

Winter wood-burning season ends as cleaner burning encouraged

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, February 28, 2015

The valley air district's annual wintertime "Check Before You Burn" program ends Saturday -- and if there's a lesson to be learned, it's this:

People with registered low-emission devices are allowed to burn much more often than those with old-fashioned wood-burning stoves and fireplaces. At the same time, those with old technology are being squeezed down to fewer days they can lawfully burn.

According to the San Joaquin Valley Air pollution Control District, residents of the valley portion of Kern County who use EPA-certified wood-burning devices were restricted from burning on only nine days this winter. In contrast, those with conventional fireplaces and wood stoves saw 71 no-burn days during the 120-day "Check Before You Burn" period, which runs from November through February.

The program is designed to reduce the build-up of harmful fine-particle pollution, which can be especially harmful to those who live in close proximity to the smoke. So this season, the air district amended the rules to allow users of low-emission devices to burn more frequently than they were allowed in past winters.

Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director, said the incentives appear to be working.

"Our studies show 85 percent of the pollution from residential wood burning is coming from people who do not have the clean units," he said. "So we placed more restrictions on the people responsible for 85 percent of that pollution."

The units certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are 20 to 50 times cleaner than a conventional fireplace, Sadredin said.

In previous years, the air district had just two wood-burning declaration categories: days with no restrictions and "no-burn days."

But this year air officials decided to create a third wood-burning declaration category: "No burning unless registered."

The new category has provided an incentive for thousands to convert.

Since November, nearly 3,000 wood-burning devices have been registered with the district as meeting current EPA emission standards -- and they expect many more will be converted as more residents become aware of their pollution footprint, and how they can reduce it. Gas devices and pellet stoves are also considered clean burning although they do not need to be registered.

Violations of wood-burning restriction can result in fines. This season there have been 470 violations valleywide, but just 39 of those occurred in Kern County. The numbers are down from the 2013-2014 season, which saw 547 notices of violation, with 45 occurring in Kern.

Residents with old, non-certified units are seeing fewer days they can burn because air officials reduced the pollution threshold at which these units may be used.

Despite fewer all-out wood-burning prohibitions, the air remained cleaner this winter season, officials said.

"The level at which the use of devices that do not meet current emission standards was prohibited was set at a considerably lower level than in previous years," Sadredin said. "This resulted in a net decrease in associated emissions, even though cleaner devices could be used more often."

Another important incentive, Sadredin said, was the grant dollars valley residents could apply for to change out their older wood-burning devices, grants of \$1,000 to most residents -- up from \$500 last year -- and \$2,500 to low-income residents, with an additional \$500 available to anyone who purchased a gas-burning device for installing the gas line. This increased funding removed some of the financial obstacles to upgrading wood-burning devices.

And they'll be back again next winter.

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Sunday, March 1, 2015:](#)

Unchecked science no basis for onerous air rules

By Lois Henry

New ozone regulations being proposed by the federal EPA would essentially force us all into electric cars and we probably still wouldn't come into compliance.

Ho hum.

Kind of the same old story for the San Joaquin Valley, where we're never in compliance and we're constantly being told our "FILTHY AIR" is killing us all.

No, our air isn't killing us. But that's another rant for another time.

The more important issue is that these rules, which even the local air district has said would force the suspension of all internal combustion, are based on health study conclusions that no one can check.

Repeat: studies that claim ozone at ever smaller levels is debilitating and even deadly are not checked to see if the results can be replicated.

So, when EPA officials bleat about how these rules are needed to save countless lives, my response is "prove it."

I've written about the problem of using unverified studies to gin up regulations for years as that's the standard MO of the California Air Resources Board (CARB).

We're seeing it again with these proposed EPA rules, which would be incredibly far-reaching.

The proposed regulations would take the ozone standard to between 65 and 70 parts per billion. And the EPA is taking comments on possible future regulations that would lower the standard even more, to 50 parts per billion.

We are just barely meeting the 1997 standard of 84 parts per billion and haven't come anywhere near the current 75 parts per billion standard, which was set in 2008. Neither has the rest of the country, which is a major argument against the proposed rules.

"The full extent of the 2008 regulations aren't known yet," said Anne Kolton, communications vice president for the American Chemistry Council, an industry trade group. "Most places in the country haven't even implemented that standard yet."

That's because the EPA didn't issue implementation guidance on the standard until this past December.

"These new rules would add a whole new level of cost, complexity and uncertainty" that could stymie the economy, she said.

The American Lung Association, which supports the new rules, pooh poohed such talk of disaster, saying industry has cried calamity for nearly 40 years since air regulations began and, still, business continues.

Kolton countered that these new rules would be a game changer.

If a region has too much ozone -- and we do -- you can't open new businesses or expand businesses if they would emit any ozone. Since most goods- and manufacturing-based businesses involve ozone in one way or another, that could put a chokehold on economic growth.

Don't own a factory? You're still not off the hook. Cars are major ozone emitters. The EPA's proposed rules could result in individuals being told how much they can drive. Or how about a per mile fee?

All of which people may be willing to do if it truly saved lives.

Problem is, no one knows for sure. And there's a lot of evidence no one's dying at all, but you can't check.

To that end, H.R. 1030 (known as the secret science reform act) was approved by committee and sent to the House floor on Feb. 25. That bill would prohibit EPA from promulgating rules using studies that rely on data that can't be replicated by other researchers. That means the underlying data has to be publicly available.

Some data sets used in air pollution studies are held by public and private universities.

But, by far, the largest and most important data sets covering 2.5 million Americans for generations are owned by the private American Cancer Society. It has collected reams of information on people who voluntarily enroll in its various studies, supposedly devoted to cancer prevention. The studies record names, addresses, social security numbers, ages, habits, occupations, family histories and much more.

It was these data sets that the first health studies used to look at how air pollution affects health on a large scale. The EPA, in turn, used those studies to set the first ozone and particulate matter (PM2.5) standards.

From 2011 through 2013, members of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology asked to see the underlying data of those decades-old studies. They were rebuffed and eventually issued a subpoena in August 2013 to the EPA for American Cancer Society data.

The EPA complied as far as it could, but it couldn't tell the American Cancer Society what to do. And the American Cancer Society was in no mood.

Suffice to say House members didn't get the data.

The main objection to that subpoena, and the loudest criticism against H.R. 1030, has been that making such data sets public could be a terrible invasion of privacy for those people who enrolled in health studies thinking their information would be protected. No one wants that to happen. But considering these data sets have been routinely used by a number of researchers without negative consequences, I think that argument is a red herring.

In fact, the American Cancer Society has gone so far as to give at least one researcher individual addresses (which it said it would never do when the subjects were enrolled), for a 2011 CARB report by Michael Jerrett on air pollution and mortality in California. No identity theft reported so far.

I wrote to American Cancer Society Vice President for Epidemiology Susan Gapstur back in 2013 and again earlier this year to ask why the cancer society wouldn't release data to Congress with its usual strict privacy protections. And, I wanted to know, why had it provided Jerrett with addresses, something that appears against cancer society rules?

I never heard back from her. A public information officer for the cancer society contacted me in late January asking what I wanted to know. I repeated my questions. But, again, never heard anything back.

No matter, I think objections to this bill, H.R. 1030, fall flat.

If personal privacy can be protected for certain researchers, it can be protected for other researchers to replicate these studies' results.

Since it's the public that has to live with rules based on studies using this data, I, for one, would like to have it checked.

Wood-burning restrictions end

Central Valley Business Times, Saturday, February 28, 2015

The first winter of the amended residential wood-burning program in the San Joaquin Valley ends Feb. 28 with more days that newer, cleaner wood-burning devices could be used compared to past winters, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The restrictions are in place from November through February. Each day during this period, a wood-burning declaration is issued that determines what, if any, residential wood-burning devices may be used.

As of Feb. 26, there were 36 days when wood burning was not allowed for anyone in at least one county. A year ago, there were a total of 376 curtailments throughout the air basin.

This season, there were fewer days during which the fine-particle level exceeded the federal health standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter. There was also more rain and less atmospheric stagnancy than last winter, although the statewide drought continues with associated air-quality effects.

New wood-burning rules: Less smoke, possibly more confusion

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee, Saturday, February 28, 2015

The San Joaquin Valley's air was cleaner this winter — maybe because it was a little stormier, foggier and breezier. Or maybe some people avoided their fireplaces because they were confused by the new wood-burning rules.

The clever but most complicated wood-burning rules in a dozen years took hold this winter, along with millions of dollars invested in the cleanest-burning wood stoves and inserts available.

And the serendipitous return of just enough rainfall and the Valley's notorious fog helped knock down the soot from November to February when 30% of dangerous particle pollution comes from wood fires in city neighborhoods.

Wood-burning restrictions officially ended for the season Saturday after the Valley exceeded the day-long federal particle standard on 45 days, nearly a 37% drop from last year. It was still a higher total than the South Coast Air Basin, which had 25 bad days.

Particle pollution is responsible for hundreds of premature Valley deaths, and soot is one of the biggest problems because it is concentrated where people live. The Valley's particle pollution is the worst in the nation, but it improved this winter.

"It was definitely not as dry as it was last winter and that helped," said executive director Seyed Sadredin of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "People also embraced the changes we made this year."

Instead of simply either allowing wood fires or not allowing them, the district this winter both lowered and raised the threshold for no-burn days, dividing it into two simultaneous phases.

The first phase is a lower no-burn trigger each day at 20 micrograms per cubic meter of air, which is far stricter than ever before. The previous level was 30 micrograms.

At the same time, people using the cleanest-burning devices registered with the district were allowed to burn wood until the 65 microgram level — which is much higher than the old no-burn trigger from last year.

So, people using open fireplaces and old burning devices were shut out most of the season. Those with the clean-burning devices were stopped only six times this season. Last year under the old rule, people with the new devices would have been stopped 59 times.

But until the district finishes its analysis, there's uncertainty about how much effect the rule had or how much confusion there might have been. Only about 3,000 devices were registered — which covers a little more than 1% of the Valley's households with fireplaces.

Officials hope, however, that a movement has started toward the cleaner-burning devices. Residents applied and received \$6.3 million in grant funds to buy certified fireplace inserts and stoves, as well as convert to natural gas-fired fireplaces. The inserts are able to incinerate more of the particles, so they produce less smoke.

"Our best tool in reducing winter-time pollution is residents themselves," said Sadredin.

Work to be done

The Valley still faces a long battle against particle pollution, known as PM-2.5. The region has long been the nation's hot spot for PM-2.5 — soot, dust, chemicals and microscopic debris, according to the American Lung Association, which annually ranks air quality around the country.

In last year's "State of the Air" report from the Lung Association, Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield ranked in order as the three dirtiest cities in the country for particle pollution. The direct sources are fireplaces, vehicles, farming and industrial processes.

The pollution also forms in the air when oxides of nitrogen from vehicles combines with plumes of reactive organic gases from dairies, gasoline and paints. The combination is called ammonium nitrate.

Together, these particles are responsible for the overwhelming majority of the Valley's 800-plus premature deaths related to air pollution each year.

Even in a cleaner Valley winter, people with asthma and sensitive lungs suffered from it, said Dr. Praveen Buddiga, a Fresno allergist for the last decade.

"I'm seeing a lot of patients reacting to the air quality," he said. "The elderly and very young people are more susceptible and react faster. Because of the continuing drought, the allergy season is earlier."

But wood-burning restrictions are not completely accepted among Valley residents. Some say the district has no business stopping them from warming their homes with a fire. Others say the wood-burning heat helps soothe their arthritic conditions.

Those who are caught breaking a burning prohibition can get a notice of violation. The violations can result in fines that start at \$50 for the first offense and rise as high as \$1,000 for subsequent penalties.

Violation notices dropped 14% compared to last year. The district wrote 470 over the winter. The previous year, there were 537 violation notices.

The restrictions do not apply everywhere in the Valley. There are two exceptions: burning is allowed even on restricted days if you have no other source of heat or if you have no access to natural gas service.

Parts of Madera Ranchos just north of Fresno are exempt from the rules because they have no natural gas. People often heat their homes with wood fires, and neighbors notice.

"Sometimes, the smoke entirely envelops our house," said resident Richard Gilman. "You can't stay inside, but you really can't go outside."

Air district officials say they will consider regulating those situations as they develop a new plan in 2016 to comply with ever-tightening federal standards.

Health advocates say federal, state and local air-quality leaders need to keep pushing for particle pollution reductions. The debris gets into homes beneath doors and through cracks around windows.

About 30 or 40 of the particles would fit across the width of a human hair. Visible only with an electron microscope, they can easily pass through the body's defenses and lodge deep in the lungs. Some pass through the lungs into the bloodstream to reach the heart, kidneys and other body organs, creating inflammation.

Buddiga said Valley residents can take simple action to reduce their risks during PM-2.5 episodes. He advised residents to use an over-the-counter sinus rinse to remove the irritating debris from nasal passages.

"Think of it this way," he said, "it's like using a water hose to rinse sand off your driveway."

'Check Before You Burn' ends season

The Porterville Recorder, Friday, February 27, 2015

The first winter of the amended residential wood-burning program ends Saturday with more days that newer, cleaner wood-burning devices could be used compared to past winters.

Check Before You Burn, the program that minimizes the build-up of harmful fine particle pollution, runs each winter from November through February. Each day during this period, a wood-burning declaration is issued for each county in the air basin that determines what, if any, residential wood-burning devices may be used.

This winter, the regulation was amended to allow users of EPA Phase II-certified wood-burning devices to register them with the District and use them more frequently than they were allowed in past winters through the adoption of a third wood-burning declaration category, "No burning unless registered." There are two additional categories that are similar to past years: "No restrictions, burning discouraged" and "No burning for all." Violations can result in fines.

Simultaneously, the District reduced the threshold at which the use of older, noncertified units could be used. Together, these two changes reduced the amount of particles in the air basin.

“The response we received to these changes was enthusiastic,” said Seyed Sadredin, the District’s executive director and air pollution control officer. “Together with increased funding for the Burn Cleaner program, which grants money to purchase cleaner wood-burning devices, Check Before You Burn has had a very positive effect on winter air quality in the Valley.”

Through February, nearly 3,000 wood-burning devices were registered with the District as meeting current EPA emission standards. Gas devices and pellet stoves are also clean-burning although they do not need to be registered.

This winter, as of Feb. 26, there were 36 days when wood burning was not allowed for anyone in at least one county. Comparatively, last winter, there were a total of 376 curtailments throughout the air basin.

Tulare County saw 65 days with no burning unless registered restrictions, and seven when no burning at all was allowed. A total of 69 notices of violation were issued in the county.

Despite the reduced number of all-out wood-burning prohibitions, the air remained cleaner this year, officials said.

“The level at which the use of devices that do not meet current emission standards was prohibited was set at a considerably lower level than in previous years,” Sadredin said. “This resulted in a net decrease in associated emissions, even though cleaner devices could be used more often.”

The District offered more money this year to Valley residents to change out their older wood-burning devices, granting \$1,000 to most residents (up from \$500 last year) and \$2,500 to low-income residents, with an additional \$500 available to anyone who purchased a gas-burning device for installing the gas line. This increased funding removed some of the financial obstacles to upgrading wood-burning devices.

This season, there were fewer days during which the fine-particle level exceeded the federal health standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter. There was also more rain and less atmospheric stagnancy than last winter, although the statewide drought continues with associated air-quality effects.

“The drier weather continues to thwart our efforts to reach attainment for fine particles,” Sadredin said. “But we are encouraged that with these changes to the wood-burning rule, we’re moving in the right direction.”

Beginning March 1, the District will no longer be issuing a daily residential wood burning status for each county. While no formal burning restrictions will be in place after Feb. 28, the District discourages residential wood burning.

Check Before You Burn ends season Saturday Restrictions on fireplaces, wood burning over until November

Taft Midway Driller, Friday, February 27, 2015

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The District offered more money this year to Valley residents to change out their older wood-burning devices as well, granting \$1,000 to most residents (up from \$500 last year) and \$2,500 to low-income residents, with an additional \$500 available to anyone who purchased a gas-burning device for installing the gas line. This increased funding removed some of the financial obstacles to upgrading wood-burning devices.

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