

Valley's stricter wood-burning rules start on stormy weekend

By Mark Grossi

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District executive director Seyed Sadredin discusses the health risks of wood-burning. THE FRESNO BEE

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A dark and stormy weekend may ease any pain from San Joaquin Valley's wood-burning rule — the toughest in California and maybe the whole country.



With a storm in the forecast, the air could be scrubbed clean enough so anyone can legally burn wood in open fireplaces as the rule enforcement season begins on Saturday. But unless you own the latest federally certified heater and register it with the local air district, you may not get a lot more opportunities.



The new rules are expected to shut down most wood burning in fireplaces, older stoves and inserts from Nov. 1 to Feb. 28. The fireplaces and older heaters create more than 90% of the Valley's soot pollution.

Inspectors from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will be cruising neighborhoods, answering complaint calls from neighbors and writing citations. Thanksgiving and Christmas wood fires in open fireplaces probably will be forbidden, unless there's a storm to clear the air.

As one of the dirtiest air basins in the country, the Valley needs dramatic cutbacks in fireplace soot, which is among the most dangerous air pollutants. On the worst winter days, soot is about a third of the particle pollution hanging in the air over neighborhoods.

For the last 11 winters, air authorities have slowly tightened down wood-burning regulations, removing tons of soot from the air. But without the new rule, the Valley has no hope of achieving new federal health standards for particle pollution, known as PM-2.5, authorities say.

The new rule caught flak this year from environmental activists who don't think it is tough enough. On the other side are critics who say it's far too tough on folks who want a wood fire in their fireplace.

Richard Bohannon, 52, of Sanger, realizes the smoke can trigger asthma and heart problems, but he can't afford utility bills.

"I burn wood to keep my house warm," he says. "My wife and I are shopping for one of those new fireplace inserts. But like most working people, we don't have \$2,500 to \$3,000 to buy it up front, and then get some grant money from the air district to help pay for it."

The air district is handing out more than \$2 million to help people buy the new heaters. Homeowners can get up to \$1,500 for the certified inserts, which can cost up to \$5,000 or more. Applicants who qualify as low income can get up to \$2,500.

Another \$500 is available for those who are converting to natural gas, which is exempt from all the burning restrictions because it burns so cleanly.

Other exemptions are allowed for people who have no access to natural gas and for those who have no other means

of heating.

Why allow new wood-burning heaters and not fireplaces and older heaters? The district says the newer devices burn 20 to 50 times cleaner.

“Even if all the new heaters were being used at once, we would still reduce PM-2.5,” said district executive director Seyed Sadredin.

The district has received about 750 applications for funding to help buy new heaters, according to spokeswoman Jaime Holt. She added that 263 devices have been registered with the district, but she expects that number to climb as no-burn days are announced.

As the soot is reduced in urban neighborhoods, dozens of lives will be saved this winter, Sadredin said.

Health researchers say wood smoke contains dangerous, microscopic debris that can pass through the lungs into the blood system. They are called PM-2.5 specks — 30 to 40 would fit across the width of a human hair. The specks can enter the home through cracks, so staying indoors often does not adequately protect people, researchers say.

Of the 800 premature Valley deaths blamed on air pollution each year, the majority are linked to soot, chemicals, droplets of moisture and other debris.

Environmental activists are concerned about the district allowing burning with the new devices when air pollution is well above the current health standard. But district leaders say the crackdown on fireplaces and old heaters will make a big difference.

Fines for violators will start at \$50, but people can avoid the fine by taking an air quality class. The fine is \$300 on the second. The fine can climb as high as \$1,000 for subsequent penalties, depending on the case.

Bohannon in Sanger says he needs to keep his home comfortably warm in the winter. He is caring for his 88-year-old mother-in-law and her twin sister. Each time the rules get tougher, his budget suffers a little more.

He says others in his situation will suffer, too: “I think a lot of people are going to be burning no matter what the district says.”

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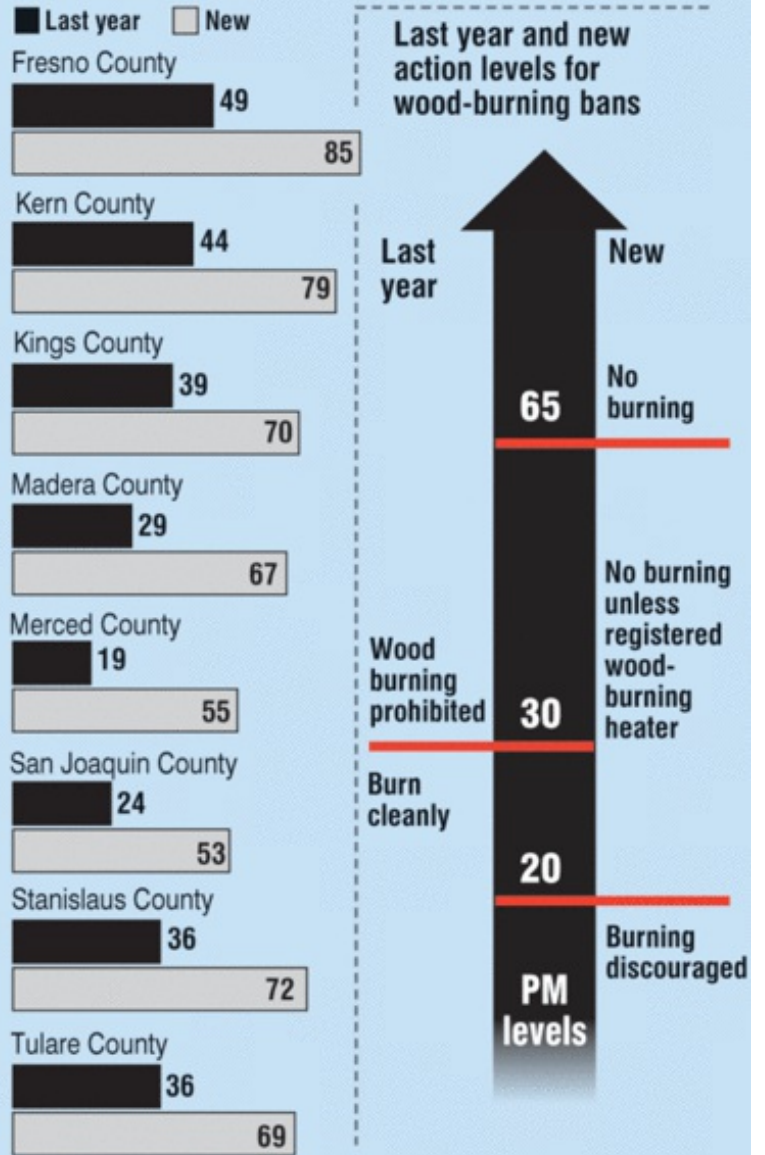
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Doubling no-burn days

The Valley air district's new wood-burning rules take effect Saturday, lowering the threshold for ordering a no-burn day from a concentration of 30 micrograms per cubic meter of air to 20 micrograms. No-burn days will increase throughout the Valley.



Source: San Joaquin Valley Air Control District

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