THE SPARK

Wildfire Preparedness is Year Round

*For an accessible, readable version of this document, please visit https://facnm.org/the-spark-wildfire-preparedness-is-year-round

As Temperatures Cool, Proper Ash Disposal Can Reduce Fire Risk

As temperatures drop and leaves begin to change, many New Mexicans are preparing to heat their homes with wood stoves and fireplaces. While cooler weather may bring a welcome decrease in wildfire activity, the risk of fire does not disappear. In fact, improperly disposed wood ash can become an unexpected source of ignition during the fall and winter months.

Before tossing your ashes, remember: **gray does not necessarily mean cold.** Ashes and partially burned wood can retain enough heat to ignite combustible materials long after a fire appears to be extinguished. Improperly disposed ashes can start house fires, ignite vegetation, or cause a trash fire when placed in garbage cans or other containers with combustible materials. This is an important reminder that even when wildfire season appears to be winding down, carelessness can still have significant consequences.

When cleaning out a wood stove, fireplace, or fire pit, assume that gray ash is still warm. Place the ashes by themselves in a sealed noncombustible container, such as a metal bin with a tight-fitting lid, and allow them to cool for 24–96 hours, recognizing that larger quantities may require several days to cool completely. Never use cardboard boxes, paper bags, plastic containers, or other combustible or meltable materials to store warm ashes. Keep the closed container outdoors on a noncombustible surface and at least 10 feet away from buildings, decks, firewood, and other combustible materials. Do not place warm or potentially hot ashes in household trash, as hidden embers can ignite garbage or trash containers. Once the ashes have cooled completely, you can place them in a plastic bag, tie it securely, and dispose of it in your curbside trash can or at a solid waste transfer station.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Ash from untreated, unpainted wood can sometimes be reused around the garden. Wood ash can provide nutrients and raise soil pH, and small amounts may be added to compost. Do not use ash from treated, painted, stained, or chemically processed wood in gardens or compost.
- As hunting and bonfire season gets underway, the same principles of careful fire management still apply. Before leaving an outdoor fire, make sure it is dead out by using the drown, stir, feel, and repeat method.

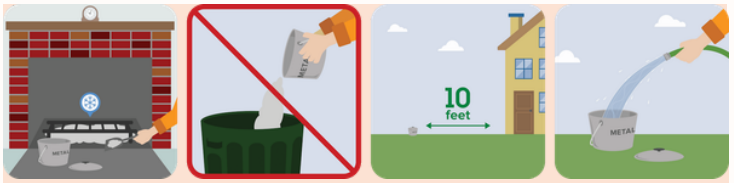


Photo 1: Safe practices for discarding fireplace ashes.
Photo 2: Wood ashes removed into a noncombustible container.
Photo credit: El Dorado County Fire Protection District

