

EPA says Oakridge is clearing the air, thanks to efforts by residents and officials

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Today's Local stories

OAKRIDGE — Ongoing efforts to clear the air in Oakridge are having tangible results, say local and federal air quality officials.

Wintertime woodsmoke has been the persistent air quality problem in Oakridge for years.

The town about 40 miles southeast of Eugene has been the only Lane County community that has failed to meet federal air quality standards for pollution since 2009.

But Oakridge is on the right path because the city improved its air quality in 2016 and last year. If the trend continues this year, the city of about 3,300 people will have officially improved its air, EPA specialist Christi Duboiski said.

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“It’s definitely a good news story,” she said.

Oakridge sits in a bowl, ringed by the Cascade Range. The topography allows air inversions to trap woodsmoke, said Lane Regional Air Protection Agency spokeswoman Jo Niehaus.

Natural gas heat isn't an option in Oakridge, so residents rely on burning wood or electricity to heat their homes.

A concerted effort by the city, LRAPA and others has led to better air, Duboiski said.

Specifically, many Oakridge homes heated by woodstoves are producing less smoke.

"It's about dry firewood," Oakridge Mayor Jim Coey said in regards to the cleaner air. "It's about code enforcement. ... It's about education."

City of Oakridge and air pollution agency officials have gone door-to-door, offering residents tips on how to burn wood more efficiently, Niehaus, of LRAPA, said.

While Niehaus is glad Oakridge has gotten some recent recognition from the EPA, she said there is still plenty of work to do.

So LRAPA, which monitors air quality in Lane County, will be putting together a plan, detailing how to keep improving Oakridge's air.

"We have met the requirements of clean air, the national standard, however, we have to prove that we can maintain this," Niehaus said.

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