Monitor shows poor air quality in Columbia Valley area of northern Whatcom County

A Northwest Clean Air Agency monitor has again detected air in the unhealthy range for fine particles in the Columbia Valley area of northern Whatcom County.

“Unhealthy” is one of six categories established by the Washington Department of Ecology to describe air quality in the state: Good, moderate, unhealthy for sensitive groups, unhealthy, very unhealthy and hazardous.

Fine particles are harmful because they can be inhaled deeply into lungs and damage delicate tissues. The Washington State Department of Health recommends that people who are sensitive to air pollution limit time spent outdoors until air quality improves. Air pollution can trigger asthma attacks, cause difficulty breathing and make lung and heart problems worse. Air pollution is especially harmful to children, people with heart and lung problems and adults age 65 and older.

The Northwest Clean Air Agency asks residents in Columbia Valley to refrain from burning – including burning wood for heat and recreation – when conditions are poor. Columbia Valley residents should check air quality conditions at www.nwcleanair.org/airQuality/current.asp before lighting wood stoves.

Conditions are expected to remain poor with cool temperatures, light wind and no precipitation. Conditions should improve by Thursday with increasing wind and rain. However, air quality is often worse in this area in the evenings because more people are home using wood stoves, and cold weather and nearby mountains can trap smoke close to the ground.

The Northwest Clean Air Agency has the authority to issue burn bans and fine violators when conditions remain poor.

Tips for reducing smoke from wood fires

If you must use wood for heat, you can take steps to reduce smoke and the health risks associated with smoke particles indoors and outdoors. These steps also will make firewood last longer and reduce the risk of chimney fires:

- Check to see if smoke is visible from your chimney. A smoky chimney is an indicator that the fireplace or wood stove is not being operated correctly. State law limits the density of chimney smoke to just a wisp.
- Burn a small, hot fire.
- Fully extinguish a smoldering fire.
- Consider using manufactured logs. They are made from recycled wood products and burn cleaner than cut wood, especially wet, unseasoned wood.
- Give the fire lots of air. Don’t damper it down.

For those who heat with wood, remember that it is always illegal to emit excess chimney smoke and to smoke out your neighbors. It is also illegal to burn trash.
Help is available

Incentives are available for Columbia Valley residents to upgrade to cleaner heating systems:

- **Columbia Valley wood stove change-out program:** If you meet the Opportunity Council’s income eligibility guidelines, you may be able to replace your old wood stove for a new, cleaner-burning wood stove or efficient heat pump for free. Call the Opportunity Council at 360-255-2192 to see if you qualify for energy assistance.

- **Columbia Valley wood stove change-out incentive program:** If you don’t meet the income requirements for energy assistance, you still may be eligible for rebates for replacing old, uncertified wood stoves with any cleaner source of heat. You must sign up for a home energy assessment from the Community Energy Challenge to qualify for this incentive. For more information, contact communityenergychallenge@oppco.org, or call 360-676-6099.
  - If you replace your qualifying, uncertified wood stove for an efficient ductless heat pump, you may qualify for a rebate up to $3,400.
  - If you replace your qualifying, uncertified wood stove for any cleaner source of heat, including a certified wood stove, you will qualify for a minimum rebate of $1,000.

**More information:**

- Local air quality information, including Columbia Valley: Northwest Clean Air Agency.
- Statewide air quality information: Washington Department of Ecology.
- Health effects of air pollution: American Lung Association of Washington.

For additional information about the wood stove change-out program, contact Laura Curley, Northwest Clean Air Agency, at 360-428-1617 ext. 202 or laura@nwcleanair.org.

The Northwest Clean Air Agency works to protect and improve air quality for people in Island, Skagit and Whatcom counties.