Columbia Valley winter air quality outreach strategy

Introduction

With winter approaching, the East Whatcom Community Council Clean Air Committee is teaming up with Whatcom County Fire District No. 14 and the Northwest Clean Air Agency on an outreach effort to help reduce excessive smoke from residents’ chimneys.

This outreach effort is intended to be an early step – a start to an ongoing conversation within the community – while the Clean Air Committee continues its work toward a long-range, community-based plan for air quality improvement.

The major focus is making door-to-door contact with people whose chimneys have been observed to be emitting excessive smoke. Outreach activities include tips for cleaner burning, information about assistance programs and learning what underlying challenges exist that may lead to smoky fires.

Background

Improving air quality is a priority in this area because residents experience periods of unhealthy air. These periods occur most often during winter temperature inversions, when colder air sinks below warmer air, trapping pollution close to the ground. The pollution-trapping effect of inversions is compounded in Columbia Valley by topographical conditions and excessive smoke from some of the 1,200 homes in this two-square-mile area.

An air quality monitor located in Columbia Valley recorded 41 days last winter when the 24-hour average concentration of small particles, or particulate, was considered “unhealthy for sensitive groups” or “unhealthy,” according to federal air quality standards. Those occurred from November 2012 through March 2013, with January having the most days with the highest 24-hour average pollution levels.

For comparison, the Snohomish County town of Darrington, which has similar topography and has been known to have similar air quality conditions, did not have any days during the same period (November 2012 through March 2013) with 24-hour average concentrations higher than “moderate.” Also, the highest 24-hour average concentration was much higher in Columbia Valley (107 micrograms per cubic meter) than in Darrington (35 micrograms per cubic meter).
This could be due, in part, to the difference in the density of residential development: About 500 homes in 1.67 square miles.

**Purposes of the outreach program**

The purpose of the joint East Whatcom Community Council-Northwest Clean Air Agency Columbia Valley Winter Outreach Program is to reduce excessive smoke through the following door-to-door activities:

- Offering safety tips and advice to prepare for winter heating.
- Sharing methods to improve woodstove operation to reduce excess smoke.
- Providing information about the woodstove change-out program.
- Inviting residents to a community event publicizing the woodstove change-out program and promoting cleaner wood-burning practices.
- Identifying specific challenges that may be responsible for poor woodstove operation.
- Listening to concerns, questions and ideas regarding excessive smoke in the valley.
- Providing contact information for the Northwest Clean Air Agency regarding enforcement.
- Informing residents in advance that the Northwest Clean Air Agency will be working in the community this winter to identify sources of air pollution.

**Outreach plan steps**

**Sponsoring Organizations:** East Whatcom Community Council, Northwest Clean Air Agency, Fire District 14, Opportunity Council, KendallWatch, Foothills Chamber

**Phase 1: Information to local organizations**

A. Winter Outreach Plan Overview presented to the following organizations:

- Fire District 14 Commission
- KendallWatch
- East Whatcom Community Council Board of Directors
- Foothills Chamber
- Mt. Baker Lions Club
- Saturday Morning Men’s Club
- Columbia Valley Water District Commission
- Whatcom County Water District 13 Commission
• Northwest Clean Air Agency Board of Directors
• Mount Baker School District

Phase 2: Community Meeting
A. Wood heating workshop
   • Dec. 11
   • East Whatcom Regional Resource Center
   • Evening Event

Phase 3: Winter fire safety and smoke reduction door-to-door canvas
A. Visits to Columbia Valley UGA residents by firefighters, NWCCA employees and resident committee members
B. Joint planning and training of firefighters
   • Launch date – Nov. 18

Phase 4: Report back to Clean Air Committee
A. Post-visit information form
B. Regular updates on Clean Air Committee agenda for December through March

Phase 5: Evaluation of Winter Outreach Program
A. Items from post-visit information forms
B. Interviews with participating firefighters and NWCAA staff
C. Comparison of winter 2013 air quality data with 2014 winter air quality data from CVUGA monitor

Clean Air Committee winter outreach team members and affiliations

Rebecca Brown – NWCAA
Bob Uhrich – NWCAA (not participating on the Clean Air Committee)
Lou Piotrowski – Community Council Board
Phil Cloward – Community Council Board, timber industry
Jerry DeBruin – Whatcom County Fire District No. 14
David Moe – Whatcom County Fire District No. 14
Kurt Thompson – Vice Chair East Whatcom Community Council
Victor Vetkov – East Whatcom Community Council Board
Mark Schofield – Opportunity Council
Veronica Dearden – Kendall Watch, East Whatcom Community Council Board
Katie Skipper – NWCAA
Laura Curley – NWCAA
Julie O’Shaughnessy – NWCAA