

Controlled Burning All Year Round?

For many years I have been asked the question “Why can’t we burn when there is snow on the ground?” From a fire danger perspective it has always been a real good question. We have always been told we couldn’t do any control burns in Lewis & Clark County between December 1st and the end of February because of the air quality and Montana Department of Environmental Qualities (MDEQ) regulations. The fire community and the mitigation contractors have been pressing the issue with MDEQ for the last couple of years because of the large amount of red and dead trees. There simply is not enough safe burning time to get them all burned.

Last winter they finally admitted that there was not an outright prohibition for burning between those dates and they were finally staffing a position to deal with any requests that came in for Winter Time Open Burning. It turns out there is an established process for making such requests, having them approved, and then getting the burns carried out. It really is amazing what you learn when you ask the right person the right question!

Why the hesitation on MDEQs part? Well, winter burning may reduce the fire danger but it dramatically increases the risk of bad air quality. As you will see in the next few paragraphs about how this process works, there are many steps and they all have to do with keeping the air quality in the Helena valley in the healthy range - Where we all want it! I don’t think any of us want to be able to see the air we breathe this winter like we did all summer! The only way this is going to work is if we cooperate and understand that winter burning is a tradeoff between lower fire risk and higher health risks. The first few burners that light off their piles with a “hell with everyone else attitude”, will see steep fines and put the entire possibility of winter burning in jeopardy. The other thing everyone has to realize is this is a LAST RESORT! In the request for wintertime burning you will have to explain why it is ESSENTIAL the burning be allowed in the winter. Every backyard burner is not going to get approved for wintertime burning. Large mitigation projects protecting homes, escape routes, and entire subdivisions are going to get priority over 10 bags of leaves from grandma’s tree.

The process starts with you getting or having a L&C County Burn permit. You can get them on the burnpermits.mt.gov website or at the City/County Building – Real Estate Office. You will have to activate your L&C County Burn Permit every day you are allowed to burn by MDEQ. That is the system that notifies the L&C 911 Center that you are doing a controlled burn. The system will be running all year round now and will allow you to activate your permit unless overall conditions are bad enough to prevent all burning. If you printed your permit earlier this year, the expiration date was November 30, 2012 but if you go on the website after December 1st and reprint your permit, it will show an expiration date of February 28, 2013.

Step 2 is calling MDEQ’s Air Quality Bureau at 444-3490 and talk with them about what you are planning to burn and when. They will help you determine if you qualify before you spend the time filling out the form. If your plan meets the qualification of being ESSENTIAL, to obtain the Montana Wintertime Open Burning Request form go to www.burnclosures.mt.gov website. At the bottom of the page there are Additional Links, click on *State Air Quality Open Burning Permits Webpage*: link. This will take you to the

Open Burning Permits page. At the bottom of that page there is a link to the page for *Air Quality Forms Applications, Instructions, and Manuals* and at the bottom of that there is a link to the form – *Winter Time Open Burning Request Form*.

The MONTANA WINTERTIME OPEN BURNING REQUEST is two pages long comprised of 16 questions. The first two questions address the reasons why the burning was not completed during the regular burn season or cannot wait until regular open burning starts again. The remaining questions detail out exactly what you want to burn, a description of the piles, the location and its relation to neighbors or sensitive areas, elevation, how long each burn will take, and the proposed dates you would like to burn. The address where you send the request is on the bottom of the second page.

Once MDEQ gets the request, they will either approve or deny it based on the answers. If you are approved, you will start working with the MDEQ Meteorologist to find a weather window for your location and duration of burn. The weather will dictate when your specific project and location are approved for actual burning. Once you get the go ahead for each burn, activate your L&C County Burn Permit each day you burn so the 911 Center, local fire departments, and the public are notified.

I know the process is long and involved but it is way better than NO burning allowed. It is important that you follow the process as the MDEQ fines for violating the air quality rules are in the thousands of dollars. They make the fine for burning without a L&C County burn permit seem like lunch money! If you have questions or need advice, contact Fire Chief Bob Drake at 431.3600 and I will help you any way I can to get your burning done safely.