Public urged to stay warm, take precautions

As temperatures continue to drop in the months ahead, the risk of home heating fires peaks. In fact, December, January and February are the leading months for home fires, when half of all home heating fires occur.

"The use of heating equipment largely contributes to the peak in U.S. home fires during the winter months," said Lorraine Carli, vice president of communications at the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

According to NFPA's most recent report, "Home Fires Involving Heating Equipment," home heating equipment was involved in an estimated 57,100 reported home structure fires, 490 civilian deaths, 1,530 civilian injuries, and $1.1 billion in direct property damage in 2010.

Stationary and portable space heaters accounted for one-third (32 percent) of reported home heating fires, but 80 percent of the home heating fire deaths, two-thirds (67 percent) of associated civilian injuries, and half (52 percent) of associated direct property damage.

"Space heaters clearly present the greatest risk of home heating fires," said Carli. "No matter what type of heating system people may use, we can all reduce our risk by taking simple safety precautions."

Below are NFPA's tips for safely heating your home this winter:

• All heaters need space. Keep anything that can burn at least three feet away from heating equipment, like the furnace, fireplace, wood stove, or portable space heater.

• Have a three-foot "kid-free zone" around open fires and space heaters.

• Never use your oven to heat your home.

• Have a qualified professional install stationary space heating equipment, water heaters or central heating equipment according to the local codes and manufacturer's instructions.

• Have heating equipment and chimneys inspected and cleaned each year by a qualified professional.

• Remember to turn portable heaters off when leaving the room or going to bed.

• Always use the right kind of fuel, specified by the manufacturer, for fuel-burning space heaters.

• Make sure the fireplace has a sturdy screen to stop sparks from flying into the room. Ashes should be cool before putting them in a metal container. Keep the container a safe distance away from your home.

• Test all smoke alarms monthly and replace the batteries once a year, or when they begin to chirp, which means the batteries are running low.

• Install carbon monoxide (CO) alarms outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home. Test the alarms monthly.

Unemployment insurance tax rates to decrease

AUSTIN – The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), on Monday, announced the average Unemployment Insurance (UI) tax rate for all employers will be 1.82 percent for Calendar Year (CY) 2013, down from 1.96 percent in CY 2012.

The average tax rate for experience-rated employers is 1.71 percent for CY 2013, and is down from 1.87 percent in CY 2012. The standard minimum UI tax rate paid by Texas employers in CY 2013 will be 0.54 percent, which is down from 0.61 percent in CY 2012. These employer-paid UI taxes replenish the Texas Unemployment Compensation Trust Fund, which provides temporary income for Texas workers who lose their jobs through no fault of their own.

The minimum tax rate is paid by 250,184 employers, which represents 63.5 percent of experience-rated employers. An experience rating is determined by the amount of an employer's taxable wages and the amount of UI benefits that have been paid to former employees and charged to the employer's account for the last three years. An employer paying the standard minimum tax will pay $48.60 per employee in CY 2013 compared with $54.90 per employee in CY 2012. The maximum UI tax rate, paid by 6.8 percent of Texas employers, will be 7.35 percent.

In setting tax rates for CY 2013, TWC sought to minimize the effects of any increases and exercise the authority given to it by state law to hold the tax rates to the lowest and most predictable rates possible.

TWC suspended the deficit tax last year in order to keep taxes low, a strategy supported by employer groups across the state. TWC is dedicated to finding ways to lower the financial impact of UI taxes on Texas employers. TWC and its 28 local workforce boards also are committed to helping UI claimants return to work as soon as possible.

The components of the CY 2013 tax rate are as follows:

• The general tax rate is based on claims against an employer's account. If TWC has paid benefits to former employees who were laid off or separated through no fault of their own in the past three years, then those employers will pay a general tax.

• The replenishment tax rate is charged to all experience-rated employers to cover unemployment claims not charged to a specific employer. This tax tends to rise following economic slowdowns when claims increase and businesses close.

• The employment training assessment is charged to all employers who are eligible for a computed tax rate to finance the Skills Development Fund. The employment training assessment calculation is a separate line item on the Employer's Quarterly Tax Report.

• The obligation assessment tax rate is collected to repay bond obligations. This tax is experience-rated and based on an employer's 2012 tax rate.

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Sunday, Dec 30	Thursday, Dec 27 @ Noon
Wednesday, Jan 2	Thursday, Dec 27 @ Noon