

Stay indoors: California health officials warn of dusty winds amid power shutoff

By Hayley Fowler

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Respiratory specialist Stephen Szabo of Tenet Healthcare talks about the health risks of particulate matter. He is director of cardiopulmonary/respiratory services for hospitals in San Luis Obispo and Templeton. By David Middlecamp

As engineered power shutoffs persisted Wednesday amid increasingly gusty winds across California, air quality officials warned of worsening air quality conditions from the dust and debris being kicked up.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an air quality alert until 3 a.m. Thursday for exposure to particle pollution across the central parts of the state, including in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced and Fresno counties.

“Stay indoors if possible,” officials said in a health cautionary statement that was carried by the National Weather Service. “Avoid prolonged or strenuous outdoor physical activities to reduce the effects of unhealthy air.”

The warning was issued during a historic public safety shutoff event, in which Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has cut electricity to more than 500,000 homes and business. As critical red flag warnings continue through Thursday, even more of the utility’s customers could lose power in the Bay Area and in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

PG&E officials feared power lines triggering wildfires amid some of the strongest winds California has seen in recent years — the National Weather Service is forecasting wind speeds between 20 and 30 mph, and gusts as high as 50 mph, across the Sierra foothills and wine country.

“This is forecast to be the strongest wind event of the season so far,” the NWS in Sacramento tweeted Tuesday.

In a news release, the air pollution control district, which covers most of the San Joaquin Valley, said “gusty winds” could carry smoke and dust from the Briceburg Fire near Yosemite National Park in Mariposa County.

“Smoke impacts are expected to continue until the fire is extinguished, while blowing dust should subside by Thursday,” the release states.

Officials warned the pollutants can trigger asthma attacks and aggravate existing respiratory issues.

Fire near Yosemite grows to 4,900 acres. Evacuees find shelter but businesses suffer

By Vikaas Shanker

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Business owners in parts of Mariposa County braced for more hardship Wednesday as the Briceburg Fire filled the air with smoke, threatened to leave hundreds without power and scared away tourists.

The fire has burned 4,900 acres since Sunday and remained just 25% contained with at least one structure destroyed, according to the latest update from Cal Fire on Thursday morning.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. planned to cut power Wednesday to nearly 1,812 residents in Coulterville, La Grange, Greeley Hill and parts of Mariposa due to “changing weather patterns,” spokesperson Jeff Smith said. The Mariposa County cuts were planned as part of a second phase of cuts by PG&E to reduce fire dangers around the state.

In Midpines, things mostly were quiet. Mariposa County Sheriff’s deputies said few cars had been through the area Wednesday, noting many Midpines residents already left because of the wildfire smoke.

In Mariposa, talk shifted from the fire to the PG&E power cuts elsewhere in the county.

“Luckily, it wasn’t as bad as before,” said Darci Bazinet, daughter of the owners of Happy Burger Diner. “The smoke seemed to be blowing away from us.”

The Briceburg Fire has so far forced fewer evacuations than other fires in recent years. It’s still damaging tourism, one of Mariposa’s most important industries.

“It’s absolutely hurting business,” Bazinet said. “I dread these fires.”

While some of the restaurant’s loss is made up by locals and traffic from firefighters battling the blazes, each time fire closes a major road, business suffers, Bazinet said.

And, she said, wildfires are nerve-racking. Bazinet remains on edge whenever she hears reports of small grass fires.

“You don’t know if that will turn into another Ferguson Fire,” she said, adding she also was concerned with the effect the fires have on air quality and her son who has asthma.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on Tuesday issued a “cautionary statement” in connection with dust and debris blowing around the foothills and into the valley in connection with the fire. Authorities urged anyone exposed to wildfire smoke to remain indoors with the windows closed, especially those with heart or lung diseases and elderly people and young children.

Highway 140 has been shut down between Colorado Road and Savages Trading Post since soon after the fire started Sunday, limiting access to Yosemite National Park. It’s the third time in three years a wildfire or flooding caused by burn scars have shut down the roadway.

PG&E set up a community shelter at 10293 Ferry Road in Coulterville, the community fire department, for affected residents, Smith said.

The fire started around 2:30 p.m. Sunday near Highway 140 and the Briceburg Road bridge. It grew to 500 acres by Monday afternoon. Firefighters worked through Tuesday night into Wednesday morning removing debris and other potential fuel sources and built containment lines.

The fire is burning in an area that hasn’t burned for many years, causing additional concern to firefighters, Cal Fire incident spokeswoman Emily Kilgore said, adding the fire had generally moved in a south-southeast direction since it started.

Mandatory evacuation orders were issued earlier this week for addresses on Highway 140 between Octagon Road and Buffalo Gulch, any homes or camps on Buffalo Gulch Road, Bug Hostel and Briceburg Campground. Mandatory evacuations previously were ordered for three homes near the fire, Briceburg Information Center and the McCabe Flat Campground.

An evacuation center had been set up at New Life Christian Fellowship, located at 5089 Cole Road in Mariposa. But the Red Cross placed the location on standby after none of the roughly 130 people who were evacuated sought assistance, officials said.

It was the same story for a small animal evacuation center set up by the SPCA of Mariposa County at 5599 Highway 49 in Mariposa, according to the Red Cross.