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Editorial: Hot air over fireplaces

Today's vote seeks to restrict pollution

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If you or your loved ones don't suffer from asthma, heart problems or lung disease, the effort of the Sacramento Air Quality District to curb wood burning on still winter days may seem silly. It isn't. The health data are overwhelming. Microscopic pieces of soot that blow out of fireplaces penetrate deeply into lungs and can enter the bloodstream, aggravating respiratory diseases and, in the worst cases, triggering heart attacks.

Know-nothing, local talk-show gabsters and bloggers have targeted Sacramento Air Quality Management District officials for ridicule lately because officials have proposed banning residential burning on the most polluted days of the winter. Under the rule initially proposed, all burning would have been prohibited for an estimated 23 days between November and February, those days when air pollution is at its worst, when there is no wind and atmospheric conditions hold soot, smoke, dust, metals, nitrates and other dangerous pollutants close to the ground, where people live and breathe.

County supervisors and City Council members on the local air board balked at the district proposal last month because it did not exempt less polluting pellet and wood-burning stoves and fireplace inserts certified by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The staff was instructed to list alternatives.

Officials today will consider a menu of five proposals. They include the comprehensive ban as well as some less-protective options that primarily involve exemptions for less-polluting stoves and inserts. Elected officials worry that homeowners won't invest in cleaner burning devices if they don't receive exemptions, but the larger reality is that the health benefits of the comprehensive ban are indisputable.

When the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District imposed its residential winter burning ban four years ago, it was able to meet federal standards for large bits of soot. The ban was controversial at first, but now the public accepts it and breathes easier as a result. Sacramento residents deserve to breathe easier as well.

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