

High winds hammer foothills and Yosemite, closing national park. Power outages in region

By Joshua Tehee

Modesto Bee, Sierra Star and other papers, Tuesday, Jan, 19, 2021

Strong, damaging winds are blowing through the foothills and higher elevations of the Sierra, toppling trees and power lines and causing the closure of Yosemite National Park.

The national park closed on Tuesday due to downed trees and power lines, according to the Mariposa County Sheriff's Office, which reported power lines down across the county.

"Trees and debris are across most roadways. If you must be on the road this morning please drive with extreme caution," the office wrote on its Facebook page Tuesday morning.

There was also reported damage to Yosemite park facilities.

The wind toppled at least one 100-plus foot Ponderosa Pine in front of houses at Bass Lake in eastern Madera County. Residents there say the power is out and more than 40 homes in the area were damaged by downed trees.

The patio at South Gate Brewing Company in Oakhurst was destroyed by the winds Monday night. The brewery was closed on Tuesday and slated to reopen Wednesday, according to a post on its Facebook page.

"Today we are so grateful that it wasn't worse. No windows broken, no damage to neighbor properties and most important of all, no one was hurt. Big thanks to our community friends who showed up this morning and helped us pick up the pieces.

Gusts up to 110 mph Monday night

The National Weather Service on Sunday issued a high wind warning for areas including those ravaged by the Creek Fire last fall. That warning remains in place until 7 p.m. Tuesday, as automated gauges in the Madera County foothills have been reporting wind gusts up to 55 mph.

A gauge at Cascadel Heights was reporting winds up to 110 mph Monday night, according to the weather service.

The winds, combined with recent dry conditions, has created a critical fire weather for the central and southern coastal ranges. Multiple vegetation fires have been reported, including the Mill Fire, which started burning Monday night near the Douglas Ranger Station south of North Fork in Madera County.

A second fire, The Manzanita Fire, was reported at the old North Fork Mill.

PG&E customers without power

PG&E has been monitoring the wind events since Saturday and the company's Emergency Operations Center has been managing response, including a Public Safety Power Shutoff as precaution against wildfire.

The shutoff was called because of high wind speeds, which could cause flying debris to damage power lines, and extremely dry vegetation. according to PG&E. The event will affect approximately 5,200 customers in seven counties in central California.

Those shutoff are already in place according to PG&E's outage map. Power is expected to be restored to those areas by 3 p.m. Wednesday.

At the same time, the company is responding to unplanned outages related to the wind storm. As of Tuesday afternoon that included 21,692 in the Yosemite Division, which includes Madera and Mariposa Counties, and nearly 3,000 more in Fresno, Kings, Tulare counties.

Air quality affected

The winds also had an affect on the Valley floor.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a Health Caution, saying high winds and blowing dust have the potential to cause elevated PM10 levels. Residents should protect themselves from exposure to wind-blown dust and refrain from using wood burning devices, which only add to the unhealthy air quality.

The winds are expected to diminish by late Tuesday night, according to the National Weather Service.