

Breathing problems on the rise in mountains, Valley as Ferguson Fire rages near Yosemite

By Barbara Anderson

Fresno Bee, Thursday, July 26, 2018

Dangerous smoke from the Ferguson Fire is affecting the health of people in the mountain communities of Oakhurst and Mariposa, and the air pollution is seeping onto the central San Joaquin Valley floor in high enough concentrations to send children to emergency rooms.

At Valley Children's Hospital in Madera County the emergency department is seeing 10 percent to 15 percent more children with respiratory problems. The children are coming from Fresno and other communities on the Valley floor, said Mark Fung, emergency department charge nurse.

Children with asthma and other breathing conditions are especially sensitive to smoke, but Fung said smoke from the Ferguson Fire, summer ozone pollution and hot weather have "exponentially increased the risk of respiratory issues" and affected a wider range of patients. "We have been seeing an increase of kids who don't have anything before who are having difficulty breathing with asthma symptoms, wheezing and cough."

Wednesday afternoon, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a Valleywide health alert because of the Ferguson Fire and other wildfires burning in the Sierra. The district warns that its real-time monitors aren't calibrated to detect ash from fires. Instead, the district says, if you can smell smoke or see ash you should consider that the air is in the "unhealthy" range.

At John C. Fremont Healthcare District in Mariposa, patients are being seen in the emergency department for breathing problems, but so far no one has had to be admitted to the hospital, said Kristen Clayton, chief nursing officer.

Smoke is thick in the community and the health district has air scrubbers to filter smoke from the air inside the hospital, Clayton said. The district has sent four of its air scrubbers to Yosemite Valley at the request of the Mariposa County Health Department, she said.

Yosemite National Park officials ordered closure of the park effective noon Wednesday mainly because of hazardous smoke conditions.

Smoke from wildland fires is recognized as a public health threat. Wood smoke contains tiny particles and invisible gases that can affect breathing and people can experience problems for days or weeks. Smoke can cause burning eyes and a runny nose, but the biggest health threat from smoke is from fine particles that can dig into lungs. an penetrate deep into your lungs. According to the California Air Resources Board, breathing the particles can aggravate chronic heart and lung diseases. And exposure to particle pollution is even linked to premature death.

Clayton said the smoke in Oakhurst, where she lives, has affected her. "It was so bad this morning I could see smoke in my house and I woke up with a headache," she said.

The Kaiser Permanente Oakhurst Medical Office has been busy, said Dr. Daniel O'Meara. Doctors estimate they are seeing about a 10 percent to 15 percent increase in patients complaining of breathing problems because of the smoke, said O'Meara, who is an adult medicine physician at the office.

"Most of the people who live here are familiar with the smoke and know how to deal with it by staying indoors," O'Meara said. "But we are seeing people coming in who are staying at outdoor camps, like Bible camps, who are not in enclosed buildings and are experiencing breathing problems."

O'Meara said physicians are kicking up the intensity of treatment for patients, particularly the ones dealing with asthma, by increasing medications and offering other assistance.

Better blaze another trail if you were driving to Yosemite this week

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, July 26, 2018

Millions of Americans have driven through the mountain tunnel on Highway 41 that leads to one of the most beautiful places on Earth, Yosemite Valley.

But that iconic view has been marred this week by smoke from the Ferguson Fire.

If you were planning to make that drive between now and Sunday, new reservations may be in order. The valley as well as the Wawona area of Yosemite National Park were closed to visitors Wednesday to allow firefighting operations related to the Ferguson Fire.

Highway 140, which runs through Merced and the town of Mariposa and accesses the park on its west side, is also closed, from Midpines to Big Oak Flat Road, according to the National Park Service.

Tioga Road and Tuolumne Meadows, including Big Oak Flat and Tioga Pass entrances, and Hetch Hetchy remain open, according to the National Park Service.

Visitors who had reservations for hotels, tent cabins, campgrounds and activities Wednesday to Sunday are eligible for refunds or for new reservations.

As of late Wednesday afternoon, the fire, in Mariposa County, had grown to 38,522 acres and was 25 percent contained. Smoke from the fire and other wildfires is affecting air quality in locations throughout the San Joaquin Valley, which prompted local air pollution officials to issue a health cautionary statement valleywide. Smoke impacts are expected to continue until the fires are extinguished.

Wawona Campground, including group and horse sites, is closed, according to Recreation.gov, which takes reservations for many of Yosemite's campgrounds. Reservations through Aug. 6 will be canceled and fully refunded, according to the site.

A message left on the website: "We do not have an estimated reopening date at this time."