

Air District sees drop in wood burning violations

By Kristina Hacker

Westside Connect, Wednesday, March 9, 2022

The Valley Air District concluded its 2021-2022 Residential Wood Smoke Reduction Program season Monday, recording a drop in violations from last season in the District overall and a decrease in violations in Stanislaus and Merced counties.

The Residential Wood Smoke Reduction Program (previously known as the Check Before You Burn Program) takes place each winter from November through February to reduce the build-up of harmful PM2.5, which can have adverse effects on public health, aggravating heart and lung diseases such as asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. In accordance with District Rule 4901: Wood Burning Fireplaces and Wood Burning Heaters, the District issues a daily wood-burning declaration and restrictions, based on the air quality forecast for each county. Regional high-pressure systems often cause pollutants to become trapped in the bowl-shaped San Joaquin Valley, creating high concentrations of PM2.5, that accumulate very quickly at ground level, resulting in poor air quality.

“The District’s primary responsibility is protecting the health of San Joaquin Valley residents. This requires strict enforcement of rules that regulate emissions from activities such as residential wood burning,” said Jaime Holt, District Chief Communications Officer.

During the 2021-22 season, Stanislaus County recorded 77 “No Burning Unless Registered” days, an increase from the 61 days of the previous season. The county also had one “No Burning for All” day, same as the 2019-20 season. The air district issued 130 notices of violation of the wood burning regulations, a significant drop from the 177 violations issued in Stanislaus County during the 2020-21 season.

In Merced County, there were 67 “No Burning Unless Registered” days in 2021-22, an increase from the 52 the previous season. The county did not have any “No Burning for All” days this season, compared to one in 2020-21. The air district issued 92 notices of violation of the wood burning regulations, down from the 94 issued in Merced County the previous season.

While no formal residential wood burning restrictions are in place from March 1 through the end of October, the District urges the public to refrain from burning any solid fuel, even when permitted. The San Joaquin Valley Air Basin faces unique air quality challenges, continually seeking every feasible control measure to protect public health and meet strict federal air quality standards for particulate matter pollution 2.5 microns and smaller (PM 2.5).

Residents are encouraged to upgrade from an open-hearth fireplace or older wood stove, to a cleaner device by taking advantage of the District’s Burn Cleaner incentive program, which provides up to \$3,000 for cleaner devices such as, electric heat pumps, natural gas inserts, or certified wood burning devices (in certain areas). Visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner for program guidelines.

For more information on the Residential Wood Smoke Reduction Program, visit: www.valleyair.org/rule4901/ or call the District office in Modesto at 209-557-6400.

New Biden wildfire commission looking for prevention experts to shape federal policy

By Alex Roarty

The Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Mar. 10, 2022

WASHINGTON The federal government on Thursday will begin accepting applications for a newly created commission designed to shape the nation’s management of wildland fires. The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission is seeking potential members with expertise in wildland fire prevention, federal officials say, and hopes to assemble a diverse collection of people from rural, urban and suburban communities. Members will include representatives of tribal and state and local governments, especially those from areas like California that are at a high risk of wildfires.

The group is expected to recommend a set of national policies next year to manage wildland fires and rehabilitate affected areas, with the first meeting likely to be held in late spring of this year. It will deliver a report to Congress with its recommendations one year after the first meeting. The deadline for applications is March 25.

The commission was established last year by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, a roughly \$1 trillion measure that, in addition to creating the group, will spend \$8.25 billion attempting to reduce wildfire risk. The commission will operate under the Department of Agriculture, Department of the Interior and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Roughly 2.6 million acres of land in California were burned by wildfires last year, amid a severe prolonged drought that has made them a perennial problem for many Western states. President Joe Biden has promised that the federal government will become more involved in preventing and mitigating the effect of the fires, though climate change scientists warn they are likely to only increase in severity in the coming years amid rising temperatures globally.