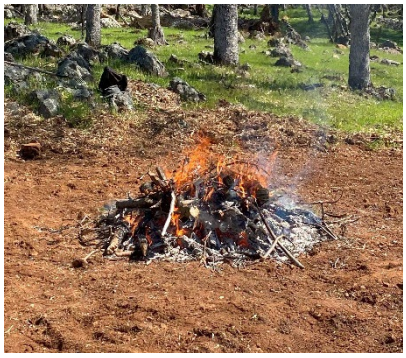
UC ANR Fire Network
University of California
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Guide to Residential Pile Building and Burning

Pile burning is an affordable and effective way to dispose of brush and woody vegetation around your house. Learning how to construct and prepare burn piles takes skill, good equipment, and an understanding of the current and predicted weather to minimize the risk of escape. **This factsheet provides guidance for homeowners conducting residential pile burns located within State Responsibility Area (SRA).** If you are located outside the SRA or have questions about other types of burning, please contact your local fire department and your local Air Quality Management District.

Pile Construction

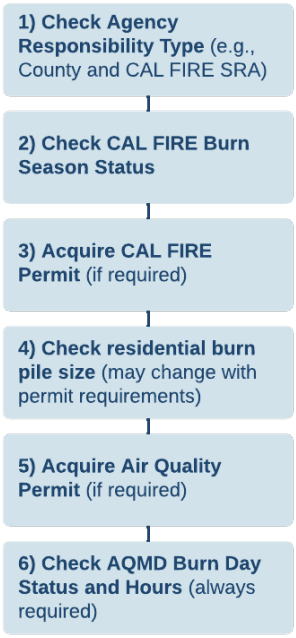
1. **Build your piles with cured materials**. Make sure the materials have dried for 1 month (0-2 inch diameter), 2 months (2-6"), or > 6 months (≥ 6"). The longer the dry time, the cleaner it burns.
2. **Ensure proper pile size.** Generally, residential piles are not limited in size when CAL FIRE Residential Burn Status is "Burning Allowed", though a 4' x 4' pile size is recommended and you can add to the pile as it burns down. **When CAL FIRE Residential Burn Status is "Permit Required", residential burn piles must be less than 4' x 4' in size**.
3. **Be mindful of vertical clearance and topography.** Make sure piles have at least 10' of clearance on all sides from other vegetation, have no vegetation directly overhead, and are at least 100' from all structures.
    - Build your pile on the flattest ground possible. Orient logs perpendicular to the contour to minimize rollout. If you build on a hill, dig a "roll out" trench just below the pile to prevent hot coals or logs from rolling downhill.
    - The more vertical the sides of your pile are, the cleaner it burns.



4. **Cover your pile to ensure a safe, clean burn.** You can use burn pile paper, which is safe to burn, or a tarp that you remove before you ignite the pile. Covering will keep your pile dry in rain and allow you to burn in wet conditions, when there is less risk of escape.
5. **Do not burn trash, treated wood, or piles consisting of mostly grass, leaves, or conifer needles**, as those can produce unhealthy smoke. Avoid burning poison oak.

Air quality permitting and regulations will vary based on your local Air Quality Management District and where your property is located. Some AQMDs will require a permit for residential pile burning, either for free or at a cost. *Note not all AQMDs allow residential pile burning in their jurisdiction.*

When burning piles, you should always check local AQMD permit requirements and verify that it is a permissable burn day (must check daily). For questions about permitting or local burning regulations, please call your local AQMD or visit their website https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/california-air-districts.



CAL FIRE Permits and Burn Season Status

Knowing which agency responsibility area you are located in is critical to determining required permits. Determine if you are in the State Responsibility Area (SRA) by visiting this website: https://bof.fire.ca.gov/projects-and-programs/state-responsibility-area-viewer/. If you are located outside of the SRA, contact your local fire department for more information.

Always check CAL FIRE Burn Season Status to determine if permits are required: https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/current-burn-status. Permits are always required beginning May 1st, but local CAL FIRE units may declare "Permit Required" and "Burning Suspended" status earlier based on precipitation, weather conditions, and wildfire activity. Parts of California require permits all year.

Apply for a CAL FIRE Residential Burn Permit (if required) at your local CAL FIRE station or online: https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/. Note that CAL FIRE Permits are only valid for the calendar year in which they are issued and must be reapplied for annually on or after May 1st. Larger pile burns will require different permits; contact your local CAL FIRE station for more information.

Day-of-Burn Checklist

1. **Check local Air Quality Management District burn day status and burn hours.** Burning is only allowed on permissive burn days. Refer to your local AQMD office for more information.
2. **Check local weather to ensure conditions are safe.** Do not burn on a windy day or on Red Flag days. Consider predicted weather and how it may interact with remnant coals.
3. **Notify your neighbors**, particularly if you plan on burning a large number of piles or anticipate significant smoke. Ask nearby beekeepers to keep their bees in for the day.
4. **Wear appropriate clothing and protective equipment.** Wear long pants and a long sleeve shirt made from natural fibers (cotton or wool), leather work boots, leather gloves, and eye protection.
5. **Have the appropriate tools ready.** Have at least one metal hand tool (e.g., shovel, McLeod, rake) and a reliable water source (at least 5 gallons) with you at all times.
6. **Create a containment line around your pile.** A clearance of 10' of bare mineral soil (no vegetation or flammable material) around the pile is mandatory when CAL FIRE permits are required. This minimizes "creep" and reduces likelihood of escapes. Burning when the ground is wet creates safer burn conditions. Do not build piles on tree stumps or other features that are prone to long-term smoldering and underground creep (via roots, etc). Piles can creep under dry snow without containment lines.
7. **Safely ignite and burn within allowable burn hours.** You can use newspaper, kindling, or dry firewood to get the pile going. For newer burners, consider igniting only one pile and feeding material from adjacent piles. Burn hours are determined by your local Air Quality Management District.
    - Once lit, one adult must watch the pile at all times.
8. **Extinguish your pile by the end of allowable burn hours.** To extinguish the pile:
    - If winds are light and you can monitor the fire, let the pile burn down to ash. Push all the coals into a mound in the middle as it burns down.
    - Douse with water and stir with a hand-tool to disperse heat. The pile should be cool to the touch.

Adapted from material by Jared Childress, Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association.