

Nights spent by comfy fire may be numbered

Tuesday, November 19, 2002

Visalia Times-Delta

By Melinda Morales
Staff writer

The sound of soft crackling from a fire burning in the fireplace is as comforting as the warmth it generates, but it may also be a sound that will soon become extinct.

If new regulations proposed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District take effect next year, burning wood may eventually become a thing of the past.

"And that's what people say they like most about a fireplace," said Peggy Maurice, sales associate at Cameron Creek Ranch, the McMillin Homes subdivision on the corner of Court Street and Caldwell Avenue in Visalia. "The sound and the ambiance."

In fact, Maurice said she wouldn't be surprised if the percentage of homebuyers who choose not to have a fireplace built into their new home -- now about 40 percent -- increases if wood becomes a banned substance.

The proposed changes seek to prohibit wood burning on the most polluted nights. Those changes include:

- **Mandatory curtailment:** The district would prohibit wood burning on days when airborne particulates reach unhealthy levels. The district estimates the restrictions would be in effect 20 days each winter in different areas in the Valley. Clean-burning technology, like gas and EPA-certified stoves, would be exempt.
- **Limits:** Builders would be limited on how many wood-burning devices are allowed in new housing developments. This would include fireplaces, wood-burning stoves and chimneys.
- **Retrofit:** Homeowners would be required to retrofit their wood-burning equipment or block it up when they sell their home.

Charlie Goldberg, public education specialist with the district in Fresno, said the proposed amendments, if readily approved, likely won't be implemented until next summer.

"So what we're really talking about for consumers is the next burn season," he said.

And how will the district find and deal with violators?

"Enforcement is still up for discussion," Goldberg said. He said one method may be to

have a toll-free hotline where residents can call in and report violators, similar to a system now in place for industrial polluters.

He said other jurisdictions, like Reno, that have implemented a hotline system had problems primarily in the first year of implementation that eventually worked themselves out.

"We anticipate a fairly easy adoption," he said.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the proposed changes, Bob Haun is doing a brisk business at Buck Stove Fan & Spa in Visalia. In business for 18 years, Haun said November is turning out to be his best month on record.

Haun sells fireplace inserts, gas logs, wood-burning and pellet stoves and all of the related accessories.

He said homes with masonry fireplaces can be retrofitted with costs ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.

He said a gas log can be the least expensive route costing from a couple hundred dollars to less than \$1,000. Gas logs come in a variety of styles and are made to resemble a stack of logs inside the fireplace.

They aren't terribly efficient, however.

"I don't sell these for heat, I sell them for atmosphere," he said.

Another option is a high-efficiency gas insert which Haun said can cost between \$600 and \$2,600. Fireplace inserts are heating units that retrofit into an existing fireplace. They burn wood, gas or wood pellets and offer excellent efficiency.

Inserts utilize the existing chimney, though a flue liner or other modification may be necessary. Vent-free inserts require no chimney or flue modification. Many have blowers to circulate the heat.

At McMillin Homes, as with most builders, a standard fireplace set-up includes a gas pipe run to the fireplace, but the homeowner is responsible beyond that.

A sealed fireplace with no chimney and an instant-on switch is available as an upgrade.

Although fireplaces have the potential to go the way of the dinosaur with the proposed changes, Haun said he isn't worried.

"Until this becomes law, we don't know what will happen," he said.

Air advisory in effect through Friday

The Bakersfield Californian

Monday November 18, 2002, 11:04:32 PM

Regional air quality officials on Monday urged valley residents not to light their fireplaces for the remainder of this week due to a strong high-pressure system that will trap pollution near the ground.

Such advisories are normally issued for single days, but unfavorable weather is expected to persist through the week. So the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued its "Please Don't Light Tonight" request through Friday morning.

"This is the first time it's been more than one night," said air district spokesman Charlie Goldberg. "This is a particularly stable (weather) pattern, so we're kind of forecasting forward."

Though currently voluntary, the "don't light" program is expected to become mandatory next year. Residents are urged not to light their fireplaces and older woodstoves. The request does not apply to homes above the 3,000-foot elevation, people who rely on wood-burning devices as their only source of heat, and users of newer EPA-certified wood or pellet burning stoves or fireplace inserts.

The smoke-trapping weather includes a strong high-pressure ridge moving into the region, light surface winds and a strong morning inversion layer. Together, these conditions will confine wood smoke close to the ground.

The particulate pollution from wood burning can irritate the eyes, throat and sinuses and cause headaches, allergies, asthma, emphysema and bronchitis.

For more information, call 1-800-SMOG-INFO or visit www.valleyair.org.

Meeting on plan to limit fireplace use open to public

The Bakersfield Californian

Friday November 15, 2002, 11:23:27 PM

The public is invited to comment on a proposal to restrict the operation and installation of fireplaces and woodstoves at meetings in early December.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District proposes to ban the use of fireplaces and woodstoves during unfavorable weather conditions. Voluntary restrictions

are currently in place, but federal officials have found them inadequate to protect public health. Wood smoke is a leading source of winter pollution in the region and a major irritant to people with asthma, bronchitis and other breathing difficulties.

The air district also would limit installation of wood-burning appliances in new homes, and require older woodstoves to be removed or replaced when existing homes are sold.

The district will hold a public workshop at its offices in Bakersfield at 2 p.m. Dec. 4. The office is at 2700 M St., Suite 275.

Similar workshops will be held in Fresno at 6:30 p.m. Dec. 3, at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., and in Modesto at 1:30 p.m. Dec. 5, at 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130. The public may attend these in person or by videoconference from the Bakersfield office.

Public comments on the new rules must be submitted in writing or in person by Dec. 20. Send written comments to: Tom Jordan, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, CA 93726, or e-mail tom.jordan@valleyair.org.

A staff report on the proposed rules should be available on the Internet by Monday at: www.valleyair.org/Workshops/public_workshops_idx.htm(scroll down to "Rule 4901").

No-burn nights declared all week

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, November 19, 2002

By Mike Jensen

Central Valley air pollution is so bad that residents have been asked not to use their wood-burning fireplaces or stoves until Friday.

Such requests are typically made only for a 24-hour period.

However, poor weather conditions prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue its voluntary "Don't Light Tonight" request through Thursday night.

The northern part of the Valley today is expected to have an air quality rating of 72, meaning that residents with respiratory illnesses like asthma should consider limiting their time outdoors.

A temperature inversion layer is keeping fine soot particles trapped close to the Valley floor, according to Charlie Goldberg, an air district spokesman.

At the same time, moisture from the Valley fog is helping to keep the tiny particles suspended in the air.

"Since the weather patterns won't change any, the particulate matter will accumulate," said Goldberg.

By Friday, the weather is expected to change and the pollution is expected to dissipate.

"The bigger concern may be next week," Goldberg said, explaining that there may be more wood burning because of the Thanksgiving holiday.

The voluntary no-burn nights this week will be mandatory next year under new rules the Valley air district expects to adopt.

Wood burning in fireplaces and stoves is expected to be banned on about 20 days per winter.

Residents whose only source of heat is from wood burning won't be affected.

Residents with new, cleaner-burning stoves that have emissions control equipment should be affected less than five days of the winter, air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello has said.

The Central Valley's air is already considered to be in "serious" non-attainment of federal health standards when it comes to fine airborne particulate matter. In air quality terminology, the pollution is referred to as "PM10," particulate matter that's 10 or fewer microns in diameter. Ten microns is one sixth the diameter of a human hair.

Unlike visible dust that gets caught in the upper respiratory system, the tiny PM10 particles reach the lungs and in some cases even the bloodstream.

Among health effects cited by air officials are increased asthma attacks, bronchitis aggravation and respiratory disease.

Residential fireplaces and stoves contribute about 30 percent of the Valley's winter air pollution, according to Merced Bello.

Air Officials asking Valley residents not to burn wood

The Record

Published Tuesday, November 19, 2002

San Joaquin Valley air regulators are asking residents to keep their wood-burning fireplaces and stoves cold until Friday.

A high-pressure ridge over the eastern Pacific Ocean is expected to build over the Valley over the next day, making it difficult for tiny pieces of soot and dust to disperse, said meteorologist Shawn Ferreria of the Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Without winds and low pressure to disperse the tiny particles, the level of pollution is expected to climb.

This type of particulate pollution is blamed for breathing diseases, including childhood asthma and cancer. A Natural Resources Defense Council study said that 93 deaths out of 100,000 in Stockton could be attributed to high levels of particulate pollution.

Stockton was ranked as the fifth-worst area in the country, behind Visalia, Riverside, Bakersfield and Fresno. Riverside is the only city outside the Valley air basin.

Wood smoke from residential fires is blamed for up to 30 percent of the Valley's particulate problem.

The request to refrain from burning is voluntary and should not apply to residents living above 3,000 feet or who rely on wood-burning as their only source of heat. It also does not apply to people using pellet or federally certified wood-burning stoves or certified fireplace inserts. All inserts made after 1993 are certified.

Although this week's request is voluntary, air-district board members are expected in the next few months to approve rules that would make burning wood on bad-air days illegal.

For more information on the Please Don't Light Tonight campaign, go to valleyair.org.

Valley fog proves fatal

Series of crashes leaves one person dead, two others with major injuries.

By Valerie Avalos-Lavimodiere and Matt Leedy

The Fresno Bee

(Published Tuesday, November 19, 2002, 7:15 AM)

A series of fog-related crashes in the Central Valley on Monday left one man dead, two drivers with major injuries and the California Highway Patrol scrambling.

The thick fog slicked roadways and limited visibility to as close as 50 feet in some areas. Driving conditions could be worse today, the National Weather Service warned.

Visibility was estimated at 50 feet during an accident early Monday that killed Reedley resident Joseph Perez, said David Gosvener, accident review officer with the Visalia CHP office.

Perez, 37, was northbound on Road 56 north of Avenue 422 near Dinuba when he swerved into the southbound lane going about 45 mph and collided head-on with a vehicle driven by Reedley resident Hilda Lemus, 54.

Perez's car was hit a few minutes later by Agustin Chavez, also of Reedley. Chavez was driving north at an "unsafe speed" in the dense fog when his Toyota pickup plowed into Perez's stopped vehicle, Gosvener said.

"Fog was definitely a factor," Gosvener said of the 3:50 a.m. crash. "It's not unusual for visibility to be 50 feet or less. That's not very much time to see a hazard in front of you."

Gosvener said Perez also may have been under the influence of alcohol when he hit Lemus' vehicle. Officers found several empty beer cans in Perez's vehicle and are awaiting toxicology results from the Tulare County coroner.

It was unclear Monday afternoon whether Perez died from the first or second crash, Gosvener said. Chavez was not injured. Lemus suffered major injuries and was taken to Kaweah Delta Hospital in Visalia.

In Kings County, CHP officials reported five fog-related injury accidents, one of which left Corcoran resident Johnny Gomez with major head injuries at University Medical Center in Fresno.

Gomez was southbound on 17th Avenue approaching Kansas Avenue near Stratford about 6:30 a.m. when his vehicle ran a stop sign and drove into the side of a tractor-trailer rig, said Jerry Pierce, spokesman at the CHP's Hanford office. Gomez's vehicle was dragged for a short distance after becoming entangled under the trailer.

The series of crashes left no officers available to pace traffic in Kings County, Pierce said.

"Our officers were scrambling from wreck to wreck," Pierce said. "It's scary and frustrating for us when we go through this day in and day out.

"The solution is simple. People need to slow down in the fog. What you can't see can kill you."

The fog also was a factor in an accident Friday that killed Visalia resident Mark John Ruiz. Ruiz, 40, was westbound on Highway 198 in Hanford when he swerved into the eastbound lane, ran off the road and hit a palm tree. Visibility was estimated at 300 feet at the time of the accident.

There were no major fog-related crashes in the Fresno area Monday, and CHP cars were pacing traffic on Highway 99 south of North Avenue, CHP spokesman Axel Reyes said.

The Valley's fog season typically begins after a heavy rain and lasts until late February.

A rainstorm that began Nov. 7 kicked off the current fog season, meteorologist Mark Burger said. The Valley's fog grows worse as daylight becomes more sparse.

"And December and January are the worst. The days are short and the fog is worst," Burger said.

The thickest fog typically settles in the South Valley, including Tulare and Kern counties, and the Central Valley's lowlands along Highway 99 from Bakersfield to Merced. Highways 41, 43 and 198 also become muddled with fall and winter fog, Burger said.

Travelers should set their headlights to low beams, roll their windows down slightly and listen for traffic, Fresno-area CHP officer Rodney Nazario said. Those who can't navigate through the fog and are forced to pull off the road should turn their lights off so drivers don't mistake their cars for moving traffic, Burger said.

No fog-related accidents were reported in Madera County on Monday, but CHP officer Scott Krider warned that many drivers were traveling too fast and making unsafe lane changes.

"Just take your time in the fog," Krider said. "Clean your windows in the morning, turn your headlights on, and take your time."

Because of the fog, agricultural burning is banned today and Wednesday by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, spokesperson Josette Merced Bello said.

The air district also is asking residents not to use their fireplaces this week as part of its voluntary Please Don't Light Tonight program. Fires produce pollution that can be trapped in the air by fog, Merced Bello said.

Fog clogs county traffic

The Bakersfield Californian

Friday November 15, 2002, 11:23:27 PM

Heavy fog blanketed the valley areas of Kern County Friday night, making driving treacherous and leading the California Highway Patrol to pace traffic on Highway 99 from the Grapevine north to the county line and on Interstate 5 north to the Highway 46 interchange.

The fog was heaviest in the southern end of the valley, CHP dispatchers said, and lifted considerably in the northern end of the county late Friday.

Most of central Bakersfield was socked in by 7 p.m., leaving downtown eerily quiet.

Forecasters with the National Weather Service in Hanford issued a dense fog advisory until 11 a.m. today, with visibility expected to be below a quarter mile in many locations. Later today, forecasters expect mild temperatures nearing 60 degrees with light winds, then patchy fog tonight and Sunday morning.

The CHP said visibility on I-5 near Buttonwillow was between 200-300 feet, but north of Lost Hills the fog cleared significantly and officers stopped pacing traffic.

On Highway 99, CHP units escorted traffic from Sandrini Road south of Bakersfield all the way to the Tulare County line. Visibility was estimated to be about 800 feet Friday night, CHP dispatchers said.

Some deliveries of The Californian could be delayed this morning by foggy conditions, the newspaper's circulation executives said.

Friday night's pea-soup conditions followed two consecutive mornings of widespread fog, which led to numerous school delays across the valley.

Valley residents were asked not to use their fireplaces and woodstoves Friday night and this morning because weather conditions could trap wood smoke near the ground where it is harmful to the public. The same inversion layer that leads to fog formation also is to blame for keeping fireplace smoke from dissipating.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued its first "Please Don't Light Tonight" notice of the year because of the conditions. The notice is voluntary, but the district is working on a plan to make the notices mandatory next year because current efforts aren't doing enough to clean the valley's air.

For more information on fireplace restrictions, call the air district at 326-6900 or visit www.valleyair.org.

For updated weather information, visit the weather service's website at www.wrh.noaa.gov/Hanford/.

For updated driving conditions, call Caltrans' road conditions line at (800) 427-7623.

In air fight, my bet's on the eco-guy

By Bill McEwen

The Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, November 17, 2002, 4:15 AM)

Both sides in the rotten air debate pitched camp on a foggy morning in the an Joaquin River bottom off Friant Road last week.

An upper crust of business leaders, appearing crisp and earnest in matching white cotton shirts with stitched logos, announced they had formed Clean Air Now.

Flush with a \$2 million commitment from ChevronTexaco, they had public relations handlers, slick brochures, Webcast cameras and a catchy acronym, CAN.

Their goals: Educate the public, refrain from politics and finger-pointing, and provide "real world" solutions to air problems suffocating people from Tehachapi to Stockton.

Sierra Club member Kevin Hall stood alone in back of the cameras, armed with a wry smile and lawsuit experience in the air-quality fight.

His goal: Make the various government agencies entrusted with regulating our air enforce the laws on the books.

Who, in the years ahead, will do more to help asthma sufferers? Who will make dairies cover their waste lagoons? Who will reduce ag burning and dust? Who will require the replacement of old diesel-belching pumps? Who will force us to invest more in mass transit and technology superior to the internal-combustion engine?

I'm betting on the environmentalist, the guy who rides the bus and is big petroleum's worst nightmare. When it comes to real-world solutions, he will kick the CAN. And this is a battle that can be won only in the courts.

"They make clean air sound like a mystery. It's not," Hall says of CAN. "We know what causes pollution, and we know what it takes to clean it up."

That's not to say \$2 million won't help. The fact that ChevronTexaco admitted we have a problem should finally silence the talk-show wackos who insist our air is fine.

(Every time someone says "the air's not that bad," I imagine a variation of Robert Duvall's classic scene in "Apocalypse Now." Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore is standing on Highway 99, trucks rolling by on both sides, and shouting, "I love the smell of diesel in the morning.")

More encouraging, CAN's Fred Ruiz, chairman of a family-owned frozen food company in Dinuba, strayed from the party line and struck a decidedly political chord. Sounding a lot like Hall, Ruiz said he'd like to see our region not seek further delays in meeting air-quality standards.

"I don't think people have taken this seriously enough," Ruiz said. "We have 1,500 employees, and they have about 4,000 children. Their future is important."

Big oil knows what's at stake.

ChevronTexaco had \$3.3 billion in net income last year and \$7.7 billion in 2000. The company forked out \$7 million two years ago in a settlement of accusations it had violated the Clean Air Act at its El Segundo offshore loading terminal.

The air fight is about who pays and who profits. Think of it this way:

Our lungs subsidize the delivery of goods via diesel trucks.

Our lungs subsidize the crops grown with clean-air exemptions.

Our lungs subsidize development on the fringe of our cities.

Who's going to help us pay our lungs back?

I'm betting on Hall.