

Annual 'Check Before You Burn' program to kick off Nov. 1

By Steven Mayer

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, October 22, 2016

Let's face facts, Bakersfield. We live in the downwind end of a valley that traps and holds air pollution like no other place in the nation. So every emission counts.

And that includes smoke from fireplaces and wood stoves.

The valley air district's annual wintertime "Check Before You Burn" program begins next week — on Nov. 1 — and a key component of the program is a daily wood-burning declaration for each valley county issued by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The three declaration levels are "No Burning for All," "No Burning Unless Registered" and "No Restrictions, Burning Discouraged."

The second one was added last winter, after the air district amended the rules to allow users of registered low-emission devices to burn more frequently than they were allowed in past winters.

Conversely, those with old technology are being asked to burn on fewer days in the hope that more residents will upgrade to cleaner technology — or simply limit the burning of wood to a few times a year or eliminate it altogether.

In fact, since the district instituted the change last year, 6,946 residents have converted to cleaner-burning devices, with eight of 10 opting for natural gas, said district spokeswoman Jaime Holt.

Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director, said the incentives appear to be working.

Why? Because 14 years after the district began trying to educate residents about the damage wood smoke can do to human health, valley residents have been buying into this new way of thinking.

"We want to give credit to valley residents," Sadredin said. Credit for responding in a positive way to what he called "the toughest fireplace rules in the nation."

Ten years ago there was a lot of opposition — and anger — from valley residents who saw wood-burning restrictions as an attack on a valued American tradition.

But people have begun to understand that pollution from wood burning is localized to neighborhoods, not the valley as a whole. So when you burn wood in your fireplace, you're not impacting someone across town, you're affecting your next-door neighbor, the kid with asthma three houses down, the family whose vents are sucking invisible particles into the home itself.

"The black carbon in wood smoke is the most dangerous particle species you can expose yourself to, or your children, or your next-door neighbor," Sadredin said.

It typically shows up in the evening and night hours, when air movement is stagnant.

"It is not a pollutant that travels and dilutes."

Indeed, at its most basic level, the program is designed to reduce the buildup of unhealthy fine-particle pollution, which can be especially harmful to those who live in close proximity to the smoke.

The district's own studies showed that about 85 percent of the pollution from residential wood burning was coming from people who did not have the clean units. So the district placed more restrictions on the people responsible for 85 percent of that pollution.

According to the air district, residents of the valley portion of Kern County who use EPA-certified wood-burning devices were restricted from burning on only nine days last winter — a big advantage for those who converted.

In contrast, those with conventional fireplaces and wood stoves saw 71 no-burn days during the 120-day "Check Before You Burn" period, which runs through the end of February.

The units certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are 20 to 50 times cleaner than a conventional fireplace, Sadredin said.

Gas devices and pellet stoves are also considered clean burning although they do not need to be registered.

Violations of wood-burning restrictions can result in fines.

Last winter there were 470 violations reported valleywide, but just 39 of those occurred in Kern County. The numbers were down from the 2013-2014 season, which saw 547 notices of violation, with 45 occurring in Kern.

One component of the program that has really helped “break the dam” of opposition, Sadredin said, are the grant dollars for which valley residents can apply to change out their older wood-burning devices.

Grants of \$1,000 are available for EPA-certified wood pellet inserts, freestanding stoves or natural gas inserts. The program also offers \$2,500 for eligible low-income applicants on all devices.

An additional \$500 is available to all applicants toward the installation cost of a natural gas device. To participate in this program, visit valleyair.org/burncleaner or call (559) 230-5800.

Yosemite Unified gets futuristic upgrade

By Mark Evan Smith

Sierra Star, Friday, October 21, 2016

Yosemite Unified School District got a \$94,500 upgrade this week, in the form of five brand new golf carts at its campuses that transportation supervisor Sandy Dew said resemble the Popemobile, or George Jetson’s spaceship.

Zero emission vehicles powered by electricity, Dew said the carts come with enclosed glass cabins better equipped for harsher weather, and are painted bright blue with a letter Y sticker.

“They’ll most definitely improve safety when students are being transported around, things like that,” Dew added. “The older ones we had were slower and not very reliable.”

The new carts, which will replace some older models dating back to 1965, were funded entirely through grant dollars from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, Dew said.