

Domestic burning of coal and wet wood

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The sale of wet wood and coal for use in home burners could be phased out in England under government proposals.

Bags of logs sold in DIY stores, garden centres and petrol stations often contain wet wood - which is more polluting - and would be banned.

Traditional house coal could be phased out as early as 2019 under Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) proposals.

The government says it wants to encourage "cleaner burning". However, it is not banning wood or coal burning stoves. Its proposals, currently out to consultation, aim to get people burning wood in stoves and open fires to use dry wood. The plans also aim to encourage people burning coal to use a smokeless version along with low sulphur manufactured solid fuel. They would ban the sale of wet wood, which produces more smoke, in small quantities and anyone wishing to sell it under a certain volume would need to apply for certification.

Cleanest fuels

Traditional coal - which is more likely to be used by people on low incomes than wood burners - could be phased out any time between 2019 and 2021, under the proposals.

Pollution from burning wood and coal in the home currently causes 38% of particulate pollution - far outweighing that caused by industrial combustion (16%) and road transport (12%).

The Government's Clean Air Strategy aims to reduce particulate matter emissions by 30% by 2020.

The proposals are aimed at ensuring only the cleanest fuels are being sold. Environment Minister Therese Coffey said: "Everyone has a role to play in improving the air we breathe and reducing pollution from burning at home is a key area where we can all take action. "While we will never be able to eliminate all particulate matter, by switching to cleaner fuels, householders can reduce the amount of harmful pollution to which they unwittingly expose themselves, their families and the environment, while still enjoying the warmth and pleasure of a fire."

In May the European Commission said it was taking the UK to court over its failure to meet air pollution limits.

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Owners of wood burners, stoves and open fires will no longer be able to buy house coal or wet wood, under a ban to be rolled out from next year.

Sales of the two most polluting fuels will be phased out in England to help cut air pollution, the Government says.

Bags of logs sold in DIY stores, garden centres and petrol stations often contain wet wood - a type of wood which produces more pollution and smoke.

The public should move to "cleaner alternatives", the Government says. Plans for the ban were first announced 18 months ago, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has now confirmed it is going ahead. The Government said wood burning stoves and coal fires are the largest source of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), small particles of air pollution which find their way into the body's lungs and blood. Particulate matter is one of several pollutants caused by industrial, domestic and traffic sources.

"Cosy open fires and wood-burning stoves are at the heart of many homes up and down the country," said Environment Secretary George Eustice. "But the use of certain fuels means that they are also the biggest source of the most harmful pollutant that is affecting people in the UK."

The changes will mean:

- Sales of bagged traditional house coal will be phased out by February 2021, and the sale of loose house coal direct to customers will end by 2023
- Sales of wet wood in small units (less than 2m cube) will be phased out from February 2021. Wet wood in volumes greater than 2m cube will also have to be sold with advice on how to dry it before burning
- Makers of solid fuels will also need to show they have a very low sulphur content and only emit a small amount of smoke.

It is not banning wood or coal burning stoves.

Similar proposals to reduce the burning of wood and coal are being considered in Wales and Scotland.

Echoes of the diesel controversy'



Analysis
By Roger Harrabin
Environment analyst

Today's announcement has echoes of the diesel controversy. Many drivers bought diesel vehicles because they are less bad for the climate than petrol. It turned out they created more of the particulate pollution that harms people's lungs, so now diesel car values are sliding.

Likewise, many people shelled out for wood-burning stoves because they don't add to climate change. Now they too are being hit by local pollution rules. Households in Clean

Air zones are banned by law from emitting dense smoke (although, for some reason, bonfires are still permitted). And elsewhere people will have to burn thoroughly dried wood, which may put up the cost of the fuel. There are loopholes. It's unlikely that local councils will prioritise inspections of garage forecourts when their ranks are depleted by spending cuts. What's more, there's nothing to stop you burning tree cuttings from your home without drying them. And there are no powers to inspect homes, so any rules on the use of wet wood cannot be enforced.

Rob Power, from the rural village Clarencefield in Scotland, said he feared the changes in England may have a "knock-on effect" by increasing the cost of his fuel supply. The 73-year-old said his woodburner heats his radiator and water during the winter months, adding that it is too expensive to convert to another system. "We're going to find it difficult," he said. "People like us in rural areas have still got to live. "With my income I can't afford to keep up with the modern trends."

Open fires and wood-burning stoves have risen in popularity over recent years - offering an additional form of heating for many households in both urban and rural areas, and possibly the sole heat source for some. Around 1.5m homes use wood for fuel across the UK, however burning wood and coal in open fires and stoves makes up 38% of the UK's emissions of PM_{2.5}. By comparison, 16% come from industrial combustion, 12% from road transport and 13% from the use of solvents and industrial processes. This means a wood burning stove emits more particles per hour than a diesel truck.

What is wet and dry firewood?

Wet - also known as green or unseasoned wood - is often sold in nets and is cheaper to buy. It contains moisture which, when burned, creates more smoke and harmful particles of air pollution (PM_{2.5}) than dry wood. Wet wood can also damage chimneys much more, by allowing tar and soot to build up.

Dry or seasoned wood - which has been dried out, often in a kiln - has a moisture content of 20% or less.

The Government set out its commitment to reducing emissions of PM_{2.5} alongside four other air pollutants, including ammonia and nitrogen oxides, in its 2019 Clean Air Strategy. Officials said the phase-out will give the public and suppliers time to use up stocks and move to cleaner alternatives, such as dry wood and manufactured solid fuels.

These alternatives produce less smoke and pollution, and are cheaper and more efficient to burn, the Government added. Wood briquettes, made from compressed dry sawdust and/or wood chips, are one example of an alternative fuel.

The Government is aiming to reduce emissions of PM_{2.5} by 46% by 2030.

According to the Clean Air Strategy, air pollution is the top environmental risk to human health in the UK.

In Wales, a consultation is currently ongoing for a clean air plan, which is looking at whether wet wood could be banned.

The Scottish Government is due to consult on a draft revised air quality strategy later this year, following a review that included recommendations on domestic wood burning stoves, a spokeswoman said.

Last year, Britain had its first week without using electricity from burning coal since the 1880s, according to the National Grid Electricity System Operator. The Government plans to phase out the UK's last coal-fired plants by 2025 to reduce carbon emissions.