

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY AIR POLLUTION CONTROL DISTRICT

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Wildfire smoke not posing significant health risk on Valley floor Air District urges residents to be cautious

Air monitoring stations in the San Joaquin Valley aren't recording significant increases in air pollution levels due to an 83,000-acre wildfire burning in the Sequoia National Forest and the Giant Sequoia National Monument. That does not mean, however, that the Valley's air quality is not at risk.

Although the McNally fire has burned for more than a week, levels of airborne particles at the Valley Air District's monitoring sites on the Valley floor matter have remained relatively steady in the good to moderate range.

"We're seeing only very slight increases in particulate matter levels on the Valley floor, not anywhere near the federal health standard," said Evan Shipp, supervisor of air quality analysis for the Air District. "That could be because the smoke is poking through the inversion layer and being dispersed."

Airborne particulate matter (PM) includes dust, ash, tiny liquid droplets and smoke. Particulates that are ten microns and smaller can be inhaled deep into the lungs and cause serious health problems. Ten microns is roughly one-seventh the width of a strand of human hair.

Although monitoring sites aren't showing elevated PM levels, residents should be cautious because the situation could change rapidly.

"Obviously, there's a lot of smoke at ground-level near the fire. A change in winds or a change in the inversion layer could quickly bring that smoke down upon us in unhealthy concentrations," Shipp said.

Therefore, residents should be aware of their surroundings and exercise caution. "If you find yourself in a smoky area, it's probably a good idea to stay indoors to avoid exposure," Shipp said.

Air District meteorologists will continue monitoring the particulate matter levels closely and inform the public if smoke from the fires becomes a health risk.

Exposure to high PM levels traditionally is more of a health concern during winter months, whereas ozone is the bigger concern during the summer. Today's ozone levels are expected to be good in the northern Valley, moderate in the central Valley, and unhealthy for sensitive groups in the southern Valley. Residents can protect themselves from the health risks of increased ozone pollution by staying indoors or reducing exertion levels if they must be outdoors.