In a 2013 file photo, wild grass grows along Friant Road north of Fresno. The ongoing drought hasn't prevented the onset of a powerful allergy season.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

The drought is drying up Valley farms -- but not noses.

The dry, warm spring has kicked allergy season into overdrive. Pollen counts began spiking early, in February instead of their typical arrival this month, and except for a storm or two in March there hasn't been rain to wash the pollen away.

In addition to starting earlier, the pollen season could last longer, said Dr. Leonard Bielory, a professor at Rutgers University Center for Environmental Prediction in New Jersey.

Grasses likely will pollinate for a week longer and trees for about two weeks longer, Bielory said.
So far, allergy season has packed a punch.

"There's probably more pollen in the air than we've had in the past," said Peter Van de Water, an assistant professor in the Department of Earth & Environmental Sciences at California State University, Fresno.

And if the dry spring continues and plants dry up and die earlier than usual, Van de Water doubts that people plagued by allergies will get much relief: Winds will kick up pollen and dust from dry soils.

Acres of dry grasses increase the risk for grassland and wilderness fires.

Breathing smoke and pollen is a double threat to people with allergies and with asthma, said Dr. Praveen Buddiga, an allergist at the Baz Allergy, Asthma & Sinus Center in Fresno. "We enter that vicious cycle of poor air quality and allergies."

This spring, Buddiga's patients already have sniffles from sycamore and olive tree pollen, he said. The trees usually pollinate later in the year.

Tanya Rodriguez, 35, of Sanger, said her nose began running in February. In past years she's not been miserable with hay fever symptoms until March or April.

"This year, with no rain, I think the pollen has been up in the air a lot more," Rodriguez said. "It's been tough."

A hot spring also can speed up smog season in the Valley. Ozone levels increase as temperatures rise.

"There's a double whammy in a bad way for health," said Kim Knowlton, a New York-based health scientist with the National Resources Defense Council who studies the effect of climate change on people's health.

Hotter temperatures also could drive pollen from the Valley floor into higher elevations.

Lewis Ziska, a plant physiologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Maryland, expects Valley pollen to move up into the surrounding mountains.

Ziska, who grew up in the Valley, led a study published in 2011 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that looked at the effect of climate on ragweed pollen counts. The study found an increase in frost-free days and a delay in frost season in northern-latitude states has extended ragweed season by about two weeks.

Southern regions of the country, including the Valley, did not have a longer ragweed season, Ziska said in a telephone interview this week. But we're not completely off the hook, he said. "It suggests that the exposure to pollen is going to be rising up," he said.

And Van de Water of Fresno State said plants could produce more pollen -- and more powerful pollen if this is a smoggy spring. Studies have shown that plants react to carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, by producing more flowers, and the pollen they produce is a more powerful allergy trigger, he said.

Bielory said more research needs to be done on how climate change affects pollen production. He is in the process of studying the effect of a combination of temperature and carbon dioxide on plants and pollen production.

But pollen counts definitely are increasing, he said. Two years ago, Bielory presented findings at the 2012 annual scientific meeting of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology about higher pollen counts due to climate change. He said Thursday that pollen counts in the United States will increase by 10% to 20% by the year 2030.

Rodriguez, the Sanger allergy patient who sniffled during a telephone interview, doesn't need scientists to measure the pollen count this spring: "It's worse."
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