

Burning wood -- just not a good idea

Merced Sun Star Editorial, Wednesday, December 4, 2002

It's said to feel like tiny daggers piercing tissue in the deepest recesses of the lungs, as microscopic particles carry 100 carcinogenic and toxic chemical compounds directly to the bloodstream.

It's been called the "other second hand smoke," and it's more carcinogenic than equal volumes from tobacco.

It's wood smoke.

We're told it's made up of particulate matter known as PM10. It's microscopic and 100 times smaller than a single grain of table salt. In fact, 90 percent of wood smoke particles are smaller than bacteria, red and white blood cells, talcum powder dust and even human hair.

But just what's in wood smoke? Try carbon monoxide (the poisonous stuff that comes out of a car's exhaust) and formaldehyde (the stuff funeral directors use in embalming) for starters. Then there's an unhealthy dose of organic gases and nitrogen oxides.

So why in the world would we pollute our atmosphere with this potentially life-threatening smoke? Your guess is as good as ours.

Of course, in all reality, there are those people who have to burn wood as it's their only source of heat. Our beef isn't with them. It's with the folks who heat their homes with gas or electricity, and enjoy the coziness of a big roaring fire crackling in the fireplace on bad air days.

Ever wondered what happens when chimney smoke meets cold, foggy, still Valley air? As night falls, ground level air cools and the cold air slides down onto the Valley floor. With little or no wind, temperature inversions trap smoke and other air pollution close to the ground. As home heating systems operate mainly in the evening, the smoke from stoves and fireplaces remains at ground level and collects overnight in the air we all breathe. It's that easy.

For those of us with relatively healthy lungs, it's more a case of discomfort and irritation when we inhale the smoky night air. We can only imagine how this wood smoke affects those of you with asthma or other lung problems.

It's no wonder so many of us seem to come down with a cold or flu around this time of year. Exposure to bad air reduces our ability to fight respiratory infections.

After all is said and done, burning wood in a fireplace or stove isn't even a cost-effective way to heat a home. In fact, using wood instead of gas can increase

your energy costs. The cost of creating useable heat with wood is about \$41 per million BTU (a measure of heat efficiency). The cost of creating heat with a gas furnace is about \$23 per million BTU.

There's also an 80 percent energy waste as heat goes up the chimney in the form of hot combustion gases, leaving the remaining useable 20 percent of radiant heat to be felt only a few feet from the fireplace.

In an attempt to clean up our seriously bad air, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is asking residents to voluntarily refrain from using fireplaces and wood stoves on the worst air days.

In fact, public workshops are ongoing this week around the Central Valley to "present, discuss and receive comments" on the proposed amendments to Rule 4901 for residential wood combustion.

District Rule 4901 was originally adopted in 1993, and established the voluntary Please Don't Light Tonight program, limited the sale of non-certified wood stoves and heaters, and regulated the sale of seasoned firewood.

But in February, the Environmental Protection Agency ruled that these provisions do not fully comply with Clean Air Act requirements for the control of residential wood burning, so the amendments were proposed.

They include: no-burn days when airborne particulates reach unhealthy levels; limits on the number of wood-burning devices allowed in new housing developments; and required retrofit or retirement of non-certified wood-burning equipment upon the sale of existing homes.

It's a step in the right direction. But we don't think it's enough.

Our air is already considered to be in "serious" non-attainment of federal health standards when it comes to fine airborne particulate matter. The air district says residential fireplaces and stoves contribute about 30 percent of the Valley's winter air pollution.

Next winter, use of fireplaces and stoves will be banned when there's too much soot in the Valley's air, estimated to be about 20 days per winter. This ban of course doesn't apply to those who burn wood as their only source of heat.

It remains to be seen exactly how the new ban will be enforced. Those found violating the ban could be forced to pay a fine. However, for at least the first year of the new regulation, those who violate it may receive nothing more than a warning letter, and will be "pretty much on their honor."

Josette Merced Bello, an air district spokeswoman, has said, "We're hoping people go along because it's the right thing to do."

While banning a whole industry of stove and fireplace manufacturers is out of the question, we'd like to see more stringent rules governing the use of "recreational" wood burning, as well as tougher penalties for those who disregard the no-burn orders.

It's time for the air district to get tough. After all, there's a lot at stake.

Workshop draws objections to fireplace restrictions

By MATT WEISER, Bakersfield Californian
Wednesday December 04, 2002, 11:55:00 PM

For many people in Bakersfield, a soothing fire in the hearth is a basic human right. Others feel they have an equal right to clean air.

Both viewpoints were heard Wednesday at a public workshop on plans to ban wood heating when winter weather traps smoke near the ground. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District wants to impose mandatory restrictions on wood burning to protect public health. It also wants to limit the number of polluting woodstoves in new and existing homes.

About 50 people attended Wednesday's meeting in Bakersfield and most were not happy about the proposal.

"I have a problem with you telling me I can't light my fireplace," said Bakersfield resident Pat White. "You're telling me what I can and can't do in my home. That's not fair. This is a taking, I feel, of my rights."

The air district is under an order from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to make its wood-smoke regulations tougher. Existing measures, including the voluntary "Please Don't Light Tonight" campaign, have not reduced wood smoke pollution enough, so the district faces a deadline next year to impose tougher rules or face penalties that could include a loss of federal highway funding.

But the Bakersfield Board of Realtors warned of other economic impacts if the proposed regulations are approved. The rules would require older woodstoves to be removed when existing homes are sold, and limits would be imposed on the number of woodstoves allowed in new housing. Greg Hanvey, chairman of the Realtors' government relations committee, said this could make homes too expensive for some buyers.

"Typically during a real estate transaction, buyers and sellers are stretched to the maximum, financially," Hanvey said. "These amendments, if enacted, would be detrimental to affordable housing and property rights."

Testing by the district has found that residential wood burning contributes up to 30 percent of the particulate pollution in some areas of the valley. Even worse, wood smoke produces the smallest type of particulate pollution, particles so small they can lodge deep inside the lungs, causing reduced breathing capacity, asthma, bronchitis and other ailments.

Some, like Bakersfield resident Gordon Nipp, said skipping a fire a few nights a year is an acceptable tradeoff for better health.

"I think it's sort of a motherhood and apple pie issue to want to have clean air, and I think we all need to do our share," Nipp said.

Others took issue with the air district's science, alleging the health risks are exaggerated and asking if wood burning is really such a big problem.

Air district officials acknowledged the 30 percent figure came from tests in Fresno, not Bakersfield, and that those tests occurred during the Christmas and New Year's period, when more people than usual burn wood.

But more recent tests in Bakersfield attribute 20 percent of local particulate pollution to wood burning.

Tom Jordan, a senior air quality planner with the air district, also noted that health standards for particulate pollution are routinely violated.

"We exceed the federal standard here in Bakersfield," said Jordan.

Others objected to the proposed enforcement method on no-burn nights: a telephone tip line that residents could use to alert the air district if neighbors light up when they shouldn't.

"Now it's coming to where neighbors have to tell on each other, and I don't think that's the way it should be," said Virgil Simpson of Bakersfield.

Jordan stressed that many details, including enforcement measures, are still in draft form and could be changed with input from the public.

Another public workshop will be held at 1:30 p.m. today in Modesto, and Kern County residents can participate by video conference at the air district's local offices at 2700 M St., Suite 275, in Bakersfield.

A final round of public workshops is planned in February after refinements to the proposal. The district board is expected to vote on the changes in April.

Residents hot over proposed limits on use of

fireplaces

By Audrey Cooper

Record Staff Writer

Published Wednesday, December 4, 2002

MODESTO -- A proposal to limit use of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves on some bad-air days was attacked Tuesday night by residents who argued the rules would infringe on their personal rights.

"If it's cold on a nonburn day, I'm going to burn. If you tell me I can't burn, I'm going to leave this state," Bakersfield-area resident Arthur Litton said.

"I'll move back to Mississippi. You can burn anything there," he said at the first of three meetings this week on the issue.

The wood-burning rules proposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are expected to be approved in April. If the rules are adopted, owners of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves would have to check with the air district to see if pollution levels are low enough to permit fires.

Homes that have no other sources of heat would be exempt from the rule, as would homes equipped with gas-burning fireplaces and stoves.

Fireplace and stove smoke accounts for about 30 percent of the Valley's particulate pollution on winter nights, air regulators said. The eight-county Valley air district has among the dirtiest air in the nation, with smoggy skies in the summer and particulate-ridden air in the winter.

Those two types of pollution are believed to cause some cancers, aggravated asthma, decreased lung function and thousands of premature deaths in the Valley. But pollution from fireplaces is the among the deadliest, because the microscopic particles get lodged deep in human lungs and cause more damage, air planner Tom Jordan said.

The Valley never has attained federal health-based standards for particulate pollution and could lose \$2 billion in federal road-building dollars without an anti-pollution plan that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency likes. The EPA wants fireplace and stove restrictions in the new pollution plan.

On Tuesday, dozens of Valley residents protested limits on fireplaces and asked the air district to look to other pollution sources first.

Speakers blamed everything from airplanes to cars to leaf blowers for the bad air. Regulators answered that some pollution sources affect smog but not particulate levels. Others are regulated only by the federal or state governments. Few produce more pollution than fireplaces and stoves, regulators said Tuesday.

Residential wood burning rivals even agricultural burning, which already is limited to certain days, Jordan said.

The air district calls voluntary "Please Don't Light Tonight" alerts on bad-air days. Such an alert was called Tuesday night, the sixth so far this year in San Joaquin County.

Under the proposed rules, those bad-air alerts next year will trigger a temporary but mandatory ban on wood-burning stoves and fireplaces on as many as 20 days a year. The air district has not yet decided on the punishment for people caught with fires burning.

Stoves and fireplaces with no pollution controls would be the first to be snuffed under the proposed rules. EPA-certified stoves and fireplace inserts would be banned under the proposed rules only if air-quality is expected to be particularly poor.

A regular masonry fireplace with no controls puts out about 47 grams of soot an hour, compared with 1.2 grams for a gas-burning fireplace. Government-certified inserts cut fireplace and stove pollution to around 6 grams an hour.

A few residents welcomed limits on wood burning. Barbara Smith, a Fresno-area resident, said she suffers from multiple chemical sensitivity. Air pollution causes her extreme pain, she said.

"My opinion is that this is too little, too late. I just hope nobody else develops this illness because of air pollution," she said.

A Stockton company was among those protesting the proposed fireplace rules.

Chris Caron, a vice president at Duraflame Inc., said his company's manufactured fire logs put out no more than 16 grams of pollution an hour and should be encouraged as an alternative to natural wood logs.

Manufactured logs are made from wax, sawdust and other commercial byproducts.

Air district officials agree that the fire logs are a good alternative to wood but say they can't officially endorse the product, because it isn't certified by the EPA.

* To reach reporter Audrey Cooper, phone 546-8293 or e-mail acooper@recordnet.com

Public hearings

There will be two more public hearings on the wood-burning issue: today at 2 p.m. and Thursday at 1:30 p.m. All meetings are held via videoconferencing, and

residents can participate at the Modesto air district offices, 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130.

Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee

Air fouled by growth

December 5, 2002 Posted: 05:45:14 AM PST

This is in reference to your editorial, "Put out the fires so we all can breathe easier" (Nov. 16). The objectives of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are commendable, but the changes in the draft proposal are too extreme.

The restriction on fireplace use is probably unenforceable. It apparently will depend heavily on neighbors reporting alleged violators, which encourages acts of retaliation and neighborhood disputes.

The rule is proposed without justification, since there is no indication that the attempt to persuade limited fireplace use with the "Do Not Light Tonight" program has failed. We see reference to the dangers from fireplace smoke, but no evidence or research methodology on which these conclusions are based.

I recommend that you visit www.valleyair.org and read the draft proposal for rule 4901. This proposal coincides with PG&E's notification of a 27 percent increase in natural gas prices, as you promote the increased use of natural gas fireplaces. Section 5 is intended to force use of natural gas for fireplaces by requiring fireplaces to be rendered inoperative or converted to gas when a house is sold.

Your editorial position suggests that we should treat the symptom, not the cause. This problem, as well as many others, is caused by too many people moving into the valley and the creation of denser housing areas in the valley.

You have proposed attracting industry to provide more jobs in order to attract more people to the valley. More people in the valley will increase housing density, which will exacerbate the problems. Do we really want to emulate the Santa Clara Valley?

M.R. RILEY
Modesto

Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee

Don't burn up rights

December 5, 2002 Posted: 05:45:14 AM PST

The Bee's "A Book of Dreams 2002" (Page 9, wish 12E) tells the sad story of Mrs. Boman, a single mother of four, and her wish for firewood needed to heat their home or cook food for this winter.

I am sure that this story could be repeated in our community. My neighbor lost his job and is supplementing his income by selling firewood out of his yard. These are everyday people doing their best with what little they have. They are not asking the government for a handout and they are not standing on a corner with a sign begging.

Then along comes the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control air police with its tip/snitch line. The air police will grant burn permits with ease, which I have personally proven, and now they are going to fine me for having a fire at home in my fireplace?

My family enjoys spending an evening at home with a cozy fire. It is family fun that does not involve alcohol or drugs; clean family fun that Modesto is not able to provide us with.

As residents of this valley, my family has done its part in cooperating with the new smog checks, conserving energy, purchasing energy efficient products and conserving water. But now telling me that I will soon no longer be able to have a controlled fire in my fireplace is going way too far!

There has to be a better solution other than taking away a right that has been enjoyed by Americans in their homes, on their own property, for hundreds of years.

STEVE ROMKEE
Modesto

Burning in fireplace is discouraged

By Hanford Sentinel Staff, 12/5/02

HANFORD - The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District wants Kings County residents to curtail residential fireplace and wood stove use through 4 p.m. today.

The voluntary no-burn request is in effect through Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera and Kern counties as well as in the Northern Region of the Central Valley. The request is in response to rising air pollution levels this week due to fog and cloudy conditions.

Residents who light fires are urged to use only dry, seasoned wood, and should not burn trash, newspapers, magazines, green or painted wood. Manufactured

fire logs are also recommended over wood, and small, hot fires are recommended instead of large smoldering blazes.

Residents using stoves for heating are encouraged to use only gas inserts or EPA-certified wood and pellet stoves.

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

Improving Valley's terrible air quality is up to us all

By Ganisha Sethi

Fresno

(Published Thursday, December 5, 2002, 4:59 AM)

I am responding to your recent article about the air quality in Fresno. I would have to agree that we, as residents of Fresno, are contributing more to the problem than to the solution, and the problem is growing day by day.

My father suffers from severe allergy and asthma problems, and doctors have said these problems are mainly due to the hazardous air of Fresno. It pains me to see my father go through such problems and I don't know how to help.

I have tried to limit my hours of driving, but it doesn't seem that one person can truly make a difference. I believe that we must all join in and help. We all have to be a part of this solution if we truly want to improve our health and cut the death rate significantly.

It takes time and effort to make a difference, but we must start with motivation. The past is the past, but the present is here and it is in our hands to make Fresno a better and healthier place to live.

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

Out with SUVs

By Saba Michael Maaza

Fresno

(Published Thursday, December 5, 2002, 4:59 AM)

After having read Arianna Huffington's Nov. 26 column, "Death of gas-hog SUVs could be around the corner," I found her opening sentence to be very fitting. It read, "Once again, America is a nation divided."

I can say the same for the environmental class I am currently taking, in which we struggle over whether such things as the environmental/security commercials help or hinder the nation, an argument hotly contested between the liberals and conservatives.

I agree with Ms. Huffington and her efforts, however radical they may be. Can we fault her for pointing out that we continue to manufacture and buy some of the deadliest pollutants on Earth, not to mention the outrageous amount of fuel needed to sustain one? They are our SUVs. Let the message be heard clearly from California to Detroit, and to our congressmen in that great big building where it seems nothing much ever gets heard, and maybe even into my environmental class.

Letter to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, 12/5/02

Keep growth coming

I read Letters to the Editor with a combination of amusement and confusion regarding business growth in Bakersfield.

Letters have been written against new dairies because of the heavy pollution and employing few people due to modern technology.

Letters appear against Wal-Mart bringing their new super centers to Bakersfield because of increased traffic and more pollution, as well as creating more vacant buildings in the city. We seem to want economic growth but live in a fantasy world regarding the way to do it.

Any business growth will bring challenges and problems. Are the residents of this fine city up to those challenges? Or are we hiding our heads in the sand by being against everything and offering no positive solutions? We have to have continued and managed growth, but any progress is good for many and not so good for a few. We have to focus on the best way to live with it and nurture it.

BILL PALMER, Bakersfield