

Q & A Wood Stoves and Fireplaces

Q: Why is the District trying to ban wood burning?

A: The District is NOT banning wood burning. The District is trying to reduce smoke from wood stoves and fireplaces (fine particulate matter - PM2.5) on poor air quality days because of our continued violations of the federal PM2.5 health based standards.

Q: Is there a rule requiring NO BURN DAYS for using your wood stove or fireplace?

A: Not at this time. The District Governing Board has approved a voluntary “Check Before You Light” program whenever meteorological conditions are forecast to cause poor air quality. Based on the forecasts, the District issues a health advisory for the following day requesting residents not to use their wood stove or fireplace.

Q: Why can I see agricultural burning on days when you ask residents not to use their wood stove or fireplaces?

A: Agricultural burn day determinations are made the same day based on **actual** air quality and meteorological conditions county-wide. If conditions are good, burning is allowed. Agricultural burning occurs during the daylight hours when dispersion is much better than it would be during the cold stagnant nighttime when wood stoves and fireplaces are active.

Q: Is the voluntary “Check Before You Light” health advisory issued for the whole county?

A: No. The program was structured so that advisories could be issued separately for Chico, Gridley and Paradise. Residential wood burning is a localized problem in the Chico area, so “Check Before You Light” advisories were issued for the Chico area only during the 2008-2009 season.

Q: Why is Agricultural Burning allowed?

A: State law currently allows the burning of agricultural waste for removing crop residues, weeds, preventing disease and controlling pests. Before a grower may conduct any agricultural burning they must obtain a District burn permit and receive authorization each day they want to burn.

Q: How significant is smoke from woodstoves in Paradise, and does it affect the Chico area?

A: Woodstove smoke in Paradise can be significant, as is all smoke, however, the problem with Chico is that it is often an area that suffers from inversion layers in the winter, where the air stagnates, no breezes or winds occur, much like when Tule fog develops, and the air pollutants concentrate near the valley floor. Paradise sits right at or just above where the inversion level occurs, thus the concentrations do not have as much of an impact on the town as they do down on the valley floor.

Q: Why not have a mandatory curtailment regulation county-wide?

A: The Chico Urban Area has over 100,000 in population, making it the largest concentration of people, residences, and vehicular traffic in all of Butte County.

Many older homes in Chico still have traditional masonry fireplaces, or older inserts. The exceedances recorded on Butte County monitoring equipment show that Chico has a greater problem with wintertime particulate matter than the Gridley and Paradise areas.

Q: How significant is transport from urban areas to the south?

A: Transport is not significant in the winter months. While there are occasions where pollutants may be transported from areas outside of our air district, the nature of transport winds is such that they are at a higher altitude level than the valley floor and may adversely impact the foothill communities in Butte County, as we sometimes see during the summer months when high ozone levels can be a problem. Fine particulates may be transported from out of our area during significant events such as wildfires, but in turn, other areas are often the recipients of Butte County's polluted air as well.

Q: Diesel exhaust must be causing this problem.

A: Diesel exhaust is a significant air pollutant, but is not responsible for our wintertime particulate exceedances. The monitoring equipment and testing process is sophisticated enough to isolate different sources of particulates, and we can determine that the typical wintertime PM2.5 source is from wood combustion, and with the hourly data available, we can also conclude that the 5 pm to 8 am hours are when most people who burn wood in their homes would have active fires going.

Q: How come I am just hearing about this problem now?

A: The District's initial woodburning regulation was adopted in 2001. The District has been working in a concerted effort for over a year and a half to bring this problem to the attention of Butte County residents. Staff have held many workshops, media interviews, and devoted many hours of staff time interacting with the public to try and educate people about the dangers of wood smoke. We have been developing and improving our relationships with local media and interested groups in order to bring the message to everyone. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a while to cultivate these relationships and get everyone on board, and to also get the correct message out. At the request of public citizen input, we increased our public outreach efforts, and are beginning to receive positive feedback. We are also quite open to comments and additional suggestions, anything to improve communication with the people who breathe the air of our county.

Q: Why isn't the nonattainment status determined from more monitors?

A: There are three monitors that record PM2.5 data in Butte County. They are located in Chico, Gridley, and Paradise (new in 2008), and the locations passed the criteria required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and California Air Resources Board for placement. Monitoring equipment is very expensive, we are fortunate to have a means to track the level of pollution in our community. According to EPA criteria one monitoring location can be used to designate an entire area nonattainment.