

The answer is blowin' in the wind

By Mike Fitzgerald, Record Columnist, December 6, 2002

When I heard regulators might outlaw fires in home fireplaces on some days, my first thought was, no way.

Sure, air pollution in the Valley is a scary problem. We can dirty the air only so much before we badly harm our health. We're there. Some limits are a must.

But on home fires? They have been so much a part of home life since cave days, they seem like a basic human right. The home is the last bastion of property rights, too, the inner sanctum of personal privacy. Could you guys be a little more intrusive?

Plus, hey, fires are romantic. A champagne toast with a loved one by a crackling space heater -- how trailer park is that?

Then it occurred to me I was protesting exactly the kind of rules I have no problem imposing on industry. So, should we accept restrictions as our fair share of smog busting? Or keep the home fires burning?

Law soot

Soot, dust, particulate matter: call it what you want; it's a bad form of air pollution.

No matter how warm and cozy it feels burning in the fireplace, the tiny motes that go up the chimney and into the air damage people's lungs.

Already, 300,000 Valley residents suffer lung disease. One out of six Valley kids has asthma. That statistic may not hit home until you see dying adults fighting for breath in a respiratory ward or your kid wheezing like a codger.

True, industry, certain motor vehicles and busy dirt roads (surprisingly) are bigger villains. It's fair to ask if these offenders are doing their share to fix the problem.

Yes and no. Business-friendly Bushies delayed stricter federal vehicle emissions standards until 2007. They also want to ease rules governing industrial emissions. Locally, new rules requiring owners of busy dirt roads to reduce dust went into effect in November but haven't gone far.

Firing line

Nevertheless, on the worst winter days, particulates belched by home fires exceed federal safety levels. The law requires rules to reduce them, air officials say. They may forbid home fires perhaps 20 days each winter.

Not having a fire when the mood strikes: it's an unwelcome adjustment. But behind the new rule, there appears to be sound science and genuine concern for worsening public health.

That doesn't mean the new rule is perfect. The air-quality measurements used to determine dirty air days lump Stockton in a big district with smoggier cities to the south. Delta breezes wash Stockton's air cleaner. The city needs fewer no-fire days than, say, Merced.

Officials say air-monitoring gizmos eventually will be installed in each city. Stockton will go by its own readings.

Bottom line, though: air's bad. Smoke's hurting children, the elderly, asthmatics and outside laborers. On really bad days, everybody.

"Do you use your fireplace?" asked Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District. "When you do, do you open the flu? Why? Because breathing the smoke is unhealthy. Well, if it's not good for you, why do you want to put it in the air?"

[Letter to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, Dec. 6, 2002](#)

Bonfires irresponsible

This is in response to the recent editorial regarding school bonfires. Are you serious? How could one not consider a bonfire hazardous to public health?

Such events pose immediate danger to the public due to all the pollution they cause and the possibility of injury.

By rejoicing in the pollution-creating ceremonies, youth are encrypted with degrading ideologies. If such an event is permitted, then where is one supposed to draw the line?

In addition, the bonfire massacre that occurred in Texas is still vivid in memory. It is our responsibility to learn from previous incidents and protect this haven, earth, for future generations.

TANVEER RIAR, Bakersfield