

Is burning waste worth the risk of starting a wildfire or compromising your health?

By [Central Office](#) April 14, 2015

DNR officials respond to several wildfires in recent days, urge alternatives to burning

MADISON - With fire danger currently elevated in Wisconsin, it's even more important that people consider recycling and composting instead of burning waste and yard debris, which Department of Natural Resource officials caution may cause wildfires and add pollutants to the air.

"Wildfire season is here and it's not a good time to be burning outdoors. Just yesterday, we had a 200 acre wildfire and evacuated 44 homes," says Catherine Koele, DNR wildfire prevention specialist. "Luckily, no one lost their home and no one was injured, but it was a good reminder to consider alternatives to burning, especially right now with the current fire threat."



A 200-plus acre wildland fire west of the village of Necedah in Juneau County required the evacuation of 44 homes on Monday.

WDNR Photo

Though it is legal to burn some yard waste in certain areas, the department cautions that debris burning is the number one cause of wildfires in Wisconsin, causing about 30 percent of the state's wildfires each year.

"Open burning of any material produces a variety of air pollutants. Burning plastics or treated or painted wood can release carcinogens such as arsenic, benzene and formaldehyde into the air," said Brad Wolbert, DNR recycling and solid waste section chief. "Children, older adults and people with cardiac disease and respiratory ailments, such as asthma, are generally more

sensitive to smoke from burning garbage. Burning anything can affect your health, your neighbors' health and the environment."

Burning household trash in Wisconsin is illegal. A study by the U.S Environmental Protection Agency found that 15 households burning trash each day emits the same amount of cancer-causing dioxin and furan emissions as a 200-ton-per-day municipal waste incinerator that uses high-efficiency emissions control technology.

It is also illegal to burn recyclable materials such as glass, plastic, metal containers and clean paper, as well as agricultural and horticultural plastics such as silage film, haylage bags, bale wrap, woven tarps and nursery pots and trays. If these materials cannot be recycled, they should go to a landfill.

"Every community in Wisconsin has a recycling program for plastic, glass and metal containers, and paper," Wolbert said, "For yard debris, composting is a good option."

Composting and recycling are the preferred alternatives to burning - search "[open burning](#)" on the DNR website dnr.wi.gov for more information and alternatives.

Burn permits help protect against wildfire

If burning is the only option for yard waste, burning permits may be required to burn yard debris piles or for broadcast burning any time the ground is not completely snow-covered. In [DNR Protection Areas](#), permit holders are authorized to burn vegetative materials, such as leaves, brush and pine needles. Permits are designed so that burning is done safely with minimal wildfire risk.

Customers can obtain [DNR permits online](#) or by calling 1-888-WIS-BURN from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. They may also visit their local ranger station or emergency fire warden to receive permits. Once an individual has a burning permit, he or she must call or go online after 11 a.m. on the day of the planned burn to check [daily fire restrictions](#).

"Currently, much of the state is under high to very high fire danger. Several counties have suspended DNR burning permits due to low humidity and windy conditions," says Koele. "It's just not a good idea to be burning anything right now."

For more information on burning permits and the current fire danger in Wisconsin, visit the DNR website dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "[fire](#)." To learn more about ways to handle waste materials, search "[waste](#)" on the DNR website. Information on recycling of agricultural pesticide containers is available at www.acrecycle.org (exit DNR).

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Brad Wolbert, 608-264-6286

Catherine Koele, Wildfire Prevention Specialist, 715-356-5211 x208 or 608-219-9075

Last Revised: Tuesday, April 14, 2015