

## **Crews fight Shell Fire along Grapevine**

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A fire sparked early Sunday afternoon by a vehicle blaze on northbound Interstate 5 near the Grapevine has spread to about 2,000 acres and was about 30 percent contained by midday Monday, the Kern County Fire Department reported.

About 200 firefighters from a variety of local, state and federal agencies battled the Shell Fire throughout the night Sunday, department Public Information Officer Andrew Freeborn said. They were assisted by firefighting planes and helicopters, as well as dozers and other resources.

"You really have all aspects of fire resources that were actually working this fire," he said.

While the blaze was not threatening any residences, Freeborn noted a vacant elementary school and resources such as power lines and cellphone towers remained at risk.

He said the fire has remained on the east side of I-5 and as of about 2 p.m. Monday was heading south.

Aerial firefighting resources had to be called off for a period Sunday when a flying drone was spotted in the air near the fire, Freeborn said. Such incidents are unfortunate but may serve to remind people not to fly drones near an active firefighting effort.

"Those drones go up and are spotted," he said. "That is an enormous safety issue and all of those safety resources have to divert."

On Monday the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District warned the Shell Fire was worsening local air quality. That, combined with smoke from wildfires as far away as Arizona, prompted the agency to issue a health caution until the fires can be put out.

The air district advised people to stay inside in order to reduce health risks related to airborne particular matter from smoke.

"Particulate matter can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke," the district said in a news release. "Individuals with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of (particulate-matter) exposure. Those with existing respiratory conditions, including COVID-19, young children and the elderly, are especially susceptible to the health effects from this form of pollution."

## **Valley Air District asks residents to just say no to fireworks use**

By Steven Mayer

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It may be an uphill battle, but the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is asking nicely anyway.

In a news release and Zoom meeting held Monday, valley air officials said they are asking residents of the eight-county district to refrain from using personal fireworks during Fourth of July celebrations.

"What takes place every year around this time is that we reach unhealthy levels of particulate matter pollution on the evening of the Fourth of July — and this really impacts a lot of folks," said Anthony Presto, the district's outreach and communications representative.

The people it affects the most tend to be small children, the elderly and people with existing respiratory conditions, he said.

"They're going to be hit the hardest and obviously feel it before a generally healthy adult," Presto said.

"When we get into the unhealthy levels we see on the Fourth of July, everybody is impacted."

Ground level ozone is historically the primary summertime pollutant in the southern valley. But emissions from so-called Safe and Sane fireworks on the Fourth, as well as smoke from wildfires, can increase residents' exposure to particulate pollution, which can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections.

It's about being considerate to the health and well-being of one's neighbors, the district said. Fireworks release large amounts of PM at ground-level, where we breathe. It only makes sense, the district said, to reduce those emissions.

Paradoxically, fireworks sales are often tied to local good works and worthy causes. Countless nonprofit organizations, from school service clubs, booster clubs that help support high school marching bands, churches, museums and more are the beneficiaries of legal fireworks sales across Kern County.

Koral Hancharick, director of the Buena Vista Museum of Natural History & Science, said the past year has been a tough one for the downtown Bakersfield museum. First, the pandemic severely affected attendance at the museum. Then in December, a fire next door resulted in smoke and water damage at the museum.

"For us, this is just really, really important," Hancharick said of hoped-for proceeds from the fireworks booth in the parking lot of the northeast Bakersfield Target store.

It's a quandary. Not only do fireworks pollute the air, they can be difficult to endure for some combat veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They ignite structure and grass fires, cause personal injuries, and stress out thousands of pets each year.

But for the Stockade High School Silver Mustang Band & Color Guard, the dollars make a difference.

"The fireworks booth is one of our biggest fundraisers," the band's booster club says on its Facebook page.

"There's a lot of folks that still want to light fireworks," said Jaime Holt, the air district's chief communications officer.

"There's a lot of nonprofits that the majority of their funding comes from fireworks sales," she said.

"This is one of those times when we ask the public to do the right thing and really limit or avoid fireworks this Fourth of July."