

Opinion: Proper disposal of hot ashes can prevent unwanted fire

By John Poell

Improperly stored fireplace ashes are being blamed for a Christmas Day blaze in Connecticut which killed five people. Locally, several recent fires were started by the same thing.

Fortunately, the Lake Valley Fire Protection District, with the assistance of South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, has been able to control and contain the fires. Discarded fireplace and wood stove ashes are a major cause of house fires every year.

Locally, the Lake Valley Fire Protection District has kicked off a Can Your Ashes campaign.

The campaign is designed to educate residents about the inherent dangers associated with disposing of fireplace, wood stove or barbecue ashes in an improper container or location. Embers, often concealed in what appears to be cold ashes, can remain hot enough to kindle a fire for several days.

In one of the recent blazes, a resident placed hot ashes into a plastic trash container, and then placed the trash can on the back deck. The trash later caught fire, burned through the container, and set the outside wall of the home on fire. The fire finally breached the wall, which ultimately caused major damage throughout the entire structure.

In a second Meyers-area fire, Lake Valley FPD officials found hot ashes from a wood stove were placed into a non-metal container (a 5-gallon plastic construction bucket) and placed in the laundry room. The next morning the residents discovered that the bucket burned a hole through the floor and was still

smoldering underneath the subfloor.

According to the most recent National Fire Protection Agency statistics, between 1994 and 1998 improperly discarded ashes caused 9,870 residential structure fires, 32 civilian deaths and 171 civilian injuries. Two residents recently died in their home within the Tahoe basin due to a similar incident with hot ashes.

To safely dispose of ashes, we offer these tips:

- Never store ashes in bags or boxes.
- Place discarded ashes in a heavy metal container, douse with water, and cover with fitted metal lid.
- Store the container outside, away from structures, decks, fences, wood piles or other combustible materials.
- Never use a vacuum cleaner to pick up ashes.
- Contact your local trash collection agency for their disposal recommendations after ashes have cooled and embers are out.

Manufacturers advise that wood stoves should never be completely cleaned of ashes during the burning season. They burn more safely and efficiently with a layer of ash in the bed.

General fire safety tips:

- Make sure you have working smoke alarms on every level of your home, outside each sleeping area, and inside each bedroom. Test them at least once a month.
- Keep anything that can burn at least three feet from space heaters and other heat sources.
- Never leave the kitchen when something is cooking.

- Keep candles and matches out of the reach of children.
- Extinguish all fires, even candles, when you leave the room or go to sleep.
- Remember to call 911 for all fires, no matter how small.

This public safety campaign to Can Your Ashes can save lives and property.

Please contact us at (530) 577.3737 for further information.

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