

To burn or not to burn...

A look at pros, cons of bonfire tradition

By **BILL HETHCOCK**

Texas A&M students spend 125,000 hours a year building bonfire.

In the process 8,000 to 10,000 trees are chopped down, stacked and burned before the football game against the University of Texas.

To some, bonfire represents the ultimate symbol of Aggie spirit, pride and unity.

A&M wouldn't be the same for these people without the yearly tradition of constructing the world's largest bonfire and watching the huge stack of logs burn.

To an increasing number of students and faculty members, however, bonfire no longer represents the good A&M has to offer.

Instead, bonfire is seen as a massive monument to environmental destruction, a waste of human resources and a negative influence on students' grades.

Charles Albert, president of the Texas Environmental Action Coalition, says he thinks most A&M students still support bonfire, although opposition to the 81-year-old tradition is growing.

"There are more people speaking out against bonfire than there were five years ago, but certainly the campus as a whole is behind bonfire," Albert says. "I think people are realizing what bonfire does to the environment, but many still think it's a valid tradition."

Albert says TEAC, a group formed to encourage student involvement in environmental issues, will not take a position condemning bonfire because almost half the 200 members support it despite negative environmental consequences.

"Because of the diversity of the group, we're not taking a position," he says. "We have Corps members, Aggies Against Bonfire and everyone in between. Personally, it bothers me we can't make up our minds, but I'm happy we can reach out to so many people."

One group of students, however, is more direct in its criticism of bonfire. Aggies Against Bonfire wants to see bonfire completely abolished.

AAB President Kelly Harper says bonfire is an outdated tradition during a time of environmental concern.

"We ought to be more aware of how to manage our natural resources, especially since we're a land-grant University known for forestry and land management," Harper says.

"With the kind of money and manpower we put into bonfire, we ought to be able to do something more constructive, worthwhile and creative than burning a stack of wood."

But senior redpot David Cheever says trees burned in bonfire are destroyed so the land can be strip mined. Texas Municipal Power Agency owns some of the land where trees for bonfire are cut.

Redpots are students in charge of overseeing bonfire's construction.

"The woods we cut for Aggie

bonfire would be bulldozed anyway," Cheever says. "We're just working with TMPA to use a resource that would be put to waste otherwise."

Harper, however, argues that burning trees sends a message that A&M does not care about the environment.

"Even though the trees would be knocked down and burned anyway, I don't want my University to support it," she says.

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Besides environmental concerns, bonfire has been criticized for other reasons.

A Faculty Senate bonfire advisory committee and Student Government members recently released a report calling for higher minimum grade point ratios for bonfire workers.

According to the report, "students with marginal grades are at academic risk from the potentially heavy time demands of bonfire."

The committee recommended a minimum GPR of 2.3 for bonfire leaders and 2.1 for workers. The grade requirements, however, were rejected

in September by the Student Senate.

Senior Redpot Scott Van Poppel says he does not think building bonfire takes away from workers' study time.

"We're responsible enough to know what we want to do and we're mature enough to handle our time," Van Poppel says. "Nobody forces anyone to come out and build bonfire."

Humanitarian considerations also are addressed in the advisory committee's report.

as part of an agreement to restore the land to equal or better condition than before bonfire cut, Cheever adds.

"As redpots this year we've gone to great lengths to get going in an environmental direction with tree planting, picking up trash the night it burns and only killing trees that were going to die anyway," he says.

Melissa James, Davis-Gary's bonfire coordinator, says she thinks bonfire's benefits outweigh any negative environmental consequences.

Participation has taught her leadership skills and allowed her to make lasting friendships, she says.

James says she is discouraged to see anti-bonfire sentiment on the rise at A&M.

"What we get out of it is so much friendship," James says. "But all of a sudden we're horrible people tearing up the environment."

"We're not out there to destroy the environment. We're out there to work toward something and have that sense of accomplishment."

Cheever says those who have never worked on bonfire might not understand reasons for working on bonfire or the emotional high the work brings.

"If you want to know what bonfire symbolizes and what it takes to build it, come out and work on it and feel the comradery because there's nothing like experiencing it," he says.

"These so-called Aggies Against

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