University of Washington Tacoma

Policy on the Safe Use of Sterno and Other Chafing Fuels

1) Purpose

This policy establishes safety requirements for the use of Sterno and other solid or gel chafing fuels during events on the University of Washington Tacoma campus. Its purpose is to protect the health and safety of campus occupants and ensure compliance with UW EH&S food safety and fire safety requirements.

2) Scope

This policy applies to all UW Tacoma departments, student organizations, external caterers, and vendors using Sterno or similar open-flame chafing fuels to keep food warm at campus locations. Sterno use is only permitted in approved public assembly or event spaces and never in private offices, classrooms, laboratories, or sleeping areas.

3) Definitions

- Sterno / Chafing Fuel: A semi-solid or gelled flammable fuel used to heat chafing dishes.
- Open flame: Open flames (that are not Sterno burners) include propane, BBQ grills, solid fuels (e.g., charcoal, wax or wood) and liquid fuels (e.g., gasoline or alcohol). These types of open flame for food preparation and warming require additional fire permits from the Tacoma Fire dept.
- Public Assembly Space: Event spaces designated for gatherings.
- Event Coordinator: The responsible party ensuring compliance with this policy.

4) Responsibilities

- Provide all vendors with this policy.
- Designate a trained Fire Watch when Sterno is in use.
- Ensure that an ABC fire extinguisher is accessible.

4.2) Caterers / Vendors

- Follow manufacturer instructions for safe handling, lighting, and extinguishing Sterno.
- Ensure staff remain present and attentive whenever Sterno is lit.
- Conduct proper extinguishing, removal and disposal of Sterno burners post event.

4.3) UW Tacoma Environmental Health & Safety

- Review Temporary Food Establishment Permit applications.

- Provide guidance on safe food handling and open-flame use.

5) Approved Locations

Sterno may be used only in designated events and public assembly spaces. It is not permitted in private offices, classrooms, laboratories, or residence areas.

6) Safe Use Requirements

6.1) Setup

- Use UL-listed chafing dishes designed for Sterno fuel.
- Place Sterno cans before lighting.
- Keep Sterno at least 3 feet from combustibles.
- Ensure chafing stations are on stable, heat-resistant surfaces; place a non-flammable plate underneath the Sterno if using a table linen.

6.2) Lighting

- Use a long-handled lighter or match.
- Open Sterno cans using a blunt tool.
- Light Sterno only after food and water pans are in place

6.3) During Use

- Never leave lit Sterno unattended.
- Do not move chafing dishes while Sterno is lit.
- Lid must remain next to the lit Sterno while in use.
- Maintain clear access to fire extinguishers.
- Keep Sterno away from children and high-traffic areas.

6.4) Extinguishing

- Use the manufacturer's snuffer cap or a metal lid.
- Allow Sterno to cool completely before disposal.

6.5) Disposal

- Dispose of spent Sterno cans in non-combustible waste containers.

7) Food Safety Requirements

- Hot foods under temperature control must be maintained at 135 deg F or above.
- Sterno is intended only for holding, not cooking food.
- Sternos are allowed (as an exception to open flame) only when a caterer stays onsite to set up and monitor for safety. Caterers are required to dispose of Sternos.
- Events serving temperature-controlled foods may require a Temporary Food Service Permit.
- Any food/beverage served must meet applicable health standards as interpreted by EH&S.
- Additional guidelines can be found on the EH&S website.

8) Alternatives

UW Tacoma prefers electric warming equipment when it is feasible.

9) Prohibited Practices

- Using Sterno in non-approved spaces.
- Leaving Sterno unattended.
- Using Sterno without a Fire Watch.
- Improper disposal of used sterno burners.
- Transporting lit Sterno.
- Using Sterno near flammable decorations.

10) Enforcement

Non-compliance may result in extinguishment of Sterno, event cancellation, revocation of event privileges, or charges for damages.

11) References

- UW Tacoma: Serving Food on Campus
- UW EHS Fire Safety for Events
- Sterno Manufacturer SDS and Safety Information
- Washington State Retail Food Code (WAC 246-215)
- Tacoma/Pierce County Fire Code