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Tips for responsible wood burning

By Jennifer Barker For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Wood heat is popular in Eastern Oregon, and for good reason. It is a locally-produced energy resource, available in (or close to) our own back yards. Homeowners can substitute personal labor for cash to acquire it, making it by far the least expensive home heating option.

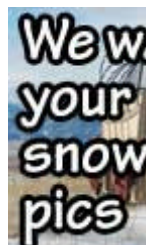
However, all energy use has impacts. With some types of energy, like electricity from coal-burning power plants or hydropower dams, the impacts (pollution or degraded river systems) may be removed by time or distance. For wood heating, the impacts are close-at-hand and may be negatively affecting you and your neighbors.

In the valleys, temperature inversions trap clouds and pollutants near the surface for much of the winter. Vehicle emissions, wood smoke, and moisture in the air combine to form smog, no matter whether your location is urban or rural. Burning wood produces carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, oxides of nitrogen, and fine particulates. Wood smoke pollution can cause respiratory illness and cancer.

So how can we heat our homes in such a way as to minimize the impacts of our energy use? First, we must reduce the quantity of energy needed to heat our homes. If it's already too late to build a passively-heated solar home, we can weatherize our existing one for maximum efficiency, and make minor tweaks to bring in natural heat and light.

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Second, we should make sure our energy source is as environmentally-friendly as possible. Using energy that produces its pollution elsewhere merely exports the impacts onto other people. The lowest-impact way to produce heat is with a high-efficiency heat pump run on renewably-produced electricity. Though less efficient, wood heat is also a renewable energy source. We can learn by experience how to achieve our goals of burning wood with high efficiency and low emissions. Here are some commonly accepted responsible burning practices:

- Only burn seasoned, dry wood. If wet when burned, much of the energy is wasted evaporating excess moisture, resulting in very poor combustion, increased pollution and creosote build up.
- Never let a fire smolder. A clean fire should not make visible smoke except when first lit. Dark or smelly smoke drifting from your chimney means the wood is not burning completely. Your wood is being wasted and is producing not only pollution, but excessive creosote (the perfect fuel for chimney fires if allowed to build up).
- Wood should be actively flaming until it is reduced to charcoal.
- Wood burns best in cycles. A cycle begins with the placement of several pieces of wood on a coal bed and ends when that wood has burned to a similar-sized coal bed. Wait to reload until you notice that the room is beginning to cool off, then add a load of at least three pieces to create a triangular formation where the glowing surfaces of one burning piece radiate on the other pieces, creating the site where a fire ignites and is sustained. Match the size of the load to heat demand.
- Don't burn garbage! Plastics, rubber, painted or oiled wood, and glossy or colored paper make toxic smoke, and should be recycled or disposed of properly, not burned.

Each and every one of us uses energy every day, for many purposes. There is no type of energy we can use that is without some level of impact. Our goal should be to learn to use energy efficiently and responsibly, to minimize the impact on ourselves, our neighbors, and our future.

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