

Dangerous heat and dusty winds prompt weekend health warnings across Central Valley

By Bethany Clough

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Saturday, June 27, 2020

This weekend could be dangerous to people's health in the Fresno area as temperatures could hit 107 degrees and forecasts of blowing dust and air pollution are prompting caution from the local air district.

A dry cold front with gusty winds is predicted to move through the Valley this weekend, resulting in unhealthy levels of particulate pollution, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. High winds are expected to hit the northern and western portions of the Valley on Saturday, subside overnight and then return Sunday.

The district has issued a "health cautionary statement" beginning Saturday afternoon through Sunday for Fresno, Kings, Tulare, Merced, Madera and Stanislaus counties, and the valley portion of Kern County.

All residents are recommended to remain indoors during the windy periods.

Exposure to such particulate pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, trigger asthma attacks and bronchitis, and increase risk of respiratory infections — possibly worsening the effects of COVID-19 infections, according to the district.

Older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion outside. People with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with exposure to such pollution.

Temperatures also high

The valley is also under a heat advisory until 8 p.m. Saturday from Atwater to Bakersfield.

Temperatures are expected to range from 102 to 107 degrees, according to The National Weather Service. The city of Fresno was expected to hit 105 degrees Saturday with Modesto reaching 102.

Temperatures along the foothills of the Sierra will range from 96 to 101 degree.

Heat-related illnesses are possible for people who are new to the area, the elderly, young children, and those with chronic illnesses.

City of Fresno cooling centers will be open from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday at the Ted C. Wills Community Center at 770 N. San Pablo Ave. and the Frank H. Ball Neighborhood Center at 760 Mayor Ave.

To reduce the risk of spreading coronavirus, the centers will follow social distancing guidelines, not allow use of recreational equipment and provide masks to visitors.

The city's FAX bus system will provide free rides to cooling centers.

Saturday's heat follows a string of hot days, with Fresno highs hitting 101 or higher since Monday.

The area is headed for a cool-down, however. The high temperature in Fresno is forecast to be 92 degrees on Sunday, and 86 on Monday, before temperatures climb back into the 90s later in the week.

Red flag warning issued for parts of Northern California ahead of windy forecast

By Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper

Sacramento Bee, Saturday, June 27, 2020

The Sacramento Valley, from Redding to Sacramento, will see heightened fire danger Sunday and Monday with the National Weather Service issuing a red flag warning for a majority of Northern California's low-lying areas.

The combination of strong winds and dry conditions through the weekend will lead to the potential for severe fire conditions, meaning blazes could grow swiftly, the weather service said.

High winds will spread from the north through the region to the Delta, forecasters cautioned. The northerly gusts will continue for much of Monday. Winds will blow from the north at 15 to 20 mph with gusts up to 30 mph.

Humidity also is expected to be very low, ranging from 12 to 20 percent during the day, with moderate overnight recoveries, forecasters said.

The red flag warning was issued for wide swaths of Butte, Colusa, Glenn, Sacramento, Shasta, Solano, Sutter, Tehama, Yolo and Yuba. Those areas included portions of Mendocino, Shasta and Trinity national forests, northern Sierra foothills below 3,000 feet and most Valley locations below 1,000 feet. The foothills of Placer and El Dorado above 1,000 feet were not included in the warning.

"Outdoor burning is not recommended," the weather service said.

The alert will be in effect from 2 p.m. Sunday to 8 p.m. Monday. However, winds in the Sacramento area were already increasing on Saturday afternoon, with Sacramento International Airport observing sustained winds of 10-15 mph with strong gusts.

An additional red flag warning was issued until 11 p.m. Sunday for the eastern slopes of the Sierra including Alpine and Mono County and neighboring counties in Nevada.

Due to this weekend's high winds, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District also issued an air quality warning for San Joaquin and Stanislaus county, as well as valley locations south. Exposure to particles may lead to serious health problems, the alert said. Officials cautioned residents of Stockton, Modesto and other Central Valley areas to stay indoors when possible and to avoid strenuous outdoor activities.

The capital region's Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District was not issuing an alert, according to its website, but did say air quality would be in the moderate range.

The weather service also warned of high winds and rough waters in the Lake Tahoe area. Officials said small boats and kayaks could easily capsize and should stay out of the water.

Fewer miles driven during pandemic contributed to improved air quality in the valley

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Jun 27, 2020

Nobody likes a pandemic.

But if there's a silver lining to the coronavirus pandemic — and the state-ordered lockdown that followed — it may be marked improvement in air quality residents enjoyed in the San Joaquin Valley.

"During the early days of the pandemic, a lot of people were sheltering in place, working remotely and not commuting to work," said John Liu, Caltrans District 6's deputy director for maintenance and operations.

"There was a very large reduction in traffic volume on almost all the highways," he said.

Highway 99, the busiest traffic artery in Bakersfield and the major north-south corridor on the eastern side of the valley, experienced a stunning phenomenon as traffic volume plummeted.

According to Jessica Olsen, program manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, an analysis of vehicle miles traveled on the valley portion of Highway 99 showed an estimated 45 percent reduction in April, compared with the same month last year.

Even commercial truck traffic in the valley took a hit, with trucks on Highway 99 logging some 26 percent fewer miles in April 2020 than they did in April 2019, Olsen said. And with trucks being among the biggest polluters in the valley's troubled air basin, the reduction in total miles translated to a reduction in pollutants that cause ground-level ozone. The main ingredient in smog, ozone can trigger a variety of health problems, particularly for children, the elderly and those who suffer from asthma and other lung ailments.

"There are thousands of sensors along the freeway system that provide real-time data," Olsen said of the technology used by Caltrans to gather traffic-related data.

The steep drop in vehicle miles traveled in April coincided with a 22 percent drop in valley ozone levels as compared with the previous five-year average, Olsen said.

That's a good thing, she said, but also cautioned against attributing the improvement in air quality exclusively to the reduction in traffic.

Air quality in the valley has been improving for years, she said.

"Last year was our best ozone year on record," Olsen said. "This year is shaping up to be a great year as well, assuming we aren't inundated by outside influences like wildfires."

By May, traffic numbers on Highway 99 were already beginning to trend upward. But they still remained well below normal.

The air district estimated a 20 percent reduction in total vehicle miles traveled last month along the valley portion of 99, with commercial trucks showing a 16 percent drop in miles traveled, compared with May of last year.

Air officials saw a corresponding reduction in ozone pollutants — a 13 percent dip.

Traffic counts on Interstate 5, north of the junction of Highway 99, also showed lower total traffic volumes, and the reductions appeared to be even more dramatic than those seen on Highway 99. Truck traffic, however, was the exception, with 99 experiencing a larger reduction in commercial truck volume.

According to data collected by Caltrans on the Interstate 5, total traffic volume — a different measure than vehicle miles traveled — decreased by 19.7 percent in March, 48 percent in April, and 38 percent in May, compared with the same months last year. The corresponding decrease in the volume of truck traffic was much more modest at 1.1 percent, 9.8 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively.

On Highway 99, between I-5 and Highway 46, the drop in total traffic volume was likely more relevant to air quality in metro Bakersfield.

Total traffic volume on this stretch decreased by 18.9 percent in March, 40 percent in April, and 24.4 percent in May, Caltrans found. The corresponding drop in truck traffic was 4.1 percent, 11.3 percent, and 8.3 percent, respectively.

It's clear that a significant decrease in traffic volume and vehicle miles can have a positive effect on the valley's air quality.

That means the opposite is also true. The miles we drive, and don't drive, clearly makes a difference in the air we breathe.

Ironically, the air district has no direct jurisdiction over mobile sources of air pollution, such as cars, commercial trucks, trains and buses. Yet, mobile sources contribute the largest portion of emissions, by far — emissions that generate much of the ozone smog and particulate pollution that continues to bedevil the valley to this day.