



# Fact Sheet

California Environmental Protection Agency

 **Air Resources Board**

## Backyard Burning of Household Waste

### What you don't know can hurt you

Some people still have 55-gallon metal drums in their yards that they use to burn household garbage and rubbish. It's important to know that burning these materials can release some very unhealthy air pollutants that can affect you, your family, and your community. Below are some facts about the public health problem posed by burning these wastes at home.

- Use of burn barrels is a public health concern. Household waste burned in these barrels produces toxic pollutants that can linger in the environment and our bodies for a long time. These toxic pollutants may cause cancer, immune system damage, and other health problems.
- The cancer causing pollutants produced during burning include dioxins. Infants and young children may be especially vulnerable to dioxin exposure according to the State Office of Environmental Health and Hazard Assessment. The smoke produced by burning waste in burn barrels may also cause other health effects, such as triggering asthma attacks.
- Avoiding the plume of smoke is not sufficient to eliminate the potential health risks. These toxic pollutants can travel long distances in the air, and can deposit on soil, on plants, and in water. The ash from the barrel also contains these pollutants, which can be released into the soil and water. Animals and fish can ingest the pollutants, plants can absorb them, and they can be passed on to people when contaminated food is eaten.
- Before 2004, about 800,000 households throughout the State were allowed to burn some form of household waste in burn barrels. This burning was one of the largest sources of dioxins in California. Other sources such as municipal and medical waste incinerators have strict pollution control devices that substantially eliminate dioxins. No pollution control device is feasible for controlling the toxins from backyard burning of household waste.
- To address this public health concern, the California Air Resources Board adopted a Statewide rule restricting the burning of household waste at residences, effective January 1, 2004.

## What the Statewide Rule Requires

- Burning household waste outdoors in burn barrels or backyard incinerators is prohibited Statewide. Exemptions in limited areas are explained below.
- Burning dry vegetation waste in piles at a residence may be allowed, unless prohibited by local rules and ordinances. Check with your local air district for these additional restrictions.
- Outdoor residential waste burning is only allowed on a permissive burn day in the air district where the burning occurs. Local air districts have recorded phone messages or websites where burn day status is announced.

## Exemptions

- Exemptions *may* be allowed to burn paper and cardboard, and to use burn barrels, in areas of very low population density in some of the more rural areas of the State, where availability of waste services is limited. Check with your local air district to find out if you live in an exemption area, or consult the exemption list on the residential burning web page listed below.
- No exemptions are allowed for burning plastics or household garbage.

## Alternatives to Burning

- Household garbage and rubbish must be disposed of through curbside pickup or self-hauling to a transfer station, landfill, or recycling center.
- The volume of waste materials we generate for disposal can be reduced in several ways. These include buying products with less packaging, reusing materials, and recycling. Household waste can be compacted. Organic and paper waste can be composted.
- Although many local ordinances continue to allow natural vegetation to be burned in piles, non-burning alternatives should be considered where possible to minimize neighborhood smoke impacts. These alternatives include composting and chipping vegetation.

## Additional Information Sources

- ARB Residential Burning Web Page:  
<http://www.arb.ca.gov/smp/resburn/resburn.htm>
- United States Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) Backyard Burning Web Page:  
<http://epa.gov/waste/nonhaz/municipal/backyard/index.htm>
- California Integrated Waste Management Board Web Page:  
<http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/PublicEd/>
- ARB Public Information Office: (916) 322-2990