

California wildfire pollution paralyzes San Francisco region

November 20 2018, by Rob Gloster



Smoke from the Camp Fire (C top) blows south towards San Francisco (C) and out to sea on November 9, 2018

The sidewalk cafes of this Silicon Valley city, usually packed at lunchtime with workers from Google and other high-tech companies, were mostly abandoned Monday afternoon.

A few people, some wearing facemasks, rushed past and ducked inside stores, avoiding the acrid, smoky air outside. Though the [deadly wildfires](#) around Paradise are about 150 miles (240 kilometers) to the northeast, the San Francisco Bay area has been blanketed with a thick layer of haze for days.

San Francisco reported unhealthy air quality for the 12th straight day on Monday. Purple Air, a private company that monitors air quality worldwide, last week ranked Northern California as having the foulest air around the globe.

Weather forecasters promised improvement when rain arrives on Wednesday.

"If I don't have the mask on, I actually feel like I can taste the sediment in the air," Eric Ryzl told AFP as he delivered packages for UPS at a Mountain View apartment complex.

Many Bay Area universities and [secondary schools](#) remained closed Monday, and did not plan to reopen until after the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. Those schools that did open restricted students, canceling sports and other outdoor activities.

'Beijing worse'

Joanne Doria, a junior at Los Altos High School, was wearing a mask and said she was trying to avoid going outside when possible.

"The [tiny particles](#) from the smoke can damage your lungs, and I have

slight asthma as well as a history of getting pneumonia," she said, adding that she donned a mask "because my dad is worried."

Parks and zoos were closed, and streets usually packed at lunchtime were ghostly quiet. Across the bay from San Francisco, a group called Mask Oakland planned to hand out 50,000 masks to homeless people and others most at risk in that city.

San Francisco's iconic Golden Gate Bridge was shrouded in haze as the air quality index was listed at 172. Anything above 151 is considered unhealthy, and leads to calls for even healthy people to avoid prolonged outdoor exertion.

Tourists found attractions such as Alcatraz Island closed, and some Bay Area residents headed to neighboring states Nevada and Oregon in search of fresher air.

At the University of California, Berkeley, classes were canceled Monday and Tuesday and Chancellor Carol Christ sent a message to those students remaining on campus suggesting which libraries and classrooms have the best air filtration systems.

The Camp fire, which wiped out the town of Paradise on November 8 and is still burning in the drought-parched Sierra Nevada foothills, is the worst in California history. At least 77 people have died, about 1,000 are missing and more than 11,000 homes have been destroyed.

Alan Wang, a local realtor, and his three young children all were wearing facemasks as they hurried into a Mountain View cafe. He has tried to limit how much the kids are outside for the last couple of weeks.

But Wang said the air is still not as bad as what he experienced as a student in the late 1990s in China.

"I used to live in Beijing," he said, "and it was much more disgusting than this."

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