

December 31, 2007

Cold fronts bring chilly weather and fire threat

For the first time this winter season much lower temperatures are forecast for Sarasota County. Colder temperatures mean an increase in the use of heating equipment and the threat of accidental fires. In the United States in 2005, 670 people died and 1550 were injured as a result of 62,200 heating equipment-related home fires. In addition to the tragic loss of life, these fires resulted in \$909 million in property damage.

Home heaters are the leading cause of home fires during December, January and February. These home fires involved portable electric heaters, wood stoves, fireplaces, portable kerosene heaters and room gas heaters. In the last three years 26 heating-related fires have occurred in Sarasota County. Fires that started as a result of space heaters were the most deadly, accounting for three-fourths (73%) of the fire deaths related to home heating.

"These fires don't have to happen," said Sarasota County Fire Chief Gorski. "Most fires with space heaters are preventable if key safety measures are followed like keeping all space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can burn, including furnishings, bedding and clothing and always remember to turn the heater off when you leave the room or go to sleep."

Wood stoves and fireplaces also need special care. If you're buying a new unit, make sure a qualified technician performs the installation. If the appliance has already been installed, have it checked to make sure the installation was done properly. Most fires in wood stoves, fireplaces and chimneys occur because of a lack of regular cleaning, leading to the buildup of creosote. Use only seasoned hardwood and don't burn trash in a fireplace because the fire could easily burn out of control. Keep sparks and embers inside the fireplace with fire screens made of heat-tempered glass or sturdy metal.

Heating equipment that burns fuel is a potential source of carbon monoxide (CO). CO is an odorless, colorless, poisonous gas that is created when fuel burns incompletely. Install CO alarms in your home to provide you with an early warning if CO is accumulating. Heating devices should be inspected and cleaned on a regular basis according to the manufacturer's instructions. Candles should never be left unattended. Put candles securely in a non-tip candle holder, keeping them well away from Christmas trees, decorations, curtains and blow out candles before you leave the room or go to sleep.

"We are also still in a drought situation and cold temperatures with low humidity and high winds can be just as dangerous the dry heat we experience in the summer. These types of conditions do not lower the threat of wild fires," stressed Gorski.

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the Fire Department Fire Prevention.