

Air regulators cite Russian consulate in San Francisco after mysterious illegal burning



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

After black smoke was seen billowing from the chimney of the Russian consulate in San Francisco, Bay Area Air Quality Management District investigators have cited the foreign government agency for violating burn restrictions that day. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

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PUBLISHED: September 12, 2017 at 1:21 pm | UPDATED: September 12, 2017 at 3:54 pm

SAN FRANCISCO — After the mysterious burning of materials at the Russian consulate on the eve of its closure earlier this month, Bay Area air quality investigators Tuesday formally cited the foreign government agency for violating burn restrictions, according to an official.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District issued the Notice of Violation to the Russian consulate for “burning inappropriate materials,” board member John Gioia said. Essentially, the Russians burned “garbage” in a wood-burning fireplace, he said.

“Smoke from the consulate’s fireplace can be just as harmful as smoke from a homeowner’s fireplace,” Gioia said. “We believe in equally enforcing our rules to protect public health, even if that means citing and fining the Russian Government for interfering with our air quality.”

The violation was mailed to the now-shuttered Russian consulate in San Francisco, said BAAQMD spokeswoman Lisa Fasano said, under the presumption it would be forwarded to the appropriate person.

“It’s unclear if we will receive any response,” she said, adding that investigators were able to obtain enough evidence to issue the citation.

On Sept. 1, acrid, black smoke was seen pouring from a chimney at the Russian consulate, a day after the Trump administration ordered its closure amid escalating tensions between the United States and Russia. The smoke drew attention from neighbors who called the fire department thinking no one would be intentionally using their fireplace on a Spare the Air Day where temperatures soared into the triple digits.

Firefighters and air district investigators were denied access to the building, and speculation began about what exactly was being burned in the facility's fireplace.

Despite never entering the building before or after the incident, investigators "reviewed photographs and talked to the fire department," Fasano said.

"With such black smoke it was clear something other than wood was being burned, and that usually means garbage," she said.

Gioia said the foreign diplomats violated Regulation 6-3-309, a prohibition against burning garbage, non-seasoned wood or certain materials.

"No person shall cause or allow any of the following materials to be burned in a wood-burning device: garbage, treated wood, non-seasoned wood, used or contaminated wood pallets, plastic products, rubber products, waste petroleum products, paints and paint solvents, coal, animal carcasses, glossy or colored paper, salt water driftwood, particle board, and any material not intended by a manufacturer for use as a fuel in a wood-burning device," the rule states.

That violation is not specific to a Spare the Air Day and can be issued on any day.

"Garbage" is defined by the agency as: "Any solid, semisolid, or liquid waste generated from residential, commercial, and industrial sources, including trash, refuse, rubbish, industrial wastes, asphaltic products, manure, vegetable or animal solid or semisolid wastes, and other discarded solid or semisolid wastes."

No specific fine is attached to such a violation, Fasano said, but both entities will reach a settlement on the proper punishment.