

What's the Problem with Backyard Burning?

There is nothing worse than a fine calm summer's day being spoiled by the fumes and smoke coming from your neighbour's backyard fire. Burning household waste either in an open fire or in a back yard 'incinerator' is not a solution to managing our household waste because it means burning at low temperatures, which is damaging to the environment.

Almost 73% of the dioxins emitted to air in Ireland come from the uncontrolled, low temperature burning of waste. This makes backyard burning the single biggest source of dioxins released into the Irish Environment.

The Attraction: According to Áine Mc Carthy, Environmental Awareness Officer with North Tipperary County Council "There has been increase in backyard burning of waste especially during the summer months. Some people see it as a way to save money. There is no doubt that some people think that there is no harm in this way of reducing the amount of waste of which they have to dispose. To some people this is a legitimate form of waste disposal, but this is not the case"

The Problems: Burning used to be seen as a nuisance to the householder because it ruined a neighbour's washing. In the past the nuisance caused directly by smoke was considered the only reason not to burn waste. Traditionally waste was made up of simple things like wood, paper and organically produced food waste. However modern science has changed much of this. The application of chemicals to preserve and enhance things and the widespread use of metals and plastic in most manufacturing items has changed much of what is in our waste today.

Toxic Fumes: "When we burn most waste items, toxic and dangerous by-products are created. These are not subsequently destroyed by the fire and are emitted into the air we breathe." added Ms. Mc Carthy. These pollutants can have profound long term health implications. Tiny amounts of some pollutants emitted by the backyard burning of chlorinated products like certain types of plastics and solvents. These are sufficient to have undesirable health effects. They can also contaminate our back-gardens when they precipitate out of the air and land on the ground. This type of uncontrolled burning should be avoided at all costs. For example burning wood that is painted or treated with a preservative can be the cause of emitting very toxic fumes. The same is true when paper, which is plastic coated or contains certain inks, or glue used to bind pages together in book form, is burned.

The Real Solution: The only real solution is to minimise the amount of waste of which we have to dispose. We can achieve this through changes in what we buy. We all must cut down on the volumes of waste, which we need to dispose of by avoidance and reuse by assessing our waste to look for reuse opportunities. Other solutions are recycling, home composting, and passing on your textiles and footwear to charities.

"By signing up to a private waste collector in North Tipperary you will be provided with a two bin service, one of these bins is solely for recyclables which are collected monthly or bi-weekly depending on the service provider. There are two Civic Amenity sites in North Tipperary with a third due to open in Roscrea during the summer. You can ring the Local Authority to find out which materials they accept or

visit the website at www.tipperarynorth.ie/environment . You can dramatically reduce the volume of your waste needing disposal by using a facility like this.” commented Ms. Mc Carthy

The Law: According to Aidan Marshall, a member of the North Tipperary County Council’s Enforcement team “Anyone who carries out outdoor burning activities can be liable for prosecution under the Air Pollution Act 1997, particularly if they cause nuisance. Householders often complain that they can’t open their windows or hang out their washing because of the fumes coming from their neighbour’s backyard fire.”

There are two important laws, which prevent the burning of waste, even when waste is being burned as an alternative fuel. The Air Pollution Act 1987 obliges everybody not to cause or permit an emission in such a quantity, or in such a manner, as to be a nuisance or cause Air Pollution. There is an additional obligation on business and other non-domestic operators to use the best practical means to prevent or limit emissions. The Waste Management Act 1996 prohibits the burning of any waste except in accordance with a permit. The Local Authority may issue such a permit for relatively small quantities, subject to conditions. The process involved is very similar to applying for Planning Permission. Advertisements have to be placed in the paper and site notices have to be erected and maintained. Usually such permits have conditions applied, which restrict the types of waste, and how it is burned. An example of a case where a permit has been issued is the burning of natural untreated wood by a sawmill for space heating. Both of these laws have heavy penalties for non-compliance.

Please notify the County Council if you come across any incidents of backyard burning. Free information fact sheets on backyard burning are available from North Tipperary County Council Environment Section, telephone 067 44786.

Ends

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