

More “no burn” days coming to air district vote

By Garth Stapley

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Thursday could be a red-letter day for people who either suffer from breathing problems or enjoy burning logs in a fireplace.

They can comment at a public hearing before air district leaders, who are expected to take a landmark vote that could double the number of “no burn” days for many. In Stanislaus County, burning in fireplaces and older stoves would be outlawed on most winter days.

On the other hand, people who own devices with clean-burning technology, such as federally certified wood-burning stoves, pellet stoves, and gas stoves and heaters, would get special treatment from November through February.

“No burn” days have helped the Valley make great strides on cutting down pollution over the years, say San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials. But particle pollution, mostly from dust and soot, remains a problem in the winter because of the Valley’s bowl shape.

The district served notice a couple of years ago that burning restrictions, already among the most stringent in the nation, would get even more strict this year. If rules are adopted Thursday as proposed, the average number of Stanislaus “no burn” days among 120 days of winter could shoot from 36 to 72 as the current threshold for micrograms per cubic meter of particle concentration is lowered from the current 30 to 20.

Conditions have been better in Merced and San Joaquin counties, where the average number of “no burn” days each year would increase from 19 and 24, respectively, to 55 and 53.

However, the proposal would recognize the hearth industry with a new category for people with clean-burning devices.

Regular fireplaces and older stoves could not operate when particle concentrations reach 20 micrograms, but those with cleaner devices could keep burning until levels reach 65 micrograms, according to the proposal – more than twice the current threshold of 30.

That represents a huge shift in the thinking of air district leaders thanks to years of lobbying, with Steve Goldstein of Modesto’s Spa Doctor Pool-Spa & Stove Center at the forefront.

Only about 7 percent of homeowners have wood or pellet stoves, and 75 percent of those would not meet the new standard of being certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The air district has pumped \$2.3 million over the years into incentives to reduce the cost of devices with newer technology, which can cost \$5,000. The district now proposes to spend \$2 million more on additional incentives of up to \$1,500 for a new device; low-income residents could qualify for rebates of up to \$2,500.

People with certified devices would register them online.

Vehicles are regulated by other agencies, but they continue to cause much of the Valley’s wintertime pollution, which is more toxic than summer ozone.

Thursday’s meeting will start at 9 a.m. at the district’s Fresno headquarters, with video teleconferencing in its Modesto satellite at 4800 Enterprise Ave., Modesto; people can participate at that location, including providing comment during the public hearing.

Proposed wood-burning rule: www.valleyair.org/Workshops/public_workshops_idx.htm#09-18-14-4901.

Certified heaters: www.valleyair.org/rule4901/documents/0819/Appendix-F-EPAlistofdevices.pdf.