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State fire marshal and Oregon Department of Energy urge winter heating safety

Acting State Fire Marshal Randy Simpson and officials at the Oregon Department of Energy are urging Oregonians to think fire safety and use caution when heating homes this winter.

“We are likely to see record high heating costs this winter, and many Oregonians may be considering alternative sources to heat their homes,” said Mike Graine, Director of the Oregon Department of Energy. “More homeowners may be using woodstoves, fireplaces and portable heaters and we want to remind them to be fire safe.”

“Homeowners need to have the chimneys and flues on their fireplace and woodstoves cleaned and inspected regularly,” said Acting State Fire Marshal Randy Simpson. “Also be sure to give heaters their space, keeping them away from combustible materials.”

Graine is also reminding Oregonians that financial help is available for low income customers paying utility bills and for low income weatherization to reduce heating costs. A list of utilities, state and local social service agencies and community and charitable organizations and other resources are on the Department of Energy’s web site at www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/, or call 1-800-221-8035.

According to the Office of State Fire Marshal, there were 1,227 fireplace or woodstove-caused fires in Oregon from 2003 through 2007 resulting in four deaths and nine injuries. During this same period there have been 1,368 electrical-caused fires, many related to portable heaters and other home heating equipment.

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Oregonians can keep themselves safe by following these tips:

- Have chimney and woodstove flues inspected and cleaned each year by a qualified chimney sweep. Ask them to check for creosote deposits, soot build-up, and physical damage.
- Always use a fireplace screen. Make sure the screen is made of sturdy metal or heat-tempered glass to prevent sparks from escaping.
- Keep a clutter free environment. Store kindling, fire logs and wood at least three feet from any heat source.
- Dispose of ashes in a metal container and place the container outdoors at least three feet from anything flammable. Ashes may retain heat for days after they appear out.
- When using portable electric heaters make sure they have an automatic tip-over switch and a high temperature limit switch. The tip-over switch turns the heater off if it gets knocked over. The high temperature limit switch prevents the heater from getting too hot.
- Give heaters space. Put at least 36 inches of space between the heater and combustibles such as furniture, curtains, papers and people.
- Check the cord on portable electric heaters. If the cord gets hot, frayed or cracked, have the heater serviced.
- Never use extension cords with portable electric heaters. It can overload the circuit and cause a fire.
- Unplug heaters when not in use or before going to bed.
- Be aware of electric baseboard or wall heaters. These heaters are thermostatically controlled and turn on without warning when temperatures drop. Keep combustibles at least three feet from these heaters.
- If using a propane-fueled heater, or other appliance make sure it is designed for indoor use. Follow all manufacturer's instructions and make sure it is properly vented.
- Do not use any barbecue indoors.
- If you smell gas, do not operate any switches, appliances or thermostats. A spark from one of these could ignite the gas. Get everyone outside and away from the building. Shut off the gas supply. Call your propane supplier from a neighbor's phone.
- Only use kerosene heaters outdoors as they may emit poisonous fumes.

For more home fire safety tips, visit http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/FPW_2008.shtml.

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