

Fire and Forest

Winter Fire Safety

by Mike Esnard

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Now that the nights are cold and we wonder if the next storm will bring rain or snow, the threat of wildfire is greatly reduced. But though the threat of forest fire is diminished, the threat to an individual home is actually greater. This is because more homes are set on fire in winter than in any other season, and of these fires, most are started in the kitchen from cooking.

Cooking on the stove top is how the majority of fires are started. Of these, most are started by frying, according to statistics from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). It seems that most of these fires start when people walk away from the stove to do something else, which is why our State Fire Marshall Tonya Hoover has a catchy saying to “keep an eye on what you fry”.

The holidays, of course, are the perfect time for kitchen fires to start when we are distracted. People have a lot to do, and attention to guests can easily lead us to forget the pan of hot oil on the stove. And let’s not forget drinking, which we do more of on the holidays, and which is not exactly aimed at increasing our memory and focus.

Like anyone who has done a lot of cooking, I have had my share of mess ups. I have set a towel on fire, forgotten a boiling pot, and dangerously overheated a pan of oil, which had too much oil to begin with. Luckily these mistakes caused little harm, though they did get my heart racing. Giving the stove our complete and undivided attention, I have learned with embarrassment, is the most important thing we can do to make sure our home is safe from kitchen fires.

In addition to attention, two precautions that my wife taught me have been useful and are recommend by experts. One is to turn pot handles toward the back of the stove so that they can’t easily be bumped, or be grabbed by

an inquisitive child. Another is to keep a very large lid nearby to use to smother grease fires if needed. (Water just spreads the fire.)

The NFPA also emphasizes that if a fire starts in your kitchen, the wisest course of action is to get out of the house and call 911. Some people will feel capable of fighting a fire with a fire extinguisher, but most of us won't, and more than half of reported injuries are caused by people trying to fight the fire. The best advice for most of us is to turn off the stove or oven if we can, get out, and leave the fire fighting to the professionals.

Kitchen fires aside, another common cause of winter fires up here is placing hot ash in a paper bag and placing it on the deck. Most of the time we don't realize the ash contains coals or cinders hot enough to ignite a floor or deck. The simple solution is to always use a metal bucket to handle ash from a fireplace or wood stove, and to dispose of the cooled ash in the designated bin at the transfer site.

The Mountain Community Fire Safe Council wishes everyone a safe and happy holiday season, and we hope your cooking goes beautifully.