

Valley air district gets \$255,400 to modernize wood-burning stoves

Modesto Bee and Fresno Bee, Friday, Oct. 9, 2015

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will receive \$255,400 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to get area residents to switch from old wood-burning stoves to energy-efficient ones.

EPA Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfield announced the funding during a Thursday news conference. The money was collected from Virginia-based trucking company Estes Express Lines as part of its payment for emissions violations in California.

Blumenfield said that 73 of Estes' diesel trucks, roughly 15 percent of its California fleet, were not equipped with special air filters that help to limit the environmental impact of burning diesel fuel. These requirements have been in place for truck and bus companies since 2010.

In all, Estes' paid \$290,400 in penalties. The bulk of that will go to the Valley air district. However, \$100,000 will also go to the U.S. Treasury and \$35,000 will go to fund additional environmental education for truck and bus companies at the University of California at Davis.

"About 20 percent of the 2.5 millimeter-particulate matter pollution in California is from trains and trucks," Blumenfield said. "The filter laws allow us to move these very stubborn numbers in the right direction."

Not everyone agrees with the new rules.

Tony Mendes is the director of Southwest Transportation Agency, which contracts buses out to school districts throughout Fresno and Kings counties. He said that government paid for him to retrofit his fleet with new filters, but they plug up easily and cause mechanical problems in older vehicles.

"If you ruin one of these (filters), it costs a fortune to fix it," he said. "And I could hire a mechanic for four hours a day just to fix problems with these filters. They break that often."

The filters cost between \$17,000 and \$20,000 each, Mendes said.

The EPA maintains they are necessary, and it hopes to use the fines to help areas of need – particularly Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley.

"The new filter laws will prevent an estimated 3,500 premature deaths between 2010 and 2025 if done correctly," Blumenfield said.

Blumenfield said the EPA decided to give the Valley district the lion's share of the funding because the district's "Burn Cleaner" stove reimbursement program has seen some strong returns in terms of pollution reduction.

"It gives us the most bang for our buck," he said.

Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the district, said she was grateful for the EPA's recognition of the Valley's air-quality challenges, which are "unmatched in the nation."

"The winter brings more 2.5 mm-particulate matter pollution to our area," she said. "The majority of this comes from residential wood-burning stoves, fire pits and fireplaces."

Holt said the "Burn Cleaner" program, which offers rebates for changing to newer, EPA-certified gas or wood-burning heat sources, has been around for about a decade. This program, coupled with the district's three-tiered wood-burning advisory system, cuts particulate matter pollution by 5.1 tons each day.

"That lovely wood smoke smell during the winter time is actually really unhealthy," she said. "You are breathing in particulates."

Holt added that the effects of cleaner-burning stoves are two-fold: It improves air quality in the immediate area, as well as helping to reduce the Valley's overall pollution.

Low-income households using older wood stoves or fireplaces are eligible for \$2,500 rebates for newer heat sources. They can also secure an additional \$500 in rebates if they switch to a gas-burning heat source.

This is almost enough to cover the entire cost of the change, Holt said. The newer devices burn four or five times cleaner than older ones.

Those not in low-income households are eligible for \$1,000 rebates, plus the \$500 gas-burning incentive. A list of retailers participating in the “Burn Cleaner” program can be found on the district’s website.