

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District News Release

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Air District seeks public input on fireplace and wood stove controls

The public is invited to help shape rule amendments that would reduce pollution from fireplaces and wood stoves in the San Joaquin Valley.

Public meetings for amendments to Rule 4901 are scheduled for 2 p.m. on April 1st and 6:30 p.m. on April 4th at the Valley Air District office in Fresno, located at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave. Residents can attend the meetings and provide comments via video teleconference at the District offices in Modesto at 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130; and in Bakersfield at 2700 M St., Suite 275. Anyone unable to attend the meetings may also submit comments by mail to Hector Guerra, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave, Fresno, CA 938726 or via e-mail to hector.guerra@valleyair.org.

The Air District's current residential wood-burning rule (Rule 4901) was adopted in 1993 to reduce emissions of particulate matter 10 microns and smaller (PM10) in the Valley. PM10, which consists of tiny airborne particles and liquid droplets, can be inhaled deep into the lungs and cause serious health problems. Short-term exposure to PM10 can aggravate existing lung conditions, such as asthma and bronchitis. Long-term exposure to PM10 can increase the risk of heart attacks and death due to lung cancer.

The San Joaquin Valley failed to meet the federal health-based standard for PM10 by the Dec. 31, 2001 deadline. The federal Clean Air Act now requires the Air District to implement better controls and amend rules in an effort to meet the standard. Failure to do so could result in Valley-wide sanctions such as loss of federal highway funds and stiffer permitting requirements for new businesses.

Rule 4901 currently includes a voluntary curtailment program, as well as prohibitions on burning certain materials, like treated wood and garbage. Through the Please Don't Light Tonight program, the Air District encourages residents to voluntarily refrain from using their

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fireplaces and wood heaters on evenings when airborne particles are expected to reach unhealthy levels. Historically, the voluntary program has resulted in about 10 curtailment requests each year.

“We’re now required by law to look at other areas of the country and see what measures they’ve used to reduce PM10 levels,” said Hector Guerra, an air quality planner with the Air District. “The federal government has pointed out three provisions we need to consider including in our rule. But first, we need public input on these ideas.”

A possible provision would establish a mandatory curtailment program but is likely to include exemptions for homes in which wood burning is the only source of heat. The curtailment provision could be two-tiered, applying only to non-certified equipment at lower levels of pollution and applying to all wood burning devices at higher levels of pollution.

Smoke-producing fireplaces and wood stoves can be significant sources of PM10 during the winter, especially in the Valley’s urban areas. An open fireplace emits between 35 and 80 grams of PM10 per hour of use, depending on the type of wood burned. An uncertified wood-burning stove emits about 30 grams per hour. By comparison, wood stoves and inserts certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are designed to emit less than eight grams per hour, and a typical natural gas- or propane-burning unit emits less than one gram per hour.

“The mandatory curtailment provision wouldn’t mean people couldn’t use fireplaces anymore,” Guerra said. “But once in a while, wood smoke can sock in entire neighborhoods and create unhealthy conditions. So on certain nights, mandatory curtailment orders could help reduce health risks of wood smoke.”

A second possible component of the rule would require a homeowner to replace or retire uncertified wood-burning equipment at the time of sale or transfer of the property. The third provision under consideration would limit the number of fireplaces and stoves allowed in new developments. None of these provisions are finalized, however, and the District wants the public’s input on these proposals.