

Back Yard Burning: It's Not Like It Used To Be

By Mary Ashwood & Bob Messinger
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Mary Ashwood, from the Otsego County Conservation Association, wrote the following article. She is part of a group of concerned citizens in Otsego County who are promoting the elimination of open burning.

After New York's recent long winter, spring-cleaning sounds almost magical. But in rural New York State, it is instead too often a toxic experience. For many, nearly a third of my county's residents, it means uncluttering the barn or the backroom and burning all the unwanted papers, plastics, household furnishings and clothing in either piles, the outdoor wood furnace or in the ubiquitous 55-gallon drum, a.k.a. the burn barrel.

So what's the stink? Rural residents have been getting rid of garbage by burning it for a long time, but garbage just isn't the same anymore. Inks are often heavy metals. Paper is often coated with thin layers of plastic. It seems that plastic is everywhere. If you burn these items at the low temperatures attained in backyard barrels or piles, you create a toxic cooker for such toxins as dioxins, furans, heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, hydrochloric and sulfuric acid.

Some of these toxins may indeed only pollute the burner's property. But most times these toxins travel far beyond the confines of one person's property. So every time we burn, we create and release toxins into the environment that stockpile in our fatty tissue. They might not kill you or even make you sick - today. But when these toxins reach crucial levels, they have been linked with increased respiratory disease, damage to the immune system, birth defects and certain cancers.

Even if you do not burn or have neighbors who burn, when you eat meat or dairy products you can ingest these long-lived, fat-soluble, carcinogens. Too often farmers site burn barrels adjacent to their fields and pastures where cattle can ingest the dioxins and other toxins that are deposited on the plants. It is then stored in their fat. Every time we eat meat and dairy we can add to our own personal dioxin reservoirs.

More and more towns, counties and even states have enacted or are considering anti-burning legislation due to rising awareness of this potential health problem. Legislation to limit burning in rural areas has passed the New York State Assembly unanimously several times (four years in a row), but the New York State Senate is yet to be convinced. A group including organizations like the American Lung Association, the Sierra Club, the Otsego County Conservation Association, the New York Public Interest Research Group, Environmental Advocates, the NYS Assembly Legislative Commission on Solid Waste, The NYS Assembly Toxics Commission, and the NYS Attorney General's Office are promoting the passage of this proposed legislation during the 2004 session.

Consider alternatives to burning such as recycling or just not buying a product because of its excessive packaging. Pass on your unwanted items to thrift stores or just try to re-use items. In this small way, we can make a big step towards lessening air, water and soil pollution and return some truth to the image of a country being a clean and healthy place to live. Good luck with your spring-cleaning.

P.S. by Bob Messinger

I completely understand NYRWA's reluctance to openly support this proposed change to a "way of life" in rural New York. But having attended a number of meetings where this issue has been thoroughly discussed, I must agree that open burning does present dangers to our health and environment. Studies have shown that in some areas up to 50% of rural residents burn their trash. They continue to do it mostly because their fathers did it, and their grandfathers did it, and their greatgrandfathers did it. It was an acceptable way of garbage disposal. Studies show that in many cases economy and



convenience are not the major reason folks continue to burn their garbage, they do it simply because, "it's always been done that way." The problem today is that we aren't burning what our grandfathers burned. That was mostly wood and wood by-products. As Mary pointed out, today's trash includes a great deal of plastic (both seen and unseen), and the uncontrolled burning of plastic at low temperatures produces an environmental nightmare.

Any change to New York's Environmental Conservation Law regarding open burning will only happen after people understand the reason for it. They will agree to this change of lifestyle only after they understand the dangers involved with what they are presently doing. Open burning is certainly not the only past practice that has been proven harmful. For many years, we simply deposited our garbage on the ground where the leachate it produce often contaminated both surface and groundwater. We, unknowingly, used DDT, Agent Orange and other harmful pesticides. Years ago, little thought was given to hazardous waste disposal and batteries with mercury were thought harmless. There is any number of other examples.

Change is hard. But most people will change for the right reasons. Folks want to do the right thing for themselves, their families, and the environment. Open burning restriction is an issue that people, once they understand it, will see as beneficial. But it will be difficult, because what is being asked is not so much a change in law - as it is a change of lifestyle. ♠