Smoke Nuisance from chimneys

If you own a wood heater it is your responsibility to ensure your appliance operates correctly and you only burn dry, seasoned firewood. An excessively smoking wood heater cause air pollution and contains fine particles that can affect people’s lungs. These fine particles can be particularly dangerous to the very young, the elderly and people who have existing respiratory problems.

This factsheet includes information that can help residents to reduce smoke and meet their legal requirements.

Be a good neighbour

Talk to neighbours. Find out what concerns they have and ask suggestions to resolve problems. Solutions can often be found that satisfy everyone. If you own a wood heater make a habit of checking the chimney for excessive smoke.

The law

New South Wales’s Protection of the Environment Act 1997 includes controls for smoke emissions. If issues between neighbours cannot be resolved or a complaint is made, Council will investigate. If the smoke is deemed to be “offensive smoke” Council may issue a Direction Notice detailing offence and giving a timeframe for the problem to be rectified. If the Direction Notice is not complied with Council may issue a penalty notice.

Government departments other than Council may also be responsible for regulation of smoke emission.

What Council will consider:

When investigating a smoke complaint Council will consider:

- The amount of smoke
- The smokes duration, rate of emission and characteristics
- The sensitivity of the environment and the impact it has had or may have
- Views of any other neighbours
- Any other relevant criteria

Ways to reduce smoke emissions

Choose your firewood carefully:

The dryness of firewood makes all the difference to the amount of smoke emitted from a chimney. Wet or green wood causes excessive smoke and doesn’t generate as much heat.

Dry wood is generally lighter in colour and should make a hollow cracking sound when banged together. Wet or green wood is heavier and usually darker in colour.

Do not use wood products such as chipboard (as they contain formaldehyde) or treated or painted timber (as the smoke from these products is hazardous to people’s health) and never burn rubbish (such as plastics, rubber or foam in the heater.

Harvest wood in a way so as to not threaten vegetation and animal habitats.

Stack wood correctly:

Wood should be air-dried for at least eight months before burning. Keep wood under cover and stack in a crisscross manner to allow air to circulate.
SMOKE FROM WOOD HEATERS

Burn fire brightly:
Start with dry kindling and fully open the air controls. Do not use oil or fuel soaked rags. Once the fire is well established gradually add larger wood pieces making sure not to choke the fire by overloading it with logs. An efficient fire should have bright swirling flames with little or no smoke coming from the chimney.

Keep air controls shut at night:
Avoid shutting down the air controls (damper) overnight as this also causes excessive smoke. Let the fire burn out completely overnight – a well-insulated house should hold enough heat to keep your house warm until morning.

Check your chimney:
All wood heaters tend to smoke when first lit. However the smoke should not last for more than 10 minutes. Regularly check the chimney and if it is smoking too much, reduce the fuel load and open the airflows.

Regular cleaning and maintenance:
Clean and maintain your chimney and wood heater regularly especially at the beginning and end of winter. Regularly check the glass door for cracks and door ropes and seals for deterioration. Check the firebox for rust and lubricate the air-slide control with high temperature grease.

Consider the potential impacts that a wood heater may have on your neighbours. If you decide to purchase a wood heater, ensure that it is the correct size. A heater too large for a home will need to be turned down reducing its efficiency and causing excessive smoke. Make sure that the heater is constructed and installed correctly and meets the Australian Standards (AS4013 and AS2918). Note you will need Council approval before you install a wood heater.

Insulation:
By having a properly insulated house the need for heating will be reduced. Ensure that ceiling insulation is in place, draughts are blocked, doors are closed to unoccupied rooms and curtains are drawn to keep heat in.

Alternative heating methods:
Consider other heating alternatives such as gas heaters which are clean burning, cost effective and less polluting or reverse cycle air conditioning.

For more information
Visit our website or contact Council.

Other things to consider
Before you buy a wood heater:
Smoke from a wood heater is a difficult problem to resolve because most of them (regardless of their type and technology) will tend to emit smoke at different times. Fires and wood heaters in residential areas which are in close proximity to other homes will nearly always cause nuisance on a still winter’s night compared with those in rural areas which are often a considerable distance from other dwellings, resulting in the possible ‘dilution’ of smoke.