Fall 2020

The Official Publication of the Forest Fire Wardens protecting Penn's Woods from wildfires.

The Forest Fire Warden News

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry

Year of Change

To say that 2020 has been a year of change would be an understatement. In a matter of a few weeks, Pennsylvanians were transported from an everyday life to one seriously disrupted. This was a challenging scenario for all of us, and our wildland fire program was no exception. In March we were moving into another spring fire season, historically one of our busiest times for wildfire. Staff and wardens were in the middle of preparations, conducting Forest Fire Warden trainings, air operations briefings, and other preparedness routines.

Despite the disruption to our human lives, nature continued on its course as it has done for millennia. A relatively open winter transitioned to spring. Wildfires occurred in fits and starts, there were some periods of elevated fire activity punctuated by wet periods with relatively little activity. A historic number of fires were reported in the month of February, less so in April, followed by a brief resurgence of fires in mid-May. Eventually yards and grasses turned green, shrubs and trees sprouted leaves, putting an end to our fire season.

Throughout all of this, our Forest Fire Wardens continued to do their work. I was extremely proud of the way that everyone continued to do their duty in the face of these challenges. I heard no complaints or resistance about our need to continue to suppress, investigate, and report wildfires. Our volunteer Forest Fire Wardens and volunteer fire departments across the Commonwealth were instrumental in protecting lives and property numerous times. I'd also like to specifically thank the wardens for their efforts to submit wildfire reports. So far this year, there have been over 1,000 wildfires reported, with four-plus months still to go. Based on this number, it is evident that many of you have acknowledged the need to report those fires.

We do not know what the future holds over the coming months, but based on your past performance, I am confident that our Forest Fire Warden organization will be able to meet the challenge. Thank you!

Michael D. Kern, Chief Forest Fire Warden

Division of Forest Fire Protection Personnel

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Prescribed Fire Specialist

Chad Northcraft
Incident Management Specialist

Katie Thomas
Fire Operations Technician-East

Jason Williams
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Tom Wolf, Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Cindy Adams Dunn, Secretary
Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Ellen Shultzabarger, State Forester
Bureau of Forestry
Mike Kern, Chief
Division of Forest Fire Protection

COVID Response

In these uncharted waters that Pennsylvania has been treading with the COVD-19 pandemic, members of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have been assisting the Pennsylvania Department of Emergency Management (PEMA) with the administration of Coronavirus Testing Centers in Montgomery County, Warren County, Indiana County, Luzerne County, Temple University, the Philadelphia Emergency Operations Center, and the Harrisburg Commonwealth Response Coordination Center. To many people this may come as a surprise because we are seen as "tree people," but what some may not know is that one of DCNR's mandates is to handle wildland fire on public and private lands across the Commonwealth. This has put certain employees in the unique position to help with the pandemic response.

Since the beginning of the pandemic we have had 48 separate single resources assigned to 85 different assignments to help the citizens of Pennsylvania. These assignments range from Incident Commander of a testing site, to assisting their local counties, to personnel delivering desperately needed supplies to hospitals.

Montgomery County set up their testing site with assistance from many local, state and private partners. However, they were dealing with many other issues that were related to COVID-19 in addition to their normal workloads, so they turned to PEMA for an Incident Management team. PEMA also had an increased workload and requested assistance and support from the DCNR Bureau of Forestry. While the Bureau was in its historically high wildfire danger season, this was a wet year and DCNR was able to send staff.

"I have received letters of support and encouragement for this mission not only from my supervisors but also form Secretary Dunn and her staff," said John Hecker, Incident Commander of the Montgomery County testing site, "I believe this mission is supported at the highest levels in state and local governments. In times of a national crisis like this, it has been amazing to see the very willing cooperation and involvement of so many agencies."

Safety is first in doing this work, just as it is on wildfires. DCNR has a standing order on all wildfires, "to fight fire aggressively but to provide for safety first." The same rules apply for the testing sites. According to Hecker, on-site there many experts that help isolate the risks through proper hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE). Those who are ill and visiting the site for testing are instructed to stay in their vehicles and only briefly when completing the tests can roll their windows down. Team members are given proper PPE and given the opportunity to test for infection prior to leaving the site at the end of their assignment. The infection rate here has been very low for staff, despite having approximately 60 or more people working here each day in one of Pennsylvania's hot spots.

"DCNR has a long history dealing with large scale incidents," said Chad Northcraft, Incident Management Specialist with the Bureau of Forestry, Division of Forest Fire Protection. "In the past it was mainly wildland fire incidents, but for the past several years we have been utilized for all hazard incidents such as this. Many of our staff are specially trained and nationally qualified in ICS positions. The experience and qualifications that these people bring to the table sets the Commonwealth up for success when taking on such an assignment."

DCNR has two Type III Incident Management Teams made up of command and general staff, along with several position specific resources that can be utilized during an incident. Generally, these teams respond to one large incident where the entire team is needed, along with several small incidents where only a few people will be needed, each year. The people that respond to these types of incidents have hundreds of hours of training, most of which they have taken upon themselves to get. The DCNR supports team members in gaining more experience and leadership by sending a couple hundred incident command staff and firefighters each year to assist other states in wildfire and disaster response. Team members don't come from one job classification, the teams have people from across the Bureau along with some retirees and volunteers.

When asked what the similarities and differences are between a typical fire assignment and this assignment helping with testing centers, Hecker indicated many similarities.

"We are coordinating a team and enlisting partners to help fight a common enemy," stated Hecker. "Normally its wildfire but here its fighting a virus through testing. We still have a need to coordinate many community partners and organizations into a safe and effective organization, just like on a wildfire. The same organizational structures and processes that are used for effective and coordinated wildfire response work whether it's a team of firefighters or a team of medics and first responders. Safety, planning, public information and logistical support are all still necessary for effective operations. Here we are just working in a county with a million people and staying in hotels instead of in a remote forest camping in a tent."

The testing centers are available for the public, first responders and medical staff to use in the hardest hit areas of Pennsylvania. The site in Montgomery County is one of 37 federally assisted community-based testing sites across the country. The testing offered at these sites is free and it's a way to get tested for those who suspect they have a COVID-19 infection, but who are not critical enough to require medical care. According to Hecker, so far at the Montgomery County sites they have been successfully testing 250 people per day and almost 8,000 worried people since opening. That is a lot of helpful relief and knowledge in one of the hardest hit areas of Pennsylvania.

According to Hecker these tests also give epidemiologists necessary data to better manage this crisis. Results from these testing sites provide a look at infection rates in the broader population who has COVID-19 but does not necessarily end up in the hospital. This information helps our state and national government officials decide better when to get people and our economy back to work. Our leaders say more testing will be necessary in the future as we all start to get back to more normal work patterns.

"I think the individuals who assisted should feel good about taking this risk," said Shawn Turner, Incident Commander at the Luzerne County testing center. Turner had started out in the planning section for the Montgomery County testing center. "Site safety is number one and was a shared value of all those who worked there."

Something that really struck Turner while being on this assignment was seeing the compassion of those working on the site to the public they were serving. When asked why he wanted to help at the testing centers Turner said that he felt that it was important to help our state partners in this time of need.

For Hecker it was seeing a steady stream of 250 cars a day coming through the site, many of them very worried and knowing that they can be helped through testing is very rewarding.

"I think also the support of the local communities for the work being done here is really overwhelming sometimes," Hecker said. "At both sites we had community members put up signs of support and encouragement for test takers and for staff. We couldn't accept, but we had a couple people and restaurants at both sites offer to buy the entire camp lunch. That's more than 60 people. We had one dear person offer to buy enough Girl Scout cookies for everyone and another day on a warm afternoon someone offered to bring us all milk shakes. Another gentleman heard there may be shortages of masks for medical workers, so he went and cleaned out all the masks he had in his garage and offered to give them to us. Just amazing the kindness and generosity of people have shown us."

The testing appointment website opens every day at 8:00 am and most days it is booked solid in the first hour. People are encouraged to register early to get in.

"I'm proud of being part of an agency and an organization that can be a significant partner in helping to bring this crisis to an end in Pennsylvania," stated Hecker. "Our years of training and experience at DCNR and nationally in some of our nation's largest wildfires and natural disasters are what make us useful at this time. No one likes to see a large disaster but being able to help at times like this makes all the training and time spent preparing worthwhile. "

"The dedication and professionalism of these people is unmatched," said Northcraft. "Many times, the situation they are agreeing to respond to is disorganized and chaotic. Members as a team do a remarkable job of bringing the much-needed organization to that chaos. None of what they do is required of them, they are individuals that like assisting those in need and the challenge that comes with it."

Katalynn Dildine, Wildfire OPS Tech, DFFP

The Bureau of Forestry Celebrates 125 Years of Conserving Penn's Woods!

This summer the bureau celebrates a true milestone, our 125-year anniversary! Known as a ''quasquicentennial", 125 years is a long existence for any organization.

If we could turn back the clock to the bureau's inception, we would see a denuded landscape plagued by rampant and uncontrolled wildfires. We would see streams severely impacted by sedimentation. We would also observe visionaries like Joseph Rothrock and Mira Lloyd Dock and later, Gifford Pinchot, stepping forward with an eye to the future and what Penn's Woods could be. When the bureau was founded in 1895, the mission was to gather information on the state's forests, implement a forest fire protection system, and buy land for reforestation and watershed protection.

The state forest land system started with a purchase along Young Womans Creek, in what is now Sproul State Forest, in 1898. Fast-forward to 2020, and there are now over 2.2 million acres of state forest lands, an area roughly the size of Yellowstone National Park!

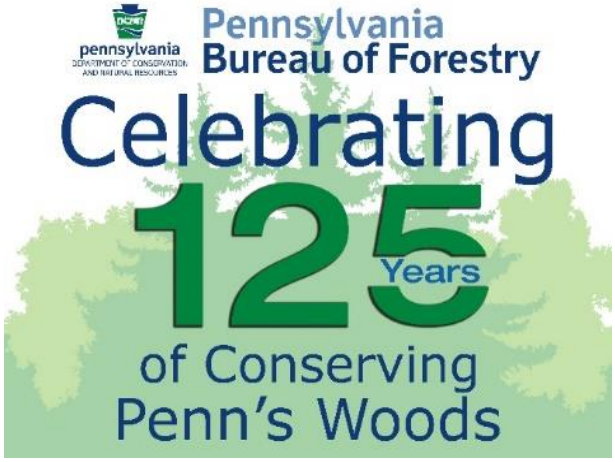
Our mission is now to ensure the long-term health, viability, and productivity of the commonwealth's forests and to conserve native wild plants. As the land base has grown, so has our charge to care for the commonwealth's forests.

There have been many accomplishments over the last 125 years, such as the creation of Wild and Natural Areas, the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the transition to Ecosystem Management. The hard and necessary work of bureau employees (past and present) has produced world class fire, forest health, rural and community forests, silviculture, planning and minerals programs; as well as third-party certification in sustainable management from both the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forest Initiative. Of course, this list hardly scratches the surface of all of that has been and continues to be accomplished.

Despite all the success, new challenges loom. Invasive insects, plants and diseases; competing recreational uses, and climate change are just a few of them. The staff of the Bureau of Forestry will rise and meet those challenges and carry its mission forward as it always has and in the manner of those who came before them. Now is the time to reflect on the bureau's history of dedication to the state's forests and service to the citizens of the commonwealth.

What a remarkable 125 years it has been!

Jeff Woleslagle, Section Chief, Communications Section



Single Engine Air Tankers Mid-Air Collision

On July 30th, 2020 two AT-802 Single Engine Air Tankers collided while working a fire in Nevada. Both pilots were killed in the crash. The accident is under investigation and not much else is known about the accident at this time.

From what I have been able to learn about the fire, they were in the extended attack phase, so they should have been familiar with the sequence of operations. At this time, I do not know if the collision occurred during retardant drop or when they were transitioning to/from the fire. It is unclear whether an ATGS (Air Tactical Group Supervisor) was present when the collision occurred.

This accident is a reminder to review tactics and safety procedures when working with aircraft.

- Always complete a comprehensive mission brief.
- Utilize sound risk management as a base for all decisions.
- Mitigate hazards that may contribute to terrain/ground contact, rotor strike, tree strike, and poor aircraft performance prior to engaging in low-level flight operations.
- Ensure communications are heard and understood.
- If you have concerns, communicate them immediately.
- Critically analyze the situation without rushing, go slow to go fast.
- Anticipate and adjust to changing conditions.
- Acquire and evaluate feedback from assigned incident pilots.

Jason Williams, Aircraft OPS and Safety Spec, DFFP

SMOKEY

pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WILDFIRE CAUSES

Natural

- Lightning - A wildfire resulting from a lightning strike.

Human

- Campfire - A wildfire resulting from an outdoor fire started for cooking, heating, recreation, or providing light or warmth (excludes railroad operations and wildfires stared by children less than 12 year of age).

- Children - A wildfire ignited by children less than 12 years of age.

- Debris Burning - A wildfire spread from clearing land, burning trash, dumps, vegetation, logging slash, or other prescribed burning (excludes railroad operations and wildfire started by children less than 12 years of age).

- Equipment Use - A wildfire ignited by any and all mechanical equipment (excluding railroad operations, electrical power line distribution, and wildfires started by children less than 12 years of age). Examples include: equipment related radiant or conductive heat transfer (exhaust pipe, engine, etc) from equipment source, exhaust particles, fuel sparks, electrical equipment (excluding electrical power line distribution), chainsaws, friction, blade strikes/scrapes, etc. Sources include cars, trucks, heavy equipment, UTV/OHV/ATV, light equipment, trailers, watercraft, UAS, aircraft, etc.

- Fireworks - A wildfire resulting from the use of fireworks (excluding wildfires stared by children less than 12 year of age).

- Incendiary - A wildfire willfully set by anyone with malicious intent to burn or spread to vegetation or property not owned or controlled by same, and without consent of the owner or agent (excluding wildfires stared by children less than 12 year of age). Malicious intent: spite, premeditated evasion of the law, ill will, intention to harm. Incendiary wildfires also include those set by mentally incompetent persons.

- Miscellaneous - A wildfire resulting from source not covered within the other defined cause categories. Examples include: firearms, exploding targets, spontaneous heating/combustion, electric fences, reflective or magnifying objects, blasting, flares, wood stoves and outdoor wood burners etc.

- Power Line - A wildfire resulting from electrical power generation or distribution. Examples include: conductor (power line) failure, insulator failure, or other hardware failure/faults. Arcing may result when conductor contacts or comes into adjacent phase with vegetation or similar combustible materials. Also includes hardware failures resulting in arcing, melting, burning, or explosion, which in turn ignites a wildfire.

- Railroad - A wildfire resulting from any railroad operations including construction, operation, or maintenance. Examples include: carbon sparks, brake shoes, wheel bearings, flares/fusees, clearing of right-of-way, rail grinding, welding, etc.

- Smoking - A wildfire inadvertently ignited by a smoker from matches, lighter, tobacco, or other smoking materials (excludes railroad operations, power line operations, and wildfires started by children less than 12 years of age).

- Structure - A wildfire resulting from a structure source of ignition. Structures include any permanent, stationary dwelling. Structures include commercial and residential buildings.

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