

With Green Firewood, Savings Go Up in Smoke

By Jeanne Huber

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Q: With heating bills so high, I plan to use our fireplace more than we have in past winters. But how do I know if the firewood I buy is dry?

A: Heating with wood can be a viable alternative to burning oil or natural gas, but if you're just gearing up for it now, you're right to be concerned about buying dry wood. If lots of people are contemplating having more fires this season, there might be a shortage of the well-aged logs that will actually save you money.

If you were to burn green wood, you wouldn't get much heat because a lot of the energy stored in the fibers would just go into evaporating the moisture within the wood. The amount of water can be considerable -- equal to half or more of the weight of the wood. Plus, the cool-burning fires produced by green wood create a lot of smoke, which results in air pollution and leaves thick deposits of creosote building up in your chimney. That, in turn, can lead to a chimney fire, which can wreck the chimney or even start a house fire.

The firewood you use now should have been cut early last spring, or even earlier. So you might start by asking when the wood was cut. If the wood was split then and stacked to dry in the sun and wind, the moisture content now should be below 20 percent. Depending on the weather, it may drop down to 12 percent or even lower. If you have access to a moisture meter, you can check the level precisely. Meters typically start around \$130, so it's probably not worth buying one just to check firewood. However, if you're buying wood from someone who's in the business of providing it, you might ask whether he has a meter; if so, ask for a test you can witness. Or if you have friends who do a lot of woodworking, ask to borrow their equipment.

There are also some less precise ways of evaluating firewood:

Touch the wood. Freshly cut pieces are noticeably damp, especially on the ends.

Look at the bark. If it's still firmly stuck to the wood, the firewood was cut recently. If the wood lacks bark or if you can pull it off with your hands, that's a good sign.

Check the ends. If the wood is newly cut, you will see a series of circular rings, showing how the tree formed wood in annual layers. If you also see cracks that run perpendicular to the rings, you know that the wood is dry or at least is headed that way. Wood fibers shrink as their moisture evaporates, but the shrinkage doesn't occur evenly. So some of the fibers inevitably pull away from each other, forming the cracks.

Bang a couple of pieces against each other. If you hear a hollow crack, the wood is dry. If the wood makes a dull sound, it's still wet -- or rotten.

Like green wood, rotten wood isn't worth burning. Even if it's dry when you buy it, you won't get much heat because the fungi that cause wood rot will have already removed most of the energy-rich ingredients. The heat value of firewood is mostly related to its weight, provided the weight isn't water, and rotted wood is very lightweight.

The visual and audible clues about whether wood is dry and still worth burning are obviously quite subjective. So it's probably no surprise that consumers often complain that they were sold wood that wasn't as good as they were told it was. When you purchase wood in the fall, always inspect it before you pay. In the spring, you don't have to be as careful, especially if you are dealing with a supplier who cultivates long-term business relationship with you.

The other big source of consumer complaints about firewood centers on the quantity of wood purchased. Most people know that wood is often sold by the cord, but they're often unclear what that means. A cord of wood consists of pieces stacked as compactly as possible into a pile 4 feet high, 8 feet long and 4 feet deep. A "face cord" is a pile just as high and long but only as deep as the length of the pieces. If pieces are 24 inches long, a face cord equals half a standard cord. If pieces are 16 inches long, a face cord is just one-third of a standard cord.

It's difficult to pinpoint the prices at which firewood becomes a better bargain than heating oil or natural gas because the efficiency of furnaces and stoves varies considerably. However, you can assume that burning wood in a fireplace won't save money, says James E. Johnson, an associate dean in the Department of Forestry at Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources.

"A fireplace is nice for a little bit of mood," he says. "But it is not a heating device unless it's an emergency when the power is out." Except in Rumford fireplaces, which can be efficient at heating a space, burning a fire can actually suck heat out of your home because of the quantity of air that goes up the chimney. Fireplace inserts, free-standing wood stoves and wood-burning furnaces are far more efficient.

Carpooling could pay off in Chula Vista

Free shuttle service has extra incentive

By Carly Bartkiewicz

San Diego Union-Tribune, Thursday, Nov. 17, 2005

Sitting in gridlock waiting to merge onto a congested highway is a daily routine for people who commute to work from east Chula Vista.

There aren't too many songs on the radio that relieve the traffic tension. Gas prices add to the aggravation.

Local officials hope to change all that. They want to get commuters out of the driver's seat and into car pools by showing them the money.

Starting in early December, two coach buses and two shuttle vans will take residents who live east of Interstate 805 to their jobs in downtown San Diego or to the trolley station at H Street. The Chula Vista Xpress will run Monday through Friday.

Not only is the program free, those who participate by riding the Xpress or creating their own ride share will be paid \$2 every day for the first three months. That means commuters who allow someone else to drive them to and from work each day could receive \$130.

"It's a simple program to encourage people to take transit and change their travel behavior," said Dan Forster, growth management coordinator for the city of Chula Vista.

Once the incentive period ends, commuters can continue to use the buses and shuttles for free.

The Xpress is a two-year trial program. It may continue beyond that if enough residents use it and the city can obtain more funding. The program has \$980,000 for the trial period. It is being funded by a grant from the San Diego Air Pollution Control District and developer fees.

The program focuses on east Chula Vista because of the rapid growth in the area. With many of those new residents commuting to jobs in San Diego, traffic has become a nightmare.

A telephone survey conducted in 2001 by Godbe Research and Analysis estimated that 13,000 east Chula Vista commuters drive alone to work during the peak morning travel period of 6:30 to 8:30 a.m.

"We hope this program will relieve some of that peak-time traffic," Forster said. "But this is not necessarily going to get you to your destination faster."

Each of the two buses and shuttles will make one run in the morning and evening. With the buses, shuttles and groups who create car pools, there is enough funding to accommodate 700 to 900 people.

East Chula Vista residents who form their own car pools or van pools, or who start bicycling or walking to work or a trolley station, will be eligible for the \$2 incentive. To qualify, residents will have to complete an enrollment form, log their daily commutes and have their employers verify their participation.

They must live in the communities of Otay Ranch, Eastlake, Rolling Hills Ranch, San Miguel Ranch, Rancho del Rey, Bonita Long Canyon, Telegraph Canyon Estates or Sunbow.

People who already are in a car pool are not eligible for the incentive, based on the stipulations of the grant from the Air Pollution Control District.

"Part of receiving the grant meant that we had to decrease current air pollution, and this meant we had to get new riders," Forster said.

To qualify, commuters currently must drive to work or the trolley alone and leave their homes between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. The Xpress leaves downtown between 4:30 and 5:30 p.m. for the evening return, and the shuttles also pick up passengers at the trolley station at 4:40 and 5:40 p.m.

At the end of the 90-day introductory period, riders can submit their carpool logs to Chula Vista Xpress, which will send out checks about 30 days after that.

There are three pickup stops in Chula Vista and five drop-off stops in downtown San Diego for the two express buses running in the morning and evening. The two shuttles have the same three pickup stops in the morning and drop off at the H Street Trolley Station.

The pickup stops are Eastlake Parkway and Otay Lakes Road, where parking will be available in the Target lot; Village 5 at Cottonwood Park, where parking will be available; and Village 1 at Heritage Park, which will not have parking.

The five stops in downtown San Diego are tentatively located in the area bordered by Pacific Highway, 10th Avenue and C and A streets.

"After six months we should have a pretty good idea what's working," Forster said. "Maybe only two people will ride the trolley shuttle, we'll have to wait and see, but we'll deal with those contingencies as they arrive."

Report: Smog a Problem in Ohio, Kentucky

By LISA CORNWELL

The Associated Press

Published in the Washington Post, Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2005

CINCINNATI -- A study showing that smog reached unhealthy levels in the Cincinnati and Dayton metropolitan areas 19 days this year demonstrates the continuing problem of air pollution and highlights the need for vehicle emission tests, the American Lung Association said Wednesday.

For at least nine of those 19 days from April through September, the smog levels also were at unhealthy levels in the northern Kentucky area across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, according to a joint report by the association's Ohio and Kentucky chapters.

The report comes as the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency plans to end testing on emissions from vehicle tailpipes in seven southwest Ohio counties at the end of December. Tests in northern Kentucky ended earlier this month.

"Nineteen is a high number of days for a city to exceed the federal ozone levels," Janice Nolen, director of national policy for the American Lung Association, said Wednesday. "We are struggling to see how these states can cut emissions testing programs in those areas and still meet the federal health standards."

Smog, formed by nitrogen oxide and organic compounds mixing with heat and sunlight, has been linked to a wide range of health problems.

"Many thousands of people in southwestern Ohio and northern Kentucky are at special risk from exposure to dirty air," said Roberta Taylor, regional program director for the American Lung Association of Southwest Ohio. "They include children, people with asthma, senior citizens and those suffering from chronic bronchitis, emphysema and other lung diseases."

More than 2.8 million people in southwestern Ohio and northern Kentucky live in areas where smog or ozone levels are too high, according to the report based on data from air quality monitoring agencies in Ohio and Kentucky that supply information to the U.S. EPA.

It is the first report by the association to look at high pollution levels for a single year, Nolen said.

Bruno Maier, supervisor of the Regional Air Pollution Control Agency in Dayton, said that results aren't official until the federal government checks them for quality assurance, but he said the official numbers usually don't vary much.

The Ohio EPA plans to hold a hearing next month on its proposals to replace emissions testing with pollution reducers such as additional controls on industry and cleaner-burning gasoline.

Lawsuits have been filed in Ohio and Kentucky to stop the elimination of emissions testing, but officials in both states are confident they have found good alternatives.

"We know we can't just get rid of E-Check without replacing it," said EPA spokeswoman Heidi Griesmer. "The modeling checks we have done on our proposals show that they will be efficient replacements."

Kentucky already required cleaner-burning gasoline and vapor recovery nozzles at gas stations and has added additional controls on industry.

"We know there will be some days that exceed approved levels, but we believe these alternatives will keep us in compliance with federal requirements," said Mark York, a spokesman for the Kentucky Environmental and Public Protection Council.

The U.S. EPA declared the entire region out of compliance with clean air laws in 2004, and a report released by the American Lung Association earlier this year gave eight southwest Ohio counties and the three in Kentucky an "F" rating for bad air quality.

"It's hard to see how these areas can meet federal requirements by getting rid of a tool like emissions testing that works and replacing it with something that might not succeed," said Nolen.

Ag News

Valley Voice, Thursday, Nov. 17, 2005

Cow manure and the methane it produces, rather than a burden, could help fuel one million cars, says a USDA study last month. The study estimates that about 18 billion cubic feet of methane produced from the state's 1.7 million cows are equivalent to 150 million gallons of gasoline.

[\(Developers with existing or proposed District contracts\)](#)

Acreage to 'bloom' with houses

Council OKs planned developments -- one amid internal oil tiff

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Nov. 17, 2005

Rosedale Ranch, a 1,655-acre community planned at the northwest corner of Bakersfield, has sailed through the city zoning process without a hitch.

Until now.

Wednesday it blew up in front of the Bakersfield City Council.

Attorney Tom Fallgatter, representing Occidental Petroleum, accused developer Keith Gardiner of trying to extort money from Oxy in exchange for access to the mineral rights the company owns under his land.

Greg Sanders, an attorney for Gardiner, accused Oxy of threatening to sink Rosedale Ranch in front of the council if Gardiner didn't give them nine individual 11-acre drilling islands.

And city of Bakersfield Development Services Director Stan Grady said the whole fight has nothing to do with approval of the zone change and general plan amendment the council was looking at Wednesday night.

Oil drilling islands, Grady said, are handled when the developer presents a specific map of homes or shops to the city and asks for permission to build it.

"I thought things were going along swimmingly with this project until Monday when I heard that there might be problems," said Councilman David Couch.

Couch made a motion to approve the project despite the verbal battle over oil.

The council voted unanimously to support that motion.

In the end the decision seemed to come down to whether Oxy will have a chance to get drill sites at a later date.

The city said it will.

"When the process is ready for the tract maps, are the islands proposed at that time and then do they go to the Planning Commission?" Councilwoman Jacquie Sullivan asked city staff.

That happens when Gardiner comes back to the Bakersfield Planning Commission with map of part of his project that he is ready to build, Grady replied.

Councilman Zack Scrivner complemented Gardiner about the plan for Rosedale Ranch -- a community linked by parks, lakes, shopping centers and space for 13,000 office, commercial and industrial jobs.

"You can really tell that you really put your heart and soul into this project," he said.

Old River Ranch

A second major project, Old River Ranch, also got city approval Wednesday.

The 1,833-acre project is located between South Allen and Old River roads on the south side of Panama Lane.

Sierra Club leaders and lawyers complained that the project will have more traffic than expected and convert huge chunks of farm land to homes.

Developers Mike and Greg Petrini and their team of staff countered with the promise of tree-shaded walking trails that link every home to parks and shopping centers.

"I want to commend the Petrinis for the design features that they have incorporated into their project," said Gordon Nipp of the Sierra Club. But, "it is taking out over 1,800 acres of prime agriculture land."

Babak Naficy, an attorney for the Sierra Club said the rapid conversion of ag land into homes is a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads to more growth.

"Population is growing because more housing is being developed," he said.

Mike Petrini said he and his brother wanted to make sure they built a walkable community with various sizes of homes and apartments for all income levels.

In addition, city staff said, the brothers offered to pay millions of dollars in voluntary fees to help build parks and maintain police and fire services for the community.

Councilman Harold Hanson said the project was great development for the city and rejected the Sierra Club arguments about the loss of ag land.

Sierra Club went on to raise the same concerns with Rosedale Ranch.

In total, the council approved 13 projects Wednesday night, many over Sierra Club complaints.

"Six miles of prime ag-land is going to bloom one last time -- bloom with houses," Nipp said.