

Managing Smoke

Since 1978, the State Airshed Management Group, informally known as Smoke Management, has been coordinating large fall burns to reduce the amount of smoke in the air. The program is completely paid for by the members, whose fees are based on how many acres they burn and how much smoke they produce.

Members include agencies and companies responsible for large acreages as well as federal, state and local air quality regulators:

Army Corps of Engineers	Idaho Dept. of Lands	Pyramid Mtn Lumber
Big Sky Lumber	Idaho Fish and Game	R-Y Timber, Inc.
Bureau of Indian Affairs	Louisiana Pacific Corp.	Smurfit-Stone Container
Bureau of Land Mgt.	Missoula Health Dept.	Stimson Lumber
Coeur d'Alene Tribe	Montana DEQ	Stoltze Land & Lumber
Crown Pacific Inland	Montana DNRC	US Forest Service
Darby Lumber Co.	National Weather Service	US Fish and Wildlife
Glacier National Park	Plum Creek Timber	Yellowstone Nat. Park
Idaho DEQ	Potlatch Corp.	University of Idaho

Members submit lists of proposed burns to the monitoring unit. A meteorologist forecasts how well the smoke will disperse each day and decides whether to restrict burning. Restrictions may be imposed by airshed, elevation or special impact zones around populated areas.

Many loggers, farmers and ranchers who are not part of the Smoke Management program benefit from it. They don't have to pay any fees, but as long as they get a permit from their local fire agency and follow the restrictions posted on Missoula's Outdoor Burning Hotlines, they can burn in the fall. Without the program, fall burning would probably be far more restrictive in Missoula County, especially around the urban centers.

Who Can Burn

Fall burning is limited to that which cannot be done readily in the spring and for which no reasonable alternative for achieving goals or disposing of material is available. This includes two basic categories: prescribed wildland burning and essential agricultural burning.

Prescribed Wildland Burning

These burns occur on forest land or relatively undeveloped rangeland to:

- improve wildlife habitat
- improve range conditions
- promote forest regeneration
- reduce the fire hazard from forestry practices (like logging)
- control forest pests and diseases

Essential Agricultural Burning

These burns occur on a farm or ranch to:

- eliminate excess vegetation from cultivated fields
- improve range conditions
- improve wildlife habitat

Essential agricultural burning is almost always field or broadcast burning - not the burning of piles.

Burning Seasons:

General	March - August
Conditional	March - August
Essential Agricultural	March - October
Film Production	March - November
Prescribed Wildland	All year
Firefighter Training	All year
Emergency	All year

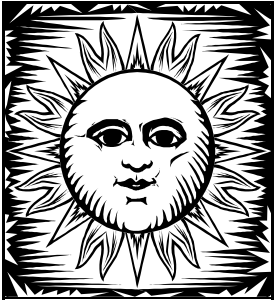
It's Fall



Why Can't I Burn?

Explanation of the Fall Burning Season in Missoula County

For Outdoor Burning, Think Spring



It's a fact of valley living. We have inversions, which means smoke and other pollutants can linger in the air. Cold air is heavy, and at night it tends to slip down from the mountains into our valleys. Without wind or the energy of the sun to warm the earth and make the cold air move, it just sits there and doesn't mix with other layers above it. That means all the pollutants produced under these inversion conditions build up. Unfortunately, this is the same air we all have to breathe.

Inversions occur most frequently in the fall and winter, when the days are shorter and the sun is often obscured. As a consequence, outdoor burning is restricted in the fall and only allowed under special circumstances in the winter. During the long days of spring and summer, the sun's energy creates updrafts, which disperse pollutants. However, the danger of wild-fire is typically high from July to September. So, when it comes to general outdoor burning in Missoula County, think Spring!

Someone is Burning in the Fall. Why?



Montana's forests evolved with fire. Our state tree, the ponderosa pine, depends on fire to compete against less fire-resistant firs. The western larch needs fire to remove pine needles and other dead matter that forms a thick mat on the forest floor for its seedlings to germinate. But, after decades of fire suppression, these forests have changed from relatively open stands to dense fir forests with a lot of undergrowth. This sets the stage for a severe wild fire that could devastate the forest, pollute the air, and threaten homes and lives.

One way of restoring forest health and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires is to use fire under controlled conditions. It's a natural means of cleansing the forest floor and rejuvenating the landscape. Loggers have been burning their unwanted tree tops and limbs in slash piles for more than a century. Ranchers and foresters carefully ignite sections of land to reduce old vegetation and to encourage new leafy growth, which in turn attracts more wildlife.

The best time to do this large scale burning is in the fall, when the fire will burn hot enough to remove the thick layer on the forest floor. Winds tend to be calmer, which reduces the chance that fires will get away. And instead of heading into the hot dry summer season, the risk of flare ups is reduced with the coming rains and snows of winter.

"It's just a small pile..."

It's true that your small pile of tree limbs would have little impact on the valley's air quality, but consider the effects of smoke from hundreds or even thousands of small fires on the valley floor. Since the air is relatively calm in the fall, smoke would quickly fill the valley. The smoke from fires at higher elevations tends to disperse better and has less impact on the air quality of the population centers.

Up until the late 60's, we could burn leaves and other debris in the valley in the fall, but, because of this, we were violating federal clean air standards. As a result, clean up burning is no longer allowed past August under state and county air quality regulations.

Waiting until Spring

Clean up burning is allowed in the spring - with a permit from the fire department. If you cover your pile with a tarp this winter, it will be dry and ready to burn when the season begins.

If you don't want to wait until spring to get the yard cleaned up, you can always compost or landfill your yard waste.

**For more information:
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(406) 523-4755**



Missoula County
Fire Protection
Association
