



Fire extinguisher training while under a fire ban

Question: In the past, we have conducted the hands-on component of our annual OSHA fire extinguisher training by lighting a fire in our parking lot and having our employees use dry-chemical extinguishers to extinguish it. Due to dry conditions, we've been under a fire ban for several months. How can I conduct the hands-on component of the training with a fire ban in place?

Responding to this month's question is Ryan O'Donnell, CEO, BullEx Digital Safety, Troy, NY.

Answer: Many communities are limiting uncontrolled burning, including the use of "homemade" burn pans for fire extinguisher training. The solution is to use a live-fire training simulator that addresses the safety issues associated with the older, uncontrolled burn methods while still providing a hands-on, live-fire experience.

In determining what method of live-fire training to employ, it is important to understand the type of burn bans that may be present in your location. The two types of burn bans that prohibit live-fire burning are air quality burn bans and fire safety burn bans. These bans can be enacted and enforced by federal, state and local officials. Air quality burn bans are typically short in duration and are caused by an unhealthy level of stagnant pollutants in the atmosphere. Fire safety burn bans typically are longer in duration and result from dry conditions which create a high potential for outdoor wildfires. The burning of diesel or kerosene in a pan for fire extinguisher training typically violates both the air quality (black smoke) and fire safety (uncontrolled) burn bans.

Fire extinguisher training simulators are now available that address both air quality and fire safety burn bans, and allow you to conduct the hands-on portion of your annual training at any time. The newest simulators use clean burning propane, have a series of built-in safety features, and eliminate the need to discharge actual dry-chemical extinguishers, which has exempted these simulators from burn bans in most cases. These modern training systems actually detect the actions of the trainees as they use the "PASS" (pull the pin, aim the nozzle, squeeze the trigger, sweep back and forth) technique with special training extinguishers that discharge compressed air and water. These systems allow the trainee to get the feel of discharging an actual extinguisher on a live fire, while a sensing system automatically varies the flames based on where the trainee aims and sweeps.

Because they use a clean-burning controlled fire, and because they eliminate the discharge of dry chemicals, such training simulators are not restricted by either air quality or fire safety burn bans.

Apart from environmental and fire safety concerns, extinguisher training simulators can actually prove to be more cost-effective than the conventional "kerosene/diesel burn pan" method. Because actual dry-chemical extinguishers do not need to be gathered, used and refilled after training with modern simulators, there is very little variable cost resulting in a long-term cost savings.

The ultimate benefit of extinguisher training simulators is that they enable users to gain hands-on experience operating a portable fire extinguisher in a safe and controlled environment.

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