

Chimney Guys

RESEARCH REPORT

National and Regional Standards for Domestic Wood Burners and Air Quality

Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes current regulations, technical standards, and financial assistance programs concerning domestic wood burners and air quality management across New Zealand. The transition toward cleaner heating is driven by the National Environmental Standards for Air Quality (NES for Air Quality), which aim to reduce particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) produced by inefficient solid-fuel burners.

Central government policy, administered by the Ministry for the Environment (MfE), mandates that wood burners on properties smaller than two hectares must meet specific emission limits (<1.5 g/kg) and thermal efficiency ratings (>65%). Regional councils, particularly in Nelson, Canterbury, Otago, and Rotorua, have implemented more stringent local rules, including burner "expiry dates," bans on open fires, and point-of-sale replacement requirements. While financial subsidies remain available through the Warmer Kiwi Homes program and regional initiatives, a significant policy shift occurred on January 9, 2026, when EECA ceased accepting new grant applications for wood and pellet burners, prioritizing heat pumps as the primary clean heating solution.

Regulatory Framework and Standards

National Environmental Standards

The Ministry for the Environment maintains an authorized list of wood burners that meet the NES for Air Quality. To be authorized for use on properties under two hectares, a burner must demonstrate:

- **Discharge:** Less than 1.5 grams of particles for every kilogram of dry wood burned (g/kg).
- **Efficiency:** A thermal efficiency of at least 65 percent.

Regional Variations and Airshed Management

Regional authorities manage specific "Airsheds"—designated zones where topography or population density necessitates stricter controls to prevent pollutant trapping.

Region	Key Regulation / Status
Nelson	No new enclosed solid-fuel burners in urban areas unless replacing a lawfully established burner. Open fires have been banned since January 2008.

Region	Key Regulation / Status
Canterbury	Burners have a defined lifespan. Low-emission burners are non-compliant after 20 years (15 years in Timaru) and must be replaced.
Rotorua	Implements a "Point of Sale" rule: non-compliant burners must be removed or replaced before property title transfer.
Otago	Air Zone 1 (Alexandra, Arrowtown, Clyde, Cromwell) requires an emission rate of <0.7 g/kg.
Hawke's Bay	Prohibits non-compliant wood burners or open fires upon property transfer in Airzone 1.

Detailed Analysis of Key Themes

The Transition to Ultra-Low Emission Technology

The documents highlight a hierarchical preference for heating appliances based on their environmental impact:

- Non-polluting:** Heat pumps, electric heaters, and flued gas heaters.
- Highly Efficient:** Ultra-Low Emission Wood Burners (ULEBs) and pellet burners.
- Authorized Wood Burners:** Standard burners meeting the 1.5 g/kg national limit.
- Prohibited/Phased-out:** Open fires, coal burners, and multi-fuel burners (which are no longer recommended due to higher pollutant discharge).

Expiry and Compliance Enforcement

In regions like Canterbury, the age of the burner is the primary determinant of legality. Environment Canterbury (ECan) reports growing non-compliance due to homeowners being unaware of the 15-to-20-year expiration rule. In Rotorua, authorities utilize infrared camera technology during winter months to detect the use of illegal or non-compliant burners.

Fuel Quality: The "Burn Dry" Initiative

A recurring theme across all regional data is the critical role of firewood quality.

- Moisture Content:** Firewood is considered "dry" and fit for burning only when it has a moisture content of less than 25% (ideally below 20%).
- Health and Efficiency:** Burning wet or "green" wood results in energy being wasted on boiling off moisture rather than producing heat, leading to excessive smoke and creosote buildup in flues.
- Prohibited Materials:** Documentation strictly forbids burning treated timber, painted wood, driftwood, or household waste (plastics, electronics, nappies) due to the release of harmful toxins.

Financial Assistance and Support Programs

Warmer Kiwi Homes (EECA)

The national program provides substantial grants for eligible homeowners (owner-occupiers with a Community Services Card or living in high-need areas).

- **Insulation:** Grants covering 50% to 90% of costs.
- **Heating:** Grants up to 90% (capped at \$3,450) for heat pumps.
- **Policy Change:** As of January 9, 2026, wood and pellet burners are no longer eligible for new Warmer Kiwi Homes grant applications.

Regional Subsidies

- **Environment Canterbury:** Offers subsidies up to \$5,000 for homeowners in Clean Air Zones to replace expired burners with ULEBs or heat pumps. Eligibility is restricted to those who have not previously received support and whose burners expired after October 2016.
- **Rotorua Hot Swap:** While the original loan scheme ended in June 2021, the council still offers some funding for the free removal of illegal burners under specific terms and conditions.
- **Otago Support:** Residents can access various programs such as the Cosy Homes Trust for advice, and Habitat for Humanity's Home Repair Programme, which offers interest-free loans up to \$20,000 for essential repairs, including heating upgrades.

Important Quotes with Context

"We all breathe what we burn."

- *Context:* Used by the Otago Regional Council to emphasize the collective community impact of individual domestic heating choices and the shared responsibility for air quality.

"There is no safe level of air pollution."

- *Context:* Found in the Rotorua air quality project documentation, justifying the push toward total avoidance of wood burning in favor of non-polluting alternatives to protect vulnerable populations (children and the elderly).

"Low-emission burners can be used for 20 years from installation... after which they become non-compliant and can no longer be used."

- *Context:* From Environment Canterbury, explaining the regulatory expiration of wood burners in the Canterbury Air Regional Plan, a rule that often surprises homeowners.

"Burning damp wood means the fire is mostly used boiling the moisture out of the wood... This careful management achieves a very dry wood that burns with a lot of heat."

- *Context:* Hawke's Bay Regional Council's technical explanation for why seasoned wood (dried for at least two years) is more cost-effective and environmentally friendly.

Actionable Insights

For Homeowners and Buyers

- **Due Diligence:** Before purchasing a property, especially in Rotorua or Nelson, buyers should verify the compliance of existing burners. In Rotorua, the vendor is legally responsible for removing non-compliant burners before title transfer.
- **Burner Expiry Check:** Residents in the Canterbury region should use the "Solid Fuel Burner Database" to check the installation date of their appliance. A burner installed in 2006 in Christchurch is now non-compliant.
- **Firewood Procurement:** Firewood should be purchased or collected at least 6–12 months (ideally longer) before use. Documentation recommends stacking wood loosely off the ground with a top-only cover to facilitate airflow.

For Landlords

- **Healthy Homes Standards:** Landlords are responsible for providing an efficient, fixed heater in the main living area. Tenanted properties are generally excluded from most regional and EECA heating subsidies, though they must comply with regional air quality bylaws.

For Low-Income Households

- **Subsidy Stacking:** Homeowners should investigate if local community organizations offer "top-up" funding. In some regions, combined support from EECA and local trusts can cover 100% of the cost of insulation and a heat pump.
- **Hardship Waivers:** In Canterbury, households with residents over 80 years old or with serious health concerns may apply for a one-off waiver to use an expired burner for one final season.

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