

# Pile Burning in the Central Coast

## 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 flattest ground possible. If you must build on a hill, dig a "role out" trench just below it, so that hot coals or logs will not role 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, safe conditions.
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 a 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](https://www.mbard.org/files/8319b8554/BackyardBurnBrochure_Non-SSA.pdf)
  - For **Backyard burners in San Lorenzo Valley**:  
[https://www.mbard.org/files/acf86aa78/BackyardBurnBrochure11-28-17\\_SLV.pdf](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 **Open Burn Season**, is roughly from Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> to May 1<sup>st</sup>. 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/state-responsible-area-viewer)  
Or check out MBARD’s fire district finder at:  
<https://mbuapcd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Viewer/index.html?appid=b06abae532f14f12bc3a88cb6ac7ba5a>
12. If in SRA, you will need a burn permit from CAL FIRE. If you live in Santa Cruz County, you will have to get them from your local Cal Fire station. If you live in Monterey or San Benito Counties, then you can get an online version at (it’s a useful video too!):  
<https://burnpermit.fire.ca.gov/apply-for-a-permit/>
13. 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:**

14. 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.
15. 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.
16. **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.
17. 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. The liability is on the landowner.
18. If you are on a local Facebook group or Nextdoor, it can be a courtesy to put a message out to neighbors.
19. Wear appropriate clothing: leather work boots, jeans, long sleeve natural fiber shirt, leather gloves and eye protection.
20. Clear a control line, 10’ around your pile, down to bare “mineral” earth. This will help stop pile burn “creep” and escapes.
21. Have a water source and shovel/ hand-tool on hand.
22. 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 3pm. Have the pile cold by sunset. These efforts allow for better smoke dispersal and cleaner air.
23. An adult is required to be in attendance of the fire. Invite friends too!
24. 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 lots of 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 should end up with “bio-char” or charcoal, which is a great garden soil amendment, as it holds water, soil microbes, and stable carbon (as opposed to the atmosphere).

**Other resources:**

- 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/>