

New Valley air plan will cut fireplace use in 2014

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

Fresno Bee, Thursday, Dec. 20, 2012

The Valley's new \$1 billion plan to clean up dangerous specks of soot and other debris in the air will mean far fewer days of wood burning in fireplaces, beginning in 2014.

After hearing testimony from health advocates, the local air governing board decided Thursday to start the tighter wood-burning restrictions two years earlier than proposed.

The new restrictions could mean that in some years nearly all winter wood burning would stop in larger cities, such as Fresno and Bakersfield.

The restrictions, along with the controversial new state diesel truck rules and other local measures, are supposed to clear the air by 2019.

"We want to emphasize that most of the Valley areas would attain the standard by 2017," said executive director Seyed Sadredin of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The Valley and its neighbor, South Coast Air Basin in Southern California, are considered to have some of the nation's worst particle pollution.

Valley businesses and industries largely supported the plan, though some said the costs of upgrading equipment have become unreasonable. Environmentalists wanted to see a stronger plan.

Board member Alex Sherriffs, an area physician, said the plan is a big step forward for the health of the Valley's 4 million people. He said the plan would save \$500 million in health costs and 2,000 lives over the next several years.

"This will have a huge impact here," he said.

In cities during the winter, soot from wood burning is the biggest source of particle pollution, which is called PM-2.5. The microscopic soot, invisible to the eye, can easily get deep in the lungs and even pass into the bloodstream.

It triggers asthma, heart problems and premature deaths. More than 700 people in the Valley die prematurely due to PM-2.5, medical researchers have found.

The wood-burning rule was first passed in 2003 and amended four years ago. Starting in November 2014, the threshold for banning burning will be 20 micrograms per cubic meter of air, down from 30.

The district estimates it would prevent 1.5 tons per day of pollution -- which is considered a big reduction.

But one critic said the district plan ignores 40% of the PM-2.5 problem. Lawyer Brent Newell, who is based in San Francisco with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said the problem is linked to the Valley's massive dairy industry.

Ammonia plumes from animal waste combine with diesel and vehicle exhaust to form a speck called ammonium nitrate.

"You have got to deal with ammonia," he said. "It needs to be regulated."

Air district leaders say ammonia is not a big health risk, especially compared to soot from fireplaces and diesel engines. Also, analysis by the district and the California Air Resources Board showed ammonia reduction would achieve insignificant benefits, the district said.

Other rules in the 1,100-page plan include stricter limits on PM-2.5 coming from commercial charbroilers, steam generators and gas turbines.

Representatives from farming, the Valley's largest industry, generally supported the plan, but complained about additional regulations and costs.

Roger Isom of the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association and California Agricultural Processors Association said farming is more regulated in the Valley than anywhere else in the country. He suggested some parts of the farming industry could be driven away from California.

"We're tired of doing more," he said. "We cannot afford it."

No-burn days likely to double by 2014

By Garth Stapley

Modesto Bee, Friday, Dec. 21, 2012

Fireplace burning could be severely restricted much sooner than initially proposed, and people with cleaner-burning wood and pellet stoves are likely to get more leeway than they do now, air quality officials decided Thursday.

The number of no-burn days in Stanislaus County is expected to more than double for people with open-hearth fireplaces by 2014, two years earlier than expected, officials unanimously decreed with the landmark vote after hours of testimony from opposing sides.

As a compromise, owners of clean-burning stoves should get some sort of special treatment not afforded under current no-burn rules, because their devices produce a fraction of the soot that hurts people's lungs.

The deal was proposed by county Supervisor Bill O'Brien, who is chairman of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's governing board. He figures that soot levels will go down if more people with fireplaces convert to stoves.

"The benefits will be bigger than what we were even expecting," O'Brien said.

Some people relying on wood burning as their only heat source are granted exemptions.

Thursday's vote, in a meeting at Fresno headquarters relayed to Modesto's north valley office, puts in motion more than 100 additional regulations expected to improve air quality, especially in the winter. The plan to reduce particulate matter, or PM-2.5, eventually will affect activities such as commercial charbroiling, lawn care, commuting and farming.

Fireplace rules commanded most of the attention, including in the Modesto office, where people's comments were relayed via video.

Stanislaus County averages 36 no-burn days from Nov. 1 through the end of February; by 2014, that could jump to 74.

Particulate matter is made worse by smoke and vehicle fumes and is harder on lungs than summertime ozone. Further regulating cow manure wouldn't help much, scientists say.

Two north valley men said their wives are in poor health and wood stoves help them feel better because of the type of heat they provide.

"Drier heat makes a difference," said D.C. Snow. "It's a different heat."

John Barnett of Modesto said his wife's asthma, normally made worse by smoke, subsided when they got a wood stove.

Aiming to change 'lip service'

Diane Fidel of Turlock said she loves her clean-burning stove, which has "some kind of thing in it that reburns pollutants going up the chimney." But she didn't check one day last winter and was fined for using it on a no-burn day.

"I thought then, 'This is really pukey.' We spent thousands of dollars on that stove and it doesn't do any good if it's a (no-)burn day," Fidel said.

Steve Clegg of Waterford said it costs about \$1,500 every six months to fill his mother's propane tank, which heats her home. Cleaner air makes sense, he said, while urging officials to give some consideration for clean-burning devices.

Steve Goldstein, who sells wood and pellet stoves at Modesto's Spa Doctor & Stove Center, said: "We get lip service during these board meetings, but in the end, there is never real recognition for the products we offer."

Thursday's vote aims at changing that, in a big way.

Officials don't have a clear plan for accommodating clean burners, who might trade some privacy for permission to light up. Current technology doesn't distinguish open-hearth smoke from much cleaner stove emissions.

O'Brien said it might work in a way similar to vehicle smog checks — a technician verifies a clean-burning device and issues a permit. Details, such as how to pay for that bureaucracy and thresholds for clean burners as opposed to regular fireplaces, should come forth as staff recommendations in coming months.

Area representatives on the board, all of whom voted for the compromise, were Ceres Mayor Chris Vierra, San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas and Merced County Supervisor Hub Walsh.

Businesses see more hardship

Industry representatives said companies have gone to great lengths to adapt to rules, sometimes at considerable expense.

Almond branches now are chopped instead of burned, but small sticks cause problems, requiring more equipment, said Kelly Co-vello of the Almond Hullers and Processors Association.

More regulations "are truly a hardship on some folks. We adjust or we don't survive," said Katie Patterson of the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau.

Roger Isom of the Western Area Processors Association and the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association said his groups don't support the plan. Regulations imposed on forklifts, harvesters and tractors already are the most stringent on the planet, he said.

"You've put us in a predicament where we're not competitive with any other region in the world," Isom said. "There's nothing more we can do."

Others said valley people have waited far too long for clean air and urged stricter rules.

For example, Michelle Garcia of the Fresno-Madera Medical Society suggested banning leaf blowers.

Air board members were rattled by news that federal officials last Friday published new standards for particulate matter and assumed they were being asked to vote on a plan that already has become outdated. A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency representative explained that the new goal addresses particulate matter readings averaged over one year, while Thursday's vote focuses on 24-hour averages.

Officials remain upset that 80 percent of emissions in the San Joaquin Valley come from mobile sources, particularly diesel trucks passing through, which the air district can't regulate.

Judge dismisses Calif. bus, truck pollution suit

by Associated Press

in the Fresno Bee, S.F. Chronicle and other papers, Thursday, Dec. 20, 2012

LOS ANGELES -- A federal judge has dismissed a trucking association's lawsuit against new rules aimed at reducing truck and bus pollution in California.

The suit left the court's jurisdiction when the Environmental Protection Agency approved California's plan to reduce emissions, including the rules for trucks and buses that will go into effect Jan. 1, U.S. District Judge Morrison C. England in Sacramento ruled Wednesday.

If the Upland-based California Construction Trucking Association wants to continue pursuing the case against the California Air Resources Board, it will have to include the EPA as a party in the litigation in a court of appeals, Morrison wrote.

CCTA spokesman Lee Brown said an appeal is being discussed and is likely. The group brought the lawsuit against state regulators to prevent implementation of the legislation, which was first adopted in 2008.

The 2008 rule was eased in 2011, in recognition that compliance costs were difficult to manage in the flailing economy. The regulation began being phased in with the 2012 calendar year, after the judge denied motions for injunctions to halt its implementation.

As of Jan. 1, a new phase of regulations will kick in requiring many heavy duty trucks and buses from model years 2000 to 2004 to install diesel soot filters, as needed. The 2012 phase had similar requirements for 1996 to 1999 models.

The National Resources Defense Council, an environmental protection group, applauded the court's ruling, saying it would ensure that roughly 1 million aging diesel vehicles will be retrofitted to reduce pollution.

"Older diesel trucks and buses have little or no emissions controls," NRDC attorney Melissa Lin Perrella said in a statement. "We have the technology to make these large vehicles cleaner for the people riding inside and for those who breathe their exhaust."