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Department of Fire Services



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New Mulch Regulation Takes Effect September 1

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan and fire chiefs across the state want to alert building owners and managers about a new mulch safety regulation that takes effect this weekend. The regulation was developed in response to several fires in the Commonwealth involving mulch-wood products.

New Regulation on Mulch Safety

Starting on Saturday, September 1, 2012, the new application of mulch within 18" around combustible exteriors of buildings (such as wood or vinyl but not brick or concrete) is prohibited. Residential buildings with less than six units are exempted from this regulation, but all homeowners may also wish to adopt these safety practices.

Tips for Property Managers and Building Owners

Here are some tips for property managers and building owners on how to prevent mulch fires:

- Keep wood mulch 18" away from combustible exteriors of buildings such as wood or vinyl siding. Don't put it right up against the building.
- Use something like pea stone or crushed rock for the first 18" as a barrier around the foundation of the building.
- Provide proper receptacles for smoking materials.

Mulch is Combustible

Mulch is a combustible material that can be easily ignited by improperly discarded smoking materials. Hundreds of small and large fires are started this way every year. The risk is what starts as a small outside mulch fire can quickly spread to buildings and climb the exterior. The fire can get a good start before people are made aware by smoke alarms, sprinkler systems activating or someone notices.

Million Dollar Mulch Fire

The most notable fire occurred at a Peabody apartment complex in May 2008. A cigarette-lit mulch fire caused a \$6.7 million loss, displaced 750 people temporarily and 36 the residents of the apartments permanently.

In April 2012, improperly discarded smoking materials ignited mulch outside an assisted living center in Braintree. The fire forced the early morning evacuation of many older adults, some of whom suffered smoke inhalation injuries.

Be a Responsible Smoker

Put It Out. All the Way. Every Time.

- Properly dispose of all smoking materials.
- Use appropriate receptacles for smoking materials when provided.
- Don't discard cigarettes into mulch or potted plants.
- At home, use ashtrays that won't burn or catch fire and that are deep enough to contain butts. Wet them down before throwing out.
- As more people smoke outdoors rather than inside, most building fires started by smoking begin on decks, porches, and exterior stairways.
- So be smart in your choice of container for butts. Consider using metal cans with sand for outside disposal.
- Dispose of cigarettes inside your motor vehicle; do not throw them out the window. Because of the risk of starting a fire, it is illegal to do so and punishable by a fine of \$100 and/or thirty days imprisonment.

Storage and Manufacturing of Mulch

The new regulation also has safety requirements for those who store or manufacture mulch. It limits the size of mulch piles, requires a distance of 30-feet between piles, and limits the distance from the lot line to 25-feet. Large piles of mulch can easily spontaneously combust with all the heat they generate, so it's important to be vigilant and employ good housekeeping. The distance between piles prevents a fire in one from easily spreading to another or to a building.

Permits Required to Store 300+ Cubic Yards of Mulch

Permits are required from the fire department wherever more than 300 cubic yards of mulch is produced or stored.