

## ANALYSIS Air pollution



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# We really must stop burning wood

Michael Le Page

THE UK government has announced plans to tackle sources of air pollution, including trendy wood-burning stoves, but its Clean Air Strategy, which was unveiled last week, fails to address the real problem.

Although pollution from wood-burning stoves is a relatively new problem for the UK – they became fashionable only a few years ago – it has long been a major one in countries such as Canada and New Zealand. And the take-home message from their efforts to control the release of harmful particulates in the air is simple: ban wood burning.

"There does not seem to be a limit below which there is no impact on health," says Gary Fuller at King's College London, whose team has shown that wood burning is now the source of a third of particulate pollution in UK cities.

As *New Scientist* reported last year, families with wood burners are likely to be exposed to the highest levels of pollution because even the best stoves can produce large amounts of indoor pollution. Their neighbours are

next in the firing line, given that the particulates produced can easily escape from homes.

Despite this, the UK government isn't planning a ban. Instead, it wants "to prohibit the sale of the most polluting fuels", such as wet wood. But even dry wood is highly polluting.

What's more, lots of people with wood burners don't buy wood from shops. Instead, they scrounge it from wherever they can, with skips of building waste one popular source. This is a disaster in pollution terms

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as treated or painted wood can release highly toxic chemicals when burned.

The plan is also to "ensure that only the cleanest stoves are available for sale by 2022". But even the cleanest stove produces eight times as much pollution as a diesel truck, says Fuller. In other words, having a neighbour with a wood burner is like having eight trucks sitting in your street with their engines idling all night.

Some cities, such as Montreal, have gone a lot further than the UK is proposing, and actually required old wood stoves to be replaced with cleaner new ones. That has helped, but wood burning remains a major source of pollution, says Fuller.

Oh, if you are thinking that burning wood is at least better for the climate, you are wrong. In most cases, sticking with gas central heating and properly insulating your home is less harmful in global-warming terms than switching to a wood burner.

Finally, although environment secretary Michael Gove has presented the strategy as a UK initiative designed to protect people's health, it is actually a response to a European Union air quality law aimed at reducing the overall amount of pollutants released. There are separate but related EU laws that set limits on the maximum allowable concentrations of specific pollutants in the air at individual locations. The UK frequently breaches these: London's Oxford Street often hits its annual limit within the first weeks of each year.

As a result, the UK government has lost a series of court cases brought by the environmental organisation ClientEarth. Separately, on 17 May, the UK and five other countries were referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union for their repeated failures to keep to these limits. If Gove really wants to clean up the UK's air, he has a lot more work to do. ■