

Planning outdoor Thanksgiving activities? Better check the air quality

By Monica Vaughan

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If you plan to host any outdoor Thanksgiving activities this week in the San Joaquin Valley, you might want to check the air quality in your neighborhood — especially if children or older adults are part of the family.

Elevated levels of particulate matter that have impacted the Valley this week might clear up on Thanksgiving Day, if weather permits. Either way, it's going to be cold with a high of 58 degrees.

Ground-level air pollution is common this time of year across the Valley, creating a health risk during outdoor activity for children, seniors and people with existing lung and heart problems, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Winter-like weather patterns tend to trap pollution on the Valley floor, including smoke from wood-burning stoves, which produce particulate matter that can be dangerous to hearts and lungs, both in the short-term and after repeated exposure.

"Smoke travels in plumes and when it has nowhere to go, it lingers," said Heather Heinks with Valley Air. "When you burn, you impact all your neighbors."

In addition to the regular health risks of breathing smoke, the Environmental Protection Agency warns that people recovering from COVID-19 may be at increased risk of health effects from residential wood smoke because of compromised lung function.

Check the air quality in your neighborhood using fire.airnow.gov. The tool was created to track wildfire smoke, but is helpful to monitor real time air quality because it includes data from more monitors than the general air quality map.

Wind expected on Wednesday should clear pollution. But it could kick up dust in parts of the Valley, creating a different kind of air quality problem, Heinks told The Fresno Bee. Dust tends to carry PM 10, while smoke tends to carry PM 2.5, smaller particles that can more easily travel through the respiratory system into lungs and the bloodstream.

The cold night Wednesday should help disperse ground-pollution from the Valley on Thursday, Heinks said. Early forecasts for the weekend show a return of more stagnant air on Friday and into the weekend.

Valley Air is enforcing no-burn days, meaning residents could be fined for using wood-burning fireplaces unless it is their only source of heat.

The regulatory agency has issued nearly 100 notices of violation this November. Each violation comes with a \$100 fine that can be reduced by half if violators attend an educational class provided by the District.

Valley Air does offer monetary incentives for people who replace their wood-burning devices.

Residents in the counties of Fresno, Madera and parts of Kern could receive up to \$4,000 for replacing a fireplace with a natural gas insert, or electric heat pump. Other residents in San Joaquin Valley may be eligible for \$1,000, or \$1,500 if they meet certain income requirements.

Visit <http://www.valleyair.org/burncleaner> to learn more.