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Home Wood Heating season began November 1, residents asked to follow advisories

Lane County's mandatory home wood heating season officially started on November 1 and residents are being encouraged to follow the daily advisories issued by Lane Regional Air Protection Agency (LRAPA). "Our air quality tends to deteriorate in the winter months when we have air inversions and stagnant weather patterns - those times without much wind or rain," said Sally Markos, LRAPA spokesperson. "Smoke from wood stoves and fireplaces quickly builds up in the valley, especially when fires are allowed to smolder, or when wood stoves are damped down." According to LRAPA's emission inventory, residential home wood heating smoke is the major source of all particulates emitted in Lane County, especially on cold winter days.

In 2006, the federal standard for fine particulates, a major component of wood smoke, was tightened to be more protective of public health. Advisories are now called at lower concentrations of fine particulates and the community will likely see more yellow and possibly red days compared to previous years. "Following the advisories is very important to protect public health," said Markos. "If residents can use another source of heat rather than wood during days when a yellow advisory is called, we may be able to avoid red days and violations of the federal clean air standard."

Fine particulates are smaller than the diameter of a human hair and, when inhaled, lodge deep in the lungs and are not expelled. Wood heating smoke also contains hazardous chemical compounds. Health-based studies demonstrate that wood smoke can severely impact individuals, especially those with heart or lung problems, allergies, and asthma. Older adults, pregnant women, and children are most vulnerable.

The home wood heating season is in affect from November 1 through the end of February within the Eugene/Springfield Urban Growth Boundary including both cities, and the City of Oakridge. The program is in place to help keep air pollution from wood stoves and fireplaces to a minimum. Both the Eugene/Springfield area and Oakridge have wintertime air quality problems related to wood burning. Last season, Oakridge experienced ten red advisory days. Oakridge has also been officially declared a non-attainment area for fine particulate because of winter time pollution from wood smoke. As a federal nonattainment area, Oakridge must develop a 5-year implementation plan to outline strategies and steps to bring the area into attainment. The advisories are crucial element in a successful implementation plan.

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How the home wood heating advisory program works

During the four-month season, LRAPA issues daily advisories to inform residents if burning in their wood stoves and fireplaces is allowed. A simple “green, yellow, red” system informs residents of the daily advisory. A “green” advisory is called when air quality is good and burning is allowed; a “yellow” advisory is called when air quality is deteriorating and burning is cautioned against; and a “red” advisory is called when air quality is approaching unhealthy levels for sensitive groups. During a red advisory, no visible chimney smoke is allowed. Burning on a red day can result in a fine of up to \$500. Residents in Eugene/Springfield can expect to see LRAPA staff present in the community on red advisory days when visible emissions are not allowed. In Oakridge, City police handle enforcement and this year will be issuing tickets to repeat violators.

Daily burning advisories are provided to the public through a number of outlets, including the LRAPA Home Wood Heating Advisory Line at 746-HEAT (746-4328), the agency’s web site at www.lrapa.org, local radio and television stations, and the Register Guard newspaper’s weather page.

Burning clean is key to minimizing smoke emissions

“To help minimize smoke we ask people to burn only clean, dry firewood. Burning wet wood provides little heat while producing a lot of excess smoke,” Markos said. If people use manufactured firelogs, LRAPA encourages the use of products that use cleaner, less odorous binders, such as the “All Natural Firelog” by Duraflame, which contains no petroleum products and emits very little smoke. LRAPA also reminds residents to build small hot fires and NOT “damp down” their stoves, which cuts off oxygen to the fire causing incomplete combustion and excess smoke with toxic emissions.

Residents are reminded that using a wood stove or fireplace to burn trash is illegal. Burning waste paper, plastic and other trash in wood stoves or fireplaces causes excessive smoke and harmful pollution and can result in a \$500 fine. The cities of Eugene, Springfield, and Oakridge have ordinances that restrict the amount of smoke allowed at any time, including green advisory days.

Program exemptions are available for residents who meet low-income energy assistance guidelines for Lane County. In addition, Oakridge residents may apply for exemptions if their homes are heated solely with wood. Eugene/Springfield area residents should contact LRAPA (736-1056) for an exemption; Oakridge residents need to contact Oakridge City Hall (782-2258).

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