

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Thursday, Dec. 20, 2012](#)

Our View: Fireplace rules part of a plan

Some local residents are fuming over a proposal to further restrict fireplace use in the San Joaquin Valley. They see it as another example of government infringing on their freedoms and as an economic hardship.

Here's what some of these fired-up opponents may not know:

- This is only the latest of many steps to reduce ozone and particulate pollution in the valley over the last two decades. The mandates have come in five overlapping phases.
- Valley air is significantly cleaner than it was -- the number of days where the valley's air contains more pollutants than levels set by the federal government has been reduced by 85 percent.
- Despite the improvements, the valley was hit with a \$29 million fine because we had too many violations of the federal ozone standard in 2010. Vehicle owners are now paying off that fine via a \$12 per year surcharge on their DMV registration.
- Valley farmers and businesses have shouldered nearly all of the regulations and expense of clean air improvements so far, with more than 500 new regulations imposed on them since 1992 at a cost of \$40 billion. The rules affect every manner of business, from service stations to dry cleaners to drive-through restaurants.

Consider, for instance, ag burning. Orchard prunings used to be disposed of through burning; now most are chipped. Approximately 80 percent of ag burning has been eliminated.

- The standards that the air district is trying to meet were not set by current politicians but are the result of the 1970 Clean Air Act and amendments adopted two decades later.

We think that understanding all these things puts a little different perspective on the fireplace restrictions, which are part of a larger plan that the air district board of directors is scheduled to vote on Thursday.

Approval of the plan will lead to another process of establishing timelines and other details to implement the plan. The changes in fireplace rules wouldn't be effective until the late fall and winter of 2016-17. These would be stricter than the current "Check Before You Burn" practices, which include daily updates, by county, on when it is OK to use a wood-burning fireplace or stove.

Air quality standards are confusing. Regional air quality districts -- of which ours is the largest in the state -- are required by the Environmental Protection Agency to produce plans detailing how the standards will be met. By the time the deadlines for the plans approach, the EPA issues a new set of standards and a new deadline for compliance. In short, the finish line moves just before a runner breaks the tape.

The new fireplace rules, which could double the number of no-burn days in Stanislaus County, from about 36 to 74, are essential to meet the more stringent air standards, according to Seyed Sadredin, the air district's executive director. There are other strategies in the plan as well, but none are getting as much attention as the plan to limit the use of wood-burning fireplaces.

What are our recommendations regarding fireplaces?

1. The air board should adopt the new plan, with a modification that eases the restrictions for those who have already converted to cleaner burning stoves, which emit only a small fraction of the particulate matter that open-hearth wood fires do.
2. Step up the education efforts to explain to valley residents how much has been accomplished and how much business, including agriculture, has already done. Individual residents have neither understood the success nor felt the pain to this point.
3. Beef up the promotion and incentives for people to convert their fireplaces to gas and to convert their wood-burning stoves or replace them with those that use pellets.
4. Make sure that people understand that these rules only apply to wood-burning fireplaces, not to those that burn natural gas. Most newer homes have gas fireplaces, which generally provide more ambience than heat.

5. Inform people about the risks associated with wood burning, both inside and outside their home. The tiny particulates can harm sensitive lungs, aggravate asthma and cause lung cancer. The accumulation of particulate matter is worse when there isn't wind in the valley -- think of fog, with toxins. Ozone pollution -- generated largely by fuel-burning vehicles and equipment -- is a warm-weather problem.

6. Let residents know that while this is a health issue, it also has a direct impact on their pocketbooks. Every valley resident who owns a vehicle is paying the DMV surcharge. The only good news out of this is that the money is being reinvested in the valley air district for incentives and other programs rather than going to the federal government.

DECISIONS

- Who: The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board, consisting of one elected supervisor from each of the eight counties (San Joaquin south to Kern); five elected council members selected by cities in the district; two public members appointed by the governor. Stanislaus Supervisor Bill O'Brien is the current board chairman; Ceres Mayor Chris Vierra is among the city representatives.

- What: The board's monthly meeting.

- When: Today, 9 a.m.

- Where: 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno. People also can attend the videoconference at the Modesto regional office, 4800 Enterprise Way, off Kiernan Avenue. The session also will be webcast. Go to <http://is.gd/iuIP3A> for the link.

For more information: The proposed plan that includes fireplace restrictions is available at <http://is.gd/bAc9iR>.