

The Latest: Safety investigators eye firefighter death

The Associated Press

Modesto Bee, Fresno Bee and other papers, Tuesday, July 18, 2018

excerpt from larger story

MARIPOSA, Calif. - Officials say smoke from a forest fire near Yosemite National Park is affecting air quality in central California.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District urged people with existing respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people to stay in air-conditioned buildings.

District spokesman Anthony Presto said Monday smoke from fire can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

The counties affected are Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno and Tulare.

At Yosemite, visitors could use all trails, campgrounds, lodges and restaurants on Monday.

But Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman says officials are asking tourists with respiratory issues to be cautious.

Smoke clogs Yosemite Valley as firefighters battle blaze

The Associated Press

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MARIPOSA, Calif. - Hot and dry weather on Tuesday hindered efforts to slow the growth of a forest fire near Yosemite National Park that killed a California firefighter last weekend, leading some tourists to cut short their visits although all park trails remained open.

The blaze roaring through dry brush and timber between the town of Mariposa and Yosemite National Park has scorched more than 19 square miles (49 square kilometers) in steep terrain on the park's western edge, the U.S. Forest Service said.

More than 1,400 firefighters were battling the flames threatening more than 100 homes and businesses, the Forest Service said. It's just 5 percent contained.

An inversion layer trapped smoke in the area, limiting air attacks and leading officials to issue a hazardous air alert, saying people with health conditions should stay indoors.

"Use common sense. If it looks smoky outside it's probably not a good time to go for a run. And it's probably not a good time for your children to play outdoors," Mariposa County officials said.

Alyssa Sandoval of Pollock Pines, California, planned to leave the park Tuesday. But she left a day early after spending a couple hours in a smoke-filled valley.

"The smoke was horrible, it was horrible. My mother got sick, my husband's eyes were stinging, burning," she said. "I've never seen the valley like that. It was smoked out. You didn't even know you were in Yosemite."

All amenities and trails remained opened Tuesday, and park rangers tending the entrances and the visitor center were informing tourists of the poor air quality, park spokesman Scott Gediman said. Information was also posted on the park's social media accounts.

"Our primary goal is get the information out to them so they can decide how best to go about their visit," Gediman said.

Air quality monitors showed particulate levels in the park at "very unhealthy" levels, meaning everyone should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion or risk serious health effects such as respiratory problems.

Yet tourists plan their visit to Yosemite months or even years in advance. So far, there have been few cancellations, Gediman said.

Images posted to social media showed billowing smoke completely obscuring Half Dome, an iconic rock formation. Park webcams showed other landmarks, such as the El Capitan rock formation, at times concealed by thick plumes of smoke.

Graduate student Paul Schlesinger, 28, said the smoke-choked air and raining ash forced him and a group of friends to change their plans to hike up to Glacier Point, which normally offers sweeping views.

But after driving for 90 minutes from Fresno and waiting in a 5-mile long line of cars to enter the park on Sunday, they decided to instead hike in Mariposa Grove.

"We didn't think it was worth exposing our lungs to that air when you couldn't see anything but also wanted to take advantage of our day there," he said.

A high pressure system was trapping the smoke that is polluting the air, and the same weather phenomenon is expected Wednesday, National Weather Service forecaster Cindy Bean said.

There is a possibility of thunderstorms Thursday, which could bring erratic winds and create containment problems for fire crews, Bean said.

A big concern is thousands of dead trees that were killed by an epic drought that has gripped California for several years.

On Monday, crews retrieved the body of heavy fire equipment operator Braden Varney, 36, after he died in steep terrain on Saturday. Firefighters took turns keeping vigil near Varney's body and saluted as it was taken to a coroner's office.

The blaze that started Friday prompted officials over the weekend to order the evacuation of the Yosemite Cedar Lodge, which is outside the park, and of several nearby communities as flames crept up slopes.