News Release

Contact Information: Katherine Benenati / 501.682.0821 / benenati@adeq.state.ar.us

FOR RELEASE: Oct. 15, 2014

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING: Nostalgia of Autumn Burning Should Stay in the Past

Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem “Autumn Fires” gives a wistful vision of burning piles of fall leaves. It concludes with this happy sentiment: Sing a song of seasons! Something bright in all! Flowers in the summer, Fires in the fall!

But that poem was first published in 1885 before the cumulative effects of years of industrial emissions and open burning were known. Now we know that what was once a seasonal tradition of raking and burning leaves can have a negative effect on our health and the environment. Smoke can lead to health problems for people with asthma and other respiratory ailments and cause eye irritation. Open burning also releases carbon dioxide, which contributes to the greenhouse effect that is creating warmer oceans and climate change.

It is illegal in Arkansas to burn household waste, which usually contains plastics that emit harmful chemicals when burned, and old pressure-treated wood, which also releases chemicals that pollute air, water and soil. There is no state law against the on-site burning of yard waste (grass clippings, leaves and shrubbery trimmings) when there is not a burn ban in effect because of drought, but the
Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality strongly urges residents to consider alternatives to burning yard waste in order to help keep our air quality high.

Local authorities, such as the city council or county officials, can place local restrictions on the burning of yard waste and may also set up a permit procedure that requires residents to get a permit from the county courthouse or city hall or the fire department before burning yard waste.

If a complaint about burning yard waste is filed with local or state officials, they can order the fire to be extinguished and possibly issue a ticket or a fine if the fire is persistently offensive to neighbors, is hazardous to surrounding property or becomes a safety hazard.

One way to cut down on yard waste is to mow over leaves and use them for mulch instead of raking them. Grass clippings and leaves can be composted to enrich garden soil.

Arkansas law bans yard waste from landfills, but some towns pick up yard waste for municipal composting programs. If you don’t have curbside garbage and yard waste service, contact your city hall, county judge’s office or regional solid waste management district for information on transfer stations or drop-off programs for wastes, recyclables and compostables.

To learn which regional solid waste management district serves your community, visit the Solid Waste Division pages on ADEQ’s website, www.adeq.state.ar.us.

For composting information, go to ADEQ’s online brochures and click on the fact sheet series.

Report pollution problems from open burning to the ADEQ Air Division, 501-682-0729.

Report nuisance, fire or safety complaints to your local fire department, police or sheriff’s office.

In the winter, residential wood smoke can trigger asthma and aggravate lung diseases; pregnant women, newborns, and people with health conditions such as obesity or diabetes may be at increased risk.

For information on the safe operation of wood-burning appliances, visit http://www.epa.gov/burnwise/.