Outdoor Air-Quality Requirements Take Effect Friday

On Nov. 1, Lewis and Clark Public Health will begin daily reporting of outdoor air quality in an effort to protect the health of area residents.

The health department issues these reports each year from November through February, when temperature inversions are more likely to trap chimney smoke and vehicle exhaust under a layer of warmer air, adding significantly to air pollution. The reports let residents know when they can use fireplaces or woodstoves and how to protect their health from the effects of smoke.

Smoke from woodstoves is the main source of winter air pollution throughout the county. Breathing wood smoke can cause poor lung function, headaches, and chronic bronchitis. It can also aggravate existing lung disease, including asthma.

When air quality is poor, the health department will issue temporary restrictions on indoor and outdoor burning throughout the Air Pollution Control District, which includes the North Valley and the communities of Helena and East Helena. During these episodes, you may be required to stop using woodstoves that aren’t certified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) until air quality improves.

Air Quality Designations

The department designates air-quality status each day using these terms:

- **GOOD** – Particulate pollution levels are low, and there are no restrictions on the proper use of woodstoves and fireplaces.
- **WATCH** – Air quality is moderate, and weather conditions are not expected to improve. The health department will ask you to voluntarily avoid or reduce the use of fireplaces and stoves, especially those not certified by the Environmental Protection Agency. A list of certified stoves is available at [www.HelenaAir.org](http://www.HelenaAir.org).
- **POOR** – Particulate pollution levels are high, and the National Weather Service predicts little change. You can use only pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices. You
must reduce smoke from these devices by following proper burning practices (see below). The department may issue violation notices during poor air-quality episodes.

Weather conditions can change quickly, and you may be fined if you violate burning restrictions during a “poor” air stage. So it’s important to check air quality if you plan to burn.

To learn the daily status of local air quality, check local media, call the health department’s 24-hour air quality hotline at 406-447-1644, or sign up for daily e-mail updates at outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov.

Exemptions and Variances

If you’re enrolled in the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), you can apply for an exemption that allows you to burn when air quality is “poor.” You also may be eligible for an exemption if your gas or electric heating system temporarily stops working.

If you don’t qualify for an exemption, you can apply for a variance to the regulations. To get an exemption or variance application form, call 406-447-8351.

Proper Burning

You can help reduce smoke pollution by burning a clean, hot fire. This also will cut back on creosote buildup in your chimney, which will reduce the chance of a chimney fire, as well as the amount of wood you burn. It will save you time and money.

Here are some tips for burning properly to cause less pollution:

- Make sure your stove is the right size for your needs. If your stove is too big, you’ll have to damp down your fires, causing smoldering.
- Use only dry, well-seasoned, medium-sized wood.
- Start your fire with small, dry kindling to establish a hot flame.
- Don’t pack too many logs into your stove or fireplace. Smaller, hotter fires are more efficient and pollute less.
- Keep air intakes or dampers open enough to maintain a clean, hot fire.
- Check and clean your chimney regularly to avoid creosote buildup.

It’s illegal in Montana to burn garbage, building materials, plastics, and hazardous waste. Burn barrels are also illegal in areas that are served by garbage pickup services.

For more information, call the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351 or visit www.HelenaAir.org.