



## “Currents” March 2019

### Outdoor Burning Can Impact Water Quality

Spring has arrived in the Hill Country! This time of year leads many of us outdoors to prune, trim, and rake our landscaping back into shape. The accumulated piles of material can be disposed of in different manners, but many landowners in Kerr County are accustomed to burning brush, leaves, and branches cleared from their property. Additionally, some rural residents also burn their garbage in barrels because trash pickup service is not accessible. When these practices are conducted in a responsible manner according to the rules and regulations, impacts on the environment are minimal. However, when improper materials are burned or burning occurs in the wrong place, the consequences can be toxic to the environment.

The impact of burning and other practices carried out on the land can have repercussions throughout the watershed. A watershed is the land that water flows across or through on its way to a common stream, river, or lake. Here in Kerr County, we define our watershed as the land area that drains water into the Guadalupe River. Therefore, anything we do throughout the county has the potential to impact the quality of the Guadalupe River from the headwaters in Hunt all the way to the mouth near Victoria.

The floodplain connects the upland areas of a watershed with a river or stream. It is the flat area along a body of water that the river expands into during a flood. As you can imagine, improper burning in the floodplain puts contaminants on the fast track into the river because harmful objects or hazardous materials can be easily washed into the water during a flood event.

Objects like glass and metal often do not burn completely and their fragments can end up in the water where we swim, canoe, and fish. Shards from light bulbs, bottles, or partially burned wire are unfortunately a common find during UGRA’s Annual River Clean Up each summer.

Burning materials other than natural brush or debris almost always releases hazardous chemicals into the air, soil, and water that can ultimately enter our bodies through our lungs or the foods we eat. The chemical dioxin is formed when PVC plastic, bleached paper products, or Styrofoam are burned; it is a carcinogen and can also cause neurological and skin disorders. When plastics and other man made products are burned, the ashes contain many harmful contaminants such as heavy metals like arsenic and mercury. If washed into the river, the ash releases pollutants that can contaminate the water and eventually accumulate in fish tissue. It also increases suspended solids, which harms fish and insect populations and blocks sunlight necessary for plant growth.

Overall, the choice to burn comes with a great responsibility both to human health and safety and environmental quality. Please follow the guidelines for burning established by the county and local fire departments and dispose of household hazardous wastes properly. Also, keep your burn piles out of the floodplain and dispose of ash and unburned materials accordingly. When possible, choose alternatives to burning such as mulching up trees and branches for use in your flowerbed and garden. For more information on outdoor burning regulations, contact the Kerr County Environmental Health Department at (830) 896-9020.

### **Let’s Keep Our River Clean**

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