



Hunter can't see the wood for the smoke

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TRY telling someone their wood burning heater is making a significant contribution to the poor quality of air in the Hunter during winter.

Good luck with that one. After they blame the internet, they'll garrote you with a litany of advice suggesting the air quality in Newcastle is affected by fresh sea salt, dust from soil and industrial emissions. Then they'll scratch their primeval urge for bespoke romanticism by chucking another bit of green wood on an inefficient burning device and conveniently not notice they clog up the neighborhood air on a windless day for donkeys.

As the mercury drops, household fireplaces and wood-burning heaters will fire up, elevating particle and visible pollution across the Hunter. A fortnight ago, Sydney down to the Illawarra copped smoke from hazard reduction burns that hung round like relatives at Christmas. Smoke from bushfires or from back-burning operations or from wood-burning heaters

share similarities in that they all generate biomass smoke – a poisonous soup made up of carcinogens and toxins.

While the EPA's recent Lower Hunter Particle Characterisation Study achieved considerable attention, the Upper Hunter Wood Smoke Community Research Project prepared for the EPA by Databuild Research and Solutions received comparatively little fanfare when released late last month. The study, conducted with wood heater users in Muswellbrook and Singleton, found that wood heater owners' attitudes about the impacts of wood smoke are very different from those relating to other forms of particle pollution in the Upper Hunter. Attitudes about wood smoke are often underpinned by lack of awareness of the risks and reluctance to change current methods of heating, while mining, power stations, diesel trucks and trains tend to be seen as the only real sources of air pollution in the area.

The study found that despite evidence that wood smoke is as harmful as other sources of air pollution, this is counter-intuitive in the Upper Hunter – and I would suspect in Newcastle as well – where there is strong reluctance in the community to accept that wood smoke can have an impact when there are other more obvious polluters such as the mining industry and the power stations. Many in the study's stakeholder group (which included representatives from councils and environmental organisations) believed that because they are surrounded by coal mines in the Upper Hunter, householders “do not care” what they do at home as “they are putting up with dirty air anyway and are angry that we are trying to cut back on wood (as a heating source) when it should be coal”.

Yes, I know wood is a sustainable resource. In rural areas it is often available free of charge or for a carton of beer, and no, I don't know how many coals die every time I turn on any form of electric heating. Why not use gas? Perhaps because gas is not always readily available and compared to free or low cost wood, it is too expensive.

I love what passes for winter in the Hunter. But I am no fan of smoke from crappy domestic fireplaces. The condition of the wood being burnt and the condition of the burning device can be a significant contributor to particle pollution. If you do live close – particularly below – to someone in the neighbourhood who starts burning green wood via a poor condition heater in May and doesn't quit until September, it can be a torturous few months. Guess I'll just have to suck it up.

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