although University of the Pacific's Stockton and Sacramento campuses will be closed today and San Joaquin Delta College will be closed until Sunday due to poor air quality caused by smoke from the Camp Fire in Butte County, Lodi Unified School District schools will remain open.

"LUSD schools will remain open with the exception of Middle College High School due to the San Joaquin Delta College closure," Lodi Unified spokeswoman Chelsea Vongehr said in an email to parents on Thursday.

The school district monitors the air quality with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Real-Time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) — available on the front page of the school district's website — which showed that the air quality in the Lodi and Stockton area was at a Level 5, or "very unhealthy."

"While the air quality remains at Level 5, all outdoor activities have been canceled or moved indoors," Vongehr said. "School personnel will do their best to keep all students indoors as much as possible."

Galt Joint Union High School District, Galt Joint Union Elementary School District and Arcohe School District will also close their schools today, according to a Thursday press release.

Galt High School District schools are expected to re-open on Nov. 26, superintendent William Spalding said in an email to parents on Thursday, as the district's Thanksgiving break takes place from Nov. 19 to 23.

Also on Thursday, Stanislaus State announced that its Turlock and Stockton campuses will remain closed until Monday due to the air quality.

Camp Fire smoke rolls south, worsening air quality and prompting warnings to stay inside

By Yesenia Amaro

Fresno Bee, Friday, Nov. 16, 2018

People are urged to stay indoors as smoke from the Camp Fire is expected to linger over the Central Valley for a while and the air quality could soon reach hazardous levels in Fresno.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District says schools and venues should reconsider hosting outdoor events. Already, the California Interscholastic Federation canceled the Northern California Regional Water Polo Championships in Clovis. Ironically, that event had been shuffled away from home sites because of air quality concerns.

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Classes at UC Merced were canceled Thursday and Friday. The leadership at Fresno State is closely monitoring the air quality conditions, but classes haven't been canceled.

Cassandra Melching, an air district spokeswoman based in Fresno, said northern counties and communities, such as Stockton and Turlock, sunk to level 5 air quality Thursday night. A level 5 is when the air quality is at its worst and everyone is advised to avoid going outdoors.

"Eventually, it's going to move its way down to us," Melching said of the hazardous air quality levels.

Fresno was at level 3 midday Friday, which means the air quality is unhealthy for sensitive groups of people with certain respiratory illnesses.

The air district declared a no-burn day for all of its counties except Madera, Fresno and Tulare, which were limited to burning only if registered.

The Camp Fire, spreading over 142,000 acres, is only about 45 percent contained. To make matters worse, a high pressure system sitting above the Central Valley will remain throughout the weekend, trapping smoke in the Valley, Melching said.

"The conditions will not be very healthy at all throughout the Central Valley," she said, adding people should stay indoors and those with respiratory health conditions should stay in touch with their physicians.

People should keep an eye on the young and the elderly, as well, she said. Another tip: consider changing home and car air filters.

Anyone can check current conditions in their specific area on the air pollution control district's website at www.valleyair.org.

Air quality conditions in the Valley are not expected to improve until after the Camp Fire is completely extinguished.

"We still have a long, uphill battle with this," Melching said.

Fresno State spokeswoman Lisa Boyles said the campus leadership is closely monitoring the air quality conditions, but classes are still in session. Sporting events scheduled for Friday and over the weekend, such as the Bulldogs' football game against San Diego State at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, are still on schedule.

"We are continuing to monitor things as they change," she said.

SJ Delta, Pacific close campuses over poor air quality

Stockton Record, Friday, Nov. 16, 2018

STOCKTON — San Joaquin Delta College — including Middle College High School — University of the Pacific and California State University, Stanislaus have announced campus closures due to the poor air quality from wildfire smoke. St. Mary's High School also will be closed Friday.

Pacific reported its campuses in Stockton and Sacramento were closed Thursday and will stay closed Friday. Delta will be closed through Sunday. CSU Stanislaus has been closed since Wednesday. Students and staff at all campuses are encouraged to check their school's websites and social media for the latest information.

K-12 public schools in San Joaquin County are all monitoring the air quality closely and following guidelines issued by public health officials.

Stockton Unified School District issued the following statement Thursday afternoon: "We have no plans to close our schools. We are restricting all outdoor activities and keeping students indoors."

Lodi Unified issued a similar statement, adding: "We believe that we can best serve our students and community by keeping our schools open."

With the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, several large districts already had planned school breaks next week, including Stockton, Lincoln and Tracy unified. Lodi Unified schools are scheduled for now to be open through Tuesday, while Manteca Unified will remain open with a scheduled minimum day on Wednesday. Public school districts in Stanislaus County are keeping students inside, on what Modesto City Schools calls a rainy day schedule, according to The Modesto Bee.

Elsewhere around Northern California, classes have been canceled for tens of thousands of students. At California State University, Chico, 11 miles from the devastation in Paradise, ash was falling this week and classes have been canceled until after Thanksgiving.

"It's kind of freaky to see your whole town wearing air masks and trying to get out of the smoke," freshman Mason West, 18, said. "You can see the particles. Obviously, it's probably not good to be breathing that stuff in."

West returned home this week to Santa Rosa, hard hit by last year's wine country fires, only to find it shrouded in smoke from the Paradise fire 100 miles away. West's family had to evacuate for a week last year, but their home was spared.

"It's as bad here as it was in Chico," West said. "It almost feels like you just can't get away from it."

Pacific also moved Thursday's NCAA men's soccer playoff match against UC Riverside to Fresno Pacific University. A women's volleyball match Thursday was canceled and plans are underway to reschedule and relocate the game.

Bad air chokes valley

By Glenn Moore

Tracy Press, Friday, Nov. 16, 2018

Wildfires burning in northern and central California have shrouded the Tracy area in smoke, forcing a health caution and prompting one school district to voluntarily cancel classes.

David Thoming, superintendent of the New Jerusalem Elementary School District, made going to school optional for students Wednesday and Thursday because of the poor air quality.

The district had kept students indoors since last week, canceling outdoor recess, physical education classes and outdoor sports practices as smoke from the Camp Fire burning in Butte County hung over the Central Valley.

“At the end of the day, we have to put the kids’ health and safety first, and while it’s a huge undertaking for our part to deal with this — paperwork and all that kind of stuff — to me it’s worth doing,” Thoming said.

Thoming decided to make attendance optional based on reports from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Like many school administrators, he checks the district’s real-time air advisory network each day to assess the air quality, which has been registering at unhealthy levels.

“We were keeping kids indoors and canceling anything outside, and later on in the day yesterday noticed it was getting worse, and I got on the website again and saw today’s forecast was going to be worse than even yesterday,” he said Wednesday.

Thoming checked to see whether any other schools had closed because of the air quality and found a few in Napa, Sonoma and the Bay Area, where the reported air quality was better than in the Tracy area.

He had also received reports that the district’s school nurse had heard from many students about headaches and breathing issues.

“I said, ‘We have to do something here.’ Even keeping students indoors isn’t working,” Thoming said.

The students were still exposed to the smoke while waiting for the bus, riding on the bus, walking to class or going to lunch.

“They are outside compared to being at home, where they are inside every minute of the day,” Thoming said.

He added that one student suffered a severe asthma attack on a bus on the way home Tuesday afternoon and had to be taken by ambulance to a hospital.

“That happened 30 minutes after we made the call to do what we did, and we are like, we’re really making the right decision in doing this,” he said. “Somebody has to go first, and I wasn’t going to wait around for somebody else to do it while our kids were suffering. It’s not worth it.”

About 45 percent of New Jerusalem and Delta Charter students went to school Wednesday, with the rest working on independent study from home.

The superintendent was surprised that other districts weren’t taking more precautions in the smoke.

“I was somewhat shocked as I drove by one of the high schools in town yesterday to see soccer players out there practicing,” Thoming said. “It’s kind of like, gee, do you live under a rock?”

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared a public health emergency because of the smoke and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health caution for people throughout the valley. The air district said smoke from the Camp Fire in Butte County and the Alder, Mountaineer and Moses fires burning in the Sequoia National Forest in Tulare County were all responsible for the toxic air.

The Camp Fire, which began Nov. 8, had burned 140,000 acres as of Thursday and was 40 percent contained. The lightning-sparked fires in Tulare County had scorched a combined 3,700 acres since Oct. 4 and were 55 percent contained.

Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the air district, said in an emailed statement that the bad air will linger through the weekend because high pressure is keeping smoke trapped in the valley.

The district publishes a real-time air advisory — available at www.valleyair.org — that monitors the conditions throughout the county, giving updates on the fine particulate matter, called PM 2.5, made of smoke, dust, soot and ash. The particles are 2.5 micrometers or smaller. That's 30 times smaller than the thickness of a human hair and roughly a quarter of the size of pollen and dust particles.

The particles can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic heart and lung disease, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

At Jefferson Elementary School District, Celli Coeville, an administrative assistant to the superintendent, said the roughly 2,355 students were kept inside this week as smoke filtered over the valley.

"All of our students are remaining indoors for lunch and recesses as well as all P.E. classes are indoors at this time," she said. "At this point, we're keeping an eye on everybody. We are monitoring the air quality."

Both Thoming and Coeville said that when students return from the Thanksgiving break on Nov. 26, they will re-evaluate the air quality to decide whether to continue to keep them indoors.

Lammersville Unified School District in Mountain House has been keeping close watch on the effects of the smoke on its 5,387 students.

Associate Superintendent Thor Harrison said the goal was to minimize student contact with the bad air.

"For our K-through-8 schools, we are doing a rainy-day recess schedule," Harrison said. "The kids stay indoors, PE is indoors in our multipurpose rooms, and at lunchtime we are keeping them indoors, multipurpose-cafeteria area."

Mountain House High students are also being kept inside as much as possible with lunch and brunch served in the cafeteria or indoor hallways. Harrison said outdoor sports were being postponed or canceled as necessary.

Harrison said the school nurses have been keeping watch for students with asthma or other breathing conditions who might be having issues with the smoke.

"Our nurses are very active monitoring those students. Some of those students may be kept home by their parents," Harrison said.

Lammersville students will be off all next week for Thanksgiving, but some school employees working Monday and Tuesday will monitor the air conditions before they return Nov. 26.

Administrators of Tracy Unified School District are also keeping tabs on the air quality.

Bobbie Etcheverry, secretary to the superintendent, said the district monitors the real-time air advisory network to determine whether to keep students inside. She added that an email was sent to principals of all the schools Wednesday morning alerting them to the poor air quality. Each principal had the option to keep students indoors.

"We are working together to make sure everyone is safe and out of harm's way," Etcheverry said. "Tracy was in the unhealthy zone. Kids could go outside, but we try to limit their activity. It can change so rapidly."

Several community colleges and universities in the region announced they were canceling classes because of the smoky air.

Dr. Shyamsunder Subramanian, a pulmonologist with Sutter Gould Medical Foundation and director of the Center for Advanced Asthma Care and Pulmonary Critical Care at Sutter Tracy Community Hospital, sees the impact of the smoke in his practice.

"It's certainly kind of been a nightmare of a year for people with respiratory conditions in this area in Tracy and in the Central Valley region as a whole," Subramanian said. "It doesn't help that we are already in one of the worst air quality regions in the country. We have a very heavy burden of respiratory illness in the community, and on top of it the wildfires have just exacerbated it to very significant degree."

He said more people than usual have been requesting medications and having trouble breathing, several requiring hospitalization.

"Typically we don't see more than one or two flare-ups in whole a week, and in just the past four or five days, we have had almost three or four patients coming in with flare-ups every single day," he said.

Subramanian had only two words of advice for everyone.

"Stay indoors," he said. "I repeat this over and over, and as hard as it may be in terms of interfering with quality of life. When air quality gets to be so dangerous, the levels of particulate matter in the air become so dense, it is very easy for their air passageways to get clogged up."

People with bad asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are especially susceptible, but even healthy people can be affected.

The doctor said the effect is worse for people exercising because as they breathe harder and faster, they inhale more particulate matter. One of his patients recently took his grandson out for a short bike ride.

"When he started he took a feel for how the air felt. He didn't think it felt too smoky or couldn't smell the fires or smoke in a very big way," he said. "An hour later he was so bad he had to be rushed to the emergency room and is currently in day three of his hospital stay."

Echeverry with Tracy Unified said that decisions about outdoor sports practices and events would be made by each principal and coach.

Subramanian cautioned that people might not be taking the dangers of the smoke and particulates in the air as seriously as they should because Tracy is not in the thick of the fire.

"It is sort of an invisible enemy," he said. "You can't see it. You really can't even smell it unless occasionally the smog becomes really prevalent, and so you sort of go about your day thinking, 'I don't really see the smoke, I don't smell anything, so it's perfectly fine.' It's just human nature, I suppose, to not make yourself more aware about this."

The doctor advised that people who must venture outside wear an N-95-type respiratory mask that covers the mouth and nose. A scarf or cloth mask has little effectiveness against the smoke.

Subramanian said he hoped people would come together as a community to watch for people in distress.

"If you have neighbors who are elderly or on oxygen, to check in on them. Check in on your family," he said. "I think if the community becomes more aware of the dangers, they can have some kind of community support to make sure people with respiratory illness are checked in to more often — there are people watching out for them and if they get into trouble, they can get into medical care as early as possible."

EXTREMELY UNHEALTHY AIR Conditions from Camp Fire tank SJ air quality

By Jason Campbell

Manteca Bulletin, Thursday, Nov. 15, 2018

Air quality reached extremely unhealthy levels in many parts of the Northern San Joaquin Valley on Wednesday as the Camp Fire in Butte County continues to rage.

And that is posing a unique challenge for school districts that have to take the health of students into account when figuring out how to structure a school day around limiting outdoor exposure.

Manteca Unified School District, for example, is continuing to work with San Joaquin County Public Health to monitor conditions and is following the recommendations of the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District which tracks the potentially harmful particulate matter that fires generate.

The district included an air advisory on its website on Monday that details how the district is using the Real-time Air Advisory Network – which provides hour-by-hour updates to air quality conditions – to plan activities and maintain a safe environment for students.

The Manteca RAAN monitor – which is located next to Sierra High School – showed that air quality in that area moved into the worst category, very unhealthy, shortly after 8 a.m. and continued to worsen throughout the day. With a threshold of 75 being the marker for particulate matter 2.5 to move into the very unhealthy category, air near the monitoring station on Wednesday reached measurements of 134, and while the measurements dipped back down below 100 between 5 and 6 p.m., the air continued to worsen throughout the evening.

Sacramento, by contrast, had PM 2.5 measurements that were as high as 190. Several school districts closer to where the fire is currently raging have canceled classes until conditions improve.

At least three California State University campuses – Chico, Sacramento and Stanislaus – have cancelled classes this week because of concerns over air quality, and all are expected to turn students away today as conditions are not expected to improve.

According to a bulletin posted by the San Joaquin County Department of Public Health, children are especially susceptible to complications from smoke because their respiratory systems are still developing. Children with asthma, respiratory infection and heart or lung disease are especially vulnerable to air quality conditions, and officials urge parents of those children to work with health care experts to formulate a plan for prevention and treatment of symptoms if they arise. Parents are also encouraged to monitor the smoke forecast – which can be accessed by visiting http://www.valleyair.org/Programs/RAAN/raan_landing.htm – and limit children's outside activity as necessary.