

# Los Angeles Times

## Heat Hits Deadly Levels

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The suspected death toll from California's record heat wave rose to more than 50 Tuesday. Many of the victims were elderly people or transients unable to seek shelter from the oppressive heat.

Most died in the Central Valley, where temperatures have topped 100 for two weeks. The toll climbed as the state continued to cool down slightly and energy workers made progress in fixing overtaxed transformers that had left thousands without power.

Among the hardest hit was Fresno County, where hospitals are filled to capacity and the morgue is out of room for the first time in its history.

"We've never had this many before," said Fresno County Coroner Lorelee Cervantes, who said she suspects that heat played a role in killing a third of those whose bodies lie in the morgue's refrigeration unit.

A survey of coroners around the state found an estimated 53 to 57 deaths under investigation as heat-related by late Tuesday. It will take up to four weeks to conduct the necessary autopsies to determine whether heat was the specific cause of death in most of the cases.

The problem is not simply that it is hot. The regions where the deaths have occurred are typically very warm during the summer. But officials said the length of the heat wave, with its unusually high temperatures, has created deadly conditions for those who are vulnerable or have no escape.

"We're used to heat, but we're not used to this much heat for this long," said Tina Starks, health education specialist in the Fresno County Community Health Department. "It's kind of a scary thing."

Fresno-area ambulances logged 349 calls Monday, breaking the county's daily record, largely because of heat-related illnesses. One of the region's trauma centers had to temporarily shut down because of surging demand.

"It's just too hot," said Daniel Lynch, director of emergency medical services for Fresno County. "It's really busy and it's really hot."

Among the dead were a farmworker who collapsed in the fields and a transient who passed out on the lawn in front of a Fresno home. The coroner believes heat was the main cause of death in at least 11 cases and a major factor in the others, as patients with asthma, heart trouble or other conditions weakened in the broiling conditions. Most of those who died were older than 70.

As of Tuesday, officials suspected that the heat caused 15 deaths in Stanislaus County and five in Sacramento County.

A few blocks from the state Capitol, three elderly residents in single-room-occupancy hotels were found dead Tuesday.

The names of the men were not released, but officials said the hotels did not have air conditioning. And after 10 days of 100-plus heat, the rooms where the men were found were very hot.

In the vast desert of Imperial County, which stretches east from the San Diego County border to Nevada, officials said Tuesday that six elderly people had died from heat exposure over the last two weeks.

Two of the victims were found in the trailers where they lived; neither had air conditioning, said Deputy Coroner Henry Proo. One trailer had a fan.

The other four victims, including a 95-year-old man identified as Warren Brock, were found outside.

"They become dehydrated," Proo said. "When you start talking about old people, their bodies can't function at the level they need to be. Four of them were outside when they shouldn't have been. Because of their age, their body quits on them."

Geraldine Robbins, 45, was driving from Slab City, a former military base where residents camp or live in trailers, to nearby Niland and ran out of gas Saturday afternoon.

She apparently got out of her car, then returned to it. Authorities found her inside with mud on her shoes.

In San Bernardino County, the coroner's office usually handles two or three heat-related deaths each year, said Sheriff's Department spokeswoman Sandy Fatland. But last weekend alone, she said, four deaths were attributed to heat.

"To have four on a two-day period, in one weekend, basically ... it stands out," Fatland said.

George A. Greenwood, 84, of Hinkley was discovered by his wife, Carrol, Saturday evening on their property. Greenwood was declared dead at Barstow Community Hospital.

Although Greenwood had heart trouble and wore a pacemaker, he didn't let his condition slow him down, Carrol Greenwood said.

"He continued to think he was as impervious to heat as he had been," she said. On Saturday, when her husband died, her thermometer read 121.2, she said.

"This is not a normal year," said Greenwood, 77. "We've been here almost 40 years. I've never seen it like this."

No heat-related deaths had been reported in Los Angeles and Orange counties as of Tuesday.

But Jonathan Fielding, Los Angeles County's public health director, said heat probably played a role in numerous cases over the past two weeks.

"People who have lung problems or heart problems or diabetes have much less reserve," Fielding said. "Heat could be the factor that just pitches them over the edge."

Two of the most common heat-related ailments are heatstroke and heat exhaustion. In heatstroke, the body gets so hot that the normal mechanisms for controlling temperature, such as perspiration, don't work well or fail completely. The body's temperature can rise to 106 or higher. Symptoms include but are not limited to dizziness, hot and dry skin, high temperature, rapid pulse and headache.

In heat exhaustion, the body loses vital salts and water through perspiration. Symptoms are heavy sweating, muscle cramps, weakness, headache, nausea, dizziness, tiredness and paleness.

It was simple to determine cause of death for some of those who succumbed to the heat, coroners said, because they made it to hospitals and their symptoms and temperatures were obvious before they died.

A harder task is determining cause of death for those who died at home.

Doctors must also determine whether there were other natural causes, such as heart attack, and look for signs of tissue and brain damage that might indicate that heat was an issue.

Reports of people possibly killed by the heat began circulating last week. When a patient died after the air conditioning gave out at Stockton's Beverly Healthcare Center over the weekend, both Stockton police and state healthcare regulators opened criminal investigations.

The victims of the heat across the state came from different walks of life.

Ricka C. McGuire, 65, was discovered Sunday by a friend in the bus she inhabited, without air conditioning, in the remote Wonder Valley of San Bernardino County.

In the city of San Bernardino, a 45-year-old woman was found lying next to a bicycle, unresponsive Saturday evening, Fatland, the Sheriff's Department spokeswoman, said. The woman later died at San Bernardino Community Hospital.

In Kern County, officials confirmed the heat-related death of a 64-year-old woman on June 26. Five deaths there this month are suspected of being heat-related, including that of a 30-year-old man who was seen loading grass clippings into a trailer.

Another is the death of a man from Riverside who had been reported missing and was found dead in a ditch in Buttonwillow in Kern County when the temperature was 107. Another is that of a hiker on the Pacific Crest Trail near Tehachapi, who was found dead on the trail. His water bottles were empty and the temperature was higher than 100.

"All of the circumstances make us believe there's a strong possibility that they died from the heat," supervising deputy coroner John Van Rensselaer said.

Times staff writer Susannah Rosenblatt contributed to this report.