

Air district chief asks Congress for rule flexibility

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Nov. 30, 2012

The director of the valley's air pollution control district testified before a congressional subcommittee Thursday about problems with the Clean Air Act.

Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, gave politicians a detailed look at the difficulties of working with the myriad rules, bureaucratic policies and court decisions that have calcified around the act over the past 20 years.

He stressed that his goal is not to have the act gutted, but to tweak certain implementation rules to create greater flexibility.

"I'm hoping this is a setting for the beginnings of intelligent fine-tuning of the act," he said after his testimony.

Essentially, he told committee members, the act has been applied in a one-size-fits-all manner without taking into account various regions' unique challenges and that it ignores realities of economy and technology.

The act tasks the Environmental Protection Agency with reviewing the latest, best science every five years to determine if new standards for pollutant concentrations should be set. The act does not say the EPA should take into account whether those standards are economically feasible, nor even technologically realistic.

Without such guidance from Congress, bureaucrats and courts have stepped in to set policy. The result has been overlap, confusion and unmeetable goals.

For example, he said, the San Joaquin Valley is now operating under six different implementation plans for six different standards on ozone and particulate matter.

And the latest standard for ozone being considered by the EPA would require the valley to ban all fossil fuel combustion or have only zero-emission engines from trains and trucks to leaf blowers and pump motors within the next 20 years.

Sadredin suggested various ways to fix some of the problems, including separating the health standards from the implementation schedule. That way standards wouldn't trigger automatic deadlines, as they do now.

Each region could then analyze the best way to achieve those standards under timelines that make sense for its economy and available technology.

Sadredin said he was encouraged by the questions he received from staffers about his ideas on how to fine-tune the act.

But he acknowledged the political realities, noting those who came to watch the "bipartisan" hearing were almost all Republicans. The Democratic leadership was conspicuously absent.

[Bakersfield Californian Editorial, Sunday, Dec. 2, 2012:](#)

Time to revamp the Clean Air Act

Can you imagine banning all vehicles in the San Joaquin Valley? Or how about an all out prohibition on combustion of fossil fuels in the region? Is it fair to require valley companies to pay millions in air pollution penalties when their operations account for 20 percent of air pollution but vehicles and other mobile sources pump out the other 80 percent? What would happen if Los Angeles had to prohibit a quarter of its population from driving each day?

These are some of the more draconian requirements that would have to be imposed in order for the San Joaquin Valley and other regions of California and the country to meet the goals of the federal Clean Air Act as a result of antiquated provisions and various court rulings. The act, which is 40 years old, has done tremendous good and is one of the nation's most successful environmental achievements. And there's no doubt it has made our region a healthier, safer place to live. But the act also is in desperate need of some

fixes, a point that was effectively made by Seyed Sadredin, the San Joaquin Valley's regional air pollution chief, before a congressional subcommittee last week.

As well-intentioned as the Clean Air Act is, we simply can't imagine that Congress, which approved the original 1970 Clean Air Act with just a single no vote in both houses, and which gave overwhelming bipartisan approval to major updates to the act in 1990, ever intended some of the consequences the law has created today. A case in point is the multimillion-dollar fine imposed on the San Joaquin Valley despite the enormous progress that's been made cleaning the air and the ongoing obstacles that prevent it from meeting the goals for which it's being penalized. As Sadredin laid out in his testimony, it's not for lack of trying that the San Joaquin Valley hasn't met the increasingly stringent air quality standards of today. The problem has more to do with:

* The technology needed to meet stricter and stricter attainment goals is simply not available. Currently, the act allows for increasingly stringent air quality standards to be adopted by the federal government, and which local jurisdictions must meet within a set deadline, without regard for cost of meeting the standard or whether the technology to do so even exists. Currently, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is considering a new air quality standard that is nearly equivalent to the naturally occurring levels of air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley, according to Sadredin. To reach it, the valley would have to ban the combustion of all fossil fuels.

* The major sources of air pollution being outside an air district's control. The main issue here is emissions from mobile sources, over which regional air districts have no direct authority. Currently, 80 percent of emissions that significantly contribute to the valley's air pollution come from mobile sources. Only the state or federal government can act to bring down those emissions, yet regional air districts are held accountable when those sources contribute to our failure to meet air quality standards.

* Court cases that create complications and lack of clarity. For example, the valley is currently being penalized with millions in fines because a court ruled it must still comply with an air quality standard that was revoked in 2005.

These are just a few of the more blatant examples of how unwieldy certain aspects of the Clean Air Act have become. Sadredin's testimony also included a number of examples of bureaucratic red tape that has piled up over the years, which has relatively little to no impact on improved air quality but creates heavy and costly administrative burdens for the private sector and local and regional governments.

And it's not just Sadredin making the case. The head of the Los Angeles air district and many other regional and state air quality managers from around the nation have given similar testimony to the subcommittee.

The San Joaquin Valley has a huge stake in the continued success of the Clean Air Act, but that success will require reforms and updates. The situation faced by air districts like the valley's and the numerous court rulings that have complicated implementation of the act warrant serious and prompt attention from federal lawmakers. We urge them to work toward bipartisan consensus on sensible ways to improve this historic and beneficial law.

Valley no-burn days could double

Air district considering new pollution rule for 2016 to deal with small particles

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Nov. 29, 2012

HANFORD — Local residents could be restricted from burning wood in their fireplaces for twice the current number of no-burn days, according to a proposal being considered by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The no-burn days, in effect since 2003, could be increased as part of the district's plan to address small pollution particles that contribute to lung and cardiovascular disease, said Jaime Holt, district spokeswoman.

The suggested change would trigger the burning ban at a lower pollution threshold for the small particles, known as PM 2.5, that are the biggest air problem in winter.

"We're saying that we are committing to opening up that rule in 2016," Holt said. "We're going to look at a whole variety of things."

The district remains out of compliance with federal limits on PM 2.5, which is considered particularly dangerous because the tiny specks lodge deep in the lungs and get into the bloodstream. Fireplace burning accounts for 25 percent of the PM 2.5 pollution in the Valley, Holt said.

The new rule could be part of a package designed to show the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that the district is acting in good faith to meet the requirements, which have gotten more stringent.

"As those standards get tighter, we have to ratchet down our rules to reduce pollution even further," Holt said.

The rule has a bigger impact in concentrated urban areas in Fresno County than in more rural Kings County, where housing and pollution are more spread out.

Reaction to the existing rule is mixed, with private property advocates suggesting it's too intrusive and public health advocates questioning whether it goes far enough.

"For us to be denied the ability to heat our homes with a fireplace somewhat bothers me, although I can see the other side of it," said Glenn Rider, a Central Valley Tea Party member in Hanford. "It's a fact that pollution does collect here, so any amount that we add to it just makes it worse. I guess I'd have to say I want to alter it to be less intrusive, to be used only in extreme cases."

"I think it's necessary," said Tom Frantz, president of the Association of Irrigated Residents, a clean air advocacy group in the south Valley. "This Valley, it's just a special place for bad air, and we really have to do everything we possibly can."

Frantz was critical of what he called "major exceptions" for agricultural burning and oil field flares.

"I don't see a uniform strictness," he said.

Phone calls and emails received by the district from the public break down into about half saying the no-burn program is too strict and half saying it doesn't go far enough, Holt said.

"I think more people are on board than when we initially launched it," she said.

The district responds to complaints about illegal fireplace burning by physically verifying it, then issuing a notice of violation, which could result in fines. The district also does its own enforcement. Officials drive through old neighborhoods where homes don't have natural gas inserts and check for burning on restricted days.

Inserts that burn natural gas are exempt from the rule. So are homes where woodburning is the only heat source and homes that have no access to a natural gas line.

Last year, the district declared 49 no-burn days and issued 30 notices of violation in Kings County. In Fresno County there were 68 no-burn days and 228 notices of violation issued.

Kings has had seven no-burn days so far in the season, which runs from November to April.

The no-burn days are announced on TV news programs, in radio spots and newspapers and on www.valleyair.org, the district's website, Holt said. The notice goes out the afternoon of the previous day, she said.

**Editor note: Check Before You Burn runs November through February.*

Upgrades underway at Oakhurst library **New community room is scheduled to be completed by February**

By Tiffany Tuell

Sierra Star, Thursday, Nov. 29, 2012

There are many changes happening at the Oakhurst Branch Library and many new services are available to the public. Thanks to grants, upgrades and the long-awaited expansion of the facility is now underway.

Remodeling construction has begun on the old fire station attached the library that was vacated in 2010. It is now being transformed into a nearly 2,000 square foot community room complete with two ADA approved bathrooms and a hallway connecting it to the library. A new staff lounge is also being added.

There will be two covered porches that trucks can back up to for book drop-off and the Friends of the Oakhurst Branch Library will have a new area for book processing and storage. It is due to the efforts of the FOBL that the expansion is possible.

"We would not have received the grants if the Friends hadn't partnered with us," Branch Manager Dale Rushing said.

The Oakhurst Branch Library received a \$200,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture Community Facilities funds in 2010 for the remodel and the Friends matched the grant with \$80,000.

Once completed, the community room will be free to use for non profit groups and available to all groups for only \$25 for a meeting. Rushing hopes to host a variety of events in the new community room -- from children and teen activities and the summer reading program to guest authors, writing classes and book clubs.

The old community room, the Sue Rhu Room, is now a children's reading room and library. Although the transformation is not yet fully complete, the room, along with the entire library, has new carpeting thanks to a Chukchansi community grant. The room also has new shelving thanks to Jim Elliott. Plans are still underway for redecorating the area and Rushing said they will partner with the Oakhurst Kiwanis Club for new preschool books.

The library has also created a new area for teens with two two computers -- one laptop for regular Internet research and a desktop computer with a program called Advanced Workstations in Education on it, offering educational games. There are also two computers with AWE software in the children's area.

"Teens are very important to us and we want to reach out to them," Rushing said.

There are also two computers in a separate corner of the library with Rosetta Stone English as Second Language program on it. These computers have no Internet access and are solely for learning English. The library has partnered with the Mountain Area Literacy Council for this and the Friends purchased the Rosetta Stone programs.

The library is also updating the books it has to offer and weeding out old books that haven't been checked out for a year or more, replacing them with new books. There is also a section of best sellers available for rent and a section of books for sale -- both sponsored by the Friends.

The library also has four new security cameras, a new heating and air conditioning system and a fifth public computer that were purchased through a Chukchansi grant.

And thanks to the Friends, Wi-Fi is now available to the public as well as the Madera County Law Library extension which is open noon to 4 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

The library remodel has provided new money saving features. There is new lighting thanks to an energy efficiency grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to upgrade lighting for all county owned buildings thanks to Bill Hayter, Madera Grants & Program Management. This will save the library about \$3,000 a year on its electric bill.

In addition, there are new energy efficient windows thanks to Central Valley Community Bank, Wells Fargo, United Security Bank and Yosemite Bank who, together, donated \$2,800. The new windows will help keep out heat during the summer, cold air during the winter and conserve energy use.

Rushing said she is hoping for all landscaping to be done sometime next spring. That landscaping will include an ADA approved sidewalk from the front door of the library and around the building to the new community room. Some of the cement for the project has been donated by Outback Materials.

"Several years ago the Oakhurst Library began to update, modernize and move forward with innovative ideas, wish lists and hope," Rushing said. "All this is slowly becoming a dream come true because of the

overwhelming generosity of Friends of the Oakhurst Library, our volunteers who give hours of their time each week, the generous gifts given to the Oakhurst Library by local businesses, community clubs and most of all, the caring support of the citizens of Oakhurst. That support allows us to make a difference."

The outside of the library is also being repainted and volunteers are being sought. Those interested can call the library at (559) 683-4838.

Voice thoughts on air quality to board of San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

By Garth Stapley

Modesto Bee, Saturday, December 1, 2012

People with opinions on air quality, whether on fireplace restrictions or health concerns, can submit comments by Tuesday to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Input will be considered by the district's governing board Dec. 20, when members weigh a proposal addressing particulate matter, or PM-2.5. The wintertime pollutant, made worse by smoke, vehicle fumes and other sources, causes breathing problems and premature death.

The district staff is proposing an array of rules affecting farmers, restaurants, road work and commuters. The most controversial would sharply increase the number of valley no-burn days, when it's illegal to use fireplaces, wood stoves, pellet stoves and more.

Public comment has ranged from people urging burning bans every day to those who rely on fires for inexpensive warmth. Some exemptions are granted to people who have no options.

If the governing board embraces the strategy Dec. 20, more stringent regulations could go into effect in 2017, according to a proposed time line. No-burn days in Stanislaus County, averaging 36 each winter, could more than double.

Comments can be submitted by 5 p.m. Tuesday to pmplans@valleyair.org or by calling (559) 230-5800. The Dec. 20 hearing is expected to be held at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, with a local teleconference link at 4800 Enterprise Way, Modesto.

THE RANKINGS

The San Joaquin Valley suffers far worse air pollution than anywhere else in the United States, according to a Forbes list released last week. Modesto and Merced ranked sixth and seventh for cities with the dirtiest air in the nation, on Forbes' list of America's Worst Cities for Your Lungs. Mountains around the valley trap smog and soot, worsening ozone in the summer and particulate matter in the winter. Twelve of the 50 cities with the worst air are in California, despite some of the nation's strictest rules, among 277 on the list. Here's a look at the top 10:

1. Bakersfield
2. Los Angeles
3. Hanford
4. Fresno
5. Visalia
6. Modesto
7. Merced
8. Pittsburgh
9. Philadelphia
10. Cincinnati

13 things to know about California's cap-and-trade program

By Dona Hull

San Jose Mercury News, Dec. 2, 2012

How California's cap-and-trade will work

Rather than having a strict government mandate, like a carbon tax, to reduce pollution, a cap-and-trade system uses market mechanisms to reward companies that figure out ways to reduce pollution below the level the government sets. California's cap-and-trade rules, which will affect oil refineries, power plants and large factories, take effect Jan. 1.

1. Starting in 2013, a statewide cap on greenhouse gasses will be put in place. Through 2020, it will drop each year by 2 to 3 percent.
2. Industries must obtain a permit, known as an "allowance," for every ton of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases they emit.
3. As the cap goes down, companies must decide each year how they will get enough allowances to cover their emissions. Their choices: Operate more efficiently, burn less fossil fuel, or buy allowances from another company.
4. Sacramento makes money by holding an electronic auction four times a year to distribute the pollution allowances. At first, 90 percent will be given away free and 10 percent auctioned for sale. By 2020, 50 percent will be auctioned. The first auction is scheduled for Wednesday.

State regulators are celebrating California's first-ever auction of greenhouse gas emissions allowances held Nov. 14. So what exactly happened? Why does it matter? And what happens next? We've gotten many questions about the cap-and-trade program from our readers at the San Jose Mercury News; here's answers to several of them.

Q: What is AB 32 and what is CARB?

A: AB 32, also known as the Global Warming Solutions Act, is the Assembly Bill number for a landmark piece of legislation signed by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2006. AB 32 commits California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, or roughly 17 percent from where we would be if we took no action and continued on our current course. AB 32 did not prescribe specific strategies on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; it designated the California Air Resources Board, or CARB, as the lead regulatory agency responsible for designing a comprehensive plan for the state to comply with AB 32. California's cap-and-trade program is the cornerstone of the larger plan (known as the "Scoping Plan"), which includes a suite of policies designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition California to a cleaner economy. These include performance standards for cleaner cars, fuels, energy efficiency and renewable energy requirements such as solar and wind. The chairman of CARB, Mary Nichols, widely recognized as one of the most influential climate and clean air policy leaders in the United States.

Q: Where do California's carbon emissions come from?

A: California emits 447 million metric tons of carbon dioxide a year, according to CARB, which has been collecting and monitoring emissions data since 2008. The biggest chunk, 38 percent, comes from the transportation sector, largely from cars and trucks. 21 percent comes from electric power plants. 19 percent comes from industrial factories. 10 percent comes from commercial and residential buildings; the rest comes from agriculture and natural events like wildfires. A graph presenting these figures can be seen at <http://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/inventory/data/graph/graph.htm>

Q: What is the "cap" and who is regulated?

A. The cap is the mandatory, statewide limit on greenhouse gas emissions set by CARB and based on verified emissions data. That limit declines 2-3% year, ensuring the overall level of emissions statewide is steadily reduced. Large businesses that emit more than 25,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide are covered under the program. That includes 360 businesses representing 600 facilities across the state. In the first phase of the program (2013-2014), the cap covers electricity suppliers and large industrial sources like refineries and cement companies. Chevron's Richmond refinery is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in California, emitting 4.5 million tons of carbon dioxide each year. After the first phase, the program will expand to include gasoline, diesel, and natural gas providers. Those regulated are the fuel

providers that distribute fuel, not local gas stations.

Q: What is an allowance?

A: An allowance (sometimes called a permit) is like a permit to pollute. It authorizes the holder to emit one ton of carbon. Under the rules of the cap-and-trade program, every regulated facility must turn in allowances equal to their emissions at periodic check-ins. So Chevron's Richmond refinery will need to turn in 4.5 million allowances to cover their annual greenhouse gas emissions. The total number of allowances available in the program in any year is exactly equal to the cap for that year. As the cap declines, so too does the number of allowances. As allowances become scarcer, their value will tend to increase--creating an incentive in the market to find ways to reduce emissions in the most cost-effective manner.

Q: Why is CARB selling allowances in an auction?

A: At the start of the program, CARB will distribute most of the allowances for free to give companies time to transition, adjust to carbon pricing and implement cost-effective strategies to reduce their emissions. Building off lessons learned from other cap-and-trade programs, such as the world's largest in the European Union, CARB is also auctioning a portion of the allowances. For instance, in the auction that took place on November 14, CARB auctioned off 10 percent of all allowances. Auctions ensure everyone has equal access to allowances and establish a clear price in the market. Auctions are also transparent, which helps expose potential market manipulation.

Q: What exactly happened during California's first cap-and-trade auction, held Nov. 14?

A: The bidding and buying of pollution allowances occurred online during a three hour window. There was no jam-packed auction house or frenetic trading floor: bids were placed quietly and electronically, from computers around the country. Those that participated submitted bids to purchase three times the available supply of allowances. All of the 23.1 million allowances offered at the auction to cover 2013 emissions were purchased, calming fears that the market would be under-subscribed. A 2013 allowance sold for \$10.09, slightly above the \$10 floor price. The state also auctioned 39.5 million allowances that cover 2015 emissions; of those 5.6 million allowances were sold, at \$10. All told, the auction raised \$289 million.

Q: Where does the auction money go?

A: The money goes into two buckets. Publicly-owned utilities like PG&E and Southern California Edison auctioned their allowances under one program, and proceeds from these sales must be used for the exclusive benefit of those utilities' ratepayers. The California Public Utilities Commission has proposed giving residential ratepayers a twice-a-year "climate dividend" worth about \$30 and credits to small businesses; that proposal is expected to be voted on Dec. 20 at the CPUC. The second bucket includes proceeds from the industrial and transportation sectors. These will be deposited in a new special fund in the state treasury that will be used to further the state's clean energy goals. Legislation signed last September will require at least 25 percent of the proceeds benefit the state's most disadvantaged communities.

Q: Isn't \$10.09 for a ton of carbon a low price? Does a low price mean the program is not working?

A: Some analysts had expected a higher price, of between \$11 and \$12 a ton, and were disappointed that the settlement price was not higher. Others say that merely having a price on carbon, for the first time, is a huge milestone. And a low price on carbon is not necessarily a bad thing: it's a sign that the market doesn't think it will be hugely expensive to reduce emissions (since the price of an allowance represents the market value of the cost of reducing one ton of carbon). Many speculate that allowance prices will go up in future auctions as the market begins to take shape. CARB put in a floor price of \$10 to prevent prices from falling too low. The floor price simply sets a minimum that ensures that companies will incorporate that price into their business planning, as they do all costs associated with running their business. This will help drive their decisions about investing in new and more efficient technologies, processes and infrastructure. It also provides certainty to investors and entrepreneurs looking to pencil out projects to help businesses reduce their carbon footprint.

Q: When is the next auction? How many allowances will be available then?

A: There are four auctions a year, held in February, May, August and November. The next auction will be February 19, 2013. ARB estimates the minimum number of 2013 allowances available in February will be 13.6 million. It is expected there will be 9.6 million 2016 allowances available.

Q: Are companies required to participate in the auction? Who participated?

A: Participation in an auction is entirely a matter of choice. Companies who emit large amounts of carbon can either purchase allowances in the market (either in the auction from each other or in the secondary market) or try to reduce their carbon emissions on their own. Those that reduce emissions below their cap, or that are already emitting less carbon than allowed under the cap, can sell or trade their unused allowances to companies that exceed their limits. If the system works as designed, the most efficient companies will be rewarded, polluters will pay and statewide greenhouse gases will be significantly reduced. CARB did not disclose which companies participated in the auction, as that could reveal sensitive information about a company's emissions profile and reduction opportunities. But several of the state's largest entities, including Chevron, ConAgra, the Regents of the University of California and Valero were among the list of 73 "qualified bidders," which meant they registered for the auction and were approved to participate. The bids themselves are sealed and will not be made public, because each company is making critical strategic decisions about bidding strategy. (Full results of the November auction can be found at:

http://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auction/november_2012/auction1_results_2012q4nov.pdf)

Q: I'm worried that this whole thing is a scam — how can we be sure this won't turn into another Enron boondoggle?

A: CARB has put a number of safeguards in place to deter and detect any attempts to manipulate the market. Every market participant must register with CARB and submit to California's jurisdiction. CARB will track every transaction in the market in a central database (each allowance contains a unique serial number). Hoarding rules and purchase limits prevent any one actor from cornering the market. CARB also uses an independent market monitor, Market Analytics. They have extensive experience monitoring energy markets which are similar to carbon markets, especially in terms of analyzing the bids and activities of participants. Market Analytics won the contract through the standard, public contracting procedures used by the State of California.

Q: I keep hearing about a possible carbon tax at the national level. What's the difference between a carbon tax and a cap-and-trade program?

A: Both are designed to put a price on carbon and reduce the amount of greenhouse gases pumped into the atmosphere. Fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas each emit carbon dioxide when they are burned, and the overwhelming majority of the world's scientists agree that carbon dioxide emissions are warming the earth and disrupting global weather patterns.

A carbon tax is a straight tax on fossil fuels, with the idea that polluters will have to internalize the actual costs of pollution if this tax is added to their operating costs; in theory, they will then have an incentive to reduce emissions. But a carbon tax does not actually guarantee greenhouse gas reductions; the tax could be passed onto consumers, and the incentive hinges on the level of the tax. There's been some talk in Washington about using a carbon tax to raise revenue and lower the national debt, but that seems unlikely, especially since some conservative members of Congress have said they will only support a carbon tax if it is "revenue-neutral." President Obama shot down the idea of a carbon tax at his first news conference after being re-elected.

A cap-and-trade program, in contrast, specifically requires carbon emissions to go down over time, because there is an actual declining cap set on those emissions. This type of program does not set a price on carbon, but allows the market to determine the price through the trading system. California's program sets a limit on the amount of carbon dioxide affected entities are allowed to emit. Companies that reduce emissions can sell or trade unused allowances to companies that exceed theirs. Over time the total cap decreases, making allowances scarcer and providing an incentive to find cost-effective ways to cut emissions.

Q: Isn't the California Chamber of Commerce opposed to the cap-and-trade program?

A: The CalChamber filed a lawsuit in Sacramento Superior Court Nov. 13 challenging CARB's authority under AB 32 to withhold emission allocations for the purpose of generating revenue for the state. The CalChamber argues that the auction will raise energy costs in the state, harm the economy and impact California's competitiveness.

[Sacramento Bee special editorial, Dec. 2, 2012](#)

The Conversation: Danger in magical wood fires

By Susan Sward

About this time of year, as the holidays and cold weather press in upon us, I invariably think of my father, pine cones and fireplaces.

Throughout my childhood, Father had a way of turning chores into adventures. Help him hang laundry on the clothesline. Ride with him from our Santa Monica home to a Topanga Canyon ranch to pick up chicken manure for our compost pit. Stand on a chair beside him to dry the dishes he washed.

My pine cone-gathering memory is perhaps the strongest of these recollections, and I find it cropping up in my mind as I watch state and local regulators focus their attention more and more on the pollution stemming from fireplace fires.

The various bans and limits started some years ago. Bothered by this development, I recently spoke with several air quality districts around the state and found the trend toward restrictions is growing: More cities are adopting rules limiting burning. Fines in some areas are increasing. More "no-burn days" are being imposed when winter weather conditions trap wood smoke near the ground.

When the regulators moved to fight air pollution by placing limits on how people could use their own fireplaces, they were invading a realm that gave me great happiness – especially when I took the time to gaze into the fireplace, stare at the flickering flames and transport myself into some sort of meditative trance. I focused on fires and firewood so much that I once tried unsuccessfully, at age 10, to make money in a wood kindling business by attempting to sell neighbors thin pieces of bark from our cajeput tree. Another time my two sisters and I earned money by helping Father haul wood home that a neighbor had given him.

Our most regular venture was accompanying Father to gather pine cones felled by rainstorms or dry Santa Ana winds on a street one block away. After filling bags with cones, we headed for home, happy with our supplies ensuring fabulous fires.

Taking a global view of regulation for a moment, I acknowledge that I am far removed from those who believe government has no business imposing rules about how people live in their own homes. In fact, I approve of rules designed to tackle health and safety hazards in the home.

In the case of fireplace restrictions, however, I balked. All my life I had loved wood fires so much that when I came home from camping trips, I would bury my nose in my clothes for one last whiff of campfire smoke. Feeling this way, I initially decided that some regulators had gone too far when they banned new construction of open-hearth fires and approved of gas-fueled fireplaces with fake logs. It was this sentiment that prompted me to contact and question air quality officials as they began imposing this season's no-burn days.

Typically, air quality authorities call for no-burn days during the months from November through February when they say wood smoke is the greatest contributor to localized air pollution. State Air Resources Board officials say that limits on fireplace fires, permitting them only in homes with no alternative to heating, have achieved dramatic reductions in public exposure. That reduction, officials say, has meant reduced cases of bronchitis, asthma and cardiovascular problems.

Fireplace smoke is typically concentrated in neighborhoods, and in winter months when the air is calm all that smoke stays close to the ground. ARB officials say that while one fire may not be much, when whole blocks of homes are burning wood in fireplaces, smoke can drive up particulate-matter concentrations rapidly.

"Smoke may smell good, but it's not good for you," says the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Wood smoke can affect everyone, but children under 18, older adults, people with diabetes, asthma or other lung diseases are most vulnerable."

The amount of wood smoke is enormous: In the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, wood smoke produces 4.67 tons per day of PM 2.5 pollution (particulate matter 2.5 micrometers in diameter and smaller – one-thirtieth the diameter of a human hair); that is about 26 times the PM 2.5 pollution from the region's electric utilities.

Stressing the need for regulation, the ARB says as much as 70 percent of chimney smoke can find its way back into the home or into neighbors' houses.

"The more we find out about the small particles in smoke, the more dangerous they appear to be," said ARB spokesman Dimitri Stanich. "The particles exacerbate cardiopulmonary disease and are difficult for people with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)."

Several years ago, Stanich said, he bought a home that had a gas-fueled unit in the fireplace without real logs. He said: "I had grown up with a wood-burning fireplace and I enjoyed it, but over the years I have come to really like this unit. It warms the room more effectively, and it looks and acts like any other fire."

In my childhood home, I lobbied to have wood fireplace fires year-round. Decades later, I can still hear Mother telling me: "Honey, you're the only one I know who loves a fire in August."

That is still true. When my two sons were young, we went to Stinson Beach in the summer. As soon as we unpacked, the boys and I would walk to the edge of Bolinas Lagoon and collect driftwood for fires we would have every evening.

When I ask myself why this freedom to burn wood has meant so much to me, I conclude more is involved than my love for Father, who died 32 years ago: For me, building a fire is a Zen-like task, similar to washing a car, that produces within me extraordinary peace. In many ways, life has turned out to be more full of sorrow than I anticipated, and in such a world I value my fireplace-fed sense of calm.

Today, accepting the data behind the government limits on fireplace burning, I can endorse and obey these rules. I cannot help but be sad, though, that wood smoke has turned out to be one of the fiercest demons in the world of pollution.

WHAT REGULATORS SAY

Here are observations from agencies regulating air quality in California

Christina Ragsdale, spokeswoman for the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, said its "no-burn" day mandatory program is in its sixth year and has achieved a 3.5-ton reduction in tiny particulate pollution (PM 2.5) on no-burn days. Since 2007, the district has banned open-hearth wood-burning fireplaces in new construction, remodeling and outdoor landscaping. Most first-time violators opt to take a smoke awareness class rather than pay a \$50 fine "and we are thrilled by that – we want people to understand the rule is important because of public health."

Armen Kamian, associate planner for the Butte County Air Quality Management District, said the county has had a Check Before You Light voluntary program since 2007. It alerts the public about upcoming poor air-quality days and asks residents not to use wood-burning fireplaces or stoves on those days. Last year the city of Chico adopted a mandatory no-burn program banning wood-burning fires in fireplaces and stoves whenever the county forecasts a poor air-quality day. "When it's cold, there's no air movement and people fire up fireplaces in the evening. That's when we run into problems."

Janelle Schneider, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the agency is in its 10th year of a no-burn program and has had a limit since 2003 on wood-burning fireplaces in new construction. Currently first-time violators may take a smoke awareness class or pay a \$50 fine.

"People are more accepting of the rule at this point – I think because they see the improvement in our winter air quality."

Aaron Richardson, spokesman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, said that in 2008 the agency made it illegal to burn wood or other solid fuel in a fireplace or other wood-burning device when the district issues a Spare the Air alert. The rule bans wood-burning fireplaces in new construction or remodeling. Fines for violators are "waived if you take a smoke awareness class. If you don't take the class, the fine will now be \$100 for first-time offenders and \$500 for a second time."

Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, including most of Southern California, said the agency adopted a mandatory Check Before You Burn program last year; it has called for two no-burn days so far this year. "Wood smoke is not as big a part of the pollution pie here as it is in areas of Central and Northern California. But it still is a significant problem."