



Focus

The Clean Air Washington Act of 1991 sets a comprehensive new course toward cleaner air throughout the state.

Forest Slash Fires

Background

Timber land managers use slash burning to dispose of logging residue after trees are harvested. Current law requires forest land managers to obtain a burning permit. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Ecology monitor weather conditions so that fires are set when smoke will blow away from population centers and scenic areas. The permits require fire control and containment measures.

Slash fires can smolder for days and release substantial amounts of smoke. In some cases, individual slash fires release more pollution in several hours than some large industrial plants do in a year. However, since 1980, DNR has reduced slash burning on its lands by over 90 percent. Slash is now burned on less than five percent of the acres harvested each year, significantly below the industry average.

The problem

Slash burning is only one of many kinds of outdoor burning. Outdoor burning also includes residential burning such as leaf and yard waste burning, and agricultural burning of farm fields. Outdoor burning releases carbon monoxide, particulate matter, and volatile organic compounds into the air. Carbon monoxide is a gas that interferes with the body's ability to absorb oxygen. It can cause headaches, drowsiness, and even death at high concentrations. Particulate matter is made up of tiny particles of soot, dust, and unburned fuel suspended in the air. Visible smoke is largely composed of these particles. Chronic diseases such as emphysema, asthma, chronic bronchitis, and cancer have been linked to exposure to fine particulate matter. Particulate matter also contributes to smoke haze that obscures Washington's scenery. Volatile organic compounds contribute to the formation of ozone pollution. Ozone can irritate and inflame the breathing passages in the lungs, throat, nose, and sinuses. It can cause coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, dry throat, headaches, or nausea. Outdoor burning is also known to release toxic air pollutants. Much of this pollution is released during half of the year, making its impact more concentrated.

What the Clean Air Washington Act does

- Reduces emissions from slash burning through a phased approach, based on 1985-89 averages:
 - 20 percent by the year 1995; and
 - 50 percent by the year 2001.
- Directs DNR to develop and implement a plan to achieve the reductions.
- Declares that the emission reduction requirements apply to all forest land (including federal land) in Washington.
- Directs DNR to encourage alternative disposal methods in the following priority:
 - production of less slash;
 - better use of slash;
 - disposal without burning; and
 - slash burning.

- Requires DNR to establish a slash burning permit fee to cover the cost of permit system administration and enforcement.
- Declares that slash burning shall not damage public health or the environment.
- Requires DNR to coordinate the issuance of slash burning permits with local air quality authority rules. DNR may not permit slash burning during an air pollution episode or an air quality impairment.

For more information

Ecology has prepared fact sheets on each major element of the Clean Air Washington Act. These are available from the Washington State Department of Ecology, P.O. Box 47600, Olympia, WA 98504-7600, or by calling:

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If you have special accommodation needs or require this document in alternative format, please contact Tami Dahlgren at Ecology's Air Quality Program, (360) 407-6830 (voice); or call (360) 407-6006 (TDD only).