



# The Forest Fire Warden News

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

While winter in Pennsylvania can seem like a time of dormancy when the world slows down with little change, it can also be a time of great benefit for Forest Fire Wardens and other wildland firefighters. Winter gives us a chance to pause, to look back on the past, and an opportunity to prepare for the future. There has been a lot of change forced upon all of us in the past year and given all that has occurred over the past year it is important that we prepare ourselves for the upcoming year.

Every year, our spring fire season follows quickly on the heels of winter. Some years, the change is slow and measured, but in other years it is so quick that we often feel surprised by the sudden increase in activity. There is more decision space available now that can be used to your advantage instead of waiting until later in the spring when our margins decrease. To make this transition, I thought it beneficial to share some important updates that you will need to consider and incorporate into your preparations.

First, all Commonwealth agencies have either transitioned or are in the process of transitioning to a new radio system. DCNR itself is currently in the process of making this transition, and we expect to have about three-quarters of all forest districts transitioned by April 2021. Please contact your local forest district to learn about how this will affect your communications this spring.

Additionally, we will only be able to offer limited in person training this spring, mainly S-130 field days, fire shelter practice for the refresher training, and the work capacity test (pack test). All other training that will be offered this spring, including annual forest fire warden trainings, will be conducted virtually. While this is not necessarily an ideal solution, it is better than stopping all training completely. We are extremely hopeful that as we transition into the summer and fall, we will be able to get back to more in-person training. There is certainly quite a backlog of training that is needed, and it may take us several years to get caught up.

Finally, we will be expecting everyone to continue to observe COVID-19 safety protocols on wildfires, training, and related events. This includes basic requirements like social distancing, washing hands, wearing masks when needed, and generally doing whatever we can to ensure that we all stay safe. While we were able to get through the past year without any significant illness being directly attributed to our wildland fire work, we do not want to get complacent as we start to see hope for the end of the pandemic.

Looking back on 2020, we did not necessarily accomplish what we set out to in the beginning of the year, but we did still accomplish a lot of good work, and we did it as a team. The fire organization of this state continued to respond to wildfires, make sure they were extinguished safely, and follow-up with sound investigation and reporting. I cannot state enough how important this dedication to duty was, and I also cannot stress enough how appreciative I am of the effort that all of you put into increased wildfire reporting. Despite a relatively wet spring, our wildfire reporting in 2020 was basically

*(continued next page)*

### ***Division of Forest Fire Protection Personnel***

Mike Kern

### ***Chief Forest Fire Warden***

Diane Schmidt  
*Administrative Assistant*

Charlie Choplick  
***Logistics and Finance  
Section Chief***

Rick Temple  
*Fire Cache Manager*

Terry Smith  
*Special Investigator*

Brian Pfister  
*Wildfire Prevention  
Specialist*

Jesse Geiman  
***Communication  
Section Chief***

Teresa Hunker  
*Radio Telecommunications  
Specialist I*

Dan Kauffman  
*Radio Telecommunications  
Specialist II*

Matt Reed  
***Operations and Planning  
Section Chief***

Mike Becker  
*Qualifications and Training  
Specialist*

Todd Breinger  
*Prescribed Fire  
Specialist*

Chad Northcraft  
*Incident Management  
Specialist*

Katie Thomas  
*Fire Operations  
Technician-East*

Jason Williams  
*Aircraft Operations and  
Safety Specialist*

double what our average has been over the past 10-years. This is a great achievement, especially given the fact that you were able to accomplish this during a global pandemic.

As we move into 2021, I would encourage everyone to make sure they are prepared, focused, and most of all safe. Thank you for your past efforts and I wish everyone a safe spring fire season.

**Michael D. Kern, Chief Forest Fire Warden**

### **Harry C. Drury --- A Tribute**

If asked, most people would probably wish that they “made a difference” or left a positive contribution from their work and efforts. The legacy of Harry Drury would be included in that category. Harry was involved in wildfire suppression since 1950, he became a structural fire instructor in 1963 and was appointed as a Forest Fire Warden in 1967. In 1982 he was hired by the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry as a Forest Fire Inspector and then in 1987, he was promoted to the position of Forest Fire Specialist Supervisor, a role he held until his retirement in December 1991.



It was during his decade of employment with the Bureau of Forestry that Harry initiated many new programs in the Cornplanter Forest District. According to

one of Harry’s supervisors, “he improved the fire organization more than was expected.” Harry actively sponsored training nights and other training opportunities and often served in the role as instructor. He participated in community programs which helped local volunteer fire departments provide good, well-rounded life safety programs. One of the issues Harry was most passionate about was the relationships with Fire Wardens and Volunteer Fire Departments/Companies. He recognized the importance and the critical role that volunteers play. Harry always emphasized the need for Bureau of Forestry personnel to put the time and effort into building strong relationships based on trust.

Harry’s influence extended well beyond northwest Pennsylvania/Cornplanter Forest District 14. He was one of the founding group of Pennsylvania Wildland Firefighters who organized and trained the first Pennsylvania crews to go out-of-state on wildland fire assignments. Harry’s first out-of-state assignment was in 1974 and his support and interest in the program never wavered. He always promoted the need for trainings and assignments so that Pennsylvania crews would be “on the upward climb instead of being mediocre or on the downward slide,” to quote him directly. It is reported that people could always tell Harry’s fire crews or “Harry’s Duck’s” as they were referred to, by their quality appearance and performance.

Many of us have a favorite story involving Harry. For me, I knew he always had my back. For many years, well into his retirement, if I needed Harry’s help or needed his counsel, Harry was always available to give me his straightforward, sincere, and wise guidance. Pennsylvania’s Wildland Fire program is better because of Harry’s dedication and involvement and without question he did “make a difference” that we still benefit from today. Rest in peace Harry, we will miss you.

Harry C. Drury --- 1927-2020

**Cecile Stelter, District Forester, Cornplanter Forest District**



## Congratulations to Ray Miller

Forest Fire Specialist Supervisor Ray Miller of Forest District 02 recently retired with almost 50 years of service to the Commonwealth. He began his full-time career with the Bureau of Forestry on Sept 24th, 1981 as a Forest Fire Inspector. He has been with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry for more than 48 years including time working with Forestry and at Cowan's Gap State Park as a Semi-Skilled Laborer and Water Treatment/Sewage Plant Operator.

When he was first hired as a Fire Inspector, he admitted that he did not know anything about the job of fighting forest fires. Shortly after that, he became a member of the Needmore Volunteer Fire Company where he "ran" with the company on all types of fires and other emergencies. He also took on the role as an ambulance driver and EMT. He very quickly learned about the training and funding needs of small organizations such as local volunteer fire companies in rural areas, that also suffer from a lack of volunteers, and the importance of needing somebody to "step up" and take leadership roles, and Ray did just that.

His very first "out-of-state" assignment was to North Carolina in 1985, as a crew boss. He had never even been to "Crew Camp", but he was needed, they asked him to go, and he accepted the assignment. Ray's first trip was probably a bit unusual, since he did not have much training or experience, but he had the desire to be part of a team and something "bigger than himself", and that is how he has conducted himself ever since. He is always willing to seek and take responsibility, to lead or be lead, and to be a mentor. He has personally trained or has been involved with the training of hundreds of local volunteer fire fighters and Bureau of Forestry personnel. Many of these folks serve in important leadership positions today within the Bureau of Forestry and in the Wildland Fire Crew program, which is always Nationally recognized as a "top-notch" organization. He progressed through the system from a Crew Boss to Division Supervisor to Type 2 Line Safety Officer and is a fully qualified Type 3 IC, as well as the Fulton County Deputy EMA Coordinator.

According to researchable records, Ray has been personally involved with at least 371 wildfires in Forest District 02. His first fire was a 1-acre debris burn fire on March 22, 1979 in Mann Township, Bedford County. The fire cost was \$89.34. The largest in-district fire was the 888-acre Bear Den Fire on April 19-26, 2014. The cost for that fire was a mere \$200,447.53. There is no doubt Ray has been involved in countless other fires in the district, where he showed up to make sure the VFD's and

Wardens were doing OK and to help with hose roll-up and so forth. He has also assisted other districts around the state with wildfires, Rx Burns, search-and-rescue, and as Incident Commander on numerous Type III Incidents. Since 1985, his dedication to the Specialized Crew out-of-state program has been unwavering. He has been to the annual "Crew Camp" training every year and has logged thousands of hours and miles flying back and forth across the country and walking the firelines making sure the job was getting done in a safe and orderly fashion.



Ray continues to be involved with all types of Incident Management situations from fires, motor vehicle accidents, hazmat incidents to flooding and hurricane relief efforts, and COVID 19 testing facilities, both locally and nationally. He is always sought out as the Lead Instructor or Unit Leader Instructor for all types of training required by and provided by the Division of Forest Fire Protection. Ray has always demonstrated a high degree of ability, reliability, and competence, and he continues to serve as a mentor for both "newbies" and experienced wildland fire fighters. Ray's dedication to the fire program, through 48 years of changes, has helped make it what it is today. His experience and mentorship will truly be hard to recreate. We hope to see him on the fireline somewhere carrying a shovel, getting dirty rolling rocks while dry mopping, and remembering the "Good 'ol Days"

**Bryan Wilford, Assistant District Forester,  
Buchanan Forest District**

## Years of Service

Please congratulate the following Wardens for their 50+ years of service.

Dist	Name	Year Appointed	Years of Service
17	Paul M Felton	1950	70
02	Gary Scott	1960	60
18	James L Shaffer	1960	60
05	Ronald W Carson	1960	60
18	William R Reabold Jr	1960	60
02	Melvin Deremer Jr	1965	55
10	Calvin P Funk	1965	55
05	Robert C Furiga	1965	55
08	Wayne L Minich Jr	1965	55
18	Charles P Pollock	1970	50
16	Ernest Norman	1970	50
18	Gerald L Dotter	1970	50
02	Henry A Hillegass	1970	50
18	Kenneth E Beare	1970	50
15	Paul R Lilja	1970	50
19	Roger P Seese	1970	50
18	Ronald G Strohecker	1970	50
10	Ronald Saylor	1970	50
08	Roy G Whitmer	1970	50
15	William A Pohopin	1970	50



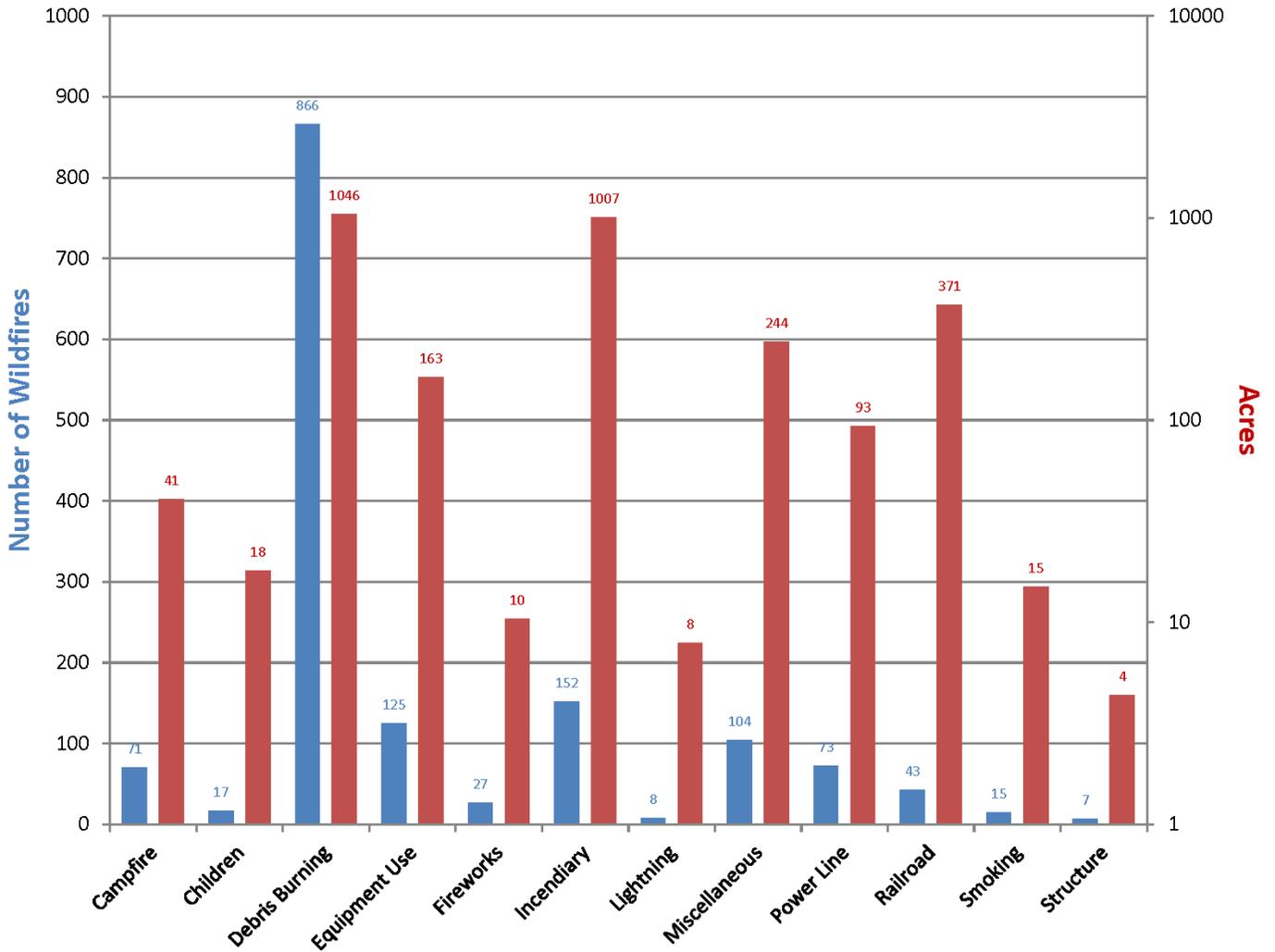
## In Remembrance

Wardens who passed away in 2020

Dist	Name	Year Appointed
01	Gregory A Bretzman	2008
01	Craig A Keeran	1969
01	Roy A Naugle	1984
02	Charles D Clingerman	1966
02	Daryl L Scott	1974
02	Richard E Timmons	1978
05	Harvey F Fouse	1965
06	Richard J Malicky	1983
06	John E Swarden	1990
08	Richard Carnahan	1994
08	Gale A Tilia	1975
10	Chester A Houdeshell	1974
11	Robert C Macarevich	1979
11	John J Maza	1980
13	Mark G Auman Sr	1995
13	David Edinger	1982
13	Richard L Sassaman	1961
14	Harry C Drury	1967
16	Robert S McCarthy	1995
16	Edgar M Sheaffer	1983
18	Thomas J Benedict	1984
18	Daniel E Brobst	2009
18	Joseph R Kufrovich	2000
18	Richard W Spitler	1959

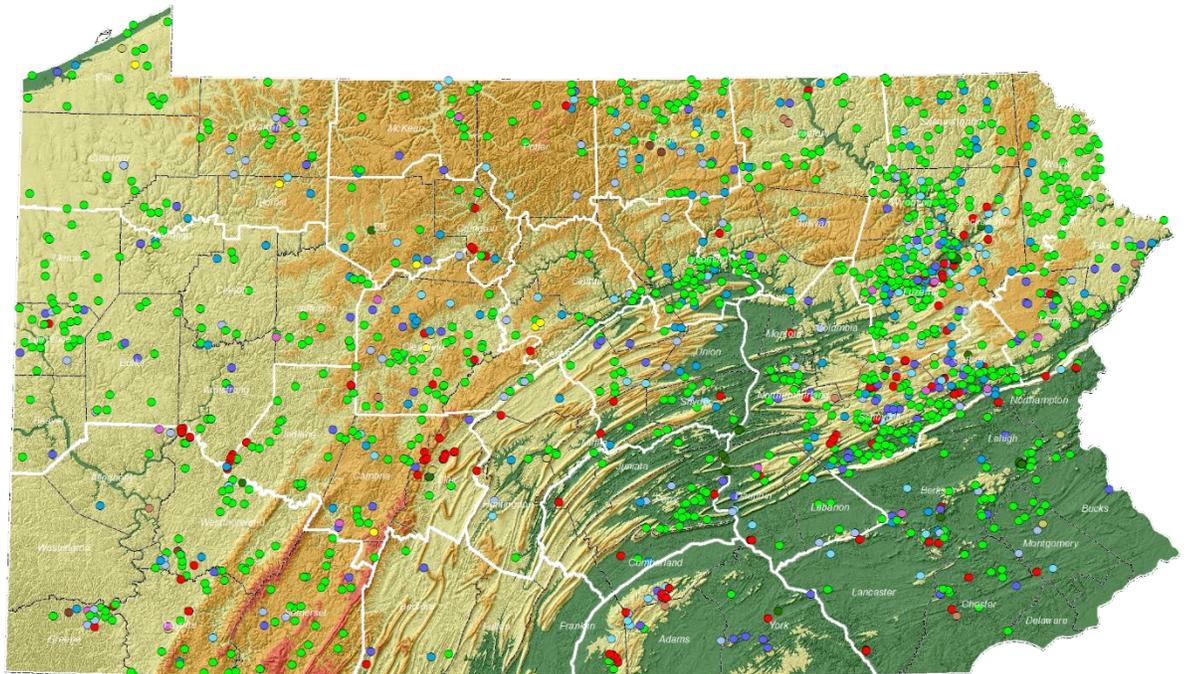


## 2020 - Number of Wildfires and Acres per Cause Class



### Wildfires by Cause

- Lightning (8)
- Equipment Use (125)
- Smoking (15)
- Campfire (72)
- Debris Burning (864)
- Railroad (43)
- Incendiary (152)
- Children (17)
- Miscellaneous (104)
- Fireworks (27)
- Power Line (73)
- Structure (7)



1,508 Wildfires / 3,036 Acres



# **The Forest Fire Warden News**