

Bill 6616

March 3, 2009

To the members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Joanne Fenstermacher and I live in Simsbury, Connecticut. I have also lived in Farmington and Canton.

I suffer from asthma and chronic upper respiratory infections. Some of the triggers for these disorders for me are: solvents; exhaust, particularly diesel; ozone; cigarette smoke; and wood smoke. To understand what it's like for me to suffer an asthma attack, hold your nose, close your mouth, and insert a small cocktail straw between your lips.

Now—try to breath through the straw.

By doing this exercise, you are simulating what happens to me when I breathe wood smoke that comes into my house from my neighbor's wood stove. You can stop the reaction by simply removing the straw and letting go of your nose. I, and many others like me, continue to gasp for breath, get dizzy and weak, and sometimes lose consciousness. Even when the reaction has stopped we suffer chronic fatigue and headaches as the result of oxygen depletion. Add to that the terrible burning in our lungs, throats, and sinuses from mucous membrane inflammation. It feels as if all of these membranes have been abraded by heavy-duty sandpaper. Every breath hurts. These reactions cannot stop until the offending wood smoke.

Wood smoke is nearly impossible to get rid of. When it gets into my home through windows, doors, or by operating an exhaust fan, it sticks to upholstery, curtains, rugs, books, etc. There is no way to get rid of it until I can air my home out with fresh air, but there is no fresh air outside when wood smoke is present. I have to suffer all of the above symptoms and hope that they don't get worse. My body has rejected the usual medications and fresh air is my only relief.

I have lived in Connecticut since 1986 and from September until May of every year, I must adapt my life around the ever-present wood smoke found in Connecticut suburbs and exurbs. When cigarette smoking was banned in public buildings, interiors became safer for me than the so-called "fresh" outside air. Try to imagine what it would be like if you could not open your windows in the beautiful fall weather we have here at times in New England, without risking filling your home and lungs with something that could start a potentially deadly reaction, just because your neighbors decided to start their wood stoves.

The entire 12 years we lived in Canton, I could not go outside nor open my windows during wood stove season except between the hours of 10:00am and 3:30pm, when the families went out and let their fires burnt out. Like pollen and cigarette smoke, wood smoke clings to clothing and hair, and can continue to cause reactions until you change your clothing and wash it out of your hair. Would you like to have to do that every time you went out?

Here in Simsbury, a neighbor started using a wood stove when oil prices started to climb. His stove burns so inefficiently that, at times, large particles of burned wood blow into our yard. He empties the ashes in his yard and spreads them out, where some of it becomes airborne and headed for our property. People burn green wood, wet wood, etc. and the smoke becomes so intense that sometimes it enters our closed home.

Connecticut has made great progress with limiting exposures to cigarette smoke and is now working on diesel exposure. It's now time to think of the quality of air in our neighborhoods, where the wood smoke is as much of a hazard to those of us with lung and respiratory disorders as are cigarettes and diesel. Help us to be able to enjoy the great outdoors as easily as people without these potentially deadly disorders. Ironically, the lung specialists advise us to get more fresh air, but in wood smoke season that is nearly impossible. Thank you for taking the time to hear my story.

Sincerely,

Joanne A. Fenstermacher

Joanne Fenstermacher
Simsbury, CT