

# Valley winter wood-burning ban starts again Sunday

By Andrea Castillo [acastillo@fresnobee.com](mailto:acastillo@fresnobee.com)

For the second winter, most San Joaquin Valley residents wanting to use their fireplaces and wood-burning stoves have two options: invest in clean-burning devices or keep them turned off.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District [issued new rules on wood burning](#) last year. And once again, the district invested millions of dollars in clean-burning wood stoves and inserts, which filter out dangerous particles.

The burn ban starts Sunday and continues through the end of February.

During winter months, 30 percent of dangerous particle pollution comes from wood fires in city neighborhoods. Particle pollution, known as PM 2.5, is responsible for hundreds of premature Valley deaths and can lead to a host of other significant health issues, including pulmonary heart disease and cancer. Soot is one of the biggest problems because it is concentrated where people live.

Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield ranked the top three dirtiest cities in the country for particle pollution in last year's "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association.

"Wood smoke is one of the most dangerous pollutants that you can expose yourself, your children and your neighbors to," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's executive director.

Residents are restricted from lighting wood fires when local particle pollution is higher than 20 micrograms per cubic meter of air. That's stricter than the previous threshold of 30 micrograms. But those using the cleanest-burning devices registered with the district are allowed to burn wood until pollution gets above the 65-microgram level.

People using open fireplaces and old burning devices are barred from lighting them for most of the season. Those with the clean-burning devices were stopped only six times last winter.

There are two exceptions to the restrictions. Burning is allowed freely for those with no other source of heat or no access to natural gas service. But air district officials will consider regulating those situations as they come up with a new plan next year to comply with ever-tightening federal standards.

The Valley exceeded the [daylong federal particle standard](#) of 35 micrograms on 45 days last year, nearly a 37 percent drop from the previous year but still more than the South Coast Air Basin, which had 25 bad days.

In last year's "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association, Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield ranked in order as the three dirtiest cities in the country for particle pollution. That includes soot, dust, chemicals and microscopic debris, which come from fireplaces, vehicles, farming and industrial processes.

The district is using \$7 million in grant funds to help residents buy certified fireplace inserts and stoves, as well as convert to natural gas-fired fireplaces. The inserts incinerate more of the particles so they produce less smoke. [Grants are \\$1,000 or \\$2,500](#) for low-income applicants, plus \$500 for anyone toward installation costs on a natural gas device.

Only about 3,000 devices were registered last year, which covers a little more than 1 percent of the Valley's households with fireplaces. Air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt said just 400 devices are registered so far this year. She said that's because of the unseasonably high temperatures this month.

"We really don't start to see people get interested in the program until they need to use those devices," she said.

Holt said the new rules were created to save 5.1 tons of particle pollution per day. She said there has been a drop in pollution, but it will take a couple more years to realize the full impact of the rules.

Plus, a [lung association analysis](#) released in April revealed the drought is making the Valley's already unhealthy air worse.

"Emissions are down but because of the drought, the actual air quality has not seen those same improvements," Holt said.

Anyone caught breaking the rules can get a notice of violation. The violations can result in fines that start at \$100 for the first offense – which can be reduced to \$50 if the offender attends a class on the importance of following wood-burning rules – and increase to as much \$1,000 for subsequent penalties. Violation notices dropped 14 percent last year from 537 in 2013.

Andrea Castillo: [559-441-6279](tel:559-441-6279), [@andreamcastillo](https://twitter.com/andreamcastillo)

More information

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issues a daily wood-burning status by county. Residents can sign up for daily email status notifications at [www.valleyair.org/CBYB](http://www.valleyair.org/CBYB). Updates are also available by telephone at 800-SMOG INFO (766-4463) or on the free iPhone app called Valley Air.