

Didn't Check Before You Burned? You Could End Up In This Class

By Kerry Klein

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If you've ever gotten a speeding ticket, you may have been required to attend traffic school. Likewise, cause a scene at work, you may have to take anger management classes. But what if you violate burning restrictions? The local air district runs a different kind of class intended to spark good behavior.

On damp, chilly nights Patrick Smith has a tradition: He builds a fire in his fireplace. Smith lives in northwest Fresno. A gas-powered furnace heats his home, but Smith still thinks of a fire as a gathering place for his family.

On the evening we speak, it's about 50 degrees in Fresno, and kindling, pokers and logs sit expectantly next to Smith's fireplace. But there'll be no fire: Today's a no-burn day. Smith knows this because he checks the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's website to know when the air is clean enough for wood burning.

One day last winter, though, he didn't check. It was raining and he assumed it was safe to burn. It wasn't.

"It was in fact a no-burn day," he says, "and I'm thinking somebody must've objected to that, recognized that, and called in a complaint."

The air district busted him. They sent him a letter with a choice: He could pay a \$100 fine, or pay \$50 and attend a class. So he took the discount—and last week attended fireplace school.

Fireplace Compliance School, as it's formally called, is a remedial class offered at the Valley air district's Fresno headquarters. It takes place in a conference room with big cushy chairs and wide flat screen displays. Attendees in from Modesto and Bakersfield connect via videoconference.

The class is an opportunity for officials to hammer home their residential burning rule: From November through February, wood burning fireplaces and fire pits can be used only on clear days with decent air quality.

The presentation serves air pollution 101. Instructors begin with a brief history of pollution regulation and touch upon pollution sources, atmospheric chemistry and health impacts. One focal point is a weather pattern called temperature inversions. In the wintertime, the air near the ground can actually be colder than the atmosphere above it, resulting in a dense lower layer that traps pollution near the ground.

Fireplace smoke is not the Valley's only source of air pollution. But it's significant: The air district estimates that it makes up about 13 percent of all wintertime particle pollution. Instructor Clay Bishop says cutting back wood burning is one way residents can directly impact the air. Plus, for most people, not burning is easy—and it doesn't cost anything.

"And it's quite impactful on air pollution," Bishop adds. "So we always look at it as a rule that's a fairly cheap rule, people don't have to spend much money to be in compliance."

But it's not easy for everyone. Some Valley residents may have no other heat source. Others have broken furnaces and can't afford new ones. For them, the air district will waive their fine, and point them toward grants to help them upgrade to cleaner burning devices. But for those like Patrick Smith who burn for pleasure, Bishop says the air district is much more strict.

"It's a really impactful rule for your neighborhood, if you want to look at it that way," Bishop says. "It's one of these things where you're making a decision on an activity that could impact your neighbor's health."

The restrictions themselves appear to be working. According to the air district, wintertime pollution levels have dropped significantly since the rule was enacted in the 90s. Why, then, go to the trouble of offering a class? Compliance officer Michael Carrera says the purpose is to get the word out. And for that, he says it's working.

"Over the years, it's not that we've seen significant reductions in the number of penalties that we've had, but we don't have a lot of repeat offenders," Carrera says.

Patrick Smith does not want to be one of those repeat offenders. He says he intends to be far more careful and check burn status more often.

“Oh yeah, I don’t want to have this happen again,” he says.

Besides, repeat violations get pretty pricey—and there’s no discount for those.