

Air quality: More rain, less smoke Fewer burn bans thanks to cleaner 2015-16 winter

By Alex Breitler

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The return of the rains this winter — at least, for a while — improved air quality and significantly reduced the number of residential wood-burning bans up and down the San Joaquin Valley, officials said Monday.

In fact, conditions improved enough that residents who have ditched their old polluting wood fireplaces or stoves in favor of cleaner units were allowed to burn every day this winter, from Stockton to Bakersfield.

And that hasn't happened in a long time.

Those who haven't upgraded still saw a relatively high number of burn bans — 36 days this winter in San Joaquin County, compared to the winter before when burning was prohibited a record 58 times, or essentially every other day.

But this year was better, as storms in December and January helped to wash pollution out of the Valley. In addition, more people appear to be heeding the burn restrictions, and that helps slash pollution in the first place, said Anthony Presto, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"We see more people cooperating with the rules, and that's always going to result in cleaner air," Presto said Monday. "That's definitely going to make a difference."

Burn bans in San Joaquin County were rare until 2008, when the air district lowered the pollution threshold required to declare a no-burn day.

The district lowered the threshold again in 2014-15, resulting in a record number of burn bans. But at the same time, officials began offering millions of dollars in incentives for those willing to upgrade to cleaner-burning units, and decided that those residents should be allowed to burn on all but the dirtiest of days.

As a result, those who upgraded were able to burn every day this winter, if they wanted.

As of last fall, residents in San Joaquin County alone had snatched up \$1.3 million in incentives to switch to gas fireplaces, more than any other county in the Valley. And the incentives are still available, even though wintertime temperatures seem a distant memory.

"No matter what time of the year it is, it's a good time for people to make this change," Presto said. "When you're in the middle of wood burning season, that's when there are delays. If you take the time to do it during the offseason you're probably going to have less of a wait to get the work done."

For details, visit valleyair.org/grants/burncleaner.htm.

Burn program ends with fewer curtailments, cleaner air

By Sabra Stafford

Turlock Journal, Tues. March 1, 2016

Tuesday marked the end of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's 13th season of the Check Before You Burn program, with fewer burning prohibitions issued and cleaner air results.

The Check Before You Burn program aims to minimize the amount of harmful particulate matter that is released into the Valley air basin by restricting when residential wood-burning devices can be used. From November to February the air district releases a declaration each day on whether or not wood-burning devices, such as fireplaces, can be used. The declaration is based on the air quality index for the day and whether or not the particulate matter from wood-burning devices would push it into a zone that is above federal and health guidelines.

Last winter, the regulation was amended to allow users of EPA Phase II-certified clean wood-burning devices to register them with the Air District and use them more frequently than they were allowed in past winters.

“We are moving in the right direction thanks to the cooperation of Valley residents and their investments in cleaner devices,” said Seyed Sadredin, the Air District’s executive director and air pollution control officer. “Together with the increased funding for the Burn Cleaner program, which grants money for the purchase of cleaner devices, Check Before You Burn has had a very positive effect on winter air quality in the Valley.”

For Stanislaus County, the Air District issued 50 “no burning unless registered” declarations this season, compared to 69 the previous winter. The entire district issued 364 “no burn unless registered” declarations for this season, which is down from the 542 issued last winter.

The Air District did not issue any “no burning for all” curtailments in the entire region that prohibits both registered and non-registered devices from burning. Last season they had one curtailment issued for Stanislaus County and 36 for the entire district.

The Air District also reported that there were fewer days this season in which the fine-particle level exceeded the federal health standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter.

The number of violations issued in Stanislaus County dropped by one this year. This winter the Air District issued 109 violations, compared to 110 last winter. The Air District issued 404 violations this season, down from 551 last season. A first time offense nets a fine of \$100, but the fine can be cut in half if the resident completes the district’s air pollution exam. A second offense costs \$300; additional fines can run up to \$600 to \$1,000.

Valley residents wanting to switch out older wood-burning devices for a cleaner model can still take advantage of the District’s Burn Cleaner grants which provide \$1,000 for certified wood, pellet inserts, freestanding stoves or natural gas inserts or \$2,500 for eligible low-income applicants for all devices. An additional \$500 is available to all applicants for the installation costs on a natural gas device. Visit www.valleyair.org/burncleaner for program guidelines.

Those needing to register their clean-burning devices can do so at www.valleyair.org/CBYBregistration.