

District to limit use of fireplaces

By MATT WEISER, Bakersfield Californian, November 13, 2002

A plan to clean up the valley's polluting fireplaces could dramatically change how people gather 'round the hearth on those chilly nights.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will soon introduce new rules that could make heating with wood illegal during certain winter weather conditions. The rules could also limit how many fireplaces can be installed in new subdivisions, and require older wood stoves to be upgraded when existing homes are sold.

These changes could add \$2,000 or more to the price of a home in Kern County and the San Joaquin Valley.

But air quality has gotten so bad in the region that many people consider it a worthy investment. "Wood smoke is a very strong irritant for a lot of people," said Dr. Patrick Leyung, a respiratory physician who has practiced in Bakersfield for more than 20 years. He has two fireplaces in his Bakersfield home, but hasn't used either in five years.

"To a certain degree, we all should contribute to clean up the air in Kern County. When we're living in a community, we all have to do our part," Leyung said.

As much as 30 percent of particulate air pollution can come from fireplaces in winter. Soot from burning wood can cause asthma, emphysema and bronchitis, and aggravate respiratory problems for people who already have difficulty breathing. Kern County's valley geography and winter weather conditions make the problem even worse by trapping wood-smoke pollution near the ground.

Some details of the district's proposed rule changes remain to be worked out, but a draft of the rules is expected to be released this week. Public workshops are planned for December, with adoption by the district's governing board anticipated for next spring. Exact meeting dates have not been set.

The first of the changes would take the existing and voluntary "Don't Light Tonight" campaign, now in its fifth year, and make it mandatory. The program aims to discourage fireplace use on winter nights when an inversion layer traps smoke near the ground. It's estimated that mandatory no-burn nights could be designated for up to 20 times a year.

The air district would create a telephone tip line to help enforce the burn ban. People could call this line to report the address of a violation. An inspection by the air district would result in a written warning for the violator, possibly leading to fines for subsequent violations. But air district officials are hoping residents will be eager to comply.

"The entire first year would strictly be warnings and education," said air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "The second year, then we would start looking at true enforcement and true penalties. Once you get your education done, people tend to go along with the program. Because not only is it the right thing to do, but it's also better for their health."

The rule changes are likely to include two other components. For one, the air district may limit the number of wood-burning appliances allowed in new subdivisions. The current proposal would allow only one wood-burning device per acre, regardless of how many homes are in the subdivision. There would be no limit on the number of gas-burning fireplaces. This rule would be enforced by cities and counties during the building permit process.

Also, older wood stoves in existing homes would have to be retrofitted with modern, clean-burning devices when the home is sold. Fireplaces would be exempt from this rule because they are seen as an aesthetic amenity, not a routine heating device, said Tom Jordan, a senior air quality planner with the district. This rule would most likely be enforced with an escrow condition, like the regulation that ensures water heaters are strapped when homes are sold.

The proposed rule changes are a response to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency finding that local wood-smoke regulations are deficient.

"If we don't remedy those (deficiencies)," said Jordan, "we could have sanctions imposed by next fall." Those could include loss of federal highway funds and rule changes that could make it more costly for businesses to expand and relocate in the region.

The Kern County Building Industry Association has not yet taken a position on the proposal. Executive Vice President Brian Todd said the group is keeping an open mind, but also keeping a close watch on the proposal.

"These rules are very volatile. It's still very early in the process and we'll be very interested in seeing how it shakes out," said Todd, who acknowledged the building industry shares the air district's concern about pollution. "Everything that impacts our quality of life is a concern to us. We live here and raise our families here the same as everyone else."

The rule changes are very similar to those already adopted in places like Mammoth Lakes, Reno, Nev., Denver and San Jose.

The town of Mammoth Lakes was a pioneer when it adopted fireplace restrictions in 1990. Though they may have added to the cost of a home, the restrictions have simply become part of the scenery after 12 years. Not only is the town's air clearer, but residents found that cleaner wood stoves also slashed their heating bills.

"They're more efficient, so they keep the homes warmer," said Marie Dennis, executive secretary of the Mammoth Lakes Board of Realtors. "No one's fighting the rules. Maybe they did when they first started, but not now. Nobody puts up a stink."

Stench evacuates buildings

By MATT WEISER, Bakersfield Californian, November 12, 2002

Hundreds of people were evacuated from various Bakersfield buildings Tuesday morning after a foul petroleum odor settled over a large area of the city.

At least seven people reported breathing difficulties during the episode, and an investigation into the stink is under way.

Among the buildings evacuated were Kern County's Public Services Building on M Street, the county courts building on Truxtun Avenue, and Centennial High School on Hageman Road. Ironically, even Bakersfield employees of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had to clear out when their offices inside the county's Public Services Building were evacuated.

"Right before the building was evacuated, we received a flood of calls regarding the odor, and we had two inspectors respond immediately to try to determine the source," air district spokeswoman Kelly Malay said after the 9:45 a.m. evacuation.

The smell lasted for several hours beginning about 9:30 a.m. The air district received at least 10 complaints, while the Bakersfield Fire Department reported receiving 30 calls. The complaints came from a broad area, including areas on and near Sillect Avenue, Gibson Street, Fruitvale Avenue and Empire Drive.

Fire department spokeswoman Leslie Devitt said seven people were treated at San Joaquin Community Hospital for breathing problems.

David Price, director of the county's resources management agency, said the smell was reported at five county buildings in total. Malay said it could take several days to determine the source, and that a penalty could be levied once the culprit is found.

"With such a widespread odor, it's not unusual that it would take a while to figure out what happened," Malay said. "This likely will result in a notice of violation because it created a public nuisance."

Foul petroleum odor forces evacuation of several downtown Bakersfield buildings

The Bakersfield Californian, November 12, 2002, 03:24:00 PM

Several downtown Bakersfield buildings were evacuated Tuesday morning after a foul petroleum odor settled over the area. At least seven people reported breathing difficulties during the episode, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District was investigating the cause of the smell.

Kern County's five-story Public Services Building on M Street may have been the largest of the evacuations. It was cleared out at about 9:45 a.m. after many people in the building reported the smell. About 400 people were in the building at the time, and the evacuation lasted about 20 minutes. Ironically, the building is home to air pollution district's Bakersfield office, which was also evacuated.

"Right before the building was evacuated, we received a flood of calls regarding the odor, and we had two inspectors respond immediately to try to determine the source," said air district spokeswoman Kelly Malay.

The Bakersfield Fire Department received about 30 calls from people complaining about the smell, and spokeswoman Leslie Devitt said seven people were treated at San Joaquin Community Hospital for breathing problems related to the smell. The air district received an additional 10 complaints.

David Price, director of the county's resources management agency, said the county courts building about one mile south of the M street location also was evacuated, and that the smell was reported at five county buildings in total.

No-burn rule blows our way

Next year, air district will tighten region's fireplace-burning restrictions.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, *November 13, 2002*

When the wind dies and the San Joaquin Valley fog hangs heavy with soot a year from now, air pollution officials won't request that you refrain from burning wood in your fireplace -- they'll tell you to stop.

The days of voluntarily cooperating with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will be gone. This is the last winter of "Please don't light tonight," which kicked off Tuesday.

Next winter, the district will control your fireplace during episodes of bad air. And repeat offenders could face fines.

Air officials released no specifics on how the program will work, but the rule already has opposition from real estate sales representatives who fear changes may affect their business.

And nobody is sure how the general public will react.

So, even as officials launched this winter's voluntary effort, they eased concerns over next winter.

"The air district won't be banning fireplaces or wood-burning devices," said spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "We're just managing wood burning on the worst nights of the year."

The no-burn rule, required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, could be called on five to 20 nights a year, depending on the weather. The 25,000-square-mile Valley is among the country's six worst air basins for soot and ash pollution.

Several Bay Area cities and the community of Mammoth Lakes have residential wood-burning restrictions. Fireplace burning rules also have been used for years in Nevada, Colorado and other western locations to reduce such pollution.

Soot and ash can trigger asthma attacks and other lung problems. This so-called particulate pollution also has been linked to higher death rates and heart problems.

About 30% of the wintertime soot and ash around Valley cities comes from residents burning wood in their homes.

This winter, the air district's voluntary program should help reduce the danger as it has for the past four years. Air district forecasters, who track weather patterns and pollution levels, advise the public a day before burn curtailments are requested.

The mandatory effort next winter would probably operate the same way.

In the next few days, officials plan to release proposals for the mandatory effort next winter. The district is expected to work out details of the rule in public meetings over the next several months.

Officials said there will probably be some kind of exemption for people whose only source of heat is wood-burning. Few details on the mandatory no-burn rule were available Tuesday, but the district has clear marching orders from the federal government.

Aside from the mandatory no-burn rule, officials must find a way to limit wood-burning devices in new housing developments throughout the Valley from Stockton to Bakersfield.

The air district also must deal with a federal requirement to replace or update old wood-burning stoves and fireplace inserts when homes are sold. Real estate industry representatives have voiced opposition to the idea, saying it would force an extra burden on home sellers.

"It's a very poor way to do it," said John Carey, president of the Fresno Association of Realtors. "If this equipment is in bad shape, why not take all of it out of homes so you have some effect on the air? Why just put it on the seller of a house?"

Firewood choice can be knotty

By Mike Bowen, Special to the Bee, November 8, 2002

It's that time of year. Days are getting cooler. Darkness is falling even before dinner is served. Time to throw some logs in the fireplace or wood-burning stove, light a match and ...

Wait! What kind of firewood are you using? How long has it been since it was cut? Is it a no-burn night for air quality?

Air quality officials, firewood suppliers and other experts on this toasty subject have a little advice:

Buy the best wood: Hardwoods burn cleaner and hotter than softwoods, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The district's Web site -- www.valleyair.org -- gives environmental tips for hearth and home. For example, a cord of live oak has double the "heat potential" of a cord of white, sugar or red pine.

But there's a catch.

Softwoods dry much more quickly after being cut into firewood. Dry wood yields the hottest, least polluting results. So, make sure the wood you purchase is well "seasoned" -- six months or more for dense hardwoods like oak, experts say.

Get what you pay for: "The only legal way to sell wood is by the cord, or fraction thereof," says Brian Cox, assistant Tulare County commissioner in charge of weight and measure issues. A cord measures 128 cubic feet. That can translate to a stack 4 feet wide, 4 feet tall and 8 feet long, but the stack can vary in shape as long as it's 128 cubic feet.

Measure your wood carefully and call the supplier if you believe you got less than you purchased, Cox advises. Call the Commissioner's Office as a last resort to resolve the dispute.

Observe "Don't Light Tonight" alerts: The Valley is known for ozone pollution during summer. But "particulates" often pollute the skies in winter, air quality officials say.

Especially hazardous are floating debris measuring just 2.5 microns, or less than 1/28th the thickness of a human hair.

That's too small to be blocked by the body's mouth-nose filtering system.

"They go straight to the lungs," says Josette Merced Bello, public education administrator at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

During winter, the majority of particulate pollution is from wood burning, Bello says.

The district's "Don't Light Tonight" program operates from late November through February. When weather conditions are ripe for unhealthy particulate buildup, residents are asked not to use fireplaces and wood-burning stoves for 24 hours.

Consider a stove or insert: Open fireplaces and older woodstoves are real polluters. Every wood-burning stove or fireplace insert sold these days must meet federal clean-burning standards. Pellet stoves are especially efficient in producing high heat and low emissions, Bello notes.

Keep your chimney swept: How often varies with type of wood used and other factors. The Michigan State University Extension gives provides this rule of thumb: Get the chimney swept after every third cord of wood, or once a year.

Of course, you can avoid firewood problems by installing a natural gas fireplace stove and fireplace insert. Seventy percent of the stoves and inserts sold at Buck Stove Pool & Spa on West Caldwell Avenue in Visalia fall into that category, according to owner Bob Haun. Customers enjoy the convenience of flicking a switch and producing an instant fire.

Still, there's something special about using real logs, even in a high-tech, low-emission appliance. "A wood fire is like a snowflake," Haun says. "Every one is different."

Valley's fire season over; new burn rules apply

By Lisa Aleman-Padilla, The Fresno Bee, November 12, 2002

With above-normal rainfall reducing the threat of wildfires, fire season is officially over in the Valley and mountain areas.

"There shouldn't be any more fires this year," said Gordon Wilkinson, a captain with the Madera, Mariposa and Merced unit of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

This fire season was slower compared with last year's, in part because of additional staffing that helped to keep incidents small, Fresno County Fire Department reported.

The end of the season means new rules for burn days.

Open burning will now be allowed with a permit in Madera County and without a permit in all of Mariposa County.

Burn-day information can be obtained for Mariposa County by calling (209) 966-1200 or (888) 440-2876. For Madera County, call (559) 683-1441.

In Fresno County, hazard reduction burning in foothill communities requires a permit available at foothill fire stations. **Agricultural burns require a permit from the Air Pollution Control District.**

In 2001, 385 wildfires caused more than \$4 million in damage, burning more than 15,000 acres of grass, brush and timber.

This year, slightly more than 2,500 acres burned in 248 wildfires, causing nearly \$775,000 in damage.

"The conditions were right for major fires; we just didn't have any," Wilkinson said.

New rules start next year in Central Valley

By Audrey Cooper, Record Staff Writer, November 11, 2002

Expected new pollution rules that threaten the paramount symbol of wintertime comfort may get a chilly reception soon from San Joaquin County residents with old fireplaces.

This is the last winter that air regulators will allow San Joaquin Valley residents to start their wood-burning fireplaces and stoves whenever the mercury drops.

Also next year, anyone who wants to sell a home with an old masonry fireplace first will have to either plumb the fireplace for natural gas, buy a government-certified insert that cuts airborne soot or brick up the fireplace.

Those options could cost thousands of dollars.

An estimated 500,000 Valley homes have old wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

Fireplaces and stoves built and sold after 1993 are certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and wouldn't require replacement.

The goal of the expected new rules is to cut drastically the amount of dust and soot pollution -- also called particulate matter -- floating in winter skies.

The Valley is considered one of the 10 worst areas in the country for particulate pollution.

The microscopic flecks of vapor, soot and dirt get lodged in human lungs and cause serious health problems, including cancer.

Fireplaces cause up to 30 percent of the particulate pollution on winter days, especially Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas, according to data from the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District.

Next winter, the air district will place bans on certain fireplaces during bad-air days, and residents will have to check with the air district before they light their fireplaces.

The air district already runs a voluntary "Don't Light Tonight" program on bad-air days.

Air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said old wood-burning fireplaces and stoves with no emissions controls could be shut down on as many as 20 days.

Fires in stoves and fireplaces with EPA controls could be forbidden on as many as five days a season, she said.

Gas-burning stoves and fireplaces always will be allowed.

Homes that need the fireplaces or stoves for heat also are exempt from the rule.

However, the small chimineas popular in some back yards will fall under the new regulations.

Manufactured firelogs are not exempt under the rules.

That rankles one of the logs' major manufacturers, Duraflame Inc.

The company, which has operations in Stockton, maintains that manufactured logs produce a third the emissions of regular wood fires.

According to air regulators, a typical wood-burning fireplace can put out about 47 grams of particulate pollution an hour, compared with 1.2 grams for a gas fireplace.

Manufactured-log fires typically fall somewhere in the middle, they say.

Jerry Crystal, owner of Crystal Plumbing in Lodi, predicts the new rules will catch homeowners unaware. Crystal's company runs natural-gas lines to fireplaces.

He said it can cost between \$100 and \$1,200 to plumb a wood-only fireplace with a natural-gas line.

A room-heating gas insert can run an extra \$1,500 to \$2,500, Crystal said.

"I would say most of my customers don't want the heat but want the atmosphere of having a fire that you can start and turn off without worrying about cleaning up," he said.

The pollution that spews from chimneys stays mostly in the immediate neighborhood, affecting neighbors and residents inside the home.

Some studies indicate wood smoke can be more hazardous than cigarette smoke.

The Valley weather will determine how bad the soot pollution gets.

Rainy days wash soot out of the air, but fog can keep the particles airborne, for example.

The air district hasn't decided on a fine for homeowners caught burning wood on no-burn days next year, but the fine could be a few hundred dollars, Merced Bello said.

Air districts in Nevada, Arizona and Colorado have imposed similar limits on wood-burning fireplaces.

The final rule related to fireplace use is expected to be approved in the next few months.

Public discussions on the issue are expected in December.

For more information on the voluntary Don't Light Tonight program, go to www.valleyair.org.

S.J. air regulators lighten up on inserts Fireplace plan shift

By Audrey Cooper, Record Staff Writer, November 13, 2002

San Joaquin Valley air regulators have changed their mind about part of a proposed plan to cut pollution in winter skies, officials said Tuesday.

Homeowners hoping to sell a house with a wood-burning fireplace will not have to fit the fireplace with a pollution-catching insert or plumb the fireplace for natural-gas burning, Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello said.

However, homes with a fireplace insert made before 1993 probably will have to replace the insert with one that is certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

All inserts made after 1993 are certified.

Merced Bello said the change came because most people with open fireplaces light fires for ambience and do so infrequently.

The inserts are designed to produce heat and are used more often, she said.

"Really, we're trying to get to the crux of what causes the pollution," she said.

The announcement came the same day a top maker of manufactured logs announced that a new survey showed widespread opposition to the proposed limits on wood-burning fireplace and stove use.

The proposed rule would ban residential wood burning up to 20 days each winter. Natural-gas fireplaces would be exempt from the bans.

Residents would have to contact the air district to verify that it was permissible to light a fire.

Residential wood-burning produces roughly 30 percent of the Valley's soot and dust pollution, also known as particulate pollution.

The Valley is one of the worst areas in the country for such pollution.

Stockton-based Duraflame Inc. -- the global leader in making logs out of waste materials such as sawdust, cardboard, and nutshells -- said 27 percent of the 300 Valley residents surveyed indicated they would ignore any ban on fireplace and wood-stove use on the worst air days.

The Duraflame survey showed 67 percent of survey respondents opposed the limits on fireplace use, and 75 percent opposed the rules that apply when a homeowners wants to sell a house with an old fireplace.

Duraflame's vice president of marketing, Chris Caron, said manufactured logs would be a good alternative to a strict ban on residential wood burning.

Old fireplaces put out about 47 grams of soot pollution each hour, but federally certified fireplace inserts cut that pollution to just 6 grams an hour. Manufactured firelogs put out up to 16 grams of pollution per hour, compared with gas and oil stoves that emit about 1 gram of pollution per hour.

Duraflame wants the Valley air district to encourage use of the company's product as an alternative to wood logs.

Merced Bello said manufactured firelogs aren't certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is why firelogs can't be allowed in lieu of regular logs on bad-air days.

However, the air district generally favors use of the firelogs instead of wood logs if residents want to enjoy a fire, Merced Bello said.

Public discussions on the issue are expected next month.

Bay Area Air Quality folks award \$9.5 million in grants

The Associated Press, November 13, 2002

Undated(AP) - - The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has awarded public agencies in the San Francisco Bay area almost 10 million dollars in grants from its Transportation Fund for Clean Air.

The money will be used for projects that reduce emissions from motor vehicles, which are the single largest source of air pollution in the region.

Since the Air District inaugurated this special funding program in 1992 - a total of 226 million in grants has funded more than 14-hundred projects.

The district says the largest emission cuts from the latest grants will come from replacing diesel-powered vehicles and buses with new clean propane or natural gas-fueled engines.

New Air Quality Rules to Take Effect in January

From Visalia Times-Delta Staff and Wire Reports

Residents who want to light up their old fireplaces will have to check with regional air quality officials first under new rules that go into effect next year.

The voluntary "Don't Light Tonight" no-burn nights on bad air days will become mandatory next year to cut down on dust and soot, air quality officials said.

The San Joaquin Valley is one of the dirtiest air basins in the country.

And air district spokeswoman, Josette Merced Bello, said old wood-burning fireplaces and stoves with no emissions controls could be shut down for as many as 20 days during the season. Homes that need the fireplaces or stoves for heat are exempt from the new rules, officials said.

Also next year, residents who want to sell a home with an old masonry fireplace will need to convert it to natural gas, buy a government-certified insert that cuts airborne soot or brick it up, officials said.

An estimated 500,000 homes in the valley have old wood-burning stoves and fireplaces.

IN BRIEF / BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN, November 8, 2002
Pollution Spurs Ban on Pregame Bonfires

A fiery Kern County tradition that has long stoked the emotions of two rival football teams may be snuffed out for good -- the victim of modern air-quality regulations.

Generations of Shafter and Wasco high school students and their boosters have enjoyed the bonfires on the Thursday night before their annual matchup.

This year, however, the Kern County Fire Department interrupted the tradition in Shafter moments before the fire was to start. Officials said the school lacked a permit from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The valley is considered one of the nation's most polluted air basins.

The department's action has set off fierce grumbling among tradition-minded residents. Bob Kard, the air quality district's director of compliance, said, "We try to reduce open burning to what's absolutely necessary."

The Basics

Does a gas-sipping hybrid make financial sense?

A new tax deduction for ecology-friendly gas-electric cars may sway some buyers, but if you'd rather go cheap than go green, nirvana is still a ways off.

By [Des Touns <http://moneycentral.msn.com/articles/common/bios.asp>](http://moneycentral.msn.com/articles/common/bios.asp)

Hybrids, those fuel-sipping cars that use both gasoline and batteries but never require recharging, make a world of sense. They pollute less, they consume less, and darn it, they make you feel good. But do they make sense if you're simply trying to save money? Not yet -- but they're a lot closer now.

Check out your options. **Record low rates could save you a bundle.**
http://g.msn.com/0MCUSENSTATIC/ED_BLOCK/LOAN?http://moneycentral.msn.com/loan/home.asp

After a couple of years of confusion, the IRS has announced that, yes, hybrid vehicles do indeed qualify for a one-time tax deduction of up to \$2,000. If you're paying the top 38.6% rate, that's \$772 off your bill, a savings that might tip the balance for many shoppers who'd like something a little greener under their Save-the-Whales bumper stickers.

The deduction -- which you needn't itemize to use -- applies to hybrids sold since they began showing up in showrooms in late 1999 (current owners can file an amended return). So far, there are just three models on U.S. roads:

- **Honda Insight:** \$21,740 with automatic and air. EPA rated at 57 mpg city/56 highway. A featherweight two-seater with limited cargo space and an enthusiastic community of drivers who report as much as 100 mpg on their daily commutes. Powered by a tiny, three-cylinder engine with an occasional assist from the batteries, which recharge by

reclaiming the energy expended when you slow down or brake. Also available with a five-speed manual transmission.

- **Honda Civic Hybrid:** \$21,010 with automatic and air. 48 city/47 highway. Just like your neighbor's Civic, but more expensive and a lot less thirsty. Same engine technology as the Insight, only the gasoline engine is bigger. Also available with a five-speed manual transmission.
- **Toyota Prius:** \$20,475 with automatic and air. 52 city/ 45 highway. Uniquely styled sedan that, unlike the Hondas, can run off battery power alone at very low speeds, making it as quiet as a golf cart in the Safeway parking lot. Automatic only.

Ford promises a 40-mpg hybrid Escape sport-utility by late 2003; others are in the works.

Forgo an SUV and save a bundle

Whether or not the purchase of one of these fuel-sipping machines makes financial sense depends on the alternative. A similarly equipped, garden-variety Civic LX sedan sells for about \$16,500 and returns 31 mpg in the city, 38 on the highway. Using the city mileage figure (which most people would achieve in day-in, day-out driving), you'd spend \$725 a year to drive 15,000 miles on \$1.50 gasoline. The Civic Hybrid would consume \$469 worth, a savings of just \$256 a year.

Without the tax deduction (and recognizing the time value of money), a hybrid owner would never earn back the cost of his car. Lop \$772 off the cost of the hybrid and the picture improves, but it's still no deal. But every dime increase in the price of gasoline puts the break-even point closer.

The numbers are better if you opt for a hybrid over a larger sedan or sport-utility. Buy that same Honda hybrid instead of a 20-mpg Accord V-6 and you'll see a savings of \$656 a year. Commute in the hybrid rather than a 13-mpg sport-utility and you'd save \$1,262, not to mention a tankful or two of guilt.

Some states offer incentives that sweeten the deal even further. Oregon, for example, offers dollar-for-dollar credit against state income tax up to \$1,500. Maryland offers a break on sales tax. There are little perks, too: Several states allow solo drivers in these hybrid cars to use the carpool lanes, and some cities offer free parking. Check with your local bureaucrats before you buy.

The clock is ticking

If you're considering buying one of these high-mileage commuters, you have until the end of 2003 to claim the full deduction (under present law, anyway; Congress is considering new incentives). The deduction is an adjustment to your gross income and doesn't require that you itemize to benefit. The IRS is still tinkering with specifics but has issued a clarification spelling out that the deduction will be accepted.

The 25,000 or so buyers of these three cars since they began hitting showrooms in late 1999 can file an amended return to claim the deduction, the IRS says.

Don't ignore the traditional risks behind any car purchase: Hybrids have proved reliable so far -- these are Hondas and Toyotas, after all -- but their history is limited. Warranties on the hybrid-related systems are eight years, but replacing those systems after the warranty expires could cost thousands (The battery pack in a Honda is estimated at \$3,000.). And resale value is still a big question mark.

So far, resale values for the Insight have been especially disappointing compared with most Hondas. Despite a \$4,000-plus difference when new, the price gap between a 2-year-old Insight and a run-of-the-mill, 2-year-old Civic LX sedan is very narrow. That's a big opportunity for hybrid-vehicle fans who don't mind forgoing the tax deduction (which applies only to the original owners)

but want to pick up one of these lightweight two-seaters on the cheap.

And of course, though you never have to plug one of these babies into your wall socket, there are certain compromises - less room and less power, for instance, than their traditional counterparts. You can read more about them at Carpoint by following the links at left.

The Cost Of Dirty Air

By Laura Meckler © MMII The Associated Press.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 12, 2002

"With medical care spending exceeding \$1 trillion per year, even a reduction of only a few percentage points would save society tens of billions of dollars annually."

Stanford University economist Victor Guchs

(AP) Older Americans in the most polluted parts of the country are significantly more likely to need medical treatment, particularly for lung ailments, according to a study that suggests reducing pollution could cut medical spending as well.

Earlier studies have established a link between air pollution and early death, but this is the first large-scale look at the impact on medical care itself, said Victor R. Fuchs, a Stanford University economist and lead author of the study being published Tuesday in the journal Health Affairs.

"With medical care spending exceeding \$1 trillion per year, even a reduction of only a few percentage points would save society tens of billions of dollars annually," the study concluded. "Use of medical care is significantly higher in areas with more pollution."

The study found air pollution significantly increases Medicare recipients' medical care needs, even after controlling for region, population size, education, income, cigarette use and obesity. Because race plays such a large role in health, the study focused only on whites.

It examined 183 metropolitan areas with more than 100,000 people, using air pollution data from the Environmental Protection Agency, and averaged data from 1989-91.

Overall, it found air pollution was greatest in the West and lowest in Florida and Big Sky country. In general, it found hospital admissions were greatest in the Deep South and in southern states nearby: Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

Specifically, the analysis found hospital admissions for respiratory problems were, on average, 19 percent higher in the 37 areas with the highest air pollution compared with the 37 areas with the least amount of pollution.

Similarly, outpatient care was 18 percent higher and hospital admissions were 10 percent higher.

Controlling for demographic and health factors, the researchers found Medicare would have saved an average of \$76.70 per person in inpatient care and \$100.30 in outpatient care for every drop of 10 micrograms per cubic meter in air pollution.

The study has drawn fire from at least one critic, economist Randall Lutter of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

Pointing out that the fact that air pollution affects health was already known, Lutter questions the methodology of the study, saying it appears to him to have used very crude measurements to get at the differences around the country. He notes, for instance, that stress also can affect health, and stress may be very different in New York City than in Des Moines.

"You can't measure stress very well, and that's kind of a fundamental problem," he said. "It (the study) has some value, but it needs to be taken with a grain of salt."

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