

Wood fires still a burning issue

With the onset of cooler weather in the ACT, the first drifts of wood smoke have begun appearing in Canberra's skies. They may be labour intensive, and not particularly efficient, but there are few sights on a winter's evening more cheery than a wood-fired heater or open wood fire. Once, wood and coal were the mainstay fuels for heating and cooking in Australian homes. The wider availability of electricity, heating oil, and then natural gas changed that. Gas-fired heaters or electric systems are now the overwhelmingly popular choice among Canberra home owners, mainly for their ease of operation and their quick heating, but many Canberrans have retained their open fireplaces or their relatively inefficient wood heaters, mainly for aesthetic reasons.

There is a cost to this cosiness, however: particle emissions from wood fires are a serious pollutant which can aggravate asthma, emphysema, pneumonia and bronchitis, not to mention irritating the eyes and triggering headaches and allergies. Particulate pollution from wood fires is a particularly insidious problem in Canberra because temperature inversions and limited air movement during the colder months tend to trap the pollutants. The health problems of stagnant, smoky air are well recognised of course, which is why governments have mandated particle emission (and energy efficiency) standards for all wood-fired heaters sold in Australia. The ACT has gone further in addressing the problem by instituting a wood heater replacement program, which offers a rebate to householders who replace an old wood heater with a mains-supplied gas heater.

Even with the advent of emissions standards and more thermally efficient (and cleaner burning) wood heaters, the likelihood is high that there will be a dirty haze above the Tuggeranong Valley on at least a few days this winter. The problem is that people are still using open fires or inefficient wood heaters, and are likely to go on doing so, rebate or not. Campaigns warning householders of the dangers of burning damp wood and allowing fires to smoulder overnight or asking them not to light up on still evenings is one way to combat the problem, but other measures are needed.

The ACT Greens want the regulations governing wood heaters toughened up, and the Government to consider extending its rebate scheme to include heat pumps and electric heaters, measures which Environment Minister Simon Corbell broadly supports. However, he maintains that education remains the best way to reduce the problem. Sensibly, both parties have reiterated they do not favour an outright ban. Any prohibition would likely provoke a backlash, and incur the risk of civil disobedience.

The Greens are right to try to lessen the environmental impact of wood-fired heaters, as inviting and comforting as they are. Education and stricter regulation will help but, if the problem persists, the Government should consider a small environmental levy on households that insist on retaining their inefficient heaters or open fires. The simple pleasures of a wood fire should be available to all, but if they result in an environmental impact, then it is reasonable users contribute to the cost of remedial action.