



City of Palo Alto, Environmental Compliance
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City of Palo Alto Woodsmoke-related Dioxin Reduction

Project Description

In response to regional concerns about dioxin emissions, the City of Palo Alto adopted a dioxin policy "to eliminate dioxin and its subsequent release to the environment..." The Environmental Compliance Division then developed a set of action items it would pursue to reduce dioxin emissions locally and regionally. One project, which developed simultaneously with the policy, acted to reduce woodsmoke-related dioxin pollution and to educate the public about woodsmoke health hazards. Specifically this effort resulted in:

- The adoption of an ordinance prohibiting the construction of new traditional wood-burning fireplaces within City limits (only gas fireplaces are allowed).
- A brochure explaining the fireplace ordinance requirements to residents and architects designing new homes and remodels.
- A multi-year seasonal public education campaign explaining health problems associated with woodsmoke.

Prohibition of new woodburning fireplaces

The City of Palo Alto adopted an ordinance, effective July 1, 2000, prohibiting the construction of new wood burning fireplaces in residential and commercial buildings. The ordinance allows *existing* traditional wood burning fireplaces to be repaired, modified, and even relocated in the same house, but *new* structures may only install gas burning fireplaces. The ordinance does not apply to wood burning stoves used for cooking or outdoor fireplaces.

Brochures explaining the ordinance and woodsmoke concerns were sent to architects in surrounding communities and are distributed at the Development Center where building permits are issued.

Public Education

Winter, 1999: Public education of woodsmoke and dioxin concerns began before the adoption of the policy or ordinance.

- A utility bill insert was sent out in February of 2000 explaining woodsmoke issues
- Small ads ran in local papers instructing residents how to burn fires more cleanly (the two messages were "Don't burn wrapping paper," and "Woodsmoke is a growing concern")
- Several newspaper articles ran discussing the proposed ordinance and dioxin issues.

Fall, 2000:

Public education will begin during the start of fireplace season and will include:

- An elementary school poster contest challenging students to design messages explaining how to reduce woodsmoke hazards.
- Movie theater ads featuring the artwork and messages of poster contest winners
- A brochure discussing woodsmoke concerns will be distributed via a local paper in early December and offer a coupon worth \$1 off on compressed firelogs at local stores.
- A revised utility bill insert to run in December.

Future plans

- Partner with Utilities Department to provide rebates to residents who replumb existing fireplaces with gas lines.
- Revisit public education strategy next year.

Lessons learned

Be prepared to defend your position on dioxin issues. There is skepticism around how much dioxin is generated from woodsmoke and its impact. Even in-house there was some disagreement about the issue's relevance. Palo Alto relied on the Bay Area Quality Management District's *Information Update (12/98)*, and *Woodsmoke Fact Sheet (12/98)* as references.

Costs:

Fireplace brochure (for architects and home owners)/design, printing and mailing: \$2,800

Movie theater ads (two months): \$5,600

Elementary school poster design: \$1,500

Resources

Copies of the City of Palo Alto dioxin policy, fireplace ordinance, and public education materials are available by calling 329.2495, or visit: www.city.palo-alto.ca.us/cleanbay.