

ELIMINATING BACKYARD BURNING

VLCT recently partnered with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to further educate Vermont municipalities about the adverse effects of open burning of solid waste.

As part of DEC's *Prevention of Illegal Burning of Solid Waste* grant program, VLCT surveyed all municipal health officers, town managers, and selectboard chairs to gather information on open burning perspectives and practices in Vermont municipalities.

Approximately 26% of the survey recipients responded. One hundred and fifty-four towns were represented by at least one completed response, accounting for 64% of Vermont municipalities. We thank the 186 individuals who completed the survey and helped us gather information on this issue.

Backyard burning is no longer a legal way to dispose of household trash due to the composition of today's trash, which is very different from trash of the past. Thousands of common household products and food packaging are now made of plastic and other synthetic materials. These durable, convenient and economical items become toxic when combusted. Dioxins and furans, known carcinogens, are released into the air when certain plastics are burned. These cancer-causing agents put children at a high risk of being affected because their immune systems are not fully developed. A child breathing the same polluted air as an adult will absorb up to six times more of the combustion products, according to information released by the Vermont Air Pollution Control Division.

Despite these serious health and environmental concerns, of which nearly all survey respondents claimed to be aware, 61% of municipalities have never discussed how to address the issue. Some municipalities noted that a school presentation or a display at town meeting might be an effective forum in which to deliver a message on backyard burning. But 69% of respondents were not interested in, or did not see a benefit to, a formal educational seminar for municipal officials or the community-at-large.

Open burning is not high on most municipalities' list of priorities. In fact, only 26% of municipalities determined that open burning was a significant enough problem to regulate at the local level. Among municipalities without an open burning ordinance, 65% do not feel open burning is a concern in their municipality. Other issues are more important, despite the reality that open burning occurs within most communities.

Survey responses revealed that enforcement is the largest challenge to adopting an ordinance. Lack of funding and staff time for enforcement are the main reasons why 74% of municipalities have not adopted a local open burning ordinance. Instead, a lot of towns rely on the state law prohibiting burning trash to regulate open burning. Seventy-six percent of Vermont municipalities rely on a regional solid waste district or alliance for enforcement of the state law.

Despite the challenges posed by enforcing local open burning ordinances, adoption of them has increased significantly since the 1980s. This trend is likely to continue with heightened awareness of the adverse health and environmental impacts of the open burning of trash. Please contact the VLCT Municipal Assistance Center at 800/649-7915, or e-mail Tara Fischer at tfischer@vlct.org if your municipality is interested in viewing the final report based on the *Survey on Municipal Burning Ordinances*, learning about the adoption of a municipal burning ordinance, or obtaining a copy of VLCT's model ordinance.

- Tara Fischer, Research and Information Assistant, VLCT Municipal Assistance Center

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