

Burning Garbage

Many people around Minnesota still use on-site disposal methods like "backyard burning" to dispose of their household wastes. From burning waste in fire pits and woodstoves to the traditional burn barrel, over two percent of Minnesota's municipal solid waste (MSW) is still managed in this way.



For most Minnesotans, it is against the law to burn or bury household wastes — it's been illegal since 1969. Some farmers are still allowed to burn their household wastes, due to the limited availability of collection or drop-off services for waste and recyclables.

However, even if you live in a county where burning household waste is still allowed, there are several reasons why you should choose to dispose of your waste in another manner.

The Law

Two main statutes regulate open burning and on-site disposal of municipal solid waste in Minnesota.

Minn. Stat. 88.171: Open Burning Prohibitions addresses burning of prohibited materials such as industrial waste, garbage, and hazardous wastes. Subdivisions 1-10 go into the specific materials that are prohibited and may not be burned in Minnesota. Subdivision 8 specifically addresses "garbage":

(a) No person shall conduct, cause, or permit open burning of discarded material resulting from the handling, processing, storage, preparation, serving, or consumption of food, unless specifically allowed under section 17.135.

(b) A county may allow a resident to conduct open burning of material described in paragraph (a) that is generated from the resident's household if the county board by

resolution determines that regularly scheduled pickup of the material is not reasonably available to the resident.

Minn. Stat. 17.135: Farm Disposal of Solid Waste covers the specifics relating to farming operations and open burning or burying of municipal solid waste. It states that:

(a) A permit is not required from a state agency, except under sections 88.16, 88.17, and 88.22 for a person who owns or operates land used for farming that buries, or burns and buries, solid waste generated from the person's household or as part of the person's farming operation if the burying is done in a nuisance free, pollution free, and aesthetic manner on the land used for farming. This exception does not apply if regularly scheduled pickup of solid waste is reasonably available at the person's farm, as determined by resolution of the county board of the county where the person's farm is located.

Burning garbage releases toxic air pollutants

Household burn barrels, fire pits, wood stoves or similar homemade devices produce low-temperature fires. They receive very little oxygen and produce a lot of smoke. Under these conditions a variety of toxic substances is produced. Virtually all of the pollutants are released into the air, and close to ground level where they are easily inhaled.

What pollutants are emitted from burn barrels?

Carbon monoxide (CO), carbon dioxide (CO₂), and nitrogen oxides (NO_x) represent the largest portion of pollutants emitted from burning household waste in a burn barrel.

Smaller amounts of more poisonous chemicals are also released into the air when household waste is burned. Chemicals commonly detected in the smoke include benzene, styrene, formaldehyde, polychlorinated dibenzodioxins (PCDDs or "dioxins"), polychlorinated dibenzofurans (PCDFs or "furans"), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and heavy metals such as lead, mercury and arsenic.

Health Concerns

Among the environmental and health risks posed by residential garbage burning, **dioxin** is the key concern.

Dioxin is a potent **human carcinogen** that is especially harmful for pregnant women, children, and the elderly. Dioxin is also an **endocrine disrupter** and can cause reproductive, developmental, and immunological problems in humans and animals.

U.S. EPA research shows that burn barrels are the #1 source of dioxin in the U.S. Just one burn barrel can produce as much or more than a full-scale municipal waste combustor burning 200 tons/day. ("Inventory of Sources of Dioxin in the U.S.," March 2001)

Read more about dioxin on the [Minnesota Department of Health](#) web site.

To Obtain a Burn Permit in Martin County

Contact the Law Enforcement Center. All burn permits must be renewed on January 1. Cost is \$10.

Some towns in Martin County allow burning periodically during the year. Contact the City Hall to follow specific instructions.