

Homes & Real Estate

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EcoConsumer | Enjoy your wood-fueled fire, but make sure neighbors don't get burned

The conflicting interests of those who burn wood for heat and those concerned about wood smoke have clashed for decades. But today, we're seeing real progress.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

As we reluctantly become acclimated to the onset of the nine-month Seattle winter, we often notice a powerful, pungent odor outside. What's that smell? Most likely, someone is burning wet or unseasoned wood, or using an inefficient wood stove or fireplace.

We might just ignore it. But if you have asthma or other sensitivities to pollutants in the air, wood smoke has health consequences.

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Efforts to protect the public from wood-smoke pollution have increased in the Puget Sound area; at the same time, there are more stoves and other products on the market that burn wood cleanly for heat.

The number of wood-smoke complaints received by the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency (PSCAA) has risen significantly in recent years, says Amy Warren, project manager for the agency's Wood Smoke Reduction Program.

Because air quality is a regional issue, the PSCAA was established in 1967 to serve King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap counties. The agency received 189 wood-smoke complaints in those counties in 2010, followed by 289 in 2011 and 316 in 2012. As of Oct. 3, there have been 409 complaints this year.

Air-quality complaints can be submitted online at pscleanair.org or by calling 800-552-3565. The PSCAA accepts anonymous complaints, but can only take enforcement action if a complainant gives his or her name. If you live outside the PSCAA's area, contact your regional clean-air agency or the state Department of Ecology with complaints or for air-quality information.

Residents have good reasons to be concerned about wood smoke, in Warren's view.

"We continue to see medical studies that further link fine-particle pollution, including that from wood burning, to health effects," she says. These health effects include respiratory disease, decreased heart and lung function, asthma attacks, heart attacks, strokes and cancer.

You don't need to shy away from wood heat, however. Burning wood for fuel can save money and provide a cozy home atmosphere, but you must burn cleanly. The most important air-quality steps you can take are to use an efficient, clean-burning stove and obey burn bans.

The PSCAA's burn bans restrict the use of wood stoves and fireplaces during stagnant weather. For details or to sign up for burn-ban alerts, visit pscleanair.org.

It is illegal to install a wood stove or fireplace insert in Washington unless it is certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and meets the state's emissions standards for solid fuel-burning devices, including wood and pellet stoves.

If an older unit doesn't meet those standards, replace it as soon as possible. It should not be used again, so recycle it as scrap metal.

Washington state requires that non-catalytic wood and pellet devices produce 4.5 grams per hour or less of particulate emissions, and catalytic devices 2.5 gph or less.

When buying a new unit, consider those that emit less than 2 gph, and also aim for maximum efficiency. As Warren points out, the more efficient the stove, the less wood you need to cut or buy. Until Dec. 31, you can qualify for a \$300 federal tax credit by purchasing an efficient wood or pellet stove. Check with your retailer for more information.

Be obsessive about using dry, well-seasoned firewood. The PSCAA and other state clean-air agencies offer practical resources at burndryfirewood.org, including instructions for building a basic woodshed. They recommend keeping firewood split, stacked and protected from rain for at least 12 months before burning. Buy wood only from a trusted source.

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