

Warning against burning plastics

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TORONTO- Anne Mitchell, Executive Director of the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) is praising spring clean-up efforts of post winter trash across the province of Ontario.

However, Mitchell wants to alert Ontarians to the environmental health dangers of burning their plastic bottles, packaging and bags in backyard fire pits and burn barrels. "This is a major source of toxic pollutant emissions that can seriously harm the environment and human health," she said.

Environment Canada studies reveal that one in four Ontarians regularly use burn barrels at their home or cottage. The relatively low temperatures and low-oxygen combustion of backyard burn barrels, combined with the tendency to burn plastic bags, PVC waste, plastic bottles and containers, releases cancer-causing dioxins, furans, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, benzene, heavy metals and other pollutants into the air.

These harmful products fall back to earth and contaminate plants, soil and water. A 2002 study from the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) states that "backyard barrel burning" is the largest source of dioxin and furan emissions in the US, and a 2003 Environment Canada report indicates this practice is the largest remaining single source of environmentally occurring dioxins in Canada.

The burning barrels of less than 40 households can release the same combined amount of dioxins as a modern incinerator designed for servicing up to 120,000. Increased concern arises from the fact that open burning often takes place in rural areas, in close proximity to agricultural operations, where pollutants are absorbed by food crops.

Mitchell offered solution suggesting, "The problem can be reduced at the source, by 'buying smart' and choosing items with less plastic packaging, and by aggressively reducing household garbage volume by composting organic kitchen wastes.

It is also important to use approved landfills, and while it is less convenient to have neighbors share the task of transporting garbage and recyclables to a distant landfill or depot, it certainly is preferable