

Air District Citations for Fireplace Use, Other Burn Violations Nearly Double

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If you don't know it already, it's illegal to burn firewood in your fireplace or on the patio in a fire pit when the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has declared a no-burn day.

But judging from the quality of air recently, some people either are unaware or just don't care that the Fresno area is in a nearly nonstop run of no-burn days under the air district's "Check Before You Burn" program, which goes from November through February.

Compared to last year, the air district has issued almost twice as many tickets this year for burn violations — 149, including 36 in Fresno County — as were issued last year at this time, air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt told GV WireSM.

And all this new smoke is coming on the heels of one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent memory, with frequent "Level 5" alerts that warned everybody, no matter their age or health, to remain indoors as much as possible.

The tiny pieces of soot and ash, also known as particulate matter, are dangerous to everyone, but particularly to the very young and old and those who already suffer from health issues.

Low-Pressure System Needed

The mild weather we've been enjoying for the past month or so is keeping air stagnant over the region, and so there have only been two days in Fresno County where burning was allowed, compared to seven days a year ago, Holt said.

Other than pinning our hopes on the arrival of a low-pressure system that will help sweep out the dirty air, residents need to be mindful and check the air district's website or smartphone app for whether burning is allowed for anyone at all or for registered wood-burning devices only. Those types of devices include EPA-certified wood burning fireplace inserts and freestanding pellet stoves.

Holt says she hears from residents complaining when they see smoke even from registered devices, though they have been configured to emit very little compared to fireplaces and backyard fire pits. But with only 604 such devices in Fresno County, with more than 1 million people, their already-limited smoke impact is miniscule, she said.

Back in 2004, Holt said, when the Check Before You Burn program was in its infancy, the complaints came mostly from irate citizens who were "passionate" about what they said was the trampling of their right to use their fireplace when they wanted. But back then, air pollution readings were constantly in the unhealthy range, she said.

These days, "more often it's people saying, 'hey, the folks in my neighborhood are burning when they shouldn't be, give them a ticket,'" Holt said.

All Complaints Investigated

Each complaint, which can be made on the air district's website or the Valley air app, is investigated by employees who go out with specialized equipment that can distinguish between the heat signatures of a wood fire and a gas firelog, she said.

After documenting the violation, the air district issues a \$100 ticket for the first offense. Residents who attend "smoke school" (kind of like driving school for a traffic ticket) only pay \$50.

"Our goal is really to educate," Holt said.

Residents who don't get the message the first time may receive subsequent tickets that can cost thousands of dollars and land residents in small-claims court.

When the air district runs out of complaints to investigate, staffers troll through neighborhoods on the hunt for no-burn violators. Even newer neighborhoods, where homes were constructed without wood-burning fireplaces, are monitored in case residents are firing up their backyard chiminea, Holt said.

And even though a cozy fire might seem like a balm to our troubled times, wood smoke has been shown in a Harvard study to aggravate COVID-19 symptoms, she said.

Maybe you're not infected, but your neighbor might be.