

Cash fuels interest in gas fireplaces

Not too late to apply for incentives

By Alex Breitler

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Even during the hottest months this year, John Dykman was fielding calls from people who wanted to convert their old wood-burning hearths to gas fireplaces.

That's what happens when you throw a little money into the mix.

"We were doing installs all through the summer," said Dykman, owner of Master Sweep-N-Clean in Lodi. "It was crazy."

San Joaquin County residents pocketed \$1.3 million in incentives over the past year to switch to cleaner-burning gas fireplaces, more than any other county in the San Joaquin Valley.

And with seasonal wood-burning restrictions set to begin once more on Sunday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Quality Control Board recently agreed to extend the incentive program again. So it's not too late to take advantage.

The intent is to help clear the air of tiny smoke particles that hover around residential neighborhoods on stagnant winter days.

Last year, the air district outlawed the use of older wood-burning stoves or open fireplaces 59 times, or roughly every other day from November through February.

But those who upgraded to gas could light a fire whenever they wanted. And those who upgraded to a newer, certified wood or pellet stove were allowed to burn all but one day last winter.

That was the carrot that air quality officials offered for the first time last winter. And lots of folks took it.

Across the Valley, \$5.2 million in vouchers were given out for gas fireplaces alone, allowing more than 2,800 devices to be installed. Hundreds of thousands of dollars went to low-income residents.

"It's a very strong program," said air district spokesman Anthony Presto. "We're very serious about cleaning up the Valley's air and helping residents upgrade from the dirtier burning old wood stoves to cleaner units."

The incentives amount to \$1,000 for a new wood-burning stove, pellet stove or gas insert, with another \$500 for those who choose gas to help pay for the installation.

The incentives won't pay for the whole thing.

"But if you get a basic unit it does take a real big bite out of that cost," said John Osburn, president of Ben's Appliance in Lodi, where the cheapest gas devices start in the low \$2,000s.

Low-income residents are eligible for \$2,500 per device as well as the additional \$500 for gas.

Not only are gas devices more efficient at heating and more economic in the long run, but they also provide the aesthetics that people love, especially around the holidays, Osburn said.

More and more in recent years, burning has been outlawed at those times. After decades squeezing businesses, farms and industry in an effort to meet ever-tightening pollution standards, air quality officials say it's time for the public to do its part.

Osburn encouraged people to act while the incentives are available. Last year the air district burned through its allotted cash quickly but decided to set aside more money while reducing incentive amounts to stretch it out further.

For more details, visit valleyair.org/grants/burncleaner.htm or call (559) 230-6000.