

Valley burning restrictions begin; fewer for clean-burning fireplaces

By Erin Tracy

Modesto Bee, Saturday, November 1, 2014

The rain has passed, but nighttime temperatures this week are expected to dip into the 40s and options for warmth might be limited.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's "Check Before You Burn" season started Saturday, restricting use of fireplaces and woodstoves on days with poor air quality.

There are no restrictions Sunday, but it will be one of few that folks with older-model, "dirty" heating devices can use them, according to air district Executive Director Seyed Sadredin.

Stricter air quality regulations this year are expected to reduce the number of burn days by half compared with last year.

In the past there were burn days and no-burn days from November to February, but this year the district is allowing those who invest in cleaner EPA Phase II-certified or pellet-fueled devices registered with the district to stay cozy by the fire nearly all winter, and it's offering cash incentives.

A third designation of "No Burning Unless Registered" has been added by the district.

Sadredin said those with the clean units will be prevented from burning two to five days during the four-month season, compared with those with dirty units who might get up to 20 no-burn days, or up to 10 in areas of the South San Joaquin Valley.

There are no restrictions on gas fireplaces. Residents who don't have access to natural gas services or whose only source of heat is a fireplace also are exempt.

The prospect of more burn days is enticing, but an even greater driving factor to going green has been the rebates.

During the first four weeks of the incentive program, 754 people have applied for rebates from the district ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,000. That translates to about half of a \$2.1 million grant for the program, Sadredin said.

The base rebate is \$1,500 for the clean units, which can cost \$3,000 to \$5,000 depending on the type and brand. Those who make the switch to gas will receive an extra \$500 and qualifying low-income residents can get an additional \$1,000.

Most people are making the switch to gas, according to area vendors.

John King, president of Valley Fireplaces Inc. in Salida, said many of his customers have come in asking about the incentives. He estimates business is up 10 percent to 15 percent compared with last year.

"Everybody is getting quite busy," Mike Gorman, co-owner of Gorman Stove Sales in Modesto, said Saturday. "I noticed my phone ringing a little bit more today; when it rains people really get on the ball."

He said about 70 percent of his sales are for gas fireplaces and stoves. There's no wood to chop and natural gas is fairly inexpensive.

The clean-burning wood fireplace units have air filtration devices, often similar to the catalytic converters in cars, which burn 20 to 50 times cleaner, according to the district.

Sadredin said 95 percent of the pollution from fireplaces comes from the dirty units. On the worst winter days, fireplace soot consists of a third of the particle pollution hanging in the air and it is among the most dangerous.

After getting the clean wood-burning units, residents must register them with the district in order to avoid fines from its inspectors who enforce no-burn days.

"It must be registered in our database so we can target our resources," Sadredin said. "If a person calls and says their neighbor is burning on a no-burn day, we can tell them whether or not they have a registered unit."

Residents can register free online this year at www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration.

Next year the district will require a registration fee of \$12.50, good for three years, after a chimney sweeper inspects the unit and certifies that it is properly maintained.

Sadredin said the incentives to switch to clean-burning units and a decreased number of burn days this year will reduce air pollution by 5 tons per day for the entire San Joaquin Valley.

Some 300 people have registered their clean-burning units, but there still is significant progress to be made in reducing fireplace soot in the air. The dirty units continue to make up 70 percent to 75 percent of the more than 250,000 wood-burning fireplaces and stoves in the San Joaquin Valley.

To get the daily burn status, sign up for email notifications and get information about the Burn Cleaner program, go to www.valleyair.org/Rule4901. Daily wood-burning declarations are also available by calling (800) 766-4463 or by downloading the free iPhone app Valley Air from the App Store.

Fireplace curtailments starting up again

The 12th season of the Central Valley's Check Before You Burn program begins Saturday

Turlock Journal, Saturday, November 1, 2014

This season, Check Before You Burn, the residential wood-burning curtailment rule, incorporates a new declaration level that will allow residents with registered, clean-burning heating devices to use them more frequently than in previous years.

The air district also is offering significantly more money to change out older units with newer devices that meet current EPA emission standards.

"The cooperation and understanding of the Valley's residents has made this the single most cost-effective regulation the air district has adopted," said Seyed Sadredin, the District's executive director and air pollution control officer. "Because of this support, our winter air quality is much cleaner and much healthier."

During Check Before You Burn season, which runs Nov. 1 through February, the Air District issues a daily wood-burning status by county. Declarations will now be either "No Restrictions, Burning Discouraged," "No Burning Unless Registered" or "No Burning."

In order to be allowed to burn during days when the status is "No Burning Unless Registered," residents must register their emission-compliant wood-burning devices with the District. During the inaugural season of this program, there is no fee to register. When burning is prohibited outright, no wood-burning device may be used. Residents can visit www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration to register their device.

There are two exceptions to wood-burning prohibitions, however: 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). Fireplace, stoves and inserts that run solely on gas or propane continue to be exempt from the rule.

To provide financial assistance to residents who wish to change out their older wood-burning devices for cleaner models, the District's Burn Cleaner fireplace and wood stove change-out program now offers \$1,500 to eligible applicants and \$2,500 to applicants who qualify for the low-income component. Another \$500 is available to all applicants for installation costs on a gas device.

To get the daily burn status, sign up for email notifications and get information about the Burn Cleaner program, visit www.valleyair.org/Rule4901. 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.

Strictest wood-burning rules in nation begin Saturday

By Alex Breitler, Record Staff Writer
Stockton Record, Friday, Oct. 31, 2014

For 25 years, Valley air pollution cops have squeezed businesses, farms and industry in an effort to slash emissions and meet ever-tightening air quality standards.

And now, "We have to get the public to do its part," said Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

On Saturday, Valley residents from Lodi to Bakersfield will become subject to what Sadredin's district calls the strictest residential wood-burning rules in the nation.

In San Joaquin County, where the air tends to be the cleanest, no-burn days over the past decade have been relatively rare.

That no longer will be the case. In September, officials decided to lower the threshold for declaring a no-burn day. San Joaquin County residents now can expect, on average, 53 burn bans each year from November through February — more than double the historic average.

But here comes the carrot: Residents who are willing to throw some cash into their fireplaces — so to speak — might be able to burn all winter.

While tightening the rules, the air district also is significantly increasing incentives for those willing to upgrade to a newer and cleaner wood, pellet or gas stove. For many buyers, those incentives would reduce the cost of the new unit by 50 percent.

Those who upgrade, and those who already have stoves that are certified by the Environmental Protection Agency, will be allowed to continue burning except on the worst of the worst days.

"The decision was to reward Valley residents that have actually invested in clean units and care about what they do," Sadredin said.

These changes should nudge the Valley closer to meeting a 2006 standard for tiny particulate pollution, he said. Failing to meet such standards can jeopardize regional transportation funding, not to mention the public health implications. Sadredin said the new wood-burning rule will prevent 30 to 50 premature deaths each year.

"Clearly, it's in the best interest of people in our community who suffer from respiratory disease to not be exposed to these high levels of airborne pollution," said Gregory Bensch, a doctor with the Allergy, Immunology & Asthma Medical Group in Stockton.

"Frankly, if you look at it from a financial point of view, it saves us a lot of money. A lot of our dollars spent on public health care are in the emergency rooms dealing with asthma" and other ailments.

Of course, any attempt to regulate people's fireplaces is likely to be controversial. Stockton-based Duraflame opposed the regulation, arguing that its manufactured logs produce less pollution than wood, and that residents who can't afford to upgrade should have other options.

Dave Smith, owner of Dave's Firewood off Alpine Road, sees a direct threat to his business.

"My sales are way down already," he said. "I feel bad for my men. They could lose their jobs. But nothing can be done."

He said he hears from many customers that they don't like to be told when they can and cannot burn.

Businesses certified by the air district to install new stoves are decidedly more upbeat.

At Ben's Appliance in Lodi, the \$1,500 incentive available to Valley residents will typically knock off about half of the cost of a new unit, which otherwise might run about \$3,000, said company president John Osburn.

"I was happy that the incentives did go up to the level that they did," Osburn said. "It gives a lot of people a chance. Everybody's winning: We clean up our air and people have an opportunity to afford these devices."

The incentive to upgrade is even larger for those willing to switch to gas, totaling \$2,000. Low-income residents who switch to gas can receive vouchers totaling up to \$3,000.

There is some red tape, though. Clean stoves will have to be registered with the district. Starting in 2015-16, that will require paying a \$12.50 fee every three years, and having your stove inspected to make sure it's working correctly.

"We need to know who is registered and who has a clean unit for enforcement purposes so we don't have to barge into people's homes," Sadredin said.

Speaking of enforcement, penalties are rising, too, for those who burn when they're not supposed to. First-time offenses remain at \$50, though that fee can be waived if violators attend a class. Second-time violations are doubling from \$150 to \$300.

Since they'll know who has a registered stove and who doesn't, district officials will also be able to target problem neighborhoods more efficiently, Sadredin said.

Asked if the district would someday end up banning wood burning throughout the Valley, Sadredin said he hopes this strengthening of the existing rule will be enough.

"If we get good participation," he said, "I think we can say, 'Mission accomplished.' "

Valley's stricter wood-burning rules start on stormy weekend

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, Oct. 30, 2014

A dark and stormy weekend may ease any pain from San Joaquin Valley's wood-burning rule — the toughest in California and maybe the whole country.

With a storm in the forecast, the air could be scrubbed clean enough so anyone can legally burn wood in open fireplaces as the rule enforcement season begins on Saturday. But unless you own the latest federally certified heater and register it with the local air district, you may not get a lot more opportunities.

The new rules are expected to shut down most wood burning in fireplaces, older stoves and inserts from Nov. 1 to Feb. 28. The fireplaces and older heaters create more than 90% of the Valley's soot pollution.

Inspectors from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will be cruising neighborhoods, answering complaint calls from neighbors and writing citations. Thanksgiving and Christmas wood fires in open fireplaces probably will be forbidden, unless there's a storm to clear the air.

As one of the dirtiest air basins in the country, the Valley needs dramatic cutbacks in fireplace soot, which is among the most dangerous air pollutants. On the worst winter days, soot is about a third of the particle pollution hanging in the air over neighborhoods.

For the last 11 winters, air authorities have slowly tightened down wood-burning regulations, removing tons of soot from the air. But without the new rule, the Valley has no hope of achieving new federal health standards for particle pollution, known as PM-2.5, authorities say.

The new rule caught flak this year from environmental activists who don't think it is tough enough. On the other side are critics who say it's far too tough on folks who want a wood fire in their fireplace. Richard Bohannon, 52, of Sanger, realizes the smoke can trigger asthma and heart problems, but he can't afford utility bills.

"I burn wood to keep my house warm," he says. "My wife and I are shopping for one of those new fireplace inserts. But like most working people, we don't have \$2,500 to \$3,000 to buy it up front, and then get some grant money from the air district to help pay for it."

The air district is handing out more than \$2 million to help people buy the new heaters. Homeowners can get up to \$1,500 for the certified inserts, which can cost up to \$5,000 or more. Applicants who qualify as low income can get up to \$2,500.

Another \$500 is available for those who are converting to natural gas, which is exempt from all the burning restrictions because it burns so cleanly.

Other exemptions are allowed for people who have no access to natural gas and for those who have no other means of heating.

Why allow new wood-burning heaters and not fireplaces and older heaters? The district says the newer devices burn 20 to 50 times cleaner.

“Even if all the new heaters were being used at once, we would still reduce PM-2.5,” said district executive director Seyed Sadredin.

The district has received about 750 applications for funding to help buy new heaters, according to spokeswoman Jaime Holt. She added that 263 devices have been registered with the district, but she expects that number to climb as no-burn days are announced.

As the soot is reduced in urban neighborhoods, dozens of lives will be saved this winter, Sadredin said.

Health researchers say wood smoke contains dangerous, microscopic debris that can pass through the lungs into the blood system. They are called PM-2.5 specks — 30 to 40 would fit across the width of a human hair. The specks can enter the home through cracks, so staying indoors often does not adequately protect people, researchers say.

Of the 800 premature Valley deaths blamed on air pollution each year, the majority are linked to soot, chemicals, droplets of moisture and other debris.

Environmental activists are concerned about the district allowing burning with the new devices when air pollution is well above the current health standard. But district leaders say the crackdown on fireplaces and old heaters will make a big difference.

Fines for violators will start at \$50, but people can avoid the fine by taking an air quality class. The fine is \$300 on the second. The fine can climb as high as \$1,000 for subsequent penalties, depending on the case.

Bohannon in Sanger says he needs to keep his home comfortably warm in the winter. He is caring for his 88-year-old mother-in-law and her twin sister. Each time the rules get tougher, his budget suffers a little more.

He says others in his situation will suffer, too: “I think a lot of people are going to be burning no matter what the district says.”

San Joaquin Valley wood-burning rule to start Saturday

By Merced Sun-Star staff

in the Fresno Bee, Thursday, Oct. 30, 2014

The 12th season of the San Joaquin Valley’s wintertime pollution-reduction rule is scheduled to begin Saturday, the San Joaquin Valley Air District announced Wednesday.

Check Before You Burn is a residential wood-burning restriction program designed to reduce particulate matter when air quality is forecast to deteriorate. According to air district officials, the program this season

will incorporate a new declaration level that will allow residents to use their registered clean-burning devices more frequently than before.

The declarations will now be either “No Restrictions, Burning Discouraged,” “No Burning Unless Registered” or “No Burning.” According to a news release, to be allowed to burn during days when the status is “No Burning Unless Registered,” residents must register their emissions-compliant wood-burning devices with the district. There is no fee to register during the interim program. Residents can visit www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration to register their device.

When burning is prohibited, no wood-burning device may be used.

The Check Before You Burn season runs through February.

The district also announced it will be offering more money to change out older heating units with newer devices that meet current Environmental Protection Agency standards. The district’s Burn Cleaner fireplace and wood stove change-out program offers \$1,500 to eligible applicants and \$2,500 to applicants who qualify for the low-income component. Another \$500 is available to all applicants for installation costs on a gas device.

For more information on the Burn Cleaner program, see www.valleyair.org/Rule4901.

Check before you burn

Sierra Star, Thursday, October 30, 2014

The 12th season of Check Before You Burn, the residential wood-burning restrictions in the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, begins Saturday.

This season the residential wood-burning curtailment rule incorporates a new declaration level that will allow residents with registered, clean-burning heating devices to use them more frequently than in previous years. Additionally, the air district is offering significantly more money to replace older units with newer devices that meet current EPA emission standards.

“The cooperation and understanding of the Valley’s residents has made this the single most cost-effective regulation the air district has adopted,” said Seyed Sadredin, the district’s executive director and air pollution control officer. “Because of this support, our winter air quality is much cleaner and much healthier.”

During Check Before You Burn season, which runs through February, the air district issues a daily wood-burning status by county. Declarations will now be either “No Restrictions — Burning Discouraged, No Burning Unless Registered, or No Burning.

In order to be allowed to burn during days when the status is No Burning Unless Registered, residents must register their emission-compliant wood-burning devices with the air district. During the inaugural season of this program, there is no fee to register.

Residents can visit valleyair.org/CBYBregistration to register their device. For an explanation of the different curtailment levels, how to register a wood-burning device and how to get money to upgrade a device, the district has created a three-minute video that can be viewed at valleyair.org/Rule4901.

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) the structure is exempt. Fireplace, stoves and inserts that run solely on gas or propane continue to be exempt from the rule.

To provide financial assistance to residents who wish to replace their older wood-burning devices with cleaner models, the District’s Burn Cleaner fireplace and wood stove change-out program now offers \$1,500 to eligible applicants and \$2,500 to applicants who qualify for the low-income component. Another \$500 is available to all applicants for installation costs for a gas device.

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Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014:

New wood-burning rules will save Valley lives

Who doesn't love a crackling wood fire on a cold day?

Answer: People with asthma, allergies and heart conditions.

So while many of us — if not most of us — love the smell of burning almond or oak and the sight of flickering flames, the right thing to do is to comply with the San Joaquin Valley's new wood-burning regulations.

The new rules are expected to shut down most wood burning in fireplaces, older stoves and inserts from Nov. 1 to Feb. 28. These fireplaces and older heaters create more than 90% of the Valley's soot pollution. The only exceptions during this time will be when a storm scours harmful pollution out of the air.

We wish the rules — some say they are the toughest in the country — weren't necessary. But our Valley's unique pollution-retaining shape and federal health standards leave us with no other options.

The Bee's Mark Grossi wrote in an Oct. 31 story on the new regulation:

"As one of the dirtiest air basins in the country, the Valley needs dramatic cutbacks in fireplace soot, which is among the most dangerous air pollutants. On the worst winter days, soot is about a third of the particle pollution hanging in the air over neighborhoods."

Some folks are bound to be angry with the rule. They'll view it as infringing on their freedom — another example of California nanny-state politics.

But if they think about a loved one coughing all winter or dying prematurely because a neighbor burns wood in the fireplace all winter, they might change their tune.

Good neighbors respect and support each other. Sacrificing the ambience of hearth and logs is a small price for significantly improving somebody's health.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is backing the rules with a carrot-and-stick approach.

Homeowners can get up to \$1,500 for certified inserts, which can cost up to \$5,000 or more. Applicants who qualify as low income can get up to \$2,500. Another \$500 is available for those who are converting to natural gas, which is exempt from all restrictions because it burns so cleanly.

Beware: The district is cracking down on violators. Fines start at \$50 and can climb as high as \$1,000 for repeat offenders.

If you still think this is much ado about nothing significant, you are wrong. Dozens of lives will be saved this winter by the new rules, district officials say.

One of those spared might be someone you know.