



Focus on Outdoor Burning

from Ecology's Air Quality Program

The problem with outdoor burning

Many people used to burn their trash. It was a quick, inexpensive, and easy way to get rid of household garbage. But a generation ago, trash consisted largely of paper, wood, food and yard waste. Today, trash often contains plastics, metal, rubber, synthetic cloth and chemicals. Even the slick, colored paper of magazines and the clear see-through portions of envelopes, when burned, send toxic fumes into the air. These chemicals then enter the air, soil, groundwater and food supply.

Air pollutants commonly found in smoke include:

- + Carbon monoxide
- + Nitrous oxides
- + Volatile organic compounds
- + Sulfur dioxide
- + Particulates that can be inhaled
- + Dioxins

Dioxins are toxic chemicals that are created when certain types of waste are burned and when chemicals containing chlorine are manufactured. They are dangerous even at extremely low levels. Tests performed by the United States Environmental Protection Agency show that daily dioxin emissions from household burn barrels used by two families equal the air pollution from a garbage incinerator serving several thousand families. *All of this pollution may be released in your backyard through backyard burning.*

Why is toxic air pollution so serious?

One of the problems with toxic air pollutants such as dioxins is that they get into the food chain. This happens when backyard burning of trash emits dioxins into the air, and the dioxins then settle on soil, on leaves of plants, and in water bodies. We then get dioxins in our bodies when we eat fruits or vegetables grown in this soil; eat beef, pork, poultry, milk, and dairy products from animals that have eaten food grown in contaminated soil; drink contaminated water; or eat fish living in contaminated water. Children playing in dirt can even swallow contaminated ash.

In addition, smoke particles can travel into houses due to their extremely small size. The resulting indoor pollution can reach up to 70 percent of the outdoor pollution level. The particles can be inhaled deep into the lungs, causing harmful chemical and structural changes to lung tissue.

Health effects

Long term health problems associated with toxic smoke include:

- + Cancer
- + Asthma
- + Immune system changes
- + Infertility
- + Birth defects
- + Learning disorders

People at high risk for health effects include:

- + Children
- + Infants
- + Elderly people
- + Pregnant women
- + Teenagers
- + People of any age with heart or respiratory disease

Alternatives to outdoor burning

Reduce Reuse Recycle Compost Disposal

The best way to handle the problem of garbage is to reduce waste and reuse products whenever possible. Buy durable products rather than disposable ones, look for recycled products, and choose products with less packaging. Recycle paper, plastic, glass, aluminum and metal. For your yard, choose plants that are the appropriate size for your area to reduce the need to prune. Consider chipping large branches, and mulching or composting your food and garden waste.

For information on recycling, call 1-800-RECYCLE, or your county's solid waste division. For waste disposal, use a garbage collection service or haul to the local landfill in your area.

Where is outdoor burning allowed?

Outdoor burning is still allowed in many areas based on what is being burned and where the burning will occur. Outdoor burning is banned in some areas and is prohibited during certain times of the year in others. Residential burning is not allowed in Urban Growth Areas in cities with a population of 10,000 people or more. Your local planning department can help you determine whether you live within the boundaries of an Urban Growth Area.

What can be burned in outdoor fires?

Natural, unprocessed vegetation can be legally burned in an outdoor fire where outdoor burning is allowed. It is never legal to burn garbage. Burning anything in a burn barrel is illegal in Washington State. Contact your local fire district to determine whether additional local restrictions are in effect.

For more information

Contact the Department of Ecology:

Central Regional Office
(Chelan, Douglas, Kittitas,
Klickitat, and Okanogan counties)
(509) 575-2490

Eastern Regional Office
(Adams, Asotin, Columbia, Franklin, Garfield,
Grant, Lincoln, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Walla Walla
and Whitman counties)
(509) 329-3400

Northwest Regional Office
(San Juan County)
(425) 649-7098

OR Contact your local air quality agency.

Outdoor burning information is available on Ecology's web site at
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/airhome.html> .

To report illegal burning, call Ecology's complaint line at 1-866-211-6284, or in the Central region, (509) 575-2490.

If you need this information in an alternate format, please contact Tami Dahlgren at (360) 407-6800. If you are a person with a speech or hearing impairment, call 711, or 1-800-833-6388 for TTY.