

by James E. Houck
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California Dreamin'

The use of fireplaces is most common in milder climates, witness the enormous number of fireplaces located in the Los Angeles area.



The enlarged area on the map shows the South Coast Air Basin in dark green. The boundaries of Orange, Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties are also shown.

Since 2002, the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted targeted surveys in 32 metropolitan areas scattered across the country. The top five in terms of the percent of occupied households reporting having a usable fireplace were Seattle (60%), Dallas (59%), Atlanta (58%), Sacramento (58%) and Orange County (57%). The bottom five were Miami-Fort Lauderdale (4%), New York City (12%), New Orleans (24%), Northern New Jersey MSA (25%) and Buffalo (27%).

California is a dream, particularly southern California, if you are in the business of selling all things related to fireplaces. The South Coast Air Basin is comprised of Orange County and parts of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties. It is what most people would think of as the “Los Angeles area.”

The South Coast Air Basin has an area of 6,600 square miles, which is a miniscule two-tenths of one percent of the total land area of the contiguous 48 states. In that 0.2 percent there are a whopping 2.55 million fireplaces. The 2.55 million count includes wood-burning and gas-fueled units, as well as fireplaces with gas log sets and inserts installed.

Southern California helps to remind

us that fireplaces aren't serious heaters. Some terms that have been used to describe the motivation for fireplace ownership and usage have included aesthetics, architectural element, atmosphere and pleasure. Certainly no one uses fireplaces to cool their home; heat is part of the experience. However, even when the stated purpose for use is heat, aesthetics is generally part of the picture, and the usage is most generally for secondary, rather than primary, home heating.

The use of fireplaces is most common in milder climates. A comparison of fireplace usage in California, the most populous state with mild winters, to New York, the third most populous state with cold winters, illustrates that heating demand alone is not the determinant for fireplace usage.

FIREPLACE OWNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH COAST AIR BASIN, 2006

Appliance Type	Estimated Number Owned
Cordwood Fireplace Insert	170,000
Pellet Fireplace Insert	5,000
Gas Fireplace Insert	21,000
Cordwood Fireplace without Insert	1,744,000
Gas-Fueled Fireplace without Insert (includes both originally manufactured gas fireplaces and gas log sets installed in cordwood fireplaces)	613,000
Total	2,553,000


The sale of manufactured wax/fiber firelogs and gas log sets reflects the aesthetic use of fireplaces. According to Chris Caron, vice president of brand development for Duraflame, Los Angeles is the single largest market in the U.S. for firelogs; he estimates 15 million firelogs of all brands were sold there in the 2005-2006 season. Similarly, according to Tod Corrin, senior vice president of the Robert H. Peterson Company, the Los Angeles area is one of the largest markets for vented gas log sets in North America.

So, if heating demand alone doesn't correlate with fireplace ownership and usage, what else does? There are multiple answers documented by credible surveys and they all point to the Sun Belt and/or the West, and are all related to demographics.

- Single-family homes are much more likely to have a fireplace than multiple family homes.
- Households with higher incomes are more likely to have a fireplace.
- Larger homes are more likely to have one or more fireplaces.
- Higher value homes rather than lower value homes are much more likely to have one or more fireplaces.
- Homes more recently built are more likely to have a fireplace.
- Homes in the suburbs are much more likely to have a fireplace than either homes in rural areas or in central cities.

It is also frequently claimed that fireplaces are more part of the culture or "way of life" of the West compared to other parts of the country. So southern California is really a dream, after all, for the fireplace, fireplace accessories and the fireplace fuel industry. It has it all - numerous, concentrated, affluent and motivated consumers.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, in 2001, the percentage of households using wood-burning fireplaces for secondary heat in California (14.1%) was surprisingly higher than in New York (5.0%). On the other end of the spectrum, if the climate is too mild, fireplaces won't be popular either.

For example, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that only about four percent of the occupied housing units in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area had a usable fireplace as compared to about 35 percent for the nation as a whole. It is easy to forget how mild the climate is in southern Florida, even compared to that of southern California. The 30-year average heating degree day (HDD) value for the Miami airport is 149 compared to 1,274 for the Los Angeles airport. It appears that the operative word for fireplace usage is *cool*, in contrast to either cold or warm. 

Data in this report is from a report recently completed by OMNI Environmental Services, jointly funded by the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association and the South Coast Air Quality Management District, to estimate the number of home heating units and fireplaces in the South Coast Air Basin.

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