

Big Steps for Air Quality in Seeley Lake

Beginning the current article by looking back should anchor the Air Quality program and any notions about it to reality. Here's a quip from an article last spring:

“The next immediate step to help alleviate the smoke problems is to get folks signed up for a new stove. It's expensive and time consuming, but, the good news is that WE HAVE MONEY to pay for some stoves and installation. So, even though we are under budget restrictions and must start small, we have enough money to begin the process of switching to stoves that are healthier for the resident and the community. Again, research over the past 15 years has shown that fine particles, measured as 2.5 microns or PM2.5, can affect populations that have respiratory sensitivities such as asthma, emphysema or lung infections. “

With the help of the Seeley Lake Community Foundation, Montana Community Foundation, Plum Creek Foundation, Missoula County and Axmen, the Air Quality Committee of the Seeley Lake Community Council was able to use the money mentioned to buy and install five stoves. In addition to the stoves, 14 wood shelters, with covers, were placed in the Seeley Lake downtown neighborhoods. There are already people calling to ask if more stoves and shelters are available. Thanks to the incredible efforts of Loren Rose, we now have new stoves and shelters in place. It was quite an undertaking and the entire community should know whom to thank for helping make their town more healthy.

So, how will this benefit us here in Seeley Lake, and the Seeley Swan Valley? First of all, the reports from the air monitors should be better. That will give us a better standing with the County (and ultimately the EPA). Secondly, all of us benefit by having cleaner air to breathe. There are a number of residents here who have heart and lung problems, and cleaner air will certainly help them.

More immediately, wood burning techniques need to be changed. There are regulations for what can be burned in a wood stove, pellet stove or fireplace. Montana law determines consequences for burning garbage in a wood stove and due to the nature of emissions and prevailing inversions in winter, toxic emissions can linger in neighborhoods and impact the health of anyone who is

exposed. Of course, the longer the toxins are in the air, the higher the chances of exposure. The primary concern in downtown Seeley Lake has been the area surrounding the elementary school. Burning safely for the resident, as well as neighbors, takes on a new meaning when neighbors are close by and children are present.

So what is safe burning? Safe burning includes burning seasoned, dry wood at high temperatures. It does not mean any other waste, especially garbage, plastics, Styrofoam—even the Styrofoam from packaged meat, or the plastic wrap that comes with it. Wood stoves, pellet stoves and fireplaces work best when the fuel used is appropriate. While oil burners do exist and are effective in some cases, burning waste oil in a wood stove is not safe or healthy.

The most important lesson in all of this is to burn clean, dry wood in an efficient stove. It saves money, gives off heat and keeps homes and people healthy. The efficient stove part is what we've been working on. Round one has been very successful. Round two depends on funding. Now that people are seeing how effective stoves can be, finding the right people for new stoves is not a problem.

From the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) daily air quality monitoring site, Seeley Lake has had good air quality for the fall. Things have turned a bit in the last couple of days, and we are still getting some spikes in poor air, but winter will show us what we need to do next. If you do check the DEQ "Today's Air" web site, the information given for Seeley Lake is from the monitor located at the elementary school. (www.todaysair.mt.gov).

We were hoping to eliminate the air problems, but hopefully we'll see an improvement and next year we can install more stoves and see an even bigger improvement. In an area that could use 50 new, efficient stoves, installing 5 stoves can only make a dent. Getting funding for another round of stoves is critical, however, the larger problem is finding a person to take on the task that Loren Rose completed this year.

Once owners of the new stoves see how well they burn, how little wood they use and how clean they are, we're hoping may neighbors will be anxious to put in efficient stoves. It's a huge step toward a more healthy Seeley Lake.

For more information on the stove change-outs, wood shelters or to donate for the next stove project, please send a note to the Seeley Lake Community Foundation, P.O. Box 25, OR to the Seeley Lake Community Council, P.O. Box 30. You may also call Loren Rose, coordinator extraordinaire at 677-2187.