

Federal wood burning rule prompts rural backlash

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — A federal proposal to clean up the smoke wafting from wood-burning stoves has sparked a backlash from some rural residents, lawmakers and manufacturers who fear it could close the damper on one of the oldest ways of warming homes on cold winter days.

Proposed regulations from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would significantly reduce the amount of particle pollution allowed from the smokestacks of new residential wood-powered heaters.

Wood-burning stoves are a staple in rural homes in many states, a cheap heating source for low-income residents and others wanting to lessen their reliance on gas or electric furnaces. Outdoor models often cost several thousand dollars, but indoor stoves can cost as little as a few hundred dollars and sometimes double as fashionable centerpieces in homes.

Some manufacturers contend the EPA's proposed standards are so stringent that the higher production costs would either force them out of business or raise prices so high that many consumers could no longer afford their products.

"There's not a stove in the United States that can pass the test right now — this is the death knoll of any wood burning," Reg Kelly, the founder of Earth Outdoor Furnaces in Mountain Grove, told Missouri lawmakers during a recent hearing.

More than three dozen Missouri lawmakers have co-sponsored a bill that would symbolically fight back against the EPA by declaring that "All Missourians have a right to heat their homes and businesses using wood-burning furnaces, stoves, fireplaces and heaters."

This past week, a Missouri House committee endorsed a revised measure that proposes to ban state environmental officials from regulating residential wood heaters unless authorized by the Legislature.

Missouri appears to be one the first states to introduce legislation in response to the proposed EPA regulations. But concerns over wood-stove pollution and regulations also have been simmering in other states, including Utah and Alaska.

States such as Washington and New York already have adopted stricter emission rules. And last fall, New York's attorney general led a coalition of seven states in a federal lawsuit seeking to compel to the EPA to adopt new emission limits on wood-fired boilers, which heat water that is piped into a home's radiator system.

The EPA's existing regulations date to 1988 and don't apply to all of the different kinds of wood-burning devices now in use. Under a proposed rule change released last month, the EPA would give manufacturers five years to meet standards that would reduce emissions by an estimated 80 percent.

The EPA has scheduled a public hearing next Wednesday in Boston, and the sponsor of the Missouri legislation plans to travel there to make his case.

"What they're doing is unnecessary, and it comes against our American values and our traditions," said Rep. Tim Remole, a Republican who has a wood stove at his rural Missouri home.

There are about 12 million wood stoves in U.S. homes, including about 9 million that are less than half as efficient as the newer stoves, according to the EPA. The agency's proposed rules would not affect stoves already in homes.

Most people who own wood stoves have other means of heat, such as electric or gas furnaces. But about 2 percent U.S. homes rely on wood as their primary heating source — a figure that has been rising over the past decade.

Darwin Woods, who owns a farm near the small central Missouri town of Clark, said his 12-year-old outdoor wood stove heats both his home and water. Though he wouldn't be forced to upgrade the stove, Woods views the proposed EPA rule as an intrusion.

"It's just another way for them to control my life and lifestyle and basically force me to pay more for just survival," Woods said.

Others point to the negative health effects from burning wood. The fine particles can worsen asthma and cardiovascular problems, ultimately leading to earlier deaths, according to the American Lung Association.

In Utah, Republican Gov. Gary Herbert has called for a winter ban on wood-burning in an attempt to improve air quality. The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation has also proposed its own emission requirements.

But some homeowners "want to keep their fireplaces to have a way to heat homes and cook food in the event an earthquake cuts gas lines and power," said Erin Mendenhall, a Salt Lake City council member and executive director of Breathe Utah, which is offering to replace wood stoves with gas units.

The National Firewood Association, based in Duluth, Minn., says some of the pollution from wood-burning stoves could be reduced if people would burn only aged wood rather than wood with too much wet sap.

"A properly burning wood fire — there's virtually no smoke or smell," said Executive Director Scott Salveson.

Associated Press writer Paul Foy in Salt Lake City contributed to this report.

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