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Briquettes may cause blazes

Sherry Rainey
Oregon Daily Emerald

An evening barbecue turned into a lesson on fire safety for a Springfield family three weeks ago.

Barney Pound, 32, heard crackling sounds coming from the garage while he was eating dinner, according to Springfield police reports. Investigating the sound, he discovered a fire. Pound immediately opened the automatic garage door and closed the door between the house and the garage.

"By opening the garage door, it let the heat and flames escape and kept the fire away from the rest of the house," said John Garitz, spokesman for Springfield's Department of Fire and Life Safety. "The father [Pound] had the forethought to shut the door between the kitchen and the garage. Although the garage was completely destroyed, the remainder of the house received only minor damage."

The fire was caused by a barbecue starter, which was put back into its box before the ashes were completely cooled, said Dick Evenson, Springfield deputy fire marshal.

The fire spread in five to 10 minutes from the barbecue to surrounding cardboard boxes and clothing, Evenson said. The fire wall between the buildings also helped protect the house.

"This type of fire happens quite often," he said. "Recently, a person [in Springfield] cleaned out ashes from their wood stove, put them in a cardboard box, then put the box on their wooden deck. The deck caught on fire and burned part of the house down."

According to the state fire marshal, 51 structure fires were ignited from discarded ashes or hot embers from a barbecue, fireplace or wood stove in 1993. 26 of the 51 fires were single family homes. In 1992, 70 structure fires were started by discarded ashes, 39 of those were homes.

"Hot ashes, whether from the stove or the fireplace or a barbecue, take several days for the ashes to get cold," Evenson said. "With barbecue starters, make sure all the rolled-up newspaper is cleaned out before putting it away."

"And if you are barbecuing in the forest, make sure you dump water over the ashes to drown them out," he said. "Don't just throw the briquettes out into the bushes."

"Most importantly, [while barbecuing] just think about fire safety and use common sense," he said.

Evenson and Mary Ellen Holly, Eugene's deputy fire marshal, gave the following fire safety tips for handling ashes from a

barbecue:

- Heat test the ashes before discarding them. First, put your hand close to ashes and if you don't feel any heat, then touch the grill. If it's cool, then you can clean any debris or embers away. The barbecue may need to be left out overnight.

- When ashes are finally cool, put them in a metal container, NOT a cardboard box or paper bag.

- Wet down the ashes in the metal container and stir them. Put a lid on the container.

- Store the metal container outside, at least 30 feet away from the home or garage. DON'T put the ashes on a wooden deck, porch or patio.

- Let the ashes cool for several days — deep ashes or heavy coals stay hot for at least 2-3 days.

- Before finally disposing of ashes, do a final heat test, wet ashes again and stir again.

"Parents need to explain this stuff to their kids too," Evenson said. "Look at fire safety as both parents and educators."

"Talk to kids about fire safety," he said. "Tell them why you are putting the ashes in a metal bucket instead of a cardboard box. Tell them why you want to let the barbecue sit out overnight."

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