

Smoke from western wildfires reaches East Coast; over 150 miles burned in Sequoia National Park

By John Becon

USA Today, Tuesday, September 15, 2020

ARLINGTON, VA. – Intense smoke from historic wildfires that is filling the lungs of millions of westerners is now clouding skies all the way across the nation.

AccuWeather Meteorologist Matt Benz says you can draw a line from California through St. Louis and on to Norfolk, Virginia – pretty much everywhere north of that line is looking at smoke-tainted skies. Areas south of that line see less smoke due to air coming up from the Gulf.

"Amazingly, that wildfire smoke has traveled thousands of miles and finally has reached the East," Benz told USA TODAY. "It looks like clouds, but it is smoke. And we are stuck with this until the weather pattern changes."

The National Weather Service forecast for Washington, D.C., on Tuesday called for few clouds through the day. "However, smoke from wildfires will likely continue to obscure the sky to some extent," the Weather Service said.

A weak cold front expected to sweep through much of the East in coming days probably won't be enough to clear the air, Benz warned.

The upside is that the smoke is so high in the Eastern sky that residents aren't breathing it. That's not the case along the fiery West Coast, where the fires have killed at least 36 people and burned through an area larger than the state of Connecticut.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom compared breathing the air to smoking 20 packs of cigarettes. The 7 million residents of Central Valley, a 450-mile-long swath of the state's interior, were being warned to stay indoors to reduce exposure to particulate matter emissions.

"No matter which way the wind is blowing the Valley is getting smoke," said Jonathan Klassen, director of air quality science at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The valley is surrounded by fire so no matter what happens we will get smoke."

In Oregon, at least 10% of emergency room visits are for asthma-like symptoms, said Gabriela Goldfarb, section manager of Environmental Public Health at the Oregon Health Authority.

Oregon ranks air quality as good, moderate, unhealthy for sensitive groups, unhealthy, very unhealthy or hazardous. Smoke levels are fluctuating between unhealthy and hazardous for Oregon and southwest Washington. When smoke levels are hazardous everyone needs to take steps to protect themselves. Goldfarb urged people to stop working outdoors when air quality is unhealthy or worse.

And that COVID-19 mask probably won't help much.

Paper masks commonly found at hardware stores are designed to trap large particles and are not designed to protect your lungs from smoke, the health authority warns.

"Standard masks are not completely filtering out the air," Benz said. "When you have smoke in the air, you need a beefier mask."

The smoke from California's fires has reached Arizona, where Tucson internist Dr. Matthew Heinz is seeing the fallout in the form of patients complaining of breathing and other problems.

"Even at this distance it can aggravate anyone who has underlying pulmonary conditions, asthma, those kind of conditions," Heinz said. "Closer to the fires, anyone can suffer."

Vision can also be a problem. Alaska Airlines and sister flyer Horizon Air temporarily suspended all flights to and from airports in Portland, Oregon, and Spokane, Washington, until at least 3 p.m. local time Tuesday.

"Improving weather conditions in the coming days could begin to dissipate smoke in Portland and Spokane," Alaska Airlines said in a statement. "However, other airports in the West could be impacted by drifting smoke."

Forests are overgrown but 'lawn rake' won't help, expert says

President Donald Trump this week repeated his claim that Democratic leaders in California deserve blame for the fires, having failed to clear leaves and dead trees from forest floors. That is a head-scratcher for Wally Covington, professor of forestry at Northern Arizona University. Covington agreed that forests have become overgrown and need to be thinned, but "not with a lawn rake." Some of the policies that led to overgrown forests, such as aggressive fire suppression, were implemented more than 100 years ago, so blaming California's current leaders doesn't make sense, Covington said.

He also noted that two-thirds of the burned acreage is on federal lands and not within the purview of state officials at all. Covington said people living in areas burning now are paying the price because policymakers would not address climate change and the effects of fire suppression on forests 30 or 40 years ago.

"Amongst fire scientists like myself we've been convinced that this train wreck was going to happen for years and years," he said. "I was hopeful back in the '90s and '80s that maybe we would reverse climate change effects. Now I'm kind of pessimistic.

Fire crews protect historic Mt. Wilson Observatory

Fire crews in Southern California were struggling to keep the Bobcat Fire from reaching the historic Mt. Wilson Observatory in Pasadena, officials said on Twitter Tuesday. The fire, which started Sept. 6, has grown to 41,231 acres and containment has dropped to 3% on Tuesday from the 6% reported on Monday. The observatory, home to 60-inch and 100-inch telescopes, said on Twitter Monday night that the fire is "knocking on our door."

It posted a photo of a red sun rising over smoke Tuesday, saying the observatory boundaries were "still secure" and that a team from the Los Angeles County Fire Department was working to protect the facility.

"It's shaping up to be a good day," the observatory tweeted.

Gov. Brown vetoes pieces of Oregon budget to fund wildfire effort

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown says she will veto 34 sections of state budget bills to help fund the costs of battling the wildfires. Among the vetoes: planned cuts totaling \$65 million at the Oregon Department of Forestry. Other vetoes will maintain a balanced budget as required by the Oregon Constitution.

Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod said the vetoes are politically motivated, saying more should have been done before this fire season to address forest management.

"Gov. Brown wants more money for fire suppression and state police, but only with an emergency actively burning down the state's doorstep," Girod said in a statement. "After years of cutting these budgets, the action is a day late and a dollar short."

Fire burns through groves of Giant Sequoias

Two major fires have combined to burn over 150 square miles in the Sequoia National Park, tearing through groves of Giant Sequoia. The Castle and Shotgun Fires have "run through" the park, according to the latest fire incident report, burning some homes in the tiny communities of Cedar Slope and Alpine Village to the ground while leaving others untouched.

Fighters were struggling against what have become familiar foes in recent weeks – gusty winds and dry, hot conditions throughout the area. The fire, sparked by lightning strikes last month, have injured 12 people, forced the evacuation of over 3,000 and destroyed 62 structures.

Estimate: Up to \$150 billion in economic losses from fires

The estimated damage total and cumulative economic loss is expected to be between \$130 billion and \$150 billion, according to AccuWeather CEO Joel Myers. That's about the same as a Category 4 or 5 hurricane, he said.

Myers said the estimate includes damage to homes and business and their contents, cars, jobs and wage losses, agricultural losses, infrastructure damage and the costs of power outages to businesses and residents.

Clackamas sheriff tells 'you-loot-we-shoot' residents to put down guns

Some residents of at least one wildfire-besieged Oregon county are posting ominous signs such as "you loot, we shoot." And Clackamas County Sheriff Craig Roberts says some armed residents concerned about looters have been conducting stops on their own. Roberts said law enforcement has the situation under control and urged residents not to take the law into their own hands.

In neighboring Multnomah County, Sheriff Mike Reese warned that residents to stop setting up illegal roadblocks or face possible arrest. "We understand everyone's concerns and anxiety (but) roadways are open to all users."

Local police departments providing assistance at Creek Fire

The Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020

Local police departments have been providing personnel to help assist in the response to the ongoing Creek Fire in the Sierra National Forest.

The Bakersfield Police Department assigned five officers to the North Fork area on Sept. 8, according to Sgt. Robert Pair, BPD's public information officer. Pair said that they are working to protect and prevent looting of evacuated properties, assist in evacuations, enforce road closures and support animal rescues and fire escorts.

"(BPD officers) are working closely with local law enforcement and fire officials in that area," Pair said.

Last week, the Delano Police Department responded to a request for mutual aid from Madera County with the fire, according to Officer Christopher Nino, public information officer. On Sept. 9, the department deployed two officers working 12-hour shifts, who were replaced by two additional officers.

Nino said their officers are patrolling for looters in affected areas, escorting individuals to their residences for necessities and enforcing the mandatory evacuation order. Officers have been deployed in the area of Camp Sierra and Reddin roads northeast of Shaver Lake.

"(Delano officers) will continue their assistance for the rest of this week and throughout the following week," the Delano Police Department said in a Facebook post.

'Stay home!' air officials warn in response to 'unprecedented' fire season, dangerous smoke

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Sept. 14, 2020

The message coming from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District on Monday was deadly serious.

They spoke as if your life might depend on it.

"We have fires to the north of us, to the south of us, the east and the west, so the challenge we've had is it doesn't really matter which way the wind is blowing. The smoke continues to come into the San Joaquin Valley," said Jon Klassen, director of air quality science and planning for the air district.

And because the valley's topography is shaped like a bowl, smoke is often trapped here once it arrives.

Klassen and other air district officials updated reporters and took questions at a remote-video briefing held Monday from their offices in Fresno. They described an unprecedented wildfire season that has consumed a record 3.2 million acres, leading to hazardous wildfire smoke impacts in all valley counties.

In recent days, the sky has looked a lot like a typical overcast winter day in the valley. But don't be fooled by appearances, Klassen said. Although winter days can have poor air quality, there is no similarity to the current problem.

"I just wanted to be clear," he said. "That's definitely not anywhere near what we're seeing here and over the past few weeks."

Dangerous, microscopic PM 2.5 particulate pollution, normally a wintertime problem, is being carried into the valley with the smoke in high concentrations.

Typically in the winter, concentrations of PM 2.5 get up to about 65 micrograms per cubic meter.

"We're seeing double that, or almost triple that in some of our readings," Klassen said. "So these are very, very high concentrations."

Most of these mega-readings have been in the Fresno-Madera area, due to their proximity to some active fires.

The entire valley is seeing poor air quality, but Bakersfield and other south valley communities aren't being inundated as badly as Fresno.

"Bakersfield is a little bit better than the rest of the valley," he said.

The east side of the valley could see some improvement by Thursday and Friday as winds are expected to shift toward the end of the week. But conditions can change rapidly.

What can we do about it?

"First and foremost, our message has been and continues to be stay inside," said Jaime Holt, the air district's chief communications officer.

Holt acknowledged that people are "sick and tired" of being inside for the past six months as residents have sheltered in place in response to the coronavirus pandemic. But in this crisis, staying indoors as much as possible is the best choice.

Officials are advising people to change the filters on their air conditioners every two or three weeks rather than every two or three months.

Investing in air purifiers is also advised, she said.

"We also have witnessed a lot of people doing activities outside, exercising or jogging," Holt said.

The district's "No. 1 advice" is to avoid cardiovascular exertion — vigorous exercise — during episodes when wildfire smoke is evident.

Individuals who work outdoors should talk with their supervisors or human resources managers. If arrangements cannot be made to avoid outdoor work, employers are required to supply workers with an N95 mask.

Cloth masks and regular paper masks are not effective in keeping out such high concentrations of wood smoke, Holt said.

Children and older people are particularly at risk, she said. And great effort should be made to protect them from these dangerous levels of PM2.5 and larger smoke and ash particulates.

Five of the 20 largest fires in the state's history have occurred in 2020, Klassen said. And wildfire season is far from finished. This is not over.

Fresno area 'surrounded by fires.' Residents warned to stay inside from record-bad air

By Monica Vaughan

Sacramento Bee, Modesto Bee & other papers, Monday, Sept. 14, 2020

A record-breaking fire season means record-breaking air pollution for California's central San Joaquin Valley, and relief is not coming soon.

Over 3.2 million acres of California have burned in the 2020 fire season, sending out billowing towers of smoke that reached thousands of miles away.

As a result, the central San Joaquin Valley is "breaking records for air quality, in a bad way," according to Jon Klassen, director of air quality science and planning with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

“In a normal fire season we may have one fire in the Sierra Nevadas or a fire down in Southern California, so if the wind is blowing in a certain direction we may not be getting those impacts,” Klassen said on a video news conference Monday.

“But because of what we’re experiencing here, where we’re surrounded by fires, no matter what happens with the weather, it seems we’re going to continue to have smoke in the Valley.”

Air quality is unhealthy for everyone in the Valley Monday, with the Air Quality Index measuring above 150. Anything below 50 is considered good and safe. It’s particularly bad in Fresno and Clovis.

It has reached hazardous levels in some areas, including Madera.

Air quality alert: ‘stay inside’

It’s a serious risk to everyone, even healthy adults.

Air quality officials have repeatedly urged residents to stay inside to protect health and prevent injury, including cardiovascular and respiratory illness from exposure to wildfire smoke.

“We understand people are sick and tired of being inside because of COVID,” said Jaime Holt with the Valley Air District. “But right now it’s very important you continue to stay inside. And, it’s very important to change the air filter in your HVAC (system).”

When asked about the risk to people who ignore the warnings and instead go outside to go jogging, for example, Holt likened their decision to smoking a pack of cigarettes.

Generally, air filters need to be changed every few months. Holt recommends changing filters every two to three weeks due to the heavy wildfire smoke.

The air quality is unhealthy for everyone, with prolonged levels of particulate matter threatening to trigger asthma, harm lung development in children, or cause heart attack or stroke in older adults.

Not everyone can stay inside to stay safe. Farm workers, gardeners, pool maintenance people, outdoor custodians are all at risk, especially if physically laboring outside.

In those situations, employers are legally required to reduce employee exposure to PM 2.5 and provide proper respiratory protection equipment, such as N95 respirators. Workers are encouraged to discuss this Cal/OSHA safety requirement with their employer, or contact OSHA directly with a complaint.

The Fresno District Office can be reached at DOSHfresno@dir.ca.gov or 559-445-5302.

Choking air from Western fires just won’t ease up

By Sara Cline and Gillian Flaccus, Associated Press/Report for America
Modesto Bee, Monday, Sept. 14, 2020

Relief from putrid, dangerous air spewing from massive wildfires across the West won’t come until later in the week or beyond, scientists and forecasters say, and the hazy and gunk-filled skies might stick around for even longer.

People in Oregon, Washington and parts of California were struggling under acrid yellowish-green smog — the worst, most unhealthy air on the planet according to some measurements. It seeped into homes and businesses, sneaked into cars through air conditioning vents and caused the closure of iconic locations such as Powell’s Books and the Oregon Zoo in Portland, the state’s biggest city.

“I don’t think that we should be outside, but at the same time, we’ve been cooped up in the house already for months so it’s kind of hard to dictate what’s good and what’s bad. I mean, we shouldn’t be outside period,” said Issa Ubidia-Luckett, a Portland resident, who was grabbing lunch on Monday.

Oregon’s Department of Environmental Quality extended an air quality alert to Thursday after it was to initially expire on Monday. The air was so thick that on Monday Alaska Airlines announced it was suspending service to Portland and Spokane, Washington, until Tuesday afternoon. Hazy, smoky skies fouled Washington state and experts said some parts of California might not see relief until next month.

Zoe Flanagan, who has lived in Portland for 12 years, has barely left the house but braved the smog to walk her two dogs on Monday. On Sunday, Flanagan and her husband, in desperation, turned on the heater, which has a better filter than their air conditioning.

said. "I felt really hungover all day Saturday. I just couldn't get enough water, I had a headache."

Dylan Darling, a spokesman for the state's department of Environmental Quality, said: "I grew up in Oregon and lived here a long time, and to see this much smoke for this long and wide spreading, really stands out in the state's history."

Some areas of central California blanketed by smoke are not likely to see relief until October, said Dan Borsum, the incident meteorologist for a fire in Northern California.

"It's going to take a substantially strong weather pattern to move all the smoke," Borsum told a fire briefing Sunday night. He said smoke from dozens of wildfires in the West and throughout California is pooling in the Central Valley, which already has some of California's worst air quality even when wildfires are not burning.

Joe Smith, advocacy director for Sacramento Loaves & Fishes, which attends to homeless people, said California's capital city hasn't seen consistent blue skies in weeks. People experiencing homelessness have grappled with an unrelenting onslaught of virus, searing heat and now, polluted air they can't escape.

"Some of the toughest folks you'll ever meet are people who live outdoors, unhoused, but it is getting to them," he said. "We've got COVID-19, followed by excessive heat wave, followed by smoke. What's going to start falling out of the air next on these poor folks?"

Twana James, who lives in a tent in Sacramento, coughed several times during a brief phone interview Monday, trying to clear her throat. She said her voice is not usually so hoarse.

"We got hella ashes from the fires, everything is covered in ashes," she said. "It's hard to breathe."

In Oregon, places like the Oregon Convention Center in downtown Portland are being used as a smoke advisory shelter where people in need of healthy air quality can go.

Darling said typically during wildfires in Oregon, such as those in 2017 that carried heavy smoke to the Willamette Valley and Eugene area, people can escape to other areas of the state for clean air.

"That's what's standing out — there just isn't a place in Oregon right now to find fresh air," Darling said.

State officials say they are collecting data to see how these fires compare to those in the past and the effects, not only on people's health but also the environment.

Tyler Kranz, a meteorologist at Portland's National Weather Service office, said for the smoke to disperse Oregon will need strong enough winds blowing from the ocean towards land — but there needs to be a "perfect balance" of wind so that it disperses smoke but doesn't further ignite fires.

"We need the winds to get the smoke out of here," Kranz said. "We just don't want them to be too strong, because then they could fan those flames and all of a sudden those fires are spreading again."

As she ate lunch at a popular burger place east of Portland, one of only a few places open, Ubidia-Luckett said the smoke reminded her of stories long-time Portland residents tell about the thick ash that fell on the city when Mount St. Helen's erupted in nearby Washington state in 1980. There was so much ash that for weeks many residents wore masks and had to clear ash off their cars.

After beginning the meal outside, Ubidia-Luckett and her 6-year-old son soon moved inside because the air was too much to take. The boy was with her because his first day of kindergarten was postponed Monday for the second time due to the hazardous air conditions.

"That's the hard part for little kids. They're so cooped up so what do you do?" she asked. "Eventually, they want to go outside."

Cline reported from Salem, Oregon. Associated Press writers Janie Har and Juliet Williams in San Francisco and Gillian Flaccus in Portland contributed to this report.

As smoke pours into Central Valley from wildfires, air quality reaches unhealthy levels

By James Ward

Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, September 14, 2020

Multiple wildfires across the state are fouling the Central Valley's air quality, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Officials say the SQF Complex Fire, Creek Fire, and multiple large and wildfires in Northern California will cause unhealthy air quality in the entire Central Valley at least through Thursday or Friday.

"No matter which way the wind is blowing the Valley is getting smoke," said Jonathan Klassen, director of air quality science and planning at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "The Valley is surrounded by fire so no matter what happens we will get smoke."

The district is warning residents to stay indoors to reduce their exposure to particulate matter emissions. The district is also issuing a health caution for people with health conditions to be cautious until the fires are put out.

The bad air can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, the district reported.

Some of the medical conditions caused by bad air quality are similar to a COVID-19 infection, the district says. The biggest difference between the virus and bad air: A fever.

The common cloth and paper masks individuals are wearing due to COVID-19 concerns may not protect them from wildfire smoke, the district reported.

The district is also advising people not to exercise outdoors or do any outdoor activities through at least Thursday, said Jaime Holt, district spokesperson said.

Any prolonged outdoor activity is the equivalent of smoking a pack of cigarettes, Holt said.

"This is not the time to take your newborn out for a walk in their stroller," Holt said.

For people who work outside, Holt said, employers are required to provide safety equipment for their workers.

The district is also asking almond farmers to delay harvesting their crops, which causes an uptick in dust that hurts air quality, Holt said.

If you smell smoke or see falling ash in your immediate vicinity, consider air quality "unhealthy" (RAAN Level 4 or higher) even if RAAN displays lower level of pollution, the district said.

You can use the District's Real-time Air Advisory Network (RAAN) to track air quality at any Valley location by visiting myRAAN.com or <https://www.valleyair.org/aqinfo/forecast.htm>.

As of Monday, the Sequoia Complex Fire is inching closer to Three Rivers and forced the partial closure of Sequoia National Park.

The SQF Complex Fire grew to over 74,000 acres over the weekend. The fire, which is actually a combination of two fires, the Castle Fire and the Shotgun Fire, started burning in August and was caused by lightning.

There are more than 750 firefighters assigned to the incident, including 10 hand crews, 18 water tenders, eight helicopters, 54 engines, seven bulldozers.