

Local Support for Air District's Rule 9-6

Lynne Baker



The Bay Area Air District is in the process of tightening emissions standards for residential water heaters to reduce nitrogen oxide (NOx) pollution and improve public health. This effort has gained local support in Napa County. Adoption of the standards is a positive step for the well-being of those who live and work in our community.

The Bay Area Air District estimates natural gas-powered water heaters and furnaces emitted 707 tons of NOx in 2022, making them one of the largest stationary sources in the region.

The Air District's Rule 9-6 was established to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions from residential water heating. The updated rule, scheduled to go into effect January 2028, puts in place a plan to improve air quality by gradually transitioning to zero-NOx-emitting water heaters (electric heat pump water heaters). Rule 9-6 applies to new sales or installations after compliance dates.

It's important to note that that homes can keep and repair current gas water heating appliances until they wear out and need to be replaced.

The Air District adopted this rule to protect public health, improve air quality, and support the transition to cleaner technologies. Reducing emissions from building appliances will help create healthier indoor and outdoor environments, reduce climate impacts, and ensure cleaner air for current and future generations.

The Air District is considering amendments to provide exemptions for low-income property owners and for situations like low-capacity electrical panels that make compliance with the zero-NOx standard unusually challenging or expensive.

Local groups including the Napa Sierra Club, the Napa County League of Women Voters, and Napa Climate NOW! have come out in support of the updated Rule 9-6.

The Sierra Club said in a Facebook post that "Rule 9-6 is a practical, balanced approach that protects public health while providing flexibility and financial assistance for those who need it."

In a letter to the Press Democrat published on July 8, Joyce Kingery, Chair, Napa County League of Women Voters Climate Change Committee wrote, "Our Committee supports Rule 9 because it will benefit public health by reducing air pollution. It aligns with the League of Women Voters' belief that an interrelated approach to combating climate change is necessary to protecting public health and defending the overall integrity of the global ecosystem."

Napa Climate NOW! member Linda Brown wrote to the Napa Register on August 19: "The phase-out of nitrogen oxide-emitting water heaters across the entire Bay Area is a welcome demonstration of true commitment to the health and well-being of all residents of the Bay Area, especially the most vulnerable members of our diverse community, including our kids. And it will simultaneously benefit the climate, since nitrogen oxides contribute to the formation of ozone, a powerful climate pollutant".

In the 1950's, scientists from the California Institute of Technology determined that the cause of smog in Los Angeles was nitrogen oxides (NOx) combined with gasoline hydrocarbons and sunlight. Further research linked NOx directly to eye irritation, coughing, and worsened asthma.

The Air District's website describes how the mountains bordering Napa Valley block much of the prevailing winds and can trap air pollutants. Data from Napa County's Community Health Needs

Assessment shows slightly higher asthma rates in Napa County than the state average (9.5% vs 9.3%).

In addition to the burden on human health, the Environmental Protection Agency determined that NOx emissions were linked to regional acid rain deposits and forest ecosystem decline in California and across North America, so there is both a health and an environmental aspect to limiting damage from this pollutant.

The Bay Area Air District Board of Directors is tentatively scheduled to vote on the proposed amendments to Rule 9-6 on November 3, 2026.

Lynne Baker is a retired nurse and is Co-Chair of Napa Climate NOW!, a local nonprofit citizens' group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, and part of 350 Bay Area. <https://napa.350bayarea.org/>