

Wood-burning fireplaces may be causing significant health problems for Central Valley residents

By Sara Jane Pohlman

Lodi News, Sat., Dec. 29, 2012

There aren't many scenes filled with more comfort or nostalgia than curling up on the sofa in front of a warm, crackling flame burning merrily away in a big brick fireplace, especially if the weather is stormy.

But that open wood-burning fire could be killing you.

So say the experts at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, who attest that tiny particles in wood smoke can enter the lungs and even the bloodstream and cause serious health risks.

The district is making a great effort to persuade Lodi residents and others in the Valley to switch to natural gas or propane fireplace inserts, offering hundreds of dollars in incentives to upgrade to a cleaner device.

And they mean it. No wood-burning fireplaces are permitted to be built in new homes. You'll have to buy an insert or wall off the fireplace before selling your own house.

"The feeling of a fire might not be exactly the same with an insert. But it's not worth what's going into the air," said Ana Reyes, a spokeswoman for the district.

Fireplaces have been fixtures in people's homes since the days of meat smoking over a flame in a cave. The firepits have grown from a cooking station in the center of the room to a gated nook along the wall, but are still a source of heat and comfort for many.

The troublemakers are tiny particles of gunk that come from burning wood, small enough to get into the lungs and the bloodstream. You cannot see them, but they can make breathing problems worse or even build up in your blood to cause a heart attack or stroke.

Homes burning wood in fireplaces are the single largest source of these harmful particles during the winter, said Reyes. Up to 17 tons of the stuff can enter the Valley skies each day.

There is a \$500 check waiting for residents who want to make the change. The Burn Cleaner program offers to help pay for a new, certified pellet or natural gas insert.

The district is so serious about converting residents to cleaner heating devices that wood-burning stoves and fireplaces must be dismantled or removed from all homes before they are sold to a new owner.

Residents who do keep their wood-burning fireplaces know they have to check with the district before lighting a match from Nov. 1 to Feb. 28. Wood burning is banned on days with high pollution levels because that gunk sits in the air like a stagnant puddle.

Those rules apply to pellet stoves, too, though they do burn more cleanly than wood.

"The rain helps, but wind is the biggest one. It takes a strong wind to drive pollution out of the Valley. We're in a bowl here," said Reyes. There were more than 25 no-burn days in 2012.

The first time you get caught, the fine is \$50. Burn on a no burn-day again, and the price tag increases.

That doesn't stop many residents, who still buy a cord of oak or cherry wood each season to burn in their fireplaces.

One local man considers himself a wood scavenger. Jim Fectau, 76, has gathered windblown or dead trees from the ranches of friends and neighbors and sold it as firewood for nine seasons.

"You find that the older generation still enjoys the fireplace. Not only the heat, but the ambiance it creates. That has a lot to do with it," he said.

Fectau and a group of friends take chainsaws out to the fields during winter and spring, then let the wood dry and season for at least six months before deliveries begin in September.

If fallen trees and branches aren't removed from ranches or farmland and used for firewood, they will be burned in the open fields, said Fectau.

"This is the easiest way out. (Ranchers) have got to get rid of the trees," he said. And people love the cozy atmosphere that comes from a glowing red log and jumping flames.

At Ben's Appliance on Cherokee Lane in Lodi, company president John Osburn presides over a host of fireplace inserts. Some ornate designs can run up to \$10,000 to install. Other, more modest models are in the \$2,200 range. No one has to carry firewood at the shop, though. All the inserts run on natural gas.

Osburn says there's no need to lament the loss of fireplace ambiance.

Today's faux log displays have come a long way from the painted cement logs paired with a lonely flame that were common in the mid-1990s.

Logs are now created using a blend of lightweight fiber and ceramic materials, and molded to look like natural logs. They even glow orange from the heat of the gas flame.

The flames have changed, too. They are spread out over a wider grate and designed to burn around the logs. The heat level is adjustable by dial or remote.

So the ambiance can perhaps be recreated. But what about the cost?

At the current price of gas, the insert can give off a strong heat for over three hours, or one cozy evening, for a dollar and a quarter.

"Or even less if you don't want the heat to cook you out of the room," said Osburn.

One cord of white oak for a fireplace costs about \$300 and produces 26.4 million BTUs, according to the California Energy Commission.

Pound for pound, it is slightly less expensive to burn even the highest quality firewood than to run the natural gas fireplace. But how much heat actually ends up in your home, instead of out the flue?

An open-hearth, wood-burning fireplace is about as efficient as a campfire, said Osburn.

"The heat goes straight up, not into the room. You only feel it when you're right on top of it," he said.

A gas-burning fireplace insert is more like having a furnace in your living room. A standard home furnace sits in the attic or on the roof and can lose a lot of heat blowing that warm air through the pipes to the vents in each room, said Osburn. The insert blows the heat directly into the room where its located, whether that's the family den or the master bedroom.

One thing the gas fireplace insert cannot recreate is the sound of a burning log. But if that soundtrack is what you're after, try the Yule log channel on cable.

Lawsuits shrink plans for Fresno's El Paseo development

By Kurtis Alexander, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Sunday, Dec. 29, 2012

Plans for a giant shopping and entertainment center off Highway 99 at Herndon Avenue, once hyped as northwest Fresno's answer to River Park, are headed for a downgrade.

Two lawsuits challenging the project, one from the managers of the River Park commercial plaza eight miles away, have prompted the developer to scale back the proposed Marketplace at El Paseo -- at least for the time being.

About half of the 238 acres initially slated for El Paseo's shops, hotels, offices and movie theater are now off the table, leaving in place only plans for the retail and restaurant portion of the project, where Target has been mentioned as a likely tenant.

Developer Chris Shane of Los Angeles-based Gryphon Capital declined to discuss the reasons behind the change. But he said he still is committed to building a premier shopping destination in Fresno, adding that El Paseo would be one of the region's biggest construction projects once it's off the ground next year.

The downsizing was affirmed this month by the city Planning Commission. The commission voted to reverse much of the zoning initially put in place for the project and rededicate the land mostly to housing. The City Council must sign off on the action before it becomes official.

The change was driven by a legal settlement between the city, the project developers and the parties suing over the project, which included River Park developer Ed Kashian's Kashian Group.

City officials said it was easier for the developer to make changes to the project rather than pursue a lengthy and costly court battle with opponents. Plus, city officials said, the developer still gets to build the 75-acre shopping complex that is at the heart of El Paseo.

"The project was such a long-term project to begin with, really only the first phase was anticipated," City Manager Mark Scott said.

The suits, both of which target the city for approving El Paseo two years ago, took issue with the impacts that the center would have, such as increasing traffic in the area.

Challenging such impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act is a common way of fighting development.

The Kashian Group declined to comment on its opposition. Kashian was out of the office last week and his associates did not wish to discuss the matter.

In the company's lawsuit filed in January 2011, traffic, air pollution and the destruction of farmland are cited as possible problems with the project that are not adequately assessed in the state-required environmental review.

"The project is also inconsistent with the city's smart growth principles," the suit reads.

The second lawsuit against the development was filed by Suzanne Lanfranco, who also could not be reached for comment.

City officials said a handful of changes to the way cars will be routed at El Paseo, such as removing traffic circles, were included in the settlement to address Lanfranco's concerns.

The retail portion of the project is slated to be built on vacant land south of Herndon Avenue along Golden State Boulevard.

Ground will be broken midway through next year, Shane said.

Target is the only tenant that Shane would disclose, though he said confidential lease negotiations were under way with several other retailers.

Shane did not rule out the possibility of expanding the project in future years, perhaps to its original size should there be demand for more growth and less resistance to the effort.

Such expansion, if the City Council accepts the Planning Commission's recent changes, would require the developer to return to the boards for zoning amendments.

Outgoing City Council Member Andreas Borgeas, who represents northwest Fresno, said El Paseo's downsizing gives the city more time to evaluate how it wants to grow along the Highway 99 corridor and to the largely undeveloped west.

"Expansion in this area and infill development is inevitable," Borgeas said. "We need to make sure we plan for the growth."

Honda model first to reach California's emissions standard

By Mark Glover

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Dec. 27, 2012

The California Air Resources Board has approved the first car for sale in California that meets ARB's most stringent smog-emission standard to date.

ARB said the 2014 Honda Plug-In Hybrid Accord produces only 20 milligrams of combined smog-forming emissions per mile, making it the first gasoline-powered car in California to meet what is known as the SULEV20 standard.

The new standard is one-third cleaner, in terms of smog-forming pollution, than the previous lowest state standard.

In addition, ARB said the Honda model has lower greenhouse gas emissions than the fleet average standard required by all cars in 2025 - the equivalent of a 50 percent reduction from current required levels.

"Honda has demonstrated that a dedicated commitment to the environment and advanced engineering at every level of the company can deliver the cleanest cars well ahead of schedule," said Tom Cackette, head of ARB's mobile source program.

Honda has a history of California firsts.

In 1995, its 1996 Civic was the first certified Low Emission Vehicle gasoline vehicle. In 1997, the 1998 Accord was the first ultra-low emission vehicle gasoline auto, and in 1999, the 2000 Accord was the first certified Super Ultra-low Emission Vehicle gas auto.