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Winter Wood Fires: Burning too much, Lamorinda?

By Sophie Braccini



At a recent Rotary meeting Contra Costa County Supervisor Gayle Uilkema expressed her concern over the wood burning habits of Lamorindans. Uilkema is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD); she noticed too many unhealthy days reported in Contra Costa, so she decided to find out if the jurisdictions of her district, including Moraga, Lafayette and Orinda, are in the habit of burning wood. The results are in and are not very complementary for Lamorinda. Are we burning too much wood?

"The air quality agency operates monitoring stations that check that we are meeting our objectives in term of air quality with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)," explains Uilkema, "and if evidence of high rates of particulate matters is found in the air, we start accumulating violation days. The consequence is that we immediately have to make a new federal plan with the EPA, and federal money for transportation is withheld from the area." Uilkema points out that, more importantly, these particulate matters are unhealthy, and make it difficult for people with asthma, other respiratory or heart conditions to breath when concentration rises.

According to the BAAQMD, wood smoke is the largest source of wintertime air pollution in the Bay Area. When there is no wind to

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disperse pollutants from smoke, they become trapped close to the ground. "When temperatures drop and with very little wind, a blanket of wood particles lingers over the residences," says Uilkema, "on 'Spare the Air' days, I have seen a horizontal cloud caused by wood burning hovering over Lafayette."

A concerned Uilkema decided to poll residents to find out if her district was doing its part and reducing wood burning. "For the last 3 1/2 years I have sent polls to communities, randomly," says Uilkema, "One of the questions is 'do you burn wood in a fire place or open pit?' What is scary is that 61.8% of Lafayette residents said yes, in Orinda 43.5%, and in Moraga 39.1% reported burning wood." As a comparison, only 28% of Hercules residents and 5.3% in Rossmoor burn wood. Among Canyon residents, however, 77.7% burn wood.

Uilkema believes that these numbers are concerning and she wants to raise the awareness of her constituency and urge them to chose alternatives. "Any type of burning is prohibited on Spare the Air days," says Uilkema, who reminds residents that the BAAQMD can fine offenders that are found burning on those days. "Finding out what days are 'Spare the Air' days is easy," she says, "You can call the Air District to receive automated email or phone alert messages." Residents concerned about burning emission can call 800-334-ODOR to report the problem.

The Winter Spare the Air season runs from November 1, 2009, through February 28, 2010. During this period, it is illegal to burn wood, pellets, or manufactured fire logs when a Winter Spare the Air Alert is issued. Residents can ask to receive automated PhoneAlert notification telephone calls by calling 1-800-430-1515 or sign up for e-mail alerts at <http://baaqmdsparetheair.enviroflash.info/>.

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