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, witness the enormous number of fireplaces located in the Los Angeles area. 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%).
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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