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Anger burns against outdoor boilers

By Andrea Stone, USA TODAY

In the winter of 2006, Joel Laws and his new wife, Melissa, were living in the Albers, Ill., house where his mother was born. They hoped to start a family there. Then a neighbor began heating his home with an outdoor wood boiler.

Smoke seeping into the house, Laws says, gave them headaches and sore throats. Melissa's mother, who has asthma, refused to visit. Their clothes smelled of soot.

The couple sued but, impatient for their lawsuit to come to court and convinced that a smoky house was no place to conceive a child, they moved out last week. "We're sick of being sick," says Joel Laws, 27, a graduate student. "We would rather pay rent than have to live with this."

AIR-QUALITY DEBATE: [Smoky boilers have neighbors fuming](#)

The Laws are among a growing number who say they have been smoked out of their homes and watched their health and property values decline because of neighbors who use wood-burning boilers. They are using local ordinances, lawsuits and the Internet — the Laws have posted video of smoke plumes on MySpace — to restrict or ban the devices.

'Very different smell'

David Cole, 60, a Hanover, N.H., lawyer who says his farmhouse is enveloped by smoke from a neighbor's boiler, won a temporary injunction to shut it down. Last week, he testified to the Legislature in favor of a bill that would crack down on the devices, also known as outdoor wood furnaces or wood-fired hydronic heaters.

"It's a very different smell than the lovely wood smoke you might get a whiff of in the countryside in the winter," says Cole. "It's a thick, oily, acrid smell."

More rural and suburban homeowners across the country's northern tier are turning to boilers as a cheap way to heat homes, bath water, swimming pools and hot tubs.

"I put it in to lower my heating costs," says Brian Wuebbels, the Laws' neighbor. He used to pay \$500 to \$800 a month for gas heat. Now, using wood he says he cuts himself, his bill is \$36.

Wuebbels denies that smoke from his boiler poses a health hazard. "It's not any more than leaves burning," he says.

Neighborhood air pollution is, "not just wood smoke," says Deidre Darsa of the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, an industry group. "There's car exhaust, indoor home cleaners. ... It's not just one particular source."

Government studies say wood smoke is a growing problem. A report issued in Connecticut in 2002, when there were fewer than half the boilers in use than in 2006, estimated that 38% of airborne particle emissions there came from wood burning, including stoves.

A 2006 report
up to 8,000 gas furnaces to produce as much pollution as one wood boiler.

The agencies' group, the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management (NESCAUM), said there could be 500,000 outdoor wood boilers emitting nearly 900,000 tons of fine particulate matter nationwide by 2010.

The NESCAUM report said the increased use of boilers "represents a potential public health problem" linked to wood smoke, including asthma, heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

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Boiler manufacturers recommend using only dry, seasoned wood. A 2005 report by the New York attorney general says that wood is often burned incompletely, or smolder, resulting in thick smoke and high particulate emissions."

Fireboxes are large enough that some owners burn tires, palettes, railroad ties, construction debris, plastic, trash and even telephone poles, releasing harmful chemicals.

Those living nearby say it can be difficult to directly link health problems to boiler smoke.

When Brad Graham's asthmatic son Hunter, 8, had trouble breathing at school, his parents called the school for comment.

"He would lose his ability to breathe," Graham says.

One day, he and his wife, Lynn, noticed smoke wafting over the school playground. It came from a boiler. The school called for comment.

Lobbying for change

The Grahams lobbied for a year for

"It doesn't do any good to confront your neighbors," Graham says. "You have to go through legal channels. It's a long, hard battle."

Beth Thomas, whose daughter was teased on the school bus because she smelled of smoke from a nearby boiler, moved after a Bowdoinham, Maine, town hall meeting voted against regulations.

"People were confusing it with wood burning rights when it was an emissions control issue," she says.

Some boiler owners say they are trying to be good neighbors. Anita French, whose son was hospitalized for asthma in their Stratham, N.H., house in 2006, "there was a little more smoke than we anticipated."

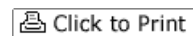
Town building inspector Terry Barnes says the Frenches raised the device's chimney and switched to coal. He says the move was "unfair and unfounded."

Still, 15 neighbors complained to the town complaining that the smoke is so bad that it set off one resident's indoor smoke alarm.

"The stench and odor are disgusting," says neighbor Lewis Ruffner, whose children often come in coughing from the backyard. "They say it's too smoky."

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