

How to protect yourself from unhealthy air quality

By Vongni Yang

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Smoke from wildfires across California has caused poor air quality in the Central Valley.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District issued another health caution this week, alerting residents of the increasing health impacts from exposure to unhealthy air quality.

The air quality alert is in effect through Thursday, said Heather Heinks, the communications and outreach manager at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District. District officials convene every Thursday to evaluate the alert.

Air pollution officials are cautioning residents to reduce exposure to the particulate matter emissions by remaining indoors in affected areas.

Valley counties impacted by wildfire smoke include San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, and parts of Kern County.

Particulate matter pollution can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, district officials said.

How can residents help protect themselves from bad air quality?

“Don’t go outside,” Heinks said. “If you can avoid it, stay indoors.”

Heinks also advised residents to check or replace the air conditioning filter in their homes.

“Even if you’re on schedule, this extra sort of influence from wildfires is making them dirty, making it work harder,” Heinks said.

Valley residents should proceed with caution while participating in activities outdoors and should abide by the Real-time Outdoor Activity Risk (ROAR) guidelines, which rates the air quality from level one to level five.

Outdoor activity is OK for all with no restrictions at level one with level five asking everyone to avoid outdoor activities.

Residents can track air quality [online](#).

“It’s been unhealthy air quality for multiple days,” Heinks said. “That just really isn’t something we are used to.”

The air quality did improve overnight on Monday, though, Heinks said.

Because of the change of the wind direction, the smoke is being pushed out of the area and into the northern counties in California.

Early Tuesday, the wind was coming in from the northeast instead of the northwest, which was occurring during the stretch of unhealthy air days.

Most of the Valley’s counties, including Tulare County, was at a level two on the ROAR chart early Tuesday.

“We’re seeing some relief,” Heinks said.

Heinks also suggested residents should stay hydrated and check in on loved ones, especially those in the vulnerable age group.

“Basically, be prepared to just hunker down until those awesome frontline workers can get a handle on the fires,” Heinks said.

Heinks had an additional caution for residents: “Don’t go outdoors under the false pretense that the paper or cloth mask that you are wearing to prevent COVID-19 will also protect you from wildfire smoke because it won’t. The microscopic particles can easily pass through those cloth and paper masks and put you at risk.”

Will the smoky skies go away soon?

"Not completely," said Cindy Bean, a lead forecaster at the National Weather Service in Hanford. "Not as long as we still have active fires all around us."

Since Aug. 15, firefighters have responded to more than 600 wildfires across California.

Smoke from those wildfires, particularly the SCU Lightning Complex Fire, the Hills Fire, CZU August Lightning Complex Fire and Castle Fire, are being trapped in the Valley.

"We like to say that the San Joaquin Valley is like a giant bath tub," Bean said. "We don't have many drains. Once that smoke gets into the Valley, it's hard to get it out until we have a significant wind change or change of air mass. We're not seeing that right now."

Castle Fire, Shotgun Fire continue to spread in Sequoia. Has Valley air gotten better?

By Jim Guy

Fresno Bee, Wed., Aug. 26, 2020

Firefighters battling two blazes near Sequoia National Park in eastern Tulare County reported Wednesday that the blazes had consumed 15,400 acres.

The Castle Fire and the Shotgun Fire, burning near the mountain community of Ponderosa, are now being fought as one major blaze, designated the SQF Complex fire by California Interagency Incident Management Team.

Air quality for much of the central San Joaquin Valley improved slightly, from unhealthy for everyone to unhealthy for sensitive groups, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Officials now estimate that the entire fire will not be fully contained until Sept. 12.

Efforts to control the fire were being hindered due to statewide efforts by firefighters to control more than 500 fires throughout California, mainly sparked by more than 12,000 lightning strikes.