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FIRE AND FOLKLORE

With current debate regarding buyback schemes and anti smoke policies, the Australian Home Heating Association (AHHA) think it's time to put an end to some wood burning myths.

Q: My local council have introduced a buy-back scheme for heaters saying that wood heaters are a menace to the environment. Is this true?

A: The AHHA fully supports the removal of polluting older-style wood heaters and open brick fire places, however, modern clean burning wood heaters are up to 80 per cent more efficient than older style appliances and open fires. Correct operation of your wood heater is as important as installing a wood heater that meets the Australian Standard AS/NZ4013 so following the manufacturer's instructions is imperative.

Q: What does "clean burning" mean?

A: In simple terms, if a wood heater is clean burning it means it meets Australian Standards and emits less particulate matter from the flue. The current Standard is 4g/kg which basically means 4grams of particulate matter is emitted per kg of wood burnt. However, those levels are only relevant if the consumer is burning dry, seasoned wood. By using your wood heater as an incinerator i.e. throwing packaging and plastic on the fire, you will be emitting much more than the acceptable level and negatively affecting the output of your heater.

Q: If new wood heaters are "clean burning" then why aren't they included in buy-back schemes?

A: A report commissioned by the AHHA states that including Standard compliant wood heaters in buy-back schemes not only helps reduce particle and carbon emissions, but has a higher success rate than schemes which exclude them¹.

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Q: My neighbour has a smokey flue but I have heard that wood heaters are low polluters. Please explain.

A: Australia has some of the toughest emission standards for wood heating in the world, so smoke coming from a flue for long periods of time is probably due to incorrect usage or an old ineffective wood heater that should be updated. New wood heaters with clean burn systems greatly reduce particle emissions. Before buying a wood heater you should check that it complies with Australian Standard AS/NZ4013 and make sure you know how to operate the appliance correctly. The AHHA have an educational DVD called Clear Skies which can be obtained by contacting their office on (08) 8351 9288.

Q: What is the difference between particle and carbon emissions?

A: Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is just one element which is emitted during wood burning. Wood heaters manufactured since 1999 have been rigorously tested to meet Australian Standards to release no more than 4g of particulate matter per kg of wood burnt, and many wood heaters on the market fall well below this at 1.4g/kg. Trees which are planted for firewood (and all other trees of course) absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere making wood heaters “carbon neutral”, i.e. for every gram of CO₂ emitted there is a tree that will re-absorb this carbon. Particle emissions are small particles of matter which are emitted when a wood heater is incorrectly operated or is old and inefficient. This is why correct operation and use of seasoned firewood is imperative.

Q: Can I collect firewood from anywhere or do I need to burn special wood?

A: It's better to buy wood from a reputable supplier (preferably an AHHA member) as logging your own timber is illegal in some areas unless you have a permit. But whether you collect your own firewood or purchase it, make sure it's been pre-dried before use. Storing wood undercover in a crisscross fashion will assist drying. Hardwoods like red gum or sugar gum are best for burning so make sure you know what you are buying or collecting before throwing it on the fire.

Q: What do you have to say about forests that are being destroyed for firewood?

A: The Australian Home Heating Association is a supporter of Landcare and provides funding to farm forestry projects growing up to 40,000 trees per project. Fossil fuels like gas and electricity have no way of reusing their resources once they have been consumed, but with trees they are continually being replanted. Burning wood not only provides a warm, damp-free home but it also produces less greenhouse gases than most other types of fuel¹.

¹ Comparison of Residential Heating Costs and Greenhouse Gas Emissions for Firewood, Gas and Electricity by Dr John Todd, June 2005.

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