

Pile Burning in the Central Coast

(Compiled by Jared Childress of the Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association Calpba.org)

Building the Pile:

1. Decide what is best for you and your land, whether to pile burn, chip or haul away.
2. Make sure brush, limbs etc. have dried for 1 month (0-2"), 2 months (2-6") or ½ year (6+ inches). The more it dries, the cleaner it will burn.
3. The legal "backyard burner" pile size is 4' in diameter and 4' tall. You can add to this as it burns down.
4. Make sure your burn-pile has at least 10' of clearance on all sides from other vegetation, is clear above it and 100' from all structures.
5. Build it on the flattest ground possible. If you must build on a hill, dig a "roll out" trench just below it, so that hot coals or logs will not roll downhill.
6. Build your pile with as vertical of sides as possible. This helps with a clean burn.
7. Cover the top of your pile with "pile burn paper" (<https://terratech.net/products/fire-equipment-control/clean-burn-slash-pile-paper-2/>) or a tarp that you remove before you light it. This will keep your pile dry in rain and allow you to burn in very wet and safe conditions. *This method is the safest way to burn without worry.*
8. Do not add non-vegetative materials to your pile. Do not burn trash. Do not burn grass or leaves, as they create lots of smoke. For you and your neighbor's health, avoid burning poison oak.

Air quality permit:

9. Apply for an open burn permit with the **Monterey Bay Air Resource District (MBARD)** at <https://www.mbard.org/open-burning> . The cost is free.
 - For **Backyard burners** (think single family home on small acreage) in San Benito, Monterey and Santa Cruz excluding San Lorenzo Valley: https://www.mbard.org/files/8319b8554/BackyardBurnBrochure_Non-SSA.pdf
 - For **Backyard burners in San Lorenzo Valley**: There are extra restrictions for burning in SLV due to chronically bad air quality. Once you apply for a permit, you must request a daily permit the day of or before you burn. There are only so many daily permits allowed. https://www.mbard.org/files/acf86aa78/BackyardBurnBrochure11-28-17_SLV.pdf
 - For **Land management or agricultural burn permit** ("Burning limited to: Agricultural and land management waste pile burning. Land management pile burning applies to the burning of natural vegetation and woody materials cleared from wildland areas managed by state and federal agencies, private camps, institutions and ranchers"): <https://portal.laserfiche.com/x4671/forms/AgBurnPermit>

Burn permit and seasonality:

10. The typical backyard, **Open Burn Season**, is roughly from Dec. 1st to May 1st. Although, this can vary depending on local weather conditions. Check for burn status at: <https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/current-burn-status/>
11. Determine if you are in "State Responsible Area" or "Local Responsible Area" or both. Contact your local fire district or your local CAL FIRE station to find out or check: [Welcome to State Responsibility Area Viewer \(ca.gov\)](https://www.fire.ca.gov/welcome-to-state-responsibility-area-viewer)
Or check out MBARD's fire district finder at: <https://mbuapcd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Viewer/index.html?appid=b06abae532f14f12bc3a88cb6ac7ba5a>
12. If you live in Monterey or San Benito County SRA, you will need a burn permit from CAL FIRE. You can get an online version at (it's a useful video too!): <https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/>

13. If you live in Santa Cruz County SRA, follow the guidelines found on this [PDF](#). Following these guidelines qualify as being in “permitted compliance”.
14. For large scale (aka bigger than 4x4’ pile) agricultural burns, you will need a LE-5 permit from Cal Fire when not in open burn season (roughly Dec 1- May 1): <https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/>
15. If you are in the LRA check with your city or county fire district that covers you, for burn permitting. The Santa Cruz County LRA Fire Depts can be found at:
<https://www.firesafesantacruz.org/santa-cruz-county-fire-protection-districts>

Day of Burn:

16. Check **air quality burn day status**: Fires are only allowed on permissive burn days. Check the MBARD Website at <http://www.mbard.org/> after 4:00 p.m. the day prior to determine burn day status. The “burn day status” link is found at the top left of the website page.
17. Burning shall not commence when the wind direction would blow smoke toward a Smoke Sensitive Area or populated area which would be adversely affected by the smoke.
18. **Notify** your local fire district or Cal Fire station with the address where you are burning, a phone contact, how many piles and at what time you plan to burn.
19. No burning should be undertaken unless weather conditions are such that burning can be considered safe. Do **not** burn on a windy day, as this substantially increases the chance of an escape. Do not burn on Red Flag days. The liability is on the landowner.
20. Let your neighbors know. If you are on a local Facebook group or Nextdoor, it can be a courtesy to put a message out to neighbors.
21. Wear appropriate clothing: leather work boots, jeans, long sleeve natural fiber shirt, leather gloves and eye protection.
22. Clear 10’ from the edge of your pile, down to bare “mineral” earth. This will help stop pile burn “creep” and embers that start escapes.
23. Have a **hand-tool**/ shovel and **water source** on hand.
24. Start burning no earlier than 8am, so that nighttime inversion layers may lift as the day progresses. Be at “burn down” (aka. be adding no more material) by 4:00pm. Have the pile extinguished by 5:00pm. For San Lorenzo Valley, burn down by 3:00 and extinguished at 4:00. These efforts allow for better smoke dispersal and cleaner air.
25. An adult is required to be in attendance of the fire. Invite friends too!
26. Have pile extinguished by 5:00pm (4:00 for San Lorenzo Valley). To extinguish, one can either:
 - Let the pile burn down to ash (only if the winds light and you have time to monitor it). Make sure you push all the coals into a mound in the middle as it burns down. This provides “blackened” edge of safety.
 - Douse the pile with water. Make sure you stir with a hand-tool and that all the heat is dispersed. It should be cool enough to touch. It takes more water than you think! You will end up with “bio-char” or charcoal, which is a great garden soil amendment, as it holds water and stable carbon (as opposed to the atmosphere).

Other resources:

- <http://www.bdfsc.org/best-practices-for-backyard-burns>
- Local Fire safe Councils:
<https://www.sbfsc.org/>
<https://www.firesafemonterey.org/>
<https://www.firesafesantacruz.org/>

● Central Coast Prescribe Burn Association: <https://calpba.org/>

● <https://www.readyforwildfire.org/prevent-wildfire/debris-burning/>