



Fact Sheet

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania • Department of Environmental Protection • Bureau of Air Quality

RESIDENTIAL OPEN BURNING IN PENNSYLVANIA

Across Pennsylvania, it is not uncommon to find burn barrels in the back yards of many residents. For decades, people have used their burn barrels as an inexpensive way to dispose of their garbage. In part, this is because of the rural nature of the Commonwealth. In less populated areas, some people say it costs too much to take trash to a landfill, and they don't need to worry that the smoke from burn barrels might bother their neighbors.

However, the nature of society is changing as people move from more urban settings into rural areas. More people are moving into places where open burning traditionally has been accepted – and conflict often arises between new and established residents over the open burning of waste.

DEP encourages residents to recycle as much of their waste as possible or to use a commercial hauler to dispose of their trash. But the practice of burning household waste is legal under Air Quality regulations. Open burning – limited to burning “domestic refuse” – is allowed on the property of private residences where not more than two families are living. However:

- The waste must be the result of “normal occupancy.” This does not include demolition waste, home insulation, shingles, treated wood, paint, painted or stained objects or furniture, tires, mattresses, box springs, metal, insulating rubber coating on copper wire, old television sets and appliances, automobiles, automotive parts and batteries. These must be disposed of according to solid-waste regulations.
- Whether it's household or agricultural waste, DEP encourages you to be considerate of your neighbors by not allowing smoke, embers or ash to travel onto others' properties.

In addition to the exemption for household waste, certain agricultural operations are exempt from open-burning regulations.

Your municipality may be required to recycle under the law, Recycling Act 101 of 1988. If that's the case, keep in mind that it is illegal to burn the kinds of waste that your municipality recycles. This includes leaves and other yard waste. In addition, Act 97, the Pennsylvania Solid Waste Management Act, regulates the burning of solid waste, and you may be required to get a permit. To determine if you need a permit, call your regional DEP office (phone numbers are on the back of this fact sheet).

Why doesn't the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulate residential open burning?

Except for the items listed above, DEP feels that regulating open burning of household waste is best left in the hands of municipal officials. Under state law, they have the authority to enact an ordinance with requirements that are equal to or more stringent than state regulations. A municipal ordinance cannot be less stringent. In DEP's experience, local officials are more aware of the needs in their communities and are better equipped to adjust requirements accordingly. In fact, many communities across the Commonwealth have enacted open-burning ordinances. Many of these are based on a model ordinance that DEP has developed. Upon request, DEP can provide a copy of the model ordinance and copies of actual ordinances.

Why worry about residential open burning if it's legal?

The nature of residential trash has changed over the past 50 years. In the past, waste consisted mostly of paper. Today, plastic packaging or products and other synthetic supplies make up a large portion of society's waste. When burned, these items can emit toxic pollutants. Collectively, open burning contributes to atmospheric pollution and increases chances of health problems. A study conducted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the New York State Department of Health shows that a single household burn barrel emits the same amount of toxic chemicals as a well-controlled municipal incinerator.

What are the health effects of burning trash?

Open burning of residential waste sends contaminated soot particles into the air. The short-term effects are usually coughing or irritation of the eyes. Smoke can be a vehicle for deep penetration of pollutants into the lungs. There is a danger of damaging lungs, kidneys, the nervous system and liver. Long-term exposure could lead to cancer and emphysema. Acids can irritate the lungs and cause problems for people suffering from asthma and emphysema.

What alternatives do I have to open burning?

In today's environment, you don't have to burn any of your waste. You can recycle it or use a commercial waste hauler to take it to a landfill or incinerator. Many

municipalities provide waste collection as part of their services.

If I am going to burn, how can I make it safer?

Because of the health risks, DEP strongly recommends that you recycle as much of your trash as possible or take it to a landfill or incinerator. If you must burn waste at home, first check to see if your municipality has an open-burning ordinance. Often, an ordinance has specific instructions about when and how you can burn household waste. If you choose to burn the waste, ensure that your fire burns as cleanly as possible by:

- Burning the waste at a high temperature.
- Making sure the fire gets plenty of oxygen. If you're using a barrel, make sure there are plenty of air holes in the sides and bottom of the barrel and in the lid. This will help create a draft as the fire burns. You also can cover the barrel with a grate.

- Not letting the fire smolder, even for a few hours or days. Pollution increases when a fire smolders.

What can I do to limit open burning in my community?

Work with your local elected officials to draft an open-burning ordinance that is as fair as possible to everyone.

Where can I get more information about open burning?

DEP has copies of its model ordinance for open burning, as well as copies of actual ordinances enacted by various municipalities. DEP also can provide copies of various studies about open burning. Additional information is available on DEP's website www.dep.state.pa.us (directLINK: "open burning"). You can also call DEP's Bureau of Air Quality at (717) 787-9702 to request copies of this information. For information about recycling, visit DEP's website (directLINK: "recycling") or call (717) 787-7382.

DEP Regional Offices

Northwest Region

230 Chestnut St.
Meadville, PA 16335-3481
814-332-6945

Counties: *Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Venango and Warren*

Southwest Region

400 Waterfront Drive
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-4745
412-442-4000

Counties: *Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset, Washington and Westmoreland*

Northcentral Region

208 W. Third Street, Suite 101
Williamsport, PA 17701-6448
570-327-3636

Counties: *Bradford, Cameron, Clearfield, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga and Union*

Southcentral Region

909 Elmerton Avenue
Harrisburg, PA 17110-8200
717-705-4700

Counties: *Adams, Bedford, Berks, Blair, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Perry and York*

Northeast Region

2 Public Square
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711-0790
570-826-2511

Counties: *Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming*

Southeast Region

Lee Park, Suite 6010
555 North Lane
Conshohocken, PA 19428-2233
610-832-6000

Counties: *Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia*

Allegheny County and Philadelphia County each has its own air quality program. For more information about air quality in Philadelphia County, call Air Management Services at (215) 685-7572. In Allegheny County, call (412) 578-8103.

This fact sheet and related environmental information are available electronically via Internet. For more information, visit us through the Pennsylvania homepage at <http://www.state.pa.us> or visit DEP directly at <http://www.dep.state.pa.us> (choose directLINK "open burning").



www.GreenWorksChannel.org - A web space dedicated to helping you learn how to protect and improve the environment. The site features the largest collection of environmental videos available on the Internet and is produced by the nonprofit Environmental Fund for Pennsylvania, with financial support from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, 800 334-3190.