

Forget the fireplace: Bad air in the Valley

By David Chircop, staff writer

Merced Sun-Star, November 23, 2005

A glowing fireplace can warm spirits with holiday ambiance, but air regulators say it also can be detrimental to your neighbors' health.

Tuesday was Merced County's fourth consecutive Orange day on the color-coded Air Quality Index.

The Orange designation means air is unhealthy to breathe for certain sensitive groups of people.

People with respiratory conditions such as asthma are particularly vulnerable to the bad air during the winter months. Bad winter air can also trigger heart conditions.

Air pollution is linked to an estimated 1,250 deaths every year in the San Joaquin Valley, according to the Valley Air District.

"It's been shown that the majority of the fatalities come from particulate pollution," said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the Valley Air District.

Air regulators are asking residents not to use wood-burning stoves or fireplaces in Merced, Madera, Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Fresno and Tulare counties today.

High pressure conditions that have brought springlike weather over the past week also are creating haze and trapping particulate matter.

"It's a great recipe for a heart attack for your next-door neighbor and that's the type of situation we're trying to reduce," Presto said.

Since stricter wood-burning rules went into effect in fall 2003, Merced County hasn't had any red days on the AQI, which are declared on days when air quality is unhealthy for all people to breathe.

Check before you burn

800-766-4463 or www.valleyair.org <<http://www.valleyair.org>>

Where there's smoke, there's ire

Valley air pollution control district ready to hand out fines for no-burn violators

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, November 23, 2005

If you're not careful, lighting your fireplace could cost \$50.

Kern had its first no-burn day Tuesday, a winter ritual that makes it illegal to burn wood fireplaces and heating stoves until air quality improves. Burning anyway can net fines starting at \$50, which violators can clear by taking a traffic-school-style air-quality class next spring.

To avoid running afoul of the air, check *The Californian's* Local section or call (800) SMOG-INFO before you light up. Today is a no-burn day.

This rule is aimed at cutting PM 10, lung-agitating microscopic particles a fraction of the width of a human hair. On the worst air days, household burning can account for 20 percent to 50 percent of particulate matter in the valley's urban areas, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district calls a no-burn day when the next day's air is predicted to be unhealthy for all people.

"It's really quite clear that smoke coming out of a fireplace is going to pollute the air," said Scott Nester, the district's planning director.

When the district orders a no-burn day, it sees results, Nester said. Last Saturday, air regulators saw pollution increase in Kern and Kings counties. In Fresno County, which had a no-burn day, they saw it drop.

"It's basically the same weather in all three places," he said. "What's different between those places is the control."

Without a storm or a few fierce gusts of wind, Thanksgiving will likely be marked by bad air and cold hearths. The mild, windless days have kept a lid on the valley's pollution and let it accumulate, and there doesn't appear to be a storm on the way to clear it out, according to district meteorologist Shawn Ferreria.

Winter wind patterns are different from summer currents, he said, which sometimes push pollution from the northern valley down to Kern.

"(In winter) it's kind of like a meandering type wind, which is just kind of recirculating and sloshing around," Ferreria said. "If you have pollution ... it tends to stick around."

Kern County had two no-burn days last season, which was the first winter the district ran a mandated no-burn program. The no-burn season starts in November and ends Feb. 28.

The burning ban does not restrict natural gas or propane appliances, nor does it apply to homes for which wood stoves are the only source of heat. It also leaves out cooking gadgets and homes that sit higher than 3,000 feet in elevation.

Get more efficiency for your heating dollar

Better filters will improve indoor air quality, protect forced-air furnace from dust and dirt

Gary Dymski, Newsday

in the S.F. Chronicle, November 23, 2005

Every month, especially during the heating season, I spend a few dollars on new air filters for my forced-air furnaces. We have two heating zones, so there's one filter for each zone.

This year, however, I upgraded. Instead of paying about a buck apiece for disposable fiberglass filters, I spent about 10 times more for high-efficiency filters.

What's the difference? Glad you asked. The inexpensive fiberglass filters are rated only 10 percent efficient by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers and are good at capturing large air particles. The air that runs through these filters enters the furnace, where it is heated and then returned inside the house. The cheap filters are not designed to improve air quality; their job is to protect the furnace from airborne dust.

On the other hand, high-efficiency filters can improve indoor air quality. They are rated from 60 to 95 percent efficient in capturing both large and microscopic allergens, such as mold, pollen, smoke and dust. The better filters not only improve indoor air quality, but they reduce the amount of dust and dirt that gets to the furnace. With more new homes using gas heat, forced-air systems have become more common. It's a good bet that many homeowners rarely change the filters. The disposable fiberglass types should be replaced monthly. More efficient ones can last two to three months.

While I've used the better ones in the past, installing them each fall has become a priority. I've become more conscious of indoor air quality because a couple of my children are allergic to dust, and last winter, I had a bronchial infection that was hard to shake.

The Environmental Protection Agency says poor indoor air quality is among the top five environmental risks to public health. Also, the EPA says levels of indoor air pollution can be two to five times higher than outdoor pollution levels.

Depending on the type of forced-air heating system, a disposable air filter is rectangular, 1 inch thick and slides into a slot near the furnace fan or into a wall or ceiling register (commonly called an air-return vent).

There also are medium-efficiency filters, rated between 20 and 50 percent efficient. They come in disposable and washable models.

While the better filters for forced-air systems can do wonders for collecting particles, don't confuse them with high efficiency particulate air filters. HEPA filters need powerful fans to operate and are rated 97.5 percent efficient. Fans used in residential forced-air systems rarely are strong enough to make these filters beneficial.

To get the most out of a filter, make sure it is properly installed. The edge should fit tightly in its seat. If the edge is crushed or if there is a gap, air will bypass the filter.

Many of the more efficient filters can be cleaned or washed. Use the brush attachment on a household vacuum to clean reusable filters or follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Another way to improve indoor air quality is to continually run the fan on a forced-air system. Circulating indoor air through clean filters reduces dust particles.

Resources

Resources on the Web for improving indoor air quality:

Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov/iaq <<http://www.epa.gov/iaq>>

American Lung Association, www.lungusa.org <<http://www.lungusa.org>>

Health Canada, www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/environ/air_e.html <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/environ/air_e.html>

Newsday

Air district issues burn advisory

Modesto Bee, News and Notes, November 23, 2005

Lighting your fireplace, wood stove or pellet stove today is discouraged in Stanislaus and Merced counties. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District forecasts air that will be unhealthy for sensitive groups. The no-burn recommendation is voluntary, though if the air gets worse, the district can order a ban. There are no restrictions today in San Joaquin County.