

Pollution program is offering incentives to give up firewood

By Christina Cornejo

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Charlene Wahl likes to wake up in the morning on cold rainy days and light a fire in her old fireplace. Wahl is retired, so she stays at home in Acampo and enjoys the warm of the fire at home during the day.

However, every year she is unable to light her fire more than a handful of times due to strict regulations on burning wood during the colder months, unless it is a resident's only source of heat.

"It got to the point where there were so many non-burn days, there were very few days when I could burn," she said.

So Wahl decided to switch over to a gas insert fireplace, since new regulations allow gas-powered fireplaces to stay lit even on non-burn days.

"I'm so looking forward to it. I don't have to haul wood into my house, and oak was getting to be \$300 a cord," she said.

Since mid-September, the San Joaquin County Valley Air Pollution Control District has been offering higher voucher incentives for people who replace their open-hearth fireplaces and older wood-burning stoves with gas-powered fireplaces.

"This change reflects our governing board's efforts to reduce pollution by getting people into purchasing clean-burning devices," said Heather Heinks, communications and outreach manager for the air district.

The Burn Cleaner Program has raised their \$500 voucher to \$1,500, with the opportunity to receive up to an additional \$500 to cover installation costs.

Low-income residents and owners of property with low-income residents can qualify to receive a \$2,500 voucher. People who already receive assistance from the government through programs such as Medi-Cal and CalWORKS qualify as low-income.

Residents may also provide their gross income to determine eligibility. A single family of four people must earn less than \$53,633 per year to qualify.

"It will cover quite a bit of the costs," Wahl said. "It's almost like they're paying me to replace my fireplace."

In order to qualify for the voucher, residents must first submit to the air district a form as well as photos of their current fireplace — inside and outside — and information about the retailer from which they intend to buy a new fireplace. The district will then mail back the voucher, which residents can take to a participating retailer.

The process is meant to ensure that residents qualify to receive the rebate.

It's a fairly simple process, according to Wahl, who recently submitted her paperwork.

The Burn Cleaner Program is only for residents who are replacing polluting fireplace systems, not for the installation of a new fireplace in a home that doesn't have one already.

According to Heinks, San Joaquin Valley has a pollution problem, and does not meet federal regulations for particulate matter in the air — the by-products of a wood-burning fire.

"We're definitely topping lists in the nation, but it's not because we are the most polluting. We have unique issues with topography, geography and meteorology," she said. "We've had a lack of rain during the drought and with those issues, it's difficult to disperse the pollution in the air. With stagnant air, yesterday's pollution is still there, and the density increases each day."

During the winter, one of the biggest polluters is the burning logs in residents' fireplaces or wood stove, she said.

John Osborn, owner of Ben's Appliance, said there are plenty of options for people looking update to a newer, cleaner-burning fireplace.

Many of the fireplaces and buck stoves he sells are high-efficiency models, according to EPA guidelines, he said. They filter the emissions released after burning.

Others still qualify under the voucher, even though they aren't gas-burning, Osborn said.

"High efficiency gas fireplace inserts is what they want you to get," Osborn said. "The whole idea is the EPA is out to clean up the air in the Central Valley area. It's a big deal. They're not just saying, 'Please clean up the air,' they're telling us, 'You need to.'"

With new incentives to switch to cleaner fireplaces, the air district hopes more people will get on board and help improve air quality in the valley.

Back in Acampo, Wahl awaits the installation of her gas insert before the weather gets chilly again.

"I haven't been this excited about a new remodel in a long time," she said.

For more information or for copies of the voucher forms, visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner.