

How to take the sting out of spring burning

Kelpie Wilson

Wilson Biochar Associates

Spring is here, and as soon as we get a few sunny days, I know my neighbors are all going to be out trying to incinerate massive piles of brush and tree limbs that came down in this winter's epic storms. The valleys will fill with smoke and people will grumble about this tiresome chore, wondering why there isn't a better way.

Good news – there is a better way! For the past several years, my company has been working with volunteers from the Umpqua Biochar Education Team to come up with clean burn methods that also produce biochar. Biochar is just charcoal, and it's easy to make it in your burn pile if you follow a few simple practices.

Biochar is good for soil. Sprinkle some in your garden beds; use it in tree-planting holes or in

horse barns and chicken coops to absorb odor. Biochar helps retain moisture and nutrients and it promotes beneficial microbes in soil. Biochar can be expensive to buy, but if you have burn piles, you can make your own biochar and have a cleaner, safer fire as well.

There are five requirements you need to follow to if you want to make biochar in your burn pile. These principles will also ensure that your fire is as smoke-free as possible:

First, use only dry wood. That means waiting a bit before you burn. Small brush that is up to 2 inches in diameter needs to dry in the sun (or part sun) for about 30 days. Bigger branches and logs up to 6 inches will need about 60 days to dry. If you have a moisture meter, you can check the wood and wait till it is 25 percent moisture or less.

Second, separate the small

from the large pieces. Small brush is the stuff you really need to get rid of for fire safety, and it dries quicker, so go ahead and burn that during spring burning season. Bigger logs can wait till fall or get used as firewood.

Third, build small piles that are loose with good airflow and no dirt. A good size is 5 to 6 feet wide and about 5 feet tall. This will let you meet the fourth requirement, which is to light the pile on the top, and not near the bottom. We know that heat rises, so common sense tells us that to get a pile going, you need to light it on the bottom. Not true. Heat transfers just as well by radiation, so a flame on top will light up the layers below. Keeping a flame on top at all times is the secret to a clean burn, because the flame burns up the smoke. A loose pile of small brush will burn up very quickly with barely a wisp of smoke.

SEE BIOCHAR ON A-9



Old boards can be hard to burn. Stack them like this and light on top for a clean, fast burn. Photo: Wilson Biochar Associates

AP FACT CHECK: Fukushima radiation not cause for alarm in U.S.

Patrick Mairs

Associated Press

Radiation from the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster in Japan has reached North American shores, but — despite a number of reports shared on social media— scientists say the levels of radiation are so low that it poses no risk to public health.

Late last year, researchers announced that Cesium-134 was discovered in waters off the coast of Oregon and in one sockeye salmon in a British Columbia lake. Cesium-134 is considered the fingerprint radiation of the Fukushima disaster, because its short half-life means it could only come from the plant that suffered meltdowns following the 2011 Japanese tsunami.

The news reports have been used as the basis for viral stories about the radiation. One story from alternativemediasyndicate.com carried the headline: "Fukushima Radiation: Your Days of Eating Pacific Ocean Fish Are Over, Or Worse." Another story from

organicandhealthy.org labeled the discovery of the salmon as "bad news for everyone" and described the U.S. West Coast as "contaminated."

Ken Buesseler, a senior scientist at Massachusetts' Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, has traveled to Japan numerous times since 2011 to study the Fukushima disaster's effect on seawater. He also leads a sampling project to study the radiation as it makes its way across the Pacific Ocean to North America.

It's fair to be concerned about radiation, he said, but the levels detected are far too small to make anyone sick: They are 1,000 times less than what a person would be exposed to during a routine dental x-ray.

"It's even less

than things like CT scans or flying in a plane or even living at high altitude. Personally I'm not concerned about those levels," he said.

Research scientist John Smith, who works for Canada's fisheries and oceans department, said the "crazy low levels" of cesium found in the salmon were suspected all along.

"It's absolutely no surprise there would be a little bit of Fukushima cesium in this fish and it's really at a level we would have expected it to be," he said.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission said in a 2015 report on the impact of seaborne Fukushima radiation on

the U.S. that evidence showed the levels "fall well short of posing any U.S. health or environmental risk." In January, state officials in Alaska announced that tests of seafood in the state's waters found no detectable amounts of radiation from the plant.

"This has been going on since the beginning of the Fukushima accident," adds Smith of some reports that have surfaced online since the disaster. "All this kind of fake news and scary news."

This story is part of an ongoing Associated Press effort to fact-check claims in suspected false news stories.

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