

## DNR imposes burning ban due to COVID-19 outbreak

**Thursday, April 2:** According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, burning restrictions are in place due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The intent is to lower the amount of fires to minimize the risk of first responders being paged out and being potentially exposed to the virus. It is also their intent to try to limit the amount of smoke in the air, so people who are at home can rest without the added irritant of smoke and stay out of an already stressed health care system.

Campfires are allowed if they meet the statute definition: not larger than 3 feet by 3 feet; cleared 5 feet around of combustible materials; burning only clean firewood (no garbage, paper/cardboard, building debris, or leaves); and smoke cannot drift into a neighbor's buildings without their permission or across a public road.

No additional burning permits are being issued at this time. If you have questions relating to burning restrictions, please contact the DNR via phone 651-296-6157, via email [info.dnr@state.mn.us](mailto:info.dnr@state.mn.us), or visit their website [www.dnr.state.mn.us](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us).

## Meeker County EDA offering COVID-19 business loans

**Wednesday, April 1:** It is the mission of the Meeker Economic Development Authority to assist in stimulating the economy of Meeker County. During this time of uncertain and stressful economic conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the EDA has created an emergency assistance loan fund for those Meeker County businesses that have been forced to close or significantly reduce their operations due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Eligible businesses are cited in the governor's Emergency Executive Order 20-04 and 20-08 and include places of public accommodation such as restaurants, bars, and cafes which offer food and beverages for on-premise consumption; and spas, salons, and fitness centers (to name a few).

The EDA will provide a maximum loan of \$5,000 at 0 percent interest for an eligible business. Loans will be for a maximum length of 24 months and loan repayments may be deferred for up to 6 months.

"We want to thank all the people who continue to work and support our community during this challenging period. It is impossible to name them all but thank you to the doctors, nurses, health care workers and administrators, first responders, firemen, police officers, daycare providers, grocery store workers, hardware store workers, postal workers, gas station workers, teachers and school staff, city workers, long-term care facility workers, social workers, and home care providers (just to name a few) who risk their own safety for the care and safety of our community and its residents. We cannot thank you enough for your dedication and commitment to the public and those in your care," said Meeker EDA in a press release.

If your business is not one of the eligible businesses cited by the governor, we can still provide information on other state and federal programs available for assistance during this challenging economic period. For questions on the EDA business loan or other resources, please contact Lisa Graphenteen at [lisa@dsi-services.com](mailto:lisa@dsi-services.com) or 507-227-5402. The business assistance loan application is also available on the Meeker EDA's website at [meekercodevcorp.com](http://meekercodevcorp.com).

## Department of Commerce shares tips on robocall scams

**Wednesday, April 1:** As Minnesotans settle into their "Stay Home Minnesota" routines, they are more reliant than ever on staying connected through our phones. Scammers – both individuals and companies – are taking advantage of the uncertainty and greater use of phones to use illegal robocalls to profit from misinformation and coronavirus-related fears.

Despite the fact that few people respond to robocalls, scammers only need a few to take the bait for them to make money. They may request your personal information, such as Social Security or bank account numbers, or they may ask victims to purchase gift cards to pay for so-called services or fees such as COVID-19 at-home tests, small business insurance, or investment protection.

Here are the best tips to follow to protect you from scams, per the Minnesota Department of Commerce:

•**DO NOT ANSWER.** If you are not familiar with the phone number, have the call go directly to voicemail.

•**HANG UP.** Do not press any numbers. The recording might say that pressing a number will let you speak to a live operator who will eventually ask you for money or say they will remove you from their call list, but answering will actually lead to MORE robocalls.

•**VERIFY.** Do not call any telephone number or go directly to a website that you are directed to on the call. You should always look up and verify any number or website on Google™ first, rather than relying on any information that you are given.

•**REPORT** robocalls at [www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov](http://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov). The more complaints that are filed, the more the FTC can help to stop them and share that information with the public and law enforcement. If you have any other questions, you can call the Minnesota Department of Commerce's senior financial ombudsman Marty Fleischhacker at 952-237-7571

•**FIND A CALL BLOCKING APP OR DEVICE.** You also can ask your phone provider if it has call-blocking tools. To learn more, go to [www.consumer.ftc.gov](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov).

## Stearns Public Health urges practicing social distancing

**Thursday, April 2:** At the urging of health providers and all agencies involved in responding to COVID-19, Stearns County Public Health strongly encourages all residents to be diligent about following social distancing guidelines. They want to remind everyone that this is the most important thing they can do right now to combat COVID-19.

There have been concerns expressed that social distancing isn't always being practiced in our communities. Health officials say this is the one thing everyone can do, and they need to do it now as it has the potential to really slow the infection rate. If COVID-19 spreads, because social distancing isn't practiced, there are concerns about the pressure it will put on our local health care system. "We realize this isn't easy or fun to do, and people are getting bored, but it's imperative that we be persistent," said Renee Frauendienst, public health division director.

To help clarify social distancing, here are some additional guidelines to follow:

•People can go outdoors, but even outside keep the minimal six-foot distance.

•Backyard barbecues, unless with immediate family you live with every day, should be avoided.

•If you or your children are going to a playground, make sure they are the only ones playing there. If other children are there playing, you will need to wait until the others are gone or play in a different area of the playground – i.e. avoiding mixing with each other.

•Don't let kids mix with other kids outside the family. Children or youth should not get any closer than 6 feet to each other. Kids can get sick with COVID-19, or spread it.

•Avoid going into new environments and others' homes.

Ignoring these recommendations can fuel the pandemic. Social distancing works and is the best strategy we have right now to combat COVID-19. "We know there are many people following the guidelines, and we thank them for doing this. But we need everyone to be responsible and socially conscious," said Frauendienst. "This is something people need to do for their neighbors, although it may be inconvenient. Even if you're healthy or young, you need to take precautions because you could end up saving someone's life – a neighbor, a child, a parent or grandparent. Now is the time for us to think bigger than ourselves; we need community."

Any questions about coronavirus, including whether participating in a social activity is recommended, can be answered by Stearns/Benton hotline staff. The hotline is staffed 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. The number to call is 320-656-6625 or 1-877-782-5683. Individuals can also call the Minnesota Department of Health hotline, which is staffed 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week, at 651-201-3920 or 1-800-657-3903.

## Rep. Jeff Howe wants reporting hotline taken down

**Thursday, April 2:** On Tuesday, March 31, Gov. Tim Walz rejected a call by Senate Republicans to take down a hotline that allows people to report violations of the governor's stay-at-home order. Walz stated that the hotline "allows people just to try and keep their neighbors safe and serves an educational function if people see someone who isn't informed about the stay-at-home order."

Sen. Jeff Howe (R-Rockville) issued the following response: "I vehemently disagree with Gov. Walz on the effectiveness of this hotline. Rather than serve as a resource, this hotline will only spread fear and mistrust amongst neighbors and communities. We are not a communist country, and we have constitutional rights here in the United States of America. Rather than cause neighbors to spy on neighbors, we should trust Minnesotans to use their common sense. If a neighbor is not following the social distancing, talk to that neighbor, have a discussion. In a time when our communities should be coming together, this will drive them apart. I hope that Gov. Walz will abolish this hotline and put the resources to better causes like supporting Minnesotans who are struggling to receive and find benefits while coping with the COVID-19 epidemic."