

Here's why violations for fires on no-burn days skyrocketed this winter

By Garth Stapley

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Holy smokes.

People caught burning fires on days you're not supposed to in Stanislaus County more than doubled this winter, over last. The sharp increase was even more dramatic in our neighboring counties, San Joaquin and Merced.

The reason has nothing to do with a sudden change in air quality or increase in smoke from wildfires. It has everything to do with the enemy we've blamed for most of our problems lately: COVID-19.

More people staying home means more fires in fireplaces, including the kind that are outlawed when air quality isn't great. And more people at home means more eyes spotting those illegal fires, and reporting them.

The total number of no-burn days in the controlled period from the beginning of November through the end of February barely bumped up from last year to the one that ended Monday — an increase of 0.4% for the eight-county San Joaquin Valley.

In the same time frame, Stanislaus burning violations more than doubled from 75 to 197. They more than tripled in San Joaquin (61 violations to 186) and Merced (32 to 102) counties.

If a breathing condition afflicts you or a loved one, you're probably grateful that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has among the strictest air rules in the nation. The district's success over the years in cleaning up the soupy smog that used to foul our skies and compound dreaded tule fog has been truly remarkable.

Others chafe at the loss of freedom to light a fire whenever they want, creating unparalleled ambiance and primordial warmth. They would rather do without these air rules, which get more strict all the time.

AG BURNING BAN COMING SOON

They include a phase out of ag burning — farmers lighting big piles of branches, clippings and other biomass — by 2025, a decision adopted just last week. Previous legislation called for that step by 2010, so farmers really can't complain that they didn't see it coming. Also, it's a good move for our children who suffer respiratory problems at a rate twice the national average.

The "check before you burn" rule became our reality in 2004, requiring people to call 800-766-4463 or check the Valley Air app every day from Nov. 1 through Feb. 28 to see if it's OK to light up. Because I'm at a computer much of the time, getting on an email distribution list for daily alerts is convenient for me.

Thousands of people have invested in clean-burning devices like stoves which they register with the air district, allowing them to burn more frequently than those with ordinary fireplaces.

Of course, whenever government makes a rule, some people cheat. Get caught and you either pay a \$100 fine or \$50 combined with attending Smoke School, like traffic school for a speeding ticket. Repeat offenders can be fined much more.

Air district workers sometimes catch untimely fire lovers in the act. But they also depend on thousands of people each year ratting out their neighbors — an apparently solid approach when fewer people venture out. Like during a pandemic.