



Montana High School Association

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**TO: MHTA SUPERINTENDENTS, PRINCIPALS AND ACTIVITES DIRECTORS
MOA REGIONAL DIRECTORS AND FALL MOA SPORTS POOL LEADERS**

FROM: BRIAN MICHELOTTI, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

RE: INFORMATION ON SMOKE, EXCESSIVE HEAT AND LIGHTNING

It is once again fall season in Montana and our late summer weather can lead to many areas of the state dealing with smoke in the air, with lightning delays leading to some postponements and with excessive heat issues during MHTA contests/meets. With the possibility of hot temperatures and smoke throughout the fall, I have included detailed information below on dealing with these type situations. Please review this information before your next contests/meets and if you have questions, please contact the MHTA office at 406-442-6010.

Smoke

Smoke always a major concern during Montana high school fall activities. [Linked here](#) is the memo that was sent from Mark Beckman, MHTA Executive Director to all MHTA administrators. Coaches should be advised that if a practice is moved indoors, the following applies:

- Indoor practice – for an indoor practice to count as one of the initial required practices, the practice must be a comprehensive full practice including participation by all players in drills for skill development, offensive and defensive simulations, and conditioning. The practice must be similar in length to other conventional practices.

Also, [linked here are the guidelines](#) for your use in making recommendations for outdoor events during wildfire season. For more information, visit Montana's website for the Department of Environmental Quality at www.deq.mt.gov or <http://todaysair.mt.gov>. Also, please be in communication with your local health department for further information/guidance regarding air quality in your specific area.

Timeouts during the game for heat and hydration and smoke?

Football

Football officials can call an official's timeout for unusual heat and the MHTA is authorizing extra timeouts because of the smoke in the air. NFHS Rule 3-5-7g states an official's time-out (which is not charged to either team) occurs during a dead ball without a time-out being charged to either team for unusual heat, humidity or smoke which may create a health risk to the players.

Officials should not schedule these timeouts. In previous seasons, officials' have announced during the pregame that they would be taking a timeout during each quarter at the six-minute mark for heat and

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hydration issues. This should not be done by the game officials. The purpose of this rule is not to pre-schedule these timeouts during a game, but to randomly have these timeouts during the game.

Soccer

Soccer officials have the authority to suspend play when conditions warrant.

Lightning

Lightning is often a possibility during contests/meets. Here is a summary of the **updated** NFHS / MHSAA procedures for these situations:

PROACTIVE PLANNING

1. Assign staff to monitor local weather conditions before and during practices and contests.
2. Develop an evacuation plan, including identification of appropriate nearby safer areas and determine the amount of time needed to get everyone to a designated safer area:
 - a. A designated safer place is a substantial building with plumbing and wiring where people live or work, such as a school, gymnasium or library. An alternate safer place from the threat of lightning is a fully enclosed (not convertible or soft top) metal car or school bus.
3. Develop criteria for suspension and resumption of play:
 - a. When thunder is heard or lightning is seen*, the leading edge of the thunderstorm is close enough to strike your location with lightning. Suspend play for at least 30 minutes and vacate the outdoor activity to the previously designated safer location immediately.
 - b. 30-minute rule. Once play has been suspended, wait at least 30 minutes after the last thunder is heard or lightning is witnessed* prior to resuming play.
 - c. Any subsequent thunder or lightning* after the beginning of the 30-minute count will reset the clock and another 30-minute count should begin.
 - d. When lightning-detection devices or mobile phone apps are available, this technology could be used to assist in making a decision to suspend play if a lightning strike is noted to be within 10 miles of the event location. However, you should never depend on the reliability of these devices and, thus, hearing thunder or seeing lightning* should always take precedence over information from a mobile app or lightning-detection device.**

* – At night, under certain atmospheric conditions, lightning flashes may be seen from distant storms. In these cases, it may be safe to continue an event. If no thunder can be heard and the flashes are low on the horizon, the storm may not pose a threat. Independently verified lightning detection information would help eliminate any uncertainty.
4. Review the lightning safety policy annually with all administrators, coaches and game personnel and train all personnel.
5. Inform student-athletes and their parents of the lightning policy at start of the season

After the clock is reset for a second time in 3c above, officials should:

- Meet with both head coaches and the contest administration. Issues such as length of drive to return home for the visitors should be considered.
- Contest administration should use every available weather resource (local news station, internet hourly forecast, lightning meters, etc.) to look at the short term forecast for the local area (See Lighting Technology below)
- Officials and contest administration should contact MHSAA staff liaisons for the particular sport
 - Brian Michelotti – (406) 465-0556 – football, golf
 - Kip Ryan – (406) 930-1047 – cross country, volleyball

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Scott Wilson – (406) 249-8674 – soccer

Mark Beckman – (406) 431-7245 – all activities

- Conduct periodic reviews for appropriate personnel to review the status of the lightning
- Also, a rule change in football for the 2020 season - The halftime intermission may be shortened by mutual agreement of opposing coaches if a weather delay occurs during the last three minutes of the second period.

MHSA personnel can also assist with sport-specific rules and regulations regarding delayed or terminated contests, rescheduling etc. Please contact the sport liaison for details.

Lightning Technology - It is important to reinforce the lightning policy and understanding the process where contest officials, coaches and administration work together regarding suspending and resuming play. However, there are some outstanding resources available to help administrators manage their contests/meets when lightning is in the area. Here are a few additional lightning technology resources that now are mentioned in the new NFHS Lightning policy:

- A lightning meter – This is the most accurate way to determine the proximity of lightning in the area. This will greatly assist with your decisions for resumption of play
- Weather Bug smart phone app. Weather Bug is a smart phone app to predict the weather forecast. Within this app there is a “Spark” feature that detects if lightning is in your area. This is a very effective app for managing your games, but if you have Weather Bug, you must check what location this program uses for reporting from your area. For example, you may be in Dutton or Fairfield, but the program uses the Great Falls Airport as the reporting station. In these cases, you must revert back to NFHS 30-minute policy.

If you have these technologies available when lightning is seen in the distance and if the technology accurately shows the lightning moving away from your area, the decision could be made to resume your game immediately. If you don't have the technology available such as Weather Bug or a lightning meter, you must use the NFHS policy of waiting thirty minutes between visible strikes.

The process for removing teams from the field when lightning is observed usually works well but many times fans do not leave the stadiums during these delays. It is imperative you announce that play has been suspended and the facility needs to be evacuated. [Linked are sample announcements](#) to use during your contests/meets. It is the administration's responsibility to make sure the players and students have been evacuated to safe areas, but if fans do not leave the stadium, it becomes their own individual responsibility for ignoring the evacuation announcements after being notified by game administration of the risk.

In the cases of smoke or lightning, officials must work together with contest administration in these situations to ensure the proper decisions are being made for the safety of contest participants and fans. Coaches cannot make this decision, but coaches can work with administration from each school to come to a decision which will lead to mutual consent by school officials from each team. If any of these situations occur, please notify the MHSA office.