MOST AGRICULTURAL BURNING NOW CONSIDERED UNNECESSARY

RALEIGH — Farmers should not burn their fields to get rid of old crops and stubble, even though this was once a common practice, state environmental and agricultural officials say.

Smoke from burning fields causes air pollution that contributes to smog, is unhealthy to breathe, and can harm the environment. Such problems have convinced the state Division of Air Quality and the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services that burning is not recommended in most cases.

“Smog and other air quality problems have forced us to rethink some practices that used to be widespread,” said Keith Overcash, deputy director of the Division of Air Quality (DAQ). “Smoke from agricultural burning is not only unhealthy to breathe, but can contribute to ozone smog that reduces crop yields and damages trees.”

The state Open Burning Rule prohibits most outdoor fires because the smoke can cause serious health problems and pollute the air. For example, a recent study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that backyard burning of trash from a family of four can emit as much of some pollutants, such as dioxin and furan, as a well-controlled municipal incinerator serving tens of thousands of households.

Under the open burning rule, the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) can allow outdoor fires to control diseases and pests on farms. Much agricultural burning, however, is done by farmers who merely are trying to clear straw from grain fields.

“At one time, farmers might have thought it was beneficial to burn their fields to clear hay stubble and residue,” NCDA&CS agronomist Kent Messick said. “But we now know that leaving stubble and straw on the field adds organic matter, conserves moisture, reduces erosion, helps control weeds and recycles nutrients. In most circumstances, fires provide few benefits and can cause other problems.”

About half of the Division of Air Quality’s penalty cases involve open burning violations. The DAQ can assess fines as high as $10,000 per violation, with larger fines assessed in cases involving repeat violations, and people who knowingly violate the law. Under the open-burning rule, it is illegal to burn:

- Garbage, paper and cardboard;
- Tires and other rubber products;
- Building materials, including lumber;
- Wire, plastics and other synthetic materials;
- Asphalt shingles and heavy oils;
- Paints, and household and agricultural chemicals.

Homeowners can burn yard trimmings — excluding stumps and logs over 6 inches in diameter — if it’s allowed under local ordinances, no public pickup is available, and it doesn’t cause a public nuisance. Other allowable burning includes campfires, outdoor barbecues, and bonfires for festive occasions. Landowners may be allowed to burn vegetation to clear land or clean up storm debris, but they should check first with the Division of Air Quality. People seeking to burn also may need permits from the state Division of Forest Resources.

A free brochure describing what is allowed and prohibited under the state open burning rule can be obtained by calling (919) 733-3340, or writing to the Division of Air Quality at 1641 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1641, or checking the DAQ web site at http://daq.state.nc.us/