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Air rule foes all fired up

By Michael Fitzgerald, Record Columnist

So, now, before you and your loved one can cozy up at home beside a romantic fire, you have to say, "Excuse me, darling. I have to call the air board."

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District imposed a few no-burn days on home fireplaces years ago. New rules may ratchet up the days to 47. One out of three winter days. You find out if it's OK to have a fire by calling (800) BIGBROTHER or by visiting the air board's website, www.reallyintrusive.com.

OK, not really. But when you learn where Valley air regulations are going, you'll be shocked.

The trend, as far as fireplaces go, is toward total abolition. The center of human habitation for millennia is an endangered species. Might that be a bit ... much?

The problem, of course, is the Valley's sickening air. According to a 2008 study, cleaning the air to federal standards could prevent:

- » 23,300 asthma attacks;
- » 188,000 days of school absence;
- » 3,000 worker sick days;
- » 460 premature deaths;

And produce other health gains. But the question is not whether the air should be cleaned - it should - but whether it can be cleaned by other means. Is it really necessary to sacrifice fireplaces?

Banning home fires on certain days will reduce the "particulate matter" (unhealthy tiny soot) in the air by ... wait for it ... one microgram per cubic meter.

Uncle Sam wants the Valley to reduce that stuff from today's 65 per cubic meter to 35.

Tiny as it sounds, the Valley can't get across the finish line of federal standards without the one-microgram reduction of home fires, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

We've tried everything else, Sadredin said.

"We've been regulating businesses, ag and dairies for about three decades or so," Sadredin said. "Going after fireplaces was not the first thing that we tried."

Seventy percent of home fires are burned not for heat or cooking but for "the aesthetic experience," Sadredin pointed out. Traditional fireplaces lose 90 percent of their heat.

But what about new cleaner-burning fireplaces and woods? The new models are up to 75 percent more efficient.

"Wood stoves and wood stove inserts, and pellet stoves, and pellet inserts ... are cleaner-burning and even getting better," said Leslie Wheeler of the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association. "The San Joaquin air board ought to understand the products today and how they are cleaner."

Banning cleaner-burning fireplaces, too, would seem to punish people who invested in cleaner air.

Sadredin conceded the point. A rule change is in the works to exempt them, he said.

Sadredin freely admits the Valley may be headed for a total fireplace ban, plus a ban on barbecues. And even unimaginable bans if the feds keep tightening pollution standards.

"I think if the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) continues down this path, ... in my view, it will set the maximum where our natural ozone layers are."

Whoa. In other words, Uncle Sam is on the way to saying the ozone that occurs naturally in the Valley is the maximum allowable - meaning man-made forms, such as fossil fuels - cars, trucks, etc., would either have to run on as-yet nonexistent zero-emission gas or be banned!

"Exactly," Sadredin gloomed. "If that standard comes into being, don't worry about climate change regulation - that comes into being at 2050 - with this standard, the only option for us to comply is to ban fossil fuel."

The air board's illiberal regulation of fireplaces, it turns out, is just the canary in the coal mine of federal air pollution regulation that is not realistic for the San Joaquin Valley. "The current system is setting up for failure," Sadredin said.