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Unified Air Pollution Control District
serving Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz counties

Photographs from the Bonny Doon Fire Safe
Council's Workshop on
**Best Practices for
Backyard Burning**

held on February 19, 2011 in Bonny Doon

On February 19, 2011, the Bonny Doon Fire Safe Council hosted a workshop to demonstrate the best practices for backyard burning. Fire Safe Council members, local residents, CAL FIRE, and the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District participated in the event.



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Question: What is a “Backyard Burn”?

Answer: Backyard burns are fires for disposing of dry natural vegetation grown on and being burned on the premises of a single- or two-family residence.

- Plant prunings, shrubbery, tree trimmings or branches, and weeds **can** be burned.
- Grass clippings, piled leaves, and piled pine needles **cannot** be burned because they tend to be smoky.



Shortly after starting the workshop, it began to rain. Cooling temperatures turned the rain into a rare snowfall. Luckily, our host had kept the pile of yard trimmings covered throughout the wet season, so it was dry and ready to burn.



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The burn pile should be 4 feet by 4 feet maximum size, as shown below by the orange stakes.



Normally it is not ideal to burn during a rainstorm or snowstorm. However, everyone was determined to continue the workshop as long as the weather allowed.

Our hosts placed the dried yard trimmings in a loose pile so that air could circulate well. The burn materials were free from trash and dirt, and they had dried at least 30 days. A small amount of newspaper was used to start the fire.



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Question: Why is it a “no-burn” day sometimes on a beautiful sunny day?

Answer: Visual sky conditions have little to do with burn day determination. Burn days are forecast by meteorologists using both vertical and horizontal smoke dispersal conditions, not by how cloudy or how sunny it is outside.

In our air basin, California law specifies two meteorological criteria that must be met in order to declare a burn day:

- Maximum mixing depth at least 1,500 feet msl.
- Daytime resultant windspeed in the mixing layer at least 5 mph.

When it was first started, the fire was a little smoky. The snow contributed to the initial smokiness.



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Within a very short span of time, the small, well-aerated pile began to burn hotter and more efficiently. Much less smoke was produced.



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Volunteers continued to feed the fire from the large pile of dried trimmings.



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Question: How long does the burn pile have to dry?

Answer: Depending on the size of the vegetation, the mandatory drying times are:

- Up to 2 inches in diameter → 30 days
- More than 2 inches to 6 inches in diameter → 60 days
- More than 6 inches in diameter → 180 days

Even with snow falling steadily, the fire burned hot and with a minimum of smoke.



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Remember -- a properly burning fire produces very little smoke. Smokiness means the combustion is inefficient and more pollutants are being released.



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The snowstorm continued, so class ended early. Volunteers safely and completely extinguished the fire with water and a rake.



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The covered pile of yard trimmings will stay dry and ready to burn on a more favorable day. Plastic tarps or waterproof kraft paper can be used to cover piles.



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