



Orange, apocalyptic haze

**Wildfires cause poor air
quality in New York**

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Wildfire smoke causes haze; unprecedented crisis

Smoke from wildfires in Canada recently led to significant air pollution across the state, as New Yorkers were among the 128 million people in the United States who were recently affected by this situation that was previously unprecedented in New York.

In some areas, the smoke and pollution led to skies being transformed into a deep orange haze that many New Yorkers have only previously seen in dystopian movies and television shows.

The pollutants led the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Air Quality Index (AQI) readings to reach unhealthy, and at times, hazardous levels across New York.

Gov. Kathy Hochul deemed the situation an “emergency crisis.” The governor and other state and local officials advised New Yorkers to avoid outdoor activities, stay indoors and wear masks to protect themselves, preferably N-95 or KN-95 masks that filter out particles.

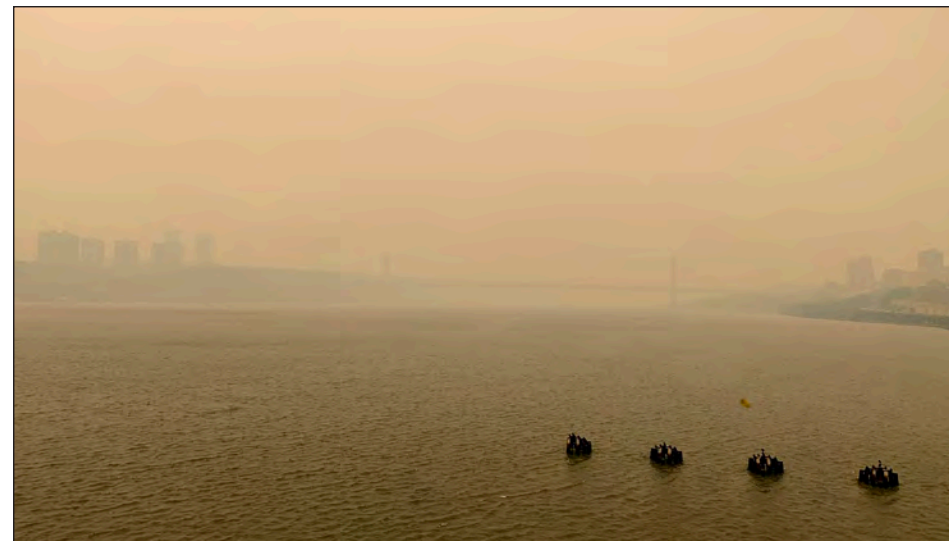
While the smoke and haze grounded flights, closed some

schools and disrupted outdoor activities, CSEA members continued to provide essential services, taking precautions while doing so.

“Much of the state has been inundated with smoke caused by wildfires in Canada,” said CSEA President Mary E. Sullivan, as much of the state was affected. “The governor recently advised against outdoor activity. I urge all members to do what’s best for their health such as wearing masks and staying indoors, if possible, during this time.”

Poor air quality

Weather stations operated by the National Weather Service (NWS) monitor the levels of hazardous air pollutants across the country. From those measurements, the AQI is calculated. The AQI is an overall value summarizing the contribution of all the pollutants and gives the potential for air quality to affect human health. The AQI can range in value from 0 to 500, with higher values indicating worsening air



In clear conditions, the majestic span of the George Washington Bridge, which connects New Jersey to New York City, can be seen from the promenade of Riverbank State Park. (Photo by David Galarza.)

quality.

As skies grew hazy, the air grew smoky and daylight was shrouded in shades of orange. Many New Yorkers repeatedly checked the EPA’s AQI readings found on the agency’s air quality website, AirNow.gov.

At the height of the pollution, New York City had the worst air quality in the world, recording the most hazardous AQI readings since those measured in Lower Manhattan after 9/11.

The primary pollutant that was generated by the Canadian wildfires is the particulate matter or PM, which consists of tiny solid

particles or liquid droplets in the air that are 2.5 microns (PM 2.5) or less in diameter. The particles are considered hazardous because they can reach the lower portions of the lungs and cause inflammation that can have severe medical consequences for people that have sensitive respiratory systems, like those with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD), reactive airway disease (RAS) or congestive heart failure.

Exposure to fine particulate matter can lead to irritation to the eyes, nose, and throat, coughing, sneezing, runny nose, and shortness of breath, and exposure to elevated pollutant levels poses an even higher risk for senior citizens, children, pregnant people and individuals with asthma, heart disease and other respiratory illnesses.

Studies have also found that short-term exposure to small particulate matter increases the risk of a range of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

While New York had previously seen only a limited amount of air pollution from wildfires, it is more common in the Western United States. Many experts predict that New York could face pollutants from wildfires more frequently.

— Janice Gavin

Highway crews continue vital work in smoky haze

UTICA — When visibility is bad in Central New York, usually heavy lake-effect snow or a white-out snow squall is to blame, not Canadian wildfires.



Mishlanie

But as smoke passed through the state, state Department of Transportation workers continued their daily duties maintaining roads and bridges, but

they did so with a number of safety concerns in mind.

Utica State Employees Local President Brian Mishlanie said he fielded numerous calls from members who were out on the job during the environmental event. The most prevalent concerns being inhaling smoke, not having proper personal protective equipment (PPE), and working in poor visibility.

“The visibility was a big concern,” said Mishlanie. “We have people who have gotten killed when

visibility is 100 percent. You can’t preach safety and then send our members out in dangerous working conditions.”

CSEA’s Occupational Safety and Health Department recommends that you avoid outdoor work and other activities as much as possible in poor air quality conditions. If you must perform outdoor work, your employer is responsible for providing personal protective equipment and taking measures to keep you as safe as possible.

— Nicholas Newcomb

City skies an 'orange, apocalyptic haze'

MANHATTAN — As a thick, orange haze enveloped New York City and the city recorded the worst air quality on the planet, CSEA members working at Riverbank State Park continued to service the park and the general public.

"I've been working here 21 years and I've never seen anything like it," said Felix Mateo, a park worker 3, as he made his rounds collecting refuse along the Hudson River promenade. "We have to take care of ourselves, but the work needs to get done."

Smoke, and what have some have described as an "orange, apocalyptic haze," engulfed the city and drove air quality below some of the most polluted cities on earth.

"When I came to work this morning, [management] told us we needed to wear a mask," said Zeline Hamilton, a cashier at Riverbank. "The air quality started to get worse and my asthma started acting up at about 11 a.m. I used my asthma pump and I was wheezing. I never felt like this before. I was sitting here because I wasn't feeling well."

Hamilton's co-worker, Courtney Chavis, also experienced the effects of the smoke as she came to work.

"I have asthma and while on my way to work, I was waiting for the bus and I started to feel my chest tightening, said Chavis, a cashier. "We've been doing our best to stay inside and wear a mask."

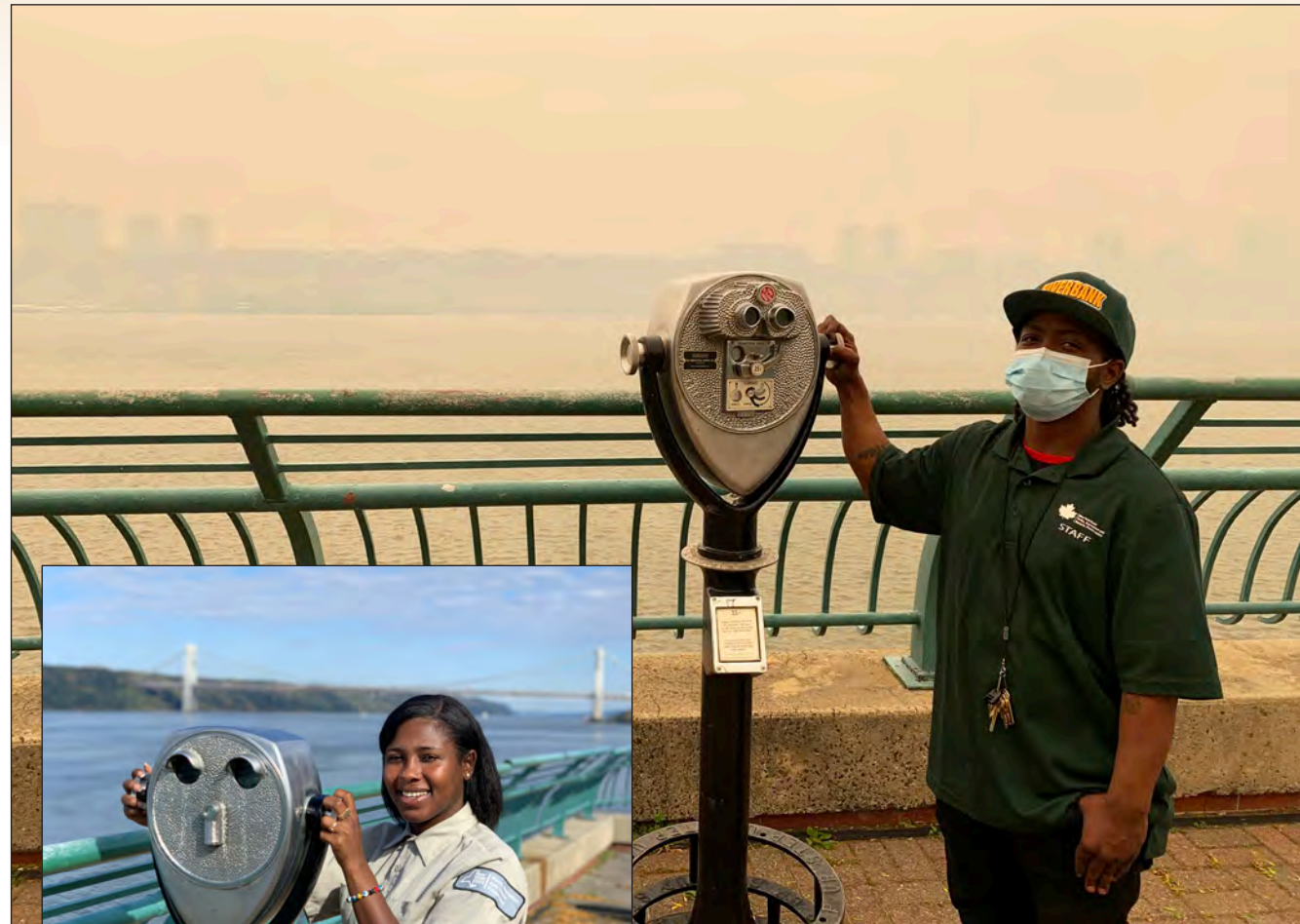
While an air quality alert was issued for the city, park workers continued to report to their positions and were also asked to distribute masks to city residents.

"This is very extraordinary, not something you see on a normal basis, especially in New York," said Maurice Dawson, a park worker 3. "We need better masks for this kind of smoke, like the ones used by firefighters. These masks are good, but those would provide more safety."

As Dawson stood in the promenade, one could barely see the outline of the majestic George Washington Bridge in the background.

"This is not good because people love this park and the weather is getting nicer, so this deters people from coming to the park," said Dawson. "I think it's global warming. We need to pay a little more attention. The environment is showing us our impact on it."

— David Galarza



Maurice Dawson, a park worker 3, stands next to a viewfinder rendered useless by the thick haze created by the Canadian wildfires. On an average day the New Jersey waterfront and the majestic span of the George Washington Bridge can be clearly enjoyed.



Inset: In this 2021 file photo, Riverbank State Park worker Chloe Johnson stands at the same viewfinder on a clear day.

From left to right, Courtney Chavis and Zeline Hamilton, cashiers at Riverbank State Park, both have asthma and experienced chest tightening and other respiratory symptoms as a result of the smoke coming from the Canadian wildfires.

'It looked like we were driving into a fire'

MEDFORD — CSEA State Department of Transportation (Babylon) Local Treasurer Dennis Kearney and local member Steven Santana were having a typical day at work when smoke from Canadian fires was traveling along the East Coast.

Kearney and Santana were largely unaffected by the situation until the smoke finally hit Long Island and slowly began to envelop the area.

"We were outside working on cable rails and we got a call to return to the yard because of the poor air quality," said Kearney.

Kearney and Santana were stationed on the eastern end of Long Island, where the smoke did not reach until later in the day. As the workers drove back to the yard, they could see that they were driving into the smoke. Suddenly, they were engulfed in the pollutant-filled air.

"It looked like we were driving into a fire," said Santana. "By the time we got back to the yard, the sun was totally covered with smoke."

"You could see particles in the air," said Kearney. "At certain points, we only had about 150 yards of visibility."

They described the scene as "looking like a scene from a movie like 'Independence Day.'"

Employer protects workers

Management quickly took action to protect the workers, and KN95 masks were already available at Kearney and Santana's worksite when they returned, which workers immediately put on.

Workers also turned on the air conditioner to help filter the air and closed all of the doors and windows in the garage, as advised by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and the state Department of Health.

"I have a preexisting heart condition, so I was concerned about protecting myself," said Kearney. "But I also knew that I had a job to do."



From left to right, CSEA State Department of Transportation (Babylon) Local Treasurer Dennis Kearney and local member Steven Santana prepare a DOT truck for the next day.

Santana opted to also wear safety goggles because he has eye sensitivity.

Kearney, Santana and their colleagues spent the rest of their shift indoors preparing for the following day, including preparing equipment and refueling trucks.

For the next few days, whenever workers were required to be outdoors, they took extra precautions, including doing as many tasks as possible from inside their vehicles – with windows up and air conditioning on.

"We never stopped operating, we just did our work on a smaller scale," said Kearney.

Like most other people affected by the

pollutants, during their breaks, the DOT workers also checked air quality tracker apps and websites for updated information on the air quality in their area.

The dayslong air quality event has made Santana and Kearney more appreciative of being union members.

"I've worked at private companies that would've had us working outside expecting production level to be high, despite the weather event," said Santana. "I'm glad that we have a job where people care about our safety."

— Wendi Bowie

Provider moves to protect children as air quality plummets

ROME — Tina Westcott, a CSEA/VOICE Local 100A Group Family Child Care Provider in Oneida County, moved quickly to protect the children in her care when she noticed the air quality deteriorating outside her home-based daycare due to recent Canadian wildfires.

“The wildfire smoke was a scary time,” said Westcott, who is CSEA/VOICE Local 100A’s Herkimer-Oneida-Madison Chapter Representative. “I had taken the children outside that Tuesday early in the morning, trying to avoid the rain. The air quality seemed fine; it just looked gloomy like it always does before it is going to rain.”

Within an hour, Westcott started noticing her throat getting scratchy and decided to bring the children

back into her home.

“By noon, it smelled like someone was burning wood in the neighborhood, and it just worsened as the day progressed,” said Westcott.

As parents arrived to pick up their children later that day, Westcott continued her efforts to safeguard them by minimizing the time children and parents were outdoors.

“We agreed the pick-ups needed to be quick,” said Westcott. “The arrival and departure of children continued to be quick for the next couple of days, with parents just handing them to me and leaving instantly due to the air quality.”

Westcott was also unable to take the children outside while the air quality continued to be poor.



Tina Westcott, CSEA/VOICE Herkimer-Oneida-Madison Chapter Representative, reads to the children in her Group Family Child Care Program in Rome.

“It was too difficult to breathe, and some of the children had allergies,” said Westcott. “To protect the health of the children, we decided to stay inside. They were sad and constantly asked to go outside, but we explained to them that we could not and did the best we could by doing things that

allowed the children to use their large motor skills while remaining inside the child care home.”

“I have never experienced anything like this wildfire smoke, but I did everything I could to keep my child care children, families, staff, and myself safe,” said Westcott.

— Jill Asencio

How to reduce your smoke exposure

Wildfires from Canada led to significant air pollution throughout New York and other states. During the poor air quality conditions, federal, state and local officials urged affected people to limit outdoor activity, particularly those who are children, senior citizens, are pregnant or have asthma, heart or related health conditions.

Here is some guidance from [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s website that centers on air quality.

Track changing air quality conditions.

- Visit [airnow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov) and enter your zip code to see the latest air quality conditions in your area. The data is frequently updated, so officials recommend you check multiple times per day.

Reduce your exposure outdoors.

- Avoid strenuous activities, if possible.
- Reduce exposure to smoke in your vehicle by closing windows and vents and running the air conditioner in recirculate mode. Reduce your driving speed if conditions are very smoky and visibility is low.
- Reschedule outdoor work tasks, if possible.
- If you can’t avoid being outdoors, use personal protective equipment, including N95 respirators and masks that reduce particle exposure. Take frequent breaks indoors. Remember that employers are responsible for protecting workers from potential hazards.

- Have enough food, medication and other essentials to last several days, so you don’t have to go out. Avoid going out at the smokiest times of day.
- Listen to the advice of your health care provider.
- Follow any safety directives by federal, state and local officials.

Reduce your exposure indoors.

- Stay indoors as much as possible, with doors and windows closed. If you have an air conditioner, ensure you have a high efficiency filter.
- Avoid activities that may lead to increasing air pollution indoors, including burning candles, using gas, propane or wood-burning stoves, using fireplaces, smoking tobacco products, frying or

broiling meats or vacuuming.

- Use a portable air cleaner.
- Create a clean air room to reduce exposure. This is ideally a room without fireplaces or many windows.
- Have a supply of N95 respirators and masks.

If you must evacuate

- Monitor local news media.
- If your indoor air is too hot, seek relief at a clean air shelter, another large building with air conditioning and good filtration or family and friends who are unaffected.
- Follow any safety directives by federal, state and local officials.
- Watch pets and livestock closely and take steps to reduce their exposure.