

Calls for wood-fire heaters to be banned

Caitlin Maloney

AIR pollution in parts of Canberra has hit its worst level since the Black Summer bushfires, with one expert calling for an urgent rethink on wood-fired heaters.

So far in June, there have been two days where air quality has been recorded as poor by readers in Monash and Florey.

Air pollution is monitored using a measurement called PM2.5, which refers to particle matter with a diameter of less than two-and-a-half microns - 50 times thinner than human hair.

An air quality reader in Monash recorded its worst pollution level since June 2020 on June 3, with the PM2.5 level peaking at 151 (very poor) at 12pm.

Previous studies have found wood smoke pollution causes 11 to 63 premature deaths each year in the ACT.

According to Professor of Environmental Public Health and director of HEAL Centre Sotiris Vardoulakis, breathing in PM2.5 can cause inflammation and exacerbate asthma symptoms.

"People can be romantic about wood heaters ... but the reality is that they are very detrimental for public health and for the environment," he said.

Clean Air Canberra advocacy group member Murray May is calling for wood-fire heaters to be banned altogether in the ACT.

"It's a high priority, but the community's been slow to wake up, very slow, and the government has been incredibly slow to wake up," he said.

But general manager of the Australian Home Heating Association Tim Cannon maintained that wood fires were an important option

when considering how to heat your home.

He said they heated all surfaces in a home in a way that electric systems could not replicate.

"Some people would be nervous that, should there be a blackout, for example, or a storm that brings down power lines or something,

you won't be able to heat your home," he said.

Nevertheless, in July 2024, the ACT government announced the Wood Heater Replacement Program rebate would be doubled from \$250 to \$500, to encourage Canberrans to remove wood fire heaters by 2045.

According to an ACT gov-

ernment spokesperson, 29 rebate claims have been paid in the 2024-25 financial year, bringing the total number of wood-fire heaters removed to 1350 since the program was established in 2004.

However, the number of wood-fire heaters is unknown, with previous estimates suggesting there are 18,524 in the ACT.

Dr May said the government's plan was "woefully inadequate", adding "they should be phased out much sooner than that".

Narrabundah resident Megan Taylor replaced her wood fire with an electric split-cycle air conditioning system after consultations with government representatives about the rebate scheme. Ms Taylor had been suffering from asthma since she moved into her home.

"I never had asthma in my life, but I think it coincided with moving in with a wood heater, but I can't say that for sure," she said.

Ms Taylor said she noticed a significant improvement to her breathing soon after she removed the heater and her gas stove.



Megan Taylor replaced her wood fire with an electric split-cycle air conditioning system. Picture by Keegan Carroll

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