

Wood burning prohibitions return to Valley

By Sabra Stafford, staff writer

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As the temperature starts to drop and people look to warm up their homes by stoking a roaring fire, the regional air district is reminding residents to check to make sure it's legal to have a fire blazing that day.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Check Before You Burn program, now in its 14th year, started up again on Tuesday. During Check Before You Burn, which runs through the end of February each year, the Air District issues a daily wood-burning status by county. The air district releases a declaration each day on whether or not wood-burning devices, such as fireplaces, can be used. The declaration is based on the air quality index for the day and whether or not the particulate matter from wood-burning devices would push it into a zone that is above federal and health guidelines.

The Check Before You Burn program aims to minimize the amount of harmful particulate matter that is released into the Valley air basin by restricting when residential wood-burning devices can be used.

"The Check Before You Burn program provides an opportunity for Valley residents to do their part to help reduce air pollution and improve public health throughout the San Joaquin Valley," said Seyed Sadredin, the District's executive director and air pollution control officer.

According to the Air District, smoke from residential wood burning constitutes the largest source of dangerous particulate emissions during winter months.

"Wood smoke is one of the most dangerous pollutants that you can expose yourself, your children, and your neighbors to," said Sadredin. "Prolonged exposure to wood smoke can lead to pulmonary arterial hypertension, pulmonary heart disease, heart failure and cancer."

This season the Air District will issue declarations of either: No restrictions, burning discouraged; No burning unless registered; or No burning for all. Valley residents that have invested in cleaner, certified wood burning devices will be allowed to have additional burn days if they register their devices with the Air District.

In 2015, there were 36 days when wood burning was not allowed for anyone in at least one county. Comparatively, in the winter of 2014, there were a total of 376 curtailments throughout the air basin.

Despite the fewer number of all-out wood-burning prohibitions, the air remained cleaner last year, according to Air District officials.

There are two exceptions to wood-burning prohibitions: If the residence does not have another source of heat or if the residence does not have access to natural-gas service (even if propane is used), they are exempt from the rule and may continue to use their device. Residents may get exemption information at www.valleyair.org/Rule4901. Additionally, fireplace inserts or stoves that run solely on gas or propane, and never burn wood, continue to be exempt from the rule. Wood-burning declarations also apply to outdoor devices and chimneys.

Valley residents wanting to switch out older wood-burning devices for a cleaner model can take advantage of the District's Burn Cleaner grants which provide \$1,000 for certified wood, pellet inserts, freestanding stoves or natural gas inserts or \$2,500 for eligible low-income applicants for all devices. An additional \$500 is available to all applicants for the installation costs on a natural gas device. To participate in this program visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner.

By the end of last season, the Air District had nearly 3,000 wood-burning devices registered with the air district as meeting current EPA emission standards.

To get the daily burn status, Valley residents may sign up for email notifications by visiting www.valleyair.org/CBYB. Daily wood-burning declarations are also available by calling 1-800-SMOG INFO (766-4463) or by downloading the free iPhone app "Valley Air" from the App Store.