

Kids swapping outdoor play for TV as smoke chokes California

August 9 2018, by Kathleen Ronayne



This photo provided by Richard Costigan III shows smoke from the wildfires fills the sky over Sacramento, Calif., on Aug. 6, 2018. The haze stretches from the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the Sacramento and San Francisco Bay areas, and nearly every major population center in between has suffered air quality that's considered dangerous for children, the elderly and people with asthma or other respiratory conditions. (Richard Costigan III via AP)

A dull haze and the faint smell of smoke from distant blazes have blanketed many California cities for two weeks, forcing summer campers to stay inside, obscuring normally bright skylines and leaving cars covered with ash.

Smoky air from blowing winds is nothing new in California, but air quality experts say it's rare for the dirty air to linger for so long, a reality of ever-larger fires that take longer to extinguish.

The haze stretches from the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range to Sacramento and hovers over the San Francisco Bay Area, with most major population centers in between suffering air quality that's considered dangerous for children, the elderly and people with asthma or other respiratory conditions.

Kaela Baylis of Sacramento used to take her nearly 2-year-old son outside twice a day but has only gone in the morning the last 10 days.

"He asks to go outside a lot in the afternoon," she said Wednesday as they strolled through a park.

Two major wildfires—one called the Mendocino Complex Fire that is the largest in California history—are burning more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of Sacramento and another huge fire near Yosemite National Park is a little farther to the southeast.

Firefighters made significant progress against the Mendocino Complex for the first time Wednesday but said the blazes will likely persist through September.



Hazy air surrounds Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. The air quality has hit unhealthy levels in cities miles away as California's largest wildfire ever burns to the north. (AP Photo/Lorin Eleni Gill)

The fires have combined to produce unhealthy air that has drifted as far east as Salt Lake City, 450 miles (725 kilometers) away.

The skies there were so murky that residents couldn't even see the nearby [mountain range](#) that hovers over the valley earlier this week. Utah air quality officials warned children and seniors to limit time outside.

The skies cleared a bit Wednesday in Utah's capital city, but more smoke is expected to blow in over the weekend, National Weather Service meteorologist Steve Rogowski said.

Thursday marked the Sacramento region's 14th straight "Spare the Air"

day, when people are encouraged not to drive and add further pollutants to the air—the longest stretch since at least 2001.



A dull haze fills the air around the San Francisco Bay Bridge and Oakland, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. Blazes in Northern California and near Yosemite National Park have caused air quality to worsen in cities miles away. (AP Photo/Lorin Eleni Gill)

A similar warning is effect in the San Francisco Bay Area, and air quality experts in California's Central Valley and areas southeast of Los Angeles are warning residents to limit outdoor exposure because of wildfires.

John and Rosalie Gonzales strolled through a Sacramento park on Wednesday with their toddler granddaughter, whom they were visiting.

For the last few days at their home in the San Francisco Bay Area community of Albany, they have awakened to ash on their cars from the Mendocino Complex Fire.

That was a rarity until a few years ago, before California began experiencing more unusually large wildfires, they said.

"It doesn't seem like it's sustainable to have this happening year after year after year," she said.



The city of Berkeley, Calif., sits in a dull, smoky haze Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. The air quality has hit unhealthy levels in cities miles away as California's largest wildfire ever burns to the north. (AP Photo/Lorin Eleni Gill)

A day earlier, dozens of summer campers sat inside watching a movie at

a Sacramento YMCA.

"Normally that doesn't happen on a regular day at camp," said Jay Lowden, president of the YMCA for a nine-county region that serves more than 700 kids weekly at 13 summer camps.

His counselors monitor the air quality on a daily basis, and Lowden said he may cancel a planned family camp this weekend in the foothills because of the smoke.

Sac United, a competitive youth soccer club, has canceled four practices in the past two weeks because of poor air quality. High school sports teams are being similarly conscious of dangerous air as practices get underway.



A haze of smoke blankets San Francisco Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. Public health and air quality experts say the smoke drifting over cities in California is

lasting for a longer stretch than normal as some of the biggest wildfires in state history rage. (AP Photo/Lorin Eleni Gill)

Sacramento residents have taken to Twitter to share photos of a dark gray sky hanging over the Capitol and a city skyline difficult to make out. The smell of smoke has even slipped into downtown office buildings.

"It was horrible; I've never seen anything like it before," Mayor Darrell Steinberg said of Monday's afternoon haze.

Lori Kobza, spokeswoman for the Sacramento Air Quality Management District, said it's hard to predict when things will improve because of the unpredictability of the fires and the winds.

Because the city is located in a valley, it's easier for smoky air to get trapped when high pressure systems blow in, making Sacramento like a smoke-filled bowl that's had a lid placed tightly on top.

"We're all trapped in it," Kobza said.



A man rides a scooter on Treasure Island as the San Francisco city skyline sits in a smoky haze in the background Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. Ongoing wildfires in Northern California have worsened air quality in cities miles away. (AP Photo/Lorin Eleni Gill)



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Video journalist Chris O'Neal records the sun visible through thick smoke from a wildfire as a helicopter flies past him Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018, in Lake Elsinore, Calif. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Onlookers watch as a wildfire burns near Lake Elsinore, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 8, 2018. Evacuations have been ordered for several small mountain communities near where a forest fire continues to grow in Southern California.
(AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

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