Some Area Residents Violating Air-Quality Regulations

More than four dozen households have contributed to smog in the Helena Valley this month by violating local air-quality regulations, according to Lewis and Clark Public Health.

The health department is responsible for enforcing the regulations to reduce air pollution and protect the health of area residents. So far, in January, it has issued 56 notices of violation.

Temperature inversions commonly trap pollution in the valley during extremely cold weather. Smoke from woodstoves and fireplaces is the biggest source of that pollution, a study by the University of Montana showed. Automobile exhaust also contributes.

“Air quality has been poor on 10 out of 18 days so far this month,” said Jay Plant, an environmental health specialist with the health department. “People who keep burning wood in violation of our local ordinance are adding to that pollution.”

The use of woodstoves and fireplaces is prohibited when air quality is poor. Pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices are exempt from the ban because they produce less pollution.

“If you can see a plume of smoke coming out of your chimney, you’re probably violating the law,” Plant said. “It’s really best if you just don’t burn at all on poor air-quality days.”

Environmental health specialists patrol the area whenever air quality is poor, including on weekends. They look for chimneys spewing smoke and send a notice of violation to all offenders. Second and subsequent violations may result in fines of $100 to $500.

From November through February, the health department issues alerts to let people know when burning restrictions are in place, and whether they should limit outdoor activity to protect their health.

The air-quality regulations apply to homes and businesses within a designated Air Pollution Control District, including Helena, East Helena, the Helena Valley, and Birdseye.
Exposure to wood smoke can cause reduced lung function, headaches, and chronic bronchitis. It can also aggravate existing lung disease.

To learn the daily status of local air quality:

- call the health department’s 24-hour air quality hotline, 406-447-1644;
- sign up for email updates at outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov; or

Exemptions from the regulations are available in certain situations, such as when a gas or electric heating system is temporarily inoperable. Low-income residents may qualify for exemptions in some cases.

For more information, call the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351 or email outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov. A copy of the regulations is available at www.HelenaAir.org.