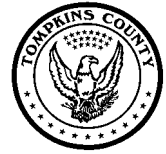




TOMPKINS COUNTY
ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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**Frequently Asked Questions
Open Burning of Household Waste**

April 18, 2005

1. What is open burning?

Open burning, commonly referred to as backyard burning or using burn barrels, is any outdoor fire or smoke producing process that sends contaminants directly into the outdoor air.

2. What open burning is currently allowed in Tompkins County?

The 20,600 rural households located more than 1/8th of a mile outside the City of Ithaca and outside the county's six villages are allowed to burn anything except garbage.

3. What open burning is currently NOT allowed in Tompkins County?

The Tompkins County Sanitary Code prohibits open burning of garbage countywide. The Code further prohibits all open burning within the city of Ithaca, within any of the six villages, or within 1/8th mile of any city or village.

4. What is garbage?

Garbage is all animal and vegetable wastes resulting from the processing, preparation, cooking or serving of food. It is already illegal to burn garbage in any part of Tompkins County.

5. What is household waste?

Household waste includes garbage and all other waste that is generated inside a residential household (i.e., in the kitchen, the den, the home office, the bathroom, etc.). Household waste contains food packaging and other packaging material made of plastic, plastic-coated paper, and chlorinated paper that create toxic chemicals when burned. In a resolution passed in October 2004, the EMC recommended that additional measures be implemented countywide to prevent the open burning of household waste.

6. Why prevent open burning of household waste?

Today's household waste is not the same as it was when your parents or grandparents burned their household waste. Packaging of foods and other household items changed dramatically in the second half of the 1900s. It now contains plastics, heavy metals and a variety of synthetics. Burning these produces toxic chemicals, including dioxins that can negatively impact human health in many ways. Open burning of household waste creates significant amounts of dioxins due to the low combustion temperatures, poor air distribution and the presence of chlorine, which is found in almost all household waste components.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, backyard burning of household waste is one of the largest known sources of dioxins in the nation. Dioxins are highly toxic even at extremely low levels, and have been linked to serious health problems in humans that include cancer and adverse development and reproductive effects. Airborne dioxins settle onto feed crops, which are then eaten by domestic meat and dairy animals. Airborne dioxins also settle on water or enter waterways through soil erosion. These dioxins accumulate in the fats of animals, and then in humans when we consume meat, fish, and dairy products.

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In addition to dioxins, smoke from the open burning of waste contains a variety of harmful pollutants, including particulates, sulfur dioxide, lead, mercury, formaldehyde, and arsenic. Breathing these pollutants can damage your lungs, nervous system, kidneys, and liver.

People who burn household waste put themselves and their neighbors at increased risk. Cooperative, respectful relations among neighbors are common, and often essential, in rural communities. Burning household waste can hurt the health of the people who live in the neighborhood because dioxins and other pollutants travel by wind, and can create resentment between residents and degrade the quality of country life.

Links to more information on the health impacts of open burning:

<http://www.health.state.ny.us.nysdoh/environ/trash.htm>

<http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/muncpl/backyard/health.htm>

<http://www.burnbarrel.org>

7. Would I still be able to burn brush?

Yes, the burning of yard and garden debris, and tree trimmings would still be permitted, as would campfires, barbecues, pig roasts, and outdoor chimneys.

8. What are the alternatives to burning household waste?

Tompkins County has a very comprehensive and affordable curbside household waste and recycling program. Your county government has invested in a state-of-the-art solid waste management facility designed with enough capacity to process all of the household waste generated in the county. This facility eliminates the need for backyard burning and is currently not being used to its full capacity.

9. Who would provide enforcement if open burning of household waste was banned Countywide?

The Tompkins County Health Department is responsible for enforcing the County Sanitary Code, which includes the current open burning regulations. It is probable that the Health Department would enforce a countywide ban on open burning of household waste.

Education and enforcement is not expected to significantly increase the existing departmental workload. A survey in the fall of 2004 of the four New York State counties that currently enforce countywide bans on open burning found that on average two to three complaints were received per month.

10. How extensive is open burning in Tompkins County?

Backyard burning is a common method of household waste disposal in rural areas. A telephone survey conducted by Patrick Engineering in the early 1990s, estimated that 40% to 50% of rural Illinois residents in five counties burned an average of 62% of their household waste. Another study conducted by the St. Lawrence County Planning Office in 1993 concluded that a minimum of 48.2% of rural households use burn barrels or similar means of incineration at home. ***If, conservatively, just 40% of rural residents in Tompkins County burn household waste, that is equal to 8,236 households.***

11. What are others saying about open burning of household trash?

In August 2004, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Erin M. Crotty joined the environmental commissioners of seven other northeast states in signing a resolution calling for regional action to reduce air pollution from open, unregulated burning of household waste. Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont joined New York in supporting this measure, which also was signed by the regional EPA administrator's for New England, New York, and New Jersey. Open burning of household waste is banned statewide in all of these states, except New York.