

Ferguson Fire wreaks havoc on Valley air

By Calley Cederlof

Visalia Delta-Times, Wednesday, July 18, 2018

Central Valley residents woke to ashes on their cars Wednesday morning.

It's a sign the smoke from the Ferguson Fire, burning near Yosemite National Park, has made its way into Tulare County.

The high-pressure system over the West has kept smoke bottled up, limiting the use of firefighting aircraft and endangering people with health conditions.

"Use common sense," Mariposa County officials said. "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."

The blaze, which has grown to more than 17,000 acres, is being fed in large part by thousands of dead trees that were killed by a drought that has gripped California for several years.

Due to the fire, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health cautionary for Tulare, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera and Fresno counties.

Tulare County's air quality went from moderate to unhealthy for sensitive groups within a day.

Like Yosemite visitors, travelers to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks should also take precautions.

On Wednesday, the air quality forecast was worse for the nearby national parks than in the Valley floor, according to air quality officials.

"Our air quality isn't any better," said Sintia Kawasaki-Yee, spokeswoman for Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. "Even if you can't see it."

Air quality is tested through sensors placed at Lodgepole Campground every day at the parks. Smoke from the Ferguson Fire is blowing toward the parks, Kawasaki-Yee said.

"Smoke impacts will continue until the fire is extinguished," according to a statement released by air quality officials. "Anyone being exposed to poor air quality or wildfire smoke should move inside to an air-conditioned environment."

Smoke from the fire can cause serious health problems, including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.

According to air quality officials, some people should take greater caution than others.

Who is at greatest risk from wildfire smoke?

- People who have heart or lung diseases, like heart disease, chest pain, lung disease, or asthma
- Older adults are more likely to be affected by smoke. This may be due to their increased risk of heart and lung diseases.
- Children are more likely to be affected by health threats from smoke. Children's airways are still developing and they breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults. Also, children often spend more time outdoors engaged in activity and play.

Ways to protect yourself from wildfire smoke dangers

- Limit your outdoor activities, especially children and people with chronic heart and lung diseases.
- Remain inside air-conditioned buildings. If you don't have an air conditioner, staying inside with the windows closed may be dangerous in extremely hot weather. In these cases, seek alternative shelter.
- If you have asthma or other lung diseases, make sure you follow your doctor's instructions about taking your medicines and following your asthma management plan. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

- If you are an older adult, have children, or if you have heart or lung diseases, talk with your doctor about whether you should leave the area.

In addition to the unhealthy air quality, Visalia and Tulare residents can expect above average temperatures through the rest of the month, said Scott Borgioli, WeatherAg chief meteorologist.

"Seasonal average high temperature for this time of year is the mid-90s," Borgioli said. "High temperatures will stick around 100-104 degrees through the end of the week and be near 100 degrees for the weekend."

According to Borgioli, the annual average for 100-degree days in Visalia is 15. The city hit the 15-day mark on Wednesday, with highs hitting between 100 and 104 degrees.

Last year, Visalia residents saw 50 100-degree days, Borgioli said.

For more information on current wildfires and how they are impacting the Valley, visit San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires.

Residents can also follow air quality conditions by downloading the free "Valley Air" app, available in the Apple store or Google Play.

Approaching Ferguson Fire sparks worries at Wawona meeting. Evacuations? Air quality?

By Jim Guy And William Ramirez

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Friday, July 20, 2018

As the Ferguson Fire raged for a seventh straight day Friday and crept closer to Yosemite National Park, people in the region continued to express concerns about the possibility of evacuations and the poor air quality.

Those two topics dominated a meeting of about 40 people who packed the Wawona Community Center on Friday afternoon. A similar informational meeting was planned Friday evening in Mariposa.

Worries became reality Friday for some when the fire jumped the Merced River near El Portal, forcing incident commanders to announce mandatory evacuations for Old El Portal, Rancheria Flat government housing, Foresta and Yosemite View Lodge.

Highway 140 is closed from 1.9 miles east of Midpines to the Cedar Lodge area and motorists are advised to use an alternate route. Highways 41 and 120 remain open for travel to Yosemite National Park.

A new evacuation center was established at Yosemite Valley Elementary School, 9009 Los Arrow Road in the park. A Red Cross shelter is at New Life Christian Fellowship at 5089 Cole Road in Mariposa.

New figures announced Friday evening put the fire's size at 24,450 acres and still just 7 percent contained.

The crowd in Wawona appeared to be split between locals and park visitors. Wawona is on Highway 41 near the southern entrance to Yosemite and southeast of the Ferguson Fire.

The park remains open, but the air in Yosemite Valley is expected to be unhealthy again Saturday, as it has been for much of this week.

"We're just telling people to continue to check the air quality updates and decide for themselves whether or not the circumstances are fit for them to go outside," Yosemite National Park spokeswoman Shanelle Saunders said.

Saunders said the inversion layer lifted Friday, which allowed the fire to make a push southeast toward the Chowchilla Mountains, roughly due west of Wawona.

Besides the new mandatory evacuations posted Friday, mandatory evacuations are in effect for the El Portal Trailer Court, Jerseydale, Mariposa Pines, Cedar Lodge/Indian Flat Campground, Savage's Trading Post, Sweetwater Ridge and Incline Road from Clearing House to the Foresta Bridge.

Saunders said the focus continues to be to protect structures, specifically those in Mariposa Pines and those surrounding the Cedar Lodge in El Portal near where the fire started the night of July 13. The fire is threatening more than 200 structures but no structures have been damaged.

A CalFire spokesman noted that the fire is raging in an area where the largest recorded fire in the Sierra National Forest took place in 1926.

Nearly 3,000 firefighters are battling the fire in rough terrain and dangerously hot weather for crews. Heavy smoke continues to hamper the use of fixed-wing aircraft to contain the spread of the blaze.

Difficult conditions could worsen for firefighters because of the chance of thunderstorms at the crest of the Sierra that produce winds that fan flames.

The cause remains under investigation.

Other road closures include Incline Road, River Road from Briceburg to the gate at Railroad Flat and all campgrounds in the area and Hites Cove-Jerseydale Road.

Authorities also issued an evacuation advisory for:

- Yosemite West
- Lushmeadows Community
- Ponderosa Basin Community
- Triangle Road from Jerseydale to Highway 49 South (including all side roads)
- Darrah Road from Triangle to Sherrod Road
- East side of Highway 49 from Darrah Road to Harris Road, including Boyer Road, Woodland Area, Wass Road and Tip Top Road
- National Park Service El Portal Complex

Ferguson Fire grows to 21,000 acres. Yosemite visitors warned of poor air quality

By Jim Guy And William Ramirez
Fresno Bee, Thursday, July 19, 2018

The Ferguson Fire roaring through Mariposa County has grown to 21,041 acres, Cal Fire reported Thursday, and containment was at only 7 percent.

Yosemite National Park remained open, but the park announced via Instagram that Glacier Point Road would be closed at 10 p.m. Thursday and it's unclear when it will reopen.

"Firefighting resources and activities involved in the nearby Ferguson Fire have necessitated the need for a small base camp located at the Yosemite Ski and Snowboard Area (formerly Badger Pass) and Bridalveil Creek Campground (which is also closed)," read a portion of the post.

The fire, which has been burning west of Yosemite National Park since the evening of July 13, has also caused a decline in Yosemite's air

Cassandra Melching, spokesperson for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the Valley air quality for most areas was at a level 3 Thursday, with the worst being level 5 closer to the fire. She said the bad air quality could present problems for people with respiratory problems.

Melching said the air quality is extremely poor closer to the blaze that was sparked off Highway 140 near El Portal. "They're definitely going to want to remain indoors," said Melching, referring to people in Yosemite.

Yosemite's air quality readings ranged between level 3 and level 5 on Thursday.

Yosemite National Park echoed Melching's sentiment via its Instagram account: "Move activities indoors or reschedule to a time when the air quality is better. Everyone else should reduce prolonged or heavy exertion and take more breaks during all outdoor activities."

Fire crews were working around Jerseydale along Sweetwater Ridge and trying to complete containment along Highway 140 at Cold Canyon. No structures have been damaged or destroyed.

A Cal Fire spokesman said crews are continuing to build indirect lines along Sweetwater Ridge and from 140 to Wawona Road, the continuation of Highway 41 in Yosemite National Park. Helicopters were able to drop water retardant in the Sweetwater Ridge area Thursday afternoon.

"We are making progress in those areas," said Michael Whitaker, a spokesman for Cal Fire.

Structures along the Jerseydale and El Portal areas are the most threatened, said Whitaker. A mandatory evacuation order was given Thursday afternoon to the residents of the El Portal Trailer Court.

Whitaker added that the firefighters hope to keep the fire south of Highway 140.

The possibility of thunderstorms was expected to increase Thursday, which could cause erratic winds that may change the direction of the fire, an additional hazard for firefighters.

Thunderstorms did not materialize during the afternoon, but the smokey conditions did make it impossible for water tankers to take to the air.