

Firewood gathering can be a fun, family activity

by Doug Newbould



Teamwork with Personal Protective Equipment, photo by Todd Weston, USFWS

Some of you will probably think I'm crazy when I say, "Firewood gathering is fun." It can be a fun family activity... if you can get your family or a friend to join you, that is. I know that for many readers who use wood heat as their primary source, firewood gathering is a mandatory subsistence activity.

Laying up 10 to 20 cords every year can take its toll on a body. Even finding that much wood every year can be a difficult challenge. Though it may not bring you much joy, at least you can feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment when you get that last cord laid up for the long winter.

For people like me who use wood as a secondary heat source, firewood gathering is more of a hobby or recreational activity. I don't have to hunt or fish or collect wood to survive, but those activities enhance my life. I enjoy the physical activity, the hard work and the results of my labor.

I take pride in the skills I have gained over the years—the safe and effective use of a well-maintained chainsaw, the act of felling a 100-foot snag right where I aim it, the perfectly aimed swing of the maul as it halves the log in one stroke, and the neatness of my firewood pile. I enjoy the aesthetic qualities of a well-managed private forest or wood lot, as I remove dead trees to make room for the seedlings and saplings underneath. For me, four to six mixed cords of spruce and

birch or other hardwood will usually carry me through the winter.

I am fortunate enough to have a ready supply of firewood on my property, so I only supplement my woodpile from outside sources when an opportunity for some "easy" firewood presents itself. For example, I have helped more than one friend clear dead trees from around their homes, trading my labor for the free wood. And I really have a hard time passing up an opportunity to get some hardwood. Birch is best, but I like aspen and cottonwood too. Aspen, in case you haven't tried it, smells great in the wood burner and it burns hot.

If you're new to firewood gathering, let me offer a few pointers. Safety is the first key to a successful outing in the woods. If you are unfamiliar with the maintenance and safe use of a chain saw, you will need to get the right personal protective equipment (or PPE, if you like acronyms) and familiarize yourself with operator safety information. Whether you're bucking up wood on the ground or felling standing trees, you will need a hardhat (with a wire mesh face shield if possible), safety glasses or goggles, ear plugs or muffs, gloves, work boots (lug soles and steel toes are best) and kevlar saw chaps or pants.

You might think all this safety gear is unnecessary and expensive, but I guarantee you it will be cheaper and less burdensome than a visit to the hospital if you touch that running chain to any part of your body, or you get a splinter in your eye.

Learning how to maintain and safely operate a saw is the next step. Read the chainsaw operator manual that came with your saw, or order one from the manufacturer if you don't have it. Check with your local chainsaw dealer for saw-training opportunities or videos. Most of the top chainsaw manufacturers have excellent safety videos available. I did a quick search for "chainsaw safety" on the Internet and found several good sites. Check for them at the end of this column.

And, of course, experience is the best teacher. I've been using a chainsaw for 25 years and I haven't lost my respect for the tools of the trade or for the wood and trees I utilize. I always wear my PPE, and there

have been many occasions when I was thankful I did. If you are fortunate enough to get your family or a friend to help you get firewood, make sure you share your safety knowledge with them and get them the PPE they need.

Use proper lifting techniques and save your back. Try not to get overheated. Take plenty of breaks and stay hydrated. Always try to avoid cutting alone. The “buddy system” has saved many a woodcutter’s life.

Now that you’re properly trained and equipped, where can you cut some wood? Well, the best opportunities for “easy” wood are going to be found on private lands. Check with your friends and neighbors. It is best to have written permission before removing wood from private lands. Check the newspaper and local bulletin boards for other private sources. I have surveyed some of the public land managers for firewood opportunities, and there are currently two options.

Contact the Seward Ranger District at 224-3374 or 288-3178 for both free-use and permit-only firewood areas on the Chugach National Forest. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (262-7021) has a firewood permit area off Funny River Road. A five-cord permit costs \$25. Permits and maps are available at Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road during business hours, Monday through Friday. Currently, the state does not have any designated firewood-cutting areas on the peninsula.

Have fun and be careful out there!

<http://www.oregonchain.com/safety.htm>

<http://www.carbidechain.com/safety.htm>

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.